Narratives of Interiority: Black Lives in the U.S. Capital, 1919 - 1942

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by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract


by

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Advisor: Professor Herman L. Bennett

This dissertation constructs a social and intellectual history of poor and working class African Americans in the interwar period in Washington, D.C. Although the advent of social history shifted scholarly emphasis onto the “ninety-nine percent,” many scholars have framed black history as the story of either the educated, uplifted and accomplished elite, or of a culturally depressed monolithic urban mass in need of the alleviation of structural obstacles to advancement. A history of the poor and working class as individuals with both ideas and subjectivity has often been difficult simply because there are limited archival sources.

“Narratives of Interiority” uses data collected and other materials created by social researchers in the Progressive era’s burgeoning social science fields to examine the everyday lives, movements, and articulated thoughts of a disaggregated African American poor and working class. While sociological and social welfare materials have been criticized for contributing to the racialization of crime and the pathologization of black urban life, they also offer historians a rich archive from which to cull the complexities of daily existence and inner life that transcend the instrumental renderings of black pathology and the narrow configurations of the black urban migration experience. This archive accentuates interiority and the quotidian
and brings into relief varied interpretations and understandings of political economy, educational possibilities, citizenship, family, appropriate (legal, respectable) comportment, and conceptions of self as articulated by black poor and working class individuals themselves. Furthermore, an historical examination of social science research materials instead of social scientists’ and reform workers’ interpretations of that material complicates an analysis of early sociology, problematizing ethnographic methodology, but also interrogating the possibilities for voice and visibility that sociological and anthropological research projects offered, and offers, people with little access to politics and visibility writ large.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project is dedicated to Ena A. Austin and Pearl Shelby Sharpe, two everyday women who inspired and encouraged me to tell (historicized) stories.

In the late summer of 2011, my mother Ena Austin died. She was eighty-one years old, had been born in Bartica, a small market town on the Essequibo River towards the interior of Guyana, South America. She migrated to New York, in her early forties with two grown daughters and two very young daughters and for over 20 years worked as a live-in home health aide in Flatbush, Brooklyn. My mother’s death, in my third year of my doctoral program just two months before I took my oral qualifying examination, fundamentally changed my life, my view of the world, and my cosmological understandings. I have since learned that the loss of a parent does this, regardless of one’s relationship with that parent. It is a deeply disorienting experience and left me afloat and untethered – to both the conceptions and the materiality of “family,” “work,” “leisure,” “memory,” and history, the very thing in which I was being trained. Her death, despite our fraught relationship, left a gap that became filled with work. The narratives I crafted from the voices that sprang from a sociologist’s interviews with mostly black women and young people became in many ways the story of my mother, who migrated with her daughters from her rural upbringing to a U.S. city for a better life, and the story of me – a first generation migrant coming to understand notions of home in an urban enclave.

Two years later, in the fall of 2013, unexpectedly, I lost my second mother. My dear, dear friend Pearl had just the year before helped me facilitate the spreading of my mother’s ashes into the Caribbean Sea. Pearl, who hailed from Compton, California, and who kept me grounded in
Durham, North Carolina, was far more invested in the potentiality of a Dr. Austin than I ever was. My academic career was as much Pearl’s project as it was mine. I knew I would finish the program, despite obstacles both professional and personal, because Pearl knew I would, and I would become the first person in my family to earn a Ph.D.

But earning a Ph.D., it turns out, is no easy task.

One person in particular made this doable. Herman L. Bennett came into the History Department at the CUNY Graduate Center and became my mentor and advisor, and that could not have been better timed. His support, guidance, wisdom, feedback, and his time, energy and commitment to my success are what sustained, and continue to sustain me. Herman’s attention to and investment in my project is what makes me the scholar I am, although any errors in the following text are mine alone! The Herman Bennett – Jennifer Morgan household became my touchstone for much decision-making. Without them, I would not have made it through the sometimes harrowing experience that navigating the academy can be for a woman of color. Herman Bennett also made it possible for me to put together a profoundly smart, instrumental, and affirming committee. I am deeply indebted to Michele Mitchell, Gunja SenGupta, Robert Reid Pharr, and Clarence Taylor for their time, attention, and interest in this project, and their incredibly thoughtful and thought-provoking questions, comments, and suggestions.

Over the course of the project that was this Ph.D. I somehow, despite my misanthropy, built a community of colleagues and friends without whose support and (tough) love this would not have been possible. Lauren Santangelo, Logan McBride, and Thomas Hafer have been the most wonderful friends and sounding boards. I deeply respect their scholarship and trust their opinions, and I look forward to a long future of work, laughs, disappointments, and celebrating accolades. I would be very remiss if I did not also thank Laura Hado and Thai Jones for their
support and advice (and cookies) both actual and via the Santangelo - Hado and McBride – Jones teams.

I have been fortunate to have had the support of fellowships that not only helped to make it possible for me to afford to live in New York City and be a graduate student, but that also resulted in a community of people who gave me serious and thoughtful feedback on my work, and who acted as an advisory council, listening ears that I have definitely bent! Through the Institute for Research on the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean at the CUNY Graduate Center and the Graduate Center’s archival fellowship in partnership with the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, I have benefited from the intellectual contemplation, wise words, reflections and support of Ryan Mann Hamilton, Anne Donlon, Christine Pinnock, Zee Dempster, Martin Ruck, Jessica Krug, Devyn Spence Benson, Rafia Zafar, John Perpener, Rashad Shabazz, Myra Armstead, and James Smethurst. Farah Jasmine Griffin, Duncan Faherty, and Khalil Muhammad are scholars whose intellectual contributions I profoundly respect and I feel incredibly honored to have had them as shepherds and facilitators of this research. My year in the Schomburg Scholars’ seminar was more valuable than words can possibly express here. Thank you also to the University of Hartford Jackie McLean Fellowship and the History department for helping me complete this project – supporting one final research trip and providing me with an opportunity to advance my teaching pedagogy and practices. Adjunct teaching CUNY –wide provided not only financial support but often a collegial teaching community. Specifically I owe a debt of gratitude to City College of New York’s Center for Worker Education for helping me grow as an educator, and to Kathlene McDonald for her support of my professional development.
Curators Dr. Ida E. Jones and JoEllen El Bashir, and library technician Richard Jenkins at Howard University’s Moorland Spingarn Research Center made my archival trips and research requests both fruitful and painless. Thank you Dr. Jones for championing my work.

Throughout, it has been important to have a woman of color cypher that I could turn to at challenging moments. Longtime sista-friend Armisey Smith has been a mainstay. Jessica Krug, Karen Tejada Pena, and Adryan Wallace are recent additions whose presence in this last year made all the difference, both in terms of helping me negotiate struggles and challenging me to articulate my arguments. Amaka Okechukwu organized a women of color writing group early on in this process, and along with Kaleefa Munroe, they were the sociologists who helped me understand the social science context of my project.

Dear friends, chosen, biological and animal family, and systems of self-care are important factors in what makes a successful Ph.D. graduate. Shana Agid, Kerry Ann MacNeil, Jill Magi, Jonny Farrow, Betsy Thorleifson, Jey Born, Shelley Austin and Patricia Saheed believe in and love me. Shana and Jill have both not only shared with me the kind of meditations on my work and the world that only artist-theoreticians can, they have both reflected back to me a vision of myself that I hoped was true, but that I could not always see as I reckoned with grief, imposter syndrome, feelings of shame, and fears of failure. They imagined a future for me that I could not see. Along with Lauren Santangelo, Logan McBride, and Thomas Hafer, they reminded me to (literally) keep swimming, to go to the chiropractor, and to see the acupuncturist. Sara Winter has been a mentor, translating for me and putting into perspective milestones and setbacks alike. I am deeply grateful for the work, the sometimes actual physical labor, my friends and family have all done in keeping me afloat, fed, clothed in clean laundry, and in the world. Thanks to Anne Hamel for her professional services as well. Finally, Nasia Shlasinger, for whom
most of my machinations in life have been, and Moke the cat continue to provide the kind of unconditional love and attention one must have to thrive.
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Introduction

My, you certainly can ask a lot of questions. You ask a question and then wait two minutes before you ask another question, and [you] look at me all the time. I don’t know if you are trying to read my mind or trying to tell if I’m speaking the truth! […] I don’t mind people looking at me, but why did you bring me up to Howard [University]? When you went out of the room, I wondered if there was a [recorder] hidden in here […] I was just sitting here thinking, just wondering […]

Sixteen – year – old Alice Williams to twenty-two-year-old interviewer Laura Lee, Northwest, Washington, D.C., June 8, 1938. ¹

Alice Williams was in her second interview with Laura Lee when she made the above observations. The African American 11th grader had already spent one afternoon the previous week with Lee, during which she had been asked about “outstanding coloreds she admired,” what she listened to on the radio, whether she ever played with white kids; “had [she] ever wanted to go downtown to the theatres”; and what she thought of segregation. Alice Williams, born in the District of Columbia in 1922 to North Carolina natives Ollie and Joseph Williams, was a subject of interest to Laura Lee as Lee worked on compiling interviews and data on Washington D.C.’s black teenagers and their families for E. Franklin Frazier’s study on “black adolescent personality development in the middle states.”²

In the summer of 1938, Alice was a junior at the overcrowded Northwest black high school named for black educator and political leader Francis L. Cardozo. On June 8th, Laura Lee took Alice to the Howard University campus where Frazier was the sociology department head. Alice had many questions about her involvement in the research project; she was paying close attention to and processing this new experience. In her time with Laura Lee, Alice can be heard

¹ “Alice Williams WDC 1,” E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Box 131-112 Folder 12, Box 131 – 113 Folder 15; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; 1920 United States Census, s.v. “Alice Williams,” Washington, D.C., accessed through Ancestry.com.
lamenting the loss of her older sister who had recently died of pneumonia and to whom she had been close; discussing the death of her father whom she missed; insisting that more mothers educate their daughters on sex and sexuality as her mother had; disapproving of spending money on boys; disparaging “parents [who had] a title – doctor or lawyer” for giving allowances to their kids; wanting to be a dancer or a social worker, but not a domestic; and asserting that she wished to remain single because she wanted to “travel all around with a female [companion].”

Furthermore, Alice was far more interested in interviewing her interviewer, and said so.

Alice, like many of the young people, women and men interviewed for E. Franklin Frazier’s project, took advantage of the listening ear of the researcher: after voicing her suspicion, Alice asked questions both of the project and of Lee, shared unsolicited opinions, articulated her truths, understandings, philosophies, her notions of self, her political ideologies, and her grievances. All of this, including her apprehension about Lee’s intentions, highlight the life of her mind. Alice’s articulated musings, her voice, that of an urban poor and working - class African American, has seldom been at the center of historical renderings. Social science literature has generally portrayed marginalized black folks as socially and culturally homogenous, in the aggregate – whether represented as in need of rehabilitation or as proletarianized. This has especially been true for black folks in the poor, urban and often segregated enclaves that developed in the wake of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century movement of African Americans out of and within the South and into northern, western, urban and industrial locations. Just as the social sciences were becoming professionalized, poor black and working class communities became laboratories in which researchers, using their new commitment to an empirical methodology, studied race relations, poverty and its adherents, and

3 “Alice Williams WDC 1,” Frazier papers.
theorized about the process of assimilation and adaptation to industrialization and urban living of both white ethnic immigrants and African American migrants.

W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* published at the turn of the twentieth century was the earliest work to employ the new approach of urban ethnography, statistics, and social history. In an effort to redress racial and social problems with science, Du Bois’s project identified social environment and history as well as cultural traits, social behavior, and social evolution as causes of racial unrest. Du Bois sought to disavow race as a biological concept by proving the structural and historical causation of poverty, thereby demonstrating the impact of a history of racial and economic discrimination on African Americans. His project was timely, as many primarily white racial conservatives were insisting on black biological inferiority and/or the benefits of segregation as a necessary civilizing force for African American inclusion in modern American society.

The 1919 Red Summer race riots in mostly urban centers, including Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C. further encouraged the attention of social scientists and reformers. They examined interracial contact and made claims about the origins of what they determined to be black poor and working class cultural behaviors. By the interwar years, and with the advent of the Chicago School of Sociology at the University of Chicago under the leadership of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, social science not only privileged a generalized theory of urban chaos on a natural progression towards organization, it also began to engage interdisciplinarily with medical fields and with psychiatry, all of which were also in their early stages of professionalization. Black and white sociologists became interested in black family formation, and specifically racialized conceptions of personality that privileged behavior and psychological theories. Leaders in black sociology like E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S.
Johnson, both students of Park, used scientism, as Du Bois had done, to impute structural and environmental forces. They centered the lives of poor and working class African Americans, attempting to deal with what had been deemed “the Negro problem,” the problem of black poverty, segregation, and interracial conflict. They hoped that the production of knowledge would help to change (white) minds about African Americans. Much of this literature, however, reduced poor, working class, and urban African Americans to a community “inflicted with social pathology,” identifying “black culture as a ‘pathological condition.” Social scientists researched poor and working class African Americans only to render them a social and cultural monolith. And, studies produced in the Progressive and interwar periods helped to strengthen a racially defined, and early, culture of poverty argument that inadvertently bolstered Jim Crow discrimination and northern de facto segregation.

Progressive and interwar era historians were equally as imprecise in their portrayals of black poor and working class people. Like sociology, history was a burgeoning disciplinary field, adopting a correspondingly scientistic approach to scholarship in order to achieve “objectivity.”

Within the field of history, a growing number of black scholars, like Carter G. Woodson,

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4 See Daryl Scott’s chapters 1, 2, and 3 for a comprehensive examination of the shifts taking place in social scientific thought and knowledge production about African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century; Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880 – 1996* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1 – 56. Chapter 4 of this dissertation is devoted to an examination of the development of the interdisciplinarity of social sciences as a field and its manifestation in Washington, D.C. out of which the sources for “Narratives of Interiority” were produced.


produced scholarship on black history that focused on African American “achievers and their contributions [...] under adversity,” advocating for black history courses at black colleges. To counteract the concomitant rise in scientific thought that placed blacks in an inferior intellectual position on a constructed racial scale, black scholars, and some white, engaged in a vindicationist historiographical project, one meant to both “build black pride and erode white prejudice.”

As early as 1883, Civil War veteran and historian George Washington Williams produced two volumes of *The History of the Negro Race in America* tracing African American advancement from “slave” to “soldier” to “citizen.”

Woodson founded both Negro History week to celebrate black historical contributions to American society and the Association for the Study of African American History and Life. And in response to slavery apologist studies of the Old South, Luther P. Jackson, for example, produced an examination of black political actors in Virginia that included enslaved people securing their own freedom, acquiring property, and becoming contributing citizens.

While both sociological and historical approaches to documenting black life – (putting aside, for the moment, the accompanying pathologization) – were certainly necessary reprisals to the pervasive white supremacist stereotypes and discriminatory social and economic policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these theoretical framings silenced voices like Alice Williams’, eclipsing the quotidian and dynamic experiences of migration and of black life in new urban enclaves in the early twentieth century. Neither approach would produce histories

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9 Luther P. Jackson, *Negro Officeholder in Virginia* (1945)
http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015014725082;view=1up;seq=7 (accessed Feb 27, 2015)
that highlighted articulations of lived experiences, ideas, and ways in which poor and working class folks thought about themselves and the world around them.

Some blame the dearth of traditional records of the thoughts and experiences of black poor and working folks for their absence in the historical record. Historian Cheryl Hicks, for instance, states that ordinary people “rarely [leave] personal documents attesting to their lives and [are] often under- [or mis] represented in […] organizations and the press.”10 I would suggest, though, that this absence is not solely a result of the scarcity of sources. Scholars have generally avoided the daily lives, the consciousness, and the intellectual production of common folks in an effort to render a portrait of racial progress as they did in the early twentieth century. Even in the revisionist period of the late twentieth century, scholars producing black intellectual histories highlighted the ideological framings of black elites who often had very conflicted feelings and ideas about black folk.11 Slavery studies produced in the period following the Civil Rights movement’s legislative victories, in what was the social history turn, centered who we might call the ninety-nine percent. Here though scholars were primarily interested in asserting enslaved people’s human agency. This historiographical project to (re)/(pro)claim black humanity, as historian Walter Johnson so eloquently argues, resulted in a continuum of accommodation and resistance on which black historical actions were positioned and judged to measure agency. While this may have been a necessary approach in the late twentieth century, as Johnson says, to “writ[e] [b]lack humanity as self-determination and resistance,” it also

10 Cheryl Hicks, Talk With You Like A Woman: Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890 – 1935 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1-5.
“delineated an optical field” that ultimately obscured “other things beyond the categories of the ‘agency’ debates.”

This “racial protocol,” for how black lives could be represented in scholarship “reduce[d] African American experiences to racial politics [and] racial struggle”; it paid little attention to private life, “individual subjectivity,” and interiority. It created a “two-dimensionality” and a homogeneity of black life. And as both historian Anastasia Curwood and literary scholar Kevin Quashie note, hiding black interiority from public view can lead to the “belief that black people lack interior lives altogether.”

“Narratives of Interiority” uses sociological investigations conducted in the late Progressive and interwar era to highlight the inner and everyday lives, the self-aware and self-reflective analytic frameworks cultivated and articulated by ordinary folks in an urban and social history of Washington, D.C. These social science studies have rightfully been criticized for reinscribing conventional frameworks of racial and class identities and for reifying social formations steeped in middle class norms and values. But because of their intrusive nature into communities and people’s personal lives, these materials also give us access to the life of the mind. “Narratives of Interiority” begins at the mundane, the sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, always complex and messy quotidian experiences and thoughts, centering the articulations of average black women, men, and young people who were migrants to or long term residents of the physically and symbolically changing Nation’s capital during hard economic times. This project underscores the inner individual lives of often invisible ordinary folks, removing them

from their sociological frames, a lens through which they were often viewed as pathological and deviant, and places them instead within their own contexts.

Interiority is defined as “a consciousness of depth and space within; a sensibility”; “human inwardness”\textsuperscript{14}; self; selfhood; self-knowledge; self-cultivation; a place of “imagination, fantasy, affect, aesthetics, and sensation”; “an amorphous space located somewhere ‘inside’ the human body, generating conviction, satisfaction, and […] identity.” It is autonomous subjectivity\textsuperscript{15}; authorial subjectivity;\textsuperscript{16} it emerges from a place of quiet – at once “irreverent, messy, complicated, representations that have […] human texture and specificity.” It “is inevitable, essential […] It is already there, if one is looking to understand it.”\textsuperscript{17} While always linked to the material world and its attendant realities, the interior, as Quashie notes, is not only a bulwark “against dominance of the social world,” but interiority “has its own sovereignty.”\textsuperscript{18}

What comes through in these narratives are the ways in which individuals were expertly aware of the economic, spatial, social, and political limitations imposed by the District of Columbia’s racially segregationist policies and customs, and the juxtaposition of those limitations with the emblematic meanings of the nation’s capital in the early twentieth century. Individuals’ answers to interviewers’ questions make clear the cultivation and mobilization of an interiority that included their own analytic categories and frames and a thriving inner life. Sometimes these conceptual frames were in tune with and sometimes they diverged from mainstream middle class mores as promoted by black and white reformers. Individuals

\textsuperscript{14} Carolyn Steedman, “Culture, Cultural Studies and the Historians,” in \textit{The Cultural Studies Readers} ed. Simon During, (NY: Routledge, 1993), 50;


\textsuperscript{17} Kevin Everod Quashie, \textit{Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 23 – 24.

\textsuperscript{18} Quashie, \textit{The Sovereignty of Quiet}, 6.
articulated racial, class, and gender identities, personal histories of movement, complex social relations, and a deep consciousness of selfhood with which they negotiated the contradictions of living in the Jim Crowed United States capital just as D.C. planners worked to create a landscape to place the city on a global stage as a symbol of Democracy, and just as the federal government’s physical presence invaded historically black spaces.

Poor and working African Americans in Washington, D.C. give voice to an interiority that provides a different understanding of black urban life in the early twentieth century, a period most scholars identify as both the Great Migration and the origins of black “ghetto” formation. Scholars have viewed the Great Migration as the period during which urbanization had a mostly negative impact on rural black folks who flocked to cities, and where black families experienced the “breakdown” of “traditional” familial bonds, resulting in an increase in urban vice and crime. The movement of African Americans out of oppressive rural southern locations to urban and industrial cities and towns did indeed lead to an increase in D.C.’s black population between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At the turn of the century, the small capital was an emerging (international) seat of democracy and it undertook a national spatial project to promote its new imperial identity, which resulted in the monumental core we know of as the Federal Mall. And while the city did not offer much in terms of economic opportunity for African Americans, the symbolic identity was especially important to African Americans in the South where violent racial and economic interdictions reigned. Despite the symbolism of the capital and the dominant and growing (physical) federal presence, Washington, D.C.’s racial geography did not provide African Americans with the social, political, or economic access they

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sought: President Woodrow Wilson’s executive policies segregated formerly integrated federal departments, and in the wake of World War I, many black veterans who had fought for their country panhandled in their uniforms on city streets for lack of employment opportunities.

Geographic, economic, and social discrimination and disparity resulted in racially motivated violence in Washington, D.C. during what was already the Red Summer of 1919. Some four days of fighting in the streets included Carter G. Woodson narrowly escaping assault, after witnessing the shooting and lynching death of an African American man by a white mob of drunk uniformed soldiers.\(^{20}\) Black Washingtonians – educated, middle and upper class, federal employees, business owners, community leaders, as well as recent migrants, domestics, janitors, and the unemployed alike all suffered the indignities of Jim Crow, to which poverty brought its own special and spatial limitations. Both the 1937 Works Progress Administration-produced Washington Guide book and the 1948 National Committee on Segregation in Washington report described sections of the District as racial “ghettoes.”\(^{21}\)

While the use of the term “ghetto” to describe black poor urban communities would not come fully into use until the post-World War II period, as early as the turn of the century overcrowded poor black D.C. neighborhoods garnered attention from social scientists, reformers, and politicians who saw these spaces as blighted areas in need of rehabilitation and improvement, but mostly demolition. Many deteriorating black communities existed “in the shadow of the capital,”\(^{22}\) “squalid slum[s] with people jobless and desperate” literally

\(^{22}\) Both reformer Charles Weller in his book *Neglected Neighbors* (1909) and the Washington, D.C. Committee on Segregation report (1948) used the rhetoric of “in the shadow of the capital,” and the visual meme of stark mostly black neighborhoods with the capital or other federal buildings in the background
foregrounded against adjacent federal buildings. While this interest in black poor communities existed prior to the 1919 riot, in the aftermath, new research agendas emerged that sought to understand “interracial relations,” “prevent local interracial friction and improv[e] the condition of the Negro,” making clear not only that there was some understanding of the structural causes for urban racial conflict, but also putting the onus on poor black folks.

Black poor communities were part of Washington, D.C.’s racial geography at the turn of the century. They were a result of racial segregation, a spatial solution to what was deemed “the Negro Problem.” Historians of Washington D.C. have addressed both its racial segregationist past and the origins of its black urban “ghettoes.” This history includes the early Federal Writers’ Project 1937 D.C. guide book. Originally the twenty-two page section entitled “The Negro in Washington” outlined the black presence in the District from slavery to freedom, to migration, segregation, discrimination, and achievements, including a section on a sort of black proclivity to “hav[ing] a good time.” By 1942, the edition pared its “Negro” chapter down to nine pages with a history of mostly black educational, artistic, political, and social contributions to the city, adhering to the “racial protocol” of highlighting accomplishment. Since these early publications, scholarship on the history of black D.C. has centered mostly on black elite communities, focusing on intellectual advancements, cultural institutional formations, and

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23 The first version of the WPA Washington D.C. guidebook, published in 1937 included a more comprehensive 22-page chapter on blacks in Washington, D.C. that addressed the poverty with which most black Washingtonians lived, as well as the impact of segregation on educational, economic, and political opportunities in the District. Federal Writer’s Project Works Progress Administration, Washington City and Capital (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1937), 89.
civic/racial pride and participation in the face of these structural deterrents, as well as the struggle against many of these obstacles. In addition to examining antislavery activism in the District in the antebellum period, scholars have looked at the development of social, cultural, and educational institutions in the wake of the abolition of slavery and the agitation for civil and political rights; the emergence of Howard University as the central site of black intellectual activity and black knowledge production; and the proliferation of black economic success in Northwest D.C. 27 This scholarship primarily examined the ways in which D.C.’s middle class black community, its “leading men and women,” fortified their social status, redefined themselves in the face of social discrimination, and mobilized around racial uplift amongst themselves and for the masses.28


28 Moore, Leading the Race, 2 – 3.
Three publications stand out in the scholarship on black D.C. While not specifically a history of African Americans in Washington, historian Howard Gillette, Jr.’s *Between Justice and Beauty* examined the long history of urban policy and planning that often did not reconcile the social welfare needs of marginalized mostly African American folks and the capital city’s project for aesthetic improvement. Gillette highlights at least five moments in D.C.’s history when early city planning, Reconstruction, Progressive era, post-World War II, and even Black Power initiatives sought to address both the needs of the city’s “neglected neighbors” and make the capital “worthy of a nation.” By looking at the “conflicting ideals between justice and beauty,” Gillette foregrounds D.C.’s urban housing, tax, and redevelopment plans - economic, political, and spatial policies that assigned legal meaning to physical spaces. He convincingly posits that these campaigns generally failed. The failures reflect not only the relationship between the federal government’s dominance of the local capital city, but also the ways in which D.C.’s urban policies and programs reflect national urban policy goals. Gillette’s work makes very clear the geopolitical significance of Washington, D.C. and the relationship between “racial control” and “spatial control.”

Two other publications on the history of D.C. specifically center the lives and experiences of black poor and working people. The first, James Borchert’s *Alley Life in Washington* traces the survival and continuity of southern rural “folkways” within urban D.C.’s black and poor alley communities. Borchert uses materials produced by social scientists and reformers to examine family, religious, and work life. He argues that instead of a “breakdown”

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of values and organization, there was familial and cultural stability in black residential alley communities. While Borchert finds that D.C.’s black alleys were part of the transition from “plantation to ghetto,” he asserts that black migrants adjusted and adapted to the new urban environment, developed community institutions and broad kinship networks that supported their survival in these enclaves, and were not transient, living in alley communities for decades in some cases.31

The second book, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis’s Living in, Living out: African American Domestics in Washington, D.C., 1910 – 1940, narrates the movement and lives of black domestic workers out of the south and into D.C. Through the oral histories of over eighty women, Clark-Lewis outlines their reasons for migration. She highlights the (true) patriarchal nature of black families, as many decisions were made through the leadership of these young women’s fathers, and charts the social and economic life transformations wrought by the conditions of their new city.32 “Despite constraints of race, gender, and class,” states Clark-Lewis, “these women were never passive, [or] powerless.”33 They took control of their work lives, and some women were even able to change their socio-economic status through their domestic work. Migrating black women also brought with them a strong family ethic and a strong work ethic, demonstrating the inherent abilities of black migrants to adapt to modern city lifestyles and circumstances.

Both Borchert and Clark-Lewis intervene in much of the scholarship on black urban ghettoization produced in the 1960s and 1970s, scholarship that focused on the political and economic interruptions of community building, family life, traditions and aspirations of black poor and working class urban residents. They also center black poor and working

33 Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, Living In, Living Out), 6
Washingtonian’s lived experiences.\textsuperscript{34} While “Narratives of Interiority” certainly builds on these foundational works, it veers from both the projects of restoring agency and the rehabilitation of a disorganized black urban enclave at the heart of \textit{Alley Life} and \textit{Living in, Living Out}. Historian Craig Steven Wilder has commented that scholarship on poor black urban communities has “[stood] as a long story of protest against legal, political, economic and social barriers to African American community building in the twentieth century city.” But, Wilder also insists that “the search for agency always confesses constraints.”\textsuperscript{35}

The stories of poor and working class African Americans at the center of “Narratives of Interiority” are less concerned with refuting the contention that migration produced migrant communities and black urban enclaves in early twentieth century Washington, D.C. that were depressed slums replete with degenerate lifestyles. Rather these narratives emphasize the specificity of daily existence and ideologies of self-identification and consciousness that do not relegate black experiences to solely struggles against or accommodations to the “ghetto”: a specificity that does not define black experiences, actions, feelings, and thoughts simply as evidence of the agency of the oppressed, but rather stresses the generative capacities of an interior life. “Narratives of Interiority” attempts to, in the words of the editors of a new anthology on the intellectual history of African American women, ”challenge narrow assumptions about intellectual history by demonstrating how ideas have been crucial to [in this

\textsuperscript{34} The most well-known and influential of these works include: St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, \textit{Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City} (1945); Allan Spear, \textit{Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890 – 1920} (1967); Robert C. Weaver, \textit{The Negro Ghetto} (1948); Kenneth Clark, \textit{Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power} (1965); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, \textit{From Plantation to Ghetto} (1966).

\textsuperscript{35} Craig Steven Wilder’s commentary for American Historical Association panel “When the Ghetto is Not Enough, Or in Some Cases Too Much: New African American Urban Identities for the Great Migration and Beyond,” January 2014, Washington, D.C.
case black poor and working class people] in their efforts to navigate the [triple] jeopardy of race, gender [and class], and the uncertain forms of citizenship often accorded to their group.”

Scholars of women’s history and of black women’s history in particular have provided valuable theoretical framings and methodologies for the work on inner and everyday life, and the relationship to the production of ideas. Not just “deprivileging” white and male as uninspected categories of gender and racial analysis, or examining the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality have been formulated and articulated, scholars have foregrounded that these identities are both socially constructed and complex, and have “embrace[d] a ‘kaleidoscopic’ angle of vision”: the intersectional quality of identity formation and its relationship to the quotidian. This framing is important as it reminds us that our identities, our always multiple identities, are not merely those structured around our relationships with the state – how we are either privileged or limited by it, how we are complicit with or are agents in resisting it. Rather, we interact with these structures just as they interact with us: by internalizing them, externalizing them, ignoring them, forming and reforming sensibilities and notions of ourselves that while they might always be within these structures, also take these structures for granted, use them as constructive, and negotiate with them both actually and with their abstractions. In this way, our multiple identities are not solely public. Through our engagement and disengagement with the structures within which we live, we develop our identities, our perspectives, experiences, feelings, beliefs, desires, the analytic categories and conceptualizations by which we live. Specifically, this theoretical

understanding does not limit black subjectivity to its social and political relevance, allowing it only to tell us something about “race or racism,” “violence and struggle,” or “triumph.” Rather it allows for the range of capacities of subjectivity.

Poor and working folks’ articulations of their epistemologies, their ways of knowing and seeing both themselves and the world around them, are especially important in the reimagining of black communities in early twentieth century urban enclaves. Labor historians Tera Hunter and Sharon Harley have specifically foregrounded this faculty in their work on poor and working women’s lives. Hunter’s *To ‘Joy My Freedom* interrogates the changing political consciousness and engagement amongst working class black women in post-Reconstruction era Atlanta. Hunter portrays the black women domestic workers at the center of her study not just as subjects, but also as activists, collapsing the distinctions that have been made between everyday survival strategies of individuals and collective resistance. She importantly identifies working women’s changing understandings and definitions of freedom from the post-Reconstruction era through the Great Migration, and the relationships to the material, political, and social realities of life in the new southern city. Finally, Hunter addresses black working women’s social and cultural life, making a significant contribution to working class histories of leisure and recreation. She posits that African American working class women, not in a position to take freedom for granted,

carved out a leisure culture that was at times independent from both whites and middle class reform-minded blacks.\textsuperscript{40}

Sharon Harley also highlights black women’s “working class consciousness,” and the ways in which women articulated identities that were not solely centered on their labor. Harley examines the relationships between ways in which black working women thought about their work and their labor activism. She finds that while they were excluded from most major trade unions of the Progressive era, they were aware of and expressed dissatisfaction with poor working conditions, and participated in black women worker organizations, both those formally organized by middle class black women and more informal groups.\textsuperscript{41} While the strength of these works lays in a representation of the collectivity of black poor and working women, both highlight, where they can, individual poor and working class voices. Hunter’s and Harley’s scholarship gestures towards a social history of governing ideas and political frameworks: an intellectual history that considers the relationship between ideologies and the material, political, and social realities in which they are developed, between the everyday and the production of ideas.

Young Alice Williams’ voice, her articulations of her inner life,– her perspectives, beliefs, desires, and future imaginings foreground the complexity of her experiences with the political, social, and economic realities of the nation’s capital in the early twentieth century. In spite of the limitations of being heard, and of there being few spaces in which “the dispossessed”


could safely speak, Alice Williams, and many of the interview subjects, were “determin[ed] to articulate, to challenge, to reveal, [and] to share.” This “tension between articulation and [silence], between the limitations of spoken language and the possibility of expression, between space for certain forms of talk, and a lack of space for speech,” and the fluidity between what we think of public and private spheres, are all evident in the sentiments and opinions expressed by D.C.’s poor and working class African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century.

Sources and Methodologies

Middle-class race reform work, the revolutions in scientism, and the professionalization of the social sciences share a historical moment. Uplift ideology adopted a sociological component that was promoted by the leading site of sociological training at the University of Chicago and subsequently by Fisk, Atlanta University and Howard University, all sites where black Chicago School graduates held prominent positions. The methodological approach to studying poor and working people followed W.E.B. Du Bois’s Philadelphia Negro. In an effort to produce knowledge about the impact of industrialization and to understand race relations, social scientists generated surveys, psychological evaluations, and social reform institutions and organizations produced records and reports ripe for historical investigation of ordinary folks, subjectivity, and interior life.

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42 Carole Boyce Davies, Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject (NY: Routledge, 1994), 152.
For example, historian Cheryl Hicks’ work on women inmates at two upstate prisons in the Progressive era draws on “the professionalization of social work [and the subsequent] creation of a profusion of records” at the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{44} To get at the lives of black urban women who migrated to the North and experienced incarceration, Hicks makes proficient use of institutional case files, prison ledgers, court records and parole board testimony. Similarly, scholars Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton and Graham White, through the examination of detailed New York City probation records, created a visually specific map of Harlem in the interwar years that allows for a ground-level and grounded view of individual African Americans often ignored by the usual emphasis on black cultural elites and political leaders in Harlem between 1915 and 1930.\textsuperscript{45}

In Washington, D.C., black sociologists William H. Jones and E. Franklin Frazier, each head of the Howard University Sociology Department respectively in the 1920s and 1930s conducted and supervised numerous projects in D.C.’s black poor and working class neighborhoods. Jones’ two research publications on black housing and recreation in the wake of Washington, D.C.’s 1919 riot and Frazier’s study on black families and black adolescent personality development form the archives at the heart of “Narratives of Interiority.”\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} Cheryl Hicks, \textit{Talk With You Like A Woman: Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890 – 1935} (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1-5.
supplemented by reports, public policy papers, and masters and dissertation theses produced by local white graduate students, mostly women, completing requirements for sociology degrees at Catholic and George Washington Universities, as well as census data and newspaper accounts.  

Scholars have criticized the work of Progressive and interwar era social scientists like Frazier for helping to reinforce and even propel an already developing racial essentialist argument about black pathology, crime, and sexual deviance during the Great Migration.  

Frazier’s 1939 *Negro Family in the United States* in particular would later be used by trained sociologist and Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan to strengthen his pejorative black matriarchy thesis.  

However, sociological investigations like Frazier are an important archival resource. As an archive, these investigations provide abundant material for the project of reconstructing the diverse, motley, and dynamic (inner) lives of the least visible African Americans, accessed through their own articulations and expressions.

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Frazier’s project on adolescent personality development yielded over 200 interviews with youth and their family and community members.\textsuperscript{50} Staff for the study was mostly “young colored men and women who had completed college and had some graduate training in addition to experience in interviewing.”\textsuperscript{51} Staff included: Laura Lee, Ruth Bittler, Thomas E. Davis, Dennis D. Nelson, Lauretta Wallace, Isadore Miles, Jean P. Westmoreland, John C. Alston, and Bernice Reed, whose brief biographies are introduced in the next chapter. Many were not that much older than the young people they would interview and in some cases much younger than the parents and community members. Some hailed from local middle class black communities and had worked at black social service and cultural institutions, so they often had pre-existing relationships with some of the young people they interviewed. Dennis D. Nelson, for example, had been a social worker at the Southwest Settlement House for two years before he began interviewing boys for the project, so it is likely that he knew many of these boys well and had spent considerable time with them at the community center. Young people were selected through their membership in “Boy and Girl Scout troops, dramatic, social and recreational clubs connected with settlement houses, the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A.; groups of upper class youths in high schools; a group of delinquents, a group of domestic workers, and a club from a Baptist Sunday School. A small number of youth were picked up at random on the playgrounds and on the streets.”\textsuperscript{52}

Frazier’s methodological approach required his research assistants to “memorize the guided interview outline and to make trial interviews which were then discussed with [him]  

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} Frazier, \textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development in the Middle States} (Washington, D.C.: The American Youth Council on Education, 1940).
\item \textsuperscript{51} Frazier, \textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways}, xxxv, n4.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Frazier, \textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways}, xxxv, n4.
\end{itemize}
before they entered upon the regular field work.” Frazier’s instructions to investigators or “workers” as they often referred to themselves in transcripts included the following directives:

“we want to find out what these adolescents are feeling, are thinking, and are doing because of the fact that they are members of a minority group…. A personality document ought to be at least 30 typewritten pages when it is completed. [So] this may take three or four interviews. However, you will have a picture of the boy, that is how he looks, how he feels, how he thinks and how he acts. Of course, this would involve some information on his family, that is his relationship to his parents and brothers and sisters in the past and during the present time.”

This design yielded, in some cases, long transcripts of interviews with different members of black D.C. families.

Working with these materials presents a methodological challenge. How does one produce a historical narrative that focuses on the lived experiences and inner lives of poor and working African Americans without falling into the “traps” of pathology, as Du Bois did in his examination of “the submerged tenth” in Philadelphia and as Frazier did in his studies of black family formation? Both men are lauded for their use of social science practices, their challenges to scientific racism and their insistences on environmental factors, they were also men of a particular class identity and whose contemporary assumptions coincided with many dominant characterizations of African Americans at the time. Both employed moralistic categories to describe class differences within African American communities.

So once historians get a hold of sociologically created materials, what do we do with them? One should rightfully question whether subjectivity and personal ideologies can be discerned from this material. Zora Neale Hurston challenged the idea of total, unmediated access through ethnography. In Mules and Men, Hurston described her experiences collecting folklore in her hometown. Even there, with her privileged “native” position, she experienced “resistance.”

53 Frazier, Negro Youth at the Crossways, xxxv, n4.
54 Letter from Frazier to Mrs. Margaret Hunton, interviewer on the Harlem study, August 11, 1938, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 40, Folder 10, MSRC.
Hurston’s black research subjects, in battling “the white man[‘s attempt] to know into somebody else’s business[, …] set something outside the door of [their] mind[s] for him to play with and handle, [saying] He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind.”55 This strategy, identified early on by Hurston is later essential in Darlene Clark Hine’s concept of dissemblance, defined as black women’s intentional practice of hiding private feelings from public exposure.56 If this strategy is in play during the interviews with Washington D.C.’s poor and working class African Americans, my challenge has been to look at the answers to researchers’ questions as possible gaming and/or performance, while also analyzing the ways that the construction of those answers speaks to ideology, thought, self-knowledge and subjectivity. No doubt individuals did not share indiscriminately or arbitrarily, and their answers were certainly proscribed by the questions they were asked.

While it is likely that there is some performance in the interviews, it is important to note that these interviews, produced at the same moment that the Works Progress Administration (WPA) is conducting interviews with formerly enslaved people, differ significantly in both process and content from the WPA narratives. For Frazier’s interview subjects, less time had passed between the experiences about which individuals were being asked. And, maybe more importantly, researchers who conducted most of the interviews on Frazier’s projects were mostly young African Americans, albeit in a different socio-economic group than their subjects. Still, their age and racial identities may have made for some level of trust or comfort in the process. Furthermore, interviews generally were conducted over the course of one or two years and many interviewers had had previous relationships with the young people at the center of the study, so

that time and familiarity may also help to make the sources more reliable for accessing
interiority.

In approaching these materials, I draw from methodology cultivated and employed by
those involved in slave (and postcolonial) studies, especially that of enslaved African American
women, whose voices, and thus experiences, have been mostly silent and silenced in historical
literature.\footnote{57} This methodology interrogates sources not meant to illuminate certain voices;
methodology that reads the archives critically and “strain[s] against [its] limits”\footnote{58}; an approach
that understands that race and gender are both unstable categories, and, as identities, are also
both performative.\footnote{59} Interviewers asked questions that often sought to reinscribe particular codes
of a black working class community – ones that classified particular cultural productions as
raced, gendered, and classed. Sometimes subjects provided answers that proved these and other
times they did not. Still other times, they answered a question they had not even been asked and
took the opportunity to tell stories of themselves and their histories. They sometimes discussed


ideas that interviewers were not expecting and which were not ultimately used in the official publications or reports. The notion of performing race and gender may have been strongest amongst the young people interviewed, as they got this opportunity to be listened to, taken seriously, and present their burgeoning identities as individuals.

While the interviews of family and community members were left in transcript form, Frazier and his research assistants literally cut up youth interviews and retyped sections onto large notecards into thematic subject areas (such as “recreation,” “gangs,” “religious participation,” “interracial interactions”). These notecards were detached from an individual’s other answers, from descriptions of neighborhood and family, detached from even a person’s name, coded so that they were anonymous. Some notecards and some transcripts of adult interviews included the questions asked and responses or reactions by interviewers, while others included merely the answers with a hint of what the questions might have been. My process for reassemblage and the creation of the “narratives” which make up the bulk of this dissertation began with this pile and a master list of the boys and girls, their addresses and their “socio economic class,” as determined by Frazier.

First, I literally pieced together the coded notecards to get a sense of both the fuller interview and the fullness of the person interviewed: the ways in which their answers flowed one to the other; what information they shared unsolicited; questions they may have had for the interviewer; and ways in which trends in their answers tell us something, give us a hint of their ideological frameworks, their core beliefs at that moment. So, the process first included a reassembling of interviews, then finding the community and family interviews with which they matched, then reading the interviews as a collection of a particular family or community several times, then crafting the narratives of individuals within that family, using census data and
contemporary maps and newspapers (black and white) of Washington, D.C. to help place these families or individuals both temporally and spatially within the city.

What resulted are pages of narratives of black poor and working people who were not the black aristocracy of D.C. These narratives underscore the complex social and intellectual lives of individuals in which they conceptualized for themselves and made sense of family, work, play, desire and sexuality, racial ideologies and segregation, violence and criminality, respectable behavior, community responsibilities, and the possibilities for the future. For many of them, the larger racial and cultural renaissance and early political and civil rights campaigns were sometimes mere backdrops to their already sufficiently full and necessarily dynamic inner, everyday lives. Focusing on this interiority, accessed through a sociologically created archive, provides important narratives of the variegated life and subjectivity that is human existence, an important component of our historical pasts and our present.

On Black Men

The voices of black poor and working class men are mostly absent from the narratives. Frazier’s papers do not have many full interviews with African American men. Many of the quotes Frazier used in his famous 1939 publication *The Negro Family in the United States* are those spoken by women about fathers and husbands. In the materials compiled for his research on adolescent personality development in Washington, D.C., some fathers are interviewed, as are men who have religious and civic affiliations or are at public events. I suggest that Frazier’s own biases on men’s roles influenced his approach to interviewing African American men, in that if

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men did not have a traditionally patriarchal role in the family or if they were reticent to speak, his research assistants seem to have passed them by with merely a reference.

Frazier’s *The Negro Family* traced the various formations of two generations of black family life and was lauded by Frazier’s professional contemporaries, peers and mentors, including Charles S. Johnson, Ira De A. Reid, Carter G. Woodson, and W.E.B. Du Bois. They found his empiricism to be beyond reproach, applauded his disaggregation of the black family, and praised his emphasis on the ways in which social and economic systems influenced different black family formations. For Frazier, absent black fathers presented a problem to the development of a patriarchal, and thus organized and functional, black family, primarily in an urban setting. Frazier maintained, though, that most men “deserted” families as a result of economic realities. He found that a “disorganized family” was a necessary adaptive stage in assimilation to urban living (as it was for most white ethnic immigrants). However, he noted that many “deserters” returned to their families, even after many years, often “disrupting plans [made] by social workers” for the family.  

In March 1965, Assistant Labor Secretary Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Policy Planning and Research, mobilized Frazier’s work on the impact of migration and urbanization on black families to support his claims about “the crumbling Negro family in urban ghettos” and its relationship to “welfare dependency.” While black women were at the center of Moynihan’s “tangle of pathology,” he blamed the absence of black men for the “disintegration” of the urban black family.  

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Indeed, black poor and working men are mostly silent in this dissertation, but they are not absent. Moreover, this silence does not connote family disorganization or urban chaos, as it did for both Frazier and Moynihan. It merely represents a silence in the archives that speaks to social science frameworks of familial gender roles. In contrast, black fathers and husbands were indeed present in households in Washington D.C.’s poor and working class black communities in the early twentieth century. Some were employed and lived in the home; many were un- and underemployed with alternative income-producing jobs, like junking, salvaging and reselling scrap metal; others were present in memory because they were deceased or were no longer living with the family either due to work or separation/divorce; still others come through in the articulations of their children. Many who lived in the home indeed did not have a traditional role in the family – they may not have been providing income to the family economy and/or were not the disciplinarians. Despite this, they were no less significant members of their families.

Narratives of Interiority: Black Lives in the U.S. Capital, 1919 - 1942

Chapter Outline

Chapter one, “A Chronic Patient for the Sociological Clinic,” focuses on how the archival materials that form the basis for this study came to be. Howard University’s sociology department was the axis out of which came a number of research projects on African Americans in Washington, D.C. from the 1920s through the 1940s in an effort to understand interracial relations and prevent racially motivated violence. Sponsored by the American Youth Council and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, researchers took an interdisciplinary social scientific approach to examining poverty, juvenile delinquency, and race relations, - issues they saw as the result of black migration to and the growth of the black population in Washington, D.C. The chapter situates black sociologists William Henry Jones and E. Franklin Frazier and their
approaches to their research, within larger ideological and methodological movements for professionalization in the burgeoning social sciences of sociology, anthropology, and in psychology and psychiatry.

Chapter two, “‘Dilapidated and Shabby’: Racialized Space and Spatialized Race in Democracy’s Landscape,” examines the relationships between space and race in the small urban capital as the growing federal presence expanded into predominantly and historically black and poor areas of the city. The City Beautiful movement began at the turn of the century with the intention of making Washington D.C. both a new imperial capital and an attractive place for tourists and government workers alike. As the Federal Triangle expanded, imposing itself on the historically black and predominantly poor Southwest neighborhood, city planners, over the course of the next forty years, threatened to redevelop these communities, so that displacement was always imminent for many black poor and working families. This chapter examines how African American poor and working class individuals perceived and negotiated the capital city’s geographies of race, reshaping the spatial conditions of their lives. Young people in particular articulated racial identities based on the social and spatial meanings inherent in the contrast of the symbolism and the Jim Crowed realities of Washington, D.C.

Then, because of the ways in which black mothers have been at the center of the so-called pathological urban black family, the third chapter, “‘I’m a Woman Who Knows Her Own Mind’: the Politics of Domesticity” reconstructs the narratives of several black poor and working mothers, highlighting the ways in which they took their familial roles and sexuality seriously, making conscious decisions about childbearing and childrearing, including the imparting of sex education; their conceptualizations of gender, domesticity, and their positions on the institution of marriage; ways in which they asserted authorial control over their bodies; and in some cases,
took advantage of the ear of their interviewers, ignoring specific questions asked, to express political ideologies and personal stories instead. While individual women interviewed (sisters, daughters, mothers, grandmothers, cousins, aunts) may not have invoked the words “new negro,” many of them, through their articulations on sex, marriage, family, labor, and leisure challenged existing gender ideologies of the time that emphasized feminine propriety and women’s roles within the domestic sphere.

Finally chapter four, “‘Rough Stuff’: The Politics of ‘Black Adolescent Personality (Development)’” foregrounds the voices of black young men and women as they articulate for themselves their views on politics and education; their sexual, racial, and gender identities; and possibilities for their futures based in their very real understandings of their present. The chapter looks at complex notions of leisure, recreation, and “fun,” which in many instances included individual and gang violence, and sexual and illegal activities, even when these same young people were involved in supervised and sanctioned recreational sports and hobbies. Chapter four highlights these first generation urban residents as they grapple with the new spatial, economic, social, and political realities of downtime.

Taken together, the sources, methodology, and narratives at the heart of “Narratives of Interiority” speak out beyond Du Bois’s veil. Here we get a glimpse of the production and mobilization of reconceptualizations of analytic categories by folks who often show up in social science as statistics: nameless, faceless, and voiceless, rendered only in the aggregate as an urban monolith. Here, domestic workers, laborers, unemployed and underemployed become audible through the discourse of social science, but we hear a much more complicated narrative than that presented by researchers, local or national policy makers, or the media. The expressions and articulations of inner thoughts, feeling, beliefs and
Philosophies of people who are usually silent in the historical record highlight human interiority in its myriad definitions and motley manifestations. The hundreds of pages of transcript, of both young people and adults espousing, offering up opinions, expressing views on varied experiences, suggest (and sometimes exclaim) a desire to speak, a desire for an audience, a desire to be heard and recognized. African American subjects involved in sociological research sometimes defied class, race and cultural categorizations, articulating identities that de-emphasized the artificial norms promoted by middle class racial uplift as the only vehicles for racial pride, progress, and (black) human existence generally. These articulations demonstrate that black poor and working class individuals had a more complex, ambivalent relationship to the concepts of double consciousness and dissemblance. Both Du Bois’s veil, as imposed by dominant white supremacist culture, and Darlene Clark Hine’s dissemblance, suggest that interiority is more often than not suppressed, proscribed by racism. Even if inner life is not always able to be fully expressed, it is nonetheless articulate and it always informs one’s humanity. In many cases, individuals like Alice Williams took the opportunities provided by invasive social science research projects to bend the ears of their interrogators.

The narratives of interiority that make up this dissertation identify and underscore individuals’ conceptualizations and use of social and cultural categories and expressions as constituted by the subjects of these investigations themselves, during a transitional and transformational period in the small, urban United States capital. Folks shared stories of regular dynamic inner lives despite and in spite of the material realities of economic, social, and spatial discrimination in the District of Columbia in the early twentieth century. In the following chapters, we see that black poor and working folks, young and old alike, understood, expressed, understood, expressed, expressed.

and in some cases, vented the contradictions inherent in the imagined and the experienced landscapes of the capital city, landscapes by which they were spatially constrained. Young people like Alice Williams spoke critically and with mastery about these juxtapositions, invoking history and practicing a politics of mobility throughout and outside the city, claiming their right to the city and reterritorializing spaces. Given the new #blacklivesmatter movement in the wake of the non-indictment of the murderer of young African American Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, it is incumbent upon us to listen to the stories, experiences, expressions of the non-elite so that we can see their worlds from their perspectives rather than hear others speak for (and against) them.

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64 Jessica Ellen Sewell defines these landscapes in the following way: “imagined,” how the built landscape is “conceived of and understood by individuals within a group,” specifically “culturally dominant imaginings” and the “experienced landscape,” how “actual people used [the built landscape] in daily practice, [which] is highly dependent on the social position of the person experiencing it.” Women and the Everyday City: Public Space in San Francisco, 1890-191, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); xiv – xxi.

65 Here I am rather rudimentarily referring to the “rights” that form the basis of David Harvey’s call for a reclaiming of these rights in his “The Right to the City,” where he defines them as not only “the individual liberty to access urban resources,” but also “the right to change ourselves by changing the city,” “a common right […] to reshape the processes of urbanization,” “the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves,” and “the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.” Harvey, “The Right to the City,” New Left Review 53, (Sept – Oct 2008): 1. http://newleftreview.org/II/53/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city I am also employing David Delany’s notion that Jim Crow’s system of racial segregation as a “legal landscape” produces experiences of “rights” and “obligations” related to location; Delany, Race, Place, and the Law 1836 – 1948 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998), 14.
Chapter One

“A Chronic Patient for the Sociological Clinic”66. Interdisciplinarity and the Production of Sources

The Negro problem was in my mind a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding. The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation. […] Whites said, Why study the obvious? Blacks said, Are we animals to be dissected and by an unknown Negro at that? [The Philadelphia Negro] was as complete a scientific study and answer as could have been given […]. It revealed the Negro group as a symptom, not a cause; as a striving, palpating group, and not an inert, sick body of crime; as a long historic development and not a transient occurrence.


In Dusk of Dawn, W.E.B. Du Bois outlined the intentions behind his important turn of the century sociological study on black Philadelphians. Forty years after the publication of Du Bois’s The Philadelphia Negro he articulated the goal of the project as the mobilization of “scientific investigation” in order to correct notions of racial inferiority.68 Du Bois reflected that his one-man study “revealed” what he saw as an essential truth: African American poverty had an historical and structural causation; long term environmental factors of racial and economic discriminatory policies were to blame. He relied on new practices of empiricism in the social sciences to help him disavow race as a biological concept.69 In what was at the turn of the twentieth century the segregated and impoverished Seventh Ward, Du Bois spent fifteen months canvassing some 1000 homes in Philadelphia, implementing techniques in urban ethnography like participant observation, census taking, interviews, and historical and economic analysis of government data that would become common practices for social scientists.

66 Alain Locke, Survey Graphic: Harlem Mecca of the New Negro, VI, no. 6 (March 1925): 632
68 Du Bois, Dusk of Dawn, 58.
69 See Du Bois’s chapters in Dusk of Dawn, “Science and Empire,” and “The Concept of Race.”
Du Bois’s methodological approach heralded a general move in sociology, which by the 1910s “sought to shed its ties to moral philosophy” and rather “presented an ‘objective’ picture of society.”\(^{70}\) Du Bois hoped, as did other black reformers and an emerging group of social scientists, that the professionalization of social science fields would help legitimize remedies for and theories about black poverty, licentiousness, and crime. Du Bois and later researchers would utilize the settlement approach to social change, which brought together personal experience and social investigation. Settlement workers, usually upper and middle class white women, resided within poor neighborhoods and reported on what they observed, bringing their own lived experiences to bear on statistical data. In the wake of the late nineteenth century revolutions in industry, scientific experimentation became the new research model.

Du Bois aimed to situate Philadelphia’s black urban conditions within the “industrial imperialism of America,” to show how African Americans had been “expelled from American democracy,” and “subject[ed] to caste control and wage slavery.” However, this desire did not preclude the ways in which Du Bois was, after all, a man of his time, steeped in the conventional wisdom of both late nineteenth century thought and of the charitable organization by whom he was employed to conduct the study. While explaining criminality as a result of a history of racial inequality, he also identified deficient behaviors and morality, and particular unwanted attitudes and proclivities of poor African American Philadelphians. He criticized certain black religious practices and choices made by folks with limited economic opportunities; he identified street and neighborhood life in poor communities as sites of danger and vice; and he privileged a

traditionally structured nuclear family above other family formations.\textsuperscript{71} These “pitfalls,” as one scholar calls them, demonstrate his “adherence to certain Victorian verities.”\textsuperscript{72}

Still, Du Bois’s use of empiricism to prove the environmental causes for black urban poverty heralded not only a shift in social scientific methodology, but a multidisciplinary approach, and a movement away from theories of biological determinism to theories of cultural adaptation. These latter theories would be further advanced by the Chicago School of Sociology at the University of Chicago. In the Progressive era, the Chicago School became the leading site for sociological training, producing “the assimilation model” in the new racial (and ethnic) sociology. The Chicago School emphasized Progressive era “democratic ideals,” promoting research that would inform social reform and mitigate the American modernization process.\textsuperscript{73} It initiated a number of community studies which centered on “race, the city, empirical methods, and cultural contacts” and made claims about “urbanism, immigration, and imperialism (the ‘racial frontier’).”\textsuperscript{74} But by the interwar period, social investigation became less interested in


\textsuperscript{74} Howard Winant, “The Dark Side of the Force: One Hundred Years of the Sociology of Race,” \textit{Sociology in America: A History} ed. Craig Calhoun (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 553; Platt disagrees that Frazier’s sociological methodology and theories were solely fashioned while at the Chicago School. He successfully argues that Frazier, as an older student who had already been teaching and writing, was influenced by Park but also veered from aspects of Park’s assimilation theory, especially around the role of class and economics in the process of cultural assimilation. See Platt, 89 – 92; Jonathon Holloway, \textit{Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunch 1919 – 1941} (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 131 – 132; 243n28.
amelioration and more interested in “managing social problems.”\footnote{Robert C. Bannister, “Sociology,” The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences vol 7 eds. Theodore M. Porter and Dorothy Ross, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 336.} This shift was partly fueled by both literal and ideological “border crossings,” the influence of German and Swiss psychoanalysts, and German and French sociologists. This shift from reform to management was also fueled by private philanthropy: the Rockefeller foundation invested several million dollars, as did the Rosenwald Fund, the Russell Sage, Carnegie, and the Harmon foundations, and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Many foundation managers were trained social scientists who believed that the production of scientific knowledge, in time, would, “in the hands of competent technicians […] result in substantial social control [emphasis added].”\footnote{Quoted in Dorothy Ross, “Changing Contours of the Social Science Disciplines,” Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences Vol. 7, 226 – 227; Lee D. Baker, From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race 1896 - 1954 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 151.}

The Rockefeller Foundation funded the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), which was founded in 1923 by political scientist Charles Merriam. The SSRC became the means by which Rockefeller funds were distributed for social research. While SSRC left decisions about specific research projects in the hands of investigators, it promoted new interdisciplinary directives that encouraged social sciences to work together. Merriam emphasized the psychological concept of “behaviorism” as the way to examine and ultimately understand the “capacity of the people” to fully participate in democracy in a period of “mass immigration, expanding enfranchisement, economic depression, authoritarian movements, totalitarian states, and world war.”\footnote{Ross, “Changing Contours,” 227; James Farr, “Political Science,” Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences, 315 – 319.} In the interwar period, the social sciences became fused with social psychology, psychiatry, and medical fields.
In the 1920s Washington D.C.’s Howard University’s burgeoning sociology department encouraged social science clubs and trained and supervised professional social workers and charitable volunteers who made the poor alley neighborhoods of Washington D.C. their laboratories. This interest in black poor and working people in D.C. had a long history, but it received renewed energy in the wake of the racial violence of the 1919 riot. Research into black poor communities was presented as a “study of race relations.” Howard University’s first black president Mordecai Johnson led the charge. Johnson would later become a member of the American Youth Commission, the federally funded agency that would produce seven studies on black adolescence in the 1930s. Johnson promoted a “multidisciplinary approach to race relations,” appointing Rayford Logan in history, Alain Locke in philosophy, Charles Drew in Howard’s College of Medicine, and Charles Hamilton Houston in the School of Law. Johnson was determined to bring Howard to its prominence as a “the keystone of change” in black knowledge production.

In 1925, Howard sociology department head, William Henry Jones was called on to conduct a 26-month survey, the goal of which was “to discover some of the social forces and factors which [were] powerful determinants of the cultural aspects of Negro life in Washington.” Funded by one of the many iterations of the Washington “Interracial Committee” that had been organized after the 1919 riot, Jones researched the *Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C.* Two years later, Jones undertook and published *The Housing of Negroes in Washington, D.C.: A Study in Human Ecology* where he stated that the 1919 riot had “resulted from the effects of a rather heavy influx of Negroes from the South into the National Capital

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78 Baker, *From Savage to Negro*, 176.
during the period of the Great War.”81 This “heavy influx,” also gave rise to a number of other residential problems: over-crowding and “congestion” of blacks in small, often alley, areas, breeding vice and immorality, isolation, disease, and general cultural “retardation”; “invasion” of blacks into white neighborhoods that resulted in whites moving out if they could or organizing activities to prevent incursion in the form of violence and/or covenants; and the creation of geographic (and mostly segregated) communities that were faced with racial discrimination and prejudicial treatment. Jones also accused the media of spreading “sensational propaganda [blaming] Negroes […] for the excessive amount of lawlessness of Washington.”82

Both of Jones’ investigations demonstrate the impact of SSRC’s focus on behaviorism and the emphasis on interdisciplinarity in examining race relations in the interwar period. Jones’ studies stressed “[…] human behavior and external physical characteristics […]” “To the sociologists,” Jones said, “behavior and forms of interstimulation are of vastly greater importance than the physical aspects of institutions.”83 Jones’ studies also reveal the new interest in urban leisure and recreation tied to black migration to cities across the country in the interwar era, implying a causal relationship between inadequate appropriate options for the use of idle time and racial violence.

A new feature of the modernizing urban city, organized recreation and leisure activities were elements of a new industry, with both free programs offered by welfare institutions and less savory businesses providing red light nightlife. Jones found that “the routinized life [of an urban center], along with mechanical and impersonal relationships, produces a great deal of social

82 Jones, Housing, 69, 86.
unrest and stress.” City dwellers required “relaxation and relief from intense psychic and muscular application.” And in order for black migrants not to revert back to “the old and more deeply-rooted racial habits,” the city needed to “control and conserv[e] play [….]” According to Jones, “the recreational side of life should be in conformity with the highest ideal.”

Jones’ “highest ideal” was one that was modeled on an upper class white American standard as the norm.

Jones’ 1929 black recreation study of D.C. made a number of recommendations. The first was “coercive legislation”: he recommended to Congress that inhabited alleys of Washington be “eliminated” and turned into “minor streets and parking spaces” or “demolished” altogether. He also asked for legislation that would “provide for a more adequate” District of Columbia Health Department. To the Interracial Committee for whom he did the study, Jones recommended that they, with the help of the Washington Council of Social Agencies, “appoint a ‘Standing Committee on Negro Housing’” that would work to “[prevent] the exploitation of Negro home buyers and renters”; drum up interest amongst “suitable agencies in the building of model Negro homes”; and “act as an advisory agency to prospective Negro tenants or purchasers much as the Legal Aid Society acts as the attorney or adviser of poor clients.” He also made recommendations to white real estate agents and the Real Estate Board; black and white property renters; social agencies; the black and white public; and white builders of black housing. Some recommendations were mostly admonitions for keeping rental rates and housing costs at “reasonable prices”; keeping property “in good repair”; entreaties against violence and other “lawless practices in dealing with Negro invasions [emphasis added]” into white neighborhoods;

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and against using cheap building materials in the making of black homes. Thus, Jones identified the ways in which structural, both legal and customary, obstacles were to blame. He also recommended some moral rehabilitation of black poor and working people.

Jones’ studies built on much Progressive era work before him that specifically linked D.C.’s “bad housing and neglected homes” with “moral and social standards.” Charles Weller, a lawyer by training, and his wife Eugenia Winston Weller, both active in the Associated Charities organization, produced their study on *Neglected Neighbors* of the Capital in 1908. *Neglected Neighbors* was replete with photographs that showed the “dark shadows” of these communities, including “idlers,” children under ten-years-old watching babies as their mothers went out to work; drunk “loafers” in the middle of the day; “the diminutive backyard”; illiterate white alley residents struggling to get a home on the outer streets; and washing hanging in these neighborhoods that would likely end up in middle class and elite homes after having been exposed to unsanitary conditions and possibly tuberculosis contamination. Importantly, Weller centered the symbolic significance of Washington D.C. by foregrounding these conditions to the backdrop of the Capitol and other federal buildings.

Interwar era social scientists like William Henry Jones made some of the earliest interventions into arguments about biologically inherent racial behaviors and cultural practices amongst African Americans. Influenced by Franz Boas’ anthropological work, sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S. Johnson, both African Americans and both students of the Chicago School, “abandon[ed] biology and mobiliz[ed] the concept of culture.” They shifted

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from a biological causation theory to a cultural one that saw more similarities between people of the same class than those of the same race.

The works of Jones and Frazier identified the lack of low cost housing, substandard recreation facilities, poor nutritional standards, high disease rates, and low wages as evidence that fetid alley dwellings and other impoverished sections of D.C. were not merely products of black laziness. Members of the black intelligentsia praised “the new scientific” approach “rather than the old sentimental interest.” Alain Locke, for example, believed it heralded a “cultural exchange and enlightenment,” an “era of critical change.” The New Negro would no longer be portrayed as “the sick man of American Democracy.”

It was not merely due to Frazier’s adherence to a combination of Boasian discourse and socialism that he identified structural economic barriers to cultural assimilation, which he saw as the ultimate goal, for both black migrants and white immigrants. The truth was that federal planning of D.C. spaces encroaching on mostly black poor and working class communities and an increase in African Americans in the city helped bring poor black communities to the attention of researchers and reformers like Frazier. Additionally, the Great Depression enhanced the economic crises for and economic discrimination of the large portion of African Americans already living in poverty in Washington, D.C. New Deal programs, as has been assessed by historians since and as had been assessed contemporarily by many local black reformers and political activists, continued to discriminate against African Americans most in need.

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90 Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” Survey Graphic: Harlem Mecca of the New Negro, 632, 634.
what Alain Locke identified as a movement away from blacks as “chronic patient[s] for the sociological clinic,” social scientists and reformers continued to research these communities looking for answers to poverty, health disparities, and behaviors deemed as culturally distinct. Much of what was theorized by social scientists in this period is rife with underlying assumptions about what is indeed inherent behavior, even as they attempted to disabuse the general public and governmental officials of just that.

While structural antecedents to poverty and crime were certainly at the center of black reformers’ and social scientists’ work in the interwar period, the social sciences played a crucial role in the construction of racialist ideologies. Both sociology and anthropology had developed alongside the eugenics movement and the rise of Social Darwinism. Despite a shift away from biological determinism, cultural practices and behaviors were still being associated with particular “racial” groups or ethnicities, specifically those of a certain class. While the “permanence” of biology gave way to the temporariness of a culture transitioning through the assimilation process into modern civilization, race as a concept and within a hierarchy remained central.92

In 1937, the American Youth Commission (AYC) of the American Council on Education, a federal agency that was privately funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, “selected” for a “special Negro study” the “problem” question: “What are the Effects, if any, Upon the Personality Development of Negro Youth of their Membership in a Minority Racial Group?”93

Patricia Sullivan, Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era; Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago 1919 - 1939.

92 Muhammad, The Condemnation of Blackness, 9; Baker, From Savage to Negro, chapter 5 “Rethinking Race at the Turn of the Century” discusses Du Bois and Boas and their roles in shifting this discourse in an effort to “assert racial equality” in opposition to both Social Darwinism and eugenics of the previous decades.

The national study aimed to “emphasize new ways of looking at race relations,” while straddling what project supervisor and sociologist Robert L. Sutherland called a “middle position between race as a biological [and race as] a social fact.”

As a result, sociologist Ira De Augustine Reid’s 1940 In A Minor Key: Negro Youth in Story and Fact was one of the first to be published in a series of studies about this particular “problem.” Then came anthropologist (William Boyd) Allison Davis and psychologist John Dollard’s Children of Bondage originally titled American Children of Caste (1940); Frazier’s Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development in the Middle States (1940); anthropologist William Lloyd Warner’s Color and Human Nature: Negro Personality Development in a Northern City (1941); and Charles S. Johnson’s Growing up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South (1941). The studies brought together experts from anthropology, sociology, psychology and psychiatry to produce a national “case study” and make recommendations for “changing stereotypes, education, social work, organized religion” and “lower-class standards.”

Davis and Dollard’s Children of Bondage provide a good example of not only the interdisciplinary approach of these studies but also the conclusions drawn that helped to reinscribe notions of a racialized and classed black culture in need of rehabilitation. Anthropologist Davis was the older brother of John Aubrey Davis political scientist and activist who helped to form the New Negro Alliance (NNA), which would organize the “Don’t Buy

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95 Ira De A. Reid, In a Minor Key, foreword by Floyd W. Reeves, director of the Commission; preface by associate director Robert Sutherland; 112; Robert L. Sutherland, “Report of Progress on the Negro Youth Study of the American Youth Commission,” Frazier Papers, Box 131-25, Folder 5; Robert L Sutherland, Color, Class, and Personality (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1942), xxiii, 79, 96, 110.
Where you Can’t Work” campaign against businesses throughout D.C. in the 1930s. His study, with psychologist John Dollard centered childrearing practices in an assessment of “the racial stratification of black adolescent personality development.” Davis and Dollard brought both anthropological and psychological theories and practices to bear on their research with black teenagers in the urban South. They posited that psychological damage of black teens could be traced to not only social disadvantage, but also to lower-class mothers who proved to be the “instigator[s]” of an “undisciplined, aggressive” personality type in their children.

Merging social science and psychiatry, Davis and Dollard blamed daughters’ damaged psyches and dysfunctional personality traits on their mothers’ inadequate childrearing. For example, the mother of 16-year-old “self-centered, exploitative, chronically aggressive,” “curiously infantile,” and “dangerous” Julia Wilson was found to be severely wanting. While Davis and Dollard agreed that Julia’s mother could not be blamed for not consulting a physician about the proper way to raise her children, for she could not afford such a consultation, she had engaged in violent fights with her husband over money in front of her children; she had cut short breastfeeding (likely because she had had to return to work); she had punished Julia for masturbating; and had angrily taken away Julia’s pacifier when Julia was 9-years-old. Using Freud, researchers like Davis and Dollard imposed harsh criticism on black poor and working class mothers. By labeling specifically single mothers as “neurotics,” social scientists focused on

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97 O’Connor, Poverty Knowledge, 65.
98 Davis and Dollard, Children of Bondage, 28.
99 Daryl Michael Scott, Contempt and Pity, 19 – 20; Davis and Dollard, Children of Bondage, 28 – 35.
“the moral rehabilitation” of daughters. Black mothers became saddled with the burden of responsibility for a functional and advancing black family.\textsuperscript{100}

E. Franklin Frazier’s studies similarly emphasized links between black family structures, class, and what he would define as both cultural and psychological pathologies, albeit temporary and mostly environmentally caused. Much of this theoretical framework is offered up in his seminal work, \textit{The Negro Family in the United States}. For Frazier, the black family was most functional when it was “established upon an institutional basis.” This meant that each member assumed their appropriate role as outlined by patriarchy: the father as the authority and the mother as “economic[ally] subordinated.”\textsuperscript{101} In Frazier’s opinion, the most functional black families were those that had descended from free blacks. Here “family life on an institutional basis [was] highly developed, […] and] closely tied up with the accumulation of property” and the roles of family members.\textsuperscript{102} He surmised that in the process of migration to the city, “family ties [were often] broken, and the restraints which once held in check immoral sex conduct [lost] their force.” “Social problems,” Frazier posited, resulted when “rural folkways” clashed with “legal requirements of the city,” specifically those that accompanied application for “relief.”\textsuperscript{103} Finally, migratory men, “roving black Ulysses,” and women who identified as single, left children behind, and engaged in sex work in northern cities, all represented “the final stages of demoralization,” “debris thrown off by a bankrupt and semifuedal […] South.”\textsuperscript{104}

In \textit{The Negro Family in the U.S.}, Frazier argued that while illegitimate births may have been an accepted and generally innocuous part of black southern rural culture, once “these

\textsuperscript{101} Frazier, \textit{The Negro Family in the U.S.}, 180 – 181.
\textsuperscript{102} Frazier, \textit{The Negro Family in the U.S.}, 205.
\textsuperscript{103} Frazier, \textit{The Negro Family in the U.S.}, 354 – 357.
\textsuperscript{104} Frazier, \textit{The Negro Family in the U.S.}, 288 – 290.
unmarried mothers[, often] a part of the great army of poorer migrants,” moved to the city, illegitimacy became “closely tied” with family “disorganization.” He noted an increase in “Negro children born out of wedlock” in black families in the period after emancipation and well into the twentieth century and made a correlation between the increase in “illegitimacy” and urban spaces. “City streets,” he said, “as well as the moving picture houses, theaters, and dance halls, provide[d] occasions for contacts which often lead to illegitimacy.” To be unmarried and pregnant, or engage in pre-marital sexual activity also marked a woman or girl as “naturally […] from the lower economic strata in the Negro population” because “as among whites, when [black] women and girls who have the advantage of education and economic security and the protection of family [became pregnant] as a result of extramarital sex relations, they [were] generally shielded both from the censure of society and from the scrutiny of social agencies.” For Frazier, without these economic and cultural resources, poor black women, as in the case of Julia Wilson’s mother, for example, would “naturally” pass on the behaviors of family disorganization to their daughters and ultimately find themselves in “Negro communities located in the slum areas of our cities.” Thus, Frazier made a link between the development of ghettos with particular southern rural migrant cultural behaviors.

Frazier’s American Youth Commission project *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, maintained many of these notions of what constituted a healthy black family organization. The study examined the psychological impact of Jim Crow discrimination on black adolescent “personality development,” In line with the prevailing multi-disciplinary approach, Frazier worked closely with premier psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan. Actually Frazier and Charles S.

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Johnson shared Sullivan on both of their studies for the AYC series.¹⁰⁹ Harry Stack Sullivan was an editorial writer and contributor to the new Psychiatry journal. He had formed, in collaboration with cultural anthropologist Edward Sapir, the William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation, which had offices in Washington, D.C. and New York City, and was considered to be at the forefront of “the fusion of psychiatry and social science.”¹¹⁰ In a memorial address for Sullivan given by Johnson, who was then President of Fisk University, Johnson credited Sullivan with moving psychiatry out of a purely biological realm, “plac[ing] new tools and materials that offer […] the first bright hope of understanding and controlling those group tensions and international conflicts by which our civilization is now so darkly endangered.”¹¹¹ Johnson posited that Sullivan’s emphasis on the interpersonal “[held] on to much of what [was] good in the biology of higher organisms, and along with this, much of what [was] good in the social psychology of the human young, in cultural anthropology and in linguistics epistemology, ecology, social geography, political science and administration […]”¹¹²

Sullivan’s work with Frazier in the middle states and with Johnson in the South led Sullivan to draw race and class-based conclusions about the differences between southern blacks and those in a “sophisticated Border city” like Washington, D.C. He found that skin complexion mattered and there appeared to be less “mid-Victorianism” amongst wealthier blacks

¹⁰⁹ Johnson shared the cost of Harry Stuck Sullivan with Frazier to produce Johnson’s research “on analysis of personality documents concerning Negro youth” in the South. See letter from Johnson to Frazier, January 20, 1939, Frazier Papers, Box 131-25, Folder 4.
in Washington. He also saw, amongst black young people, “inter-racial attitudes which [he] surmise[d] to be quite general in the United States,” specifically “antagonism towards whites,” which, he thought, existed in different degrees. Depending on region, he said, blacks exhibited either “diffident or elusive friendliness, and emotional responsive ness,” or an “unfriendliness, antagonism, or morosity.” Sullivan, like Davis, Dollard and Frazier, saw the mother’s role in family organization as highly significant. His psychiatric theory, “the good mother preconcept,” found that “a frustration in the elaboration” of a mother’s tenderness and cooperation for a child led to “promiscuity” in sexual relations and ‘superficiality’ in friendship relations.

Black women, mothers in particular, were “socially dangerous,” especially to their own children. For both black and white social agencies, institutions, and intellectuals, poor and working African Americans in growing urban spaces became necessarily associated with vice, or immoral behavior. [and] thus […] could be variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race; as a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class; as a threat to congenial black and white middle-class relations; and as a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment.

Mothers interviewed for Frazier’s adolescence project were asked questions about potty-training, breast feeding, weening, disciplinary practices, general approaches to parenting, lessons taught to children, and “privileges she allowed them.” Many of these mothers were migrants to D.C. and Frazier categorized them as southern rural parents who had “accept[ed] the belief that the Negro [was] inferior and that his subordination to the white man [was] inevitable.” This notion of inherent inferiority and resignation that Frazier ascribed to black poor and working

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113 Harry Stack Sullivan, “Chapter IX: A Psychiatric Gloss,” page 1, 2, 8. Frazier papers, Box 131-11, Folder 15.
117 From interview with Ollie Williams, “Alice Williams, WDC 1” Frazier papers 131-113, Folder 15.
parents was caused, in his estimation, by their “southern background[s], their traditional attitudes of subordination,” and lessons learned the hard way, as a result of “challeng[ing] openly the white man’s authority.” Mothers in particular imparted strategies for coping and getting along in the world that included “avoid[ing] conflict, ignor[ing] insults, and adopt[ing] techniques for ‘getting by’ [such as] ‘acting like a monkey,’ ‘jibing,’ flattery and plain lying;” and thus they damaged their children’s psyches, squelched self-esteem and ambition. Frazier posited that these behaviors were not evident in middle and upper class black households in Washington D.C.118

Not just psychology and psychiatry, social scientists also employed theories and research data from new medical fields like nutrition. For example, Marion Ratigan, a sociology Ph.D. student at Catholic University, examined four alley neighborhoods in each quadrant of D.C. in an effort to make a causal link between socioeconomic status and the incidents of disease. In the early twentieth century, tuberculosis had a high incidence rate amongst poor and working class black Washingtonians. But so did heart disease, hypertension, and just plain malnutrition. Ratigan counted stoves, beds, iceboxes, tables, dressers, overstuffed furniture sets, pictures on the walls, victrolas, pianos, and telephones in homes. She found that

people in the alleys are subject to disease – many diseases – not because they are ‘a’ people but because they are people – people who are subject to diseases associated with their low socio-economic status, with its piteous and devious occupations, dank and unsanitary housing, scanty and threadbare clothing, unbalanced and meager diet, abridged and neglected education, unwholesome and temptation – provoking recreation, and restricted and vexatious medical facilities.119

Ratigan’s language was a mix of structural causation and cultural pathology that she believed led to the pervasiveness of disease.

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Ratigan’s colleague Gladys Sellew had earlier lived in Union Court from February 1936 until April 1938 “in as far as is possible […] poverty […] in order to understand [her] neighbors.” Union Court was located in Northwest, bounded by 9th and 10th streets and V and W streets, just southwest of Howard University. Like Ratigan, Sellew, who identified herself as “of the capitalistic class,” having enjoyed the “comforts and luxuries of life,” including education, was completing doctoral research at Catholic University. Sellew believed that advancements in anthropology, psychology, and other biological sciences had proven that the distinction between the Negro and the white [was] not inherent, but rather a part of the culture of the present generation, influenced by slavery and the fact that the Negro has not yet been given free access to preparation for, and entrance into, the higher paid positions in industry or the higher ranks in the professional group.

Sellew too was an adherent of the Boasian discourse – that there were not biological determinants to racial differences and that an interdisciplinary social scientific approach had proven that. But by invoking racial slavery as a reason for cultural “retardation,” Sellew placed a particular racial culture on a continuum of civilization. Despite scientific advances, racial differences, even if not inherent, were significant. While Sellew thought that black schools should be responsible for instilling racial pride through a curriculum that emphasized “the achievements of [a child’s] race,” “it [was] self-evident that no amount of duplication of external conditions [could] make [Sellew’s] life like theirs” while she lived amongst them. “I am white,” she noted, “and they are Negroes.”

Sellew’s fourteen months were spent getting “a closer contact and a clearer, more vivid concept of the relation of poverty to the social problems [with] which [she] came in contact.”.

121 Sellew, “A Deviant Social Situation,” 16.
122 Sellew, “A Deviant Social Situation,” 42.
“Sociological poverty (to distinguish from voluntary poverty),” Sellew contended, “is the result and the cause of their economic and cultural social pathology. The concrete problems with which it is associated [are] to a great extent determined (free will enters in) by many factors of both heredity and environment [emphasis added].”¹²⁴ One of the most “ugly aspects of poverty,” for Sellew, was low nutritional standards and the impact on health and disease in poor communities. Sellew meticulously documented what she ate at every meal, how much of it was protein, carbohydrate, and/or fat. When she realized that many of the children did not eat breakfast or a noon meal, she began to provide meals for hungry children in the court on her small budget, also documenting the nutritional value of what she was able to afford to provide.¹²⁵

Not unlike other social scientific research of black poor and working people in Washington D.C., Sellew located at least one determinant of the culture of poverty in limited cultural contact as a result of racial segregation. In Sellew’s assessment, the culture of poverty “inside the home [included] physical depravation, dirt; anger and brutal punishment; ignorance and all the dangers which accompany it, and a standard of conduct based on fundamental, elementary emotions.” Whereas, “life outside the court,” especially for children, provided “relative physical comfort, cleanliness, beauty, gentleness, measured affection, self-restraint, and standards of conduct based on rational thought.”¹²⁶ Similarly, Dora Bessie Somerville’s Catholic University master’s thesis, “A Study of a Group of Negro Children Living in an Alley Culture” identified “illiteracy, laxity in sexual relationships, crime, vice, disease, and above all, an air of idleness” as a result of being “shut off from outside association [with] modern culture as represented in the schools, libraries, and playgrounds.”¹²⁷ Both Sellew and Somerville named a

¹²⁶ Sellew, “A Deviant Social Situation,” 120 – 121.
culture of poverty that manifested amongst black poor young people in licentious and delinquent behaviors and saw these behaviors as a result of the isolation caused by Jim Crow segregation practices and policies in D.C.

The focus on youth was partly a result of the early twentieth century emergence of “child science” in a number of disciplines, including social work, psychology, and psychiatry. The Progressive – era agency, the Federal Children’s Bureau, launched a number of programs including juvenile delinquency prevention programs, surveys of developmentally delayed children; promoted child guidance clinics, and produced advice manuals on childrearing and education. Juvenile delinquency was seen as environmental, but rather than address structural racism or classism, child science experts proposed medical and psychological treatment instead, including “mental hygiene” clinics and a visiting teacher program. Most of these services, however, were not readily available to poor and working class African Americans. Agencies like the American Council on Education and its commission on American youth under took research projects funded by the Rockefeller Foundation to study black youth and prove the need for federal intervention.\(^\text{128}\)

*E. Franklin Frazier’s Staff for Negro Youth at the Crossways*

In addition to engaging Dr. Harry Stack Sullivan as a consultant on the black adolescent personality development project, E. Franklin Frazier supervised four research assistants, called at various times “investigator,” “worker,” or “interviewer,” which is how he identified two of them in the book.\(^\text{129}\) Over the two years of research that it took to compile the interviews for *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, Frazier budgeted some $12,000 to support himself, an administrative

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\(^{129}\) Laura Lee and Dennis Nelson were identified as “interviewers,” while Ruth Bittler and Thomas Davis were “research workers.” Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, 295.
person, four research assistants, two of whom he delineated as “social scientists” and a
“psychiatrist.” Thomas Edward Davis, in his late twenties during his time as Frazier’s “social
science analyst,” was a native of Georgia and a resident of Northwest. Davis’s name can
mostly be found on community observation documents and interview transcripts.

Laura V. Lee was a mere 21-years-old when she began working with Frazier on the
project. Laura Lee came highly recommended, a “Washington girl who finished high school with
a good record and went to Mt. Holyoke,” where she had put herself through school and thus had
not been able to “[make] Phi Beta Kappa.” Frazier was impressed by the recommendations and
in her “honor work on sharecroppers,” which he called “a very excellent piece of work.” For
the duration of the project, Laura lived with her South Carolina-born parents, a railway mail
clerk and a grade school teacher, and her younger brother Richard Jr. Laura Lee was charged
with interviewing “lower class girls.” She became very attached to fourteen-year-old Susie
Morgan and after two years of interviews, she ended that aspect of their relationship, and instead
became more of a mentor, although she continued to document their interactions.

Dennis D. Nelson, almost thirty-years-old, interviewed most of the boys involved in the
project. Nelson was a graduate of Fisk University and had been a case worker at the Southwest
Community House for almost a year in 1937, which meant that he had some pre-existing
relationships with, and thus access to, boys and their families who were interviewed for Negro
Youth at the Crossways. Nelson used Frazier as one of his references on his letter of inquiry, but

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130 Letter from Frazier to Dr. Robert L. Sutherland, February 10, 1938, Frazier Papers, Box 131-41, Folder 2.
132 letter from Frances Williams of the YWCA to E. Franklin Frazier, February 24, 1938; letter from Frazier to Frances Williams, March 3, 1938, Frazier Papers, Box 131-33, Folder 29.
134 Susie Morgan, WDC 22, Frazier Papers, Box 131-112 Folder 11; Box 131 - 113 Folder 13.
also came highly recommended by United States House of Representatives member Herbert S. Bigelow from Ohio, who “admire[d Nelson] as one of the finest individuals of his race.”

Twenty-six-year-old Jean P. Westmoreland was a native of Michigan and lived with her mother and aunt while in Washington, D.C., both of whom had been born in North Carolina and both of whom were teachers. Noted black sociologist, Ira De A. Reid laid out Westmoreland’s attributes in his rather lackluster and matter-of-fact recommendation letter to Frazier: she had both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree, the latter of which she had received from New York University in “Educational and Vocational Guidance.” Westmoreland’s transcripts are the only ones that often included her own reactions and comments to subjects’ answers, intimating her feelings and attitudes about the lives of the folks she was interviewing.

Bernice A. Reed was a student of Frazier’s and had a Master’s in Social Work from Howard University. Lauretta J. Wallace was likely one of Frazier’s oldest employees. She was in her late fifties and a graduate student in Howard’s Sociology Department. John C. Alston was also a part time worker and a student of Frazier’s. Thirty-seven-year-old Isadore W. Miles who had a Master’s in Psychology from Clark University, was a teacher at Dunbar High School.

Finally, twenty-seven-year-old New Yorker Ruth J. Bittler was Frazier’s one white “investigator,” who interviewed white union leaders and gathered data on “community race relations,” having “access to the other side of the color line.” Twenty-four-year-old Zulme S. MacNeal was secretary for the whole project, which included the research conducted in

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136 Letter from Ira De A. Reid to E. Franklin Frazier, May 2, 1938; Letter from Jean Westmoreland to E. Franklin Frazier, June 14, 1938, Frazier Papers, Box 131 – 34, Folder 2; 1930 United States Census, s.v. “Jean P. Westmoreland.”

137 Letter from E. Franklin Frazier to Robert L. Sutherland, July 13, 1938, Frazier Papers, Box 131-41, Folder 7; 1940 United States Census, s.v. “Isadore Miles.”
Louisville, Kentucky. Born in Louisiana, raised in Chicago, MacNeal lived in New York for the duration of the project.\textsuperscript{138}

\textit{Conclusion}

Psychologist Dr. Harry Stack Sullivan was impressed by 17-year–old “Warren Wall’s” capacity for serious thought, his “unquestionable durable friendships,” and his “projection of personal experiences in his generalizations.” Wall, the pseudonym for Southwest D.C. teen Myron Ross, Jr. had, according to Sullivan, displayed an ability to “discriminate [Sullivan] as a person from ‘the white man’ as a generalized object of hostility.” Myron, Sullivan noted, “took himself, his past and the problematic future with considerable and rather realistic seriousness.”\textsuperscript{139}

The Progressive and interwar periods saw the solidification and amalgamation of disciplinary fields. Sociologists and anthropologists worked closely with psychologists, psychiatrists, and even medical doctors to assess, understand, and adjudicate race relations, and generally to produce knowledge on migrant and worker adaptations to newly industrializing labor and spaces. The Social Science Research Center set an interdisciplinary research agenda by awarding funds to certain projects. It and the philanthropic foundations that supported it were all administered by prominent social scientists. Both the approach to research and the social and political agendas of the research manifested on the ground in Washington, D.C. William Henry Jones and E. Franklin Frazier identified structural determinants for conditions of poverty and racial violence by shifting away from a biological causation theory. This shift was one many black and white progressive social scientists made. Frazier, and Jones before him, hoped to influence and propel social welfare policy to ameliorate economic and social conditions for poor

\textsuperscript{139} Sullivan, “Chapter IX: A Psychiatric Gloss,” 2.
black people in Washington, D.C, invoking the significance of the District as the national capital and thus a model for the country, and indicting the Jim Crow system of racial segregation. However, their work also reinforced the relationship between racialist ideologies and our understandings of poor and working class urban black folks, specifically making a correlation between poverty and particular kinds of behavior, including criminality, violence, illegitimacy, and truancy.\(^{140}\) This way of viewing urban African Americans continues to be “a widely shared discourse of what [is] wrong with black urban life.”\(^{141}\)

Researchers invaded poor black communities with their observations and categorizations, with their notebooks and their questions – sometimes they were welcomed, sometimes they were shut out. What they produced, though, interviews, surveys, and published and unpublished reports, provide a window into life outside their categorizations and research agendas. Seventeen-year-old Myron Ross, Jr. was not the only one who took himself seriously. Sullivan’s above assessment is evidence that interviewers, social workers, reformers, and social scientists sometimes, despite their inclinations for classification and the ways in which they were steeped in conventional race theories of the moment, noted the complexities and nuances of the personhood of their subjects. In spite of their harmful codifications, and maybe because of their political agendas of reform and amelioration, social researchers provided a forum for their mostly poor and working class black subjects to share unsolicited life stories, and to express opinions, beliefs, thoughts on an array of issues including segregation, education, leisure and recreation, work, religion, sex and sexuality, gender and familial roles, parenting, and politics.

Chapter Two

“Dilapidated and Shabby”: Racialized Space, Spatialized Race in Democracy’s Landscape

In 1938, forty-eight year old Ollie Williams had lived in Washington, D.C. for over twenty years. For most of that time she resided at 1635 3rd street, Northwest between Q and R streets. By the 1930s Northwest was on its way to being known as the section of D.C. that not only housed Howard University, but many of the black intelligentsia employed there and other middle and upper class blacks. It had the only black swimming pool and was in close proximity to Suburban Gardens, the black amusement park. However, when Ollie and her family first arrived to the Capital sometime in late 1917, traveling from their rural family homes in Gastonia, North Carolina, Northwest was a mix of native Washingtonians, black migrants who hailed from South Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland, and white ethnics from Russia, Germany, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. In 1917, Ollie, her husband Joseph, and their one-year-old daughter Helen found short term residence in Northwest with Joseph’s uncle and six other lodgers. Joseph got a position as a laborer in the U.S. Government Printing Office, which he kept until his death.

In the summer of 1919, Ollie experienced the racial violence that erupted on streets, streetcars, and even in front of the White House. D.C.’s four day race riot “was like war,” Ollie said. She recollected that “everybody was afraid to go out.” Eventually, though African Americans, many of whom had fought in the Great War, armed themselves, protecting their friends, families, and their homes. Ollie credited both her varied migratory experiences and her experiences in D.C. for her political sensibilities. While she expressed approval for some racial segregation, like at schools and theaters, believing that black-only spaces ultimately protected her children from racial violence and discriminatory practices, she also believed in “colored […]"
stand[ing] up for their rights” and in collective organizing against inequality. Despite not being able to attend, she supported the recent marches against police brutality that were being organized in the city.  

Ollie Williams’ fragmented narrative highlights several significant spatial realities of early twentieth century Washington, D.C. Between the post-Reconstruction period and World War II, the city experienced at least three waves of black migration that resulted from both perceived and actual notions of employment possibilities and the possibilities for social and political equality in the Capital City. The Great Migration not only changed the black population of D.C., it changed the political, cultural, social, and spatial landscapes of the city. It also informed the ways in which African Americans came to understand the stark juxtaposition of the District’s symbolic meaning, as the nation’s seat of Democracy, and its racially segregated realities.

When Washington, D.C. became the capital of the United States, its spatial landscape took on political significance. Simply put, D.C. had spatial meaning. Despite its emblematic aspirations, Washington D.C. had a racial and socially stratified geography. Landscape, according to geographer Don Mitchell, is “a form of ideology,” “a way of carefully selecting and representing the world so as to give it a particular meaning.” In the Progressive era, D.C.’s landscape became “an important ingredient in constructing consent and [national] identity.” Congressional decisions about the physical space of the city not only enhanced the symbolic

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meaning of the city, they also helped to “structur[e] material social relations.” Whether public or private, social relations of power are configured on and in space. Legal scholar David Delany calls these configurations “geographies of power” that manifest in exclusions, inclusions, expulsions, access, and restricted mobility, both customary and legally enforced. The District of Columbia’s geography of power materialized in the encroachment of federal buildings into black neighborhoods and the Jim Crow system of racial segregation. While streetcars and public libraries were not segregated, residential housing, employment, shops, restaurants, hotels, theaters, recreational facilities, public schools, sometimes streets, were all spaces that were legally segregated or on which racial discrimination played out.

This juxtaposition, between the “imagined landscape” of the capital’s symbolic meaning and the “experienced landscape” was an important part of the everyday lives of black poor and working class African American Washingtonians. As both Delany and architectural historian Jessica Ellen Sewell make plain, geographies of experience, the ways in which individuals corporally experience the built environment, are specific to an individuals’ race, class, gender, and age. What comes through in the following narratives of interiority is both an understanding and a contestation of the disjuncture between the lived reality, with its spatial and social limitations, and the national meaning of Washington, D.C. Through their articulations, their movements about the city, and their use of public and private spaces, black poor and working class individuals - migrants, first generation and longer term Washingtonians - express their national identity and citizenship as already intact, and especially so in the national capital.

144 Mitchell, Cultural Geography, 100.
145 David Delany, Race, Place, and the Law 1836 – 1948, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1998), 4, 5, 6 - 14
They challenged the manifestations of Jim Crow in the built environment and invoked their rights to the city by claiming, reterritorializing and repurposing spaces.

*Washington, D.C.’s Racialized Spatiality*

The 1948 Report by the National Committee on Segregation described the District of Columbia as “the Capital of White Supremacy.” The movements, dining, and leisure activities of the city’s African Americans, even its black elites, were proscribed by Jim Crow policies that became entrenched in the city during Woodrow Wilson’s presidential tenure. But the process of this entrenchment stretched back to earlier Progressive era reform initiatives. By the turn of the twentieth century, with the country’s new international prominence in the wake of the Spanish American war, city planners strove to bring the Capital physically in line with other world capitals, to make it “the show-window of the Nation.” The City Beautiful movement with its congressional backing, created a plan that included parks, parkways, federal buildings, and the monumental core we now know of as the Federal Mall and Triangle.

The new public spaces worked to position the capital as an “open air cathedral for American patriotism,” and “the Paris of America,” simultaneously attracting tourists and engendering national pride. D.C.’s black poor and working class communities stood in stark contrast. Lawyer and social reformer Charles Weller in his 1909 study *Neglected Neighbors: Stories of Life in the Alleys, Tenements, and Shanties of the Nation’s Capital* described these spaces as overcrowded “unwholesome hovels [and] plague spots” of disease, poverty, and vice.

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“nestl[ed] close beneath the window of the Capitol dome.”\textsuperscript{150} Because the Senate Park Commission was far more concerned with “the location of public buildings, preserving spaces for parks in the portions of the District beyond the limits of the city of Washington, [and] connecting and developing existing parks by attractive drives,” they generally ignored Charles Weller’s campaign to eliminate run-down housing.\textsuperscript{151}

But eventually, poor black D.C. communities, especially those in Southwest Washington, D.C., closest to the expanding federal core, would garner more and more attention from private charities and the press. Congressional committees “complained that back alleys were filled with vicious classes of people with unclean habits over whom it was impossible to exercise proper police or sanitary regulation.”\textsuperscript{152} A 1907 Civic Center Committee annual report noted the threat to public health, saying: “These dwellings often house our servants, and a large part of the washing is done there, and thus the filth and disease germs which infest these houses are not confined to their inhabitants, but are carried into our own homes.”\textsuperscript{153} Even Jacob Riis, famous for the demolition of New York’s Five Points and cleaning up the city’s drinking water, called D.C.’s poor neighborhoods “worse than New York’s,” and “menace[s] to civic health and breeding places of vice and crime.” He warned against ignoring the problem, saying it would “spread” and the city would ultimately have to “pay the bill.”\textsuperscript{154} The Civic Center’s committee

\textsuperscript{152} Gillette, \textit{Between Justice and Beauty}, 112-113.
\textsuperscript{153} Qtd in Gillette, \textit{Between Justice and Beauty}, 116.
issued a report that “blam[ed] congested housing conditions for both high incidences of disease and immorality, [and] claimed that inhabited alleys helped make Washington one of the most unhealthy cities in the nation.” The report called the conditions “truly appalling, in view of the facts that Washington is supposed to be a modern city.”¹⁵⁵ “These country negroes,” it said, “could reach higher standards; but as it is in their hidden retreats, they dwell in a state of arrested development…the poor man, bound to the treadmill of daily toil, requires all the agencies that can be provided.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, poor black migrant and native residents, some living in alley neighborhoods, came to be seen as a blot on the landscape of the capital. By 1914, the congressionally-sponsored Alley Dwelling Authority worked on a demolition and relocation scheme for many poor black neighborhoods throughout Washington D.C but especially in Southwest.¹⁵⁷

The Southwest community had a long black history. It had been home to both enslaved and free African Americans in the antebellum period. In the 1850s, Southwest had housed a mission and day school, established by formerly enslaved Marylander Anthony J. Bowen who had also assisted escaped runaways to Philadelphia. In the period during and after the Civil War, newly freed people settled in the conveniently located Southwest neighborhood, with its proximity to the shipyard and gun powder factory.¹⁵⁸ By the turn of the century, as African

¹⁵⁵ Qtd in Gillette, Between Justice and Beauty, 113.
¹⁵⁶ Gillette, Between Justice and Beauty, 113 – 114.
¹⁵⁷ Gillette, Between Justice and Beauty, 119; Washington Star Dec 27, 1908, May 6, 20, 30, 1907 (editorials)
American migration to the city grew, four and a half street, which ran north to south in Southwest, acted as a racial dividing line, with African American migrants and longer term black residents living mostly in blocks east of it. It was a “busy thoroughfare” of both black and white owned groceries and barber shops. By the 1930s, Southwest Washington D.C. was described as “run-down,” the “lowest section” and “a neglected slum area.” It was the home to night clubs, pool halls, “beer joints,” “a red light district,” including “Walter Johnson’s pool room,” “Jerry’s (Negro owned and operated) night spot,” “a vacant store, a whiskey store” “Mike’s Café,” and dance halls that came alive “when the first flicker of the […] lamps penetrated the farthestmost corner of the alleys and courts, and the huge arc lights provided by a beneficent government made Four-and-a-half street bright.” The elevated tracks of the Pennsylvania Railroad cut across the northern edge of Southwest just below the Federal Mall. Southwest was also the home to over fifty alleys and courts, interior streets that cut through blocks.

Alleys of the early twentieth century (and generally) had a particular reputation: they were thought to be transient places, and the natural and crowded homes of new migrants to any city. And in D.C., alleys were described as places with high mortality rates, incidents of disease, where “every kind of vice” could be found, including “robbery and theft,” drinking, and “family disorganization [and] illegitimacy” where individuals who had “no relation” to each other lived together and single mothers who had “no idea of [marrying] soon” resided. Black folks who

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lived in Southwest were considered “dilapidated and shabby,” just like the housing. Still, Southwest’s imminent danger of destruction did not seem to effect the arrival of African Americans to the city and to Southwest in particular, which in many cases was more affordable than other parts of the city.

Washington, D.C. continued to be a desirable destination. If you were lucky, you could secure a low level janitorial, messenger, or charwoman position in the federal government, as Joseph Williams had. Others though came to D.C. to be as near the flag” as possible, as one South Carolinian native put it. In her book highlighting three African American Great Migration stories, journalist Isabel Wilkerson identified D.C. as the “border crossing between Jim Crow” even though it was situated below the Mason Dixon line. Washington, D.C signaled the first stop on the way to the North and for those who stayed there, the Capital appeared to offer both the protection and the liberty associated with the North in particular, and with American democracy in general. Domestic worker Velma Davis migrated to D.C. a year prior to Ollie Williams in 1916, saying about her move, “Washington wasn’t the South. It’s the Capital, and you had more chances for things. Jim Crow was there, but it was still not the South to us.”

The National Committee on Segregation outlined some of the incongruities of Washington’s symbolism as “the city [...] of a nation,” “Democracy’s great stage” upon which

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162 Myron Ross WDC XIX, Frazier Papers, 131 – 112 Folder 13; Stanley Russell WDC XXIX Frazier Papers Box 131 – 112, Folders 6; Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards).
tourists and dignitaries alike from across the world came to see “Democracy in Action,” but where researchers and policy analysts found instead “that Washington [was] not a good salesman for […] democracy.”

In addition to discriminatory practices against an “African foreign minister,” “a Puerto Rican Senator,” “a Panama visitor,” and a “Hindu woman,” there were no accommodations in the downtown area; restaurants were willing only to serve blacks who stood at the counter; there was no taxi service; theaters would not admit African Americans; and “department store clerks turn[ed] their backs at the approach of a Negro.” The report even cited a dog cemetery that had “erected a color bar against the burial of dogs belonging to colored people.”

In housing, the National Committee described poor black communities in D.C. as “ghettoes,” identifying “mass segregation [as] a relatively new phenomenon in the Nation’s Capital” in the interwar period. This segregation, they said, was based on the “myth of a Negro invasion,[emphasis added]” here referring to black migration to the city. But while there had been spikes in black migration to the district, the report found that the population of African Americans had remained at about one-third of the total population over all even through the times of increases. It attributed segregationist policies to the building of new public, federal, and private real estate (“recent additions to George Washington University – forbidden to Negroes”) that had displaced large numbers of black families and communities. “Areas,” the report stated, “formerly occupied by Negroes have been condemned for government buildings, parks, schools.” As a result, mostly poor and working class blacks were “dislodged” and “crammed

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167 Landis, Segregation in Washington, 16.
169 Landis, Segregation in Washington, 22-23.
tighter and tighter into the already bursting Negro ghettos.” White associations of homeowners, initially organized as “neighborhood improvement societies, interested in such things as trees and flowers, schools and parks,” had “become actively concerned in the containment of Negroes.” As a result, pockets and enclosures of poor and working class “slums” had formed into “black belts” that appeared to “besiege the Capital.”170 Reminiscent of Charles Weller’s study of “alleys, tenements, and shanties in the shadow of Nation’s Capital,” the report included a centerfold of photographs of overgrown backyards with broken fences, trash and half naked black children playing “in the shadow of the capital” or “near [the] Senate Office Building.”171

The National Committee’s examination of “Segregation in Washington” identified a racial geography that interacted with but was little informed by class in interwar Washington, D.C. Even the District’s growing black elite class of doctors, lawyers, judges, educators, social reformers and government clerks who made their homes in the Northwest communities surrounding “the capstone of Negro education” Howard University were not immune to the limitations of Washington’s segregated landscape. Mary Church Terrell, prominent educator, D.C. Board of Education member, and President of the National Association of Colored Women had not only experienced racial discrimination while employed as a clerk in the federal government during World War I, she also lamented that “as a colored woman I may walk from the Capitol to the White House ravenously hungry and supplied with money to purchase a meal without finding a single restaurant in which I would be permitted to take a morsel of food […]

171 Landis, Segregation in Washington, 44-45.
unless I were willing to sit behind a screen.”

Black middle class movement, even for the purposes of consumerism, was contained.

Ollie Williams had been able to stay in the Northwest neighborhood, even as it had become more middle class because racial segregation had kept her rent relatively reasonable. She did not experience much of what Terrell describes, primarily because of her socio-economic realities. Somehow, though, between the insurance money from Joseph’s government job and $44 a month from “relief,” Ollie had been able to maintain a home with her four children that was described as “orderly and clean,” even though the furniture was old and worn.

While black poor and working Washingtonians may have been relegated to neighborhoods with poor housing and inadequate services and facilities, they expressed both their “right to the city” and their national identity through their geopolitical ideologies and movements outside of the places to which they had been proscribed. For poor and working class African Americans, both migrants and longer term residents, Washington, D.C. with its growing federal core, its symbolic monuments to liberty and Democracy writ large, was a field of action. They articulated their thoughts, feelings, beliefs about and solutions to the injustices of segregation and the inherent racial hostility of poverty. Less constrained by notions of acceptable

174 David Harvey defines Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” as “a right to change ourselves by changing the city. […] a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization.” See Harvey’s “Right to the City,” New Review 53 Sept/Oct 2008, 23. Lefebvre identifies the “right to the city” as a “cry and a demand,” “a right to urban life.” See Henri Lefebvre, Writings on Cities translated and edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 39 – 46.
behavior than black middle class Washingtonians, young people in particular reappropriated corners, sidewalks, doorways, playgrounds, and even national monuments.

**Susie Morgan: From Clarks Court to the Union Station Fountain**

Susie Morgan was fourteen-years-old in the summer of 1938. She lived in historically black Southwest D.C. Susie had been born in Maryland, “Westpoint” she said, and had moved to Washington, D.C. when she was two-years-old, accompanying her parents Oscar and Clara, and her older siblings, Joseph, Marcella, Dorothy, and Bertha, all of whom had also been born in Maryland. Rather than West Point, it is more likely that Susie and her siblings had been born somewhere in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, where Oscar was listed in the 1930 census as an oyster waterman, a Chesapeake Bay industry in which many of his neighbors, most of whom were black Marylanders, were also engaged. While it is not clear what motivated the Morgan move to Washington, D.C., initially they lived on K Street just west of 4 ½ street, in close proximity to the Southwest wharves. Maybe Oscar had intended to work on the docks, hoping his skills would transfer. By 1938, though, Susie and her parents, her older siblings, five younger siblings and a new baby sister resided on the alley behind C Street.

Clarks Court Alley was bordered by C and D Streets to the north and south and three and four and a half streets to the west and east. It occupied the other side of a section of 4 ½ street that housed some of Southwest’s “red light” businesses. Clarks Court in particular was treeless, “not well paved,” replete with “shacks,” lined with “piles of junk, trash, and tin cans,” and “piles

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175 Susie Morgan interviewed with Frazier’s staff person Laura Lee for over a year and possibly longer, as Lee documented not on that she and her mother had begun to spend time with Susie outside of research relationship and that Lee had begun to feel that the interviews were exploitative and noted that she would rather befriend Susie to see if she could help her change some of the circumstances of her life. “Susie WDC 22,” Frazier Papers, Box 131-112 Folder 11, 12; Box 131 – 113 Folder 13.
of fresh manure, the odor of which pervaded the air.” It stood in the “shadow” of the federal government’s physical presence, surrounded by buildings housing Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Depression-era agencies, like the Social Security Administration and the Railroad Retirement Board, buildings that by 1940 had replaced the black municipal recreational park Willow Tree Playground.

Susie Morgan’s home was “a four room shack,” with two rooms downstairs that were shared by Susie, her parents, and her nine siblings, who ranged in age from one to eighteen (three older siblings did not live at home), and two rooms upstairs occupied by another family. Susie was deeply self-conscious, even ashamed of her poverty: she lied about her address, saying she lived on C street instead, and had tried her best to dissuade the community center’s social worker and interviewer Laura Lee from visiting her there. She had also been observed fidgeting with her clothes, adjusting hand-me-downs that were too big for her, “tucking in frayed edges” of her old sweater, and pulling up or “tucking into her shoes” cheap, ill-fitting socks.

In spite of her shame, Susie was aware of the contradictions presented by the juxtaposition of the neighboring federal government and its symbolism of freedom and democracy with the geographically racialized poverty of her alley. Because of where she lived and its close proximity to federal government buildings and monuments, the fraught relationship between the imagined and built landscape of Washington, D.C. and the experienced landscape was likely familiar to this Randall Junior High School student. With this stark reality in mind, Susie moved about her city, knowing she was unwelcomed in many of these places, but claiming, occupying, and/or repurposing them in some way. Susie described one such example in

176 This description is provided by E. Franklin Frazier’s staff interviewer, Laura Lee, who was assigned to “lower class girls,” which included Susie Morgan.

177 Susie Morgan, WDC 22, Frazier Papers, Box 131-112 Folder 11; Box 131 - 113 Folder 13; “Development of the central area west and east of the Capitol—Washington D.C. 1941,” map available through Library of Congress http://www.loc.gov/resource/g3851g.ct001907/
her answer to a question about whether she and her friends interacted with the police. She and her friends, she said, “swam” in the Lincoln Memorial reflecting pool, much to the chagrin of local police. They evaded the officer by swimming to the middle and then they mocked and laughed at him, insisting that Lincoln himself had given them permission to be there: “Good old Abraham, he said we could swim in his pool.” When the police officer threatened to “beat” them, they goaded him, saying he would have to catch them first. Then they turned to Lincoln himself seated in his chair at one end of the reflecting pool and said, “Mr. Lincoln, you won’t let him [referring to the police officer] bother us will you, Mr. Lincoln?” To which someone in Susie’s group ventriloquized Lincoln, saying, “‘No indeed, you all stay down in there an’ swim ‘till you git ready ta stop.’” They then all thanked Lincoln in unison. When the frustrated police officer left to get help, Susie and her friends crawled out of the reflecting pool and ran!178

Susie Morgan may not have known that in 1922, the year before she was born, before she had even come to D.C., when the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated, “distinguished and well-bred” African Americans were relegated to an all-black section, separated from the rest of the audience by a dirt road. From his seat in this section and through the mud, educator and Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute successor Dr. Robert Russa Moton, who had been invited to speak at the unveiling of the monument, trudged to the speakers’ platform to address the crowd.179 Probably though, Susie and her friends knew that white children could be found wading and sailing boats in the same pool out of which they were chased.180

In knowingly inserting themselves into a landscape that sought to and had already, historically, dispossessed them, Susie and her friends adapted the reflecting pool for their own

178 Susie Morgan WDC 22, Frazier Papers.
179 Lewis, District of Columbia: A Bicentennial History, 75.
180 http://www.reddit.com/r/HistoryPorn/comments/2c6l0d/swimming_in_the_lincoln_memorial_reflecting_pool/
purposes, to “swim.” They, and other African American poor and working class young people, often cited that there was no pool for blacks in Southwest; the only pool was located in Northwest at the Banneker Recreation Center, clear on the other side of the expanding federal mall and triangle. White Washingtonians, in contrast, both poor and middle class, had some nine pools and bathing beaches to choose from in the heat of the summer. By invoking both slavery and its abolition, Susie and her friends asserted their natural and earned rights to Lincoln’s reflecting pool, even speaking for and as the anti-slavery president literally presiding over the space. In their play, they enacted their historical relationship with the actual place of the reflecting pool, cognizant of and mobilizing Lincoln’s significance as the United States’ president in the U.S. capital, as an advocate for African Americans generally, and as their personal advocate at this particular moment. While the federal core was literally accessible to black poor Southwest kids, these spaces, in spite of their symbolic embodiments of liberty, were designed for a public that in most ways did not include African Americans: the spaces were proximate, near, yet apart and verboten.

Susie also spent time in her old neighborhood, “down at the wharf.” There on a terrace above the street where “white people sat and ate,” black kids, according to Susie, “used to [stand below and] sing and [the white people] would throw quarters and fifty cents down,” making the children “scramble.” Sometimes they took the children’s photographs too. Susie insisted that she had never participated in this activity, saying, she “wouldn’t make no monkey of [herself].” E. Franklin Frazier wrote about this story in his section on “lower class youth” and “neighborhood contacts” in *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, ascribing “resentment” of “monkeying for whites” to

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182 The story is recounted in Frazier’s *Negro Youth at the Crossways* without naming the young person (to keep it anonymous for the study). A very similar story is told by Susie Morgan in her interview with slightly different information.
“middle and upper class Negroes.” However, it was actually “lower class” Southwest alley resident Susie who expressed disdain for this behavior herself. She added though that one day she had been “going by” and a quarter, seemingly thrown by a white person from this terrace, had “landed right in [her] pocket.” So, while Susie was aware of and even deemed as beneath her this self-deprecating behavior, she also understood the potential financial reward for this performance. In Susie’s words, she had then been chased by the police and “beat[en…] good, [by the policeman’s] hand an’ with a switch,” commenting that it was fortunate that the policeman had not beaten her with his club, which, she rightly recognized, could have certainly been fatal. The policemen took her home and insisted that her mother punish her with another “beating.” Clara Morgan promised the policeman to not just “beat ‘em,” but to “half kill ‘em.” Once the policeman had left, though, Clara Morgan gave her daughter a “five finger salute” and laughed. Susie said, “she didn’t beat us.” Her mother had performed anger for the police, seeing neither the criminality, nor the seriousness, of her daughter’s actions, and maybe even thinking she had received enough punishment from the treatment by the police. She did not chastise her for venturing too far from home either. Clara Morgan then tried to claim the quarter as her own, “mak[ing] believe it was hers, but,” Susie asserted, “it belonged to me,” implying that she had worked for it.

Susie Morgan moved fearlessly about the city claiming and reterritorializing spaces. She was an avid swimmer, swimming down by the Southwest wharves in the Washington Channel, despite it being dangerous and forbidden (a few children had already drowned there.) Susie also swam in the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting pool; she consistently participated in activities at the Southwest Settlement House, traversing dangerous sections of Southwest to do so; and she spent

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183 Frazier, Negro Youth at the Crossways, 72.
184 Frazier, Negro Youth at the Crossways, 72; Susie Morgan WDC 22, Frazier Papers.
many afternoons and evenings with interviewer Laura Lee and Lee’s parents in their home in Northwest, including requisite visits to Howard University’s campus, where Lee often took girls she interviewed. Susie’s movement throughout Southwest – from the wharves and Union Street north to the Union Station Fountain, to Howard University in Northwest – demonstrated the ways in which Susie felt the city to be enough of hers to move freely about it, proficiently dodging interactions with the police and assessing and navigating other dangers.

*Myron Ross, Jr: From lower Southwest, to Southeast, to Maryland, to the Federal Mall*

Myron Ross Jr. had lived in Southwest all his sixteen years and had seen the community physically change. In his early childhood he remembered this lower section of Southwest as “practically woods,” and the “back of [his] house” as “woods, too.” And for a long time, “white people never lived over in this section,” he said, and so his contact with them was mostly limited. He had had a paper route in Southeast where all of his customers were white. He remembered being paid well, but still said he liked working for black people better: “though white people do pay you better – Negroes treat you better. They just don’t have the means of doing the things they want to.”

While Myron Ross Jr. had only ever lived in Southwest Washington in the home his father had inherited from his parents, but which in 1938 was heavily mortgaged, he had had his fair share of travel experiences even at his young age. Myron had visited his maternal grandparents in Virginia sometimes and had gone fishing in Maryland; he had had conversations on the ham radio with a man somewhere in Africa, and was a member of the Boy Scouts, affording him a range of geographical experiences. His excursions outside of the city, like his “hikes over in Maryland for minnows,” when he was nine-years-old were often restrictive because “the pecks were so mean we didn’t go over there more than two or three times.” The
treatment he and his friends experienced at the hands of some young white people made Myron so “mad [he] could bite a nail in two,” he said. On one of his last fishing trips with his friends, they were hassled and run off by a group of white kids, who called them “niggers,” kicked their fish back into the stream, argued with them, threatened them with rocks, and menaced them with their dog, all the while “half grown white men” laughed and looked on from a bridge above. Myron Jr. saw this treatment as originating from “segregation ideas” and he would come into contact with them again at the National Boy Scout Jamboree in the Capital during the summer of 1937. “Southern boy [scouts],” Myron said, were as mean as those kids over in Maryland, but then he had been “treated so nicely, by boys from the West and North and from foreign countries, [that] we forgot about the little nasty things the Southerners said and did.”

The Baltimore Afro American reported that of the 25,000 Boy Scouts who set up their tent city on the Capital grounds on July 3rd 1937, 500 of them were black Scouts, including black southern delegations who were “Jim Crowed” and separated “from white delegates from the same states and given a special camp to themselves.” Meanwhile, the newspaper also showed images of white and black boys from Bermuda, D.C. and Cincinnati, eagerly trading badges, belts, and insignia with one another, echoing Myron’s experiences with “foreign” Boy Scouts. During the ten days of the Jamboree, Myron remembered “want[ing] to be white.” Because of the National Jamboree, African American troop members “went everywhere [white Scout troops] went – to Mt. Vernon and other places on the buses and hikes, and on all boat trips up and down the Potomac.” White Scout troops, Myron vented, “had everything any boy could wish for, [they] had the freedom of the city, and enjoyed good times in the city that even Negro Scouts

185 Myron Ross WDC XIX, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 112, Folders 6 – 11; see also Myron Ross Jr.’s narrative in chapter 3.
couldn’t enjoy here ordinarily.” In Scouting, Myron Jr. said, “a Negro boy is nearly an equal [emphasis added].” 187

Myron clearly understood the spatial realities of race: that segregation and its attendant racism manifested in attitudes, on bodies, and in spaces; that it mattered where and who you were. He said that he had never tried to go “places where Negroes weren’t allowed”; he had never tried “to crash where [he] wasn’t wanted.” He could articulate the “many crazy restrictions on Washington Negroes,” which included not only stores that did not “cater to Negroes,” white only theaters, and “separate schools,” but also that white people often refused to “address Negroes with Mr., Mrs., or Miss, […] calling them by their names, lowering them.” He had noticed that “white people address[ed] Negroes as Mr. or Mrs. if they [were] trying to get something out of them.” Myron Jr. knew that Jim Crow was complex in D.C. – that blacks and whites “use[d] the same waiting rooms at the station, and the same accommodations on buses, street cars, and taxis”; that “white people” sometimes came “to our church and enjoy[ed] themselves,” but that blacks did not go to “white churches unless they happen[ed] to be servants,” that blacks could not use the “same swimming pools or golf links,” and could not eat in white restaurants, or sometimes even get served, echoing middle class Mary Church Terrell’s lamentations. Myron’s experiences outside the city and with Boy Scouts from other parts of the country and world had proved both the existence of racist attitudes towards African Americans and the possibility of equal treatment in other places. Still, the limitations of Washington D.C. had an impact on Myron – he wanted to be an Eagle Scout, the “first Negro Eagle Scout in Washington,” maybe, but while he had been “scouting for three years,” he felt he was “stuck” without “sufficient trained Negro [Scout] leaders to help [him] reach the top.” He had met three boys his age from Cincinnati at the Jamboree who had made it to Eagle Scouts. It was times like

these Myron sometimes wished he could be born “again” as white. He admitted that many people had made “accomplishments in spite of color,” but “being a Negro put many disadvantages in your way.” “Being white,” Myron thought, “[made] all the difference in the world in success and failure.”

Myron expressed anger at the discriminatory and sometimes violent treatment he had endured, but he said he had “never had a fight with a white boy.” Recently, though, he had been “itch[ing] to take a crack at a white guy just to see if he can take it like he can dish it.” He was hoping one of the white boys playing in the nearby Hoover Playground would provide him with one such opportunity. Hoover Playground or Field was “an elaborate municipal playground for white children despite the fact that white people [did] not live in the immediate vicinity” of Myron’s lower Southwest home. Myron’s house was less than a block away from Hoover Field. He spent many an afternoon watching a handful of white kids playing, while “Negro children line[d] the fences wishing they could get in to play.” With a baseball diamond, a swimming pool, and tennis courts, Myron questioned how “so much space [could] be used for a few boys and a great number of other boys have so little.” The mere existence of Hoover Field and its close proximity caused Myron Jr. such anger that he had “tried his best to get one of the white boys mad enough to fight about it,” but as yet to no avail.

Myron’s seeming desire to be white and his eagerness for a fight both served as evidence to E. Franklin Frazier and his collaborator Harry Stack Sullivan that Jim Crow segregation indeed had a negative psychological impact on young black people. The “isolated world of the Negro” influenced “his outlook on life as well as his hopes and ambitions.”

Sullivan and Frazier both assessed that the segregation in housing and education, and the economic discrimination of “border cities,” like Washington D.C. resulted in “Negroes [who tended to be]

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188 Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, 228.
unfriendly, antagonistic, or morose.” “The border Negro,” Sullivan said, “struggle[d] with rage, […] fix[ed] on goals of superiority to whites[, which resulted in] anxiety, and protections against anxiety, compensatory and substitutive behavior,” like “a certain loud boastfulness in the presence of white bystanders.”

Despite this assessment, what is clear from Myron Jr.’s narrative about space, both the hyperlocal one that included the lack of privacy within but general security and amenities (ham radio, aquariums, library) of his home, and the limitations and dangers of spaces and places outside of his home, in the city, and beyond is Myron’s deep consciousness about the complexity of Jim Crow and what that meant for his relations with white people. The racialized spaces of D.C. also informed his understanding of future possibilities in the city. Despite what was deemed as his “isolated” black world in the segregated city, Myron Jr.’s access through his father’s ham radio operation, his visits to his grandparents in Virginia, his fishing adventures, his participation in the Boy Scouts afforded him a kind of cosmopolitanism that he took for granted, and which seemed to help him reconcile the inconsistencies of the built environment – the capital grounds of monuments on which the Scouts built their segregated tent city, but on which some black, brown, and white boys happily swapped belts, badges, and insignias with each other; Hoover Playground for white kids in the predominantly black neighborhood – and the experienced landscape, which included his parents’ roles in church and civic organizations, his mobility within and outside the city with friends engaging in leisure activities, and his choice to participate in the national organization of the Boy Scouts instead of “little athletic clubs in the neighborhood” and at school. These varied experiences formed both his understanding of the spatial dimensions and the structures of feelings of racial segregation and its relationship to economic discrimination in Washington

189 Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, 232 - 232 (written by Harry Stack Sullivan in his assessment of Myron Ross, Jr.)
D.C. Myron mobilized his relationship with both his interviewer Dennis Nelson and with Harry Stack Sullivan to access more movement outside of the city – camping trips with Nelson, and college scouting trips to Hampton and Fisk as a guest of Sullivan.

*Playgrounds and Parks in Southwest*

When Frazier’s white staff person, Ruth J. Bittler interviewed “the Boy’s Playground supervisor” about Hoover Field, which she described as “[the] white playground in Southwest Washington,” she was told that “difficulty [was] often had with colored children,” who “[stood] in gangs and beat up the white children on their way to the playground.” Either this was an exaggeration on the white male playground staff person’s part, or Myron Jr.’s sentiments were not his alone and other black boys had been more successful in goading a white boy into fighting. The Boy’s Playground supervisor saw nothing untoward about the white playground in the middle of the black neighborhood. He said, “the Negroes have plenty of playgrounds,” and saw the “gangs” instigating fights with white children as menaces. He was also looking forward to the government’s plans to “build new buildings” in the surrounding areas of the playground. But unlike Myron Ross’s father, who believed that as a homeowner he would be somehow a beneficiary to this urban improvement program, the white playground staff person believed that when the surrounding “houses [were] obtained and torn down,” he expected that “this section [would] go white and the cheap land” would encourage more white residents. The neighborhood then [would not] seem so much like […] a colored section,” a section in which he apparently was

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Raymond Williams defines “structures of feelings” as “affective elements of consciousness and relationships, […] thought as felt and feelings as thought; practical consciousness […] in a living and interrelating continuity. […] these elements [are] a structure, a set, with […] interlocking relations [that are also] in tension.” Generally “taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating,” they speak to not only the ongoing process that is the attempt to understand these “affective elements,” feelings, but also to the process of cultural formation. See Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), specifically his chapter nine, “Structures of Feeling.”
not happy to be working.\textsuperscript{191} In contrast to Myron Ross Jr.’s lamentation on the injustice of having the vacant lot in black Southwest turned into the white only Hoover Field, the staff person not only did not see the injustice but he was eager to eliminate African Americans from Southwest altogether. He saw proposals for urban renewal as the solution, while Myron Ross Sr. believed proposed projects for the improvement of Southwest would likely increase his property value, not take his property away.

Thomas E. Davis’s “summary” of his visits to playgrounds for African Americans in Washington, D.C. in 1937 and 1938 concluded that while playgrounds “provide[d] an almost adequate amount of recreational activity for children up to 15 years,” there was little for “those older and for adults.” Staff seemed less inclined and maybe even less capable of providing supervision over and designing activities for teenagers. Moreover, the facilities often closed at 7 p.m. and so were not available to young people or adults who worked during the day and whose evenings were free. Davis also found that although “most boys carried knives, ice-picks, or sharpened beer can openers for use in fights,” altercations seldom happened on the grounds during playground hours. If for example the playground was located near a wooded area, fights or sex might happen there, “but mostly after the grounds [were] closed.”\textsuperscript{192} For Frazier, the mere existence of fights or sexual activity represented a deficiency and need in terms of facilities. Congestion in playgrounds, the absence of trees for shade, and staff not interested or capable of fully engaging young people all represented an opportunity for increased funding to more fully equip and expand spaces, as well as adding amenities, specifically swimming pools for poor and working class African Americans in particular.

\textsuperscript{191} “White Playground in Southwest Washington,” Frazier Papers Box 131-41, Folder 8.
\textsuperscript{192} “Negro Playgrounds in Washington, D.C.,” Frazier Papers Box 131-41, Folder 8.
Southwest D.C. had one municipal playground. It had replaced Willow Tree Alley sometime before World War I, and by 1940, had been replaced by federal buildings. Located at the northeastern section of Southwest, just below the National Mall and what would become the south side of museum row, Willow Tree Playground was on almost two acres of land, surrounded by a fence, and had cost the federal government $25,000 for its construction and its equipment. It included a “shelter house,” a fountain, a piano, five benches, three “baby swings,” eight regular swings, eight see-saws, two slides, one sandpile, a small wading pool for “small children,” two “kindergarten tables,” one “kindergarten bench,” one set of parallel bars, one balance bar, two “tether poles,” a baseball area, a basketball court, and a tennis court. In 1924, the playground recorded over 16,000 young people participating in various activities including baseball, basketball, soccer, tennis, “schlag,” storytelling, and kindergaten programming. It was staffed by a groundskeeper and a “director.”

By the hot July afternoon in 1938 when it was surveyed for Frazier’s project, the playground had added a dodge ball court, a place to play horseshoes, and a “small grove of willow trees.” Willow Tree Playground served a “free lunch around noon” and on many days they saw as many as 400 young people, according to the director, Mrs. Robinson. Mrs. Robinson described the surrounding community of Southwest as not only a “red light district,” but also a section where “folks don’t believe in marriage,” where “some children don’t even know who their parents are.” Robinson had been supervising the playground for nearly twelve years and she described her long hours and the multiple projects for which she was responsible. A large “pile of trash, some of which had been burned,” sat in the middle of the playground as Robinson lamented that she got little help from her assistants and only a mere “$1560 a year,” equivalent to

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approximately a $25,000 contemporary annual salary. It was “no easy job,” she said, supervising all the children, mediating disputes, of which she said there was plenty because “these boys and girls don’t know anything but cutting with knives and throwing rocks; they want to fight all the time,” and “they will steal anything they can get their hands on.” Despite Robinson’s description, on that day in July Davis found some kids were having “an impromptu track meet,” a group of girls sat in a corner “making raffia baskets,” supervised and assisted by two blue-uniformed women, “a group of small kids play[ed] in a large sand box,” and two games of chess – one between “two old men” and one between “two little boys” took place at some lunch tables. When one boy threatened to throw a rock at another child, Mrs. Robinson interrupted her interview to intervene. Then she stepped into the “field house for a minute or two [to] get a little rest.” At which point, a “white policeman came on the grounds and walk[ed] slowly around near the field house.” His presence did not go unnoticed by most of the children. It caused a “silence” to come over the playground, specifically amongst “many of the kids who had been quite noisy.” But, “several groups of [adolescent] boys, paid no attention to him when he approached” them. Instead they maintained their “engage[ment] in some activity.”

There were rumors, according to Mrs. Robinson, “that they [were] going to close this playground and put some government building down here.” Robinson hoped it was not the case, saying, “these kids really need this place. They do not have any place to play.” Despite Mrs. Robinson’s general opinion about the inherent nature of the kids from Southwest, and their parents, she expressed the importance of a recreational place for them. Willow Tree Playground was of significant importance in Southwest as the only black playground that was open year round. The other youth recreational spaces were those connected with schools, like the A. J. Bowen schoolyard and the Randall Junior High School recreation center, only open during
school hours. Robinson thought that the park was “a lovely place. The prettiest we have” in Southwest.

But by 1940, the block Willow Tree Playground sat on would house the new Social Security Building. For young people who frequented Willow Tree it was not only some place they were fed, it was a free and open space, a space of beauty, and a place where they got an opportunity to engage with their peers socially, and in play, feeling free enough to act out. It was also a place where children did not forget and continued to learn about their racial and positional identities, both through the tough love surveillance of Mrs. Robinson and her staff and that of the more powerful state. Just five days before Frazier’s interviewer made his visit to Willow Tree Playground, D.C.’s Communist Party had staged a protest against police brutality. Some 2000 people, mostly African American, and many children and young people carrying placards inscribed with “You May be Next,” and “Stop Police Murders” or comparing D.C. to Scottsboro, marched through Northwest, while “10,000 sympathizers watch[ed] from the sidelines.”¹⁹⁴ So, the children’s fearful and vigilant response to the police officer’s walk-through in Willow Tree Playground, as well as the conscious nonchalant defiance of the teenage boys evidenced the clear and multiple understandings of and the negotiations young people had with both whiteness and state sponsored violence even in a space they partly, at least, felt was theirs.

Frazier noted that public spaces like Willow Tree Park were not frequented by middle and upper class black Washingtonians, who preferred “conspicuous consumption,” travel, club and college fraternity activities, the Elk’s Lodge, and, through the privilege of mobility and income, access to places like the amusement park Suburban Gardens and Highland Beach in Maryland. For someone like fourteen-year-old Southwest resident and Randall Junior High

School student Esther Wright, whose father, Robert, was a “laborer,” and whose mother, Lula, was a domestic, black amusement park Suburban Gardens or the E. Madison Hall Excursion Boat were financially inaccessible. Esther “dislike[d] sittin’ in the house all the time,” a comment made almost under her breath to Laura Lee as they sat on The Speedway at Potomac Park for her interview the day before July 4th in 1938.195

Located in the Deanwood neighborhood of Northeast Washington, D.C., Suburban Gardens was seven acres of “pleasure park,” with “a large dancing pavilion,” a caterpillar ride, a roller coaster, a ferris wheel, owned and operated by the black – owned real estate company Universal Development and Loan. Photographer and black Washingtonian, Addison Scurlock, whose studio was located in Northwest on U Street, photographed Suburban Gardens in the 1920s showing well-dressed black families lounging on benches, congregating under shade trees, and queuing for rides.196 So, in addition to Banneker Recreation Center in Northwest, middle class African Americans could also frequent Suburban Gardens’ “$50,000 crystal swimming pool” filled with “pure filtered water.”197 Few poor and working class blacks would ever visit Suburban Gardens, instead they had to rely on local community organizations.

The Southwest Community Center

Southwest was described as being devoid of any “community institutions.” But Susie Morgan, Myron Ross, Jr., and Esther Wright all frequented the Southwest Settlement House, one of the only remaining black settlement houses in Washington, D.C. by 1938. When references to the Southwest Settlement, sometimes called Community, House or Center did not show up in the

195 Esther (Wright), 3rd interview, Frazier Papers 131 – 112 Folder 12.
197 Washington Tribune advertisement 1921.
musings and articulations of young people or their parents, the interview was often happening on
site at the House. Located at the corner of Second and E Streets, the community institution
emerged out of the “zeal” of Alma J. Scott, the director of the Southwest House. According to
the nursery school staff person Lillian Dotson, Scott, a “‘socially minded’ Negro in the
Northwest section of Washington,” had lobbied the National Women’s Christian Temperance
Union in the early 1920s for funds to support the initiative. Scott, who had lived through D.C.’s
1919 riot, was spurred by the case of convicted murderer, young African American Josephine
Berry, twenty-two and a mere 78 (or 90) pounds depending on whether the Baltimore Afro
American or the Washington Post was reporting. Berry had killed her “rival” Ada Bush in the
months after D.C.’s Red Summer.198

In contrast to the reports in 1920 of Berry and her commuted sentence, which identified
her victim as another young woman, intimating that they had fought over a beau, Scott, when she
was interviewed in 1938 told a slightly different story, that of a young woman who had killed a
young man, portraying both as “victims of circumstance,” “unfortunate people [who] had been
neglected by the more fortunate ones and who were left to seek their own forms of recreation.”
Scott, and the 1932 article that had interviewed her staff person Lillian Dotson, both noted that
Scott had “made some investigations” into the young woman’s life, “survey[ing] the living
conditions in the S.W. section in order to find the causes behind the killing.” Scott, “horrified” at
her findings, “immediately began agitation for doing something about it.” Out of this agitation

198 “Saves Girl From Gallows: President Wilson Commutes Sentence of Josephine Berry,” The
American; “D.C. Southwest Community House Result of Dreams of Founder,” Nov. 5, 1932, The
Baltimore Afro American.
came the idea for a settlement house in Southwest to serve, according to Alma Scott, a neighborhood of “slums, alley dwellings, poor housing, vice, crime, etc.”  

Southwest Settlement House began in 1921 as the “Mother-Child Center,” both as a result of Alma Scott’s presence at and pressure on the WCTU meeting to “sponsor” a settlement house in Southwest Washington D.C “for the Negro.” But also likely the initiative was a part of a national “professional” movement in reform, which included parent education in childrearing methods and baby wellness centers. For example, just a few doors down from the House, was the Mothers Health Association, which provided “scientific methods of contraception,” and a clinic twice a week “for white patients” and “for colored patients.” In their promotional materials, they cited three of Southwest’s five Census Tracts as ones where there was a high rate of: “children committed to institutions and placed on probation by the Juvenile Court,” “juvenile delinquency,” “deaths from tuberculosis,” “infant mortality,” and “stillborn babies,” so clearly a community ripe for their services.

In its earliest iteration, the Southwest Settlement House offered mostly nursery services at its L Street and South Capitol location on the border of Southeast. But by 1932 it had grown and had moved to its third location from Third Street between F and G streets to Second and E Streets. In addition to its nursery school services, it also offered a daily food pantry, “distributing from 250 to 300 loaves of bread to needy families every day”; space for an array of


201 “Mothers Health Association” flyer, Frazier Papers 131 – 132 Folder 9.
youth club meetings including the Girl Reserves Club, the Soap Culture Club, the Boys Scouts, Dramatic Clubs, the Junior Art Club; and parent education training, including the “Mothers and First Aid” clubs, which hosted speakers from Howard University. Its third home in Southwest, a three-story building on the corner of Second and E Street, “formerly the Old Trent Saloon,” had “10 or 11 rooms.” The first floor, which still looked like “the old saloon” held “two ping pong tables, a pool table and a piano,” and a “quiet” part, where girls played “jig saw puzzles and jacks, etc.” While the boys mostly used the area with the pool table and the piano, milk for babies was “dispensed” from the old bar.

The second floor had a kitchen, “a room used for eating purposes” and another space for “club meetings and activities that necessitate[d] the use of tables and chairs (i.e. drawing, etc.),” Scott’s office, and another “general reception room” that also doubled as a room for club meetings. The top floor housed the nursery school program, which included two staff bedrooms, three other rooms, and a “bath,” and served about fifteen children a day from 7 a.m. until sometimes “after nine if the mother ha[d] to work overtime.”

While there was a service and a membership fee for participation in House activities, “no one pays.” At the nursery school, “no child [was] turned away” if the mother could not afford the “25 cents per day per child,” and the child received three meals a day. While the House was not able to afford medical staff for the nursery school, they received the services of a few “volunteer doctors.” In addition, the National Youth Administration provided some funds to supplement salaries for nursery school staff, who made home visits to meet with parents. The House also employed a full time “girls worker” and a full time “boys worker.” Alma Scott reported that some “60,000 [children] go through the house in one year,” and that “at present […] there were

800.” But interviewer Ruth Bittler, in her transcript, cautioned that the numbers were not to be “taken too literally,” because funding from the Community Chest was “based on attendance figures,” and she reasoned that the numbers were probably inflated.

During the summer the street was closed and became a volleyball court with net and all, and kids played across the street in a schoolyard, because there was “no yard except a few feet in front” of the building. Classes offered included: boxing, “gymnastic stunts,” nature study class, arts and craft, and a clay modeling class. There were also numerous sports activities and games, like basketball, dodge ball, ping pong, checkers, baseball, softball. Friday evenings often included a “planned party (to encourage regular attendance)” and young people received “lecture[s] on character building” by Father O’Neill of the St. Vincent DePaul Catholic Church. As a space for young people, aimed at “giv[ing] youth a chance for full development into manhood and womanhood unhampered by the lack of proper facilities,” and “safeguard[ing] youth by giving them the opportunity of wholesome recreational facilities through an adequate supply of outlets, that delinquency may always be at a minimum,” the Southwest House had a full schedule of activities, clubs, classes, and talks.

Young people certainly took advantage of the Southwest House. Seventeen-year-old James Richmond and his two friends Morris Carter, 19, and Kenneth Freeman, 15, spent part of their days (“after school hours, on weekends and throughout the summer months”) at Southwest Community House. The other part of their days they spent out front of Morris Carter’s father’s Funeral Parlor, just a few doors down from Southwest House, “lolling about” “on the corner of two of the most run-down streets in the roughest neighborhood of Southwest.”

James Richmond was from “a very poor family; his father [who had been a janitor was] deceased, his mother a domestic.” Like many other young people in Southwest, and other poor and working

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203 James Richmond, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 111, Folder 8.
class black neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., James “live[d] with his mother and aged
grandparents and a number of disreptable [sic] roomers,” according to his interviewer, on H
Street between I and the Randall Recreation Center. That is, James, like Susie Morgan, Myron
Ross Jr. and other young residents of Southwest, lived in a full house. For this reason, James,
“seldom [went] home and when he [did] he [could] usually be seen walking in and out of the
house with food in his hand in order that little time be lost getting back to his companions several
blocks away.” While James did not belong to any “clubs at the Settlement House,” daily he could
be found there watching “Kenneth and Morris play ping-pong or pool.”

Fourteen-year-old James Gray was a member of one of the settlement house’s sponsored
programs, the Southwest Junior Athletic Club. James, who lived around the corner from
Southwest House and whose younger sister was amongst a “group of [Southwest House] girls
[…] edit[ing] a community paper,” had been “chosen to head [her] club.” He was an avid
craftsman, with many “unglazed clay pieces” stored in the kitchen at “the Center,” including “an
elephant, a football player in a crouched position and a baseball player, all about eight inches
high [with a] depth of several inches.”

Many of Susie Morgan’s interviews took place at the Southwest Community House, a
location she preferred to her cramped and ill-equipped alley abode. At the Center, Susie
intermittently participated in the Girls Reserve Club and the girls’ baseball team. Two of her
sisters, Dorothy, 18, and Catherine, 13, both also attended activities at the Settlement House.
Catherine had marched as part of the Southwest Community House section in the Youth
Parade, where the Settlement House was represented by “girls pushing baby carriages gaily decorated in
crepe paper” and a contingent of girls on roller skates, sporting their Girls Reserve “sweaters

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204 James Richmond, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 111, Folder 8.
205 WDC XVIII (James Gray), Frazier papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111
Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
bearing the Girl Reserves triangle” badge. “In comparison with the colored Settlement Houses,” wrote Susie’s interviewer Laura Lee about Southwest House in the Youth Parade, Southwest House “made a good showing as only one of the two remaining houses participated.”206

The Southwest Community House also served as a meeting place for many neighborhood adult associations, organizations, and groups. Despite, or maybe because of Southwest Community House’s social service “purpose,” and its religious and moral imperative “to spread the spirit of Christian fellowship and brotherly love” and “to help [the community] understand the spirit of Jesus Christ and practice it in their daily life,”207 the House played important social and political roles in the community, and for African Americans these two were often tied. Director Alma Scott was personally involved in organizing a “citizen’s committee to prevent the opening of a liquor store in the vicinity of the Settlement House,” reminding us of her earlier relationship with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union.208

On the last Monday of each month, the Southwest Civic Association, headed by funeral director John T. Rhines, met at the Southwest Community Center. Like Myron Ross Sr., Rhines was a longtime resident of Southwest and he too lamented the many black Southwest residents he had known, doctors in particular, who had “made their money off” of Southwest patients, and then “moved up to Northwest on You Street,” “instead of staying down here and making these property owners improve the property and make this section better.”209 Rhines supported the New Negro Alliance’s (NNA) campaigns against local businesses, “to get some Negro workers in these Sanitary and High ice cream stores and other stores down here,” which, he said, “[had]
about 90% Negro patronage,” but no black employees. Rhines recounted a dispute, a “personal fight” he called it, that he had been having with the People’s Drug Store in Southwest. The drug store chain was one of the businesses the NNA was picketing. A young girl had gone in to the Southwest store to buy a quart of ice cream. She had sat at the counter to wait for her order and the manager, according to Rhines, “[took] her by the arm and pull[ed] her out.” Rhines “raised hell, wrote some letters and everything.” But, he said, his actions had been to no avail.

On the early fall day in 1938, Rhines expressed his anger with police commissioner Major Brown to whom he had advocated for a police athletic boys club for African American boys in Southwest. Instead, Brown had “put a white club down here,” promising “they would make [Southwest] the next one.” Rhines believed that as a result of the boys club “juvenile delinquency for the whites [had] steadily decreased while that [of] the Negro boys [had] steadily increased.” Furthermore, Rhines was angry that his regular contributions to “the police boys clubs” had not been spent in his community. He thought that poor and working class boys, without access to “a small job and some place to play,” could not really be “blame[d] too much.” Southwest people, Rhines believed, “live[d] within their means and not over them,” and deserved “some real work done” in the community, which he described as a “good” one.

Southwest Settlement or Community House was an important institution in the Southwest community. It was not only a meeting and organizing place for Southwest adults, it also provided a relatively safe place for young people, many of whom lived in poverty and near poverty, and in over-crowded homes too small for the family even, but which nonetheless took in lodgers to help supplement the family economy. Some young people negotiated neglect at home, while others experienced safety, security, and care there, both often experienced the struggles of

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economic limitations. Either way, Southwest House was a second home, a place to spread out, to play and argue, to do homework or make (and store) art in a quiet corner, to access adults whose job it was to be attentive; Susie Morgan sometimes came to Southwest House to “help” out rather than to socialize with the other girls. Sixteen-year-old Harold Jones, for example, “went there often,” even though he had “never belonged to any clubs at the Community Center [emphasis added].”211 Many young girls in particular, Susie Morgan and Esther Wright included, traversed sections of Southwest negotiating potentially dangerous places and solicitous male attention “under the railroad crossing” to get to and from Southwest House. At the House, the girls were fed, received hand-me-down clothes, and enjoyed exercise and leisure space and activities with their friends, some of whom they also fought with.

Southwest Community House was a space that was sanctioned by middle class reformers, as it had been founded by them. Meant to provide supervised and appropriate programming for young people, it did just that and it was popular. But like sidewalks where James Richmond and his friends “lolled,” or corner lots where Myron Ross Sr. “play[ed] community checkers with the men of the neighborhood,” Southwest House was at least partly popular because it was a free recreational and social place: there was a nominal fee, but as Director Scott noted, few paid it.

Union Station Fountain

As iterated by Esther Wright’s lamentation that she wished she could visit Suburban Gardens, most poor and working class black young people were often without the funds to frequent commercial leisure and recreation spots, which made the Community Center very important. But as is evident from Morris Carter, James Richmond and Kenneth Freeman, hanging out also involved a repurposing of public spaces. Sometimes those spaces were also

211 WDC XXV (Harold Jones), Frazier Papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
segregated. Joseph Knight and his “gang” moved throughout the city freely, despite police surveillance. They “roam[ed]” about Southwest, "making nuisances of ourselves,” “meddl[ed]” with girls in “the alley back of Willow Tree playground,” “[caught] girls over in Northwest,” ate, drank and danced with white girls in Southeast, and had fist fights at the Columbus Fountain outside Union Station, all the while they might have also been damaging property along the way – breaking into cars and houses, shoplifting at grocery stores, or crashing “house dances.” Joseph Knight’s interview, along with interviews of other boys in his “bunch,” like Nathaniel Smith, demonstrates both the claiming of spaces, which sometimes included private property and female bodies, sometimes through their destruction, in the pursuit of “fun” and leisure, despite their participation in approved and supervised recreational games and sports at Southwest House. 212 Their mobility, sometimes into spaces out of which they were ultimately chased by both white youth and the police, like the Union Station fountain grounds, highlights the possibilities for movement for young black bodies in the small racialized, socially stratified, and gendered geography of Washington, D.C.

Despite segregation, “open land in developing parts of [the city]” was rented out to temporary carnivals and circuses. These kinds of spaces, considered not entirely “respectable” forms of recreation, were mostly working class and interracial. 213 A more permanent but similar place was the Columbus Fountain outside Union Station. Dedicated in 1912 and co-created by renowned architect and member of D.C.’s 1901 City Beautiful committee, Daniel Burnham, who had also designed Union Station itself, the fountain was a monument to Columbus’s “discovery of the western hemisphere.” Columbus was flanked on one side by a remembrance of “the old

212 WDC LXXII (Joseph Knight), Frazier Papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
world” in the form of a (white) “patriarchal elder,” and on the other side by “the new world,” represented by a crouched indigenous young man. A large recumbent lion stood guard and a young maiden represented the “spirit of discovery.”

Many young people referenced the fountain as part of their leisure habits – going “up to the Fountain to walk around.” Hanging out at the Fountain did not involve spending money, unless like Susie, one went over to Union Station and inquired about the price of vanilla wafers, which it turned out at 10 cents was too rich for her blood. The inexpensive recreation of interracial fights and interracial sex amongst young people, and sometimes between young people and adults happened at the fountain, which was surrounded by obscuring bushes.

Fourteen-year-old James Gray called the Fountain a “playhouse.” James had taken on the role of man of the house since his World War I veteran father’s untimely death. He lived with his younger sister and his young widowed mother, who worked as a domestic. He rather scornfully discussed the activities of some of his male peers at the Fountain: “stay[ing] up there till late hours at night”; “tak[ing] girls up [there.]” The police, he said, had “got wise and [rode] around the grounds in police cars[, shining] their torches through all the bushes and pick[ing] up [anyone] they saw under the bushes or loitering around them.” James was concerned about the repercussions of all the sexual activity between teens that he knew was going on at the Fountain. But, seventeen-year-old Southwest resident Ellsworth Davis, “a good Christian,” a boy scout and a member of “a bunch” that included his neighbors James Boggerson, Morris Carter, and John Ross, commented that sexual activity was an affordable recreational pastime. “What else is there?” Ellsworth wondered. “A fellow,” he said, “can run with a bunch of girls without money, but everything else costs like hell.”

214 “Splendid Columbus Memorial to be Unveiled in Washington” New York Times June 2, 1912.
215 WDC XVIII (James Gray), Frazier Papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
options that included the Center of course, or playing in a vacant lot, or in one of the
schoolyards.  

But pre-marital, and likely unprotected, sex was not the only thing happening at the
Fountain. Susie Morgan recounted a fight she and her crew had with a group of white boys there
on the Tuesday night in June 1938 when Joe Louis fought his rematch with Max Schmeling. She
had not listened to the fight because she “was up at the fountain.” Susie’s altercation started
because “white boys kept going by and saying Schmeling was going to win.” She had ignored
them at first, but eventually, as the boys kept provoking, “we started fighting,” she said. When
the police arrived, the boys ran, but, Susie said proudly, “I did not!” This moment of Louis’s
important win, or in Susie’s case his potential loss, bore the weight of race pride (and would
come to symbolize the triumph of democracy over an emerging totalitarian Germany.) Susie’s
insistence of her bravery, both in the face of the white boys and the police, evidence a
burgeoning gender identity that included traditionally masculine qualities.

Joseph Knight also fought at the Fountain. The Fountain was an interracial space;
pictorial evidence shows young white and black boys having an “outdoor lunch,” eating
watermelon together in the sunshine, their clothes wet from the fountain’s waters. But, under
the cover of night, the Fountain was a more complicated interracial place, as evidenced by
Susie’s narrative. “White fellows,” Joseph said, “objected to us coming up there,”, and “each
time we met there was a fight.” Joseph boasted that he and his bunch “usually had the best of it
till the police butted in,” at which point they would be “chased back down Southwest.” The
police had even shot at them and this had really frightened Joseph. For Joseph, fighting was

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216 WDC XXVII (Ellsworth Davis), Frazier Papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 –
111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
“great fun,” even more so when he fought white boys, echoing Myron Ross’s earlier comments. However, when boys started showing up with not just their fists, but “armed with knives, clubs, and guns,” Joseph and his friends “decided to quit before somebody got killed,” either by the police or by the other boys.218

So despite engagement in sanctioned recreational activities, young people made use of all possible free leisure spaces throughout the city, even when that meant exposing themselves to violence of the police or from white boys. For black girls, this included potential bodily harm from black boys too.

_Teaters, Night Clubs and Pool Halls_

Unlike Southwest Community Center and the Union Station Fountain, commercial leisure places, like movie theaters, taverns, clubs, and pool halls required money. Still, despite recent economic crisis and longer-term economic privation, many poor and working African Americans also made use of commercial leisure places, especially the ones in Southwest, which catered to community folks.

Southwest had at least two “photoplay houses,” including the primarily black Rosalia Theater and the Jewel Theater. Howard’s William Henry Jones in his examination of _Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes in Washington, D.C._ listed the Rosalia and the Jewel as “Class C” theaters.219 The Jewel was part of the busy strip of Four and A Half Street, located between C and Independence Ave., “very near the night club area.”220 Jones thought the Jewel was black-owned, but by May 1938, the survey of Southwest found that the Jewel was “white owned and

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218 WDC LXXII (Joseph Knight), Frazier Papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
Negro managed.” Frequent by a “fairly mixed” audience, mostly men, but some women and young boys, slept, talked “loudly,” or ran up and down the aisles. The manager also walked the aisle, stopping often “very close to the screen to look at the picture.”

The Jewel “serve[d] a major portion of the Negro population in Southwest Washington, [and was] generally well filled at all times.” It sat about 300 people in “hard seats” and featured “fourth and fifth run pictures”: “westerns, crime, and adventure pictures.” The floor was “concrete, painted dark red,” and was “littered with peanut shells, and other debris.” The walls were “paneled with brown and white composition board,” with “red lights at intervals.” A smoke cloud loomed above and its odor “permeated the room,” as smoking was allowed but there was no ventilation. There were “two toilets,” one for men, and one for women. Two men’s room signs cautioned: “one person at a time in this toilet,” and “stand close to the bowl, it is unlawful to urinate on the floor, or to commit other nuisances,” indicating that the men’s toilet at least was a locale of other activities besides relieving oneself. So while the Jewel was not the cleanest place, many D.C. African Americans, young and old, chose to spend their limited funds there.

The Southwest Rosalia Theater was on F Street between Second and Third streets and had the capacity for seating 350 - 450 people.221 Unlike the Jewel, it was situated in a more residential section, and not on the business and pleasure strip of Four and a Half Street. After passing through a “small lobby” with its concrete floor and a small foyer area with its “worn carpet,” an “electric water cooler and a penny cup dispenser, two radiators,” and the poorly ventilated women’s and men’s toilets, a narrow doorway led into the “theater proper.” Seats were “individual, hard, well-constructed [and] firmly anchored to the floor.” Like the Jewel, the Rosalia had a heating and a cooling system, but it was described as more “modern.” It also

221 Jones, Recreation and Amusement, 118; “Re: Rosalie Theater, May 24, 1938,” Frazier Papers Box 131 – 41, Folder 7.
apparently had better sound and screening equipment than the Jewel, where the noises from outside the theater often interrupted what was showing. At the Rosalia, “the sound was [even] a little too loud for the size of the place.”

On the spring afternoon of the investigator’s visit, the Rosalia “was half filled with kids between 14 and 18,” a few adults, and “three white men.” Some men slept, but most of the audience were being entertained by the movie Radio City Revels, which featured a cast of white actors and scenes of African American Lindy Hoppers. The audience particularly “enjoyed” and “admired” “the skill exhibited” by the “group of Negro ‘Big Apple’ dancers.” Individuals in the audience commented, talked, made “suggestive noises” at romantic scenes, and moved about during the film, which made it often “difficult to see the screen.” Unlike the Jewel, smoking was not permitted at the Rosalia, although some teenage boys lit cigarettes while their friends kept watch for the manager. The same boys also had removed their caps and hats upon entering the theater; these might have been miscreants but they had some home training.222

Prices for picture shows ran from 10 to 20 cents depending on age, day of the week, and time of day. Still this was a prohibitive price. Fifteen-year-old Southwest resident Nathaniel Smith said he did not go often, because he “seldom [had] the money,” although Thursdays there were “free tickets.” Nathaniel had been born in Sullivan’s Court, a small alley squared by E and F Streets to the east and west and Second and Third to the South and North. Both his mother and his sister were listed in census data as “maids” for “private families.” Subsequently, his family had been able to move out onto F Street. Nathaniel liked the Rosalia, calling it “real nice,” noting that “they make you behave yourself in it, […] you can’t smoke, take in food, ice cream or pop.” Nathaniel compared it to the Gem Theater in Northwest, which he had visited with “some of

222 “Re: Rosalie Theater, May 24, 1938,” Frazier Papers Box 131 – 41, Folder 7; Radio City Revels IMDB http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0030651/
[his] pals,” and insisted he would “never go again as long as I live.” The “white” Gem was white-owned and managed, with poor ventilation and segregated seating. Nathaniel said, “it was so damn hot I almost fainted, so funky I almost puked and so smokey [sic] you’d have thought the damn place was on fire.” When he had been, the section assigned for black patrons was “packed,” while “only a few white people” occupied the other side. Still, Nathaniel noted, blacks were prohibited from sitting on the “white side.” Moreover, the space was “too small to begin with,” but, Nathaniel admitted, “the pictures are good,” and therefore, he “guess[ed], they expect you to stand everything else.” Here Nathaniel was likely referring not only to the poor ventilation, but also to the discriminatory seating practices as things whites expected African Americans to tolerate for the sake of “good pictures.”

Nathaniel also discussed “the only other white theater where Negroes can go,” The Gayety in Northwest, which Jones described as a “burlesque house with second or third class vaudeville.”223 Nathaniel was intrigued by the place, to which he had never been, but insisted, “I’m going someday.” He had heard that “white women are on stage naked,” and he believed that the theater “[had] something there!” Nathaniel lamented being shut out of “the finer shows in Washington.” He said he had “seen lots of white people go into Negro theaters,” and he asserted that if he owned a theater he would not permit white potential patrons to “get any further than the door.” Instead he would greet them with “[I’ll] let you in my theaters when you let us in yours, or you’ve got plenty of places of your own, so go to them!” Young Nathaniel was clearly aware of and had feelings about D.C.’s racial and classed geography that included his inability to afford even black commercial spaces and he expressed possible solutions for desegregating these spots.

Twenty-one-year-old Southwest resident James Brown, whose mother worked on a WPA sewing project, went “down to the Rosalie […] occasionally when [he had] money.” He had also

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223 Jones, Recreation and Amusement, 119 – 120.
been to the Gem, primarily because he “wanted to see for himself” the segregated seating. He, like Nathaniel Smith, admitted that the Gem had “good shows,” but he said the “white people” with whom he was not allowed to sit, were “the loudest and dirtiest ones he had ever seen.” Racial discrimination in theaters was also in the local and national news just then, making the commentary by Nathaniel and James that much more pertinent. The run of George Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess” at D.C.’s National Theater, featured black actors and singers, some of whom were affiliated with Howard University’s music department. At first the National had refused to allow black patrons at the performance, but the theater soon changed its policy after some protest from the local community and after the performers’ vowed not to perform if the National maintained its policy.\footnote{\textquote{Porgy and Bess Principals Break D.C. Jim Crow For Run of Show}, \textit{Philadelphia Tribune}, March 12, 1936; \textquote{Cast Members of ‘Porgy and Bess’ Block D. C. Jim Crow: Howard Faculty Joins Fight On Discrimination Theatre Mgr. Forced To Open Houses To All Citizens}, Norfolk \textit{New Journal and Guide}, March 14, 1936; \textquote{New Gershwin Folks Opera Given First Local Hearing at National}, \textit{Washington Post}, March 17, 1936; \textquote{“Race Bar Falls at D.C. House,”} \textit{New York Amsterdam News}, March 21, 1936; \textquote{“Side Seats for Porgy and Bess,”} \textit{Baltimore Afro American}, March 21, 1936; Frazier, “Recreation and Amusement Among American Negroes,” unpublished, 1940, 68 – 69, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 74 Folder 1.}

So while for William Henry Jones in his publication on “Negro recreation,” theaters, both photoplay and play houses, were major “socializing agenc[ies],” “diffusing cultures,” and providing a “wider understanding of human life everywhere,” as well as offering people vicarious adventures and an escape from their daily realities, for many of the young black poor and working class people interviewed, theaters functioned only partly in this way. In contrast to Jones, Frazier assessed play and photo-play houses with an incidental indictment of “city streets, moving-picture houses, theaters, and dance halls,” as spaces that “provide[d] occasions for contacts that \textit{often} lead to illegitimacy [emphasis added.]” According to Frazier, young women were especially vulnerable to both “the romantic element in pictures,” and to men who took
advantage of their susceptibility there. For Frazier, “city environment[s]” such as the theater “[gave] a new definition to sex.” However, commentary from young women did not corroborate Frazier’s understanding of moving-picture houses, especially since many young poor and working class black women did not get as many opportunities as they wished to go. Rosella Hillman’s mother, 33-year-old Rose Evelyn Hillman often declined invitations from her live-in boyfriend and father of her two youngest children to go out. Instead she used that money for household expenses. For both young black men and women from working class and poor families, these were places they longed to go but often could not afford to, and when they were able to go, these were often spaces where they butted up against the stark realities of Jim Crow, about which they had very strong opinions.

For both Jones and Frazier, the commercial leisure spaces of night clubs and pool halls also “formed an important role in the recreation of the Negro community.” In Jones’ study, he cited pool halls as spaces of “cultural,” but not “intellectual” contact. They were “places at which various crises frequently occur[ed]; e.g., personal conflicts, quarrels, profane language, and sometimes shooting affairs.” In Jones’ examination he had found that they “played a most significant role as mobilization centers at times when racial conflict seemed imminent,” which, in Jones’ estimation was not a good thing. He gave two examples: during the 1919 Red Summer riot, pool halls “served as headquarters for belligerents [and] incipient gangs.” “More significant than the newspaper,” Jones said that “events and matters of interest [were] discussed[and planned around, I would add] which never reach the press.” In 1923, a “prominent Negro citizen face[d] the danger of being driven from his newly purchased home in a white section of the city.”Jones stated that this black Washingtonian’s “greatest problem” was not the aggression he faced

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  \item \textsuperscript{225} Frazier, \textit{The Negro Family in the United States}, 352 - 353
  \item \textsuperscript{226} Rosella Hillman WDC 19, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 112, Folder 11.
  \item \textsuperscript{227} Jones, \textit{Recreation and Amusement}, 135.
\end{itemize}
from his white neighbors, but rather “that of preventing the gangs which were mobilizing in the
colored pool rooms [in his defense] from coming to his rescue.” Jones’s examples demonstrate
the ways in which race and class interacted with and informed black leisure spaces. Frazier
would say a decade later that “the recreation of the Negro in the border city is centered in the
Negro community,” implying that it was because of segregation that recreation and leisure
places, including theaters, motion picture houses, pool halls, and billiard parlors, were located in
black communities, catering, problematically, to an almost exclusively black, mostly working
class, clientele. However, Jones’s examples show the ways in which these spaces served as
protective. They were places of a safe collectivity from which to contest racial violence and
segregationist discrimination.

Southwest was also home to three night clubs: the Top Hat on 4 1/2 Street and Virginia
Ave, Mike’s Café on 4 1/2 between C and Independence Avenues, and Jerry’s just north of Mikes
on 4 1/2 closer to Independence Avenue. The Top Hat was “in a corner building, directly across
from the elevated tracks of the Pennsylvanin and other railroads.” It was described as loud and
smelling of “tobacco, smoke, beer, and bodies.” The owner of the Top Hat was on the
premises, overseeing the cash register and “supervis[ing] the work of a bouncer-headwaiter and
the waitresses.” There was a large room, with a “worn and dirty floor,” a jumble of tables, a
small stage for musicians, a bar, and a kitchen in the back. The musicians included “a pianist,
guitar player, violinist, saxophonist, a very intelligent looking man said to be [studying] at the
Julliard School of Music, and a man singer.” They played blues and rag time and “the patrons
[made] the place ‘jump’ by clapping their hands, stamping their feet on the floor, and hitting on

228 Jones, Recreation and Amusement, 135 – 136.
229 Davis likely conducted this investigation because his name is attached to many of the “community”
reports; “Night Life in Negro Washington (From observations during the week of 4/18/38 and
previously),” Frazier Papers Box 131 – 132, Folder 7.
the tables with [their] beer bottles,” a display which the interviewer called “pandemonium.”
Most folks at Top Hat were “from the low income group,” women dressed in “street dresses” and men “without ties.”

At Mike’s Café, “grouchy” owner Mike Wilson “guard[ed]” his cash register, but he also made “sandwiches and salads in the rear of the first floor.” There was a long bar, tables, “a cigarette machine,” and an “electric phonograph.” There was also a “white enameled refrigerated market display case [with] various meats and salads,” including “[cold] cuts, potato and salmon salad.” Despite this, one customer expressed disappointment with the fare, saying he “was going home where [he could] get somethin’ like greens and potatoes and roast pork, something heavy,” encouraging his companion with “let’s get out of here because I’m hungry.” Upstairs at Mike’s was “the Ebony Room,” where tables with “very much cracked enamel tops” were crowded together, a “women’s rest room,” another bar and cash register, this one manned by a woman, an “out of tune piano,” and “some badly executed murals one of which represent[ed] Joe Louis in a fighting pose.” Again, Mike’s clientele were “from the low income groups […] out for a good time.” Some wore “polo shirts,” kept their hats on, and did not sport ties either. Most of the women, like those at Top Hat, wore “inappropriate” “street dresses.” And everyone seemed to be drinking beer. Patrons were entertained by a “very dark girl in a faded evening dress […]; an effeminate man […] whose ‘sad’ singing brought boos and laughter from the crowd; and a young man pianist who played by ear and badly at that.” Despite the bad music, the interviewer noted dancing and flirting.

At Jerry’s, a large electric sign reading “Jerry’s Café” lit the front of the building, from whose second floor windows, “one [could] see the dome of the nearby Capitol.” Jerry’s was by “far the best equipped and planned public night club in the city.” The first floor space was
“clean,” “shelves were well stocked with a wide variety of drinks,” the tables were not crowded, and “the owner [had] a truck garden and a chicken farm from which he supplied the café.”

Upstairs though it was so poorly lit that customers really could not see what they were eating. There was a small dance floor, which had also been used for a floorshow that had been discontinued recently because of “lack of business,” and competition from both Top Hat and Mike’s. Frazier described this show as “one of the most complete floor shows in the city,” with “a master of ceremonies, a chorus of dancers, singers, individual dancers, and comedians.” The night Frazier’s staff visited Jerry’s, “a young effeminate man and a large, very dark, and also ugly woman took turns at singing” from the stage, which had a piano and a microphone. Frazier noted that there was a “prevalence of these persons (pansies) acting as entertainers in these clubs,” going by the name of “‘Mother.”’

At Jerry’s the sound system seemed to be working better; the volume of the singing was not as deafening as it was at both Mike’s and Top Hat. Frazier’s staff interviewer was at Jerry’s until it closed at 2 a.m. when many of the customers who left said they were going “where we don’t have to act too proper,” and “where the folks have got the place jumpin’.”

Only a few months after this visit, Jerry’s had changed ownership. Calling itself “King’s Cabaret” in July 1938, the “new proprietor [had] imported Harlem entertainers to help keep Washingtonians contented during the summer.”

Whether Jerry’s or King’s, the place met its commitment of providing entertainment and contentment, at least for the evening. The photograph that appeared in the Washington Afro American in July 1938 showed festive performers and customers, many smiling faces, and noted

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that “more than 1000 pleasure seekers waited in line for hours to get ringside tables.” Thirteen-year-old Theodore Smith, who lived a few blocks southeast of Jerry’s, mused that his “school teachers [could be found] falling in and out [of Jerry’s] all night, some half high, some darn near gone.” His female teachers in particular, “stay up all hours of the night, drink, smoke, dance, and have relations with men.” While Theodore did not want to “extend disrespect” to his teachers, his knowledge of the fun they had at Jerry’s made him inclined to do so, saying “some of them deserve [his disrespect.]” In light of what he knew of their activities outside of school, he found their behavior in school highly hypocritical. “They carry on something awful [at Jerry’s],” he said, “and are the first ones to want you to dance three feet away from a girl at the school dances.” His teachers often publicly called students out for talking with the opposite sex, remarking that they were being distracted from their “lessons.” After their raucous nights, Theodore thought, his teachers had some nerve to “come to school the next day and try to act hard boiled.” He was waiting for an opportunity “to drop a hint at some things [he’d] seen them do,” and he thought maybe then they “wouldn’t be so silly.” Theodore’s comments about his teachers’ double lives and that their students knew about them speaks partly to the ways in which places like Jerry’s were considered low-brow and any aspiring class and/or professional black Washingtonian walked a thin line to negotiate their leisure and their professional lives. But Theodore’s remarks also speak to the very close physical proximity of those lives, especially for black teachers, many of whom often fell somewhere in between middle and working class, but who because of segregation were limited as to where they could spend time cutting loose.

William Jones’ opinion on pool halls and billiard parlors as places of black leisure was mixed: both a dangerous “headquarter for incipient gangs,” as in the case of the 1919

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234 WDC XXII (Theodore Smith), Frazier Papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
Washington riot, and a “place where much liberal thought [was] promoted through discussion, disagreement, and the giving of information,” for clientele included both those with formal education, like Theodore’s teachers for example, and those without it, but who had instead “wide experience.”\footnote{Jones, \textit{Recreation and Amusement}, 135 – 136.} For E. Franklin Frazier, pool rooms and billiard parlors provided “not a too active form of recreation, in an environment more or less free from physical and moral restraints, at a very low price.” And while “minors (under 18) were prohibited,” there were relatively young people observed at many of these establishments, and “young and old,” everyone smoked.\footnote{Thomas E. Davis, “Washington’s Billiard Parlors for Negroes,” Frazier Papers, Box 131 – 111 Folder 1; 131- 132 Folder 7.} 

Walter Johnson’s Pool Room and the Modern Billiard Center, both of which were located on Four and Half Street between Independence Avenue and D Streets, next door to Jerry’s were two such places, where young and old, white and black mixed. On an early spring Saturday afternoon in March 1938, two white boys, 12 and 16, sat at a table in the back of the Modern Billiard Center, not far from the barber shop housed in the back of the hall. And a “small Negro boy” walked about selling “candy bars for some church.” Individuals, mostly men, discussed “the games or the numbers of the day.” Walter Johnson’s clientele was not so different, although lesser (only one of the four tables were occupied) and the space was cleaner and better ventilated than the Modern, which may have been a result of the actual building being newer. Of the two young men playing, one was both “inexperienced and inebriated.” There were also some “hangers-on,” who were not playing but “observing.”

Despite the economic crisis gripping the country, some poor and working class Southwest residents partied, relaxed, socialized in black commercial recreational spaces, some of which were owned and operated by African Americans. Even respected and aspiring class African American teachers spent their limited incomes for a night of drinking and dancing.
These spaces provided respite from often physically laborious work days and opportunities for working women in particular to reclaim their bodies as they participated in much more pleasurable movements. In the Depression – era, these spaces also were sites where individuals insisted on an albeit limited consumerist identity, where there was drama and sociability, in close proximity to the rest of their communities, so that everyone, including young people not allowed on the premises had an opinion.

Conclusion

Morris Carter, James Richmond, and Kenneth Freeman “lolled” around the doorway to Morris’s father’s funeral home when they were not at the Southwest House. What both social reformers and the police may have considered “loitering,” an indicator of, or at least a precursor to, juvenile delinquency, was actually about socializing and spending time together, taking advantage of the close proximity of public sidewalks and corners. Ellsworth Davis said that instead of going somewhere else, he sometimes “[hung] around his neighborhood with his friends.” “We’re all neighbors,” he said, “and it is natural that we stand around when we’re all home.”

For African American young people, limited by the depressed economy and the racial segregation of the District, the claiming and reappropriating of public spaces into places of recreation, leisure and community was an important part of their relationship with both the experienced and imagined landscape of Washington, D.C. Susie Morgan and Joseph Knight’s stories of their fights with white kids at the Fountain and Susie’s courage in the face of the police, with whom she interacted quite often, evidence their sense of entitlement to spaces not

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meant for them. In Ellsworth Davis’ case, he had seen his friends often when they were in school
together, but now that they were not, he felt they had “scattered,” so when they were all “home,”
they did what would have been deemed as “idle loitering,” but which Ellsworth defined as
“natural” and described as a necessary component of maintaining his friendships and his
community relationships.238

Adult black men and women not only made use of commercialized recreational places,
but claimed public spaces as well. Myron Ross, Sr., for example, spent valuable community time
playing checkers on the corner with other men in the neighborhood, in addition to his more
official civic and religious responsibilities with the Boy Scouts and his church. In contrast, his
wife Evelyn Ross, the mother of nine children may have found it difficult to be out of her house,
but she invited her church group over to her shabby, sometimes messy, and always crowded-
with-children space, seemingly unphased by the ways in which her guests might have judged her
home.239 Quenton Porter’s mother, Viola, found Northwest apartment living so confining, that
she sanctioned her son’s involvement in both YMCA activities and his association with a gang as
necessary “outlets.”

As Mary Church Terrell’s autobiography and the National Committee on Segregation
report attest to, D.C.’s Jim Crow policies and customs limited African American movement and
access regardless of class or position. In January 1942, 26-year-old African American
photographer and musician Gordon Parks, exempted from the draft because he was married,
came to Washington, D.C. to work with Roy Stryker at the Farm Security Administration (FSA)
as a Rosenwald Fellow. Upon arrival in Washington, D.C., an “excited and eager” Parks reveled
at being in “this historic place.” As he approached the city, he thought about “the White House,

238 WDC XXVII (Ellsworth Davis), Frazier Papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 –
111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
the Capitol and all the great buildings wherein great men had helped shape the destinies of the world,” he saw his future work at the FSA as building on the “tradition” of these men. He “felt their presence, [would] touch their stone, [and] walk under trees and on paths where Presidents had walked.”240 When Stryker sent him out to further explore the city on his first day, encouraging him to “go to a picture show, the department stores, eat in the restaurants and drugstores,” to “get to know the place,” Parks thought Stryker was being “trivial,” but he humored him. In the downtown “business district,” Parks stopped at a drugstore “for breakfast.” Upon sitting at the counter, he was greeted by a white waiter with “get off that stool,” and a command to “go around to the back door if you want something.” At the theater, he had a similar experience, being admonished by the ticket seller that he “should know that colored people can’t go in here.” At this point in his day, Parks wondered whether this was all an elaborate prank by Roy Stryker, finding it “hard to believe” that there was “such discrimination in Washington, D.C., the nation’s capital.” Finally, he went to Garfinckel’s department store, whose “ads were always identified with some sacred Washington monument.” He was sold a hat by a salesman he described as “a little on edge.” Then, as he exited the store he saw an advertisement for a camel-hair coat, which he had always wanted. He took the elevator upstairs to the coat department with an incredulous elevator operator. The hat sale, Parks recounted, had “relieved his doubts about discrimination” in D.C.: his attempt to buy it had been partly an experiment. But the coat was the real thing. On the floor with coats, four idle salesmen ignored him. When he finally asked someone for help, he was sent to the coats on his own, to look for his size himself. When he insisted on getting their help, excuses were made and he was ultimately asked to wait, and after some small talk with a gentleman who said he was the manager, Parks was left alone on a couch.

and never attended to. Finally, he left the store, without the coat, which he said, he would not have “accepted […] even] if they had given him the entire rack.”

Parks’ surprise and anger at his experience, at the stark contrast between his expectations of the Capital City with its symbolic representations and the often hostile and sometimes subtle discriminatory practices and policies of individuals and places in the District, including the cafeteria in the federal building that housed the FSA, was not an unusual experience for African Americans who came to reside or who had grown up in Washington, D.C. After several months in D.C. and experiences that included police harassment and witnessing police brutality and abuse of power, Parks decided that Washington, D.C. “was not the place for my children to grow into adulthood.”

For many black poor and working residents of the United States’ capital city, racial hostility as a result of being in certain spaces could not be avoided. The youngest black person understood expertly the complicated nature of D.C.’s racial discrimination and its economic adherents. D.C. had multiple geographies, of race, of class, and of gender, and for poor and working African Americans many of them overlapped. The quotidian experiences of the young people interviewed and the accompanying ethnographic reports of the Southwest community show that the condition of poverty and economic disparity was a geographic one, which made “avoiding” racial hostility extremely difficult, for the condition of poverty itself was one of racial hostility.

The slow geographic and landscape shifts Southwest experienced, starting in the late nineteenth century, and as the federal triangle and mall continued to grow, replacing Southwest black leisure spaces and displacing poor and working class black residences with federal

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buildings, came to a head in the early 1950s. Redevelopment generally of Southwest had always been imminent and some like Myron Ross, Sr. had seen it as being likely beneficial to his property values as a Southwest homeowner. In the post-World War II period, the District finally allocated the funds for urban renewal in Southwest, which included the destruction of alley streets, the demolition generally of long-held homes, and of all the community and communal spaces described above. Some 20,000 primarily African American poor and working class families left Southwest as a result of the post war urban redevelopment plans. One study found that while some families were relocated with federal support into newly constructed, modern low-income housing, or were able to make use of, either through purchase or rental, homes that had been abandoned in white middle class flight to the suburbs, most experienced the relocation as a loss of their homes and communities. The housing folks left was in most cases “substandard”; often families, especially those in alleys like Susie Morgan’s, endured filth, no running water, no electricity and outhouse toilets. Still interviews conducted found that while Southwest’s black residents had been portrayed as generally transient, many were actually “firmly and well-rooted in their neighborhoods”: nearly 65% had resided there for more than a decade.243

Moreover, despite their new modern conveniences in many of the new homes and that most people “like[d their new spaces] very much more” than their “former house in Southwest,” they had not only “strongly disliked having to move,” they also were “very sorry [they] had to move.” Many were glad for new sanitation and garbage collection services certainly, but felt they had lost a certain “neighborhood spirit,” and a sense of community. They were not convinced

that their move had resulted in better neighbors, safer streets, or “more adequate police protection.”

Residents of public housing resented the rules and regulations of the National Capital Housing Authority – specifically that folks “could not plant their own flower seeds as they were used to doing in Southwest,” or that they could not have the kind of company that they wanted, or pets. So, while most former Southwest residents were clear that their former homes were inadequate in providing sometimes basic amenities – like running water, sanitation, sometimes necessary shelter – the redevelopment of Southwest had resulted in “a social loss”; they had lost community and the feeling of protection for themselves and their children that neighborhood relationships brought with them.

Southwest and other poor and working class black neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. might have appeared unsafe and unsanitary, “dilapidated and shabby,” and as a result, primarily during the interwar reform period, faced the constant threat of redevelopment, experienced continual encroachment of the federal core, and were the perpetual laboratories for social scientific examination and reform that saw their predominant blackness and poverty as ripe for both structural and cultural rehabilitation. Black poor and working individuals navigated and negotiated the complex terrain of the multiple geographies of race, gender, age, and class that they faced in the segregated and emblematic Capital City. Asserting their authorial subjective selves, African American poor and working class young people ventured outside of their assigned places, reappropriated corners, sidewalks, doorways, playgrounds, and even national

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245 Thursz, “Where are they now?: A study of the impact of relocation on former residents of southwest Washington, who were served in an HWC demonstration project,” 65.

246 Thursz, “Where are they now?: A study of the impact of relocation on former residents of southwest Washington, who were served in an HWC demonstration project,” 66 – 70, 100; Melder, “Southwest Washington,” 99.
monuments. Their mobility and/or desire for mobility was their claim to rights to the city. For both young people and adults, their physical presence in public spaces that had not been intended for black young or black poor, or sometimes just black, bodies demonstrated the ways in which they claimed a right to a national democratic identity. As young Susie Morgan stated about swimming in the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, “we know we ain’t got no business in it, but that’s why we go in.”
Chapter Three

“I’m a woman who knows her own mind”247: “The Politics of Domesticity

‘What are [the Negro woman’s] problems?’ and ‘How is she solving them?’ To answer these questions, one must have in mind not any one Negro woman, but rather a colorful pageant of individuals, each differently endowed […] With a discerning mind, one […] grasps the fact that their problem cannot be thought of in mass.

Elise Johnson McDougald, “The Double Task: the Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation” (1925)

Elise Johnson McDougald, New York community activist and lay social researcher made the preceding statement in her 1925 article “The Double Task: the Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation.” Her essay appeared in Survey Graphic’s Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro issue, which was edited by Alain Locke. Here, McDougald outlined four distinct groups of black women, separated by class and cultural differences. In the face of pervasive racist stereotypes, like “the grotesque Aunt Jemima of street-car advertisements,” McDougald portrayed black women as “honest, loyal, [and] clean.” Where sexual “immorality” could be found amongst black women, McDougald ascribed this to “a reflex to her economic station,” not unlike her “working class” white woman counterpart. On behalf of black poor and working class women, McDougald argued for a reconsideration of their so-called sexual promiscuity and illegitimate births, attributing both to slavery’s impact on black family structures. She also praised black women’s affective kinship responsibilities that compelled them to take in “illegitimate” children and care for them as their own. McDougald’s essay sought to disaggregate the monolith of “the New Negro woman,” and identified her as necessarily

247 This quote comes from Floretta Johnson’s mother, Clara Winston Johnson, who appears briefly in the conclusion to this chapter; “Johnson” Frazier Papers Box 131 – 113 Folder 15.
“feminist.”248 Those with privilege, she said, “express[ed] community and race consciousness” through reform and philanthropic activities, while the “weighty number” of domestic and “casual” workers did the best they could, enduring and combatting economic and racial oppression, and the patriarchal “domination” of black working class men whose only outlet for the frustration of their own racial and economic woes was in the home.249

McDougald’s article was timely: little non-fiction was being written about black women, especially working class black women that did not render their lived experiences as culturally deviant and deficient. When social reformers and social scientists attempted to publicize and ameliorate conditions in poor and working class black communities, they portrayed black women, especially migrants, as culturally backward and a detriment to their own children.250 In contrast to this, McDougald identified black women as a “colorful pageant of individuals” that required careful “discernment” in order to understand the impacts of racial and economic discrimination.251

This chapter argues that the submerged tenth of black poor and working class women, while “forced to submit to over-powering conditions,” in McDougald’s words, had full interior


250 See Daryl Michael Scott’s Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche 1880 – 1996 and Alice O’Connor’s Poverty Knowledge for a comprehensive discussion of the ways in which social scientists in the interwar period, working closely with psychologists and medical doctors, attributed an early culture of poverty to young black girls as transmitted through their rural migrant mothers. Scott, Contempt and Pity (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1997). Anthropologist Allison Davis and psychologist John Dollard and their publication Children of Bondage: The Personality Development of Negro Youth in the Urban South is a prime example of this scholarship. According to Davis and Dollard, psychological damage could be traced to social disadvantage and poor and working class mothers as “instigator[s]” of an “undisciplined, aggressive” personality type in their children; O’Connor, Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 65.

251 McDougald, “The Double Task,” 691.
lives that were not merely concerned with “overcoming […] habitual limits.”

This chapter makes audible the “colorful pageant” of individual voices of poor and working class African American women, some of whom were migrants to Washington, D.C. and others who were longer term residents and even natives. Here Darlene Clark Hine’s notion of dissemblance is significant. Hine defines the concept as “the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” She argues that black women cultivated a shroud of “secrecy” in an effort to protect a private “psychic space,” that ultimately allowed them to not only “function effectively” in their domestic jobs in white homes, but also to build black social institutions, while simultaneously enduring white supremacy and its attendant hostilities.

The existence of dissemblance reminds us that black women had dynamic inner lives. In contrast to the inclination to keep all aspects of this essential subjectivity hidden, the narratives of the women at the center of this chapter reveal an important desire to disclose, to articulate some of their inner lives. What comes through in many of the social science interviews conducted with mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts are notions of self, conceptualizations of their own analytic categories, and their intellectual work on almost everything under the sun: intentional approaches to parenting, sex, and marriage; positions on local and national politics; negotiations with both Jim Crow D.C. and black middle class uplift reform; and personal migratory histories that were not necessarily constrained by racial and economic segregation.

Both Darlene Clark Hine and Deborah Gray White have lamented, as have other historians of black women, the scarcity of “source material for personal aspects of Black female

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252 McDougald, “The Double Task,” 691.
This is especially true for those doing slavery studies. Scholars working in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as both Cheryl Hicks and Michele Mitchell have aptly noted, are the beneficiaries, if one can call it that, of Progressive and interwar era professionalization of social work, social science, and the fields of medicine and psychiatry, among others, and the attendant proliferation of records, literature, and research studies, that in this case yielded a rich archive of interviews.

This chapter excavates these very materials that helped to reinforce the portrayal of urban black women as culturally pathological. Literary scholar Hazel Carby skillfully analyzes social science and social reform’s response to African American women’s migration to urban spaces in the early twentieth century, identifying the ways in which black women’s movement to cities purportedly threatened the moral social order of modern urban environments. Black women came to represent “sexual degeneracy,” “immorality,” “a threat to the progress of the race; a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class; a threat to congenial black and white middle-class relations; and a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment.” This last “threat” corresponds to what E. Franklin Frazier called “the matriarchate,” black women’s dominance in the family over both their husbands, if they had them, and their sons. Moreover, because of their “traditional southern backgrounds,” replete with “attitudes of subordination,” black mothers in particular were perceived and portrayed as ill-

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255 See Saidya Hartman’s jeremiad that is “Venus in Two Acts” and her very important discussion of necessary methodology for recovering black enslaved women’s experiences, if not voices. The scholarship of Jennifer L. Morgan, Stephanie Camp, Stephanie Smallwood work against what Marcus Rediker has called “the violence of abstraction” in slavery studies.
equipped to norm their daughters to appropriate sexual and social behaviors.\textsuperscript{258} In response to the “moral panic” created by black women migrants, social scientists and reformers in many cities undertook the study of poor black communities. Frazier’s findings posited that self-reliant, autonomous poor and working class black women were a contributory factor to the disorganization of “the black family.”\textsuperscript{259} While Frazier attempted to argue historically structural reasons for both the positionality and cultural behaviors of black poor and working class women, his work would later become foundational in the Moynihan Report, which used Frazier’s research to explain marital dissolution, illegitimacy rates, female-headed families, and welfare dependency in post-World War II urban “ghettoes.” This positioning of black women at the very center of “the tangle of [black urban] pathologies”\textsuperscript{260} became, as Carby points out, “a framework of interpretation and referentiality that appeared to be able to explain for all time the behavior of black women in an urban environment [emphasis added.]”\textsuperscript{261}

Frazier’s publications, and other similar social scientific literature of the Progressive and interwar periods identified black poor and working class women as a collective in need of rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{262} The archival sources at the heart of this literature, however, tell a wholly different story. If we read the interviews conducted by Frazier and his staff with “a discerning

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{258} Frazier, \textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development in the Middle States}. (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 47, 263 – 264.
  \item \textsuperscript{259} Frazier, \textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways}, 263 – 264.
  \item \textsuperscript{260} Frazier, \textit{The Negro Family in the U.S.}; U.S. Department of Labor, “Chapter IV: The Tangle of Pathology,” \url{http://www.dol.gov/dol/aboutdol/history/moynchapter4.htm}
  \item \textsuperscript{261} Carby, “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in the Urban Context,” 740.
mind,” as Elise McDougald suggested in 1925, we hear moments of Hine’s dissemblance, the avoidance of questions or of the interview in general. We certainly see suspicion of these intruding visitors with their intensely personal questions, as we do in the questions posed by sixteen-year-old Alice Williams whose words open the introduction. And in many cases, we hear women who take advantage of the listening ear, assessing the safety of the space with questions of their own, and sometimes expressing and then ignoring their own fears to share political notions that they worried might get them expelled from the relief rolls in the Depression era. Others offered unsolicited stories of health problems, of sexual histories, and opened their homes in as forthright a way as they could, displaying their everyday realities and at least some of their attendant feelings. No doubt they kept much back in what they shared, and certainly their answers are proscribed by the questions they were asked and what those triggered for them. Still, what is evident is that Hine’s maintenance of bodily integrity was an important concept for these women; their articulations hint at the intellectual work they engaged in and the decisions they made to preserve their interiorities. Instead of fostering “a cult of secrecy” or a “self-imposed invisibility,” though, respondents like twenty-four-year-old Henrietta Belt almost would not let her interviewer leave, as we will see later. Rather Belt regaled her interviewer with the inner workings of Belt’s mind - her commitment to an innovative and somewhat mystical practice of Catholicism, and her deliberations on the uselessness of the institution of marriage.263

Maybe because interviewees were poor and working class, less hemmed in by a middle and aspiring class need to represent images that contrasted the pervasive negative social and sexual ones of black womanhood, or maybe because they had less faith in the possibilities of respectability politics, or maybe they felt some semblance of safety from the black albeit middle

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263 Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” 915. The interview with Belt appears in the papers for Henrietta Hinton WDC 47, Frazier Papers, Box 131-111 Folder 8.
class female interviewer who had in some cases spent over a year interviewing their daughters, nonetheless, and in spite of their “suspicions,” most women seemed eager to talk. These narratives give us a window into the social and political world of emblematic interwar and Depression-era Washington D.C. from the perspective of the often invisible and voiceless. These women’s articulations foreground their desire and their abilities to express their own consciousness and ideas.

Despite the ways in which scholarship in African American and women’s history have worked to bring black poor and working class women in particular into historical focus with understandings of the relationships they had to socio-economic forces,264 all of these black women – migrants, workers, mothers - especially those in urban enclaves, have been rendered in history in the cumulative, as an undifferentiated mass, to which McDougald’s Survey Graphic article attempted to make a corrective. Unlike elite, middle or aspiring class black women whose voices, though sparse in comparison to their white counterparts, can be heard iterating thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and philosophies on the world in which they lived, as well as how they were making sense of their own identities within, and outside of, these contexts, individuated black poor and working class women’s voices – concepts, articulations of self, political ideations -

264 bell hooks, Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism (1981); Deborah Gray White, Ar’nt I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (1985); Paula Giddings, When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America (1985); Hazel Carby Reconstructing Womanhood (1987); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 – 1920 (1993) and maybe more importantly, Brooks’ article “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race”; Darlene Clark Hine authored “Hine Sight:Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History,” (1994) but also edited the encyclopedia Black Women in America; important contributions have also been made by Elsa Barkley Brown and her attention to African American women’s political culture; Gerda Lerner’s work of bringing both a gender and a specifically feminist lens to the discipline of history and her early publication of Black Women in White America; Jennifer L. Morgan, Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery; Michele Mitchell, “Silences Broken, Silences Kept: Gender and Sexuality in African American History,” Tera Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War;. Jacqueline Jones and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall have also made contributions to the changing historiographical landscape in African American women’s labor history.
have seldom been elucidated. These analytic categories and the intellectual work to create them are generally missing from our histories of black poor and working class women, not only because black urban dwellers are overwhelmingly rendered as homogeneous, but also because scholars have not been able to imagine an intellectual history of poor and working class peoples despite the fact that we may all believe that every social group engages in intellectual activities. What is evident from the narratives of women in this chapter, beyond the mere existence of intellectual work and analytic categories that do not always match up to those constructed by social science, is the material importance of these ways of thinking and knowing, the structures of feeling, and how they were put into use in managing quotidian realities.

One such important example explains the subtitle of this chapter. Domesticity has generally been used to denote the domestic ideology of the “cult of true womanhood” which emerges in the nineteenth century and defined (white) women as “ladies” – women who did not engage in physical labor or at least did not look as if they did; women who were mothers, as well as representatives of superior moral rectitude. African American women’s blackness and engagement in physical labor (as enslaved people and beyond), and I would add, black women’s sexuality and reproductive abilities, which were exploited by the institution of slavery, necessarily barred them from “true (white) womanhood.” In post slavery periods and spaces in the United States, even before the institution was abolished, free black women, determined to include themselves in the cult of domesticity, donned outward appearances that signified their membership, enduring ridicule from both upper and lower class whites. In some cases, black husbands prided themselves on not allowing their wives to work or only to engage in certain kinds of labor. Additionally, engagement in religious life, and a commitment to marriage and motherhood became important components of true domesticity for black women. These virtues
were strongly promoted by black club women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including prominent black Washingtonians like Mary Church Terrell, Nannie Helen Burroughs and Anna Julia Cooper.

For the black poor and working class women whose narratives are highlighted in this chapter, domesticity took on a much more expansive definition. Women like Anna Winston, Ollie Williams, and Louise Coleman capture and engage some of the components of acceptable domestic roles for black women, those set out by interwar and progressive era reformers, but they also interrogate and reformulate a version of domesticity more consistent with the social and economic realities of their everyday lives – one that both took them beyond the traditional domestic sphere of the home, and one in which their domestic roles stretched and sometimes contradicted social conventions. Younger women articulated their own versions of womanhood and domesticity. In the face of, in some cases, severe economic limitations, they continued to believe in sex and love, but not in the convention of marriage. While none of the women interviewed use the words “new negro” to describe themselves, they vocalize positions on their roles as individuals, as migrants, as wives, as daughters, and parents that show their engagement in the production of frames of reference and philosophies that helped them not only make sense of their lives in segregated Depression-era Washington, D.C., but also that manifested in their day-to-day approaches to those lives. These conceptualizations had a complicated relationship to the existing and dominant (racialized) gender ideologies of the time that emphasized feminine propriety and women’s roles within the domestic sphere – sometimes reinforcing them, sometimes challenging them, often broadening and reformulating them.

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Ollie Williams: Migration, Menopause, and Political Musings
Ollie Williams, introduced in chapter one and whose voice we hear in chapter two as she discusses the 1919 race riot, was born in Gastonia, North Carolina in 1890. By the time Ollie had arrived in D.C. with her husband Joseph and their baby Helen, Ollie had already done a fair amount of traveling along the east coast. From the age of twelve until her marriage in her mid twenties, Ollie Williams had been a “maid” in Asheville, North Carolina where she had worked for mostly northern white families, “Yankees,” as she called them. In the summers she worked as a waitress, where she made “good” money. Ollie, wearing a house dress, accessorized by “long black earrings,” her “grey hair slightly fuzzy” on the late spring day of her first interview, described Asheville as a spa community, with as many “sanatariums” as D.C.’s government buildings. She criticized the white patrons, who “as soon as they [got] the least run down or broke up,” they came to Asheville to rejuvenate. Still, Ollie had enjoyed living there, saying, “the air and all [was] so crisp.” And she insisted that if she could secure a job there now she would go back.

Like the women described in Hine’s work on black women migrants to the Midwest, Ollie Williams directed her own migratory movements and she enjoyed them. She missed traveling around North Carolina and elsewhere, moving from place to place, working as a maid or a waitress. Once she had realized she could take a job with a family and leave the state with no commitment to working for them when they returned to Raleigh or Gastonia, she did that as often as she could. She was very selective about families with whom she traveled, and she always had “car fare” set aside for her return trip in case she decided to leave them. And thus

265 Alice Williams WDC 1, Frazier Papers, Box 131 – 111 Folder 8, Box 131-112 Folder 12, Box 131-113 Box 15. Alice and Ollie were interviewed by Laura Lee.
Ollie had been to New York and Chicago by the age of twenty-five, as well as numerous
“summer resorts” “up and down the coast.” She had learned a lot from traveling and meeting
people and had come to believe and understand through her experiences that “knowing about
things can’t just come from hearing about them.” Life was meant to be experienced. Ollie
lamented the ways in which her married life, childbearing, and childrearing had since kept her
stationary for the last twenty years.

By 1938, Ollie had lost her husband to tuberculosis. Her second daughter Lucille had also
died in 1935 at only 17 from pneumonia, or “heart trouble”, according to Ollie. For African
Americans in Washington, D.C., especially poor and working class ones, respiratory diseases
and heart conditions were the leading causes of death in the first half of the twentieth century.
Ollie’s family was part of this statistic. Early reformers made causal links between housing and
living conditions, as well as available nutrition for young and old alike.267

Ollie’s eldest daughter Helen was employed as a maid by the National Youth
Administration, where many black young people, women in particular, found work in D.C. in the
late 1930s. Helen, Ollie’s three other daughters (Catherine, 17, Alice, 16, and Willie Mae, 14)
and her two sons (Joseph, 18, and Gilbert, 12), all lived with Ollie in the “six room, two story

Center for Health Statistics,1968), see Figure 8, Figure 11; Frazier’s papers include his collection of
health data from certain D.C. communities and William Henry Jones’s book on housing issues amongst
blacks in D.C. cites the disparity in mortality between blacks living in alleys versus on adjacent main
D.C.: Howard University Press, 1929), 42 – 43. In addition to nutrition, Gladys Sellew, who lived in
Center Court for over a year conducting research for her Ph.D. at Catholic University, found that
“occupational hazards, general lack of hygiene and vice” were all causes of high mortality amongst poor
black Washingtonians. A few years later, Marion Ratigan lived in four alley neighborhoods in D.C.
focusing specifically on black health disparities and the relationship to living conditions and nutrition for
her doctorate, which resulted in her thesis “A Sociological Survey of Disease in Four Alleys in the
National Capital,” published in 1946.
modern [frame] house. Ollie had rented and lived in this “well-kept, [but] worn” house for 22 years. It was the house in which Ollie had huddled with her husband and two toddlers during the summer of violence in 1919. Proudly, Ollie said, all of her children, except for Helen, had been born in this house.

Like her daughter, Ollie’s employment had also come through a New Deal program. She had “worked on the W.P.A. sewing project for a while,” she said, which scholar Linda Gordon describes as one of the lowest wage and most “tedious” jobs in work relief.

The onset of menopause had made it difficult for Ollie to continue her work: she had gotten “so nervous, [shaking] life a leaf.” She regretted the loss of that job even though it had not been nearly enough for her to support her family on in the aftermath of the loss of her husband and his income. Ollie was certain that the low pay and the inability of most black men and women to support their families was not solely the fault of hard economic times. She blamed “the administration.”

Realizing that this kind of remark might get her removed from the relief rolls altogether, Ollie was quick to add that it was not that she thought Roosevelt was not “probably” better than Hoover or that he was not “doing what he thinks is right.” Still, Ollie believed that Washington D.C. was under what she called “the Robert E. Lee administration and Lee’s last words were: ‘Keep them down.’” Despite her concerns about having her comments reported and losing her benefits, Ollie had opinions. She attributed the unfairness in wages to a long-standing and pervasive racist paternalism: “Roosevelt’s just patting ‘em on the head and holdin’ ‘em down.

268 Descriptions of spaces are usually those of the interviewer, unless otherwise noted.
269 Alice Williams WDC 1, Frazier Papers, Box 131 – 111 Folder 8, Box 131-112 Folder 12, Box 131-113 Box 15.
They are giving you what they think you ought to have. The way Roosevelt’s got things now, we’re livin’ in slavery.”

Ollie referenced a collective enslaved past and the failures of Reconstruction to at least partly explain the social and economic conditions of Depression-era D.C. She ascribed these conditions and circumstances to a political economy based in a history of racist ideologies. And she was not incorrect: throughout the Depression many federal administrators and local project staff maintained strict sex and race employment segregation. Her musings prompted Ollie’s interviewer to ask her what she thought about the “job situation” for young people, to which Ollie replied, “[it’s] bad. […] discouraging,” primarily, she thought, because it meant boys had nothing to do and girls got married earlier than necessary.

The issue of marriage was one many women, young and old discussed in their interviews. While for white, mostly middle and upper class women, the early decades of the twentieth century had seen a retreat from Victorian mores in the era of the New Woman, including delaying marriage, marrying for love, and pre-marital sex, for African American women and specifically poor and working class black women, pervasive ideas about black female sexuality and the economic crisis helped to maintain white and black reform ideologies about both black sexual propriety and the legitimacy of marriage. Ollie Williams, though, like many of the women interviewed, young and old, had other ideas about both sexuality and marriage.

Ollie had made a deliberate decision to delay marriage. While unusual for the time and unusual in her own family, Ollie reflected that waiting to marry had put her in a better position to deal with a husband with whom she had not been completely compatible, which may speak to her reasons for lamenting that young women were being forced to marry early due to hard

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economic times. Ollie came from a large family: she placed herself somewhere in the middle of four sisters and two brothers. Her parents were both dead, and while she was not in touch with any of her siblings who were scattered between Gastonia and Baltimore, including one in D.C., she repeated she was very “fond” of them all and that they remained, even though they were out of touch with each other, very close. Ollie’s siblings, even those younger than she, had all married before her. Ollie had decided to wait so that she could continue to live with her then widowed mother, who she described as having “done a wonderful favor by us, bringing us up like we should be and her a widow.” Ollie had really admired her mother, a woman who had been born just as slavery was ending, who had been too busy raising children to talk about her history, but who, Ollie said, had predicted many of the technological advances the country had seen – airplanes, automobiles, for example.

So, it was not until three years after her mother’s death that Ollie married Joseph Williams, a local guy her age, whom she had known since childhood. And while she had not been dissatisfied with her marriage, she and her husband had been somewhat incompatible, in that he “liked to go all the time. He was ‘sporty’ […] He liked to drink and carouse and all that.” But Ollie had been “patient” and had ultimately been “relieved,” in that he had “never brought his carousin’ home,” and that he had always provided for them, including the insurance after his death. Ollie said she had never “tried to reform him” throughout their marriage, wisdom she attributed to waiting until she was older to marry. She had, though, immediately put him “away” in the sanitarium when he had been diagnosed in order to protect the children from contagion.

Ollie had been equally deliberate and thoughtful in her decisions about childcare and childrearing. In answering questions about childbearing and “house-breaking the children,” Ollie compared her decisions to stay put once her children were born to those of what she described as
neglectful (upper class) white mothers, who continued to travel, leaving young babies behind, willingly giving up breastfeeding to black wet nurses. So, to Ollie the decision to cease her travels, which also meant giving up employment, had been intentional, not one she had been forced into, and a willing sacrifice she had made to be the best mother possible.

Ollie also shared a deliberate childrearing philosophy that was based in and had helped to cultivate an inherent trust in her children. She had always been honest with them, and had tried to foster a worry-free attitude in her parenting. Ollie’s husband had been the stricter parent, according to her daughter Alice, while Ollie had tried to be a friend and a mother, “jok[ing] with ‘em and talk[ing] to ‘em so they[‘d] look at me as just one of them.” She had a non-judgmental way of communicating with her children that allowed them to feel comfortable being honest with her. Still, she was clear about rules of behavior and boundaries. While she “didn’t believe in keeping children in,” – she wanted them to have experiences as she had done – she did not wish for them to marry early, even if they could not find employment. And she would not abide them acting like “babies” in public. She wanted the most for her children, including education, despite the fact that the present economy made her worry that “it didn’t matter how much education colored folks [got].” Still, Ollie encouraged her children “to get what they can cause you never know what might turn up.” Finally, like many other mothers, as we will see later, Ollie had also schooled them early on sex and reproduction.

For many women, questions on childrearing often triggered seemingly unrelated reflections. Ollie, for example, referenced her menopausal symptoms: her “sweats,” “dizzy spells,” “hot flushes,” “nerves” and her anxieties. She thought generally women had it harder than men – having to endure pregnancy and childbirth and “the changes in life”; menopause was, according to Ollie, “the worst period in a woman’s life” by far. We will see later, though, that
these stories were far from unrelated and often were experiences that had informed parenting and life decisions.

Ollie’s Northwest D.C. neighborhood was a racially mixed one and had been since she had moved there sometime in late 1917. She and her husband Joseph had rented the home they lived in from a former neighbor, a German migrant from Connecticut. Her children played with, although they did not go to school with, white children in the neighborhood. Recently though her youngest daughter Willie Mae and a white child had been in a fight over “name-calling.” The white family had taken her daughter to Juvenile Court. The experience helped to fuel Ollie’s belief that segregated schools were better than integrated ones. Although the case had gotten dismissed, Ollie thought it was “better for colored to be to themselves because as soon as they mix with white and something happens, they say right away it is the colored person.” Ollie advocated segregated schools as a protection for her children—from fights with and the ridicule of white children of a higher socio-economic status; from discriminatory or “partial” treatment by white teachers, rumors of which she had heard from a young woman she knew who had gone to school in New Jersey; and, finally for Ollie, segregated schools could provide job security for black teachers. Ollie’s position on segregated schools, however, did not preclude a social justice stance. As a result of her experiences during the 1919 riots, Ollie opposed mass action, especially violent mass actions, but her experiences with the riot had also convinced her of the necessity of “put[ting] an end to…things” like police brutality, like mob violence, because, she said, “if colored don’t stand up for their rights, that sort of thing will go on for ever.”

She expressed the need for African Americans to “organize and stick together” rather than compete with each other like “crabs in a barrel.” She supported both the on-going boycott against the People’s Drug

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272 Alice Williams WDC 1, Frazier Papers.
Store organized by the National Negro Alliance (NNA), and the recent march against police brutality, which she had regrettably been unable to attend. Furthermore, she called for more black-owned businesses that she could patronize.

Despite her viewpoint on “stand[ing] up for rights,” Ollie Williams was also a kind of pacifist; she did not believe in fistfights. Being called “nigger,” for example, was not a reason to brawl with someone, something her oldest Joe and her deceased daughter Lucille had both struggled with before Lucille’s untimely death. Ollie’s pacifism would have been categorized by the prevailing social science on race as an acceptance of inherent white superiority and a “technique for ‘getting by,’” but Ollie’s belief in getting along translated to her childrearing, for daughter Alice described the general camaraderie between her siblings and Ollie admitted that although “they all have their arguments, they think a lot of each other [and] have a good time together.” They had all been deeply devastated by Lucille’s death and Ollie lamented, “none of us could pull ourselves together for a long time.”

Ollie Williams’ rendering by Frazier and his staff is less than flattering. Her parenting practices, for example, breast feeding, were described as “sound,” but they were primarily credited to her contact with and observation of white motherhood while working for white families as a domestic. This, despite the fact that Ollie had seen many white mothers turn over breastfeeding to black women and had even critiqued this practice. Her approach to open sex education for her children was also approved of as “enlightened,” while simultaneously, she was

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274 Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, 264.
275 Alice Williams WDC 1, Frazier Papers.
blamed for daughter Alice’s “lack of prudishness” about sex and kissing.”  

Her views on segregation represented what was categorized as her “defeatism, resignation, and suspiciousness” remnants of black mothers’ “Negro folkways” that necessarily had a negative impact on the personality development of their children. Ollie was labeled as having “a vague, inarticulate dissatisfaction with her status in life,” as “uneducated and superstitious,” “ignorant and naïve,” and as “reconciled to racial segregation.” She and her family were described as an “excellent” representation of “the lives and attitudes of many lower-class Negroes in Washington.” In the eyes of social scientists, Ollie represented the negative impacts of migration to urban environments.

What was labeled as Ollie Williams’ superstitions and “paranoidal apprehensiveness” were actually her notions about structural inequality and institutional racism, as well as a practicality for dealing with the very real manifestations of white supremacy in the District of Columbia. Specifically Ollie articulated what she thought of as the racial paternalism of the federal government’s “new deal”: WPA’s low wages for black workers and the hiring of white workers at higher positions and higher wages; limited relief for African Americans; the inaccessibility of some business opportunities for blacks (i.e. the lack of hardware stores owned by blacks because hardware stores carried guns); and the idea that maybe what mattered more than racial identity was one’s low income status. Finally, Ollie expressed her fears that her interviewer might report her dissatisfaction with the administration and that it would result in her and her family being “put off” relief. Still, despite this fear, Ollie took the opportunity to say what she believed. For Ollie, like many of the women interviewed, she was less interested in the social science project in which she was participating, one whose categories were not

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276 Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossroads*, 247 - 248
277 Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, 239.
278 Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossroads*, 238.
capaciousness enough to include the complexities of her everyday life and ideologies, than she was eager for, if not a bit suspicious of, the attentive ears of the interviewers. In contrast to the ways in which she may have been portrayed, Ollie was clearly a woman cognizant of her role as a parent, politically aware, and contrary to the popular myth about rural origins, a well-traveled and savvy migrant.

Ollie was not the only woman interviewed to use the opportunity to express her thoughts on local and/or national issues, on women’s health, on economic dependence and independence, on family, on marriage and motherhood, on religion, or who just took the opportunity to share her personal history and her reflections on what she had learned and how these experiences influenced and informed her quotidian realities.

*Rose Evelyn Hillman: Labor, Loss and Fealty*

Rose Evelyn Hillman knew hard work. As a child, she “never had no pleasures or fun.” Rose Evelyn remembered being “12 years old before [she] ever had any time to play.” “I will never forget that,” she lamented, “I never got a chance to play a day of my life till I was twelve.” Rose Evelyn Hillman’s narrative foregrounds a long and laborious work history, which began at an early age. Still, Rose Evelyn’s notions of herself were more than work-centered. Her narrative also brings into relief her pragmatic position on the economic functionality of marriage; it builds on Ollie Williams’ dialectics of parenting; and it introduces the important role of religious belief and spiritual identity in negotiating the challenges of the everyday.279

On a spring afternoon in May 1938, Rose Evelyn stood on her “low wooden stoop” at her doorway at 1219 Carrollsburg Place in Southwest Washington, D.C. talking to her neighbors, some of whom hailed from her home state of Maryland. Carrollsburg Place was a “short street,”

279 Rosella Hillman, WDC 19, Frazier Papers, Box 131 – 112, Folder 11.
“little more than an open road,” a bit of an enclave not far from Southeast and the Anacostia River. In 1938, it was described as “a very poor street with small frame houses” none of which had “yard space in front.” Rose Evelyn shared her home with her children Winston (15), Rosella (13), Juanita (11), Constance (7), Harold (3), and baby Howard who was not yet one-year-old, and sometimes her man friend who we only know as “Mr. Mitchell.” A newer and older set of parlor furniture and a nickelodeon crowded the living room and the windows were decorated with potted plants. While Rose Evelyn herself was described as “stout,” “fat,” and “dark,” with a “flat nose and a full mouth,” she was also “attractive […] with smooth oily skin, large bright eyes” and long “straightened or well oiled” hair. Rose Evelyn Hillman was one of four of Rosie Newman’s fifteen children still alive, and she was the oldest. Until Rosie Newman’s death in 1931 at only 46, her daughter Rose Evelyn, Rose Evelyn’s children, and one of Rosie’s younger daughters, Louise Tucker had all lived with Rosie. Now, Louise and her young son sometimes also lived with Rose Evelyn on Carrollsburg Place.

Like her mother before her, the stress and hard work of Rose Evelyn’s life so far had led to both “high blood pressure” and “heart trouble” for the young 33-year-old. At the time of her interview she was suffering from a “bad tooth,” which she hoped Mr. Mitchell would pay to get “fixed for her.” Like Ollie Williams, Rose Evelyn had seen some of North America before settling in Washington, D.C. She had worked as a domestic in both Atlantic City and Montreal. But her narrative reflects fewer feelings of autonomy than Ollie’s.

Not quite understanding why the interviewers were interested in hearing about her childhood, Rose Evelyn reluctantly shared a life history that she described as “a hard time – unpleasant all the time.” She saw her own tragedy as merely a continuation of that of her mother’s – Rosie Newman had had fifteen children, had lost two in childbirth, one had been
stillborn, and “others [had] died when they was real small.” Rosie had been married three times, and widowed three times, working as a “charwoman” for the federal government. Her fifteen children “too close together,” and “heart trouble” had, according to Rose Evelyn, led to Rosie Newman’s early demise. When Rose Evelyn was a child, her mother had worked sometimes twenty hours a day, “like a dog […] in a Chinese laundry, and as soon as [Rose Evelyn] was big enough,” she had joined her mother at work, “stand[ing] on a box so [she] could reach the tub.”

As a young girl, Rose Evelyn worked late into the night beside her mother. “Sometimes,” she recollected, “[she] would be so tired and sleepy [she’d] catch [her] hand in the wringer when [she] dozed off.”

At twelve, Rose Evelyn’s mother remarried and the additional income from her stepfather allowed Rose Evelyn some leisure time. She took a break from the laundry and took on caring for a Jewish woman’s children for 50 cents a week, until her stepfather died “and things got worser.” Her family often went hungry, not knowing from whence or when their next meal would come. Rose Evelyn took on more childcare and eventually returned to working beside her mother at the laundry, as well as getting a job at the local box factory. Her life became devoid of “pleasures or fun.” And sometimes she “wonder[ed] why [she] was born,” because she could not remember ever being “really happy.”

By the time she was fifteen, Rose Evelyn was married. Her “married life,” she said “[…] wasn’t no better.” Her husband turned out to be a drinker, “the kind of man, [who] never believed in [providing] for his family.” Eventually he lost his job and her in-laws, with whom they had been living, “expected [Rose Evelyn] to take care of him.” Even after she “got sick” and had to give up her $33-a-week job at the box factory, her husband did not keep the family

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afloat. Many nights the children went hungry. The Depression had been especially difficult, as it had been for many other poor and working class black families in D.C. Rose Evelyn lost precious domestic work because “folks […] began doin’ it theirselves.” Sometimes she and her children lived on $3-$4 a week. Sometimes days went by without food and when she worked she fed her children, but not always herself.

Rose Evelyn’s pregnancies and deliveries had been difficult too. She had her first child Winston at 15 and remembered that one of her younger sisters, who had not been married, had “died deliverin’.” “But,” Rose Evelyn insisted, “I was married,” as if making a correlation between the status of “married” and an easy child birth. She had gone into labor at work and “was in hard labor for four days.” Although her mother had had so many children, Rose Evelyn said she had not told her “how to do,” leaving her unprepared. In the hospital, “they tied [Rose Evelyn] to the bed with sheets and tied [her] hands.” On the second day, the baby changed position and “the doctor got disgusted an’ went home.” By the fourth day, though, “a mid-wife heard about [Rose Evelyn] havin’ so much trouble” and came literally to the rescue. She untied Rose Evelyn, instructed her on how to breathe, and in three hours, Winston was born. Rose Evelyn was then unconscious for the next two days. Her experience of the impersonal and dismissive treatment she received in the hospital might help to explain the ways in which other women interviewed spoke proudly of giving birth to all or most of their children in their homes with the help of midwives.

For Rose Evelyn Hillman, her faith had brought her comfort in many of these hard times. At some of the worst economic moments, for example, Rose Evelyn remembered praying, “Oh dear Lord, what are we gonna do?” Then as if her prayer had been heard, a neighbor would pay one of her children to run an errand and Rose Evelyn would use that money to get her family a
meal. As a result, Rose Evelyn “believed in [living] right, ‘cause if you don’t you can’t ask the Lord to help you.” She sent her children to church every Sunday “no matter what happens.” “We are Catholic,” she said, “and the Lord has really been good to us in spite of all our troubles.”

While her faith had paid off at some desperate times, in other ways her Catholicism was not a blessing. She had not been able to divorce her errant Protestant husband, although they had been separated for so long at the time of the interview that Rose Evelyn could not quite remember when the separation had begun. She did not know where her husband was and he did not “send his own children nothin’ ever.” Moreover, she could not remarry.

Despite this hindrance, Rose Evelyn did have “a boy friend.” He was the second one she had had since her separation, according to her daughter Rosella. “Mr. Mitchell,” as he was called in the transcript, lived with the Hillmans sometimes, as had Rose Evelyn’s former boyfriend. Rose Evelyn had two children with Mr. Mitchell: Constance and Harold. And by 1940 she would have Howard as well, although all her children would be listed as having “Hillman” as their last name.\(^\text{281}\)

Like many of the single (separated, unmarried, or widowed) or singular (married but husbands not living with them) women interviewed, relationships were partly utilitarian. Although Rose Evelyn claimed she did not know how the children felt about her relationship with Mr. Mitchell, she was sure that because of their youth, they did not quite understand her relationship. Despite his abusive nature when drunk, as reported by both Winston and Rosella in their interviews, Mr. Mitchell had “been pretty good about helpin’ out when he were workin’ regular,” which he had been until recently, according to Rose Evelyn. And when Mr. Mitchell suggested they “go out,” Rose Evelyn often declined, even though she liked “to go to shows an’

places like that.” Instead, she asked for the money they would have spent so that she could buy groceries. She had not “been to a show in five years, […] because] you don’t enjoy yourself if you know next day you might not have nothin’ to eat.” Now that Mr. Mitchell was out of work though, it seemed to her “like things [was] gettin’ right back to where they used to be when [she] didn’t have a man around. Most of the time,” she reflected, “havin’ a man around makes it easier.” It was this pragmatic sentiment that Rose Evelyn felt her older children did not understand.

When Rose Evelyn reflected on her childrearing practices she vowed that since “[she] had [had] such a hard time when [she] was comin’ up, […] she did not want [her children] to have nothin’ to go through like [she] did.” Both Winston and Rosella had chores so that they would learn “how to work,” - she praised Rosella as being “awful good at workin’ around the house.” But Rose Evelyn also made sure that her children “got to play,” reflecting her own lost childhood. When it came to sex education, her open approach mirrored Ollie Williams’. Rose Evelyn planned to talk to thirteen-year-old Rosella once she started menstruating. “I’m gonna tell her all about what to do to take care of herself an’ what to do if she ever fool with boys and have, you know, connections with ‘em […],” adding, “I ain’t gonna let her have nothin’ happen an’ not know what to do.” She did not plan on insisting that her daughter be abstinent until she married, but rather she planned to help her be careful and safe, both of which Rose Evelyn herself was still learning about in terms of her own sexual activity. Finally, she wanted Rosella to aspire to be whatever she wanted to be when she got older: a nurse, an actress, or a sewing teacher, all of which Rosella had expressed interest in.

For Winston, Rose Evelyn was more worried, and incidentally, slightly more hands off in terms of sex education. Although “the family [was] on relief [with] Mrs. Hillman work[ing] one
day a week (domestic work) in some one else’s place,” Rose Evelyn blamed her work schedule for Winston doing “things he shouldn’t do,” specifically hanging “around with bad boys,” indicating that contrary to her interviewer’s description, Rose Evelyn actually worked more than one day a week. Despite her work schedule and five children, Rose Evelyn asserted that Winston “[had not] been taken up yet ‘cause [she] work[ed] him hard,” “taken up” meaning either by a youth gang or the police. In contrast to her plans for sex education for Rosella, Rose Evelyn had not really told Winston much about sex. “Boys find out things like that,” she believed. She did, though, caution him not to “get no girls in trouble.” According to Winston, if he wanted to be a boxer, which he did (a popular potential occupation at this moment as Joe Louis was the Heavy Weight Champion and would soon have his rematch with Max Schmeling), his mother had instructed him not to “fool with girls.”

Rose Evelyn Hillman had been reticent to engage with the interviewers, at first wondering if they were there to discuss her daughter’s recent displays of lack of interest and “pouting” at school. She was not quite sure why they were interested in her history, but she eventually was forthcoming. Still, Rose Evelyn seemed aware of the power differential between herself and her two educated African American young women interviewers and may have sought to level the balance somewhat or mediate her own discomfort by posing “the same question[s]” to her interviewers. While neither interviewer indicated how they responded to Rose Evelyn’s questions, both remarked on Rose Evelyn’s “resign[ation] to the fact that her lot was a hard one,” that she spoke in a “monotone, with a quiet, sad look in her eyes” and that she was “tired looking.” But Rose Evelyn’s interview does indeed contain a narrative of a hard life with

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282 Quoted from Bernice Reed’s transcript of her interview with Rose Evelyn Hillman. Rosella WDC 19, Frazier Papers, Box 131-112 Folder 11.
283 Rosella WDC 19, Frazier Papers, Box 131-112 Folder 11.
many unpleasant realities to which Rose Evelyn had adapted and which she had had to accept on some level. Still, at times she had done what was in her power to do: she had ended her relationship, although the Catholic Church stood in her way of doing so officially. She had entered into other romantic relationships, feeling herself deserved of companionship, but also as a strategy to increase the family income and feed her children. Furthermore, she articulated the thoughtful ways in which she was raising her children. And, clear from the transcript, are the ways she not only cared for them, herself, and her house, described as “spotlessly clean,” which is important, since most visits were unannounced, but also that she had found ways on their limited budget to beautify both herself and their living space, indicating that she had not at all completely “resigned” herself.

Henrietta Belt: Rite, Ritual, and Self-Rule

Like Rose Evelyn Hillman, Henrietta Belt was a committed Catholic. Catholicism, and not Protestantism, might seem an “anomaly” for African American Washingtonians, but for both Rose Evelyn Hillman and Henrietta Belt, their families’ origins in Maryland could partly explain their religious affiliation. While black Catholics were “a minority within a minority,” most could be found in Maryland and Louisiana from as early as the colonial periods of both territories, and through migration black Catholics made their homes and communities in other cities.²⁸⁴ For Henrietta Belt, her Catholic identity was central to her sense of herself.

Henrietta Belt was not the intended interviewee on Friday, August 5, 1938. When interviewer Jean Westmoreland visited 125 L Street, Southeast, she hoped to meet Henrietta Hinton, aged 18. Instead she found Henrietta Hinton’s 25-year-old aunt, Henrietta Belt, who

²⁸⁴ Henrietta Hinton WDC 47, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 111 Box 8; Albert J. Raboteau, A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 117, 132 – 133; see also Thomas (Taiwo) J. DuVall’s autobiography Venial Sins. DuVall was born in the mid-30s in D.C. and lived in Southwest where he attended St. Vincent De Paul on Third and I Streets and hailed from a long line of Maryland black Catholics.
Westmoreland mistakenly labeled as “cousin.” Henrietta Belt invited Westmoreland to wait for her niece, saying that she was at Belt’s brother’s house in Southwest baking a cake because the oven at 125 L Street SE did not work. Westmoreland took a seat and later wrote in her transcript that Henrietta Belt “was quite voluble[, setting herself] in the rocker opposite W[estmoreland] and volunteer[ing] quite a lengthy interview.” During the conversation, one which was later labeled as unusable, but one in which Westmoreland participated more than merely serving as a scribe for responses, Westmoreland noted that Henrietta “seemed to definitely enjoy talking with [her].” When Westmoreland left later that morning, Henrietta Hinton had still not returned from her cake-baking errand, and Henrietta Belt appeared to Westmoreland to be “reluctant to let [her] go,” signifying Henrietta’s belief that she had something to say and a desire to be heard.

Henrietta Belt eagerly took advantage of Westmoreland’s ear that morning as she spent her day off at her older sister Carrie’s house. Henrietta and Carrie, Henrietta Hinton’s 40-year-old mother, were two of Virginia and Maryland natives William and Emma Belt’s several children. Like Carrie, Henrietta worked as a domestic. But for Henrietta it was not her work that made her who she was. In the first half of Henrietta’s interview, she proudly framed her identity through her Catholic and syncretic spiritual practices, practices that had a decidedly this-worldly functionality. Her articulations on her religious understandings foregrounds religious historian Wallace Best’s assertion of the significant role “a self-conscious construction of religious life” played in the lives of black urban migrants in dealing with their quotidian social conditions.286

Described as having “a round and pleasant face,” with “Negroid features,” “brown skin but much lighter than” her niece, Henrietta Belt boasted, “We is all Catholic.” This was in

285 Henrietta Hinton WDC 47, Frazier Papers. In this narrative, I name Jean Westmoreland as Belt’s interviewer because Westmoreland appears less as a transcriber to Belt’s answers and more as an interlocutor and an interrogator.
response to a question posed to her about her niece. Henrietta Belt said that the younger
Henrietta had recently “married in the Catholic Church.” This surprised Westmoreland for,
according to Westmoreland, 18-year-old Henrietta Hinton was pregnant and surely showing at
the time. The elder Henrietta (Belt) was not aware of any consequences for her niece’s out of
wedlock pregnancy, at which Westmoreland was astounded. Henrietta thought that at the most
her niece would have confessed, maybe gotten admonished, and made to do some penance,
which Henrietta later explained to Westmoreland was saying “certain prayers a certain number
of times.” But in the end the young Henrietta, pregnant and all, “had got[ten] married, and it was
all right, I guess,” concluded her aunt.

Westmoreland, maybe because she was not talking to her intended subject, followed up
by engaging Henrietta in a discussion about the Church’s stance on abortion and birth control
where Westmoreland’s own personal positions became apparent. First she asked Henrietta
whether “the priest ever talk[ed …] about birth control.” Henrietta was not sure what birth
control was and instead responded that the priest “gets after you for getting rid of children. That
is a terrible sin, you know,” adding “He don’t like that.” Westmoreland pressed, though, asking
what the priest would think if “you can prevent having them.” Henrietta replied that while she
agreed that one should “prevent having them” if one could, the priests “don’t want you to
prevent having them. It’s a sin to stop a child from coming,” referring again to abortion.
Westmoreland pushed further: “But suppose you have not become pregnant, and you can keep
yourself from becoming pregnant.” Henrietta reflected that she had “never” heard “anything
about that herself.” To which Westmoreland reported to Henrietta that “the Catholic Church does
not approve of the method.” And Henrietta could “see how they wouldn’t.” Here
Westmoreland’s notions about the church’s position on birth control are evident. However, this did not deter Henrietta’s loyalty to either the institution of the Catholic Church or her own faith.

Henrietta thought that the Catholic Church asked very little of an individual, but offered much in return. Westmoreland was interested in what they might offer “that no other church can do.” To which Henrietta said, “Well, if you want anything and it is really for your good, you’ll get it.” When Westmoreland seemed incredulous, Henrietta went on, “reassuring” Westmoreland that what she was saying was “really true. If you want a thing bad enough, and it is for your good to have it you will get it. You know, the Father won’t refuse anything that is asked of him.” The “Blessed Mother,” on the other hand, “the Virgin Mary,” got “most” requests. In Henrietta’s estimation, Mary was much more discerning: “she decides whether it is for your good. Then if she thinks you should have it you will get it, or the Father will give you something else that’s better in its place.” Westmoreland was puzzled at how one would “know that [one’s] requests [had] been replaced by another thing.” Henrietta replied matter-of-factly that one could easily tell: “you know what you want and why you want it. You get something else that is just as good for what you want it for. So you know it’s been given in place of the thing you asked for first,” which seemed to Henrietta a simple enough explanation.

Henrietta’s assertions about the benefits of Catholic beliefs were also reflected by Rose Evelyn Hillman’s faithful practice, and were shared by Northwest resident Viola Porter, who defended Catholicism as a better religion than the others, calling it more stable. “Negroes,” Viola proclaimed, “[got] more material benefit from the Catholic faith than any of the others. They say ‘Once a Catholic, always a Catholic, but ‘Once a Baptist, you’re liable to be everything else. [emphasis added]”

287 Quenton Porter WDC IV, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
Despite Henrietta’s clear religious commitment, her interviewer continued to interrogate Henrietta’s understanding of the foundations of her belief system by asking about the ascension of Mary into Heaven. How was it, Westmoreland wondered, that Henrietta “knew” that Mary had ascended “body and soul.” Henrietta seemed to misunderstand at first, responding that she had learned well her catechism; she knew all her “saints and the Holy Family,” “the days of birth and death of the saints,” and that as long as she remembered to celebrate those, “they won’t forget you” when you make requests of them. But that was not what Westmoreland was asking. She was asking how it was that Henrietta could believe that Mary’s body had ascended, “when we are told that only the soul can enter the Kingdom [of Heaven]?” Henrietta attributed this to Mary’s special condition of being a virgin, her body being unsullied by sex. Westmoreland was even more unconvinced by this: “But how could she conceive without knowing a man?” Henrietta recounted the story of the angel’s appearance to Mary, as if maybe Westmoreland just did not know the particulars of that narrative. Westmoreland wanted to know though whether Henrietta accepted that Mary’s husband Joseph “believed her.” Henrietta was certain that he did. Moreover, she said, “[he] is a good saint.” Her experience had been that when she prayed to St. Joseph, she was often pleased with the results.

Henrietta had recently sent a dollar to the St. Josephites and had received “a letter, beads, the rope, and the Holy oil.” The Society of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart was a national organization committed to increasing black membership in the Catholic Church. And while it had a national scope, it was located in Baltimore, Maryland, and thus was in close proximity to Henrietta Belt and her family. Moreover, its educational arm, the St. Joseph Seminary was located in Northeast and Henrietta had sent the dollar to support their work in “train[ing] men for
the church.” They also published what was then called “The Colored Harvest,” a bimonthly newsletter, which Henrietta had on hand and which Westmoreland “scrutinized,” along with the letter Henrietta had received when Henrietta left the room. Westmoreland noted in her transcript that the letter was a “mimeographed” form letter, “though it sounded extremely personal.” When Henrietta returned to the room and noticed Westmoreland looking at the newsletter, she commented that she had just started to read the Harvest regularly. Westmoreland was dubious about whether Henrietta “[understood] all that [was] in [the Harvest].” Henrietta replied that actually it was from this publication she received “all the news of the colored churches and what [was] going on in the race.” So, despite the conservative position of the Catholic Church, Henrietta trusted their commitment to racial uplift and their ability to provide her with political news.

Henrietta’s loyalty to and pride about her Catholicism did not mean though that she necessarily considered herself “a good Catholic.” Although she attended church “every Sunday,” remembered feast days and holidays, she sometimes “[sat] up in church and [fell] asleep,” and was easily distracted – by hushed conversations going on around her or if people came in late. And while she was clearly committed to a certain kind of Catholic practice, she admitted that she was not as singularly loyal as she should be, “not such a strict Catholic.” She confessed that she visited “the Baptist Church” on occasion because she enjoyed their passionate singing. In particular there was one woman who “[came] around [and sang and prayed] with you. She really knows you too when she is through with you.” Henrietta laughed when she thought about how angry her priest would be if he knew she participated in Baptist services. Still she insisted, echoing Viola Porter’s sentiments, that she “wouldn’t ever” join another church. Henrietta’s Catholic faith was something she “wouldn’t change.” However, she had found that spiritual
power existed beyond the Catholic Church, too. In another denomination’s church a woman had recently diagnosed Henrietta with something her doctor could not. She would not disclose what this was, but did say that her plan was to “pray to St. Joseph to heal [her].” When Westmoreland tried to guess at what ailed Henrietta, saying that she “looked perfectly healthy,” Henrietta intimated that it was not physical.

Just then, in rumbled three men, one of whom was the brother of Henrietta Belt and Carrie Hinton. All the men wore “work clothes” and trampled the blue rug with “red clay” from their shoes. Henrietta introduced them to Westmoreland and talked with them a bit. Just before the men left, Henrietta’s brother “commented on the gifts [Henrietta] had received from the St. Josephites” and expressed interest in getting “some too.” He asked his sister to send away for him and she told him it would cost him a dollar, to which he said “all right.” Henrietta’s adherence to her Catholicism was clearly shared by her siblings, as evidenced by her niece’s recent marriage in the Catholic Church and her brother’s request. Moreover, despite Westmoreland’s seeming disbelief that Henrietta had a critical understanding of her religious faith, Henrietta’s Catholicism had allowed her to develop an adaptive practice that included both a deep abiding belief in some of Catholicism’s more mystical traditions and the ability to go outside the Catholic church for spiritual guidance.

The second half of Henrietta’s interview is framed around her determination to remain single. Henrietta Belt’s other proud description of herself was that of her siblings she was “the only one who [wasn’t] married. All the rest of them [were.]” Westmoreland, seemingly on high alert for inconsistencies in Henrietta’s musings, wondered at “how [it had] happen[ed] that [Henrietta was not] married,” asking her age as if to say she was certainly old enough to be married. Henrietta replied that she was twenty-five and “just haven’t wanted to marry.” Like
some of the other young women interviewed, Henrietta seemed disinterested in marriage. She had “see[n] so much married life,” she said, and it seemed to her to be filled “with […] bother and everything that [she] had] decided that [she] didn’t want to marry.” The single Westmoreland, who was only a year older than Henrietta, challenged Henrietta here as she had done with her religious faith, saying, “but all married life isn’t a bother. You expect a little discord.” To which, Henrietta felt inclined to concede: “yes, you’re right. I know it isn’t all bad.” Henrietta felt that she needed to explain though that it was not that she had not had “experiences with men, young and old.” From these experiences she had determined that (heterosexual?) romantic relationships were not just difficult but often more trouble than they were worth – “it seem like you can’t get along. They are fussing or beating you or something like that, and so I just rather not be bothered.” Westmoreland then asked Henrietta whether she was not “in love with anyone,” as if that alone would be reason enough to want to get married and put up with the fuss. Henrietta responded that she was not at the present moment, although she had “friends.” For Henrietta, like Rose Evelyn Hillman, marriage was at least partly a practical matter – a woman married and ultimately tolerated mistreatment at times, if she was not able to support herself and her children. And even if a woman’s spouse or “friend” was not always employed, the promise of income was sometimes enough to tolerate a bad relationship. But this was not Henrietta’s case. She reckoned that “when you’ve got your health as I have and a job and you been used to more like an independent life, you just don’t need to get married.” Finally Henrietta was asked whether, with all her religious practices and beliefs and her opposition to marriage, she had “ever thought [about] join[ing] an order and be[coming] a nun?” Henrietta responded with conviction. “No,” she stated, “I don’t want to do that” and reiterated that she had had several “chances” for

288 Here I ask the question of whether or not Henrietta is referring to relationships specifically with men because her earlier description of and evasiveness about the health concern that was not physical could be an allusion to her engagement in lesbian relationships and/or sex.
marriage, but “just figured it would be better not to.” Despite her disinterest in marriage, Henrietta in no way saw herself poised for a life of celibacy.

On the top of the first page of Henrietta Belt’s interview documentation, a handwritten note reads: “nothing pertinent in this portion.” There is also an “X” through the first few pages of the transcript. Some text was scribbled through or had been bracketed to categorize Henrietta’s answers. Despite the determined uselessness of Henrietta Belt’s interview, what comes through are articulations of authorial subjectivity: her resolute faithfulness to the Catholic Church and to an innovated set of syncretic religious practices; an awareness of a psychological and/or emotional struggle with which she was grappling and her actions to enlist her trusted and varied resources for help; and her clarity about her deliberate decision not to marry, reiterating the ways in which for poor and working class women, marriage was less about love and companionship than it was about the pragmatism of family economies.

Anna and Anne Winston: Attitude, Activism, and Amusements

Anne Winston, Henrietta Belt’s contemporary, was not interested in marriage either. It is possible that they had commiserated over this at some point, since both of them are listed as “members of the Domestic Workers Union.”[289] The Winstons lived at 2422 N Street NW, where twenty-three-year-old Anne Winston was visited, “for the purpose of discovering whether Anne [had been] successful in getting a job.” Instead her interviewer was greeted by Anne’s mother, Anna M. Winston, who was in the process of “rid[ding] herself of a traveling photographer […] taking pictures of people in the [Northwest] neighborhood” and who used the interviewer’s presence to “excuse herself” from the photographer. Anna and Anne Winston’s interviews intertwine to create a narrative that speaks to the complex nature of mother-daughter

[289] From a list given to Ruth Bittler on July 2, 1938 by Marcella Moore, who was reported as organizing the union for the AFL. This from an interview with Annie Stein, of the “Workers Alliance of A.F. of L.”
relationships, replete with pride, aggravation, disappointment, resentment, and loyalty. We see this play out through both Anna’s discussion about her daughter and in their mutual participation in the local political activities of a burgeoning domestic worker’s trade union, giving us a glimpse into interracial, intercultural, and intergenerational labor organizing amongst working class women in interwar Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{290}

After dismissing the traveling photographer, Anna Winston invited her interviewer into her home and proudly displayed the quilt on which she had been working. It was Anna Winston’s second quilt since she had been sick with “another illness.” According to Anna’s interviewer, the patches on the quilt “did not meet, but the colors were gay.” That day was Anna’s “first day up,” and she wore “a house coat” with “her hair done up in four balls.” It is not clear from what Anna was suffering, but she was under doctor’s care and her youngest daughter Maria, 15, was, at the time of the interview, residing at the Glenn Dale Sanitarium in Maryland for the treatment of tuberculosis.\textsuperscript{291}

Virginia native Anna Winston, who was anywhere between 43 and 50 years old in 1938,\textsuperscript{292} was the mother of Martha (29), Anne, Charles (19), and Maria. While both Anna and her much older husband William hailed from Virginia, they had first settled in Maryland, where all four of their children had been born. By 1938, Anna was widowed and Martha was married and had migrated to Detroit. Charles too was away from home, at school in New York City and apparently in love with his piano teacher, who was a couple of years younger than Charles. Anna was a versatile woman, having a myriad of jobs by the time she reached Washington, D.C. including working on her “own account,” and as an “insurance agent.” By 1940 she was listed as

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\item \textsuperscript{290} Anne (Winston) WDC 42, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 113 Folder 10.
\item \textsuperscript{291} http://dcist.com/2013/12/abandoned_dc_glenn_dale_hospital_an.php#photo-1; http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/06/AR2006120601206.html
\item \textsuperscript{292} (Mother) Anna Winston’s age fluctuates in the census records. Listed as 22 in 1910, 27 in 1920, 29 in 1930, and 45 in 1940, Anna may have been falsifying her age.
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working as a “junior scientist” for the “Adult Education Research Project,” “government work,” and had “partner[ed]” with widowed native Washingtonian Hunter Artist. Artist, a “janitor” for the “Board of Education,” along with his four children between the ages of 5 and 13, resided with Anna, her daughter Maria and Charles, who had returned home.²⁹³

Daughter Anne Winston was not listed as living with her mother in 1940. Anna reported to the interviewer that Anne had gotten the Works Project Administration job she wanted. However, it meant that Anne was “obliged to live away from home,” and so Anne was staying with some family friends in another part of the city. In response to the interviewer’s expressed regrets that Anne could not continue to live at home and work, Anna commented: “Well, you know how these W.P.A. jobs are run. You have to be almost out before they’ll take you in,” indicating that if it had appeared that Anna could support Anne she likely would not have gotten the job. Like Ollie Williams, Anna took a risky liberty to express her disdain for the administration of the local Depression relief program to her interviewer.

In taking another risk, Anna invited the interviewer to a “meeting of the Organization Committee of the Women’s Trade Union League,” which was happening the next day. Hosted by Annie Stein, “a paid employee of the Restaurant Workers Alliance of the [American Federation of Labor],” and co-facilitated by Julie Katz, wife of Sidney Katz, who was Regional Director of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the meeting took place at Stein’s Euclid Street NW apartment.²⁹⁴ Anna arrived after the interviewer who noted that in contrast to her drab appearance the day before, that day she as decked out in a black satin dress “with tiny white stars,” accessorized by “a yellow and green sash” around her waist; a white bag and white

²⁹⁴ “Interview with Annie Stein,” conducted by Ruth J. Bittler on May 13, 1938 and “Meeting of Organization Committee of Women’s Trade Union” June 10, 1938, Frazier Papers, Box 131-112, Folder 7.
gloves; an ivory beaded necklace; earrings, a white hat and white shoes. Anna, who had clearly made conscious sartorial choices for the political meeting, discussed her frustrations with and concerns about her daughter Anne, who was also scheduled to be at the meeting, but had not yet arrived.

For one, Anna was worried about Anne’s disdain for marriage and her disinterest in having children. Although Anna insisted that it was a known fact that Anne was actually “crazy about children,” and that children were “fond” of her, Anne had said that she “[could not] be bothered with marriage and all it entails.” In one of their recent arguments, Anne had accused her mother of “marr[y]ing the wrong man.” In her mother’s estimation, Anne “blamed her parents for things she [had] been denied.” Moreover, Anne was “hard-headed, stubborn, and determined to be different.” Anna worried that her daughter “seem[ed] to think that all that ha[d] happened to her was done deliberately to harm her.” Anne’s “resentment” appeared to stem from her financial inability to continue school.

Since Anne had had to give up school, she had, according to her mother, become quite “disagreeable and hard to get along with, […] a hard person to reason with,” who was unable to “see things another way than her own.” Anne hoped to return to school that fall, to “realize some of the things she [felt were] rightfully hers.” Anna wanted her daughter to return to school and was unhappy that she had been forced to stop. She wanted her daughter to “realize that her problems [were] not half as bad as many others.” Anne on the other hand, despite her mother’s perspective on her situation and pride in all her daughter had accomplished up until that point, was bitter about her economic and educational obstacles, blaming her mother’s choice of a husband who could not afford to pay for his children’s education, who had died and left them to fend for themselves.
When Anne finally got to the meeting, entering the apartment with a “syncopated knock,” she plopped herself onto the couch, and took on what was described by the interviewer as a “bored” affect. The women at the meeting, white, black and Jewish all expressed excitement about Anne’s new job, but Anne’s responses were portrayed as defeatist and negative. While Anne was not “on an art project,” she was “drawing,” she said, but she was quick to say that she “[did not] know how long” she would have the job. Anne explained her work with the Agricultural Department in this way: “It’s supposed to be a statistical project where figures of agricultural life are brought in. We add up and somebody else breaks down what we have added up and adds them up again. Everybody works hard for a few days and then nobody does anything for a few days.” This prompted Anne’s interviewer to ask her if she was “boondoggling after all.” But Anne insisted that it was actual work, just that her hours were irregular. Anne’s demeanor may likely have been a practical reflection on the precarious nature of her employment. Despite what was described as Anne’s cynicism, she hoped the “job [would] hold out” because she wanted to return to school, and felt that she could do both.

After some time was spent celebrating Anne’s employment, the meeting turned to its agenda, which was a discussion of “the case of a woman who was the chairman of the laundry union and who had been fired for what the employer [called] inefficiency.” The women knew otherwise and planned to write a letter to the owner of the laundry with “an ultimatum” that threatened a strike and a picket of the business. There was a call for volunteers to sign up for picketing and Anna offered up her daughter. Anne begged off, making her mother squirm in her chair. Anne instead prioritized her own leisure, saying she would be busy or too tired after “playing golf” to demonstrate. Moreover, Anne commented, she was “tired of picketing” generally. Despite the descriptions of both the young people and adults involved in the study as
apathetic.\textsuperscript{295} Anne’s response implies both the level of her own political engagement, and that of her community. The other women at the meeting ignored Anne’s refusal and continued asking her to commit to a time to picket. Anne insisted that she planned to “play golf.” When the interviewer inquired where she would be playing, Anne answered that obviously she would be playing “where Negroes have to play,” asking sarcastically if the interviewer had “expect[ed her] to go out to the Congressional club.” Finally though, Anne gave in, agreeing to join the picket line, which the other women seemed to expect she would, and which allowed her mother to settle back into her chair.

As the meeting wound down, Anne alternately flipped through the recently published book \textit{Men Who Lead Labor} by Communist Party member Bruce Minton, outlining the lives of labor leaders like John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers and ILWU’s Harry Bridges, in which she seemed mildly interested, asking if she could borrow it. She also picked at a guitar that had been standing in the corner of the room.\textsuperscript{296} Anna Winston, having relaxed, made deliberate small talk with the interviewer, expressing her general praise and approval for the “many benefits” of W.P.A. jobs.

What comes through in Anna and Anne Winston’s narrative is Anna’s deep involvement in the lives of her children and her struggles as a single parent. She took her parental role very seriously, seeking counsel wherever she could. For example, she had struck up a conversation with a young doctor at the Freedman’s Hospital one day while she was there about her

\textsuperscript{295} See social scientist St. Clair Drake’s 1967 introduction to Frazier’s \textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways}. Drake, like Frazier, was also a student of the Chicago School of Sociology and co-authored \textit{Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City} (1945), one of the significant monographs in the historiography which traced the formation of urban “ghettos,” their economic privation, and their resultant cultural pathologies.

daughter’s disposition. The likely African American doctor, “a fine fellow,” had also been a bitter youth because he too had had to “stop school and go to work,” but he had come to think of his work experience as having “broadened” him, making him more “sympathetic and understanding.” Anna found some comfort in his response, hoping that Anne would feel the same someday, wanting her to accept for her own sake the reality that “some get things easier than others.” What is also clear is her pride in her daughter’s achievements and her desire for her daughter to be successful.

For Anne, in spite of a feeling of defeat, she continued to strive to achieve certain educational goals. She resented her mother’s personal and relationship decision-making and the economic impact that it appeared to have on her. Anne’s awareness of the consequences of, or her attribution of her situation to, her parents’ actions may well have informed her own disinclination towards marriage and children. Interestingly, though, not the presence of Jim Crow segregation in her city, nor the structural economic realities of the Great Depression and their impact on traditional family roles, nor her blackness and her femaleness, had squashed Anne’s feelings of entitlement to the education of her choice, to the future of her imaginings, or, to do as she pleased with her leisure time. Moreover, despite Anne’s seeming recalcitrance, her attendance at the organizing meeting for the Women’s Trade Union League indicated not only a level of loyalty to her mother but also a level of political consciousness and engagement. As historian Sharon Harley has laid out, black working class women not only recognized the benefits of involvement in trade unions, they also already had a long history of labor organizing even when they were shut out, as were their black male counterparts, of unions, as is aptly shown
by scholar Tera Hunter’s examination of Atlanta washerwomen’s organized strikes in the Reconstruction period.\textsuperscript{297}

\textit{Hattie Savage: Privation and Pathos}

While work may not have been the central identity for poor and working class black women, hard economic situations took up considerable space in their everyday lives. In a decidedly poorer section of Northwest between the Winstons and Howard University, thirty-three year old Hattie Savage, shared a rear basement apartment with her sixteen-year-old daughter, Lucy, her son William (11), daughter Sylvia (4), baby Valerie (or Valeria), and Lucy’s nearly one-year-old son, Yudell.\textsuperscript{298} Hattie Savage’s short and fragmented narrative is one that highlights the charged relationship many poor black women had with the country’s Depression-era iteration of its social welfare system. Her narrative is also one of the few that record an almost tangible discomfort with her situation, her environment, and with the condition of being under a social science microscope. Hattie’s narrative demonstrates some of the very real feelings of inadequacy, anger, and despair that accompany poverty. In addition, her daughter Lucy Savage, like Anne Winston and Henrietta Belt, expressed indifference about marriage, an attitude which may have developed from the realities of her own unmarried situation, from that of her mother’s married but singular status, and the absence of her father’s financial support.


Hattie Savage was a South Carolina native, but had been living in D.C. for at least a decade. Hattie, her four children and grandson shared the one room apartment on the lower level of a “rooming house.” In July 1938, Hattie was described as “dark,” “extremely stout and flabby,” wearing “a hooover apron [dress that] was filthy.” “Her breasts hung loosely in the folds of the garment. Her hair was short and kinky. Her face was shiny.” She appeared to the interviewer “pleasant [but] lackadaisical.” Two other residents in Hattie’s building, who stood talking with Hattie as the interviewer walked up, had been hopeful that the interviewer was there to get employment for another young woman on the block, about whom the interviewer had inquired, but when they found out she was not visiting for that reason, they smiled at her and took their leave. Hattie too smiled at the interviewer, an expression that the interviewer said “seemed pinned upon her face.”

In the “general[ly] disorder[ed]” one-windowed room, Hattie appeared self-conscious about her surroundings. The furniture was described as “odd pieces,” “dirty,” “worn”; the seats of the two hard back chairs were “re-enforced with […] cardboard”; dirty dishes “littered” the table; and the “walls were bare, greasy and unpapered.” Hattie fumbled with the cord of the electric iron, chastising her daughter Lucy for not having fixed it. “There’s a lot that could be said about this place, she said,” to which the interviewer retorted, “there should be a number of quite interesting things that [Hattie] could tell her.” Hattie continued smiling, even through the interviewer’s comment that Hattie had “quite a few” children, to which Hattie replied “Indeed I do.” Hattie’s discomfort with their housing showed through in her immediate addition of “I am thinking of moving but I can’t seem to get things together. There are six of us in this room.” She provided, once prompted, details about where everyone slept—she and little Sylvia and baby

299 Descriptions of the Savages’ home were written by interviewer Jean Westmoreland.
Valerie slept on the bed; Lucy and Yudell slept on the studio couch; and a cot folded out for her son William. When asked about whether the family had a relief worker “who gives [them] assistance,” Hattie “look[ed] evil” and replied that they did have “a worker, but she don’t give us nothing.” In response to the suggestion that the relief worker might help Hattie with better housing, Hattie countered, “I wouldn’t ask that black-eyed hussy anything. Excuse the expression but she is a hussy and there ain’t no two ways about it.” Hattie’s anger was valid; both local newspapers and the NAACP reported discrimination at the hands of white relief workers who “set one standard for the budget of white families, [and] another for colored,” or black relief workers who “resent[ed] assignments [that] denied them broad[er] professional experience.”

Scholar Linda Gordon notes that while mother’s-aid programs had always been underfunded, they became more so during the Depression, and for single mothers in particular programs were structured by “conservative gender and family norms” in vogue during the economic crisis. Relief to women was often “morals-tested,” mobilizing a “deserving/undeserving distinction,” and “rigid nineteenth century standards of physical and moral cleanliness.”

On the rainy morning that further darkened the room they all lived in, Hattie’s current pregnancy became the subject of discussion. Hattie and Lucy were entertaining an unnamed female visitor who was waiting for the rain to let up so that she could leave and “get home.” They began a discussion on marriage, prompted by the interviewer’s comment that Lucy, like Anne Winston, was not interested in it. The visitor could understand why Lucy might be disinterested in marriage, citing men’s generally bad behavior and that “there [were] only a few men who [were] any good.” The interviewer asked whether “the good man [was] the exception.”

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The visitor responded, “Indeed” and that she, proudly, was married to one such exception. Hattie questioned the “use of getting married,” saying that the only result of marriage was “a house full of babies,” that being “all these men can give you now,” seemingly a reference to what Hattie assessed as men’s inability to financially support a family in the current economy. Thus, Hattie supported Lucy’s decision not to marry because she “would rather Lucy [not] have to contend with that.”

Then the conversation turned to Lucy’s father with the visitor asking whether Hattie had heard from him. Hattie said she had not, but that he “better not leave this city, or [she’d] have him in [the] Occaquan [workhouse] [sic].” The interviewer interjected that Robert Savage, “seem[ed] to be doing [Hattie] no good here.” And the visitor added insult to injury by saying: “And look at you, waiting this late in life to have all these children. Now another one.” At this the interviewer noted her “astonishment” and asked Hattie whether this was true. Hattie smiled again, and asked if she was not able to tell, to which the interviewer wrote that she had not noticed for “Mrs. Savage was so large it was not visible. It appeared that she was just an extremely fat woman,” a version of which the interviewer must have also said out loud for Hattie’s visiting friend “chimed in” that indeed Hattie was “so fat” that one would only know she was pregnant to “see [her] sideways.” When Lucy commented that a neighbor “down the street [had] got[ten] rid of hers,” Hattie “wish[ed she] could too,” saying “I wish I could kill this one.” The visitor suggested she figure out “a way to keep from having them,” at which Hattie said, “Of course I won’t kill them, but I surely don’t feel like having another baby. It’s hard enough taking care of these I got.” The interviewer asked, seemingly derisively, whether Robert Savage “[came] around just long enough to give [Hattie] a baby.” Hattie’s response: Indeed he had.
Echoing comments made by Henrietta Belt and as you will see later by Myron Ross, Jr.’s mother Evelyn Ross, Hattie Savage and her daughter both had limited knowledge of birth control devices and methods, beyond abstinence, although spermicidal douching, condoms, and the diaphragm were all being made available through private doctors or through new planned parenthood clinics to middle class women and ethnic white immigrants respectively to control their pregnancies. What also comes across in this documentation of the two visits with the Savages, in addition to yet another young woman’s lack of interest in participating in the institution of marriage, which seemed to have little direct appeal at this particular moment for young black poor and working class women, was Hattie Savage’s distress with the scrutiny she was under: from her relief worker, from the interviewer, even from her visiting friend; her disappointment and frustration with her housing situation, the number of children for whom she was responsible, and her husband’s absence and lack of financial support. She seemed to tolerate the scrutiny, smiling through some of it, but at other times her irritation, her anger, her sadness, her general pain were visible.

The visceral feelings experienced, expressed, or implied by Hattie in her interview are not often at the center of either historical or social scientific study of Depression-era social policy, reform and welfare. Rather we have the very important statistics of rates of unemployment, rates of participation in W.P.A. projects, or ways in which black women in particular were ignored by the reform politics of the period. Here, though, we have what literary scholar Raymond Williams might identify as structures of feeling: emergent, lived experiences and affect of black poor and working class women reckoning with, making sense of, negotiating the multi-faceted realities of their social and economic situations resulting from the national

crises of racial segregation and the Depression. Structures of feeling could also explain the prevalence of indifference to the institution of marriage amongst young black poor and working class women, just as conventions of marriage were being proffered by both policy makers and reform workers as a remedy to poverty, one that these young women saw as ineffectual.  

*Some Respite: Eleanor Bell, Lula Wright*

Like Hattie Savage, Eleanor Bell articulated frustration about constraints placed on her by her economic situation. But unlike Hattie, Eleanor’s poverty did not bar her from finding some respite in her community, despite it being the ill-reputed Southwest. Also, although Eleanor and her husband Frank both had been born in D.C.’s poor, crumbling, inadequately serviced alleys, their marriage, and seemingly their relationship, had endured whatever “dysfunctional” cultural habits had been inculcated by the environment of the alleys, which they had lived in even as a married couple. Alley life had not proven to break their familial bonds.

Eleanor had lived in Southwest “all [her] life. About 45 years,” she said. She and her husband Frank had lived in their home at 13 E Street Southwest, on the border of Southeast, which they rented, for at least half her life. On October 3rd, 1938, Eleanor discussed her sparse leisure activities, prompted by questions about her community membership and participation. Eleanor had grown up in Broad Alley, in the belly of Southwest, home to both black female and

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303 Here again both Raymond Williams’ “structures of feelings,” and Ed White’s reworking of that into “feelings of structure” seem appropriate theoretical underpinnings. See Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), specifically his chapter nine, “Structures of Feeling”. Moreover, Ed White (and Ruthie Gilmore) have deployed “feelings of structure.” White defines this as: “practical ensembles, the collectives in, from, against, and through which people south to understand, initiate, sidestep, win, co-opt, or manipulate the antagonisms or projects of their time. […] a structural analysis from below […] articulated in diverse and contradictory ways and forms by […] everyday intellectuals, as Gramsci put it in his prison notebooks”; see White’s preface to *The Backcountry and the City: Colonization and Conflict in Early America*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

304 See James Borchert’s chapter on “Alley Families,” *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850 – 1970* for how actually many families defied the perceived and pervasive notion that alleys and specifically urban ones played an important role in the disintegration of conventional family formations.
white male juvenile delinquents, according to the District Juvenile Court.\textsuperscript{305} She married Frank Bell relatively early in her life and by the time she was 16 and he was 19, they had had their first child, Edna. Frank worked as a laborer and Eleanor was a maid for a “private family.” By the time Eleanor was 19, she had both Edna and Alfonso, and she and Frank lived in Temple Court, another Southwest alley, close to the border of Southeast, where their rent was supplemented by a lodger and Eleanor’s much older brother, who lived with them and, who like Frank, was also a “laborer.”\textsuperscript{306} Eventually, Frank was able to buy a car and he set up a small chauffeur service for private clients, by which time he and Eleanor had added two more children to the family. His business seemingly allowed the family to move into the home on E Street. But the Depression affected Frank’s business and in 1930, Frank was not listed in the census at 13 E Street with his family, which included a married and working Edna, daughter Mamie (14), Frank Jr. (8), Helen (6), Thelma (4), and Charles (2). By 1938, Eleanor and Frank had added Raymond to the brood, and Frank was back in the household; he and his son Frank Jr. were both working as “laborers” for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) doing “reforestation” work.\textsuperscript{307}

Eleanor’s interview responses are littered with financial woes. Eleanor said, “I don’t belong to nothing but the insurance. Things are so tight,” lamenting that they could “hardly keep the insurance.” They were members of Zion Baptist Church, slightly south and further west in Southwest than her home, but she had not attended in some time. She was not participating in any church activities because they could not afford to. And when she attended church she “just listen[ed] to the sermon.” She remembered that as a young person she did “more things like


parties,” but now both her age and the “scarcity” of money limited her. Most of her leisure activities involved trading “visit[s with her] neighbors […] when we are well and when we are sick too.” Once a year, Eleanor threw herself a birthday party that “all [her] friends [came] to” where they “[didn’t] play cards or dance[…] just talk[ed] and play[ed] games and [had] a good time.” Despite the fact that they lived in Southwest, Eleanor appreciated her community. It was where she had grown up and was raising her children. “I like here alright,” she reflected. “These folks are laborers and some work in service. These people are all friendly and we get along fine. All my friends live in this neighborhood. All [my husband’s] friends live right down here just like mine.” While she and Frank might venture into “another part of the city” to visit his sister, for example, Southwest was comfortable, familiar, safe. So, despite the generally negative judgment researchers and reformers had of Southwest, for many of its residents it had been home all their lives where social relationships shaped their movements, activities, and opinions about it. Additionally, the short interview, backed up by census data, show a long and surviving marital relationship between two people, both of whom hailed from D.C.’s Southwest alleys, areas slated for much of this period for demolition and blamed for juvenile delinquency and family dysfunctionality. Here with the Bells stood an example of a conventionally “functional” black family. Frank Bell had even started his own business to help manage their economic troubles, but the economic crisis of the 1920s had ultimately hindered his and his family’s movement up the socio-economic ladder. Frank Bell’s contribution to the family economy stands in stark contrast to Hattie Savage’s absent husband. Despite their circumstances, Eleanor’s fragmented narrative speaks to the importance of intervals of relief from financial woes.

Respite was necessary and could and would be found and/or made. A brief example is evidenced in the paragraph of documentation about Lula Wright. Esther and William Wright’s
mother, 43-year-old Lula, “chatted a while” with her interviewer on a hot July afternoon in 1938. Lula sat “in the dilapidated swing” out front of her Southwest home at the corner of 2nd and D streets, not far from “the Speedway” that would eventually become the 395 beltway. Lula was sometimes a laundress who brought washing home and a seamstress who did private work, but on that July day, Lula was “off from work,” she said.308 Despite her day off, it “hadn’t been any holiday,” for she had spent much of the day ironing. Most days, Lula was “up […] at 5 to be to work by 7,” and according to her daughter Esther, her mother often did not return home until late. Still, Lula Wright was “thankful to be working,” what with “jobs so hard to find.” Despite her intense work schedule, both within and outside of the home, Lula made time to cultivate the flowers (admired by the interviewer) in a “tiny” garden plot in front of her otherwise rundown home. When the interviewer commented that the flowers blooming “were gay […] and pretty,” Lula was “pleased” and proudly stated that “she tended the garden herself.” Moreover, Lula added that the previous year’s growths had been better than these, indicating that she and the small plot had a history, despite her long days of work. Lula Wright, and Rose Evelyn Hillman with her potted plants, found small pleasures, maybe even domestic work that held some meditative benefits to combat their often physical, extended, and laborious days, both caring for their children and working outside the home.

*Laura Evelyn Ross: Domesticity, Dominion, and Discipline*

The woes articulated by Hattie Savage and Eleanor Bell, most of which stemmed from their poverty, were articulated by many women, even those identified by social scientific literature as “middle class.” (Laura) Evelyn Ross, or Evelyn as she called herself, and her family were categorized as “middle class” because her 45-year-old husband Myron Ross Sr. was the

sole breadwinner, the traditional role of the father, and had a “highly skilled and responsible” municipal government job: Ross was a “fifteen year veteran […] of the Local Fire Department.” Myron Sr.’s type of employment, the fact that they owned their home, and that Evelyn did not work outside the home placed the family squarely outside of a social scientific definition of lower class and necessarily made the family “organized,” “functional,” and middle class. However, Evelyn’s interview demonstrated a quite different economic reality.

The Rosses’ home was in Southwest on 2nd street between O and P Streets. It was the family home of Myron Rudolph Ross Sr. The house was “in need of repair,” but it did not compare to the “dilapidated structures which surround[ed] it.” It had “modern sanitary equipment,” “electrical fixtures, [a] telephone,” and “elaborate aquariums of tropical fish of all sizes and descriptions.” It was also a full house, filled with not only children but with ham radio operating equipment and books. All of the nine Ross children: Myron, Jr, 16, Norman, 14, Evelyn, 13, Wayland, 11, Bernard, 8, Doris, 7, Hortense, 6, Yvonne, 5, and Roland, 3, had been born in the “eight-room brick house.”

Thirty-seven-year-old Evelyn Ross was described as a generally neglectful mother and housekeeper, who was “never bother[ed] or concern[ed]” with her children, was “complacent-looking,” and was someone who “expended little energy to keep the house the least [bit] clean.” In contrast to the interviewer’s description, Evelyn’s narrative is that of a thoughtful person who, with pride, took her child-rearing very seriously. And even though we learn through the

309 Frazier, Negro Youth at the Crossways, 200.
311 Descriptions of the home and the family were noted by interviewer Dennis D. Nelson who was a young African American man who had worked as the boys field instructor for the Southwest Community House, so likely he had relationships with many of the young men he interviewed.
312 Myron Ross Jr. was not only interviewed for E. Franklin Frazier’s Negro Youth at the Crossways, which was a study on black adolescent personality development, Myron also received special attention from the psychologist involved in the study and was the case study, under a pseudonym that appeared in the book.
interview that Evelyn may not have been completely aware or well-informed of the life experiences of her children, specifically her eldest son, Myron Jr., and what parent is after all, Evelyn was very cognizant of her responsibilities in the home and the difficulties she faced in raising nine children. 313 Evelyn found status and purpose in her domestic role, as was true for many African American women, whether or not they worked outside the home.314

Evelyn had been “born and raised in the country,” just outside of Richmond, Virginia. She had not gone past “grade school” in her education, and was not sure that the education she had gotten she had even really “need[ed].” Both she and Myron Sr. had come from large families; she had five brothers and six sisters and Myron had “about nine brothers and sisters,” though most had not survived.315 Despite her large family of origin, Evelyn had not intended to have nine children herself and upon reflection wished that Myron Sr. had expressed his desire for a large family “months” before they had gotten married because if he had, Evelyn said she “would have kept [her] job [as a “maid” in a “department store’] and let him go his way.”316

Even with nine children, Myron Sr. was disappointed there had only been five boys: he had “wanted enough for a baseball nine,” he said. But Evelyn figured she had “done the best [she] could” to have boys, lamenting her subsequent weight gain after all her children and that she had married when she was seventeen and 117 pounds. Evelyn, while stating that she hoped

314 Sharon Harley’s “For the Good of the Family and Race: Gender, Work, and Domestic Roles in the Black Community, 1880 – 1930,” examines the role of work both inside and outside the home, both of which was often “domestic” in nature and brought pride and status and added income to the family economy. Also see Bonnie Thornton Dill’s “‘The Means to Put My Children Through’: Child-Rearing Goals and Strategies among Black Female Domestic Servants,” in *The Black Woman*, edited by La Frances Rodgers – Rose (1980).
316 Employment information from 1920 U.S. Census when Laura is 19 and listed as living in Northeast as a “lodger” with a John and Eva Nelson, possible her uncle and his wife.
she was finished having children, appeared to her interviewer to be pregnant at that moment, but it is more likely, in light of her comment about her subsequent weight gain and her reference to some form of birth control, that she was just fat.317

In spite of the fact that Evelyn was not employed outside the home, she thought of her role as a mother and home-maker as a “job.” She saw herself as responsible for “keep[ing the] house and family together and happy” and that was not easy. She was “busy from the time [she] got up till [she laid] down at night and then it look[ed] as though [she’d] done nothing.” Like many of the other mothers interviewed, Evelyn’s leisure activities and social life were significantly limited by both her work schedule and her material realities. Outside of going “to church fairly regularly,” she did not “go any place.” But this was not a lamentation, necessarily; Evelyn “[kept] too busy to get bored [or] tired of staying in,” she said. She also had a “few friends who came around.” Her eldest son, Myron Jr. recollected one or two such occasions when his mother “entertained one of her church clubs” in their home. He commented that he thought there just was not “enough room” to entertain and that he was embarrassed by the way the dinner guests “[had] looked at the place.” Evelyn did not mention this event; it either did not have the same impact on her as it had on her son, or the shame she may have felt about the condition of her home was not something she wanted to share.

Not only was she too busy to be bored, Evelyn prided herself on her parenting. She “loved every one of [her] children,” she said. Her sisters’ children who had “every possible care,” seemingly as a result of living in New York, were also “always sick or ailing,” she noted with some disdain. One had died of appendicitis and another was suffering with the same at the time of the interview. Evelyn’s children, on the other hand, had “kept unusually well,” and “in pretty good shape” except for “the usual cuts, bruises, colds, etc.” and except for Wayland’s

317 According to the 1940 U.S. Census, Roland is 5 and there are no more children listed.
hospitalization for pneumonia. In truth Evelyn admitted she wanted more children, but she “guess[ed she’d] better call it quit (sic) … at this late stage of the game.” Despite her son’s beliefs that neither of his parents had ever heard of contraceptives, and the interviewer’s opinion that she was pregnant at the time of the interview, Evelyn was being “careful” in order to “keep the number at nine,” mostly because of her age, she said, but likely also because of the economic hardships the family faced due to its size and limited income.

The Rosses had significant financial struggles. “Clothes and food are our biggest problem,” Evelyn said. Myron Sr., described by his son as “educated” but “kept back by […] color,” no longer even thought of himself as owner of the house he had lived in since he was eight-years-old because there was “a pretty heavy mortgage on it which [he’d] never been able to get off.” Like many black families in urban cities, Evelyn and Myron Sr. expected to supplement the family economy with income from “the older” teenage children. Evelyn was looking forward to the time “when [Myron, Jr., Norman, and eldest daughter Evelyn] [could] get out, get jobs, and help us with the younger children.”318 So, despite the ways in which Myron Sr.’s government paycheck and his house wife categorized him as middle class in Frazier’s eyes, the family was struggling. Evelyn, Myron Sr., and Myron Jr. all lamented the “hardships” of the large family: that “shoes and food go mighty fast,” Myron Jr. feared that “none of us probably will get to college,” and they all reflected on how well everyone “dress[ed] when there was only a few of us.”319

Myron Sr. was also credited with “maintaining [the] discipline in his family,” an important component in the social scientific framework for an organized black family, but, it was Evelyn who appeared to be carrying out much of the disciplinary actions, and who had the power within the family to implement them in some ways with which her husband disagreed. For example, Myron Jr. blamed the “trouble with [his] eyes,” and how he had come to need glasses on a “whipping” he received at the hands of his mother when he was younger. Now though, most of his disobedience was met with punishment by sequestration for some period of time, usually a week, in the upstairs room he shared with his brothers. This form of punishment was usually one administered only to the children who were too old “to spank.” And according to Evelyn, she enforced this in the strictest way. “In the summer, Mr. Ross would say I should let them come down in the front or back yard because of the heat.” But Evelyn prohibited this, saying, “nothing doing till the week’s up.” She “wouldn’t [even] permit the other children to talk” to the child who was grounded. Once when Evelyn’s father visited, he had “marveled” at how Evelyn “was able to handle these boys.” He wondered how she “managed to make them stay in their rooms.” Evelyn had responded, “I don’t make them, I’m their mother.”

It was through this kind of punishment that her older children ended up doing a lot of reading. Evelyn surmised that actually “they [have] a swell time. There [are] a lot of books [in the house] they’d never stopped to read.” Maybe that was partly why she did not have to “make them stay in their rooms.” During one “such confinement” Myron Jr. and subsequently his family discovered his natural “artistic ability” for working with wood. His mother recounted that “he[’d] made a beautiful carving of a Boy Scout.” As a result, they began to “let him take any crafts and shop work that struck his fancy.” In Evelyn’s estimation, Myron Jr. had found an

\[\text{320 Frazier, }\textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways, 200.}\]
important hobby as a result of his punishment for staying out too late one night: “even now,” she said, “when he can get hold of tools or go to the school shop, he is at his happiest.”

In addition to some of the disciplinary methods, there were other things about raising the family on which she and Myron Sr. did not see eye-to-eye. Evelyn admitted to wanting to “keep [her] children to themselves,” but her husband believed that since they were going to mingle with other children both “at school and on the streets” that it made more sense to “let them associate with whom they please[d].” She knew there was a lot that went on when her children were away from her “that mothers never hear about,” but she hoped her teachings would stay with them and serve them when they were beyond her view, protection, and reproachment. She also knew that her husband was teaching them to fight. When he took them on their Boy Scout troop hikes, they often came back and told her “of the boxing and fighting they [had] done.” Evelyn was not convinced that this was a good idea, because, she thought, “the average boy does enough [fighting] without being taught.” And mostly she was concerned that someone would get seriously hurt when an adult was not around to supervise. It conflicted with her general approach to “try to keep them from fighting […] anybody – white or black […] because if they’re anything like their father, they’re hot headed.”

Evelyn Ross may well have disagreed with the assessment of her family as middle class, or maybe she would have taken it as a compliment. Either way, Evelyn’s narrative articulates the specifically economic difficulties faced by her family despite the fact that she was part of a traditional household, where she did not work outside the home and one with a husband proverbially at its head. If we take Evelyn at her word, the conventionality of her family was only on its face. Myron Ross Sr. did not have executive decision-making power over how the family functioned, and certainly not when it came to discipline. He also struggled to maintain the
family’s basic needs; his position in the family was based more on the realities of their lives, than on the prevailing social science discourse on family organization and cultural assimilation. Still, though, Evelyn described a marital partnership.

Evelyn perceived her domestic role as labor, labor intensive, and as a fulfilling full-time job. Her interviewer described her home as a “constant bedlam of noise,” and her children and their friends as a “dirty mob,” either “playing in the dusty front yard,” or “tearing through the house.” Evelyn Ross, as corroborated by her father’s astonishment, seemed to manage this all both well, and with a relatively accepting and even positive attitude, in spite of not having necessarily chosen to have a large family. Despite this seemingly negative rendering, Evelyn expressed her intentionality about her child-rearing practices and philosophies, using a word like “system” to describe her home management methods. She was clearly cognizant of her domestic role, responsibilities, and power as a mother, and controlled her reproduction as part of her obligation to both herself and her family. Moreover, despite the descriptions of her as “drab” and “tired” looking, although fatigue would seem appropriate for a woman managing a household of nine children, Evelyn pride herself on her youthful appearance despite her weight gain, as evidenced by her account of being mistaken for her young teenage daughter. Finally, Evelyn Ross’s narrative is also full of the intricacies of her life: stories about the eating peculiarities of her individual children; ways in which they sassed her that she also found funny; the bruises and swollen ankles that sometimes interrupted interviews, and that she often sent on to her husband to contend with; as well as her identity separate from that of a mother and wife.

Conclusion
The Rosses were categorized as middle class, while their Southwest neighbors the Colemans were decidedly “lower class,” despite the fact that they also owned their home; despite William Coleman’s decades of work as a baker for Herbert’s Confectioners in Northwest, which put him squarely in the small percentage of employed black men with a trade, a group right below Myron Ross Sr.’s “public service” on a social scientific class pyramid, despite the fact that Louise Coleman, according to census data from 1900 to 1940 had never worked outside the home; or that all their children and grandchildren had taken piano lessons in the Coleman home on the piano they owned, (one of their daughters had even given lessons as a teenager to other children in the community); and despite the fact that almost all of their nine children had graduated from college and were pursuing professional careers as teachers. So, why were the Rosses, ignoring their very serious financial struggles, labeled as middle class and not the Colemans? The answer to this is at least partly due to the limited criteria used by social science to determine class categories. For Frazier, the unconventional structure of the Coleman family necessarily put them outside his middle class category and labeled them lower class: William and Louise Coleman, 72 and 68 years old respectively, were raising their two teenage grandchildren, and one of Louise’s nieces. And Louise Coleman was portrayed as having an overly “dominant,” and thus unacceptable role in her family.

In contrast to this rendering, Louise actually subscribed to traditional middle class notions of patriarchal family organization even though they might not have shown up necessarily in her everyday life. Like many of the narratives, Louise Coleman’s brings into relief the dissonance of the realities of daily life and the ideologies and frameworks of early twentieth century social science. Frazier ignored the Coleman’s home ownership, the existence of middle

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class cultural markers in the family like employment in a trade and professional fields, college educations, and piano lessons, and labeled the family as “lower class” because he deemed the family as unconventionally structured. What Frazier saw as Louise’s so-called dominance, Louise saw as her domestic role: her husband had left decisions about the children to her, while he maintained, and was praised by Louise for, his position as sole breadwinner. Regardless of her generational difference with many of the other mothers interviewed, Louise expressed a similar intentionality about her parenting decisions with her grandchildren, some of which were based on her own experiences as a young person as well as her experiences as a mother to her own six children. She had reluctantly made adaptations in her approaches because of ways the world had changed since she had raised her own, saying in her interview, “We are living in a different age, and you have to sort of live according to the age you’re in, I guess.”

Louise’s articulations, like those of Rose Evelyn Hillman, Evelyn Ross, and many of the women interviewed, foreground her insistence that her experiences and ideas mattered. And there is so much that emerges from these interviews that cannot be told in this chapter: like South Carolina native Louise Meachum and her disapproval of her son’s youthful marriage to his pregnant girlfriend who he had since deserted. Louise insisted that he could and would have been a better father if he had not married and had stayed in school. For Louise, illegitimacy did not mean an abdication of one’s familial responsibilities; in her son’s case marriage itself had led to such an abdication. Or Clara Winston-Johnson who had married out of fear and insecurity that once her mother passed she would be left alone. But she had been so displeased by her husband that she separated, withstanding her mother’s disapproval, honoring instead her own notion that “life [was] too short to be […] miserable like that.” She stood against her husband, who continued to badger her to let him return, saying she “was a woman, […] no silly young girl who
didn’t know her mind.” These responses highlight poor and working class African American women’s ways of thinking and knowing, as well as how these were strategically deployed to reckon with the material realities of poverty and Jim Crow that most of these women faced in Washington, D.C.

There is nothing especially unique about the women whose voices, ideas, beliefs, and opinions dwell within this chapter. To the contrary, theirs is an everyday interiority: they are not trying to prove anything. What comes through in their musings are their identifications of analytic frameworks that governed their life decisions; what they were given by these social science interviews was an opportunity to articulate notions they had been cultivating and putting into practice over the course of their lives. These notions, as well as being gendered, are necessarily class, race, age, and geographically specific: women took their roles as mothers very seriously, possessed a deep consciousness of their identities as black women who also labored inside and outside of the Nation’s capital, and were as deliberate as they could be within the economic, political, and cultural parameters in which they lived. They, in scholar Melinda Chateauvert’s words, “construct[ed] and organize[ed] their […] lives and households, [chose] their sex partners, [experienced] erotic [and other bodily] pleasures,” in ways that sometimes challenged prevailing social science “prescriptions” of racial respectability, family functionality and organization. They defined, where they could, and inhabited their own expansive domesticity.

Women like Ollie Williams, Clara Winston-Johnson, or Rose Evelyn Hillman who had boyfriends, remarried, or articulated general apathy towards marriage but not towards sexual relations, expressed their sexuality and claimed their bodies, strategized around work issues, thoughtfully, pragmatically, and negotiated with the men, children, friends, and other

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322 “Johnson” (Floretta Johnson WDC 3), Frazier Papers 131 – 113 Folder 15.
family in their lives, in ways that sometimes fell outside of and sometimes sought to meet the pervasive norms of women’s propriety, especially for those seeking relief from New Deal programs. Young women like Anne Winston, Lucy Savage, and Henrietta Belt expressed their priorities as being their independence and control over their economic situations, their time, and their futures. Even if, as poor women, their economic situations and futures seemed mostly out of their control, they were determined not to put it in the hands of a husband; they had had enough experiences in their short lives to see that black men’s economic situations were equally and maybe even more precarious than their own.

Poor and working class urban African American women, despite the ways they were portrayed in the social science materials of the interwar period, and beyond, articulated aspects of their identities and ideological frameworks with conviction. They were engaged with their families, communities, their city, and with themselves and their histories. They were self-conscious about what brought them pain and joy; thoughtful about approaches to parenting, marriage, sex, and relationships; politically aware, active, and socially conscious; and they understood well how the contexts of their lives were limiting, neither necessarily accepting nor resisting these circumstances. These ordinary women cultivated dynamic inner and outer lives and given the chance, they offered masterful, poignant, and eloquent expressions of them.
Chapter Four

“‘Rough Stuff’: The politics of black ‘Adolescent Personality Development’”

When I sit down long enough to imagine things, I think of day dreams of the success I’ll be some day. Of the fine things I’ve always wanted, but most of all that I’ve seen the world.

Fourteen (or sixteen) year old James Albert Gray, Southwest Washington, D.C. 1938.

Stated simply, the purpose of the present inquiry [into black adolescent personality development] has been to determine what kind of person a Negro youth is or is in the process of becoming as a result of the limitations which are placed upon his or her participation in the life of the communities in the border states.

E. Franklin Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*.324

In the early summer of 1938, self-identified sixteen-year-old James Gray sat in the Bell School Auditorium engaged in conversation. James likely knew his interviewer well, for the interviewer had worked as “the Boys Worker” at the Southwest Community Center for a couple of years, and James lived just down the street from the settlement house, stored many of his hand-made clay figurines there, and was the secretary of one of the community center’s sponsored programs. James’ above statement comes in response to the following questions: “When you imagine things to yourself, what do you think about? What would you do if you had $100 to spend just as you pleased? What would you like to be doing ten years from now? If you could have one wish, what would it be? Did you ever wish you were dead or not born? When was that?” From his answer, we get the sense that James had a very active life, for he often did

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not “sit down long enough to imagine things.” However, when he did, he certainly had musings, and they were on his future – one that included world travel and “fine” material things. But James also had a very pragmatic component to his response: specifically, he would buy “a bicycle, some clothes, and [he would give] part [of the $100] to [his] mother.” Also, the “trip” he would take would only be “at least as far as” the amount would allow, so maybe not quite around the world. For that he said, he would need “plenty of money.” Finally, in ten years James “hope[d] to be a successful physical education teacher.”

James Gray’s meditations, proscribed as they were by the questions he was asked, were recorded for E. Franklin Frazier’s study which, as the opening quote states, sought to understand the relationship between black youth personality development and the impact of racial segregation. In Frazier’s efforts to indict Washington, D.C.’s economic discrimination, Jim Crow segregation, and poverty as the causes of feelings of apathy and “inferiority” amongst “lower-class Negro youth,” Frazier developed intensely personal interview questions for the boys and girls, aged 12 to 23, who were “randomly” selected for participation in the study. Questions included those about sex, interracial relations, racial identity, family roles and responsibilities, local and national politics, feelings and experiences about school and with gangs, how young people spent their leisure time, and knowledge about contemporary and historical African American figures. While Frazier was praised for being able to elicit “spontaneous and incisive comments” from the young individuals interviewed, his justified insistence on the structural and his focus on the material left little room for him to recognize, let alone analyze, the wealth of interesting answers from his young subjects. Their points of view, examined outside of the sociologist’s determinations, gesture towards both a subjectivity and an interiority not often

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325 WDC XVIII (James Gray), Frazier papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
ascribed to young, and especially young black, people. Their cogitations included: complex notions of burgeoning identity, conceptions and consciousness of self, intellectual engagement in community life and politics, internal contradictions about violence, crime, leisure, and education; and imaginings of their own future possibilities beyond the structural limitations they so masterfully articulated about both their pasts and their presents. Clearly steeped in the contemporary psychological understanding of adolescence as a “phase,” young African American poor and working class Washingtonians seemed (maybe naively) certain that any teenage struggles they experienced would be overcome with time. Furthermore, their ability to, eloquently at times, articulate these understandings is in contrast to the idea that young black urban youth are not capable developmentally and otherwise of being engaged in cultivating intellectual theorizations about the world in which they live.

Black childhood has gotten short shrift in the history of young people in the United States generally. Historians Wilma King and Marie Schwartz before her have done significant work to fill this gap with scholarship that highlights the lost childhoods of enslaved young people subjected at an early age to “work, terror, injustice, and arbitrary power.”327 In addition, King’s collection of chronological essays in *African American Childhoods* brings to the fore voices of and about black children from the colonial period through to the civil rights movement, examining “how major events […] impacted or changed the lives of black children.”328 King makes an important argument for the variegation of African American childhood experiences, echoing Steven Mintz’s assertion that there is no one “American” childhood and that “every aspect of childhood is shaped by class […] ethnicity, gender, geography, religion, and historical

era.” Childhood, posits Mintz, is a “life stage whose contours are shaped by a particular time and place. Childrearing practices, schooling, [...] all are products of particular social and cultural circumstances.” Mintz and others have shown that childhood is and has been historically an “evolving [social] construct,” where few children were actually protected from social, political, and/or economic circumstances.

For the young people whose narratives are at the center of this chapter, they were not only not “sheltered” from the social, political and economic circumstances of their parents, they expertly understood the relationship between those circumstances and the structural forces from which those originated: the Jim Crow system of racial and economic segregation; the impact of the Depression; the New Deal policies that ignored the material needs of poor black urban and rural workers; as well as the contradictions inherent in the existence and maintenance of those structural inequalities in the emblematic city of Washington, D.C. It is this understanding, the foregrounding of their voices articulating their own developing analytic frameworks, political opinions, and social perspicacity that come through in the interviews conducted for Frazier’s project. The narratives of interiority in this chapter positions young peoples’ own analyses and perspectives at the center of their person-alities.

Centering young people’s voices is difficult both for those engaged in childhood studies and the history of childhood. This, of course, is even truer in the study of poor and working class

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(urban) African American youth who are marginalized because of racism, classism, and ageism, but also simultaneously seen as at-risk and prone to criminality and deviance because of the 
ghetto’s influences. Some scholars have been hindered by scarcity of sources that would allow for young people’s voices that were not “recollections of childhood.” Recently, with the emergence of Girls’ Studies in some Women and Gender History departments, scholars, using feminist theory and contemporary ethnographic research, argue that despite marginalization, girls “find strategies to play important roles in their respective communities and cultures”; “exercise their own will, agency and personal choices”; and “serve important symbolic functions” in society. Historians Susan Cahn and Marcia Chatelain in both of their recent works focus on girls as historical actors and “girlhood as political [and social] terrain” in history and take young people’s lives and voices seriously. Cahn’s chapter on African American girls, while primarily examining sexuality, shows not only how race and class shaped black Southern girls’ coming of age, but also, using black sociologist Charles Johnson’s interviews for his book in the same AYC series for which Frazier was conducting research, foregrounds girls’ voices and experiences in the interwar South. Chatelain’s scholarship examines African American girls in Great Migration-era Chicago and includes girls’ actual voices sharing experiences with racial uplift organizational work.

Like the women in the previous chapter, the silence of dissemblance was not “an absolute.” If anything, young people in this chapter were “eager to talk” to their interviewers as many of the women were, partly because they might have had a history with their interviewers

331 See Wilma King’s discussion about the difficulty of using Works Progress Administration (WPA) narratives, not merely because of the age of subjects, but also because of the power differential experienced by subjects in the interview process, “Remembering the Emancipation,” African American Childhoods, 74.
from participation in programs at the Southwest Settlement House or in some cases, they might have been “feeling,” as Cahn says, “that the very interview process itself bestowed them with some great importance.” Furthermore, they had little reason to fully lie since, like the black women in D.C.’s poor and working class communities, young people often “found support for their [...] beliefs and [...] practices among friends, some family members, and at least a portion of the surrounding community.”\(^{333}\) The narratives of James Gray, the members of the Society Gents Club of Southwest, Susie Morgan, (Oswald) Stanley Russell, and Myron Ross Jr. highlight ways in which black young people saw themselves: their own burgeoning sexuality and gender identity; their notions of racial identity; their political consciousness and activity and beliefs; internal contradictions about violence, crime, and education; and their imaginings for their futures despite any limitations, past or present, that they articulated. In this way, they appeared to understand at least one of the underpinnings of the developing “child science,” that their childhoods and adolescence were developmental stages, and many young people seemed certain that any struggles would be overcome with time.

The field of child science was born out of a concern over the growing number of children moving out of American factories and into schools. While Progressive era reformers should have been pleased, as this move from factories to schools was a result of much of their work advocating universal schooling, addressing infant mortality, promoting better child health and wellness, and leading the call for supervised municipal recreational spaces, their remaining concerns rested on the accompanying growth of more young people in general playing and working on city streets, shining shoes, selling newspapers, and running errands. Despite reformers’ accomplishments, poor and working class children and youth still lived in overcrowded and, what reformers saw as, dangerous communities, replete with unsavory adults.

\(^{333}\) Cahn, *Sexual Reckoning*, 102.
recreation and leisure places, including their own homes in some cases. Even though “child science” emphasized the “study of normal children” rather than reformers’ sole focus on “ameliorating the lives of ‘problem’ children,” social scientists became more and more troubled by juvenile delinquency in the interwar period.\(^{334}\) Coupled with reflections on the poor physical conditions of young male draftees for World War I, the interwar period saw national interest in improving health care and private funding for juvenile delinquency. With the help of a collaborative effort between the social sciences and psychiatry, experts theorized individual pathologies as not only social and cultural, but also lodged in interpersonal relations that many saw as affected by an individual’s “mental problems.”\(^{335}\) While many researchers identified structural causes for some juvenile delinquency, they often recommended individual medical and psychological treatment.\(^{336}\) Social scientists and doctors both enlisted mothers in the work on correcting child development, and blamed poor child development on mothers, concluding that appropriate family life education was key to social and cultural improvement.\(^{337}\) These “family professionals” included educators, psychiatrists and psychologists, social workers, and penologists.

During the Progressive era and the interwar period, children and youth were not only formulated as an important category of study by social reformers, social scientists, and medical doctors, they were also seen as a problem, garnering attention from a growing criminal justice system. Crimes included theft, fighting, stealing cars, breaking and entering, sexual activities

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\(^{336}\) Hawes, *Children Between the Wars*, 65 – 85; 68; see also David Wolcott’s *Cops and Kids: Policing Juvenile Delinquency in Urban America, 1890 – 1940*.

\(^{337}\) Hawes, *Children Between the Wars*, 70 – 72.
outside of marriage, often in public places, and for girls in particular pregnancy could be a crime. The diverse group of researchers all received funding from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, seeking to produce scientific findings and social reform policy that centered child research in physical growth, psychology, and “the relationship between IQ and environment.”

By the 1930s, some of the causes for public concern had been integrated as culturally commonplace and generally accepted, especially, but not only, in white middle class settings. For example, “petting,” premarital sex, and birth control were widely reported on college campuses amongst white students. While the Depression ushered in renewed interest in the nuclear family structure, young people delayed marriage until their economic circumstances improved, and instead engaged in premarital sex. Contemporary scholars noted that during the Depression, as family resources dwindled, young people’s abilities to participate in recreational activities, like the movies, were severely curtailed, and white young men spent more time “hanging around corners, creating mischief, and in general hell-raising to break the monotony of their dull lives.” While young white girls read “cheap magazines” around home. However, despite this cultural shift in thinking and a recognition of the structural realities brought to bear by economic crisis, social science and its new collaborator psychiatry persisted in attempting to understand the cultural and behavioral “pathologies” of poor and working class black youth and in determining what was successful psychological development of middle and upper class black young people.

338 Hawes, Children Between the Wars, 65 – 85; 68; for a fuller development of practices and policies, see David Wolcott’s chapter “Shifting Priorities: Targeting Serious Crime and Minority Youth in Interwar Los Angeles, in Cops and Kids: Policing Juvenile Delinquency in Urban America, 1890 – 1940 (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2005).
339 Hawes, Children Between the Wars, 70 – 85.
To do this, Frazier worked closely with noted psychiatrist, Harry Stack Sullivan. In addition to interviewing young people, Sullivan administered “the Personality Inventory” test, designed by psychologist Robert G. Bernreuter.\(^{341}\) Sullivan found that environmental factors, specifically racism, correlated to particular personality development characteristics of southern versus border state youth: “the tragedy [sic] of the Negro in America,” Sullivan said, “seems to be chiefly a matter of culturally determined attitudes in the whites,” and that a solution to this problem would be the result of “a humanistic rather than a paternalistic, an exploiting, or an indifferent attitude to these numerous citizens of our commonwealth.” Sullivan cautioned against “using [African Americans] as scapegoats for our unacceptable impulses.”\(^{342}\) Both Frazier and Sullivan, and later noted sociologist and anthropologist St. Clair Drake in his introduction to the 1967 reprint of Frazier’s book, helped to reinforce some of the very notions they seemed to argue against.\(^{343}\) Frazier identified what he called “cultural pathologies” that while they were the result of Jim Crow’s discriminatory socio-economic structures, were nonetheless manifest and especially so amongst African American poor and working class young people. Sullivan similarly found it to be a “fact that they are dark – skinned and poorly adapted to our historic Puritanism,” explaining what he saw as a tendency towards promiscuity and an “immaturity” of personality development.\(^{344}\)

Despite the naming of pathologies, one of Frazier’s goals, as he explained it, was to get at “the experiences” of black youth, and “their conceptions of themselves,” albeit to understand what he saw as their “failure to participate fully in the life of the community.” In 1967, in his

\(^{342}\) Harry Stack Sullivan, “Chapter IX: A Psychiatric Gloss,” Frazier papers, Box 131-11, Folder 15.
\(^{343}\) Scholar – activist Drake is most famous for his contribution with Horace Cayton Jr. to what has been called the “ghetto synthesis” historiography with their examination of race and urban life in Chicago, \textit{Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City} (1945).
\(^{344}\) Harry Stack Sullivan, “Chapter IX: A Psychiatric Gloss,” Frazier Papers; Drake’s intro to Frazier’s \textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways}, xviii.
introductory remarks to the reprint, Drake lauded Frazier’s innovation in the 1930s, his “rejection [of] formal questionnaires, [his] encouragement [of young people] to talk freely, with a minimum of guidance […] about their world and their place in it as they perceived it.” As a result, Drake noted that there were “spontaneous and incisive comments” by the adolescents interviewed. Drake also praised the study for demonstrating and “stress[ing]” that “not all Negroes are alike,” for being “written for the public and not for [Frazier’s] pedantic peers,” and for highlighting the “theoretical aspects of the problem.” Here Drake was referring to the environmental problem at the heart of Frazier’s study, that “pathological features of social life exhibited in the border city [of Washington, D.C.]” were a result of “a racial minority of rural background and low economic status, subject to all forms of economic and social discrimination.”

Drake was indeed correct. Frazier’s questions, which included not just musings on familial relationships and race, but also questions about sex acts and daydreams rendered and revealed introspections and meditations on inner life. But, in Frazier’s general insistence on the environmental and his focus on the material, he paid little attention to the wealth of interesting answers that pointed to complex notions of identity on the part of the young subjects. His final publication ignored some of the very experiences and conceptions of self that showed both deep consciousness about and engagement in community life, as well as interiority and the trappings and mapping of everyday life, the very “spontaneity and human interest” Drake praised about the study. This chapter brings that “spontaneity and human interest” into relief.

*James Gray: Manliness and Imaginings*

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345 Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, Drake’s intro, xiii.
346 Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, Drake’s intro, xiv.
James Albert Gray was listed as sixteen (and self-identified as such), although the census said he was actually two years younger than that and a 10th grader at Randall Junior High School when Dennis D. Nelson interviewed him in 1938.\(^\text{347}\) James’s inflation of his age makes sense, in that he saw himself as the man of the house. He lived with his widowed mother and younger sister, and his interview makes evident his concern for his younger sister Helen’s virtue and his sympathy for his widowed mother’s situation. One of James’ answers opens this chapter. While the first part of James’ answer is fanciful, the second part is highly pragmatic.

James’ Southwest residence put him in close proximity to both the youth-formed social club, the Society Gents Club, and a more raucous “bunch.” However, James said he “[had] no gang.” Described by Nelson as “a thick set black Negro boy with kinky hair” and a “deformity, a thick tongue which makes talking difficult, as he talks with a lisp,” James was also “witty, congenial; playful[,] a good sport; a leader in his set and a cooperative individual in whatever group he [found] himself.” He got along well with both boys and girls and “recently,” according to Nelson, “the girls of the Southwest House [were editing] a community paper and [James had been] chosen to head the club,” of which young sister Helen was also a member. James’ narrative, like that of many boys in this chapter, is one centered on James’s burgeoning awareness of his own masculine identity, informing his role in his family and in his community of peers. The ideas articulated in his interview also call into question Frazier’s assessment about the lack of literacy and lack of opportunity for leisure activities outside of extra-legal ones specifically in Southwest, D.C.

According to James, what Nelson described as James’ affability was the result of his “deformity.” “I was born tongue-tied,” James said in response to an undocumented question.

James had never been especially “aggressive.” Because of his speech impediment, James had thought that “silence at the right time [was] the mark of a good leader.” But really, he found that his reticence had turned into “meekness,” and “that alone added to [his] troubles.” When he was younger, his passivity had resulted in “few enemies, because [he] wouldn’t quarrel.” But eventually, James was “thrown with a bunch that took advantage of this weakness and cheated [him] out of many things.” He had “got[ten] to the point where [he] felt inferior to other boys.” “When I played games,” he said, “I was usually the last to be chosen and the first to be ‘benched’ when a better player came along. They told me I was good for my size.” But one day, James said, “things changed!” That day James, self-described as 5’10” and 145 pounds (a description corroborated by Nelson), “tore into a boy who had been meddling with [him].” The bully got the shock of his life, and James gained a new perspective on himself. He realized he had grown: “bigger and stronger than many of [his] tormenters.” It was the beginning of a new James. “From that day on,” James said, “I assert[ed] myself to everyone and [held] the respect of all. I was chosen leader of my club and captain of some of the teams, and I’ve enjoyed the position ever since.” So, while James did not run with a bunch or a gang, respecting his mother who did not “approve of gangs,” James certainly valued a show of aggression and strategically placed uses of force.

James’ new abilities and the new respect he garnered placed him in leadership positions that had previously been closed to him. James belonged to the Southwest Community House and its sponsored Southwest Junior Athletic Club, of which he was the secretary. He shared leadership with his neighbor Norris Klinkscale. James described the group as “about 15,” who “nominate[d] and vote[d] on officers once a year.” The criteria for “selecting” a “leader” was “the ability to do the job and on the confidence [the others had] in him.” Once in the club, a
member was held to a social contract, and if he did not “conform to the wishes of the officers” he had elected, he was summarily “dropped.” So unlike Nathaniel Smith, from whom we will hear later, who had been beaten up at the hands of Norris Klinkscale, the members in the Athletic Club, including James Gray had democratically elected Norris as president and had kept him on; James described him as “a quiet sort of fellow,” who “everybody like[d], […] a good athlete and always fair.”

Young James was captain of the basketball team. He had helped form a baseball team and he belonged to the Guidance Club at school, where they played “soft ball, volley ball, and other playground sports, and a representative group always compete[d] in inter-school meets.” Nelson described James as “a good athlete,” as the recipient of “numerous trophies” who took “great pride in the care of them.” Nelson also wrote that James was “boastful, of course, but [could] prove his worth if put to the test.” Although when James boasted of his prowess at ping pong, Nelson and he “play[ed] a short match, [at Southwest House] which [James] subsequently lost, with,” according to Nelson, “no alibis offered.”

In James’s musings on his affiliations we see the centrality of the development of institutional life among black teens. Scholars have looked at the importance of the formation of black organizations before, during, and after abolition, emphasizing the ways in which African American adults created professional, social, and religious societies complete with mission statements, structured membership, and names that linked them with imagined black and African communities.348 This work to build black institutional life has been identified as evidence of both

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348 Specifically scholarship that looks at early free black communities in the United States addresses this, including Craig Steven Wilder’s *In the Company of Men the African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: NYU Press, 2001); Leslie Alexander’s *African or American? Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784 – 1861* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Shane White’s *Somewhat More Independent; The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770 – 1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); and Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African
a desire for and practices of racial uplift, black agency and resistance, as well as the realities of prohibition from engagement in American institutional life. Here, as James Gray displays his leadership abilities and is in turn rewarded with positions of authority, and as he and his peers enact their democratic electoral capacities in the Southwest House’s Junior Athletic Club, we see the primacy of rank, status, structure, defined roles and responsibilities in the social engagements of black young people, even those identified by social science as inadequately prepared by their parents and culture for full participation in American society.

James was incredibly social and “fun-loving,” however, out of respect for his mother’s wishes he had not joined a “bunch or gang,” seeing them as more trouble than they were worth. He certainly associated with others who were in gangs or had a bunch, like Norris Klinkscale, for example, still James did not see “where running in a crowd [would get him] anywhere.” “Furthermore,” he posited, “the more of a crowd one runs in, the more likely he is to get into trouble.” Specifically because if one “boy in a bunch” is arrested, the police will then “have their eyes” on all members of the bunch “at all times.” His beliefs about joining a bunch, though, did not prevent James from hanging out around the Union Street Station fountain or in parks or going to a show with “two or three nice boys [his] age.”

James “practically live[d] at the [Southwest Settlement House],” but because it was “only a few doors” from his house, there were “no objections [from his mother…], as he was exceedingly helpful to the Center.” According to Nelson, the young widowed Pearl Gray who worked as a “domestic,” was “glad to have both children in Settlement activities.” James said it had been eight years since his father had been “killed in an accident,” a former enlisted man who had been “badly shot up” during World War I. James felt “sorry” for his mother, who he

*Americans in New York and East Jersey 1613 – 1863* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), to name just a few.
believed had “had an awful job” of having to raise him and his sister. He felt he “owe[d] it to her to get all the education [he could], [and] then get out and go to work.”

“Sober, honest, and exceedingly frank,” James did not “mince words and frequently [found himself] in bad with the workers of the Settlement House because of his frankness,” according to Nelson. One gets a sense of James’s candor and forthrightness in his response to what appears to be Nelson’s question about what books James enjoyed and whether he enjoyed the moving pictures. James liked both “adventure stories and adventure movies”; he saw them as being morally innocuous. He also wondered why “they [didn’t] show pictures of the things our people have done[:] pictures of what they did in the war (no doubt here thinking of his father), things they’ve invented, lives of men [like Joe Louis].” Movies with “all that slush and love-making hooey,” James believed, just made his friends “try not only to imitate what they [saw] but to out do it.” James did not think “movies of such kinds ought to be shown [to] young children.”

James followed this with a castigation of the bad behavior of his male peers, maybe here referring to the activities of his neighbors Joseph Knight, William Wright, Nathaniel Smith and Smith’s older brother: “the boys [who] used to take girls up to the Fountain at the Capitol just opposite Union Station, [who] stay[ed] up there till late hours at night.” But, James was pleased that the “police [had] got[ten] wise [… and had] broken up that playhouse!”, describing in detail the ways the cops patrolled the area, “shining their torches through all the bushes and picking up all they saw under the bushes or loitering around them.” In James’ view, this behavior had many causal factors: He blamed it partly on the negligence of schools, church, and parents in not “teach[ing] sex matters and the evils that ignorance of such things bring.” So despite the emergence of sex education in schools in the early twentieth century, it was not prevalent, for
many boys including James lamented its absence in their schools. And clearly, James also placed some blame on inappropriate moving pictures.

Finally though, and here James shared and corroborated Frazier’s concerns about “salacious types of reading matter,” James blamed “sex magazines with bad stories [and] naked women” for “much of [this] trouble.” James’ sister, Helen, merely one year younger than James, so either 15 or 13 depending on whether James accurately self-reported or the 1940 census is correct, “[kept] her head buried in [these kinds of magazines] till they [were] read through.” In general James did not think such reading material was appropriate for any boy or girl, but this after all was his sister and he “wouldn’t [have] want[ed] to see her messed up,” bringing “disgrace” on both “herself and the family.” Here as before with his articulation of the ways in which the racy content of some moving pictures made his peers want to “imitate” what they saw, James was concerned that the content of his sister’s magazines would somehow necessarily lead her down the wrong path, and she would end up sexually active and consequently pregnant. When he found he had no power to stop her from reading them, he told his mother, who “took them away and threatened to whip her if she brought in any more.”

However, Helen continued to read them, hiding them under her mattress, which James found, likely because he was looking. Again he took this evidence to his mother, who, much to James’ both chagrin and satisfaction, “sure did try to kill Helen about them.” While James did not “like to see [his] sister whipped,” he was certain that “such things [the reading of this kind of literature could] lead to disaster,” and so he continued alerting his mother to his sister’s dangerous behavior, like the times he saw her “hanging around corners with boys and girls who [he knew

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349 Frazier, “Recreation and Amusement Among American Negroes,” unpublished, 1940, 86, Frazier Papers. In the full quote, Frazier states that in D.C.’s “slum areas” there is a low level of literacy amongst poor and working class black parents and that as a result, young people, despite being “exposed to formal instruction […] seldom acquire a taste for reading as a form of recreation,” except for “salacious types of reading matter,” like the magazines “True Stories” and “True Romances.”
were no] good for her.” Proudly, James proclaimed that his mother always “[went] down and [brought] her back.” It is surprising that given the position James had taken on at home, as that of the male protective head, which often resulted in Helen bearing the physical brunt of her mother’s fear and anger, that Helen had not refused her brother’s participation and leadership role in her editorial club at the Settlement house. Despite James’ attempt at being man of the house, or of his newly developed and recognized physical prowess, he did not have clear enforcement power, certainly not to drag Helen home from the corner and turned instead to his mother.

James’ sports and group activities showed him to be rather extroverted, but his exposition on the causes of youth delinquency revealed he had a contemplative side as well. Moreover, it was not a side of himself with which he was unfamiliar - he credited his experiences with “country life” at “camp” with “learn[ing] something of God in nature,” having found it “thrill[ing to] lie out under the stars and think,” reflecting on “swell times,” his future and of traveling the world.

Camp had also given James his “first taste” of crafts. James, Nelson noted, was “quite adept in the use of tools.” During his interview, James “insisted” that Nelson accompany him to his home “to see the numerous products of his labors, and to the Center to see the results of his art study,” which Nelson did. At home, Nelson saw pieces of wooden furniture and ornaments made by James scattered around the generally “ill furnished six-room brick house.” These included “tables, taborets, book ends, chairs, [a] buffet.” These James said he had “made for [his] mother.” Actually all of the furniture in the dining room had been made by James. At the center Nelson saw clay figures: “an elephant, a football player in crouched position,” a baseball player, and James’ most prized piece, “a much carved jewelry box” he had hidden “in an antiquated ice
box.” James’ “eyes glistened as [Nelson] examined each piece and admired the workmanship.” Nevertheless, he felt it necessary to disclaim his work: “I could have made better pieces,” he said,” if I could have had better wood. Much of this had to be done with scraps. Someday, I hope to have tools of my own and I’ll buy wood and make such things right here.”

Young James had stepped into the role of father, man of the house. Articulating a level of maturity in terms of his opinions on the causes of what he saw as the bad behavior of his sister and his peers, and in terms of his capacity for reflections on his own personal gender identity evolution and his consciousness, James was a complicated young man. A blossoming social butterfly, James reflected an intricate understanding of the importance of a strong physical presence in the performance of a socially accepted and respected manhood. He and his sister were both avid participants in sanctioned recreational activities, and yet, James still saw Helen as at-risk and he had made a deliberate decision to not be affiliated with a “gang” or a “bunch.” In light of James’ level of consciousness, he could have merely been performing a particular kind of masculine maturity for Nelson, still his ability to do so is notable.

For most of the young people interviewed, identity (racial, class, gender, sexuality) was in formation. Despite this liminality, James and others seemed very aware of and could articulate how they saw and experienced these intersecting aspects of themselves. There is little that is necessarily pathological about these developments. Frazier assessed James’ use of aggression as a result of his frustration with his racial and class position. However, scholars Gail Bederman and Martin Summers would both place James and the other young people’s performance and ideologies about their gender identities and sexualities within the cultural norm for the early twentieth century. Bederman highlights a pervasive “‘rough’ code of manhood” for both working and, by the early twentieth century, middle class men built on “aggressiveness, physical force,
and male sexuality.”

According to Summers, a “modern black masculinity” emerged in the 1920s, the characteristics of which included sexual activity and other “‘unrespectable modes of leisure,’” political activity, and a desire for “access to mass consumer culture,” all of which we see manifested in the narratives of young black people in interwar Washington D.C.

Stanley Russell: Crafts, Comedy, Concerto

(Oswald) Stanley Russell was a year older than James Gray and lived about 170 feet to the east of him at the corner of E and 2nd Streets, closer to the Southwest Community House. Stanley was fifteen and in 11th grade at Armstrong High School in the summer of 1938. The researchers categorized him, like James, as one of the “lower class boys.” He lived with his grandparents Louise and William Coleman, his sister Audrey (17), cousin Lelia (19), and occasionally his uncle and namesake Oswald Coleman. Nelson described Stanley’s family as a broken one: Stanley and Audrey were “children of divorced parents,” being raised in an unconventional household headed by their grandparents, a household that sometimes included uncles and cousins; they had little contact with their mother, a fulltime teacher in the Virginia school system who worked all summer as a domestic in Atlantic City, or with their father, a Pullman Porter who “did not support them,” although he lived not far in Southwest.

Despite the lack of convention that for Nelson and Frazier was evidence of family disorganization and dysfunction, Stanley, like his mother, aunts and uncles, had learned to play the piano under Louise and William’s supervision and as a result, Stanley was interested in “specializ[ing] in music” once he graduated from high school. The piano was where Stanley

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352 Stanley Russell XXIX, Frazier papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3 – 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
answered Nelson’s questions. “Between chords and runs on the keyboard,” Stanley articulated his engagement with his own burgeoning gender identity and his sense of his future possibilities, despite both racial and class limitations.

Stanley Nelson’s narrative, like James Gray’s, highlights a complicated interior life of coming of age in depression-era Washington, D.C. Described as “very dark, stubby, with blunt Negroid features, [...] a devilish twinkle ever in his eyes, [...] very white teeth, [and] a pleasing smile,” Stanley, according to Nelson, “dresse[d] neatly but not well.” “Agile but lazy,” Stanley had “the physical appearance of a much younger boy, [and] act[ed] like one, but [thought] however, that he [was] a man,” despite “still wear[ing] short trousers.” Not much of an “athlete,” Stanley was “usually shunted about when a game with other boys [was] in progress.” To the other boys, Stanley was “just a punk.” He had devised a strategy, though, to deal with this – according to Nelson, Stanley was “ever striving to gain recognition through his antics.” He was “the clown of his gang”: “mischievous,” “meddlesome,” and often in fights.

Stanley’s burgeoning idea of manhood allowed for masculinity despite not having officially transitioned to long pants. Also despite still sartorially a boy, Stanley made use of his male privilege in the household. His older sister Audrey and older cousin Lelia, both also students, did much of the housework and cooking. The girls’ comings and goings were highly supervised by their grandparents. In contrast, Nelson noted that Stanley “managed to slip through his grandparent’s close scrutiny[,] roam[ing] as much as he [saw] fit.” Stanley commented on this, saying that although he was expected to “help” with the housework, he was naturally of little help: “I guess I was just born tired.”

Stanley was a self-avowed city boy. He had only been to camp once. His experience with a bat in his tent, snakes that “walk[ed] around like people,” he said, and worst of all, bad food –
“beans on top of beans,” had convinced him camping was not for him. The most he could tolerate was “an overnight hike,” which he was preparing to go on with his Boy Scout troop that very weekend, “but,” Stanley insisted, “[he was] taking [his] own food.”

“Ever ready to brag of his exploits,” Stanley eagerly showed Nelson the car he had made for the upcoming soapbox derby. Once in the backyard with Nelson, Stanley was not sure his “de-luxe model [would] get by the judges,” or that he would even be able to get it out of the yard; Nelson noted it looked as if it weighed 500 pounds at least. Its design was intricate, a hodge – podge of materials: “the body itself [was] a motorcycle side care […] with] an elaborate canopy top.” There were “seats, brakes, and even an instrument board,” “heavy iron wheels,” [and] a [full-size] steering wheel.” Stanley admitted he was “no good at crafts [or] carpentry,” that he had been thrown out of his hobby club for “wast[ing] good materials.” Nelson wrote that he “praised Stanley’s workmanship despite the desire to laugh,” but Stanley thought that if he could get it out of the yard without “having to tear it down,” “she [would] do some real speed once she’s started.”

Sponsored by the Chevrolet Dealers, the *Evening Star* newspaper, and the American Legion, the Soapbox Derby was held on July 23rd, 1938 in spite of rainy weather. While there is no record of whether or not Stanley entered his car, there were fourteen African American boys participated, and a few of them placed first in multiple heats. Frazier’s only white researcher, Ruth J. Bittler, attended the event, withstanding the heavy downpours, which suspended the race several times. Bittler informally interviewed black American Legion member Clifton Anderson, asking why more African American boys were not entered in the race. Clifton and his two friends responded in unison: “economic conditions. It’s hard enough getting money for food, let alone building cars.” Bittler learned that some of the white boys’ cars had been built by their
family’s black chauffeurs. One boy had even been recently taught to drive by the family’s chauffeur for the race after his car had been built.\textsuperscript{353} So, even though we do not know if Stanley got his car out of his backyard or raced it on that wet July day, we do know that in spite of Frazier’s categorization of Stanley, he may have been in a good enough economic position to build his own wagon.

Stanley Russell’s narrative highlights his complex subjectivity and identity formation. Notwithstanding his so-called unconventional home life, being raised by his grandparents, little contact with his mother and father, living with a cousin and sometimes his uncle as well, in a poor section of Southwest, and thus being deemed “unstable,” “insecure,” and devoid of any “family traditions,” – Stanley seemed not worse for the wear.\textsuperscript{354} He lived in a home owned by his grandparents, and like his mother and aunts and uncles, had benefited from piano lessons on a piano in his home, so much so that his plan for his future included studying music. Faced with the challenges of a seemingly late growth spurt, Stanley was also experimenting with a social niche for himself as a bit of a troublemaker and a cut-up, taking the sometimes physically brutal consequences of being beat up by other boys in order to fit in. Even so, he still thought of himself as “a man,” having found a way, if temporarily at least, to compensate for both his small stature and his short pants. Stanley also had a clear assessment of his skills as a hobbyist, but that did not stop him from devoting a considerable amount of time, skill and energy to the building of a soapbox derby wagon of which he was very proud.

\textit{The Society Gents Club}

Adolescents involved in the study were asked “What gangs or clubs do you belong to.” This question had particular significance in a study on black adolescent personality development.

\textsuperscript{354} See Frazier’s “The Role of the Family,” in \textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways}, 39 – 69.
In the interwar period and the Depression-era specifically, all poor and working class young people were considered at-risk for juvenile delinquency, but black young people had the added factor of race that placed an essential criminality on them. African American young people, because of their perceived migrant status and their racial identity, were more often treated like juvenile delinquents and experienced higher rates of arrest in most urban spaces. Using the environmental models in which most sociologists were trained, police believed that migrants were prone to delinquent behavior because of their struggles adjusting to modern city life and because “traditional community-based controlling institutions [had not] transferred [well] to the new urban setting.”

Frazier’s conclusions about “gang” affiliation were tied to gender identity and sexuality: In his unpublished report on “recreation and amusement among American Negroes” he stated:

> a large number of the lower class are idle and spend their time hanging about pool rooms, beer joints, and dives. Because of loose family ties and the number of unattached men and women in this class, sexual indulgence plays an important role in recreation. This is true of the youngsters as well as the adults since many come from broken homes and are without parental supervision. In a slum area of Washington, there was a club of young men which required a man be a ‘pimp’ in order to gain membership.

This “club” to which Frazier was referring was the Society Gents Club.

In the summer of 1938, the Society’s Gents Club was led by Joseph Ward Jr. (17) and Hoyte Scott (16) who were “president and vice president” respectively of what Hoyte called a “small bunch of boys.” According to Hoyte, they, along with five other boys, including 16-year-old Norris Klinkscale, who as we know from James Gray’s interview was involved in other youth groups, had all “known [each other] nearly all [their lives],” and formed the group “primarily for social purposes.” That June, they had sponsored “a dance at the Community

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Center,” which had been “far from a financial success.” Apparently, “Southwest girls and boys
don’t appreciate a nice dance,” said Hoyte, who was a native Washingtonian as were his parents.
The club had charged “20 cents a piece or 35 cents a couple,” and Hoyte believed that the
community had been “spoiled” by “5 cent dances.” Thus, he lamented that “the crowd was
small.” Still, though, Hoyte was pleased they had “kept the dance as nice as [they had] planned”
despite the low turnout.

The members of the Society Gents Club ranged in age from 13 to 17, paid dues and met
regularly, and “even dress[ed] very much alike.” They also “had an athletic program.” In the last
season, they had “played the Police Boys Club in basketball and lost to them 28 -13.” They had
won some of the games, but generally had had “a miserable showing.” Hoyte could not exactly
figure out what had gone wrong, but guessed that their losses had been a result of lack of team
work: “Everybody seemed to have been playing for himself.” Nevertheless, they planned “to try
again next year.”

Society Gents Club President, Joseph Ward lived at 3rd Street near the corner of E in
Southwest, around the corner from the Southwest Community House. Unlike Hoyte’s father who
worked as a construction “laborer,” Joseph’s father was a “messenger” with the Treasury
Department, according to the 1930 census, and they owned the home in which they lived.
Despite this difference, Frazier categorized both Joseph and Hoyte as “lower class boys.” While
there is very little left of Joseph Ward’s interview, the fragmented narrative that emerges shows
the young leader of this social club to be both politically aware and socially conscious. Later we
will see his articulation of his ideas on black political action and advancement.

357 Hoyte Scott XXIV, Frazier papers Box 131 – 74 Folders 3 – 10 (notecards); Box 131 – 111 Folders 3
– 5 (notecards); Box 131 – 112 Folder 6 (notecards).
Joseph, in response to Nelson’s question: “of the various people we’ve discussed, [who] would you care to be most like,” selected George Washington Carver, saying, “I’d like to be a scientist like him.” Joseph admired Carver’s “unselfishness and willingness to serve humanity without reward.” He felt he could make as much as or more of a contribution “to humanity” as Carver had in light of the fact that Carver came from “poor surroundings” and Joseph thought his “home life” was “better” than Carver’s, with more “opportunities available for work and education.” He also wanted to see Carver “make it possible for many Negroes to profit commercially and financially by his discoveries.” So, despite the ways that Frazier’s negative rendering of Joseph’s club implicated Joseph’s character, Joseph clearly knew something of significant African Americans and their contributions and was able to imagine a future where he too might be such a person. His formation of and participation in the Society Gents Club, his burgeoning sexuality and gender identity, as identified through “pimping” did not appear to necessarily disqualify him from a promising and productive future.

In Frazier’s estimation, youth like Joseph and Hoyte, did not make use of the (limited, segregated, under-funded and understaffed) recreational facilities available to them in the form of Board of Education’s “year-round” and “summer playgrounds.” This lack of participation in supervised recreation necessarily led to gang activity and juvenile delinquency. One mother though, Viola Porter, did not see participation in approved recreational programs as mutually exclusive or preventative necessarily of participation or membership in a gang. Her son, 13-year-old Quenton, could frequently be found at the Y. He declared that his “mother usually call[ed] over [at the Y] when she want[ed] him home.” And corroborating Frazier’s thesis, Quenton articulated as if almost on cue, “I usually manage to stay out of trouble over here […].” After all

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when you know there’s a place where you can go, have lots of fun, and still stay out of trouble, why not make use of the place?” But while Quenton might have been reticent about identifying his participation in a “gang,” his mother was less so. Describing a complicated and multi-faceted boy, who was “independent,” a “spoiled baby,” an avid newspaper reader who not only kept a drawer of clippings but also engaged his parents in heated debates about current events, a Church-goer, who had a part time job cleaning apartments in the building in which he and his family lived, and “a big help” around the house, Viola felt apartment living was “confining and depressive to children,” and, thus, she let both Quenton and his brother “use the Y and the gang as outlets,” in spite of knowing that likely her boys were not “behaving” all the time.359

“A Raucous Bunch”

And indeed they were not always “behaving.” Fifteen-year-old Nathaniel Smith had been invited to join Joseph Ward, Hoyte Scott, and Norris Klinkscale in the Society Gents Club, but he was not sure “he could make the grade.” Nathaniel was 15-years-old when he was interviewed by Dennis Nelson. He lived at 139 F Street Southwest, after having been born not far in Sullivan’s Court, one of Southwest’s alleys. Also listed as one of the “lower class youth,” Nathaniel’s narrative brings into relief the articulations of complicated notions of adolescent coming of age and the ways in which conceptions of manhood could be rife with violence. 360

While Frazier disparaged the Society Gents Club for its imitation of adult “sexual looseness,” for Nathaniel to have been invited to join the Society Gents Club was an honor because “first, you must be a pimp, and of course know how to dance and mingle in society.” So,

359 “Quenton Porter” Frazier Papers Box 131-113 Folder 9, my emphasis.
; Thomas Jesse Jones, Directory of Inhabited Alleys of Washington, D.C. (Washington: Monday Evening Club, 1912),
for Nathaniel the invitation confirmed for him that he had indeed come of age as a man. Nathaniel identified Norris Klinkscale as “the big shot in that club,” saying, “if there ever was a pimp, it [was] him.” Despite this, Nathaniel did not like Norris much. The two of them had had an altercation and Norris “beat [Nathaniel] up.” Nathaniel said he was “waiting for [his] chance to get even, [because] when some one does something to [him, he] never forgets.” According to Nathaniel, Norris, in spite of being a “pimp,” did not actually “get along well with the girls”; he was “too stuck on himself,” a description of Norris that begs the question about what exactly was meant by “pimp,” and a description that was a far cry from James Gray’s praise of Norris as a stand-up, well-liked fellow. For Nathaniel, membership in the Society Gents Club would not only be a step up in status, it would also facilitate an opportunity for him to face Norris and reclaim his manhood.

Nathaniel was concerned, though, that he would not meet the sartorial standards of the group –most of the boys in the Society Gents Club got their new threads because their mothers bought them. He did not have a similar situation; rather Nathaniel had to “scuffle around for [his clothes].” He was very interested in joining, but was afraid of “be[ing] embarrassed [by not looking] like the others,” because Nathaniel’s mother, 52-year-old Bessie Smith just could not afford it. Bessie worked as a “maid” for a “private family,” as did her second oldest daughter 18-year-old Clementine, who lived at home, along with Nathaniel’s older brother Edward, 16, his younger brother Wilbur, 12, and his baby nephew. Each month, according to Nathaniel, Bessie purchased clothes and other necessities for one child and in the month prior to his interview, she had gotten some things for him, “so [he thought] it [would] be some time before [his] turn comes around again.” Nathaniel lamented his economic situation, saying, “Its [sic] sure tough being poor! And all the worse, if you’re a poor Negro.” Here in Nathaniel’s discussion of his concerns
about his wardrobe we see the relationship Martin Summers identifies between manhood and bodily presentation, as well as Nathaniel’s understanding of the impact of race on one’s class position and the economic limits prohibiting poor and working class youth from their participation in specifically conspicuous consumption, unlike their black middle and upper class counterparts.

So in the meantime, as Nathaniel built up his attire for the Society Gents Club, he “[ran] with a bunch of boys.” This group included his older brother Edward, Joseph Knight, 21, William Wright, 19, and Jack Harris, who Nathaniel identified as “the leader.” All of the boys hailed from Southwest and were neighbors. For Nathaniel, Jack Harris’s leadership could be explained by his size; he was “bigger” than Nathaniel and “a lot rougher.” Jack also had obvious skills with the ladies – he was a “pimp,” though different from Norris Klinkscale. Although Nathaniel described Jack as “silly,” he said, Jack “sure [could] jibe girls. Before they [knew it] he practically [had] their dresses up.” Jack had also been “chosen” as group leader because he was a mastermind for the group’s extra-legal activities. Nathaniel said, “we chose him because he’s sly and a better liar than the rest of us, and he generally spots out the places beforehand and plans the get away, and the selling of the things we get.” So like James Gray’s explanation of the organizational structure of his sanctioned recreational group, Nathaniel’s bunch was also deliberate in the way they had selected their leader.

Nathaniel excitedly told stories of their exploits: the time they “took all the electric fixtures out of a house and a gas stove” and to Nathaniel’s surprise “got away with it,” selling much of it for $8.00. The times they “took suit cases of packages out of cars and never got caught.” He remembered they “used to wreck houses – go into empty houses and all we couldn’t tear out to sell, we just tore up. Once we wrecked a Chinese Laundry, threw the iron stove and
bed out of the windows, and took all the new screen doors to the place.” However, Nathaniel was not able to benefit from the new screen doors at his own home because his mother Bessie would not have approved if he had brought one home; she “would have [had] a fit,” Nathaniel said.

Nathaniel was clear though that most of this behavior was in the past, much as he might have enjoyed it. It was not entirely his idea to give up this element of “fun,” for he described himself as “[not] a patient fellow – I mean that when I want excitement I want it then.” It was the reason he had not joined the Boy Scouts, for example. He thought most of those boys were “all a bunch of sissies.” He had also refused to even join the Southwest Athletic Club, where most of his friends already belonged. He did not “want to be with a dead bunch when [he] want[ed] fun.”

The activities of his bunch had changed. The others were afraid of “get[ting] caught” and being “sent to Lorton.” Here Nathaniel referred to the Lorton Reformatory, located in what had been called Belvoir but was renamed Lorton, Virginia, and which in the late 1930s housed some 1600 inmates convicted of crimes ranging from “rape, arson, violation of the narcotic laws, armed robbery, burglary, automobile stealing, housebreaking and grand larceny, pandering, tampering with the United States mails, and forgery.” More importantly than fears of being arrested and jailed, though, Nathaniel’s “bunch” had “decided to become pimps.” Since they had “put on long pants” and started “run[ning] with girls,” they had “stopped some of the rough stuff.” Nathaniel was cultivating his prowess with girls, as well as practicing some caution and moderation, or at least as much as he could.

Whether in response to Nelson’s specific question or because for Nathaniel his sexual activity was something about which he was proud, Nathaniel described himself as pretty sexually

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active: “I used to have relations with [...] girls in the alleys, in old garages, in the parks, in somebody’s yard late at night, and once I broke into Bell school to do it.” Most of this activity he could not quite take full credit for, saying, “no use wasting time with girls these days. They generally know what they want and there’s no use delaying in giving it to them.” But he had recently learned about venereal disease in his last year in (junior high) school and was grateful to his brothers and “guys on the corner” for schooling him on girls, although he wished he had gotten sex education “in school or from [his] parents.” Even though he “wouldn’t have learned as much,” at least, he thought, he might have been safer sooner. Nathaniel was not the only young man specifically to express frustration with the ways in which he had learned about sex and sexual health. Like other boys, he wished he had learned more either at home or at school, and earlier. Most of the girls interviewed had considerably more sexual health knowledge that they had learned directly from their mothers who, in contrast to their own upbringings, which had been frustratingly silent on menstruation and pregnancy, had intentionally included open conversations about sex with their daughters, much to Frazier’s disapproval.

Nathaniel took the opportunity offered by Frazier’s project and Nelson’s attentive ear to expound on his sexual activity, listing many places he had had sexual experiences with girls. In contrast to this performance, Nathaniel’s interview also hints at his lack of experience and knowledge – that girls’ desires seemed more in control of these interactions, and that new information about sexually transmitted infections was both welcomed and late. To Nelson, Nathaniel might have been prime empirical data for both the impact of a “broken home” – Nathaniel’s father, while listed as a resident in the home in 1930, by 1940 was seemingly not an official member of the family unit, as well as the notion that a lack of involvement in

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sponsored and supervised sports and other recreational activities led to Nathaniel’s participation in illegal enterprises. And this may well have been at least partly true. While Nathaniel makes it clear to Nelson that both the Southwest Athletic Club and the Boy Scouts were options for him, that many of his friends belonged to the former and encouraged him to join, but that he chose to spend his time otherwise engaged, it may be that like his concerns about joining the Society Gents Club, Nathaniel was actually unable to participate in either the Southwest Athletic Club or the Boy Scouts. Both of those required membership fees or at least would bring costs for uniforms or other necessary equipment. Nathaniel stated very clearly in his interview that he “seldom [had] the money” to participate in any leisure activities, including the local theaters, except on Thursdays when there were free tickets. So that what Nathaniel articulated as choice - his assessment for example of Boy Scouts as less than manly and thus “a dead bunch” – might have actually been a statement on the lack of affordable, free, recreational opportunities for black poor and working class youth, which would have bolstered Frazier’s argument had he read it as such.

Joseph Knight, 21, lived next door to Norris Klinkscale on Delaware Ave between H and G streets, just south of, and not yet cut off by the 395 highway from the Southwest Community House. He corroborated Nathaniel’s description of their group’s adventures, foregrounding the kind of “rough stuff” Nathaniel mentioned. Joseph and his bunch “seldom traveled together as a whole gang,” he said. Out of the fourteen boys who belonged to the gang, there were never “more than three or four of [them] together” at one time. This segmentation might well explain why it was that Nathaniel Smith identified Jack Harris as the leader, while Joseph saw William Wright as the leader, albeit for similar reasons that Nathaniel named Jack: William was “the
biggest and the slickest too,” according to Joseph. They never planned anything in advance,
Joseph noted, but rather would “roam around the neighborhood getting into everything in sight,
[...] making nuisances of [themselves.]” They “broke in stores, stole automobile accessories,
[and] too what was at hand. [...] a couple of foglights or a tire off somebody’s car or a suit case
or clothes out of another.” Or they would “steal up a breeze” at a grocery store while one of them
“bought a bottle of pop or something.” But it was not until they “once tried to rob a man” that the
police noticed them, and “stayed on [their] tails [...] from that time on.”

In addition to burglary, they also went “to house dances and [tried] to break them up or
just meddle[d] with women and girls on the streets.” They “gambled, fought, and [were] arrested
for both.” There was “little [they] didn’t do,” Joseph asserted proudly. However, like Nathaniel,
Joseph noted that much of that activity was history. “I don’t go in for any of that now,” he said.
Joseph’s job limited when he could see and hang out with his friends. But that was not the only
reason that he had stopped “running” with them. “The police,” Joseph said, “[had] just about
ruined the bunch. Now that [they] know us and keep an eye on us, we don’t have much fun any
more.” They had “decided to quit before somebody got killed.”

Joseph was asked about whether he had ever had “a fight with a white boy [or] girl” and
about interracial contact generally. He had “had fights with every body, white and colored!” He
reminisced fondly on when he and his friends used to “hang around the Union Station Fountain
grounds.” The “white fellows who hung around there [...] objected to [Joseph and his friends]
coming up there and each time [the two groups] met there was a fight.” Joseph described
enjoying those altercations until one of two things happened, either the “police butted in,” or
“everybody came armed with knives, clubs, and guns.” Joseph remembered being “shot at” and
how frightened he had been. Joseph had also been seeing an Italian girl. He told Nelson that he
had “had to slap [her] one night for ignoring [him] around her friends.” She had responded by threatening to tell both her father and her Italian boyfriend, so Joseph decided to “let her alone.”

What had been the most “fun” group activity for Joseph was “catch[ing] girls.” “We used to catch girls around here and over in Northeast and rape them. I raped four or five myself,” he reported, “and those I didn’t, I later ‘got it’ with their consent.” Joseph remembered one night in particular that they had “caught a couple of girls and you can imagine my surprise,” he said, “when I found myself on [top of] Wright’s sister. Boy did [William Wright] raise Hell. And [Wright] had helped [to] catch them up in an alley back of Willow Tree Playground.”

It is difficult from this description or the ones given by James Gray and Nathaniel Smith about this group’s activities, to know just how Joseph Knight was using the word “rape.” That he says he later had sex with some of these girls with their “consent” may speak to the accuracy of the use of the word: girls might have felt afraid of refusing him later. Joseph may have also used the word in order to merely portray his sexual prowess and power and these may not have been actual instances of sexual violence. Still, Joseph clearly knew that rape was not consensual, as he makes a distinction between sex with and without a girl’s consent. Despite the ambiguity with which the word “rape” might have been used by young men, girls like thirteen-year-old Rosella Hillman certainly understood it to be real. Rosella felt threatened by and feared sexual assault, from both black boys and black men in her community. She knew other girls who had been “raped.”

Like some of the other boys interviewed, Joseph’s sexuality (if we can think of what he calls rape in this case as an aspect of how he thinks of himself as a sexual being) and thus his masculinity evidently included dominance and aggression; he clearly felt comfortable enough to

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363 “Willow Tree Playground, July 21, 1938,” Frazier Papers, 131 – 41, folder 7. Willow Tree Playground was Southwest’s one of the only playgrounds open year-round and was situated in the square of 3rd, 4th, D St., and Independence Ave, abutting the Federal Mall. See chapter two for a discussion on its formation and eventual replacement by federal buildings.

364 Rosella Hillman, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 112 Folder 11.
use the word rape to describe his sexual exploits with seemingly no shame, remorse, or fear of reprisal. Boys’ activities manifested as rife with “rough stuff”: violence of all kinds. Leisure and recreation included violence, which is partly what made it “fun.” Manhood and masculinity was complex and could embody violative brutality.

When Joseph discussed interracial cultural and sexual contact he attributed it to geography and class, saying that “in Southeast where there are a lot of white whores and white frowsy women [blacks and whites] do everything together, and it isn’t limited to eating, drinking, or dancing together,” a comment to which Nelson noted that Joseph smiled. “Up town,” Joseph continued, “where you strike the better class of white people and Negroes, they don’t mix much.” While people might eat together in Northwest, they did not “drink or dance together.” “They used to have mixed games (baseball, horseshoes, soccer, and even tennis),” Joseph remembered, “but for some reason they’ve stopped all that.” Joseph questioned why even local prize fighting had been recently Jim Crowed in Washington, saying that “Negroes and whites play games together in other places and get along swell.”

In the middle of Joseph’s interview, he was interrupted when “a truck drove up to the curb where [Joseph and Nelson] stood.” Joseph went over to the “burly white driver” of the beer truck to see if he could help out and get a bottle of beer in return. However, the driver told Joseph there were no full bottles left. Still Joseph invited the driver to “toss dice with him for a while,” to which the driver agreed. Once a “lookout” had been posted, “[an earnest] crap game began between” the driver’s truck and another car. And for at least a half an hour, according to Nelson, “the game progressed with a rapid exchange of dice and small coins.”

While Nathaniel Smith’s narrative highlights the complex nature of adolescent sexuality and gender identity as Nathaniel makes sense of his own desire, his heterosexual sexual
experiences, and their relationship to his evolving masculinity, Joseph Knight’s narrative of someone older adds sexual aggression to the mix, making visible the prevalence of the usually invisible but nonetheless accepted elements of rape culture.

*William Wright: Learning the Consequences of Lust and Chivalry*

William Wright, who Joseph named as leader of the bunch, was Lula Wright’s 19-year-old son, and Esther Wright’s older brother. And he had apparently saved at least one of his sisters on at least one occasion from being sexually assaulted by his own friend. Identified in Frazier archives as a high school graduate, the 1940 census documented that he and his sisters all only finished the 9th grade. William also lived in Southwest with his mother, his father John Robert, a laborer, and his sisters, on a block now home to federal buildings. There are only three large index cards left of William’s interview and they answer an undocumented question. While William might have been one of the leaders of the bunch with which Joseph Knight and Nathaniel Smith ran, none of what remains of William’s interview references William’s “gang.” Rather what remains is an explanation of how William became “Rosa’s” unwitting boyfriend, then soon to be father to her baby, and subsequently her husband. William’s fragmented narrative brings into relief the quotidian nature of a young man’s negotiation of adult relationships, the commonplace reality of police raids of Southwest youth activities and the danger it wrought, so much so that William was wishing for one just as it happened and used it for his benefit in getting the girl, despite getting hurt in the melee. His brief story also demonstrates the ways in which, for a young person, living in the moment can and did have longer term effects than necessarily intended.

William proudly recounted the respectful overture to and gentlemen’s agreement he made with Rosa’s then boyfriend from whom he took her away. After meeting Rosa, William
approached Rosa’s boyfriend, who he described as a “a nice boy,” and expressed both interest in her and a desire to pursue her. Although he did not want to necessarily “bust them up,” he warned her boyfriend that he was “going to make a play for her.” According to William, Rosa’s boyfriend “was nice about it,” saying William could try and that if he “could get her it would prove that [William] was [the] better man…. One night, William got his chance, although it was not quite the way he had thought it would go. They had all attended “a hop,” “not a dance,” insisted William, “but one of those famous rug-cutting contests.” William kept his eye on Rosa and her boyfriend all night from a corner of the room. He spied his chance when he saw them arguing, Rosa looking as if “she was going to break up the party.” William took the opportunity to “step in,” took Rosa’s hand and led her to the door. But her boyfriend intervened and “snatched her by the other hand and dragged her back into the room.” William let Rosa go and returned to his corner with one hope in mind, that there would be a police raid at that moment. And lo and behold, some ten minutes later, there was. Rosa’s boyfriend was long gone and William was not far behind him, both in an effort to escape the raid. But, when William noticed that Rosa had been pushed back against a table where a lamp was broken, he went back to get her, which put him in harm’s way. A policeman caught him and “hit [him] a hefty blow on the side of the head with his fist,” knocking William’s hat off. He and Rosa somehow got away. Later at William’s house, high on adrenaline from fear and excitement, they both “felt reckless.” That was the beginning of their relationship.

The next night at William’s house, as they were “necking,” Rosa’s boyfriend showed up, calling out to William, but William got rid of him. It is unclear whether or not Rosa broke up with her boyfriend, still, Rosa and William began to see each other. Rosa became pregnant and since then “hasn’t seen hair or hide” of her boyfriend. About the boyfriend’s desertion, William
commented “I can’t blame him [….] I only wish I had been able to steer clear too.” William’s thoughts about this particular situation in his life were cut short, for Rosa approached him and Nelson as they talked on the corner. In the 1940 census, William’s registered occupation mirrored that of his father: “laborer,” and a “Rose Mary” is listed as residing with the Wrights and as William’s wife, but there does not appear to be a child in the household the appropriate age to be the baby with which Rosa was supposed to have been pregnant at the time of the interview.

In this fragmented narrative, a chivalrous William Wright risked his safety to rescue Rosa in the police raid. He liked her enough, and had successfully “taken her” away from her boyfriend. But no sooner did he feel saddled with her, wishing he had “steer[ed] clear,” escaped as her boyfriend had. Within the next two years he would be married. William’s boyhood is cut short by the long term consequences of a particular kind of burgeoning and masculinist manhood that required him to possess Rosa. His displays of chivalry and his “gentleman’s agreement” aside, Rosa starts out as an object to be “taken away” from the man who owns her.

Savvy Susie Morgan

Boys and young men were not the only participants in or organizers of “gangs” or “bunches.” Fourteen-year-old Randall Junior High School student Susie Morgan had organized and ran with “the Union Street Sports,” which had twelve members. Susie said the gang had formed out of necessity, to provide a protective collective, to keep themselves safe: while on an errand for “white people,” she and her friends were “down [at] the wharves.” “Some larger girls took some money from one of us and we couldn’t do a thing. So we decided to organize a gang.” Susie was subsequently “chosen leader,” because she said, she was “the best fighter.” And she

along with a friend Wilhelmina, whom Susie had known since she was three years old, led the Union Street Sports in their activities, which included “giv[ing] nickel hops,” sometimes stealing but not frequently, she said, and just hanging out.

Despite the seemingly low level of criminal activity described by Susie, her bunch still interacted with the police often. “The police,” said Susie, “git after us a lot. But see, we so tight, they can’t ever catch us.” Susie proceeded to describe one of her groups favorite activities, that of “swim[ming] in the pool at the Lincoln Memorial.” Ignoring police threats of violence, Susie and her friends appealed directly to Lincoln for access to the pool. Claiming this public, national space, Susie proclaimed not just adolescent defiance, although that is there, but also her identity as a citizen of the capital city with rights and entitlements. Susie’s consciousness about both her racial and socio-economic position in D.C. likely was informed by her residence in one of Southwest’s alley communities, Clarks Court. On the other side of her small, crowded two-room dwelling, which she shared with her parents, and ten of her siblings, Susie could see federal structures. The large park that once abutted her alley had been replaced by the Social Security and the Railroad Retirement Board buildings.

When interviewer Laura Lee made her first visit to Susie’s home, on May 5th, 1938, she noted “two beds covered with blankets, a bare uncovered floor, several suit cases under the beds, and dirty unpapered walls.” Sometime after Laura Lee noted the “large piles of junk, trash and tin cans” on the street and asked for Mrs. Morgan, Oscar Morgan, Susie’s father, a short, thin man who worked 72 hours a week as a dishwasher and was also a local pastor, rounded the side of the shack. 366 Lee identified him as a “junkman.”

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Lee introduced herself to Oscar Morgan, who wore a white cap and “worn overalls,” and who, according to Lee, had a “manner” that reminded her of “the Negro portrayed in movies – the man who likes to sit in the sun and fish.” Lee told Mr. Morgan she had come to meet Susie’s parents so that she could “understand [her] better,” which was protocol for Frazier’s study: to interview parents, grandparents, siblings, of the selected adolescent. Oscar Morgan described his daughter as “right tight, right unruly.” Lee asked specifically what Oscar meant by the word “tight,” to which he responded, “hard-headed and over-bearing.” Lee asked if Oscar talked to Susie or maybe she commented that he ought to. Oscar said that he did not because “she [was] that tight.” Susie “cuss[ed] and […] smok[ed] a little,” he said, although he was quick to add that she did not cuss at him. This same characteristic of “tight” is what Susie attributed to her group of friends and what she credited for their ability to elude the police.

When Susie got back from school and found Lee at her home, she was very displeased, asking, “What you come here for, Mrs. Lee?” Susie had been slightly dishonest about where she lived, identifying her address as 336 C Street (a main street address) instead of the alley address of Clarks Court. One afternoon she had also stopped Mrs. Simpkins, the social worker at the Southwest Community House, from visiting.

Despite Susie’s poverty and her shame about her clothes and her living conditions, she had very high hopes for her future, wanting to become a nurse or a French teacher. She dreamed of being rich or being “a teacher’s daughter.” She wished she had parents who were more supportive of her education; she wanted to be “a working woman,” she told Lee. While Susie enjoyed school and had the potential to be a good student, as was true for her older sisters, Susie’s grades suffered because of her poor attendance. She was often absent, especially when her mother got pregnant and Susie stayed home to help take care of her seven younger siblings.
who ranged in age from two to twelve years old. Also, like many other girls and women interviewed, Susie was not a proponent of marriage. Even at fourteen, Susie felt she “had seen enough” to know marriage was not necessarily the best choice for a young woman.367

Susie made a strong impression on 21-year-old Laura Lee. After nearly a year of interviews, starting sometime in the early spring of 1938, Laura Lee began to feel discomfort with interviewing Susie. She wrote a six-page statement sometime at the end of the year wherein she admitted that “the continuance of the contact with Susie [was] no longer for the purpose of the study, for [she felt] to continue to try to interview Susie would be exploitation.” Lee maintained contact with Susie, though, “because [Lee] was interested in the child.” And, Lee kept “notes of the contact” for their “incidental value” to the study, and evidently turned them over to Frazier, since they can be found in his papers. Susie wrote to, called, and visited Laura Lee, and Lee’s mother altered hand-me-downs for Susie to supplement her winter weather clothing in the winter of 1938-39, just as Susie’s mother was about to give birth and her sister Dorothy was in the hospital with an appendicitis. Susie became very attached to Laura Lee and her family, and spent many evenings with them, where she talked about her frustrations with her family situation, her desire to leave home but her concerns about leaving her mother, her regret that her growing familial responsibilities meant that she missed considerable school, her difficulties getting to activities at the Southwest Community House (her fears of going “under the Railroad underpass [where] a man had chased her once”), and her need for a “desk with a light” to do her homework. Susie joked about quitting school altogether, from which Lee tried to

367 See chapter three of this dissertation, “‘I’m a Woman Who Knows My Own Mind: the Politics of Domesticity,’” where both young and older women articulate either disinterest and sometimes disdain for getting married, or regret that they had gotten married. Marriage was primarily seen as an economic arrangement, and black working class women were often in a better position to piece together consistent (domestic) work than black men were.
dissuade her, saying “all [Susie] would be able to make [would be] $5 a week.” To which Susie replied “that was better than nothing.”

Susie Morgan’s narrative is not exceptional. Despite being the only narrative about a young woman in this chapter, Susie expressed many of the same views and reflective abilities her contemporaries did. Like the other young people, Susie took advantage of Laura Lee’s concern and attention to not only express her thoughts, beliefs, and desires, she also tried to improve her living conditions and put something in motion for a future she could already imagine. Susie’s narrative is a prime example of the complex identities forming for poor and working class African American young people in interwar D.C., as well as their deep consciousness of themselves as authorial subjects. The political and historical consciousness displayed when Susie and her friends’ reterritorialized the Lincoln Reflecting pool is also not an anomaly.

*Reconstructing the world*

When the Society Gents Club president, Joseph Ward (17), was interviewed, he expressed very strong opinions about the boycott against the Peoples Drug Store in downtown D.C., as did other young people. In St. Clair Drake’s introduction to the 1967 edition of *Negro Youth at the Crossways* he commented on the generally apathetic stance of many of the young people in the study, saying: “Even grumbling about their fate had a subdued character. They did not find their catharsis through social movements, nor did they seek to reconstruct their world by social action.” That depends on how one defines social action, of course. Susie Morgan and her friends’ reappropriation of the reflecting pool as their swimming hole, their interplay with both Lincoln and the police at a potentially dangerous moment in the midst of both a wave of police brutality in the city and an anti-police brutality campaign could certainly be seen as
reconstructing their world and social action. Young people were well aware of the injustices of their city and were intellectually engaged. Take for example young Anne Winston, working on a WPA project in the Agriculture Department, who along with her mother attended the interracial Women’s Trade Union League meeting, which was preparing a letter writing campaign and a boycott against the laundry that had recently unfairly fired an employee for participation in union activities.  

With Joseph Ward, it is unclear what the question was that prompted his exposition on the New Negro Alliance’s (NNA) boycott of the People’s Drug Store: all we have is a follow-up question of “what, then, will be the solution to this problem?” In the summer of 1938, the NNA’s “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” or “Jobs for Negroes” campaign was in its early months of targeting the Peoples Drug Store for its refusal to hire black clerks despite having a significant number of black patrons. Joseph felt strongly that “the hearts of white men [could not] be changed, so the only solution [would be] better and bigger business[es] by Negroes which will hire Negro youth.” Black patronage at black businesses was the only way to deal with employment discrimination. Joseph did not see much value in the boycott and picketing being staged at the Peoples Drug Store in Northwest: “I don’t think that’s going to be of great benefit to Negroes.” He was concerned that those blacks who did hold jobs in white establishments would be fired as a result of the action and in general one or two black hires at the drug store would not “be of great financial benefit to the race.” Rather he thought that the funds being used to support the action could be spent on opening up a “first class” black drug store, which would be “advertis[ed] widely” and patronized by African Americans in the city. He saw the picket as a

368 See Chapter three for more on this meeting and Anna Winston.
369 See Michele Pacífico’s article for not only information on the boycott but on the formation of the New Negro Alliance and the other businesses in D.C. that they led campaigns against; Michele Pacífico, “‘Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work’: The New Negro Alliance of Washington,” *Washington History* 6, 1 (Spring/Summer, 1994): 66 – 88.
distraction: African Americans in the city were “letting [their] own businesses suffer while [they] tried to stifle somebody else’s.” He was also concerned that the action “[made] us look ridiculous.”

Joseph’s comments about the NNA-sponsored political action are evidence that he not only was aware of what was happening outside of his neighborhood, but that he had an informed and complex opinion. His belief that policy, whether corporate or legislative, would not change personal feelings and beliefs about African Americans gestures towards a quasi-Black Nationalist philosophy rooted in self-reliance, while still alluding to concerns about respectable comportment and their possible consequences. Joseph was not the only young person who commented on the civil rights campaigns happening in the city and whose answers illustrate the complexity of young people’s understandings of racial politics in their segregated city.

Many of the young people specifically expressed displeasure with Dr. G. David Houston, principal of Armstrong High School, who had crossed the picket line, saying he had “the God-given right to deal where [he] please[d] and buy what [he] want[ed].” ¹³⁷⁰ Sixteen-year-old Alice Williams, interviewed with her friend seventeen-year-old Frankie Meachum, expressed “approval” of the boycott. Alice believed it was “a good idea,” as did Frankie, although, when asked if they would picket, neither of them were interested in “walking on 14th and You.” ¹³⁷¹

Gloria Tinner, 16, too criticized Houston, “who is supposed to be an educator and leader of his race.” She thought he “should be tarred and feathered for going in there,” commenting that he had “no race pride whatsoever.” Gloria said she “wouldn’t have the nerve to walk in there while our people are attempting to get better jobs for Negroes.” ¹³⁷²

¹³⁷¹ “Alice Williams WDC 1,” “Francis Meachum,” Frazier Papers, Box 131-112 Folder 12.
¹³⁷² Gloria Tinner, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 112, Folder 10
Nineteen-year-old “lower class” Bernadyne, for whom there is no last name listed, was a resident of Northeast. In response to the question of whether she was “interested in the N. N. A.,” Bernadyne said she had “become interested since they [had] been picketing.” She knew what the acronym stood for and that they were working “to get employment for Negroes.” Like other girls, Bernadyne insisted she would not cross the picket line, however, unlike Alice Williams and Frankie Meachum, Bernadyne would “carry a sign.” “I’d think,” she said, “any young person interested in getting a job of any kind would be more than willing to carry a sign.” Interviewer Isadore Miles asked Bernadyne if her “parents [were] opposed to movement[s] like NNA.” Bernadyne said that her parents were actually supportive, “hop[ing] it [would] mean that Negroes can stick together on some point.” They were concerned though that the organization and the protesters would “weaken before it [was] over.” But Bernadyne did not think so. She “[was] praying for them to hold out.” Bernadyne’s narrative stands in stark contrast to not only some of her contemporaries who would not cross the picket line but would also not join it, but also to St. Clair Drake’s charge of “lower class youth” apathy.\(^{373}\)

Seventeen-year-old Northwest resident Verra Couzens asked her interviewer whether the interviewer was aware that there was picketing at the Peoples Drug Store and what he/she thought about it. Her interviewer responded: “They seem to feel they should work there,” and turned the question back to Verra. Verra was not quite certain what to think, at first saying she did not know. It had been about five months since the picketing had started and she did not seem to think it was working: “it seems to me that if the man wanted to hire colored he would have hired colored long ago.” She wondered why they should boycott white-owned Peoples Drug Store, but not “all of these Jew stores in colored neighborhoods,” where black people shopped

\(^{373}\) Bernadyne, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 112, Folder 10; see Drake’s introduction, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, xiv – xviii.
regularly. Still, she did not plan to cross the picket line. Verra’s Northwest neighbor, twelve-year-old Carolyn Taylor was not sure “whether she approved of the picketing or not, […] although] she understood the purpose all right.” Carolyn insisted though that she would indeed cross the picket line, saying, “she would go into the store if there was anything in there that she wanted on sale[, that] she would pay no attention to the signs.” Her right as a consumer was to “get articles where they were cheapest.” Moreover, “she had never seen colored clerks except in colored drug stores,” and saw the action as being futile. She believed that “Negroes should stick to their own race – [meaning they should] try to get work in colored drug stores.”

Finally, the Meade sisters of Southeast were interviewed together. Both “lower class girls” were also unmarried mothers. They were asked if they “approve[d] of the picketing…?” Older sister Addie, 19, a maid in a private home, responded by saying that she believed there should be both “as many colored working in the stores as whites” and that “there should be more colored drug stores.” Her younger sister, by a year, Minnie, a waitress at a National Youth Administration school, countered that “you [couldn’t] blame everything on white people.” She thought it was quite “natural” that whites would seek to employ other whites, since “colored people will naturally employ colored people.” She agreed with her sister that there should be “more colored people in power [with] businesses [so that they could] employ colored.” At which, Addie reiterated that there should be more black-owned drug stores, citing that there was “only one” in all of Southeast.

Joseph Ward’s narrative, Susie Morgan’s narrative, and the comments culled of Anne Winston and other African American “lower class” young people, demonstrate that young people

374 Neither Bernadyne, no last name, nor Verra Couzens show up in census.
375 Verra Couzens, Frazier Papers Box 131 – 112, Folder 10.
had a nuanced political understanding of their specific location and moment. Some lent support to the NNA or other actions with their physical bodies, others crossed the Peoples Drug Store picket line out of necessity or cynicism about changes to racist hiring policies or because it was their right as a capitalist consumer to get a bargain. Still others articulated ideas about alternatives to the boycott that included seeing an increase in black-owned and supported businesses. Despite what St. Clair Drake in his introduction determines as a sort of youth apathy and Frazier in his conclusion identifies as “the failure of Negro youth to participate fully in the life of the community,” these young people were not only aware, they took the opportunity to express strong and thoughtful opinions about political action in Washington, D.C., showing that they were indeed engaged in the life of their communities.\(^{378}\)

*Myron Ross, Jr.*

Myron Ross Jr.’s interview also shows evidence of this level of social and political engagement and awareness. He was an avid Boy Scout who took part in the 25,000-strong National Boy Scout Jamboree in the summer of 1937. His exasperation with the Capital’s racial geography that segregated his black troop and the 500 other black scouts from white troops as they set up their tent city on the Capital grounds was palpable in his interview. But he noted that this gathering had also given him the opportunity to meet Boy Scouts from across the world, many of whom were “white” but happily exchanged badges and belts with him. Myron Ross, Jr.’s interview transcript, like Susie’s, is one of the longer ones found in Frazier’s archives. Like Laura Lee’s special interest in Susie, Myron “received the most attention” from both Nelson and the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan.

\(^{378}\) Drake’s introduction, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, xviii; Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways*, 262.
Myron’s special attention, according to Sullivan, was not because of Myron’s “eminent suitability to represent the average Negro youth. Quite the contrary, [Myron] impressed [Sullivan] as definitely unusual.” Sullivan praised Myron’s clarity “[realizing] that to achieve any of the objectives that [Myron] contemplated with pleasure, he would need assistance on which he could depend.” Seemingly, Sullivan saw himself as that dependable assistance and it was Myron’s awareness of this and his willingness to talk openly with Sullivan that represented to Sullivan Myron’s uniqueness.379

For Myron’s parents the jury seemed still to be out on Dr. Sullivan, but Myron said he had “learned to like and trust [Sullivan].” Despite Nelson having put in a good word about Sullivan, Myron had initially been “suspicious,” as he usually was when “white people get all solicitous.” Myron felt “funny and uncomfortable” at first when Sullivan “asked questions about racial matters,” and Myron was not sure whether that had been because Sullivan was “a white man and [Myron] a Negro or just that the subjects were touchy ones anyway.” “In fact,” Myron said, Sullivan had been “so kind and friendly-like [Myron had] thought he was a Negro,” and had asked Nelson, who had told Myron that indeed Sullivan was white. Myron had assessed though that Sullivan was “sincere and [would] do all he [could] to help [Myron] as he promised.” And Myron “intend[ed] to be honest with [Sullivan] and [to] trust him too, […] till he prove[d] otherwise.” He credited Sullivan with his being able to get a new pair of glasses and was looking forward to a promised trip to New York.

Myron Ross Jr.’s first interview with Dennis Nelson happened as they sat “on the running board of a car parked just in front of the Anthony Bowen School Playground.” Myron had been “playing ball” in the playground, which was located at the back of the Southwest A.J. Bowen

Like Nelson’s description of Stanley Russell, of Myron Ross, Nelson commented that he “dress[ed] neatly but not well.” Myron was “a tall, lithe, well-built, dark brown Negro boy,” and was the son of Laura Evelyn Ross and Myron Ross Sr. As seen in Evelyn Ross’s narrative in chapter three, the Ross’s, despite Frazier’s categorization of them as decidedly middle class based on Myron Sr.’s city employment with the District Fire Department in the only Negro division, were not at all financially secure. Myron was the oldest of nine children and often interviews were conducted “thirty or forty yards from the house” because Nelson found Myron’s full house often too “noisy and playful.” Myron’s narrative like that of other black boys depicts Myron’s complicated relationship with his own coming of age, developing manhood and sexuality, as well as his astute perceptiveness, as we have seen with James Gray’s exposition on the causes of juvenile delinquency or Joseph Ward’s political consciousness and commentary. Myron’s narrative makes plain Sullivan’s comments that Myron “took himself, his past and the problematic future with considerable and rather realistic seriousness.”

Myron was a rising sophomore at Armstrong High School the summer he was interviewed. He belonged to the Boy Scouts, where his father was “Chairman” of his “troop committee” and he was “Patrol Leader and Assistant Scoutmaster”; he was also a member of the co-ed Baron’s Social Club, to which he paid ten cents in dues each week and served as Vice President. He was also a member of the history club at Armstrong because he was “very interested in history,” and he was a member of the track team. His large household included nine children, random stray and “bedraggled pets”, “elaborate [tropical fish] aquariums equipped with electrical devices for heating and lighting” and his father’s extensive ham radio operating

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equipment. Nelson seemed to like Myron Jr., describing him as “a good student” with “unusual aesthetic tastes,” “a real boy,” “a fair athlete,” and “possess[ive of] a very intelligent face and [a] pleasing personality.” While it is unclear what exactly denotes facial intelligence, Nelson noted that Myron seemed “deliberate in his thinking and in whatever he ha[d] to say,” adding that he “seldom smile[d when] he talk[ed], and usually converse[d] in such a manner as to leave the impression that he [sought] information rather than proffer[ed] it.”

Nelson’s questions for Myron Jr. included ones about masturbation; his first sexual experience; his thoughts on getting married and the kind of girls he preferred; his hopes for college and his future employment; his religious and spiritual beliefs; his interactions with white people and Jews; his knowledge about African American “accomplishments”; his participation in gangs and/or clubs; his first realizations about his racial identity; the impact of race on one’s ability to secure employment; black education; segregation; family formation, relationships, and responsibilities; fighting; parental discipline and “house breaking” practices; his hobbies; his attendance at dances; and whether/what he liked to read.

Myron answered all of these questions. He and his brother Norman had often masturbated together when they were younger and engaged in other sexual activity with each other, until their father “caught” them one night and “wore [them] out.” As a result of the beating, they did not “masturbate again for over a year.” Then, they started up again, continuing on until Myron was twelve, but as they “found it more and more disgusting,” they stopped. Myron’s first sexual experience with a girl also had a negative side effect: it resulted in a case of pubic lice, “crabs,” as Myron called it. “Ashamed, scared, [and] miserable,” Myron went to his father, but only after he had “stolen [his] mother’s book of home remedies” and had been unsuccessful in treating

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himself. His father was surprisingly (to Myron) very understanding, but Myron wished he had
gotten more information about sex either from school or his parents before he had had
intercourse, saying, “I think a father or a teacher should give you first hand information from
time to time without being asked.” He had gotten much of his “knowledge of sex from corners
and bunches of boys,” but not much of it had been helpful. There had been “a series of talks
arranged on sex and health” at his school. But girls and boys were segregated and although he
and a female friend had agreed to “exchange the information [they] got in the lectures,” his
friend “refused to tell [him]” what she had learned once it was over. Myron insisted that it was
not out of mere “curiosity,” rather he “really wanted the information.” He did not think there was
any “shame in the human body[: sex, birth, babies, […] are all natural things,” he said, “and
happen among birds, beasts, and man alike.” He believed nothing was gained when “men [knew]
men’s bodies and care of them alone, and girls [only knew] women’s bodies and the care of
them.” Myron, like many of the young people interviewed, felt strongly that he would have
benefited from sexual health education that gave him information about not only his own
changing body but about that of the opposite sex. And that while his father had been incredibly
helpful in getting his treatment, not judgmental and generally approachable, Myron thought his
father “ought to realize [that his children would] like to know about such things before [they] run
across such experiences.”

Myron’s hopes for his future included marrying “a brown skin girl, a little lighter” than
himself, with “a good education, a college education if possible.” But he only wanted to marry
after he had “gotten a good job, [and] a good home.” His good job would make it possible for his
wife to work only if she could “get a good job.” She would be a “good housekeeper, dress/
neatly,” and most importantly Myron wanted a wife with social skills. She had to be “above all a
good mixer.” He was clear that he only wanted two children, drawing directly on his experience as the oldest in a family of nine. He wanted his children “to enjoy life,” and he wanted to “be able to provide facilities and things for them more so than [his] father [had] been able to.” By his second interview, Myron still liked brown-skinned girls, but also felt that maybe he did not really “have much choice in the matter.” His couplings thus far “depend[ed] largely on the girl.” He was still inclined toward a girl with an education, even a “better education than [he] had providing she used it to help [him],” and did not “lord it over folks.” But in his second interview, while he was not “taking any precautions” during sex – “just praying and hoping that nothing would happen to either of us,” Myron “certainly [did not] want a child by any girl.” He was adamant that he did not “want any children,” exclaiming, “Heaven forbid!”

Myron’s change of mind about being a father likely drew from his current family situation. His second interview was filled with reminiscences of life before many of his siblings and lamentations on the limitations the large family had wrought. He remembered that they had “a pretty decent car,” and used to be able to take family trips. Now they needed “two [cars] and [couldn’t] afford one,” and now if they wanted to take a trip as a family, “somebody has got to be left out.” This somebody was usually his mother, some of the “younger children” and often Myron himself opted out, “on the pretext that [he had] other engagements.” For Myron, “a big family like this [was] a holdback to [him].” It made many things difficult: trips, clothes, toys. He remembered “hat[ing] the arrival of” a new baby, saying, “it got so it didn’t look like they’d ever stop coming[…] I don’t think the stork stopped by here – he just stayed.” Myron lamented his lack of privacy, “some place around the house [he] could call [his] own.” He shared a room with his four brothers and had an “iron locker where [he tried] to keep [his] few treasures or prize belongings.” Mostly, Myron tried to stay out of the house. And he feared his parents were still
not finished having children. While he admired his father and thought he was “an intelligent man,” he “[didn’t] think he[’d] been so smart” in the family planning department. He thought both his parents were “crazy.”

While there appeared to be few benefits from the size of the family, there were also some things Myron liked about his big family. When Nelson, assuming there was no way they could all eat together, asked, “Do you have to eat in shifts?” Myron gave a rather upbeat answer that alluded to the joy he got from his large family. He said, “No, we manage to all eat together.” His meals, he said, were like “picnics,” especially if they had guests over. They “got all the tables together through the dining room and the front room.” When there were guests, aunts and cousins, there would be “20 or 21 of us eating at the same time.” Of course, as “the family got larger [he and his siblings] all got less and less enjoyment[,] fewer clothes, fewer toys and trips.” But somehow they always had enough food to eat. Myron said: “my folks don’t believe in stinting on food. We feed well even if at times we don’t look so presentable.”

Despite Myron’s lament of all that he was made to sacrifice because of his large family, including his lack of a private space, there were some things he had come to enjoy, like family meals, which were clearly prioritized by Evelyn and Myron Sr. in the family budget. Moreover, as the eldest, he was an integral part of making sure that the family functioned. “We try to work out a regular schedule among us to help with the young kids and the housework,” Myron said. At his father’s insistence, he and the other older children “[did] all [they could] to help mother.” And while Myron did not think he was much good at “housecleaning” – he hated it, the perk was that he got “breaks and [was] able to go when [and where he wanted to.]” So unlike Stanley Russell, who was able to avoid household chores, they were a part of Myron’s role in his large family and his completion of them brought certain rewards.
Myron had “ambition to be somebody and to do something worth while […]” And to do that, education was key. He planned on going to Hampton Institute when he finished at Armstrong High School. His work with his father on the ham radio had given him lots of experience with electrical engineering and he hoped to pursue this at Hampton. Sullivan had also offered to help him achieve his college goal. He had invited Myron to visit him in New York during the holidays and had talked with him about attending Fisk to work with Charles Johnson, if Sullivan could get the tuition together.

Myron understood the relationship between his racial identity, the possibilities for his future, and education. For it had been at school that Myron first “learned” he was black. It had not been directly taught, he said, but rather he had surmised it: told that “dark-skinned people were Negroes, [he had] came to the conclusion [that he] was one too.” Myron took a very logical approach to racial identity. He thought that African Americans would “all be happier as a race if [they] were a bit more satisfied with [their] lot.” This of course did not “mean we shouldn’t try for better, but at any rate, not be dissatisfied with what we have.” After all, Myron himself was “not exactly happy of the fact that [he was] a Negro,” but he was “perfectly satisfied” knowing his race would not change. Myron’s dissatisfaction with being black was primarily a result of being shut out of segregated spaces in D.C. He was very aware of Washington, D.C.’s Jim Crow policies and their impact. Many black high schools did not have “up to date equipment.” Still, though they had “teachers […] just as well trained,” Myron thought, and his high school in particular had “the finest photography laboratory in the city schools.”

Indeed, there were “many crazy restrictions on Washington Negroes,” and Myron had “never tried to go places where Negroes weren’t allowed.” To Myron, Jim Crow also meant that blacks did not get “as good chances for jobs as white people[;] Most jobs prefer a white face to
experience,” which gave white men the ability to “choose” where they wanted to work, and maybe even what they wanted to do. This was not only unfair, in Myron’s estimation, but it also resulted in an inaccurate assessment of the capabilities of African Americans. “I think a Negro could do any job as well if not better than any white man,” Myron stated, adding, “somewhere in this country there is a Negro who could even handle the job of President, and do a good job of it.”

To Myron, his father, Myron Ross, Sr., was a prime example of the negative impacts of economic discrimination based on race. Myron Ross, Sr. had been “in the only Negro Fire Department for fifteen years. He [was] eligible for promotion but where would they put him?” Myron asked, explaining that the captain of the fire house had been there for thirty-five years and that the problem was that there were no other black fire houses to which his father could be promoted, unlike white men in fire houses who could be moved around as they became eligible for advancement. “Color again! You can’t beat it!” Still, Myron ended saying he did not have anything to compare Washington D.C. to, he had not really been anywhere except Virginia and Maryland on day fishing trips. And he had heard from “people and [his] father [that] Washington [was] kinder to Negroes than cities farther south and that Negroes [in D.C.] actually get treated as well as Negroes any where farther north of here.”

Because of the prevalence of discriminatory policies and their impact, Myron saw nothing wrong with passing. One’s racial identity was in fact a disadvantage if one was black. And, despite his “satisfaction” knowing his race would not change, if Myron could be re-born, he sometimes wished “to be white.” “Having a white face,” said Myron, “would make all the difference.” He admitted, “I would [pass] if I could and wouldn’t think anything about it either.” For this reason, Myron was especially intrigued by Booker T. Washington, who had
“accomplished [much] in spite of color,” enough that “even white people [had] to respect and admire him and the work he’s done.” Myron’s pride in Washington turned toward a discussion on “Negro History Week,” which Myron credited with making it possible for “[his] people” to learn about the “accomplishments of Negroes,” naming Carter G. Woodson; George Washington Carver; Frederick Douglass; Booker T. Washington; Colonel Charles Young – first African American to graduate West Point and to reach rank of colonel in the United States Army; Paul Laurence Dunbar, Jack Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Joe Louis, who Myron said was not in the same “class” as Booker T. Washington, but was nonetheless important. He also noted some local people he thought of as community leaders and “credit[s] to their race.”

When Nelson asked Myron about fights, Myron noted he had not had many, saying the “few fights” he had participated in had taken place “on the playground at school, either because somebody [had] meddled with [him] or [because he had] meddl[ed] with them.” And as is true in life in general, Myron said, “sometimes [he] won, [and] sometimes [he] didn’t.” About white boys though, he had not had any “scrapes.” But, he had always wanted to, thinking they would be “easy to whip.” Myron was especially interested in challenging some of the white boys he found playing in Hoover Field, the new white-only playground in his predominantly black neighborhood. He knew the dangers that came with fighting: “boys [his] size” did not fight with fists only, but rather “knives and the like”; and he wanted to avoid being arrested. He also knew his parents did not approve of fighting, although they did see the necessity of protecting oneself.

Myron’s parents had taught him that one “should treat all older people with courtesy regardless of color”; and that deference was a useful tactic especially if “you [had] some white person you want[ed] to cultivate and expect[ed] to get something out of […].” Only for this latter reason would you treat a white adult differently from someone else. Myron had learned that
“people will do a whole lot more for you [when you] act as gentlemanly as possible.” He had watched his father doing odd jobs for whites, and had seen the way he “got along swell and everybody liked him.” He had taken the same approach with his own paper delivery route in Southeast where most of his customers had been white. Myron told Nelson he had yes Ma’am-ed or no Ma-am-ed as necessary in order “to shittle something out [of them.]” He thought “they liked it, but [he] hated it every time [he] did it.” Still, it had worked: “they learned to trust [him and] so [Myron] trusted them.” He even began to do some dog-walking for some families and at Christmas he often got monetary gifts. Myron was not at all ashamed of his behavior; he had certainly seen white people use similar tactics with blacks. As he and Nelson sat talking outside of his home, Myron “pointed to a white peddler across the street, canvassing from house to house.” “Take that guy across the street,” he said. “He’d call you Sweetheart to sell his stuff. Everybody is Mr. and Mrs., but just wait until he gets on his feet or through with the sale, he’s ready to call you Joe, Sam, or Mary.”

Myron’s afterthought seems significant here. While using the peddler as an example of deference in order to get something, this example also made Myron angry that few blacks did more than quietly resent being called by their first names (or any first name) by “people of that class,” meaning poor white people. Rather, Myron believed that if more black people responded by calling that person also by his first name, “that would stop some of it.” Frazier may have seen Myron’s parents’ teachings as evidence of their country background brought inappropriately forward into the modern urban city as “techniques for ‘getting by.’” However, Myron identified politeness, respect, and deference more as methods for getting the upper hand and it was not
merely the behavior of poor blacks with rural origins, but anyone, including whites, who deployed these strategically.\textsuperscript{383}

Myron Ross, Jr.’s narrative is made more complicated by those moments when he not only answered Nelson’s questions, but used the initial question to expound on other beliefs or to share other experiences. For example, his discussion on Hoover playground - its recreational facilities, its use by a minimal of white children, while the neighborhood children looked on from the other side of a the fences – comes as a result of Nelson’s question on fighting and fighting with white boys. The unfairness of the existence of Hoover playground in the predominantly black poor and working class Southwest made Myron livid and had spawned a desire to fight a white boy. In another example, Nelson’s open-ended “tell me something of your young life down here in Southwest Washington,” and a follow-up question about whether he ever left the neighborhood led to his description of his experience fishing in Maryland and his interactions with the older white kids who had menaced him and his friends.

Myron’s narrative demonstrates the many layers to his short life so far and his thinking, as well as the ways in which much of both were informed by the realities of Jim Crow segregation. Yet, Myron had adapted in all the necessary ways, not just to his hyperlocal familial situation, but also to the unfair realities of his neighborhood, to the inequalities rampant in his education; he could articulate his dissatisfaction and his very normal feelings of anger and resentment with the many elements in his life that were unjust and beyond his control, including the size of his family. Still, like politically keen Joseph Ward, potential rapist Joseph Knight, the chivalrous and chauvinist William Wright, and hard-headed and savvy Susie Morgan, Myron could imagine a future for himself in spite of the limitations of which he was so well aware.

\textsuperscript{383} Frazier, \textit{Negro Youth at the Crossways}, 49 – 51, 68.
Conclusion

While the behaviors and notions of these young people could be looked at, and were, by sociologists and social reformers as racially and economically specific to black poor and working class young people, they were not that far from the national trends of young people generally during the interwar years and the Depression era. Premarital sex and promiscuity were pervasive amongst white college-aged young people, and boys’ idle hands and troublemaking became a new panic as employment became scarce. White middle class reformers and social scientists also took on the task of advocating for, providing, and reporting on leisure activities and supervised recreational spaces. So in this way, E. Franklin Frazier’s work had a larger national, economic, and disciplinary context.

Frazier’s project sought to assess and access the inner thoughts and beliefs of black adolescents in order to prove that inferiority and hopelessness were environmentally produced by segregation and Jim Crow policies, especially amongst the poor, the working class, and migrants from the rural south. While much of what he collected on this adolescent inner life does not appear in his publication on adolescent personality development, the voices of these young people are instructive. Their musings do not bolster Frazier’s thesis that poor and working class black young people felt themselves to be inferior. Certainly some young people, like Myron Ross Jr., expressed a desire to be white or lighter-skinned, while also articulating a very clear understanding and even “satisfaction” with the reality of his complexion. But, the ability to imagine a future that both took into consideration the limitations of structural color prejudice and that transgressed the boundary of it by the sheer nature of the existence of an imagined future, about which they were asked, highlights intellectual activity on the part of these very young
people. They were able to reckon with, reconcile and even play with, as in the story of Susie Morgan’s afternoon in the Lincoln reflecting pool, lines of demarcation set about them both as young people controlled by their parents and as African Americans in a racially, spatially, economically, and politically restricted city that was also the United States’ emblem of equality. Their articulated analytic frames help us to see the impact of larger, pervasive societal ideas, as in the example of Joseph Knight’s entanglement of sexual “fun” and rape. These mostly poor and working class African American young people found ways, some successful, others dangerous and disturbing, to navigate and make sense of their changing bodies, emotional life, their quotidian experiences, historical, political, and material realities, and they took charge sometimes aggressively and other times passively of making possibilities for their futures, with an understanding that their adolescence was indeed fleeting.
E. Franklin Frazier devoted an entire appendix to the question of whether personality was “fixed,” a “biological heredity” or whether it was “determined by the social and cultural world into which one [was] born.” He noted that sociologists and some psychologists were at odds about the answer. Frazier himself veered from the central tenets of both Freidians and Jungians, entrenched in “oral, anal, and genital drives of an infantile or archaic character,” and instead found “harmony” with social behaviorists who were much more interested “in the individual’s social experience and cultural milieu [as] the sources of motivation and conflicts.” Frazier also diverged from Robert Park and the Chicago School of Sociology. Park’s research had determined that “the Negro [had] a general sunny, and social disposition,” was not interested nor “attached to” “subjective states and objects of introspection.” Rather, “by natural disposition the Negro [was] neither an intellectual nor an idealist, […] nor a brooding introspective […], nor a pioneer”; “he [was] so to speak the lady of the races [emphasis added.]” If we ignore for now the gender bias in Park’s statement, it is important to note that Frazier, while determining intelligence, temperament, and physical heredity as necessarily biological, simultaneously regarded them as unfixed and “[influenced] by social interaction.” With an aim to implicate (the psychological violence of) racial segregation and economic discrimination, Frazier’s study of black adolescent personality development assumed that personalities could change over the course of an individual’s life and sought to prove the extent to which “experiences” had by African Americans in their “isolated world” created “attitudes,

385 Frazier, Negro Youth at the Crossways, 272; 271 – 277.
386 Frazier, Negro Youth at the Crossways, 276.
387 Park qtd in Frazier, Negro Youth at the Crossways, 273 – 274.
388 Frazier, Negro Youth at the Crossways, 275.
traits, and evaluations” in an individual both about him/herself and about the world. Here he was mostly interested in black poor and working people who he saw as particularly isolated from white society. For whatever reason, Frazier did not interrogate biological determinism except to say that it was not fixed and could be changed by cultural exposure. Moreover, he entered his project with the unshakeable assumption that African Americans felt inferior to whites, “submitted” as it were, searching for evidence that feelings of inferiority and moments of submission resulted from racial and economic discrimination and segregation.  

Some twenty years after Frazier’s project, social scientists began to revise and reconstitute their research methodology. In 1980, anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney published his oral history narratives *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*, as part of this resurgence and revision. Constituent of the new interest in and wave of scholarship on “black ghettos,” and the new interest in American cultural studies ushered in by the advent of American Studies, Gwaltney laid out the voices of poor and working class urban northeastern African Americans, identifying something he called “core black culture” and rehabilitating it as “mainstream.” While his book was panned for not including any analysis, Gwaltney’s *Drylongso* added to the work of anthropologists and sociologists like Elijah Anderson and his *A Place on the Corner* and Elliot Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Streetcorner Men*. Liebow’s

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389 Frazier argues against William McDougall’s assertion, in his 1921 *Is America Safe for Democracy*, that African Americans and more generally all people of African descent had a particularly “strong submissive instinct.” McDougall was a psychologist interested in employing a kind of anthropological psychology in the service of eugenics. See, McDougall, *Is America Safe for Democracy: Six Lectures Given at the Lowell Institute of Boston Under the Title of “Anthropology and History or the Influence of Anthropologic Constitution on the Destinies of Nations* (NY: Scribner and Sons, 1921): 117 – 118.


study was part of the series “Childrearing Practices Among Low Income Families in the District of Columbia,” funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and supervised by Howard University sociologist Hylan Lewis, continuing the long tradition of using local black poor and working communities as laboratories for an interdisciplinary (cultural) poverty research.\(^392\) Despite attempts in the post-civil rights era period to write against the notions of cultural pathology and/or inherent criminality of black poor and urban communities, these studies categorized behavior as “a direct response to the conditions of lower class Negro life.”\(^393\) Even Gwaltney, with an insistence of letting the voices speak for themselves, “catalogue[d] qualities […] of a proper core black person [emphasis added.]”\(^394\) Social scientific research, even one with an aim towards rehabilitating black poor and working class urban communities, maintains the monolithism of these communities, and homogenizes and reifies a “lower class” blackness.

Unlike historians of racial slavery in the Americas who struggle with both the “violence of abstraction” in sources and the silence in the archives,\(^395\) historians of the late nineteenth and the twentieth century have sources from which we can hear the voices of people we often think of as dispossessed (urban) masses; their thoughts have been recorded by social scientists. In contradistinction to his mentor Robert Park, Frazier depended on black introspection in order for his study to be successful. Despite the production of these sources though, these social science recorders were just as much “failed witnesses” as those in the “archive of slavery”;\(^396\) they could

\(^393\) Liebow, Tally’s Corner: A Study of Streetcorner Men, 135.
\(^394\) Gwaltney, Drylongso, xxvii.
\(^395\) Marcus Rediker, finding that much of slave studies is “plagued” by this violence of abstraction, writes against this by doing an “ethnography” of the slaver in his The Slave Ship: A Human History (NY: Penguin Group, 2007). Also Saidiya Hartman writes eloquently about the methodology of working with the silences in the archives to recover and recuperate black enslaved women’s voices in particular. See Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” Small Axe 26 (June 2008).
not see the trees for their interest in categorizing the forest. This call for attention to individuals in poor and working urban centers, pejoratively known as “ghettoes,” in no way argues for some Western privileging of the individual self, or the liberal subject, above all else, but rather demands that we examine and learn from individual articulations of the inner lives of poor and working people the same way we have the inner ponderings of elites who in their privileged positions, whether by race, gender, class, or society, left documents recording their thoughts and ideologies. Many of these wanderings and meanderings of the mind have become philosophical and political frameworks in the making of the nation-state that is the United States of America.

No transcript exists of seventeen-year-old Louise Freely of Southeast Washington DC in Frazier’s archives. Instead, what is left of Louise are twelve poems she wrote in the summer of 1937. “My Book of Poems,” “She Dreamed of Days Gone By,” “Some One,” and “I Know,” are a few of the titles. Louise’s poems speak of love, of longing (for the telephone to ring), of love lost, of daydreams, of a certain future (although she did not know if it would be filled with love or heartbreak), and of the joy writing brought her. We do not know whether Louise offered her work up to her interviewer or whether she was asked for it, but either way her young (artist’s) voice can be found in this archive.

Neither Louise’s poetic inclinations nor the musings of her inner teenage self are referenced in Frazier’s youth study publication. Rather Louise and her cohort of young people were rendered apathetic with a kind of social science violence of its own. Perceived as mere victims of their parents’ backward, rural “folk” ways, black poor and working young people were depicted as overcome by urban poverty and segregation, and thus developed criminal, violent, promiscuous tendencies. But prioritizing interiority makes us take a second look at what Louise has left us. Certainly, her words could be read as typical teen angst, but they are also
equally expressions of her introspective self, of meaning she is making about the world in which she lives, and, to use Walter Benjamin’s term, her wish-images – her imaginings for her future, even with the knowledge of the (structural) limitations brought to bear by her age, gender, class, racial and residential identities.397

Interiority in its myriad manifestations brings us ultimately to a depth of consciousness and self-awareness, even as it is burgeoning and evolving. In poet Elizabeth Alexander’s words, black interiority is “black life and creativity behind the [more] public face of stereotype and limited imagination.”398 It comes from a private space, a space of quiet, with a “sovereignty” of its own.399 Darlene Clark Hine is correct in noting that some people, black women in particular, sometimes sought to keep it private. This was certainly true for some folks who participated, or did not participate in Frazier’s research project. For example, Northwest D.C. resident, struggling single mother and new grandmother Hattie Savage was clearly uncomfortable, tense, hesitant, and even expressed irritation about the scrutiny she was under (from her relief worker and from the interviewer herself). Zulme MacNeal, Frazier’s staff for his New York City project sought interviews with twenty-year-old Frances Hicks and Carmen Drew, both young black women who worked in the cafeteria at the Harlem YMCA. Over the course of several days, MacNeal approached Frances and Carmen, separately and together, making appointments to interview them, and reminding them of both appointments they had made and missed, and

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397 Actually, Susan Cahn, in her examination of how race and class shaped girlhood in American south in the first half of the twentieth century, does a repurposing of Benjamin’s term that I find particularly useful. Using archives produced in large part by social scientists, who, Cahn says, found young peoples’ “stated expectations” as ‘disconcertingly improbable,” Cahn posits that instead these expectations were “imagined futures” that represented young peoples’ understandings of their own capacities for achievement, and “entitlement to having more” – “more power to shape their lives.” Cahn, Sexual Reckonings, 127, 336 n37.
upcoming appointments. The girls, always polite, apologetic, and willing to reschedule, continued to avoid MacNeal. One day, MacNeal positioned herself near the front door, where she knew the girls would have to sign out. Forty-five minutes after the girls were scheduled to leave, MacNeal could hear them approaching, "whispering and rustling," "close together, advancing toward the time sheet with heads averted and much giggling." Their lateness in signing out might be evidence that they had been hoping MacNeal would leave her lobby post and give them a chance to escape unseen. MacNeal noted in her transcript that Frances and Carmen had "come the longest and least convenient way from the cafeteria." The young women signed out, and snuck out the back. MacNeal followed and continued to watch them. As they reached the corner, "they looked back" at MacNeal, "[broke] into a loud laugh, [and] disappeared." Since there is no transcript of an interview with either young woman, I can only assume they continued to avoid her.

Literary scholar Saidiya Hartman asks "how [can] narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know." She posits a particular methodological approach through which we might be able to access the "detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done." I wonder whether a narrative can do both - embody life and its detritus, and respect what we cannot know. If Frances and Carmen decide not to share themselves, we have no text. But it seems we can indeed assume and respect that they, like all black young people, have inner lives, that they are indeed contemplative, that they have human places of quiet from which all the aspects of themselves emerge, and that in this case, they chose to keep those places private. Work on interiority, especially of young black people, like Ruth Nicole Brown’s recent scholarship on black girls, makes important contributions, especially as

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400 Zulme MacNeal, “Francis Hicks, 9 -2- 38,” E. Franklin Frazier Papers, Box 131-112 Folder 9.
the movement #blacklivesmatter continues to grow in the wake of the killings of specifically black young people in Detroit, MI, Ferguson, MO, Cleveland, OH, and New York, NY.\textsuperscript{403}

Brown’s recent work with young people in organizing and intervention programs in the Midwest forms the basis of her book \textit{Hear Our Truths}. She asserts, about the contemporary moment, that black young people are criminalized, misrepresented by popular media, “uncritically interpreted through statistics, and rendered in policies that punish, segregate, and silence.”\textsuperscript{404} For black girls and young women, they are often represented as “loud,” or “threatening,” especially when in a group, as sexual beyond their years, and sexualized. For black boys and young men, they are portrayed as threatening, whether together or alone, as dangerous, criminal, and as Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson testified to in his shooting of Michael Brown, as aggressive, superhuman, and even evil.\textsuperscript{405} What Ruth Nicole Brown documents through her work with young women in Saving Our Lives Hearing Our Truths (SOLHOT) is their capacities for creativity, for voice, and for the development of their own ways of knowing – how they see themselves and how they are seen.

Interiority is essential to acknowledging and seeing epistemologies. It is an essential human element – everyone has it. Just as scholarship on the Great Migration, diaspora, and postcoloniality, has foregrounded how mobility and movement has had an impact on racial identities, so too interiority includes its own mobility: the wanderings of the mind, the wish-images of young people and adults into their futures. Interiority is political. For African


\textsuperscript{404} Brown, \textit{Hear Our Truths}, 16.

\textsuperscript{405} http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/25/darren-wilson-testimony_n_6216620.html
Americans, especially those in interwar Washington, D.C. proscribed not just by racial segregation, but by political disfranchisement in the district, and for young people who, even if African Americans and District residents had had voting rights, would not have been old enough to engage in formal politics, articulating one’s sensibilities about local and hyperlocal, as well as regional and national conditions and realities is politically significant: an assertion of a critical self necessarily engaged in family, community, society, nation, and history.

In July 2014, Chicagoan fifth-graders, with the help of their teacher, collaboratively penned an op-ed in the Chicago Tribune. In response to the generally negative news coverage of their neighborhood, the students asserted an aspect of their critical selves, entering into a political discourse, starting with “This is us.” Wanting their audience, the readership of The Tribune and then the listeners of National Public Radio’s Weekend Edition, to “know [them,]” they identified and gave name to nameless “[men] on the corner,” “girls jumping rope,” and called for society to “hear the laughter and the chattering from a group of girls on the corner who are best friends and really care about each other.” They rejected the neighborhood’s moniker of Chi-raq, a name which labeled their community as one of only violence, instead calling it “home.”

In the sociological archives of Frazier’s study, over 150 African American young people, some younger than the above fifth graders, took advantage of the listening ears and intrusive questions of their interviewers to articulate their own notions of everything, from “home” to white supremacy. These young voices name and claim their interiority, their subjectivity, their individuality, their memberships in communities small and large, their developing race, gender, sexuality, and class consciousness, and project themselves positively into the future. Through these musings, we get a glimpse at this introspective, vulnerable space where (the social, the

political) self is crafted, where “the practice of knowing is[both] incomplete”\(^{407}\) and constantly being formed.

Poor young black people faced multiple marginalizations in interwar Washington, D.C. Specifically black juvenile delinquency was highly monitored, and programs and policies were crafted around it just as the new juvenile justice system was professionalizing. While some police forces around the country were “embrac[ing] new models of social welfare-minded friendliness to[ward] children,” these children were seldom immigrants, or black migrants, or poor and working class African American long-term residents. Moreover, in many cities, police retained discretionary power on the streets, as well as their own ideas about the communities they were policing.\(^{408}\) When University of Chicago student Daniel Swinney wrote about two predominantly black and poor Northwest communities in 1930s D.C., he identified them as not being necessarily more dangerous than other parts of the city, but officers who were assigned generally neglected the areas and/or refused to patrol without a partner.\(^{409}\)

In our contemporary moment, we see the continued ravages of the criminalization of black young people, making a reminder about black interiority so much more important. Racial profiling of all kinds necessarily ignores, even denies, the existence of inner quiet, self-consciousness, of the dynamism of the other’s inner life, of a place of vulnerability, need, spirituality, intimacy. It negates the humanity of the one who is being profiled – all that is seen is their public self and the choices one has made for outward self-expression, the “narrow corners [of] social identity.”\(^{410}\) What were Michael Brown’s wish-images? What did he expect to find in

\(^{407}\) Quashie, *Sovereignty of Quiet*, 134.


\(^{410}\) Quashie, *Sovereignty of Quiet*, 134.
college next year? What was he planning to major in? Where did he see himself in five years? What did Tamir Rice think of his new toy? What were his opinions on his teachers? How did Trayvon Martin compare the community in Sanford that he was visiting to his home in Miami-Dade County? How did he make sense of the differences and/or similarities? What did Aiyana Stanley-Jones like most about school? What book had she read recently, and what did she think about it? What did she want to grow up to be? These are the kinds of questions asked of young people in the years before World War II that, despite the intentions of the sociological project, brought forth an epistemological trove. We will never know the answers to these questions for the above murdered black young people or hear how these young people were coming to understand the world in which they lived.
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