Designing Community:
Architecture, Race and Democracy in American Life Writing, 1900-1950
by
S. Abigail Seeskin

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Priscilla Wald, Supervisor

___________________________
Sharon Holland

___________________________
Kimberly Lamm

___________________________
Kathy Psomiades

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2017
ABSTRACT

Designing Community: Architecture, Race, and Democracy in American Life Writing, 1900-1950

By

S. Abigail Seeskin

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Priscilla Wald, Supervisor

___________________________
Sharon Holland

___________________________
Kimberly Lamm

___________________________
Kathy Psomiades

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2017
Abstract

The turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century saw unprecedented growth and change in the demographics of United States urban environs. Not only did U.S. cities grow bigger, they grew increasingly multicultural and multiracial. American architects, urban planners, and social reformers responded to this change by attempting to instill democratic values in American cities through zoning, gridding, and housing reform that sought to alternately include immigrant populations while excluding populations seen as not white (in particular, black communities). Designing Community: Architecture, Race, and Democracy in American Life Writing, 1900-1950 examines autobiographies produced in this era that use architectural metaphors in order to either enforce or challenge this democratizing project. Narrations of the self granted space for members of minoritized populations to show the limits of the architectural project to build democracy.

In a critical introduction and three subsequent chapters, I use methods of literary analysis to study life writing as well as novels, essays, newspaper articles, and poetry. Through my analysis of three life writing texts, I center autobiography as a genre critical to the production of community formation in the United States. Each chapter examines both a particular writer as well as a particular autobiographical technique. In my first chapter, I primarily examine the 1924 autobiography of Louis Sullivan titled The Autobiography of an Idea. I argue that Sullivan uses techniques lifted from the Bildungsroman in order to show his readers that they, too, can develop into democratic
subjects. In my second chapter, I examine the 1950 memoir of the Jewish immigrant writer Anzia Yezierska titled *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. I argue that her use of the confessional produces space for her to generate self-determination as a critical component to the production of multi-ethnic community. In my third chapter, I examine Richard Wright’s 1945 memoir *Black Boy*. I argue that his use of the testimonial enables readers to see human life as innately interconnected. In my conclusion I show that architectural metaphors continue to govern contemporary visions of democratic life in the United States, particularly as Donald Trump’s administration has campaigned to build a wall on the United States’ southern border. I argue that this is a moment in which those invested in racial justice should listen to minoritized voices.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iv  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................ vii  
1. Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Population, Narrative, Race ......................................................................................... 4  
   1.2 Autobiographical Inhabitations .................................................................................... 13  
   1.3 Placing Myself in Front of the Text .............................................................................. 19  
2. Sullivan’s Architectural Foundations, or: “The Archeetec’s the Boss of Everybody” .. 27  
   2.1 Architecture’s Organic Forms: Sullivan’s Interventions ............................................. 32  
   2.2 Walt Whitman’s Impact ............................................................................................... 43  
   2.3 Modeling the Architect: Sullivan’s Autobiography as Bildungsroman ..................... 55  
   2.4 Sullivan’s Legacy; Architecture, Power, Unity ......................................................... 68  
3. Anzia Yezierska’s Glass House: Reframing Transparency in the Immigrant Subject .. 76  
   3.1 Slum Sights ................................................................................................................ 81  
   3.2 Cinderella’s Glass Window: Racial Uplift as Fairy Tale ........................................... 105  
   3.3 Correcting the Mirror in Red Ribbon ........................................................................... 120  
4. Build Bridges Not Walls: Richard Wright’s Blueprint ...................................................... 130  
   4.1 Wright’s Blueprint ....................................................................................................... 137  
   4.2 Walls and Segregation ................................................................................................. 155  
   4.3 Bridge Building; Memoir Writing ................................................................................ 168  
5. Epilogue ............................................................................................................................ 177  
Biography ............................................................................................................................. 192
Acknowledgements

I offer my sincere thanks to my dissertation chair, Priscilla Wald, for her support, guidance, and encouragement throughout this project. I am grateful to have had an advisor who allowed me to develop a project out of my own curiosity. It was upon her initial encouragement to explore the relationship between architecture and literature that this project emerged. I also offer my gratitude to the other members of my committee: Kathy Psomiades, Sharon Holland, and Kimberly Lamm. I feel fortunate to have committee members who have been supportive of me as both a researcher and an educator.

Throughout my time in graduate school I have been surrounded by fiercely intelligent and generous colleagues at Duke and beyond. Thank you especially to Jessica Hines, Kita Douglas, Daniel Picus, Alyce de Carteret, Cheryl Spinner, Layla Aldousany, Christopher Ramos, and Clare Callahan for feedback, encouragement, coffee dates, and more.

Thank you to my parents, Elaine and Barry Seeskin, and brothers, Zach and Nate for your unwavering support and love.

To Rachel: I don’t think any of this would have been possible without you. Your support and love mean the most to me. Thanks for loving me, keeping me grounded, keeping me motivated. You da best.
And thanks to Clifford. This extrovert found it difficult sometimes to sit alone at home and write, and I was glad that you were there to listen to me talk out ideas when no one else was around. I know you understood nothing about what I said to you, but you cocked your ears nonetheless if I raised the pitch at the ends of my sentences. It was weirdly encouraging. I miss you so much, bud.
1. Introduction

Although the concept of democracy as an American value is one that has been celebrated for centuries, it is a term that is difficult to define outside of the realm of government. This difficulty is perhaps clearer now than ever before. When Donald Trump was elected president in November of 2016, he proclaimed in his victory speech, “it is time for America to bind the wounds of division… To all Republicans and Democrats and independents across this nation, I say it is time for us to come together as one united people.”¹ Yet even as Trump was imagining the American people “com[ing] together,” he used his first week in office to issue extraordinarily polarizing Executive Orders that excluded immigrants from Central America and the Middle East from a vision of who constitutes the American people. In her 1991 essay “The Grid and the Logic of Democracy,” the feminist theorist Joan Copjec dubbed such a move the “peculiar logic of democracy,” noting:

When he passed the Land Ordinance of 1785, which called for the generalization and extension of the chess-board divisions and subdivisions of Eastern cities over the Western territories, [Thomas] Jefferson was engaging in a radical act of Cartesian disincorporation. Sweeping away any and all natural or subjective particulars by which America—the “melting pot,” the “nation of immigrants”—might otherwise begin to define itself, he submitted the country to a universal quantifier: the grid. The territories

came to be defined as part of our nation, as American, not though a marking out and celebration of their peculiar geographic features, but through an erasure of all such features. Similarly, if all our citizens can be said to be Americans, this is not because we share any positive characteristics, but rather because we have all been given the right to shed these characteristics. It is this right, granted by the Constitution—this equality of condition, this right to appear disembodied before the law—that constitutes us as citizens of the USA. I divest myself of positive identity, therefore I am an American. This is the peculiar logic of democracy.\textsuperscript{2}

Copjec astutely frames the logic of democracy as “the right to shed these characteristics” that mark difference. For example, when Trump called Mexican men “bad hombres,” he gestured to the xenophobic belief that Mexican men are ontologically different from native-born, white American men—that Mexican men are intrinsically morally corrupt, and have not yet sufficiently acquiesced to American values. His right-wing populist vision of democratic practice has an incredibly narrow vision of what it looks like to be an American.

In 2017, just as in 1785, the act of creating democratic subjects emerges as a spatial project. Whereas Jefferson extended the east coast grid over the Western territories, Trump now wants to build a wall on the U.S.—Mexican border. But perhaps at no point in the history of the United States was this project of extending democracy throughout U.S. environs so virulent as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Particularly in major cities like Chicago and New York, architects and urban planners, sociologists and social reformers together sought to build a city that enabled democratic practice among a population that was both growing and becoming more ethnically diverse. As the architect Frank Lloyd Wright averred, in his 1908 essay “In the Cause of Architecture,” “our ideal is Democracy, the highest possible expression of the individual as a unit not inconsistent with the harmonious whole.” Across the diverse fields of architecture, social reform, and sociology, practitioners under Progressivism sought to bring individuals perceived as foreign into the “harmonious whole” of American democratic practice.

While architectural and urban historians have shown how architects, reformers, and sociologists envisioned the city as a “laboratory” through which they could build democratic practice, autobiographical writing by those proximate to urban reform have not yet been integrated into this conversation. In Designing Community: Architecture, Race, and Democracy in American Life Writing, 1900-1950, I seek to change that. If Frank Lloyd Wright saw democracy as the process of expressing “the individual as a unit not inconsistent with the harmonious whole,” then life writing as a genre that actively

---

4 The sociologist Robert Park wrote in his 1925 essay The City, “The city, and particularly the great city, in which more than elsewhere human relations are likely to be impersonal and rational, defined in terms of interest and in terms of cash, is in a very real sense a laboratory for the investigation of collective behavior.” See Robert E. Park, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment,” in The City, by Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967), 22.
explores the individual’s relation to their environs emerges as an important lens through which to explore the fraught nature of the democratic project. In this dissertation I read three life writing texts written by three astute American observers of the democratic project: Louis Sullivan, Anzia Yezierska, and Richard Wright. As a set of writers, all three were critically invested in the spatial dimensions of democratic practice in the United States. Louis Sullivan was a practicing architect. Anzia Yezierska, a Jewish immigrant in New York, lived in housing reform projects for much of her young adult life and made them a subject of her fiction. Richard Wright, as a black migrant to Chicago, became closely involved with University of Chicago sociologists, whose concern with race, ethnicity and urban spaces helped to shape the focus of their discipline. The architectural metaphors of their autobiographical writings attest to their interest in the relationship of space and the broader project of democratic practice. I argue that life writing emerges as a critical site through which writers can produce relational bonds beyond the governance of top-down democratic practice.

1.1 Population, Narrative, Race

In 1911 the writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote a short utopian novel entitled Moving the Mountain. She called it “a short distance Utopia, a baby Utopia, a little one that can grow. It involves no other change than a change of mind, the mere awakening
of people.” Unlike Edward Bellamy’s 1887 utopian novel Looking Backward, Moving the Mountain did not stipulate that her readers would have to wait until the year 2000 for utopia to come. And unlike her not-yet-written novel Herland, her readers did not have to travel to far-flung lands and live in all female-societies. Moving the Mountain presents utopia as achievable by only two things: the creation of co-educational universities and finding the solution to the Immigrant Problem—one that the book defines as “a sociological process not possible to stop, but quite possible to assist and to guide to great advantage.”

Gilman’s novel imagines a world free of “sin,” “poverty—no labor problem—no color problem—no sex problem—almost no disease,” and more, but it is vexed by the question of racial and ethnic inclusivity. An enthusiastic eugenicist, she tended to consider human life in terms of use-value limited to one’s labor potential. As the character Nellie explains to her brother John, “Well, whether you like it or not, our people [of “proud English stock”] saw their place and power at last and rose to it. We have discovered as many ways of utilizing human waste as we have used for the waste product of tar.” When John asks if her culture has made use of “idiots and criminals,” Nellie replies:

---

6 Ibid., 50.
7 Ibid., 46.
“Idiots, hopeless ones, we don’t keep any more...They are very rare now. The grade of average humanity is steadily rising; and we have found the proud satisfaction of knowing we have helped it rise. We organized a permanent ‘reception committee’ for the whole country, one stationed here and one in California. Anybody could come—but they had to submit to our handling when they did come.”

Gilman’s novel uses the language of radical inclusivity ("we refuse no one") while simultaneously making exceptions to this inclusivity ("idiots," "criminals," “hopeless ones"). Moving the Mountain argues that any human of worth is fundamentally moldable through “handling.” Those who are not capable of being made into subjects of predetermined worth are not kept anymore. Thus the strength of Gilman’s utopian vision depends upon the reader’s agreeing with Gilman that some lives are less valuable than others. As scholars such as Alys Weinbaum have argued, Gilman’s brand of feminism is distinctly nativist. Her utopian imagination is enabled by eugenics.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Gilman was hardly the only figure vexed by how to reconcile rapidly changing demographics—in particular, the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe—with the professed democratic principles of the United States. Census records indicate that more and more immigrants

---

8 Ibid., 51.
9 Alys Weinbaum refers to Gilman’s ideology as a “maternalist racial nationalism.” She was notoriously hostile of immigrants. See Alys Weinbaum, Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). 64, 72.
came to the United States over the course of the ninety-year period from 1820-1910.\textsuperscript{10} Gilman’s novel, alongside sociological texts like Edward Alsworth Ross’s 1914 \textit{The Old World in the New}, show that some of those who prided themselves in descending from “Puritan stock” felt that the United States risked losing its democratic values through freely admitting those immigrating from “backwards lands.”\textsuperscript{11} For Ross the health of the nation was more important than professed ideals of inclusion. As his preface to \textit{The Old World in the New} makes clear, the very future of the nation was at stake:

I am not of those who consider humanity and forget the nation, who pity the living but not the unborn. To me, those who are to come after us stretch forth beseeching hands as well as the masses on the other side of the globe. Nor do I regard America as something to be spent quickly and cheerfully for the benefit of pent-up millions in the backward lands. What if we become crowded without their ceasing to be so? I regard it as a nation whose future may be of unspeakable value to the rest of mankind, provided that the easier conditions of living here be made permanent by high standards of living, institutions and ideals, which finally may be appropriate by all men. We could have helped the Chinese a little by letting their

\textsuperscript{10} A. Dianne Schmidley, \textit{Profile of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2000} (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), 8. Schmidley writes, “With the exception of the 1860s (which included the Civil War) and the 1890s (which included the ‘closing’ of the agricultural frontier and economic depression), the number of international migrants to the United States increased in each decade from the 1820s to the 1901-1910 decade. Data from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INC) indicate that the number of immigrants increased from 0.1 million in the 1820s to 8.8 million in the 1901-1910 decade, the highest total on record for a single decade. Census data reflect this migration trend and show that the foreign-born population increased rapidly from 2.2 million in 1850, the first year place of birth data were collected, to 13.5 in 1910.”

surplus millions swarm in upon us a generation ago; but we have helped them infinitely more by protecting our standards and having something worth their copying when the time came.

Ross imagines an American standard of living, in part constituted by “institutions and ideals,” that is concretized, monolithic, identifiable—as also a limited resource. He justifies his anti-immigrant sentiment by employing a long-term futuritive thinking that imagines that immigrant populations will drain these resources. Gilman’s interest in establishing a “handling” center for immigrants follows in a similar vein; she argues that immigrants can only value the American standard of living should they be able to prove their acceptance of American ideals. These publicized sentiments in part justified restrictive immigration policies, enacted in the 1910s and 1920s.

But examining the foreign-born population of the United States only offers one piece of how U.S. American demographics shifted in the first few decades of the twentieth century. On the broadest scale, more and more American residents became city dwellers; the number of people living in U.S. metropolitan areas more than doubled between 1910 and 1930. In their analysis of demographic trends of the twentieth

---

12 In this dissertation I will shorthand “U.S. American” to “American,” while also acknowledging that this shorthand is imperfect and runs the risk of reinforcing American exceptionalism. Because my dissertation is invested in aesthetic responses to policy and demographic trends noted on the level of the nation, I have nonetheless chosen to focus on art objects produced in and about life in the United States. I do not mean to suggest that the United States is an exceptional place, but I do think that the United States has specificity.

13 Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), 32. The U.S. Census counted 26.1 metropolitan residents in 1910 (28% of the total US population) and 54.8 million in 1930 (44.6% of the total US population).
century Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops argued that this happened not just because of the influx of immigrants, but also because US metropolitan areas increasingly incorporated previously rural space. Cities became attractive to those who grew up in rural areas; stories like Theodore Dreiser’s 1900 novel *Sister Carrie* show how young people in a modernizing world came to the city for economic and social reasons. By 1950, half of all American residents lived in metropolitan regions.\(^{14}\) While the demographics of rural areas remained relatively constant, as US cities grew they became more diverse in terms of national origin and racial identity. Between 1915 and 1970, six million black people left the U.S. south for the urban north to escape the conditions of Jim Crow. Because conceptions of race and ethnicity changed immensely over the first half of the twentieth century, the data measuring the racial makeup of urban cities are considerably less reliable.\(^{15}\) Even so, it is clear that U.S. cities were becoming less predominately white.\(^{16}\)

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) See Anthony Daniel Perez and Charles Hirschman, “The Changing Racial and Ethnic Composition of the US Population: Emerging American Identities,” *Population and Development Review* 35, No. 1 (March 2009), 7-16. Perez and Hirschman offer a fantastic overview of how race and ethnicity were conceptualized and counted over the course of the twentieth century. Most basically, they argue that the data concerning race in the early twentieth century are unreliable because racial prejudice inflected how people of African ancestry were conceptualized and thus counted. They argue that “[t]he social science of the late nineteenth century was almost completely dominated by Social Darwinist ideology that reinforced the assumptions of white superiority. Administrative practices, including census classifications, reflected these biases.” In 1890, the census included categories like “quadroon” and “octoroon” to measure people of African descent. By the first few decades of the twentieth century, census writers consolidated these categories into “Negro,” which included anyone with any African ancestry. Perez and Hirschman argue that this follows a vested interest in the “one-drop rule.”

\(^{16}\) Hobbs and Stoops, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century*, 76.
But Gilman’s nativist, utopian vision of the United States as a democratic space free of poverty, disease, “the color problem,” the “gender problem,” and more did not unfold as she desired. Instead poverty persisted and became concentrated within non-white and immigrant communities as racism, xenophobia, and nativism flourished in American cities. Isabel Wilkerson notes in her sweeping history of the Great Migration that “the arrival of colored migrants set off remarkable displays of hostility, ranging from organized threats against white property owners who might sell or rent to blacks to firebombings of houses before the new colored owners could even move in.” 

Architectural spaces, as Wilkerson notes, became central to debates concerning the inclusion of black people within the vision of the American metropolis. This was true for immigrant communities as well: Jacob Riis’s 1890 photojournalistic treatise How the Other Half Lives showed generations of reformers the dangers of the tenements housing the immigrant poor. Through the first decades of the twentieth century, Progressivist reformers worked hard to move immigrants out of these tenements. They believed that this was a public good: not only would immigrant communities enjoy safer living conditions, but the acculturated immigrant could emerge, too, as evidence that it is possible to convert foreign-born people into democratic American citizens. These combined efforts produced architecture as a site that tests the possibility of producing

---

the democratic, utopian American city. Some populations—like immigrants from European countries—found that their adjacency to whiteness allowed them to become contingently included in the democratic project should they sufficiently prove their allegiance to an American standard of living. Other populations—like black people, and those other populations perceived as not white—found only exclusion from democratic American space. As I will show throughout my dissertation, both sets of communities suffered from these practices.

The conditions of racism, xenophobia, and nativism produced cities that were segregated by race and ethnicity. The philosopher Horace Kallen, himself a Jewish immigrant from Poland, noticed that immigrants lived in “a series of stripes or layers of various sizes” concentrated in American metropolises.18 At the same time, early sociologists shaped their discipline through their study of the life of a city. One of the founders of the disciplines, the University of Chicago sociologist Robert Park, noticed that the city’s diversity seemed to prevent people of disparate communities from forming connections with each other. In 1924 he wrote, “It is characteristic of city life that all sorts of people meet and mingle together who never fully comprehend one another. The anarchist and the club man, the priest and the Levite, the actor and the

18 Horace Kallen, “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot,” The Nation, February 18, 1915, 191. Kallen’s cultural pluralism offers an important counterpoint to the sentiment expressed by Gilman and Ross. In this essay, he argues that Americans should embrace the different cultures and attitudes of American residents.
missionary who touch elbows on the street still live in totally different worlds.”\textsuperscript{19} Park’s major interest as a sociologist was to describe city life rather than prescribe solutions for any perceived problems. He was intrigued to discover that the physical proximity produced by urban density did not necessarily produce social relationships across identities—even as reformers, architects, planners, and urban planners worked hard to produce a coherent American identity through urban space. American cities by their built structures of exclusion and contingent inclusion inhibited the possibility of widespread community across race and ethnicity.

Although sociologists such as Park might have been surprised by their findings, this was not a phenomenon lost upon people from immigrant and racially minoritized populations. Throughout this period racially and ethnically minoritized writers and artists used their art forms to explore the extent to which they felt they belonged or did not belong, identified or did not identify with the experience of living in American cities. Writers such as Abraham Cahan and Nella Larsen used fiction to show how members of their communities experienced intense loneliness in American cities, a loneliness they could at least partly contribute to the racism, sexism, and xenophobia their protagonists

These writers explored the contradictions between democratic ideals and the lived experience of racial and ethnic minorities in the spaces of urban America.

1.2 Autobiographical Inhabitations

In response to the question “What is space,” the critical geographer David Harvey suggests that we ask a different question: “[H]ow is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualizations of space?” He argues that it is impossible to definitively answer the first question, as “the nature of space has remained something mysterious to social enquiry.” We might consider space as a phenomenon like democracy: space is neither definitively absolute, with “an existence outside of matter,” nor is it a purely relative nor relational. Instead he suggests that space can be any or none of these things. In shifting his reader from the first to the second question, Harvey seeks to wrest considerations of space from ontology: space does not inherently exist, but rather human communities make use of space through social practices. It is through an examination of social practices that useful spatial concepts emerge.

---

20 Abraham Cahan’s 1917 novel The Rise of David Levinsky shows the limitations of the “rags to riches story” as his Jewish bootstrappin’ protagonist arrives at an ending constituted by loneliness more so than wealth. Nella Larsen’s 1927 and 1928 novels Passing and Quicksand show the loneliness of educated black women in American metropolises. A companion project to this dissertation could examine how structures of segregation produce the affect of loneliness through novels of this era.

21 David Harvey, Social Justice and the City (Athens, GA; University of Georgia Press, 2009 [orig. 1975), 13-14.

22 Ibid., 13.

13
Architecture’s status as a social practice that makes use of space is a bit obvious. As Harvey himself has argued, “Architecture clearly has actual function, but it also defines and arranges spatial units in terms of actual spatial relationships which have meaning for us in terms of the space in which we live and move.”

For the feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, architecture is not just a field that designs space and makes buildings, but it also offers a language to the process of creating:

Architectural models have always provoked philosophy. There are some interesting and sometimes even profound metaphors within architecture that philosophy might be fascinated with (for example, notions of “dwelling” and “habitation” that so captivated Heidegger; the idea of “foundation” that fascinated Descartes and Kant, or “becoming and itinerancy” that beguiled Deleuze) but which philosophy really hasn’t been able to come to grips with. The notion of philosophy as a making, building, production, or construction, a practical construction, is a really interesting idea, one worth developing in the future.

It is not only philosophers that have found architectural metaphors productive for their theories of how we inhabit the world; such metaphors articulate how spatial relations shape social relations. It is not surprising, then, that not only architects like Sullivan, but also authors such as Yezierska and Wright would be drawn to these metaphors as they explored their sense of belonging and relationship to the practices of democracy. In this

23 Ibid., 31.
dissertation, I explore how architectural models produce life writing as a social practice that reveal the self’s relation to their spatial environs.

In the memoir boom of the 1990s, a conservative strand of literary criticism framed those who write about their own lives—particularly those who write about their own traumas—as dwelling too deep within their own selves, being captive to their experience. For example, in 1994 Daphne Patai disparaged life writing as a “nouveau solipsism—all this individual and collective breast-beating, grandstand, and plain old egocentricity” arguing that the life writer often dwells too much on their own self with little regard for the world beyond.25 More recently, Jonathan Yardley dismissed the bulk of autobiographical writing in a Washington Post review of Ben Yagoda’s Memoir: A History. When he wrote that “few of [a life writer’s confessions] can be of interest to anyone except the people writing them,” he effectively positioned himself as capable of diagnosing life writers as public narcissists.26

Not surprisingly, this punishing interpretation of the ethics of life writing has also received sharp criticism. As literary scholars such as Nancy K. Miller have argued, life writing is a deeply relational genre that requires that the life writers not only understand their own relation to the other figures who populate their writing, but also

to form a relationship with the reader, too. Miller characterizes life writing as a deeply generous genre that invites the reader to temporarily inhabit the writer’s world with them. Life writing produces an occasion through which both the writer and the reader practice itinerancy as the reader encounters unfamiliar places and people. While novels and poetry and other literary practices can also produce itinerancy, no genre invites the reader more intimately into the writer’s life.

Yet as social practices, architectural and autobiographical practice do not theorize inhabitation in the exact same way. Or at least, autobiographical practice does not require the same inhabitation that architectural practice produces. Here the philosopher Henri Lefebvre offers a useful distinction: in *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre writes that space is a multitudinous phenomenon produced by a “conceptual triad”: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space. Architectural space is a representation of space, or space conceptualized: “the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers.” Lefebvre argues that “[t]his is the dominant space in any society” that aims to create top-down order. As architects, planners, politicians and others design spaces of inhabitation, they

---

27 Nancy K. Miller, “But enough about me, what do you think of my memoir?” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2000), 422.
29 Ibid., 38.
generally seek to impose order on how people experience their inhabitation. For example, the architectural historian Annabel Wharton argues that the architecture of the West Campus of Duke University “invites investigation and promises the excitement of discovery” as it “promotes the pleasure of variety and unexpected disclosure.” We might see sociologists like Robert Park offering “representational space” as he “describe[s]” the life of a city and “aspire[s] to do no more than describe.” Life writing as a form could easily duplicate the aims of architectural space, especially as it can mimic the form of a bildungsroman; it might also offer representational space. But I find that the most powerful examples of life writing for me tread in that third prong of space: spatial practice. Lefebvre writes that spatial practice “secretes that society’s space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it. From the analytic standpoint, the spatial

31 Annabel Wharton, “Gender, Architecture, and Institutional Self-Presentation: The Case of Duke University,” The South Atlantic Quarterly 90, no. 1 (Winter 1991), 179. As a student at Duke University, I found that my engagement with Wharton really helped concretize for me that architecture seeks to impose specific order upon its inhabitants. Wharton argues that Duke’s campus is quite gendered. In her essay she examines the differences between the architecture of East Campus and West Campus, noticing that the East Campus was originally designed to educate and house women and West Campus was designed to educate and house men. She argues that the two designs of the two campuses indicate that the architects that Duke hired wanted to educate women and men differently. The East Campus is a neo-Georgian rectilinear campus, using symmetry to produce order. She argues that this campus thus aimed to instill a sense of duty within its female inhabitants. The West Campus, however, is an ungridded, wooded, neo-Gothic campus that instead aims to inspire a sense of wonder and exploration amongst its male students. In a conversation with Wharton, she pointed out to me that though these campuses are no longer divided by gender, they still maintain this ethos. All first-year students, new to college life, live on Duke’s East Campus, and more non-traditional and humanities-based programs like Gender, Feminist, and Sexuality Studies, Cultural Anthropology, Dance, and Music continue to be housed on Duke’s East Campus. Duke’s West Campus exclusively houses upper classmen, and is home to all of the hard science departments.

32 Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 39.
practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space."\(^{33}\) We can read life writing as capable of doing exactly this: it can be a spatial practice that produces knowledge about the space of a neighborhood, a city, a nation at it deciphers the self’s relation to that space. Through the journey of life writing, the writer can create space in excess of the desire for order that architectural spaces produces.

In that excess I will argue the potential for community building arises. The philosopher Michel de Certeau has argued that to read another’s story is to tour with them. In shorthand, he writes, “each story is a travel story—a spatial story.”\(^{34}\) He further claims:

> These narrated adventures, simultaneously producing geographies of action and drifting into the commonplaces of an order, do not merely constitute a “supplement” to pedestrian enunciations and rhetorics. They are not satisfied with displacing the latter and transposing them into the field of language. In reality, they organize walks. They make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it.\(^{35}\)

In imagining each story as a “travel story,” de Certeau reminds the reader that every story takes place in both time and space. Storytelling is an act that provides a journey through that space; it can both guide and transgress. Through their very quality of being narrated, stories set *itineraries* through space. They “organize walks.” By following the

---

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 38.


\(^{35}\) Ibid., 116.
walk of another through reading their life narrative, the reader follows the spatial practice of the writer. The historian Joan Scott observes that reading another person’s story can open up new spatial practices for readers in their own lives. As she argues, the stories people tell about themselves “become a way not only of exposing us to differences beyond our frontiers, but also open us to other ways of thinking about the present, the place we live now… [S]torytelling has a decentering effect; it offers epistemological challenges to [orthodox histories]…”

We might imagine orthodox histories and dominant representations of space as bedfellows: life narratives, especially as they narrate marginalized life and name the oppressions marginalized populations encounter—produce a counter-site that challenge the dominant order.

1.3 Placing Myself in Front of the Text

In Designing Community I explicate the salience of three life writers’ rhetorical choice to frame their life writing through the careful use of architectural metaphors. The architect Louis Sullivan imagines his autobiography as providing a blueprint for democratic practice: in using strategies of the Bildungsroman, Sullivan shows how he has developed as the architect of democracy and encourages his readers to follow in his footsteps. The Jewish immigrant writer Anzia Yezierska chooses in her autobiography to correct “a glass-house with crooked mirrors” that she feels has distorted and exploited

---

her. As an immigrant subject whose status as a celebrity was used to showcase the immigrant’s ability to successfully acculturate to American standards of living, Yezierska uses her autobiography to candidly explore the pressure she had once felt. The black writer Richard Wright alternately imagines his memoir as “a bridge of words between me and that world outside.” Wright uses his autobiography to upend structures of segregation by creating a web of relations among American subjects across racial divisions.

Lefebvre’s conceptual triad clarifies the socioethical stakes of each of these projects. Sullivan’s use of the Bildungsroman places him squarely within a representation of space. In his autobiography, Sullivan shows how his mastery of American space allowed him to become a leading American architect. Yezierska and Wright’s memoirs, on the other hand, are emblematic of life writing as a spatial practice. Both Yezierska and Wright experience significant oppression throughout their lives, and use their life writing to decipher and remake their spatial environs.

In choosing texts that name oppression, I follow Rita Felski’s call to open myself to a reading practice beyond critique, an interpretive practice that is shaped by “a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on the precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in

---

some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical.”  

While careful to frame her project as one that does not simply offer a critique of critique, Felski asks questions that probe the limitations of critique as a dominant mode in literary criticism. Most saliently, Felski asks this question: “What intellectual and imaginative alternatives does [critique] overshadow, obscure, or overrule?”

Felski’s question is inclined toward the same architectural metaphors that motivate my dissertation. Her question is fundamentally orientational in nature: how can literary analysts choose to orient themselves to their literary objects? The feminist theorist Sara Ahmed has argued that “Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend the world of shared inhabitance, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward.” Felski likewise names her reading practice that orients itself toward possibility rather than critique as “placing ourselves in front of the text,” an orientation that clarifies the relation between reader and writer. As she writes:

---

40 Ibid., 5. Felski writes, “Let me specify at the start that this book is not conceived as a polemic against critique, a shouting from the rooftops about the obduracy of obtuseness of my fellow critics. My previous writing... owes an extended debt to traditions of critical thinking. I was weaned on the Frankfurt School and still get a kick out of teaching Foucault. I have no desire to reverse the clock and be teleported back to the good old days of New Critical chitchat about irony, paradox, and ambiguity.”
41 Ibid.
Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might turn to place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible. This is not idealism, aestheticism, or magical thinking but a recognition—long overdue—of the text’s status as cofactor: as something that makes a difference, that helps make things happen.43

Felski’s supposition that literary critics place themselves in front of the text asks critics not just to describe or explain the texts that lie before them, but also to act as a co-creator of meaning.

Although Louis Sullivan, Anzia Yezierska, and Richard Wright are figures who inhabit the democratic project quite differently (Sullivan as architect; Yezierska as “included” immigrant; Wright as “excluded” black man), they are united by their interest in understanding the effect of the architectural project to engender democracy in American cities. Louis Sullivan and Richard Wright were both writers based in Chicago, which in this period emerged as a hub for both architectural innovation and the sociological study of the city. Wright eventually moved from Chicago to New York, where Yezierska notes that the two of them worked together for the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. Yezierska describes Richard Wright in her

---

43Felski, The Limits of Critique, 12.
autobiography as a figure who enabled her to see similarity in their oppressions. But Yezierska also had a connection to Chicago: in 1917, she became the protégé of the Progressivist educator John Dewey, who had spent the early part of his career at the University of Chicago. He was well known to the sociologists who would influence Wright.

My study begins in architecture. My first chapter, “Architectural Foundations: The Archeetec’s the Boss of Everybody” examines the 1924 autobiography of the architect Louis Sullivan. I argue that as Sullivan uses the form of the bildungsroman to guide his autobiography, he creates what Lefebvre calls a “representation of space” through the form of life writing. As he produces a dominant notion of how Americans should best imagine their relationship to democratic practice, he suggests that the way to build democracy in the United States is to encourage as many U.S. residents as possible to learn to cultivate an architectural consciousness. Sullivan wrote The Autobiography of an Idea in his last years of life, long after his most successful years in architecture in the 1890s. I argue that in his Autobiography, Sullivan proposes an architectural literacy that offers the foundation for true democratic practice. He thus

---

44 She writes, “I looked from the furrowed head and dream-ridden eyes of the old Jew [Jeremiah Kintzler, a Jewish union organizer] to the smooth-faced young Negro [Richard Wright]. One reminded me of so much that I knew and wanted to forget; the other opened a new, unknown world. I wondered whether it was harder to be born a Jew in a Christian world than a Negro—a black skin in a white world.” Yezierska, Red Ribbon on a White Horse, 158.
suggests that American residents could imagine themselves as an “architect” for democracy.

The following two chapters build on Sullivan’s call for American residents to practice an architectural consciousness, Yezierska and Wright, however, both use architectural metaphors not to reify Sullivan’s democratic project, but rather to show how immigrants and black people, respectively, suffer in American environs. As a Jewish immigrant in New York, Yezierska was subject to a variety of educative programs—especially Settlement House projects—that attempted to make democratic values transparent to immigrant subjects. When she became famous in the early 1920s for her short story collection *Hungry Hearts*, she felt put on display as a model immigrant (newspapers called her a “Sweatshop Cinderella”) in such a way that felt inauthentic to her lived experience. In her autobiography she referred to this as like living in a “glass-house with crooked mirrors.” In this chapter, I will argue that Yezierska attempts to correct the “glass-house with crooked mirrors” by offering candid explorations of the stress and discrimination she experienced in her earlier career. In her autobiography she unravels the myth of her success and subsequent failure in order to generate her autobiography as a space of self-determination. She effectively argues that the problem of imagining immigrants as a population that should be “included” in the democratic project is that Progressivist reform minimized the possibilities for self-determination in immigrant communities. In my second chapter, “Anzia Yezierska’s
Glass House: Reframing Transparency in the Immigrant Subject,” I argue that Yezierska’s use of the confessional allows her to candidly explores the anxiety Progressivist reform has produced in her. In her fiction and in her 1950 memoir *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, Anzia Yezierska shows the limits of imagining each American subject as empowered to architect democracy through an extended metaphor on glass and windows.

By the 1940s, few populations living in the United States were barred access from American space as black people were. In the US South, Jim Crow laws and the threat of physical violence produced intense fear among black residents. In the US North, zoning and redlining effectively sequestered black residents within particular neighborhoods within US cities. In Chicago, Wright and his family lived in the small swath of land known as Chicago’s Black Belt. Through his collaborations with members of the Chicago School of Sociology, Wright developed a consciousness that allowed him to see segregation as not incidental but rather structural. He explores this in his writing. In his memoir *Black Boy*, Wright episodically returns to an experience of “running into walls” as he tries to forge connections with people—both white and black. Yet at the end of his memoir, Wright subverts the structure of the wall to name his memoir as a “bridge of words, between that world and me.” I argue that Wright imagines the black memoir as a form that attempts to overcome a segregated architecture. If Yezierska’s memoir becomes a site that creates self-knowledge, it is in Wright’s memoir that we more fully
see the development of a community consciousness. I argue that Wright’s memoir takes
the reader away from democracy as a useful metric as he asks the reader to work toward
an architecture of care. If the “window” acts as a signpost of contingent inclusion for the
immigrant, Richard Wright’s 1945 memoir *Black Boy* uses a metaphor of walls as a sing
of holistic exclusion from the democratic project. In “Build Bridges Not Walls: Richard
Wright’s Blueprint,” I argue that Wright’s use of the testimonial enables him to imagine
life writing as a genre that can lead in the project to overcome architectures of
segregation that have been particularly punishing to black people.

Although the architect Louis Sullivan was well known in his own time at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century and has become popular again in the present, his reputation flagged for most of the twentieth century. The turning point was in the 1980s. After the architect Jack Randall successfully led a campaign to save Sullivan’s Wainwright Building in Saint Louis from demolition, the Chicago Historical Society and the Saint Louis Art Museum collaborated to produce a travelling exhibit on Sullivan that reignited both public interest and academic scholarship. As the curators worked to explicate Sullivan’s interest in architectural ornament and his belief in the relations between form and function, a more prescient revelation emerged from Sullivan’s archive: Sullivan was a prolific thinker in the project of building a democratic nation.

The architectural critics Robert Twombly and Narcisso G. Menocal would go so far as to argue that all of “[Sullivan’s] mature life work… was aimed at a single objective. That object was the rebirth of democracy in the United States.”¹ Throughout his career, Sullivan imagined democracy as a force that extended beyond the realm of government and policy. He imagined architecture could inspire the American people with the democratic spirit; as such, he was critical of his fellow architects who reused

---

architectural forms borrowed from past anti-democratic European cultures. Rather, Sullivan proposed that American architects produce an “organic” style most often summarized by shorthand in Sullivan’s adage “form follows function.”

Throughout his career, Sullivan’s ideology was remarkably consistent, though the forms through which he expressed that ideology changed over time. His democratic vision first found expression in his architectural practice. While he eventually found autobiographical space to be his final and preferred site to explicate his theory of democratic practice, architecture remained the key metaphor for its articulation. Sullivan explains in his autobiography how he as an adolescent became enamored with the figure of the architect. “One day, on Commonwealth Avenue [in Boston], as Louis was strolling,” he writes, “he saw a large man of dignified bearing, with beard, top hat, frock coat, come out of a nearby building, enter his carriage and signal the coachman to drive on. The dignity was unmistakable, all men of station in Boston were dignified; sometimes insistently so, but Louis wished to know who and what was behind the dignity.”2 The young Sullivan turns to a nearby laborer to ask him who the man is. The man tells him that he is an “archeetec.”3 As he further elaborates, “He lays out the rooms

---

3 The builder is French, hence “archeetec” rather than “architect.”
on paper, then makes a picture of the front, and we do the work under our own boss, but the archeetec’s the boss of everybody.”

In this chapter I argue that this paragraph helps us understand not only what drew Sullivan to architecture, but also how it supplied a blueprint both for his understanding of democracy and for the broader social commentary that extends beyond his autobiography. In his autobiography Sullivan articulates the democratic project as one to be built; he imagines the democratic nation as one in accordance with organic nature. He proposes the figure of the architect as someone uniquely capable of both diagnosing the structural flaws of civic life and drawing up plans for a more democratic future. In short, Sullivan believed that architecture literally as well as metaphorically supplied the terms and forms that could shape democratic practice.

Sullivan understood the figure of the architect as the emblem as well as the agent of democracy. When Sullivan names the architect, he does not necessarily mean a person who has been trained in architectural school and earned credentials. In his most

---

4 Ibid., 119.
5 The use of the masculine pronoun is intentional on my part. Sullivan unilaterally imagines the architect as a man, although interestingly he also derided any architect who would think of their practice as masculinist. Sullivan’s best architect transcends gender norms. In his essay “What is Architecture: A Study in the American People of Today,” Sullivan asks his architects to not resist their sentimental urges as he claims: “You have not thought deeply enough to know that the heart in you is the woman in man. You have derided your femininity, where you have suspected it; whereas, you should have known its power, cherished and utilized it, for it is the hidden well-spring of Intuition and Imagination… Poetically considered, as far as the huge disordered resultant mass of your Architecture is concerned, Intuition and Imagination have not gone forth to illuminate and search the hearts of the people. Thus are its works stone blind. If such works be called masculine, this term will prove but a misuse of neuter. For they are empty of procreant powers.” See Louis Sullivan, “What is Architecture: A Study in the American People of Today” in Kindergarten Chats and other writings (New York: Dover, 1979), 229.
famous essay, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” Sullivan explains:

“When I say the hand of the architect, I do not necessarily mean the accomplished and trained architect. I mean only a man with a strong natural liking for buildings, and a disposition to shape them in what seems to be his unaffected nature a direct and simple way.”

Sullivan, moreover, understood autobiography in spatial terms; life writing was a space that allowed him to model his own development from the child of immigrants to a master designer.

Fundamental to all of Sullivan’s belief was that anyone “interested in the nature of Architecture as a creative art” could learn to contribute to the ideation of democratic life; he wrote so that his readers could inhabit an architectural consciousness. In fact, it was only when readers opened themselves to this architectural consciousness that a nation such as the United States could truly exist as a democracy. In this chapter I will first attend to Sullivan’s architectural theory to explicate his development of organic architecture in conjunction with his theories of democracy. I will argue that Sullivan’s

---


7 Louis H. Sullivan, foreword to “Kindergarten Chats,” in Kindergarten Chats and other writings (New York: Dover, 1979), 15. After Sullivan offered an address at the inaugural Architecture League of America (ALA) conference in 1899, the Cleveland-based publication Interstate Architect & Builder commissioned Sullivan to write fifty-two articles for them, to be published once a week. These fifty-two essays were eventually edited for a more general audience and published together as Kindergarten Chats. KC is a series of Socratic dialogues between Sullivan as “master architect” and an imagined junior architect. During the summer and early autumn of 1918, Sullivan revised and condensed the text for a broader audience, believing that his text could impact those beyond the field of architecture. He framed this text as one that is “simple and elementary.”
development of an organic architecture was a major intervention in the architectural thought of his time. It was by appealing to a broad sense of nature, Sullivan believed, that organic architecture could restore the United States from “serfdom” to a more fully democratic practice.⁸ I will then turn to The Autobiography, in which Sullivan shows his clear indebtedness to the nineteenth-century poet of American democracy, Walt Whitman, with extensive quotation from Democratic Vistas, Whitman’s treatise on U.S. politics and the American spirit. Building on Whitman’s contention that literature is the best site for the realization of a truly democratic culture, and “the literatus” the best-suited people to bring it about, Sullivan adds architecture and the architect as equally critical sites of democratic practice. Sullivan’s autobiography allowed him to inhabit the two roles—author and architect—together. Architecture afforded the key metaphors in this work, which, in turn, offered a blueprint for democracy. Finally, I will show that, although Sullivan positioned himself as a maverick in the world of architecture, he shared this understanding of architecture as a potential site for the realization of democratic practice with his contemporaries, especially fellow architects Daniel Burnham and Frank Lloyd Wright. Although Sullivan believed himself at odds with Burnham’s vision, for example, he shared a desire for American architecture to embrace unity—even if they disagreed about what that unity should look like. By drawing on

⁸ Ibid.
Wright and Burnham, I situate Sullivan in a larger cultural conversation about the role of architecture in cultivating a democratic American aesthetic. American architects felt that they played a leading role in producing the American subject, and in doing so they could determine who did and did not fit into this democratic vision.

This larger conversation also makes the limitations of this architectural utopianism more apparent. In their conviction that spatial design could offer a holistic vision for the nation, Sullivan and his colleagues also prescribed an archetype for the democratic subject. As unprecedented immigration and migration generated an ever more multiracial and multicultural nation, this architectural vision was a distinctly assimilative one. As I show in the subsequent chapters, it was precisely that aspect of the architectural vision that Anzia Yezierska and Richard Wright challenge—through architectural metaphors—in their own autobiographies.

2.1 Architecture’s Organic Forms: Sullivan’s Interventions

On January 10, 1891, the Chicago architects Daniel Burnham and John Root gathered the architects they had identified to be the finest in the United States for a meeting to discuss construction for the World’s Columbian Exposition. The occasion for the Exposition was the celebration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the American continent, and the architects involved also knew that the World’s Fair offered them the opportunity to broadcast American values not only to the
twenty-seven million visitors of the fair, but to anyone who would see the photographs of the Fair.

Over fifteen years later, Burnham would reflect back upon this meeting, remembering that the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens exclaimed to the group, “Do you realize that this is the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century?” In that same recollection, Burnham also proclaimed that “the buildings of the World’s Columbian Exposition... have never been surpassed.” At the closure of the Exposition, one of the selected architects, Henry Van Brunt, wrote an official report of the fair’s architecture as part of a much larger document offered to the United States Government. In the document he celebrates his fellow architects’ use of neoclassical forms, arguing that the structures demonstrated that the best of American architects “have inherited all of the knowledge of the past” and could speak a “universal language of form.” He imagines that the neoclassical designs prove that American architects are literate in the global language of “civilized nations.” To the visitors of the fair who were not yet literate in architectural form, Van Brunt contended that these buildings “should open to the minds of the common people of our country starved by the narrowing experiences of their uneventful lives in factories or on farms, in tending machinery or in trade, a wider

---

10 Ibid., 4.
vision and a far nobler ideal of living.”11 That is, Van Brunt and his fellow architects believed that the working-class and rural American visitors of the World’s Columbian Fair could absorb the values of their “civilized nation” simply by inhabiting the fairgrounds, however briefly, and even, it seems, by seeing photographs of them.12

11 Henry Van Brunt, “Architecture of the World’s Columbian Exposition,” in Report of the Committee on Awards of the World’s Columbian Commission, Vol. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), 13. Van Brunt’s passage describing each building is so sweeping, so exalting, that it is worth providing the full passage here: “Mr. [Richard Morris] Hunt preferred to model the administration building on the lines of the French Renaissance, as inculcated by the École des Beaux Arts; Messrs. [Robert Swain] Peabody and [John Goddard] Stearns very happily allowed the quality of the Renaissance which they used in the palace of mechanic arts or machinery hall to be colored by Spanish examples, recalling the country of Ferdinand and Isabella and Columbus; Messrs. [Charles Follen] McKim, [William Rutherford] Mead & [Stanford] White, in the palace of Agriculture, expressed themselves in the purest art of the Roman Empire, such as was seen on the Palatine Mount and in the imperial villas and baths; Mr. [George B.] Post’s vast building was in modern French Renaissance, such as occurred in the buildings of the last Paris Exposition, the eight porches being modeled after the triumphal arches of the Romans; Messrs. [Henry] Van Brunt & [Frank M.] Howe permitted the architecture of the electricity building to be affected by the freer French classic of the sixteenth century, the Château de Chambord of the time of Francis I offering suggestions of detail mainly in the fantastic skylines and in the great apsidal projections of the north front toward the lagoon; the structural scheme of the mines building imposed upon Mr. [Solon] Spencer a very modern (and, in the best sense, an American) interpretation of the classic formula, more influenced, however, by Italian than by other historical examples; Messrs. [Dankmar] Adler & [Louis] Sullivan made a very wide departure from classic principles in designing the transportation building according to oriental motifs, used in such a manner, however, that if these artists had not been familiar with Byzantine or Romanesque forms, their design would assumed a character entirely different from that which they actually developed; Mr. [William Le Baron] Jenney’s horticultural building was in free Italian Renaissance somewhat after the manner of Sansovino in the treasure of St. Mark; Mr. [Francis M.] Whitehouse’s festival hall was fundamentally Greek in character; Miss [Sophia] Hayden’s women’s building was modeled after an Italian villa of the sixteenth century; Mr. [Henry Ives] Cobb, in his fisheries building, used a Romanesque motif, such as appears in the monastic cloisters of the south of France in the tenth and eleventh centuries, but with a gayety and freedom entirely in harmony with the festival character of the Exposition; the Government building was in that sort of free Renaissance which the practice of the office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department has made, in a manner, vernacular…” Ibid., 11-12.

12 Van Brunt also writes: “The architect of America, like our language, has its roots in the old world, just as our political institutions are based upon the lessons and experiences of civilization in general. Our architects, like those of modern Europe, have inherited all the knowledge of the past... The old types are as much ours as theirs: they constitute a universal language of form. It would therefore be a work of supererogation to deliberately attempt to force upon our architecture a patriotic expression of spurious originality, to construct a new language, when none was needed, especially in the World’s Columbian Exposition, where we wished to welcome mankind with stately ceremony and with a hospitality of
In his notes, Van Brunt contends that two of the projects majorly defected from using the neoclassical style that Burnham set for the fair. The first was Henry Ives Cobb’s fisheries building. Van Brunt notes that while Cobb used a “Romanesque motif,” the “gayety and freedom” of his building was “entirely in harmony with the festival character of the Exposition.” The second, the Transportation building designed by Louis Sullivan and his partner Dankmar Adler, used “oriental motifs,” about which Van Brunt opines:

In the exterior design there was abundant evidence of intention to avoid the usual conventional devices of architectural expression, and to apply only severe logical methods. A plain inclosing wall surface with no other incidents than the regular recurrence of large glazed arches; the protection of this shadowless surface by the broad overhang of a flat roof; the emphasis of a very few points by countersunk arabesques; a central porch of receding arches, set in a square Oriental pavilion, flanked by little kiosks, and profusely embellished with diapered ornament like the arcades of the Alhambra. All this could be readily accounted for, and there was little or nothing of caprice to condone. The whole mass was reasonable, but it was not festive, interesting, or poetic, save in its promise.

utterance which to the people of all civilized nations should be intelligible and polite, and not barbaric or strange.” Ibid.

13 Ibid., 11.
14 Ibid., 17.
While Van Brunt believed that the neoclassical structures could communicate a mastery of European culture, Adler and Sullivan’s building refused to speak that—or any poetic—language.

But what Van Brunt saw as fundamentally dull represented, for Sullivan, a deliberate iconoclasm. And what Van Brunt saw as a global language of form, Sullivan regarded as a distracting eclecticism, characteristic not only of the Fair, but also of American architecture generally. More than three decades after the Fair, Sullivan would complain of the “virus” that was initiated by the World’s Columbian Exposition and continued to infect the nation: “We have Tudor for colleges and residences; Roman for banks, and railway stations and libraries,—or Greek if you like—some customers prefer the Ionic to the Doric,” he sniffs in *The Autobiography*. “We have French, English and Italian Gothic, Classic and Renaissance for churches. In fact we are prepared to satisfy, in any manner of taste.” The World’s Columbian Exposition separated Sullivan from many of his colleagues and enabled him to begin articulating his vision for organic architecture in the subsequent year when he published “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered.”

Writing for a general audience, Sullivan begins to carve out and then evangelize the specific ideology he believes undergirds his architecture. Whereas the architects

Sullivan had worked with celebrated neoclassical forms as a mode for showing their deference to the European architectural schools that came before them, Sullivan puts forth a different thesis in this essay, often summarized by his most famous adage “form follows function.” Whereas most of Sullivan’s published work appeared first in architectural journals, this particular essay enjoyed much greater circulation as it was published in the literary journal *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* in March of 1896. “The Tall Office” begins by insisting that present “evolution and integration of social conditions… results in a demand for the erection of tall office buildings.” By the essay’s end, Sullivan makes this charge not just to his fellow architects, but also to any person reading his essay:

> Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight, or the open apple-blossom, the toiling work-horse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, *form ever follows function*, and that is the law. Where function does not change, form does not change. The granite rocks, the ever-brooding hills, remain for ages: the lightning lives, comes into shape, and dies, in a twinkling.

> It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. *That is the law.*

---

17 Ibid., 408. Emphasis his.
Form follows function: an eagle flies so it requires wings; the apple tree bears fruit so its limbs must be open, and so forth. As Sullivan works in the essay to justify his design for the tall office building, he inscribes his own architectural process as following what he calls “natural law.” Sullivan’s protégé Frank Lloyd Wright would eventually call this “organic architecture” as he continued carrying elements of his mentor’s ethos. In his essay “In the Cause of Architecture,” Wright writes, “A sense of the organic is indispensable to an architect; where can he develop it so surely as in this school [of Nature]? A knowledge of the relations of form and function lies at the root of his practice; where else can he find the pertinent object lessons Nature so readily furnishes?” In imagining nature as the architect’s school, Wright reiterates Sullivan’s argument that nature should be the architect’s major inspiration. In generating a theory of organic architecture, Sullivan resets the terms of how American architecture should be imagined. If Burnham, Van Brunt, and the other architects who worked at the World’s Fair sought to align American architecture with its European precedents, Sullivan wanted American architecture to break from European traditions in order to start afresh. In nature, Sullivan found a grammar that he felt could transcend the trappings of history.

Following nature’s laws, for Sullivan, does not mean emulating nature. Rather, the appeal to “natural law” is an appeal to the idea of evolution. Architecture should evolve according to the principle of form following function. Following this principle allows Sullivan eventually to imagine skyscrapers and architecture as able to possess a “natural” or “organic” form. But in order to get the reader to consider the skyscraper as a natural form, he first has to open and redefine the terms “life” and “nature,” especially as he names architecture a “living art.”

“All things in nature have a shape,” he writes, that is to say, a form, an outward semblance, that tells us what they are, and distinguishes them from ourselves and from each other.

Unfailingly in nature these shapes express the inner life, the native quality, of the animal, tree, bird, fish, that they present to us; they are so characteristic, so recognizable, that we say, simply, it is “natural” it should be so. Yet the moment we peer beneath this surface of things, the moment we look through the tranquil reflection of ourselves and the clouds above us, down in the clear, fluent, unfathomable depths of nature, how startling is the silence of it, how amazing the flow of life, how absorbing the mystery! Unceasingly the essence of things is taking shape in the matter of things, and this unspeakable process we call birth and growth. Awhile the spirit and the matter fade away together, and it is this that we call decadence, death. These two happenings seem joined and interdependent, blended into one like a bubble and its

---

19 Sullivan, “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” 408. In his text Kindergarten Chats, Sullivan calls for the need to imagine language as plastic. He writes, “Statically words have little significance, as you may assure yourself by consulting any dictionary; but, when once they are treated dynamically and pictorially, their power to convey thought increases enormously; still, let it always be understood that the powers are not in the words so much as in the mind and heart of him who uses them as his instrument.” See Louis Sullivan, “Kindergarten Chats,” in Kindergarten Chats and other writings (New York: Dover, 1979), 49.
Iridescence, and they seem born along upon a slowly moving air. This air is wonderful past all understanding.

Although Sullivan lists objects in this passage that one can easily imagine as “natural”—the animal, the tree, the bird, the fish—he asks the reader to interrogate what makes these objects feel natural to us, for he recognizes that because the word “natural” is common in daily vernacular, it is hard to define precisely. The “natural,” he contends, is defined by that which has life. Yet he wrests “life” from its biological definition as a series of metabolic processes: it is neither the act of breathing, nor the act of digesting; it is not the act of reproducing, but rather a mystical synergy produced by an object’s expression of its “native qualities.” The cloud, the sun, a bubble all have life because they so express their essences through forms. Nature then becomes not just a space of fields and flowers and forests and mountains, but also a space with a temporal logic that endlessly embraces life. In short, nature is a space of evolution.

In “The Tall Office Building,” Sullivan only advocates for his own vision of organic architecture; he does not criticize other architects’ work. Yet as Sullivan entered the midphase of his career, as he started writing more prolifically, this changed. In Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings, initially written in 1901, Sullivan begins exploring

---

the dangers of an “unnatural” architecture more cogently. He writes, reflecting on the rise of neoclassical architecture:

The architecture that we see today bespeaks lost organic quality. Like a man strong but now decrepit, it no longer functions normally. Hence its form has become abnormal. It no longer speaks in tones of ringing eloquence as of yore—it now cried out to the attentive ear with an appalling, inarticulate cry, now muffled, now piercing, but ever the wail of disorganization, the sigh of dissolution. Its features have a pallid leer, a rictus. Its eye is lusterless, its ear is dulled, its vitals atrophied. So moves it wearily on its crutch of scholarship—groping through spectacles or words.²²

Sullivan anthropomorphizes neoclassical architecture as a disabled body. This disabled status is new; it is presumed by the phrase “lost organic quality” that classical architecture used to be a part of healthful nature. But in the early years of the twentieth century, these neoclassical forms cannot speak essence clearly as their natural cousins might; instead they utter a muffled “inarticulate cry.” As they cannot speak, they also cannot see, cannot hear, cannot live well, cannot move. Like an old, worn out body, neoclassical architecture is ripe for retirement.

In their current forms, the buildings are more than antiquated; they are also infectious, as Sullivan explains in Kindergarten Chats:

These [barbarian] buildings, as they increase in number and uproar, make the city poorer and emptier, morally and

spiritually; they drag it into the mire of materialism. This is not American civilization; it is Gomorrah. This is not Democracy, it is madness. It is the growl of a glutton hunt for the Dollar, a yelp with no thought for aught else under the sun or over the earth. It is decadence in its most convincing form: so truly does this architecture reflect the causes which have brought it into being. Such structures are profoundly anti-social; and as such, they must be reckoned with... It means tainted architecture. It means a virus implanted for generations to come...²³

By naming a building as a “barbarian” type, Sullivan imagines that buildings with an inorganic architecture will multiply and ravage the social structure of the city by their “profoundly anti-social” behavior. Through this rhetorical gesture, Sullivan begins to link his theory of organic architecture—his theory of inducting architecture into the natural world—with a theory of democratic practice. Here, democratic practice—like nature—is a space of rehabilitation.

In “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered,” Sullivan expands the categories of “the natural” and “nature” and “life” to encourage the reader to interpret the social world (as comprised of cities, institutions, buildings, humanity, and so forth) as a living ecological system.²⁴ But in Kindergarten Chats, written as a series of Socratic dialogues between the master architect and a junior architect, he makes this claim much

²⁴ In “The Tall Office Artistically Considered,” Sullivan accordingly names architecture “a living art,” 408.
more explicit as he develops his theory of democracy. In a section titled “Democracy,” Sullivan tells the junior architect:

Democracy is not... merely a modern notion of government by and for the people; it is a force, latent, and old as earth; a force for whose fulfillment the ages have been preparing the way, dissolving the obstructions one by one, and slowing making for it a pathway. It is the serene forces of nature that are most powerful; and that force which we call Democracy, lying inexpressibly deep in the spirit of man, is now as ever seeking expression.25

As Sullivan names democracy not as “a modern notion of government by and for the people,” but rather as a “force, latent, and old as earth,” he writes democracy as an organic social formation. He argues that democracy is the expression of the human’s most essential qualities. As he writes Kindergarten Chats in the first years of the twentieth century, he starts to become much more enamored with the prospect of writing.

2.2 Walt Whitman’s Impact

When Sullivan tells the story of his first architectural feat in The Autobiography of an Idea, he narrates it as an act done out of play rather than as one born out of need.

When he was a child, he found himself frustrated by the authoritarian education he was receiving at the local school he attended while living at his grandparents’ farm in South Reading, Massachusetts. On a day home from school, he remembered that a small river flowed through the nearby woods. “He got immediately to work,” he recalls. “He

gathered the largest field stones he could handle, and small ones too. He had seen Scotchmen and Irishmen build farm walls and knew what to do.”26 As Sullivan begins work on a dam, he imagines the act of constructing as a playful experiment in which he role-plays as common laborer. Because there is no material need for a dam, he rips out the center of the wall as soon as he successfully completes his project. The dam crumbles.

Sullivan imagines that his playful architectural act inducts him into a fraternity of men that transcends time, space, and identity. Upon completing the dam, and then destroying it, he writes:

Then he loafed and invited his soul as was written by a big man about the time this proud hydraulic engineer was born. But he did not observe ‘a spear of summer grass’; he dreamed. Vague day dreams they were—an arising sense, an emotion, a conviction; that united him in spirit with his idols,—with his big strong men who did wonderful things such as digging ditches, building walls, cutting down great trees, cutting with axes, and splitting with maul and wedge for cord wood, driving a span of great work-horses. He adored these men. He felt deeply drawn to them, and close to them. He had seen all these things done. When would he be big and strong too? Could he wait? Must he wait? And thus he dreamed for hours. The shadows began to deepen and lengthen; so, satisfied, with a splendid day of work and pondering, he reached home in time for supper.27

---
27 Ibid., 56.
This passage clearly riffs on the famous opening lines of Walt Whitman’s poem *Leaves of Grass*: “I loafe and invite my soul,/ I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.” Here Sullivan imagines himself as an instantiation of Whitman himself. As Whitman spends his lifetime writing and rewriting *Leaves of Grass*, and, in doing so, trying to develop a practice of democratic poetics, so Sullivan would spend his lifetime building and then writing to design a more democratic architecture. In this passage he imagines himself as connected to more people than just Whitman: he sees himself as connected to all men who have ever conducted work that contributed toward architectural production. This “hydraulic engineer” imagines that his architectural practice constitutes a web of relations, fraternizing men across time and space by their common goal of building. As Sullivan lies in the grass, he asks when he will be able to fully embrace his identity as a professional architect.

*The Autobiography of an Idea* tells the story of Sullivan’s maturation through childhood, adolescence, and into becoming an architect, a wish he acquires, as I have noted, when he first sees the dignified man on Commonwealth Avenue and learns he is “the boss of everybody.” *The Autobiography* explores what exactly that phrase means. In this section, I argue that as Sullivan transcribes “the archetect’s the boss of everybody,” he expands the project Whitman puts forth in *Democratic Vistas*. In that

---

work, Whitman argues that the democratic project will not be realized by policy change, but by producing its own national literature that embraces the vernacular of American ideals. “I say that Democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil,” Whitman explains, “until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of arts, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists, or that has been produced anywhere in the past, under opposite influences.” Whitman contends that literature, especially as constructed by the Literatus, uniquely will be able to form these cornerstones of democracy.

Democracy might have interested Whitman and Sullivan because they both wrote in times of great change. Whitman, in particular, is conscious of his historical moment, going so far as to date some of his passages as he writes Democratic Vistas out of order. For example, he writes:

As I write this passage, (November, 1868), the din of disputation rages around me. Acrid the temper of the parties, vital the pending questions. Congress convenes; the President sends his Message; Reconstruction is still in abeyance; the nomination and the contest for the twenty-first Presidentiad draws close, with loudest threat and bustle. Of these, and all the like of these, the eventuations I know not…

Here Whitman takes great effort to contextualize his argument within the concerns of his time. He documents the national debates surrounding women’s suffrage, black

---

30 Walt Whitman, Democratic Vistas (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 5.
31 The Literatus is Whitman’s name for the class of writers that will compose Democratic literature.
32 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, 28.
suffrage, black civil rights, and Reconstruction that face the United States as Whitman actively ruminates about democracy. Sullivan, though not as self-conscious, begins his writing career at a moment when he knows that American life is on display; he also continues to write throughout the largest immigration wave the United States had seen.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that a man with accented speech is the one to tell him about the architect’s role: Sullivan, as a child of immigrants himself, was quite conscious that residents of the United States came from around the globe. In The Autobiography, he even went so far as to identify himself as of “mongrel origin.”

Sullivan borrows many of his key terms and concepts from Whitman. Most notably, he borrowed Whitman’s proposition that democracy exists in opposition to feudalism. In Democratic Vistas, Whitman argues that feudalism is antithetical to American values. As he writes at the essay’s outset, “I shall use the words American and Democracy as convertible terms. Not an ordinary one is the issue. The United States are destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of Feudalism, or else prove the most

———

33 Sullivan’s father Patrick was from Ireland. Of his mother Adrienne List Sullivan, Louis Sullivan writes, “[S]he seems French, but was not wholly so. She had the eyelids, expressive hazel eyes, and oval face, feature mobile. She was a medium stature, trimly built, highly emotional, and given to ecstasies of speech. But she also had parents: her father, Henri List, was straight German of the Hanoverian type—6 feet tall, well proportioned, erect carriage, and topped by a comical head, full, clean-shaven face, thick lips, small gray eyes, beetling brows and bottle-nose… Her mother, a miniature woman of great sweetness and gentle poised, was Swiss-French, born in Geneva—where also her three children were born. But her long Florentine nose suggested, unmistakably, an Italian strain. Her maiden name was Anna Mattheus. Like a true mere de female, she ruled the roost, as was the custom in French society of the Middle Class.” Here we can see Sullivan’s obsession with racialized types, a theme he returns to throughout his autobiography. Sullivan, The Autobiography of an Idea, 11.
tremendous failure of its time.” While Whitman refrains from ever clearly defining feudalism, he frames it as a political structure that temporally inhabits the time before democracy and geographically inhabits a space apart from the United States. He imagines it as those qualities from Western Europe that the United States inherited but need not continue.

In a 1949 introduction to the publication of *Democratic Vistas*, the scholar John Valante offers this delightful explication of Whitman’s conception of feudalism, as helpful as it is colorful. In this passage, Valante argues that Whitman understood feudalism and democracy not as material structures, but as narrative structures:

> Feudalism was the accepted caste system which had persisted at the very doors of America, and which Whitman had feared his countrymen had not fully shed. It was the lurking insidious dragon of the mediavael romances which Americans were honor bound to destroy. It was blind ecclesiasticism. Feudalism was the endless and persistent continuation of the fictional models derived from the “Amadises and Palmerins of the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries,” alas too constant disguised and re-employed as models in the domestic fiction of moderns. Feudalism abounded in the chivalric tales of Walter Scott. It was also political and moral code, embedded in “rich Shakespeare, luxuriant as the sun, artist and singer of feudalism in the sunset.” It was the persistent, though not dying feudalism found in the contemporary verses of Tennyson, “dirged” at last in the poet’s purple rhymes. As in the case of Greek and ancient culture, which might weaken or enslave the freedom of his country, this was the feudalism the poetry

---

34 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 4.
was meant to destroy, and which no longer must serve as a model of democratic America and the New World.\textsuperscript{35}

Valante imagines feudalism not as a material object but rather as a narrative form perpetuated through tales, plays, and stories. As Americans continue to read Sir Walter Scott, William Shakespeare, and Alfred Lord Tennyson they continue to carry feudalism into American culture. Democracy, then, is also a narrative structure that can be bolstered by the creation of democratic stories.

In \textit{Democratic Vistas}, Whitman imagines that literature has the capacity to usher what Sullivan would later call the “troubled spirit of man” into a democratic ethos.\textsuperscript{36}

The stories that comprise the past of a culture leave tracings upon contemporary culture. He explains:

It is not generally realized, but it is true, as the genius of Greece, and all of sociology, personality politics and religion of those wonderful states, resided in their literature of esthetics, that what was afterwards the main support of European chivalry, the feudal, the ecclesiastical, dynastic world over there, forming its osseous structure, holding it together for hundreds, thousands of years, preserving its flesh and bloom, giving it form, decision, rounding it out, and so saturating it in the conscious and unconscious blood, breed, belief, and institutions of men, that it still prevails powerfully to this day, in defiance of the mighty changes of time, was its language, permeated


to the very marrow, especially that major part, its enchanting songs, ballads, and poems.\textsuperscript{37}

Here Whitman imagines language and artistic output as the foundation that structures a culture and its institutions. The ancient culture, even as parts of it have been lost to time, leaves a fossil record—an “osseous structure” out of which current culture finds space to give expression to diverse life: “flesh and bloom.” These structures provide one continuous, long history for a culture; any change that does not carry over from one generation to another, one century to another, simply becomes stored within a culture’s fossil record—there to grant life, there to be discovered.

But literature is even more than the foundation of a structure; it is also its marrow, the organic core of its bones. Literature makes sustaining cultural life possible. In human bodies, marrow produces the red blood cells that carry oxygen throughout the body, thus sustaining tissues. Without marrow, lungs would not be able to take in oxygen for lungs themselves would already be dead tissue. If we inhabit this metaphor with Whitman, we see that he might imagine literature as the site that allows all those other parts of culture—politics, sociology, religion, and more—to live. Literature is the tissue that provides the linkage among these seemingly disparate projects. Literature makes structure possible, and literature grants life.

\textsuperscript{37} Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, 7.
If confronting the idea that Whitman imagined literature as a connective tissue seems familiar, it is probably because that idea is not dissimilar from the passage at the top of this section, in which the young Sullivan “loafes” on the grass and imagines himself linked with all laboring men. Sullivan did not just cite Whitman in this one passage: Whitman’s fingerprints are all over Sullivan’s work. Sullivan clearly read and adored Whitman, and used his own literary work to show how architecture could enact and expand Whitman’s project. If Whitman imagined that literature could usher in democracy in his own time, Sullivan felt that architecture would usher in democracy in his time. For example, in Democrazy: A Man-Search, Sullivan imagines his moment as a critical “break” from feudalism:

Troubadors sang and sneered while monks devoured the land, nobles devoured land and people, and the people devoured each other.
   Wars, wars, and more wars.
   Intrigue and more intrigue.
   Betrayal upon betrayal.
   Murder upon murder.
   Kill and let kill was the word—the logos of the time.
   Rose the church higher, looming vaster.
   With increasing church came increase of ministering beauty; song; and power, glory.
   With nobles and King came opulent parade.
   As Church and nobles rose, the people sank,
   As beauty increased, squalor increased.
   The people fought, worked, dreamed, and listened to story-tellers and wandering minstrels.
   In an age of crapulous romance, of fanaticism, cruelty and credulity; an age of illusive faith, renunciation, and despair of this world, slowly the nations shaped, took on
semblance of individuality and suggestion of identity. The spirit of nationality was beginning to emerge from the chaos.

Slowly the tornado subsided; continuing, thereafter, an ordinary variable storm. The sky opened and closed here and there in alternate sunshine and gloom—peace and war, war and peace.

Thus moved the troubled spirit of man—our man.38

In this passage, Sullivan—like Whitman—casts feudalism as endemic to medieval and early modern Europe. But as he does so, he also poetically imagines feudalism as a storm, a “tornado,” that swept through that place and time, and thus produced conditions that enabled the church and the noble class to exploit common folk for their own material gain. By imagining feudalism as a storm, Sullivan effectively naturalizes the social structure of feudalism. He does not suggest that feudalism is antithetical to human values. Rather, he writes both the modern era and the foundation of the United States as breaks in the storm—a moment when the sky opens. He situates his moment and location—the United States, on the verge of the twentieth century—as a time of radical possibility, in which the “troubled spirit of man” can work toward engendering Whitman’s democratic vista.

If earlier in The Autobiography he imagines himself as a junior Whitman, by the book’s end he begins describing his own vision of a “Democratic Vista.”39 While

38 Sullivan, Democracy: A Man-Search, 137-138. Democracy was published posthumously in 1961, but was originally drafted in 1909.
Whitman sees “feudalism” and democracy” as fundamentally narratological, Sullivan capitalizes on Whitman’s use of the word “vista” to emphasize feudalism and democracy as projects that work in the visual register as well. As he claims, “In place of myopic ideas, democratic modern thought uses clear vision. Clear vision leads to straight thinking, sound thinking to sane action, and sane action to beneficent results that shall endure.” Feudalism is created by a short-sightedness, an inability to see into the future; democratic vision, alternately, is both future-looking and of clear vision. By asking his fellow Americans to look at the United States with clarity, Sullivan believed that Americans could strip away the remnants of feudalism.

As Sullivan recasts democracy as a visual as much as a narratological project, he also amends Whitman’s call that the literatus, as a “priestly class [of writers] that can speak to common people” could craft poems, stories, and prose that would bind all of American culture into a universalist democracy. As Sullivan imagines all phenomena—those natural and manmade, those material and immaterial—to have structure and form, he posits that the architect is at least as well suited as the writer to lead the democratic project. He proclaims boldly in *Kindergarten Chats*:

---

40 Ibid., 280.
41 Whitman never clearly defines the literatus, but I think Ed Folsom summarizes it well. By thinking of the literatus as a “priestly class,” Folsom underscores how deeply theological Whitman’s democratic project was. Sullivan carries over Whitman’s theological impulse into his project, too. See Ed Folsom, “Annotations,” in *Democratic Vistas* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 91.
The character of our architecture has defined itself unmistakably, and the time is ripe to reckon with it. You have come into your architectural career at a most critical period, a period in which the forces that make for growth or decay are in strenuous but delicate balance. Whichever way our architecture goes, so will our country go; or if you prefer, whichever way our country goes, so will go our architecture; it is the same proposition stated in different ways. We are at that dramatic moment in our national life wherein we tremble evenly between decay and evolution, and our architecture, with strange fidelity, reflects this equipoise. That the forces of decadence predominate in quantity there can be no doubt; that the recreative forces now balance them by virtue of quality, and may eventually overpower them, is a matter of conjecture. That the bulk of our architecture is rotten to the core is a statement which does not admit of one solitary doubt. That there is in our national life, in the genius of our people, a fruitful germ, and that there is a handful who perceive this, is likewise beyond question. All this and more, I shall strive to make clear to you... \(^{42}\)

In a Socratic dialogue, Sullivan addresses junior architects. As an architect might examine a building and see it is structurally unsound, so Sullivan positions himself as capable of diagnosing the structural integrity of the United States. He can see the fissures in the cement of American culture that are invisible to those without an architect’s eye; he can see that the national character of the US has equal potential to evolve into a democracy or decay into a feudal society. Because of this eye, Sullivan argues that the architect, more so than any other professional, has the unique ability to

---

direct the future of American national life. In augmenting built environs, the architect has the capacity to change everyday life, which will in turn direct national life.

As I have noted, Sullivan imagined architecture as a mindset as much as a profession. The architect is not someone who necessarily had attended years of architecture school, and the American architect is certainly not someone who has studied at the famous École des Beaux-Arts as many of Sullivan’s colleagues had; Sullivan felt that this international and elitist training advanced the “feudalist” impulses as seen in the neoclassical architecture of the World’s Columbian Exposition. If Sullivan defined the architect as “a man with a strong natural liking for buildings and a disposition to shape them in what seems to be his unaffected nature a direct and simple way,” as I have noted, then the spirit of the architect can be cultivated through a holistic democratic education. Thus as Sullivan entered the last years of his life, as he no longer was sought after as the maverick of his earlier days, the autobiographical form offered him an intriguing structure through which to fashion his own life story. In doing so, he could model to the reader how he became an architect.

2.3 Modeling the Architect: Sullivan’s Autobiography as Bildungsroman

In 1922, Louis Sullivan was in constant correspondence with Charles Whitaker, the editor of the Journal of the American Institute of Architects. According to Twombly, Whitaker attempted to solicit Sullivan to write book reviews, but Sullivan could not
muster enthusiasm for such a project. Instead, he wanted to use the final years of his life to write his own memoirs.\textsuperscript{43} From June 1922 until September 1923, Whitaker’s journal published sixteen monthly installments of what they called \textit{The Autobiography of an Idea}. The first thirteen installments were published in thirteen chapters. They constitute a linear narrative that takes the reader from Sullivan’s young childhood to age twenty-five, when Dankmar Adler signs Sullivan as a partner to his architectural firm. In the subsequent chapter, Sullivan develops his own “Democratic Vista” in a chapter called “Face to Face.” The last chapter is a two-part afterword entitled “Retrospect” (the first “Retrospect was published in August 1923; the second in September 1923). The chapter reads as a two-part condemnation of the architect Daniel Burnham, whom Sullivan accused of being obsessed with “feudal power.”\textsuperscript{44} In the first “Retrospect,” Sullivan explains how Burnham’s fascination with power meant that Sullivan’s more altruistic vision of democracy prevented Sullivan from realizing immense success. In the second “Retrospect,” Sullivan explains that Burnham’s architectural visions have badly hampered American architecture, which he claims embraces feudalism. In 1924, Whitaker published the installments together in one bound volume. In 1934, Norton

\textsuperscript{44} Sullivan, \textit{The Autobiography of an Idea}, 288.
republished the edition for broader audiences. Although *The Autobiography* is probably the most coherent of Sullivan’s writings, it was never widely read.\(^{45}\)

In this and the following section, I consider the generic valences of Sullivan’s autobiography. As he develops his story over the course of those fifteen months, the first thirteen chapters register as a *Bildungsroman* while his final two register as a manifesto. Together, these two genres produce a message that democratic society can only be reached through the cultivation of democratic subjects who maintain an architectural consciousness enabled by “the only possible foundation—Man and his powers.”\(^{46}\)

Elsewhere in his essay “What is Architecture: A Study in the American People of Today,” Sullivan expands this argument and names this foundation as a broad humanities education:

> [W]e have the active-minded but ‘uneducated’ man, he who has so large a share in our activities. He reads well those things that he believes concern him closely. His mind is active, practical, superficial: and, whether he deals with small things or large, its quality is nearly the same in all cases. His thoughts almost always are concerned with the immediate. His powers of reflection are undeveloped, and thus he ignores those simple, vital things which grow up beside him, and which, as destiny, he will some day have to reckon, and will then find himself unprepared. The constructive thinking power of such men, the imaginative reach, the incisive intuition, the forceful will, sometimes amaze us. But **when we examine closely we find that all this is but a brilliant superstructure, that the hidden**

\(^{45}\) Twombly, *Louis Sullivan*, 1  
foundation is weak because the foundation-thought was not sought to be placed broad, deep and secure in the humanities.⁴⁷

Here Sullivan uses the architectural metaphor of “foundation” to name the power of a broad humanities education. By this passage Sullivan imagines each human as a building, granted life as architecture is granted life through an attention to form and essence. But whereas a building is to be designed by the architect, the human life under democracy is to be shaped by the human who lives it. Humans becomes capable of shaping their own lives by participating in a democratic culture that is self-reflexive, outward-thinking, and forward-looking only if they have been sufficiently rooted by a strong humanities education. We might think of Sullivan’s autobiography, then, as his opportunity to model how he became not just an architect of buildings, but also an architect of life. I call this concept the creation of the architect-subject. As Sullivan models his own development, he suggests that all humans under a democratic education can become architect-subjects.

Sullivan himself makes this point explicitly in the conclusion of the first thirteen chapters. After remarking that upon becoming “a full-fledged architect before the world,” he had now “arrived at a point where he had a foothold, where he could make a

beginning in the open world," he explains that he was only able to do this through pursuing a self-education. As Sullivan writes:

It is not to be supposed that Louis arrived directly at results as though by magic. Quite the contrary, he arrived slowly through boldly through the years, by means of incessant thought, self correction, hard work and dogged perseverance. For it was his fascinating task to build up a system of technique, a mastery of technique. And such a system could scarcely be expected to reach its fullness of development, short of maturity, assuming it would read its fullness then, or could ever reach it; for the world of expression is limitless; the theory so deep in idea, so rich in content, as to preclude any ending of its beneficent, all-inclusive power."

Here Sullivan explains the process by which he became an architect, emphasizing that it was not a spontaneous, magical arrival, but rather one that required a strong education, a Protestant work ethic, and self-discipline. In thinking of his story in part as narrating his own arrival into the state of the architect, Sullivan by this end passage reminds the reader that the narration of his story has depended upon his application of techniques associated with the Bildungsroman.

Though the Bildungsroman is generally considered a novelistic form, critics like Jed Esty, Max Saunders, Gregory Castle, and John Paul Riquelme have argued that the

---

48 Ibid., 257.
50 I delight in the fact that the German word Bildung, meaning self-cultivation, sounds so similar to the English word “building.” As I have written this dissertation, I have found it so helpful to think about architects and writers using the word “building” broadly to both refer to a physical architectural structure and to the act of creating a life for oneself.
Bildungsroman has played an important role in the development of life writing, especially as writers work to understand how they have arrived at their present station. In particular, Riquelme notes that in twentieth-century modernist writing, “the boundaries between fictional and nonfictional life narratives are crossed significantly... Modernist experimental fictive biographies and autobiographical fictions invite speculative interpretive readings that address the relations and differences between the genres of life narratives.” Sullivan similarly uses the conventions of fictional genres like the Bildungsroman in order to frame his story. For example, he begins his story on the register of the fairy tale, a mythic form that Julia Prewitt Brown has argued greatly informs the Bildungsroman. “Once upon a time,” Sullivan begins, there was a village in New England called South Reading. Here lived a little boy of five years. That is to say he nested with his grandparents on a miniature farm of twenty-four

---

53 Brown argues, “Fairy-tales about growing up—‘Snow White’, ‘Cinderella’, ‘Hansel and Gretel’, and many more—characteristically begin with the loss of a parent. The myth underlying these tales then is one that seeks to explain why parents die, the brutal fact of generational passing. This is the terror that myth imposed on primitive man and that the coming of age fairy-tale so brilliant beguiles. So close is the Bildungsroman to this myth, that, like the tales of old, Bildungsromane often open by describing the hero’s orphaned status. In both tale and novel we are led to believe that if the natural parent had survived, the hero would not have experienced the hardship we witness; the death of the parents is compensated for by the ultimate triumph of the child.” Julia Prewitt Brown, “The Moral Scope of the English Bildungsroman,” in The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel, ed. Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 666.
acres, a mile or so removed from the center of gravity and activity which was called Main Street. It was a main street of the day and generation, and so was the farm proper to its time and place.  

The conventions of the fairy tale are evident: his parents are absent, his time is generalized, his geographic location is rendered ordinary. Sullivan takes great length to establish himself as an entirely ordinary child who becomes extraordinary not through his circumstances but through his decisions. This “natural” child—who “nested with his grandparents on a miniature farm”—is Every Child.

As a genre that developed in French, German and British cultures over the eighteenth and nineteenth century before crossing the Atlantic, the Bildungsroman has been historically imagined as having a distinct pedagogical purpose. In a study on English Bildungsromane in the Victorian era, Brown describes the “aim” of the form as one designed at least in part, to teach people how to live in the world. Through the archetypal figures of 19th-century Bildungsromane—the young man who travels from the provinces to the big city and the young woman who has yet to commit herself romantically—the novelist proposed to help readers navigate the new, more democratic and multifaceted social scene.

Given Sullivan’s interest in democracy and society, it is not hard to imagine why Sullivan might have been interested in using the conventions of the Bildungsroman to tell

his story. By framing himself as an American archetype—living near a major city, fond of the outdoors, curious about the world he lives in—Sullivan could use *Bildungsroman* conventions to incorporate, as he guides, his readers.

While Brown argues that the British *Bildungsroman* urged its readers to cultivate a sense of morality, Sullivan uses the genre of the *Bildungsroman* to urge his readers to reconnect with and nourish their innately democratic spirits. Thus Sullivan fixates much of his autobiography on the development of the child. In the chapter “Face to Face,” in which Sullivan generates his own theory of the Democratic Vista, he writes this declaration of the goal of democratic education:

> These things [a democratic education] shall do:
>
> It shall regard the child body, the child mind, the child heart, as a trust.

> It shall watch for the first symptom of surviving feudal fear and dissolve it with gentle ridicule while it teaches prudence and the obvious consequences of acts. No child that can toddle bravely is too young to know what choice means, when presented objectively and humanly. Thus it shall teach the nature of choice at the beginning.

> It shall allow the child to dream, to give vent to its wondrous imagination, its deep creative instinct, its romance.

> It shall recognize that every child is the seat of genius; for genius is the highest from of play with Life’s forces.

> It shall allow the precious being to grow in its wholesome atmosphere of activities, giving only that cultivation which a careful gardener gives—the children shall be the garden.

> It shall utilize the fact that the child mind, in its own way, can grasp an understanding of things and ideas,
supposed now in our pride of feudal thought to be beyond its reach.

It shall recognize that the child, undisturbed, feels in its own way the sense of power within it, and about it. That by intuition the child is mystic—close to nature’s heart, close to the strength of Earth.

The child thus warded will be wholesome, happy, child. It will forecast the pathway to its maturity.\textsuperscript{56}

Sullivan imagines the child as an entity in nature—a garden, he claims (or perhaps a nest)—that can be nurtured into a democratic subject through protecting and cultivating the child’s imagination and genius. As a flower does not need \textit{instruction} to grow—simply water, air, nutriment—so the child intrinsically knows how to embrace the democratic spirit, but needs cultivation and guidance not to grow wild, as the flower likewise needs pruning. The mystical nature of life that Sullivan articulates in “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered” reappears as a native element in the existence of the child. Children only learn to become an antidemocratic subject if they are tainted by a feudalism that separates them from their native elements. The democratic education becomes framed by an architectural landscape that grows, nourishes, wards, and restores children to their innate spiritual inclinations of wonder, creativity, and romance.

Throughout his autobiography and elsewhere, Sullivan develops an architectural sensibility about the educational experiences he received. If the idealized democratic education is like a garden, he casts his elementary school in exactly opposite terms:

Louis found it vile; unspeakably gloomy; a filthy prison for children. He learned nothing. There was no one to teach him, and what he saw there shall not be recorded here. So passed winter; Louis looking, ever aimlessly, yearning, for a teacher. As a rose springs upward from the mulch and puts forth gracious blooming, even so out of the muck of this school a re-action sprang up, a fervent hungered yearning within, for a kindred spirit that might illumine him and in whom he might rejoice; a spirit utterly human that would break down the dam made within him by sanctioned suppressions and routine, that there might pour out of him the gathered cesspool, and the waters of his life again flow on. Of such a nature was the hunger of a well-fed child.57

This gloomy, filthy prison in which children are disciplined without greater purpose creates subjects who feel prisons within them: dams “made...by sanctioned suppressions and routine.” But even in this environment, the democratic child persists and can yearn for a nurturing experience defined as the opposite reaction to his present experience. Sullivan frames the school-as-prison as an experience that can be overcome by a hunger for a democratic education.

Sullivan argues that places of formal education that do not center a democratic education in their pedagogical framework will harm not just the child, but also the greater society. After graduating from high school early, Sullivan matriculated to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the age of sixteen. He only stayed for a year. Unsatisfied with his education there—“[h]e began to feel a vacancy in himself, the need

57 Ibid., 99-100.
of something more nutritious to the mind”—he left MIT for Philadelphia to work as an apprentice under the architect Frank Furness. He then attended the famed École des Beaux Arts in Paris before moving to Chicago to work with Dankmar Adler. Although Sullivan is more generous to his experience of the École in his autobiography, he elsewhere insisted that these elite schools of architecture are antithetical to his democratic vision. In Kindergarten Chats, he issues this charge:

Anyone who will take the trouble to investigate the architectural schools will shortly discover that, as institutions of learning, so-called, they are bankrupt, if, by solvency we assume what makes for the good of the people. Not only are they useless to our democratic aspirations, they are actively pernicious, and their theory of operation is a fraud on the commonwealth which supports them. Their teachings are one long continuous imbecility. They are undemocratic to the core of their dried-up medievalism, although a democracy pays their bills and houses and feeds them in a land of freedom. They are essentially parasitic—sucking the juices of healthy tissues and breeding more parasites.

Here Sullivan reiterates his conception of society as a closed system as he names financial resources as finite. These architectural schools are “undemocratic,” “medieval,” and feudalist as they absorb a disproportionate amount of resources that lessens financial investments in other programs. In Sullivan’s imagination, elite institutions become parasitic as they become attractive to the broader community through their

58 Ibid., 188-189.
59 Sullivan, Kindergarten Chats, 68.
maintenance of class status. Because some people get ahead through attending elite institutions, the people end up investing time, energy, and money in those institutions rather than supporting more equitable and accessible institutions of education.

A democratic education, via Sullivan, encourages students to think of themselves as powerful, as planners, as architects of their experience. He sees this lived out by his high school teacher Moses Woolson, who “was not a deep thinker, nor was [he] erudite or scholarly, or polished in manners, or sedate. Rather was he a blend of wild man and poet.” Woolson embodies a love of discovery and a connection to the natural. From Woolson, Sullivan learns to cultivate “the Self Discipline of self power.” He explains:

Louis felt the hour of freedom was at hand. He saw, with inward glowing, that true freedom could come only through discipline of power, and he translated the master’s word of discipline into its true intent: Self Discipline of self power. His eager life was to condense now in a focusing of powers: What had the words meant;—“silence,” “attention,” “promptness,” “speed,” “accurate,” “observe,” “reflect,” “discriminate,” but powers of his own, obscurely mingled, unco-ordinated, and, thus far, aim to create? Now in the master’s plan, which he saw as a ground plan, he beheld that for which, in the darkness of broad daylight, he had yearned so desperately in vain; that for which, as it were with empty, outstretched hands he had grasped, vaguely groping; as one seeing through a film, that for which he had hungered with an aching heart as empty as his hands.61

60 Ibid., 164.
61 Ibid.,159-160. Emphasis original to the text.
In this moment in his adolescence, Sullivan begins to become aware that the subject who can learn to cultivate and discipline his powers of silence, attention, promptness, and so forth will embrace the mindset of the architect who creates and plans as he acts within the world. An attention to these powers will encourage the architect-subject to understand his environs, know its resources, diagnose its problems, and imagine its solution. The architect-subject can learn to see the democratic vista. Architect-subjects are defined by their ability to critically engage, imagine, and build. And so even if the architect-subjects do not become practicing professional architects, they will still bring this consciousness to whatever work they pursue.

Those who do become architects, however, have a particular obligation. When Sullivan speaks of the generation of a democratic architecture, he means that architects should use this democratic education to inform their building design, thereby fashioning democracy. He articulated this injunction throughout his career, but stated it most clearly in “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered.” There he writes:

Let us state the conditions in the plainest manner. Briefly, they are these: offices are necessary for the transaction of business; the invention and perfection of the high-speed elevator make vertical travel, that was once tedious and painful, now easy and comfortable; development of steel manufactures has shown the way to safe, rigid, economical constructions rising to a great height; continued growth of population in the great cities, consequent congestion of centres and rise in value of ground, stimulate an increase in number of stories; these, successfully piled one upon another, react on ground values;--and so on, by action and
reaction, interaction and inter-reaction. Thus has come about that form of lofty construction called the “modern office building.” It has come an answer to a call, for in it a new grouping of social conditions has found a habitation and a name.62

Sullivan here models his process for developing the structure of the skyscraper. Through an attention to observation and reason, Sullivan identifies the social conditions that face him: 1) “offices are necessary”; 2) elevators and innovations in steel manufacture make vertical construction necessary; 3) cities are congested with people which makes 4) urban land expensive. His design of the tall office building does not fix or change the number of people in cities, nor does it cheapen land value. Rather, he imagines his design of the tall office building as an answer to the problem before him.

The autobiography as a form indebted to the Bildungsroman allows Sullivan to communicate that the architect-subject is one who can be cultivated by an attention to a democratic education. In turn, the architect-subject will do work that will continue to build a democratic society. Even as Sullivan’s autobiography was not widely read, his writing about the architect as a figure of democratic power caught hold within broader culture. Over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, writers began creating characters who were architects as a mechanism to understand the architect’s power.

2.4 Sullivan’s Legacy; Architecture, Power, Unity

As Sullivan worked to generate a theory of the architect-subject through his autobiography, he proposed that the architect maintain a particular relation to power. Notably, he chooses to title his autobiography not *The Autobiography of Louis Sullivan*, but *The Autobiography of an Idea*. Perhaps this title indicates an insight into Sullivan’s aims while writing *The Autobiography*: more than manifesting a desire to communicate his life story for the sake of being remembered, Sullivan wanted to articulate a broad theory of humanity. Toward the end of his story, Sullivan finally clarifies his “idea”:

As months passed and years went by, as world after world unfolded before him and merged within the larger world, and veil after veil lifted, and illusion after illusion vanished, and the light grew ever steadier, Louis saw power everywhere; and as he grew on through his boyhood, and through the passage to manhood, and to manhood itself, he began to see the powers of nature and the powers of man coalesce in his vision into an IDEA of power. Then and only then he became aware that this idea was a new idea,—a complete reversal and inversion of the commonly accepted intellectual and theological concept of the Nature or man.

That IDEA which had its mystical beginning in so small a thing as a child’s heart, grew and nurtured itself upon that child’s varied consistently continuing and metamorphosing experiences in time and place, as has been most solicitously laid bare to view in detail, in the course of this recital. For it needs a long long time, and a rich soil of life-experience, to enable a simple, single idea to grow to maturity, and solid strength.63

Sullivan sees power as inherent and diffuse in nature, and as children maintain a connection to nature, this power is also inherent in the child. But in order for adults to reclaim this power, they must work to restore and nurture their relationship to nature. They must learn to see again. Because the architect is specifically trained to see, to imagine, to build, the architect can produce a world that will restore humanity to its mystical connection to nature. This, Sullivan believes, is democratic practice.

It seems that Sullivan ended his life disappointed. He died in June 1924 shortly after the Press of the American Institute of Architects published all sixteen installments of *The Autobiography of an Idea* together. His disillusionment is evident in the final installments. If the first thirteen chapters of *The Autobiography* read as *Bildungsroman*, the last two read as fiery invective. Sullivan rebukes the architectural practices set forth by Daniel Burnham and the World’s Fair Architecture. He declares that the World’s Fair implanted a virus in American culture; he opines, “For Architecture, be it known, is dead.” It is possible that Sullivan felt bitter that his career experienced a downward trajectory. The architect Paul Davies has summarized how Sullivan’s biographers, architectural historians, and others typically narrate Sullivan’s career:

Sullivan was bedeviled by financial crises, and undone by the very ‘hustle’ and ‘salesmanship’ he abhorred. He had been let go by [the architect] Frank Furness in the depression of 1873, and his partnership with Adler

---

64 Ibid., 325.
dissolved with the financial panic that followed 20 years later. In 1899, after six years struggling on his own, Sullivan married Mary Azona Hattabaugh. This further precipitated disaster. They bought a second home in Mississippi, but separated in 1909, days after Sullivan had auctioned off most of the household goods to pay debts and support her fledgling acting career. The same year he was passed over for the design of Mr. Selfridge’s flagship London store despite having designed Selfridge’s Chicago base: the astonishingly modern… Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co… building of 1904. He drew few commissions from then on. His loyal draughtsman George Elmslie also left in 1909. A year later he had to sell the Mississippi home and was divorced in 1916. They had no children.

By this narration, Davies casts Sullivan’s last thirty years as both unproductive and unreproductive (literally, by the reminder that Sullivan had no children). Not only did Sullivan fail to design buildings, but he also failed to leave a legacy noticeable to greater American culture. Davies’ synopsis of Sullivan’s life is both reductive and glib as it emphasizes Sullivan’s material imprint on the world. In this section, I argue that although Sullivan’s writings were never well-read, his ideologies proliferated as American culture increasingly viewed the architect as a figure of immense power.

Aside from his design of major buildings like the Chicago Auditorium, the Carson, Pirie, Scott Building, and the Wainwright Building that continue to shape American architecture today, Sullivan’s largest legacy was perhaps found in Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright began his career by joining Adler & Sullivan’s firm, but the

working partnership did not last past 1893, when Wright decided to begin working on more residential projects. Toward the end of Sullivan’s life, however, the two rekindled their friendship. Upon Sullivan’s death in 1924, Wright wrote a series of elegies printed in the journal *Western Architect*. In the following passage, Wright mourns not just Louis Sullivan the human, or Louis Sullivan the architect, but also Louis Sullivan the writer:

And now this book. ‘The Autobiography of an Idea’ his book, has come to convince an unwilling world, tainted with that hatred for superiority that characterizes a false Democracy, of what it missed in leaving a man of such quality to turn from the rare work he could do, to give, in a book, proof that quality in a medium his kindred had learned to understand — proof of his quality — too late.

It is a characteristic triumph of Genius such as his that he should lay this book upon the library table of the nation he loved, as he died! His fertility was great enough to scatter seed no matter what the disability, no matter what the obstruction. If the eye of his country was uneducated, inept, objective, illiterate or merely literal; if its sense of Beauty of Form as Idea or beauty of Idea as Form was unawakened, he took literature, the literal medium by which the literal may most easily be reached and, perhaps, literally made to understand — grasped it and made himself known — the Master still.

But he was most needed where the workmen wait for the Plan — where the directing Imagination must get the work of the world done in such master-fashion that mankind may see and forever more believe that Spirit and Matter are one — when both are real. Realize that Form and Idea are one and inseparable — as he showed them to be in the master-key to the Skyscraper as Architecture — the Wainwright Building. To this high task he came as an anointed prophet — to turn disillusioned to the cloister as so many have turned before him and will so turn still —
although his cloister was the printed page—the book, that, opened now, all may read.\textsuperscript{66}

If Davies much later would describe Sullivan as an un(re)productive architect, Wright names Sullivan’s imagination as fertile, virile, intensely reproductive. He repeats Sullivan’s garden trope to signify that Sullivan’s ideological fruits might not yet be realized. But perhaps most noticeably, Wright imagines Sullivan as a great prophet—a prophet who could see truths about both architecture and the United States that others would never be able to see. In doing so, Wright emphasizes Sullivan’s “IDEA” at the risk of losing Sullivan’s arguments about democratic life. Wright interprets Sullivan’s promotion of the architect-subject as a call to embrace a masculinist ethos.\textsuperscript{67} But Wright also underscores an idea that proliferated throughout architecture of this period—even those architects with whom Sullivan so fervently disagreed. As Wright reiterates the relation between spirit and matter, form and idea, he articulates a desire to create an architecture of unity. Sullivan’s democratic ideation is one that emphasizes harmony. His criticism of American eclecticism—emphasized so strongly at the end of his autobiography—may also be a desire to de-emphasize difference.


\textsuperscript{67} Relatedly, Sarah Allaback has argued, “During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the architectural profession in America was closely tied to the studio or atelier. It need hardly be noted that this setting—an office run by a famous architect—was the ultimate “old boys” club.” In 1920, there were two hundred women in the United States practicing architecture. For more on women’s exclusion from architectural practice, see Sarah Allaback, \textit{The First American Women Architects} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 2.
Although Sullivan was so critical of Daniel Burnham, Burnham too reiterates a desire for unity in American metropolises. Margaret Garb has argued that in his 1909 Plan of Chicago, Burnham aimed to use the material conditions of public space—property owned and managed by the state—to fashion a new public, a new citizenry, rooted in a shared aesthetic experience. His project then merged aesthetics with politics and conceived of the public sphere—or civic culture—as overlapping, if not always congruent, with public space. Burnham’s views drew on a long line of landscape architects from Andrew Jackson Downing through Frederic Law Olmsted, to name just two, who argued that carefully designed parks and other public spaces would strengthen American democracy.68

As Burnham offers a plan for Chicago, he makes clear his desire “to bring order out of the chaos incident to rapid growth, and especially to the influx of people of many nationalities without common traditions or habits of life.” As he continues, “Among the various instrumentalities designed to accomplish this result, a plan for a well-ordered and convenient city is seen to be indispensable.”69 Here Burnham argues that a city with order and unity will be able to create a common culture for immigrants and migrants who live in Chicago.

69 Burnham and Bennett, Plan of Chicago, 1.
In this sense, we can see Sullivan’s interest in a democratic education as wanting
to similarly create a monolithic democratic culture. In the following two chapters, I
investigate the works of literary writers who occupied positions of alterity in American
cities. In his writing, Richard Wright argues that the Black body is routinely and
systematically excluded from this democratic vision. In her writing, Anzia Yezierska
expresses psychic consternation over the mandate that Jewish immigrants must
assimilate to American culture in order to have access to the American city.
3. Anzia Yezierska’s Glass House: Reframing Transparency in the Immigrant Subject

From a farsighted view the Jewish immigrant writer Anzia Yezierska shares a strange symmetry with Louis Sullivan. Like Sullivan, Yezierska returned to democracy again and again throughout her multi-decade writing career. And like Sullivan, Yezierska experienced a burst of celebrity in her career. In the 1920s, Yezierska’s short story collection *Hungry Hearts* was celebrated by the Progressivist educator John Dewey, and subsequently made into a Hollywood film of the same name. Hollywood executives asked Yezierska to work on the film as one of their three major writers.\(^1\) Based on her sudden rise to fame, newspapers nationwide celebrated her as a “Sweatshop Cinderella,” a name reportedly given to her by the Goldwyn Pictures publicist Howard Dietz in 1921.\(^2\) This name allowed Dietz to neatly package the complexity of Yezierska’s success within the then-already clichéd rags-to-riches narrative. Dietz named the condition of her nationwide visibility on Hollywood screens as the metaphorical glass slipper that allowed her to leave the immigrant ghetto for Hollywood glamour. To American audiences, Yezierska’s very existence seemed to offer proof that the American Dream was no fairytale, and that the immigrant could overcome the limits of ghetto life to successfully acculturate to the democratic city. And like Sullivan, Yezierska’s success

---

\(^1\) The other two writers were Paul Josephson and Montague Glass, both writers of the Hollywood cut.

was fleeting: in her 1950 memoir *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, she laments that her life could be succinctly summarized by this phrase: “From an author in Hollywood to a pauper on W.P.A.”

Along with these parallels, Yezierska shared with Sullivan a deep sense of the importance of space to the project of democracy. Because she herself grew up in tenement housing, she was keenly aware that these housing structures exacerbated poverty in immigrant communities, thus making it difficult for immigrants to fit into the democratic education that Sullivan imagined. Yet, Yezierska differed from Sullivan in an important way. Where Sullivan celebrated democracy with unqualified Whitmanian conviction, Yezierska was considerably more skeptical. As a Polish Jewish immigrant, Yezierska experienced first hand that ways in which America’s professed democratic project fell short of its claims to inclusivity. Yezierska’s fictive work—largely composed between 1920 (when *Hungry Hearts* was published) and 1932 (when her last novel, *All I Could Never Be* was published)—endlessly repeats this failure. Her protagonists, including *Salome of the Tenements*’s Sonya Vrunsky (1923), *The Bread Giver*’s Sara Smolinsky (1925), *The Arrogant Beggar*’s Adele Linder (1927), and *All I Could Never Be*’s Fanya Ivanowna (1932), are all invariably young Jewish women, either immigrants or children of immigrants from Poland, and residents of New York’s Lower East Side. Each

---

expresses frustration from the outset of the novel at the limitations of what ghetto life seems to offer her, with her disgust at the dirt and din that covers the surfaces of her tenement home. Each professes the desire to live in the “America” beyond her ghetto neighborhood. With the exception of The Bread Givers’s Sara, each protagonist gets a taste of the Anglo-American life beyond the ghetto’s limits through an encounter with a Progressivist reformer, and each enthusiastically embraces the reformer’s project only to that it never satisfies—and even negates—her desire to maintain components of her Jewish identity.\(^4\) Although scholars such as Leslie Fishbein have argued that Yezierska was not just complicit but agential in producing the “Sweatshop Cinderella” narrative about her, I argue that her writing shows that she was at best ambivalent about the democratizing project but much more likely quite tortured by it.\(^5\)

\(^4\) In Salome of the Tenements, this is John Manning; in Arrogant Beggar, this is Sarah Hellman; and in All I Could Never Be, Henry Scott. Bread Givers was written at the peak of Yezierska’s celebrity status, and as such I argue that it is a bit of an outlier. Of all of her writing, Bread Givers is easily the text most comfortable with assimilation.

\(^5\) Leslie Fishbein, “Anzia Yezierska: The Sweatshop Cinderella and the Invented Life,” Studies in American Jewish Literature 17 (1998): 137. Fishbein characterizes Yezierska as a writer who willfully misrepresented her life to make herself into a “Sweatshop Cinderella.” Fishbein writes, “A Jewish immigrant author who had been proclaimed “the sweatshop Cinderella,” a purportedly untutored natural talent who wrote of the pathos of ghetto life from her heart, Yezierska was, in fact, a graduate of Columbia Teacher’s College and obviously quite fluent in English prose. Yezierska had an infallible sense of what the public demanded, a rags to riches romance that tacitly accepted the inevitably of acculturation and the rightful hegemony of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. She created that saga and claimed it as her own, but her life was far less epic. She won modest literary success, but at the expense of a profoundly alienated personal life: a failed marriage, an emotionally abandoned daughter, and no fulfillment in the romances she so ardently pursued.” Not only is Fishbein’s construction of success distressingly (hetero)normative, but her argument renders Yezierska a static figure whose attitudes about acculturation and WASP culture never changed.
Throughout her fiction Yezierska’s characters encounter democracy through architectural structures that promise to include them, just as Louis Sullivan had envisioned it. These projects are generally domestic: they include settlement houses, high-rise apartments on the Upper West Side, and suburban homes. These characters’ struggles within those structures suggest Yezierska’s growing sense that there was no true place for an immigrant woman to thrive within US urban environs. Each sequential project’s ending seems to revise the prior: While Sonya finds a place in New York’s fashion industry, Adele rejects a professional career, opting to move back to the Lower East Side ghetto. While Adele finds meaning in ghetto life, Fanya finds that return foolish and moves to the suburbs. After Yezierska wrote All I Could Never Be she did not write another book for nearly eighteen years.

While in her fiction Yezierska struggled to explain precisely and confidently why these projects felt so destructive to her and the larger immigrant community, she ultimately finds that language in her 1950 memoir, and, strikingly, expresses it in architectural terms. Reflecting upon the experience of converting her stories into a film, she explains why she had to flee from this project. She writes, “As long as I remained with Goldwyn [Pictures] I was in a glass-house with crooked mirrors. Every move I made was distorted, and every distortion exploited to further the sale of Hungry
Yezierska, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, 81.
Building upon Konzett’s work, I argue that Yezierska knew this, and in her fiction uses transparent surfaces like glass and windows to capture the affect of being the “successful immigrant” who has been put on display. I will argue that her fiction, when read cumulatively, produces an ethno-pessimism that argues that under this Progressivist vision, immigrants will always feel exploited and distorted. I will then turn to her memoir Red Ribbon on a White Horse. I will argue that through her memoir, Yezierska builds a narrative space for herself aside from this Progressivist vision; she corrects the “glass-house with crooked mirrors” through writing candidly about the stresses and anxieties she experienced as a celebrated immigrant writer. In writing her memoir, Yezierska finds an ability to determine which values she would like to follow in her own life. In doing so, she argues that democratic spaces can only be produced through the self-determination of minoritized populations.

3.1 Slum Sights

When Yezierska and her family moved from Poland to the United States in 1890, they settled as many Eastern European Jews did in a tenement community in New York’s Lower East Side. Jews in the 1880s were certainly not the first ethnic population to cluster in tenements in New York: by the 1880s, New York had already long been the first home of immigrants and refugees arriving to the United States. While Americans who identified themselves as native-born could often find attractive middle-class housing in New York, immigrants—especially immigrants like Eastern European Jews,
who fled organized oppression and poverty—tended only to be able to afford to rent a space in tenement housing—structures that were dark, cramped, decrepit, and disease-ridden. Over the course of the second-half of the nineteenth century, social reformers grew increasingly vocal about the dangers of tenements living. By the time the Yezierski family arrived in New York, there was already a robust and continuing social and philanthropic movement to end poverty. Yet this reform was not solely based within selfless altruism; instead, I argue in this section that the predominant impulse that enabled housing and social reform in immigrant neighborhoods like the Lower East Side of Manhattan was rooted in a desire to produce the immigrant as a subject capable of converting to democratic practice—an idea that Yezierska mobilizes in her fiction in phrases like “I want to make myself for an American.”

Furthermore, I argue that the predominant mechanism through which reformers sought to convert immigrants into Americans operated through a metaphors of exposure and transparency. Reformers both wanted to expose the vice of the slums while also making American values transparent to immigrant subjects. This metaphorical desire became quite literalized as immigrants moved immigrants into housing that increased their ability to see the city through windows, broader streets, and more.

---

While early twentieth century sociologists wrote that ethnic segregation in cities was inevitable, a closer examination of the history of tenement construction reveals that this was not quite the case. Rather, greed, economics, and nativism made tenement housing not just possible but lucrative for investors in these properties. The historian John F. Bauman argues that an “urban-entrepreneurial vigor” rampant among middle-class New Yorkers produced a capitalist class of landlords who recognized opportunity in the rising price of Manhattan real estate, a commodity necessarily limited by Manhattan’s status as an island. While landlords could not create new land in Manhattan, they began to realize that no law prohibited them from dividing previously single-family homes into multi-family housing structures that would allow them to reap greater profits. Bauman argues that the design of these subdivided tenements was “tailored to exploit the crush of new immigration.” The historian Jared Day concurs, arguing that tenement landlords were the central driving force in both creating and maintaining “some of the most haunting and lasting images of urban life.”

---

9 In his essay “The City,” Robert Park writes that the city has “moral regions” that are “part of the natural, if not the normal, life of the city.” He explains that “the organization which city life spontaneously assumes the population tends to segregate itself, not merely in accordance with its interests, but in accordance with its tastes and its temperaments.” See Robert E. Park, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment,” in The City, by Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967), 43, 35.


and Day’s accounts of nineteenth-century tenements show that the containment of immigrants in slums and tenements was no spontaneous event but one engineered over time.

Tenements not only exploited immigrants for their financial precariousness, but also successfully contained immigrants in neighborhoods out of view from middle- and upper-class New Yorkers. As Bauman explains:

[Tenement houses—defined as residential buildings where three or more families cooked and slept on the premises—had become a commonplace habitation of the working poor. Families crammed every inch of formerly one-family dwellings, including cellars and jerrybuilt courtyard or back alley additions... Flimsily constructed three- and four-story ‘railroad flats,’ plagued with internal, windowless, closet-sized sleeping rooms, were jammed onto twenty-five-by-one-hundred-foot lots and housed twelve to twenty-four families.”

By cramming twelve to twenty-four families onto a single lot, landlords could accommodate the limited space of New York to growing immigrant populations without having those populations spill into established middle-class neighborhoods.

Tenements were undoubtedly crowded spaces that were seen as unfit for the number of

---

13 Day, Urban Castles, 8. Day notes that In 1895, the Lower East Side averaged housing 523.6 people per acre, whereas Manhattan more broadly home 144 people per acre. By 1895, 1.3 million people lived in the Lower East Side, 95% of whom were immigrant families.
people who resided within them even by nineteenth-century standards. Yet Bauman’s observations, written from a contemporary standpoint, also point to a problem that urban reformers began to recognize: tenements, because they are subdivided structures not initially designed to hold this number of people, often lacked windows. Such a lack would have been a safety concern, since one can escape from a residence through a window in the case of emergency. Windows also allowed residents to better regulate the internal temperatures of their homes. But it also meant that the immigrants who lived within these structures could not look out into the city, and neither could city inhabitants look back into immigrant residences.

For nineteenth-century social reformers—in both England and the US, in urban and rural locales alike—the lack of windows presented more than a health hazard. For such reformers, architectural determinism—which Sharon Marcus defines as “the belief that spatial environments determine the social arrangements, daily behaviors, and political status of those who inhabit them”—meant that living conditions were a social problem as well.¹⁴ In the mid-nineteenth century, social reformers became increasingly

---

¹⁴ Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 9. Another prominent example of architectural determinism at work emerges in *The American Woman’s Home*, an 1860 tome written by Harriet Beecher Stowe and her sister Catherine Beecher. In *The American Woman’s Home*, Stowe and Beecher seek to instill bourgeois Christian values within middle-class homes by teaching white, bourgeois women how to best run their home economies. They show that the very structure of the home—“what may be properly called a Christian house; that is, a house contrived for the express purpose of enabling every member of a family to labor with the hands for the common good”—will instill values of health, economy, and taste. See Catherine E. Beecher
concerned that continuing to allow the immigrant poor to live in decrepit settings would produce morally degraded subjects prone to violence, crime, gang affiliation, and other behaviors that bourgeois New York deemed morally unfit. For example, in 1850 the then-former New York Mayor Philip Hone wrote in his diary that the construction of tenements homes was “shameful.” Yet he is neither ashamed of these buildings because they were dangerous for the inhabitants outside, nor because he outright objected to landlords profiting from the economic precariousness of immigrant populations; rather he writes this odd observation: “I have noticed especially in the eastern section of the city, blocks of new buildings so tightly built that they could not stand alone and, like drunken men, require the support of each other to keep from falling.” In comparing tenements to besotted men, Hone expresses shame that these tenement structures do not allow working men to live a moral life of temperance, virtue, and health.

Over the second half of the nineteenth-century, social reformers responded to observations like Hone’s by engaging in a multi-decade, multi-pronged effort to eradicate the slums—not just for the sake of the immigrants who resided within them, but for urban dwellers more generally. By working to create environments for the working poor that looked more like middle-class housing, reformers believed they could

eradicate some of the behaviors they believed both to be immoral and to have emerged from the slums themselves. Accordingly one of the major strategies of housing reform was to mandate changes to the tenements houses themselves through policy. The Tenement House Act of 1867 attempted to make tenements safer and more sanitary by requiring all housing to have fire escapes and at least one bathroom for every twenty residents. In 1879 the New York Sanitary Reform Society advocated for a second Tenement House Act that better addressed the issue of overcrowding: the Act stipulated that a building could not occupy more than 65% of the area of its plot as it also set a new minimum size of a residence per occupant. Day argues that the new requirements set in 1879 were not just ineffective (architects simply designed a new “barbell” structure for apartments that allowed them to evade this requirement while still cramming housing on lots), but also detrimental to the tenements dwellers: the new size minimum meant

____________________________________

16 The labor historian Joseph Varga argues that Progressivist reformers wanted to create throughout the city a “bourgeois visual environment,” a term he lifts from the historian Chris Otter. Varga writes, “For the reformer, the space of the working-class neighborhood was the antithesis of the [bourgeois] visual environment—crowded, cramped, with hidden corners, narrow alleys, overpopulated interiors, spaces that negated visuality, where conduct could not be seen and evaluated based on accepted codes of behavior and decorum. It stands to follow… that for the Victorian and the Progressive, the denizens of such environments ‘could not be trusted with social and political freedoms.’” Varga continues to establish space, visibility, and health as the “holy trinity of the gospel of moral environmentalism and the basis for the Progressive obsession with conceptualizing urban space.” Joseph J. Varga, *Hell’s Kitchen and the Battle for Urban Space: Class Struggle and Progressive Reform in New York City 1884-1914* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 50-51.
that tenement dwellers could not take in boarders, and so many were unable to make
rent.\textsuperscript{17}

A second major strategy for reform centered not on policy but on philanthropy. In the 1870s and 1880s, housing reformers like Alfred T. White advocated for the construction of model tenements, designed for the “deserving poor.”\textsuperscript{18} These model tenements were newer constructions made more affordable for tenants through curbing investment dividends.\textsuperscript{19} As Day argues, “In theory, [the model tenements] demonstrated new design principles that emphasized health, cleanliness, and limitations on overcrowding. Moreover, reformers felt that such projects lifted the tenants morally and

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} Day, \textit{Urban Castles}, 26. Day’s most central argument in \textit{Urban Castles} is that the landlord class successfully thwarted any successful housing reform. Roy Lubove reports that the dumbbell tenement was engineered when the \textit{Plumber and Sanitary Engineer} announced a contest in 1878 to see who could design a structure on a 25 x 100 square foot plot that “best combined maximum safety and convenience for the tenant, and maximum profitability for the investor.” James E. Ware submitted the dumbbell design, and builders thus used it for decades beyond. He describes the structure thusly: “The dumb-bell was essentially a front and rear tenement connected by a hall. Situated on a pinched 25 x 100 foot lot, the dumb-bell was usually five or six stories high and contained fourteen rooms to a floor, seven on either side running in a straight line. One family occupied the first four of these seven rooms, a second family the remaining three rooms to the rear. The dumb-bell thus harbored four families to a floor. The hallways and stairwell were dimly lit by windows fronting the air shaft. Water closets, two to a floor or one to every two families, were located opposite the stairs.” For more on this see Roy Lubove, \textit{The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City 1890-1917} (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 29-31.

\textsuperscript{18} Bauman writes, “Nineteenth-century philanthropists and social reformers identified slum conditions with slum dwellers and distinguished between the undeserving poor, whose sloth, intemperance, immorality, and other sinful behaviors condemned them by their own acts to a wretched existence, and the deserving poor, widows and orphans not responsible for their poverty.” See Bauman, “The Eternal War on Slums,” 6.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 8. Lubove writes that model tenements were attractive to some investors because even though landlords “might reap diminished profits...[they] would be rewarded by the pleasure of having served the poor.”

\end{flushright}
spirtually as well as the communities in which they were located.”

Furthermore, wealthy businessmen could raise their professional reputations by funding model tenements. As a 1905 article in the periodical The Independent claims:

There is no better way to use money for the benefit of our cities than that of providing comfortable and sanitary homes for our working people. And it is strange that, since Mr. [George] Peabody set the example in London, and made himself a great name as a public benefactor a generation ago, so few have followed in his steps. We have had important reform in the laws, assuring light and air, and some good buildings which have been erected which are fairly sanitary and which pay a profit, but they are commercial and not philanthropic in their main purpose and they are very few. Now Mr. Henry Phipps, a wealthy steel manufacturer, formerly of Pittsburg [sic], emulating his friend Mr. Carnegie’s example, and perhaps bettering it, gives one million dollars for model tenements to his board of trustees, just as Mr. Peabody did in London. He will have the income limited to four per cent. and any further profit devoted to increasing the number of such tenements, here again borrowing a leaf out of Mr. Peabody’s trust. We are glad to see thus a comparatively fresh line of benevolence adopted, and it is to be hoped that others will follow his example.

20 Day, Urban Castles, 22. Yezierska’s daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen, in a 1988 biography of Yezierska, reveals that in the early 1910s, Yezierska, her then-husband Arnold Levitas, and the infant Louise lived in the Vanderbilt Apartments, which she describes as “a new development of ‘model’ dwellings exemplifying the latest and best in architectural design for living. Their apartment was furnished… with the deliberate simplicity of Mission chairs and tables, fishnet curtains, and a monk’s-cloth sofa covering.” See Henriksen, Anzia Yezierska: A Writer’s Life, 58.

While model tenements could successfully boost the reputation of those philanthropists who publicly invested in them, they did not always yield better results for the inhabitants within. Sometimes the model tenements became just as dangerous as the original tenements.22 Ironically, moreover, the success of the model tenements also faltered, in some cases on the attitudes of the social reformers. As Day has argued, the reformers’ paternalist orientation to the slum dwellers often prevented the residents of these tenements from advocating for the improvement of their own living conditions.23

As concern about housing and its effects upon its inhabitants grew throughout the nineteenth century, the popularization of photography accelerated interest in housing reform through making the suffering of the immigrants within visible. In 1890 the photojournalist Jacob Riis broadcast the conditions of the tenements in his treatise

*How the Other Half Lives*, a text that circulated widely among middle-class Americans. In text and flash photography Riis documents the tenement dwellings of the immigrant poor to demonstrate the horrors that lay within. Although Riis, like the social reformers who came before him, was a passionate advocate for tenement reform, he also

---

22 Lubove details the history of one of the first model tenement buildings built in Lower Manhattan. He writes, “It contained eight-seven suites of apartments, two stores, and a large hall. Rents ranged from $5.50 to $8.50 per month, which was expected to return 6 per cent on the original investment of $90,000. This tenement, occupied by [Black people] rather than white American or immigrant workers, did not in fact prove either a financial or social success. It degenerated into one of the worst slum pockets in the city, and was sold in 1867. In the 1880’s, ironically, a committee of the [Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor] condemned the ‘big flat’ it had sired as unfit for human habitation.” See Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slums*, 9.
undermined his own efforts as he produced the tenement as a spectacle that could now be visually seen by people who had never ventured into the tenements, let alone New York. The literary critic Keith Gandal describes this phenomenon as a version of “urban tourism.” He explains that Riis “considered it necessary to stalk the tenements at three in the morning… he wanted to catch ‘the slum when off its guard.’ It was the insertion of the ‘search for excitement’ into the crusade for moral and social reform, the generalizing of the police reporter’s jurisdiction to what might be called the ‘social beat.’ [and] the mixed agenda of spectacle and surveillance” that produced How the Other Half Lives as a text not only informative for those interested in social reform, but also entertaining at the risk of exploiting the immigrant subjects.24 The art critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau similarly argues that Riis’s writing and photography together “converge within a dense matrix of bourgeois social anxiety and the need to assuage them. This matrix was constituted by the threat posed by large numbers of poor, unassimilated recent immigrants, the specter of social unrest, the use of photography as a part of the larger enterprise of surveillance, containment, and social control, and the imperatives of ‘Americanization.’”25 How the Other Half Lives contributed to the growing idea that the

---

immigrant could *never* assimilate to American values should they stay within the confines of the tenement home.

Indeed, Riis distinguishes, in his work, between compassion for the immigrant poor and the need to rehabilitate the slums. He frames tenement reform as a social good that stands to benefit the United States *as a whole* rather than one that might benefit the tenement dwellers themselves. This distinction is evident, for example, in his discussion of the need to include Chinese immigrants in broader American culture:

 Granted, that the Chinese are in no sense a desirable element of the population, that they serve no useful purpose here, whatever they may have done elsewhere in other days, yet to this it is a sufficient answer that they are here, and that, having let them in, we must make the best of it… Rather than banish the Chinaman, I would have the door opened wider—for his wife; make it a condition of his coming or staying that he bring his wife with him.26

Although the Chinese for him “are in no sense… desirable,” they can best be absorbed into broader American life by being integrated into mainstream American values and practices. When Riis writes that “the door [should be] opened wider” to Chinese male residents of New York, he writes about inducting these men into a broader, Anglo-American bourgeois way of life. By insisting that they men bring their wives, he writes that this population must be contained within the structure of the nuclear family.

How the Other Half Lives’ use of text and image generated increased attention among social reformers to tenements, particularly in the form of the settlement house movement, which built upon Riis’s assimilative ethos to provide immigrant women in particular with an *education* about how to best incorporate American practices in their everyday lives. The historian Michelle Chen describes the settlement house movement as

a uniquely grassroots approach to reform... Moving beyond simple charity, the settlement house model served as a practical and theoretical scaffold for young activists both to learn about the ‘real’ life of the poor and to ‘educate’ the community members on how to advance themselves socially and economically... [T]he settlement became a microcosm of progressive ideals and a testing ground for reform initiatives, attracting an array of social organizations, academics, and political ideologues. The settlement concept was designed to encompass the entire lives of all involved, bridging class and ethnic divides, jumbling the privileged and dignifying the impoverished.27

The settlement house project developed across several major US cities. The most famous face of the settlement house movement is probably Jane Addams, who founded the Hull House in Chicago in 1889.28 In New York, Lillian Wald and Mary Brewster—both nurses—founded the Henry Street Settlement in the Lower East Side.

28 In her *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Addams very much affirms Chen’s assessment that the goal of the settlement house was to bridge a divide between the wealthy and the impoverished. Addams writes, “Hull-House was soberly opened on the theory that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal; and that
As Wald explains the foundations of the project in *The House on Henry Street*, she notes that her commitment to Henry Street is all-encompassing. She writes, “We were to live in the neighborhood as nurses, identify ourselves with it socially, and, in brief, contribute to it our citizenship. That plan contained in embryo all the extended and diversified social interest of our settlement group to-day.” Though Chen theorizes the settlement house movement that extends “beyond simple charity,” Wald narrates her citizenship to Henry Street as a “contribution” to the immigrants that populated the tenements of the Lower East Side.

Unlike tenement buildings, settlement houses architecturally embraced the spaciousness of middle class housing. When Addams and her partner Ellen Gates Starr initially founded Hull House, they rented a suburban mansion on the West Side of Chicago that had been previously built for the real estate magnate Charles Hull.

---

as the social relation is essentially a reciprocal relation, it gives a form of expression that has peculiar value.” See Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House, with autobiographical notes* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 54.

29 Lillian D. Wald, *The House on Henry Street* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915), 8-9. Though Chen theorizes the settlement house movement as one that extends “beyond simple charity,” we can see in this passage that Wald struggled to holistically live that. As she narrates her citizenship to Henry Street as a “contribution” to the immigrants that populated the tenements of the Lower East Side, we can see her imagining herself as offering her *self* as a gift. So even though settlement house work is importantly different than earlier nineteenth century projects (Wald and Addams significantly altered their lives to make these projects possible), Wald and Addams cannot fully escape from the language of philanthropy.

Likewise, the main buildings of the Henry Street settlement were initially “Federal style row houses [that] were built as stylish private homes for local merchants” in the 1830s. In her novel Arrogant Beggar, in which the character Adele Lindner temporarily resides in a settlement home, Yezierska describes the difference between the fictionalized Hellman home and her slum home: “Here was a real home. A place where a girl had a right to breathe and move around like a free human being... Light, air, space, enough room to hang up my clothes. Even a bureau with a mirror to see myself as I dressed. But more than the mirror, the space to move around. More than the light, the air.”

In this passage Adele is extremely aware of a sense that while tenement housing threatens her ability to feel “like a free human being,” the settlement home offers her a more healthful environs in which she can more easily breathe and move. The very design of settlement houses sought to expose immigrants to a sense of new freedom otherwise not felt in their slum housing.

Wald, Addams, and other leaders of the settlement house movement performed labor that was not just limited to maintaining the settlement homes and offering educative programs for the families that resided within; they also wrote about their experiences. In doing so, they sought to develop and then broadcast a theory of

democratic life rooted in their professional experiences. The literary critic Jamin Creed Rowan argues that the writing these women did was a labor that created narratives and produced knowledge about immigrant communities, the field of social work, and the democratic city itself. Most notably, Addams and Wald both published memoirs about their experiences. In 1910, Addams wrote *Twenty Years at Hull-House*; in 1915 Wald wrote *The House on Henry Street*. As Rowan argues:

> Writing about its efforts to improve conditions for the urban poor became one of the settlement movement’s most vital tools for doing neighborhood work. It took advantage of preexisting print venues in the newspaper, magazine, and book publishing industries, but also established a number of its own publications: newsletters and pamphlets, institution and neighborhood newspapers, and conference proceedings… Through these various genres and print mediums, settlement writers sought to redefine habits of urban philanthropy by revising the preexisting literary conventions for describing the urban poor.

Rowan astutely notes that Wald and Addams saw their work as efforts that “revised philanthropy.” The genre of life writing in particular allows Wald and Addams to highlight their life’s dedication to this endeavor.

---

[33] Jamin Creed Rowan, “Sidewalk Narratives, Tenement Narratives: Seeing Urban Renewal through the Settlement Movement,” *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 3 (Dec. 2012), 395. Rowan specifically argues that these various texts “defin[ed] members of the city’s tenement districts and ethnic quarters as neighbors and citizens, rather than as the deserving or underserving poor.” While I think it is critical to note that the words used to describe immigrants change over time, Rowan’s argument misses the distinctly maternalist tone of Addams’ and Wald’s writing. Notice, for example, how Wald imagines her settlement project as “embryonic,” as a project that gestates within her being.
Within their memoirs Addams and Wald produce themselves as people who do not just live out democratic values, but work to convert American space into one that better embraces democracy. By making American space democratic, they believed, too, that American residents would become democratic subjects. Addams in particular makes this possible by framing her commitment to democracy as theological. She writes that her “devotion” to democracy was produced at the same time that she converted to Presbyterianism. She explains:

I was conscious of no change from my childish acceptance of the teaching of the Gospels, but at this moment something persuasive within made me long for an outward symbol of fellowship, some bond of peace, some blessed spot where unity of spirit might claim right of way over all differences. There was also growing with me an almost passionate devotion to the ideals of democracy, and when in all history had these ideals been so thrillingly expressed as when the faith of the fisherman and the slave had been boldly opposed to the accepted moral belief that the well-being of a privileged few might justly be built upon the ignorance and sacrifice of the many? Who was I, with my dreams of universal fellowship, that I did not identify myself with the institutional statement of this belief, as it stood in the little village in which I was born, and without which testimony in each remote hamlet of Christendom it would be so easy for the world to slip back into the doctrines of selection and aristocracy?^{34}

Addams conversion to Presbyterianism lays the foundation for her commitment to democracy as she sees Christianity as a religion founded upon a commitment to

^{34} Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 46-47.
universal fellowship. She fundamentally narrates her investment in democracy as faith-based. Furthermore, she positions her work as a settlement house worker as Jesus-like as she shares the gospel of democracy with immigrant subjects.35

Although Yezierska was skeptical of these projects—as I will explore in subsequent sections—other immigrant writers use the space of autobiography to express their own conversion from immigrant to American (sometimes in conjunction with a conversion to Christianity). These conversion narratives were often worded so profoundly that they insinuated that exposure to democratic American life changed the immigrant ontologically. One of the most wide-circulating of these texts was the Jewish immigrant Mary Antin’s 1912 autobiography The Promised Land, a text that Keren McGinty notes was a “national best seller... that was considered to be the most popular immigrant autobiography of its time.”36 Set in Boston, Antin’s narrative dramatically ends on a spatial anecdote that tells the story of her going to Nahant, Massachusetts with the Hale House Natural History Club “which played an important part of my final emancipation of the slums... those earnest men and women... opened their homes to me

35 In this sense, the conversion process is dual, especially for those non-Christian immigrants. Addams served populations in Chicago much more likely to be Christian. Wald was herself a German Jew, but German Jews tended to be less religious and more interested in acculturating to modern life than their counterparts fleeing from the Russian empire.
36 Keren R. McGinty, “The Real Mary Antin: Woman on a Mission in the Promised Land,” American Jewish History 86, no. 3 (September 1998), 285. McGinty argues that Antin’s narrative was a highly crafted one, not always truthfully reported. She writes, “[N]ot only did Antin intentionally omit material that would either endanger her authority as a cultural mediator or negatively affect her readers’ opinions of Jews, but [she also] constructed an identity for herself that would be attractive to a predominantly patriarchal Gentile country.”
that I might learn how good Americans lived.” Antin writes that the Hale House’s programming offered her a newfound freedom from slum life by showing her habits of American daily life. Upon her return from the field trip, Antin sits on the steps of the Boston Public Library and muses, “In that moment I had a vision of myself, the human creature, emerging from the dim places where the torch of history has never seen, creeping slowly toward the light of civilized existence, pushing more steadily forward to the broad plateau to modern life, and leaping, at last, strong and glad, to the intellectual summit of the last century.” Antin frames her experience with the Hale House as both a conversion narrative and an evolutionary narrative: she writes that she could emerge from the depths of the dim ghetto into the light of “civilized existence,” as if an exposure to modern American life could produce for her a literal evolution. Two years after Antin wrote The Promised Land, Edward Steiner in his autobiography From Alien to Citizen casts this same transformation in even more biologically encoded language. He writes, “While the generations which are to follow us are bound to be the result of various kinds of intermarriage, my opinion is that although they will be intensified, they will be an American type, in whose shaping, environment will play a larger part than inherited

Mary Antin, The Promised Land (New York: Penguin, 1997), 283. The Hale House was part of the United South End Settlements, a bloc of settlement houses in Boston founded in 1891.

Ibid., 285.
race qualities.\textsuperscript{39} Steiner argues that environmental factors will eventually override any sense of significant racial classification.

Thus in New York’s Lower East Side, the notion that immigrants could “make for themselves an American” was embraced by reformers and some of the immigrants themselves, through both housing and narrative. In her young childhood and adult life, Yezierska absorbed the narrative that immigrants were initially unfit for American life, but could also be shown \textit{how to be fit}, and acted upon it. Although she would later narrate her autobiography as if she were spontaneously discovered as a fresh voice from the sweatshop floors, she was actually middle-class by the time she began publishing in 1915.\textsuperscript{40} At the turn of the century she lived in the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls, a philanthropic organization that housed young impoverished women. In 1901 she began attending Columbia University’s Teacher College on scholarship from the Clara de Hirsch Home, where she was required to mostly take classes in traditionally feminine disciplines like home economics.\textsuperscript{41} She subsequently lived in collectivized housing projects like the Rand School and the Educational Alliance, giving her increased taste for

\textsuperscript{39} Edward Steiner, \textit{From Alien to Citizen} (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1914), 328.
\textsuperscript{40} Yezierska’s daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen to date has provided the most thorough account of Yezierska’s life. See Henriksen, \textit{Anzia Yezierska: A Writer’s Life} for a more thorough account of Yezierska’s life before she gained fame in the 1920s.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 17.
alternative housing formations. She was a close friend of the educator Henrietta Rodman, who sought to build feminist housing with co-operative daycares and communal kitchens in New York. In 1911, while she was working as a schoolteacher, Yezierska married Arnold Levitas, a fellow Jewish immigrant. Yezierska took their only child, Louise, with her to San Francisco before deciding that Louise would more likely thrive more with Levitas, whom she subsequently divorced. As Yezierska began her writing career in 1915 with the publication of her story “The Free Vacation House,” she was both temporally and geographically removed from the poverty she had once known.

Yet by all accounts, Yezierska’s status as a writer accelerated in 1917, when she audited a class on social theory taught by the Progressivist educator John Dewey at Columbia University. The two maintained a close relationship for a few years—a relationship that some report as a mentor-protégé, and others report as romantic.

According to Henriksen, it was through Dewey that Yezierska could make larger sense

---

43 Susan Edmunds, “Between Revolution and Reform: Anzia Yezierska’s Labor Politics,” Modernism/Modernity 18, no. 2 (April 2011); 407. Edmunds argues that Yezierska “constantly sought out alternatives” to “bourgeois forms of marriage and family life,” and lived most of her life estranged from her only child Louise and Louise’s father Arnold Levitas.
44 Mary V. Dearborn provides an exhaustive account of Yezierska and Dewey in Love in the Promised Land: Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey (New York: Free Press, 1988). She argues that the two had a secret love affair that becomes manifest in Dewey’s poetry. Yezierska’s daughter, on the other hand, saw their relationship as far more nefarious: though she would have been just a young child when her mother befriended Dewey, she frames their relationship as bordering upon condescension and abuse. She writes, “[S]ometimes he was lie a father explaining the world to a child. He tried to answer her questions about the students in the seminar who consider her, she felt, not even human.” See Henriksen, Anzia Yezierska: A Writer’s Life, 91.
of her experiences as an immigrant under Progressivist reform projects. Henriksen writes that Yezierska felt that

she had been excluded from her rightful place as a schoolteacher because she was a non-Anglo-Saxon, an immigrant with not-so neat ways[... S]he told him that she had dreamed and worked and starved to be a schoolteacher through years of hardship and sweatshops and laundries, attending preparatory school at night and at last college. She had believed in the immigrant’s dream of America: opportunity. But as soon as she arrived a college, Columbia University itself, she had discovered “big fences put up against me, with the brutal signs: ‘No trespassing, Get off the grass.”

Before Dewey began teaching at Columbia in 1905, he had lectured in philosophy, psychology, and education at the University of Chicago. The time of his lectureship—the 1890s—directly coincided with the years that Sullivan and his fellow architects of the Chicago School of Architecture were actively attempting to build Chicago as a democratic city. Furthermore, the feminist philosopher Charlene Haddock Seigfried notes that Dewey was “intensely engaged” with the Hull House Settlement.

45 Ibid., 86.
46 Charlene Haddock Seigfried, “Socializing Democracy: Jane Addams and John Dewey,” Philosophy of the Social Sciences 29, no. 2 (June 1999), 212-213. Seigfried continues, Hull House in Chicago developed a pragmatist experimental model of transaction that criticized top-down approaches to problem solving in favor or working with others in a way that calculated to change the attitudes and habits of both the settlement workers, mostly middle- and upper-class women, and members of the impoverished working-class neighborhood with whom they worked. Hull House attracted the admiration and support of the Chicago school of pragmatists, including Dewey and George Herbert Mead, and formed and important part of the milieu out of which the departments of sociology and social work were later established at the University of Chicago.”
While Yezierska experienced first-hand reformists’ attitudes to housing, her relationship with the Progressivist educator John Dewey in 1917-1919 attuned her to broader theories of democracy. Dewey noticed that immigrants moving to the United States often found the transition difficult, that US social institutions were not always designed to accommodate immigrant life, and that immigrants often did not participate in civic life beyond their ethnic neighborhoods. US social life, according to Dewey, seemed fragmented and stagnant. Dewey’s contemporary Horace Kallen, an immigrant himself, noticed the same fragmentation; he wrote in his 1915 essay “Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot” that whereas the early colonists to the United States were of an “ethnic and cultural unity; they were homogenous with respect to ancestry and ideals,” the growing number of immigrants disrupted the “like-mindedness” of Americans.47 A year after Kallen published the essay, Dewey defined democracy as “more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”48 Whereas Kallen proposed cultural pluralism as the best end-result to the supposedly newfound heterogeneity of U.S. American life, Dewey argued that producing a new like-mindedness was central to the democratic project. As Dewey wrote, “To have the same ideas about things which others have, to be like-minded with them, and thus to be really members of a social group, is therefore to attach the same

meanings to thins and to acts which others attach. Otherwise, there is no common understanding and no community life.” In his many writings and teachings, Dewey advocated that immigrants, through social programming, and children, through public education, could be assimilated into a democratic vision of the United States. While Dewey’s vision of democracy was not exactly fixed, his refrain of “common understanding” that appears in his writing suggested that democracy would be achieved when any American could clearly communicate to another American.

As I turn to Yezierska’s fictional work, I argue that her writing demonstrates pessimism that “clear communication” is an achievable goal in an increasingly multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural city. The repetitious nature of her plots from project to project perhaps suggests frustration, as though she had not yet captured or conveyed the torment immigrant subjects felt under Progressivist reform projects. In her writing, this sense of inadequacy takes shape through an architectural form.

---

49 Ibid., 29-30.
50 Reviews of Yezierska’s writing from the 1920s support my argument. For example, John J. Smertenko, writing for The Literary Review calls Salome of the Tenements a “fecund failure.” He continues, “Miss Yezierska gives full measure of the ingredients that make popular fiction: compact and melodramatic action, obvious and conventional motives, undistinguished and uninspired characters, and a happy ending… Were the author a conscious and inveterate writer, she would not deserve this adverse criticism. But there is promise of an ability to do worthy work. How soon Miss Yezierska will fulfill this promise depends entirely upon the time it takes her to recognize her limitations. Obviously, her field must be a small section of Manhattan and her own soul. If she intends to carry on with her mission, she needs to realize that in order to achieve conviction her characters must live and represent what she declares they represent, that it is Gittel and not Sonia who stands for the East Side. Her work is a monotone, shrill and loud as the scolding of a yenteh…” Smertenko simultaneously decries Yezierska for relying upon stereotypes while upholding ideas about who does and does not represent slum life. See Johan J. Smertenko, review of Salome of the Tenements, The Literary Review, January 20, 1923, 395.
Windows, transparent surfaces, and mirrors repeatedly accompany in epiphanic moments, suggesting the insufficiency of democracy imagined as a “common understanding” or shared vision. Yezierska’s fiction expresses her sense that immigrant communities will feel most at home when they can determine their own visions for their futures.

### 3.2 Cinderella’s Glass Window: Racial Uplift as Fairy Tale

Between 1923 and 1932, Yezierska wrote four novels: 1923’s *Salome of the Tenements*, 1925’s *The Bread Givers*, 1927’s *Arrogant Beggar*, and 1932’s *All I Could Never Be*. The literary critic Susan Edmunds maintains that the repetition evident in these works is not the sign of a writer stuck in a particular theme, nor even necessarily the frustration of a story not yet full told, as I have suggested. It is only by considering them together, she argues,

> that the full impact of [Yezierska’s] vision is felt. Read one by one, the novels tell almost identical stories of an Eastern European Jewish immigrant working girl who struggled against all odds to achieve professional status and a lover who cherishes her work. Read together, they tell the story of a *nouvi byt*—or new everyday life—sprung up on the Lower East side.\(^5\)

Although I see the frustration in the repetition of this plot, I would argue that it is precisely this frustration that leads to the new everyday life. Yezierska both an ethno-

---

\(^5\) Edmunds, “Between Revolution and Reform,” 408.
pessimism about the ability of an immigrant woman to find a place in the American city
in which she can thrive under the Progressivist project and, from it, the beginning of a
new way of imagining the everyday in American through their eyes.²⁵²

The epiphanic moments that are choreographed in and in front of glassed
surfaces to which I have referred suggest this new perspective, as if, by looking out on
the city, the circumstances of the protagonist’s lived condition become apparent to her,
along with the scripts of her existence that she had not previously experienced as open
to challenge. Broadly speaking, there are two types of epiphanic moments: the first
happens when her immigrant subject realizes the squalor of her lived environs in her
Lower East Side tenement building. As Lisa Botshon argues, “The ghetto… was not only
a site in which immigrant Jews lived and worked, struggling with the realities of
poverty and pressures to Americanize, but also a kind of showcase where the immigrant
Jew was on parade for native-born Americans.”⁵³ In these moments I argue that
Yezierska’s protagonists feel the pressure of having to prove themselves as persons
capable of converting into an American subject.

---

²⁵² When I use the word “place,” I mean it both literally and metaphorically. Quite literally, Yezierska seems
to find it hard to find a geographic place in which she can live a life of her own desires. We see this in both
her fiction and her life beyond, as she was quite an itinerant soul. But I also mean “place” in the spiritual
sense.

of Narrative Theory 30, No. 3 (Fall 2000), 205.
The window literalizes Botshon’s observation that the immigrant is on display in the ghetto as it also gestures toward the limitations of imagining democracy as an inclusionary process. Yet the first epiphany is always followed by a second in which the same protagonist realizes all that she has lost by abetting Progressivist reformers in their projects to eradicate ghetto life. The second epiphany shows Yezierska’s protagonist as recognizing the extent to which she has been complicit in her own distortion and exploitation. The various endings of her novels suggest that Yezierska never finds a way to satisfy this second epiphany in her fiction. Whereas Louis Sullivan employs techniques lifted from fairy tales to show that organic architecture can work toward a utopian vision of democracy, Yezierska uses techniques lifted from fairy tales to show the exact opposite: that racial uplift is a narrative based in fantasy.

Yezierska’s first novel, Salome of the Tenements (1923), explicitly interrogates the Progressivist desire to work toward racial uplift through building a settlement house. When the protagonist, Sonya, meets and immediately falls in love with and soon marries the millionaire philanthropist John Manning, her friend Fanya calls her an “American Cinderella.” Whereas the traditional Cinderella narrative shows the glass slipper as the mechanism that lifts Cinderella out of poverty into royalty, this story instead offers the Manning Settlement Home. Unlike the glass slipper, which maintains class structure as

---

it lifts just one character from poverty to riches, the Manning Settlement Home is a project that will be a “beacon-light of human brotherhood, a center where his dream of democracy would find a growing realization” by working to eradicate class difference.\(^55\)

The Manning Settlement Home stands rhetorically as the device that will uplift slum dwellers into bourgeois American life.

Once Sonya meets Manning and learns of the Manning Settlement Home, she becomes immediately disoriented in her own home environs. When she returns to her Suffolk Street tenement home, “The very ground under her feet seemed to expand and glow. It was not solid. Nothing she touched was solid. Even the crooked stairs that led her to the hall-room changed into a Jacob’s ladder that led skyward where dreams open upon dreams.”\(^56\) Her encounter with Manning produces a sense for her that she will be quite literally lifted out of her tenement existence as she cognitively transforms her living quarters. The text continues:

Still under the spell of [Manning], she went to the window, looking out on a fire-escape where she kept her can of milk and groceries for her breakfast. The roaring tumult of the noises from the street below woke her from her dreams. Wedged in, jumbled shops and dwellings, pawnshops and herring-stalls, strained together begging for elbow room. Across the alley a second-hand store protruded its rubbish. Broken stoves, beds, three-legged chairs sprawled upon the sidewalk. The unspeakable cheapness of a dry goods shop flared in her face—limp calico dresses of scarlet and

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 78.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 4.
purple, gaudy blankets of pink and green checks. From the crowded windows hung dirty mattresses and bedding—flaunting banners of poverty.

She slammed the window with a crash. “God from the world! How did I stand all this till now?”

The grimy walls of her little room pressed in upon her—suffocated her.

“An end to darkness and dirt! I’ve found my deliverer! Already I’m released from the blackness of this poverty. Air, space, the mountain-tops of life are already mine!”

The spell Manning casts does not enchant Sonya’s surroundings, as we might expect.

Rather, under this spell, she experiences her environs through his eyes, as disenchanted. She sees that the furniture is broken, that the colors of her garments clash, that dirt and din cover every inch of her tenement home. She is embarrassed that Suffolk Street, rather than hiding its poverty in shame, displays it proudly. This sense of shame and frustration with herself for accepting the conditions of poverty suffocates her.

Furthermore, from the standpoint of her window, she begins to see how the poverty about her bars her and her fellow Jewish immigrants from participating in greater white Anglo-Saxon culture: poverty blackens them. Yet through the promise of Manning’s settlement project, she hopes to be lifted out of her ghettoized environs.

Unlike the traditional Cinderella narrative, Sonya’s story of uplift is fraught with conflict when she sees the Manning Settlement House at work. Whereas Louis Sullivan saw his organic architectural projects as ones that nurtured children to become

---

57 Ibid., 5
democratic citizens, Yezierska shows how Manning’s paternalistic vision arrests the population he wants to “save” in a childhood-like state. This becomes clear to Sonya in a moment in which Manning asks her to transcribe his dictations. When they sit down together to work, he tells her that he imagines the Settlement House as a structure that “‘build[s] a strong foundation for the right kind of womanhood, manhood, and citizenship.’” In imagining there to be a right type of “womanhood,” “manhood,” and “citizenship,” Manning effectively suggests that those who do not act in accordance with his democratic vision are neither adults nor citizens of their community. He continues, “‘The past year has seen many errors—often expense of fruitless energy, but we feel we are learning slowly and each month we grow in understanding of our problems and closer to our community.’”58 In this moment it becomes clear to Sonya that Manning imagines the settlement house as offering a blueprint for bourgeois citizenship according to his own terms, which is to say his own understanding of the problems of tenement life. Sonya not only experiences this sentiment not only as one that betrays their partnership, but also as that infantilizes her. “Her whole body shook under a tornado of weeping,” the text reads. “The tears ran out in a stream on the glass-covered desk. Her shoulder blades sticking up sharply rose and fell in spasms of sobbing. She looked very small, very pathetic—like a beaten child.”59 The text frames Sonya’s

58 Ibid., 86.
59 Ibid., 88.
recognition of the nefarious nature of the Manning Settlement House as one that is abusive and diminishing. The settlement house does not allow Sonya to flourish, but rather reminds her of her second-class status in New York.

When Sonya sees her tears stream onto Manning’s glass-covered desk, she begins to recognize that Manning’s vision to make democratic values clear to tenement dwellers reinstates a class structure that maintains the authority of philanthropists and the bourgeois class. Later as the two plan a society reception for the Manning Tenement Home, Sonya tells Manning explicitly that even under his democratizing project she still feel separated from his “society friends.” He “wave[s]… aside” her interpretation of class relations and reminds her that the reception is “[their] opportunity to show the world that all social chasms can be bridged with human love and democratic understanding.” In this moment she recognizes that her marriage is not a relationship built upon partnership but one in which she is placed on display to advance Manning’s political vision.

In the ensuing argument that emerges out of Manning’s dismissal of Sonya’s anxiety, the text shows that the immigrant subject will never be able to reach “democratic understanding” so long as members of the bourgeois class imagine the “deserving poor” as an object that broadcasts the purity of their political commitments.

---

60 Ibid., 119-120.
Sonya challenges Manning: “‘Democratic understanding?...Don’t talk over my head in your educated language. Tell me in plain words how there can be democratic understanding between those who are free to walk into steerage and the steerage people who are not allowed to give one step on the upper deck’” The text continues:

Evading his wife’s concrete question, he went on explaining in his usual, abstract way: “Why do you constantly emphasize differences which you and I both know to be false? I am giving up my life to prove my belief in the brotherhood of man,” he continued with hurt pride. “The elimination of all artificial class barriers is my religion. And you harp constantly on class differences, as if you wanted me to lose faith in my work.

And so Manning had his way.61

Manning not only dismisses Sonya’s analysis of class relations, but also insists that her challenge to him is a personal assault upon his character. Rather than taking her feedback as an opportunity to “learn... slowly” and “grow in understanding” of each other, he accelerates his democratic project by proposing a project to build “‘model tenements for model couples.’”62 As Yezierska works to resolve the narrative’s plot, Sonya asks Manning for a divorce and eventually settles with Jacques Holland, né Jaky Solomon—a fellow Jew from the Lower East Side who has built a fashion empire upon his own terms.

______________________________

61 Yezierska, Salome of the Tenements, 120.
62 Ibid., 133.
The feminist theorist Joan Copjec clarifies the logic of democracy that Yezierska troubles in *Salome of the Tenements* and elsewhere. Manning ultimately interprets democracy as a project that insists that the immigrant subject shed class difference in order to prove themselves as sufficiently American. In her 1991 essay “The Grid and the Logic of Democracy,” Copjec argues that democracy maintains power as an ideal within the American public through Cartesian logic, which assumes that although a statement (“The elimination of all artificial class barriers is my religion”) can be proven false (later, he asks Sonya to no longer “mix [their social] circles”), “the instance of doubt—of thought or speech—could not be doubted: it remained innocent of all charges of error.” 63 When Manning articulates democracy as his religion, he also asks of Sonya and his disciples to believe in him, or at least believe that his intentions are always noble despite the contradiction of his actions. Copjec effectively situates democracy as Progressivist reformers practice it as a project that seeks to reify the subject rather than diffuse or circulate power. She argues that the radical innocence of the democratic subject is created out of the notion that the democratic subject is also a “denatured, universal subject”—this same “brotherhood” that Manning develops, is a negative identity: “if all our citizens can be said to be Americans, this is not because we share any positive characteristics, but rather because we have all been given the right to *shed* these

characteristics... I divest myself of positive identity, therefore I am an American. This is the peculiar logic of democracy.”64 Even as Manning and Sonya do not speak specifically about the process of becoming American, so Sonya’s insistence that she maintains difference from Manning upsets him. In addressing class as a material condition of US life, Sonya very much questions the terms democracy insists upon in order to operate. As democracy promises individualization, it also promises to obscure difference as a productive agent.

Throughout the next decade, Yezierska continues to explore the tension between ethnic and classed difference and the democratic vision of housing reform. In her 1927 novel Arrogant Beggar, the protagonist Adele experiences the same initial epiphany that Sonya does: after applying to live in the Hellman Home for Working Girls, a philanthropic home designed to house young working women, Adele crawls onto her fire escape. She narrates:

Too excited to sleep, I crawled out on the fire escape, drawn to the little patch of gray which all the sky I ever saw between the black hulks of the tenements. The gray began to glow. Morning was breaking.

A moment of silence with nothing to mar the beauty. Then a cloud of black soot from a factory chimney darkened the glow of morning. The crash of the elevated trains, factory whistles, rumbling trucks, and the thousand and one noises that begin the day and swept away my thoughts.

64 Ibid., 13.
How could the soul keep alive here—where every breath of beauty was blotted with soot, drowned in noise—where even the sky was a prisoner and the stars choked?65

Adele’s interpretation of her slum environment is uncannily similar to that of Sonya’s. Once she imagines that she could live in an environment with “light, air, space, enough room,” she can only see that her current environment is the exact opposite: instead of air, she breathes soot; instead of space, she feels a prisoner.66 Like Sonya, Adele becomes included in a Progressivist housing project when she is invited to live in the Hellman Home. And like Sonya, Adele becomes tantalized by the possibility of class mobility when she falls in love with the son of Mrs. Hellman, Arthur.

Just as Sonya and Manning’s marriage ends after an irreconcilable argument about racial and class difference, so Adele and Arthur’s relationship deteriorates after a remarkably similar conversation. Before the argument takes place, Adele has moved back to the tenements after publically declaring to Mrs. Hellman that her time in Hellman House has made her feel “poisoned” and insulted by their charity.67 When Arthur tells her to act more generously toward his mother, she responds, “’[t]he whole world is made to order for you.’”68 He laughs at her and cruelly calls her a “dear child,” to which she replies: “I entertain you—do I? I amuse you? I’m to you a slumming tour.

65 Yezierska, Arrogant Beggar, 16.
66 Ibid., 8.
67 Ibid., 86.
68 Ibid., 112.
A sensation. But how absurd of me to expect you to understand."⁶⁹ As Sonya resists Manning’s desire to put their relationship on display in order to show the world that “all social chasms can be bridged,” so Adele has no desire to make herself available to Arthur as a “slumming tour.” Like Sonya, Adele eventually partners with a fellow Jew; but unlike Sonya, Adele chooses to embrace ghetto life by her novel’s end.

When Yezierska publishes again in 1932, she frames the same conflict about common understanding within a framework of translatability. In this novel, Yezierska’s protagonist Fanya falls in love with Henry Scott, a figure based upon Yezierska’s own lover, John Dewey. She first encounters him when she attends a lecture at a settlement home, where he delivers a speech on democracy. He imagines America as “the meeting ground of all nations of the world,” composing an “interracial symphony.”⁷⁰ Yet whereas Scott hears harmony, Fanya hears discord. After reading his book The Meaning of Democracy, Fanya tells him,

[Your book[...] belies the title. It’s written in such abstract, undemocratic language nobody but a handful of college people can make head or tail of it. Whenever I try to read it, I get so lost under the heavy weight of words[...] That book was meant to be the Bible of America. It’s wicked not to have it available for everybody. You could light up the lives of millions. But somehow it needs flesh and blood.⁷¹

---

⁶⁹ Ibid., 113.
⁷¹ Ibid., 70.
Fanya criticizes the academic and removed nature of Scott’s work, in effect arguing that his delivery of his democratic ideals is what makes it in fact undemocratic. She argues that rather than orientating or teaching the reader about democratic values, his text has made her feel lost. She experiences his writing as stripped of humanity.

At this later point in her writing career, Yezierska’s novels decidedly write against the immigrant narratives that had been popular in the 1910s. In From Alien to Citizen Steiner wrote that as the immigrant becomes acculturated into American life, “we are not only pardoned; we receive a new birth.” 72 But in All I Could Never Be, a novel framed by its title as sharply pessimistic, Fanya instead asserts that “[w]e foreigners are the orphans, the stepchildren of America. The old world is dead behind us, and the new world—about which we dreamed and about which you lecture to us—is not yet born.” 73 Whereas Steiner in his autobiography narrates the immigrant as receiving a “new birth,” Yezierska’s final novel argues that American urban environs are a trap for the immigrant that arrest them in between the space of death and rebirth. Yet by the word “yet,” Fanya also indicates that it is possible to build a world in which immigrants and their children can thrive.

Toward the end of All I Could Never Be, Yezierska hails and critically amends the image of Sonya seeing the ghetto as disenchanted from her tenement window. After

72 Steiner, From Alien to Citizen, 329.
73 Yezierska, All I Could Never Be, 38-39.
Fanya has for years called herself Fannie Frank, she goes to the local library to find her friend, the neighborhood librarian Helena Hoffman. Discovering that Miss Hoffman has not gone to work that day, Fanya proceeds to Miss Hoffman’s apartment on the Upper East Side, where she is startled to realize that the reason Miss Hoffman has not gone to work is because that day is Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year. When Fanya is confronted by Miss Hoffman’s religious practice—a practice that she as Fanny has long abandoned—she is swept into a reverie of her father’s observance of Yom Kippur in their native Poland. “Suddenly,” the text reads, “Fanya became aware of her father’s undying spirit in her.” She confesses to Miss Hoffman, “I was clutching too greedily at the rainbow that I lost the reality. Why, the mere thought of my father is ground under my feet, a sky over my head.” Miss Hoffman seems to have already experienced what Fanya is now just for the first time realizing. She says to her, “Now that you have found yourself in your father you have found something real and abiding. Roots to hold you. Soil in which to grow.” The text continues:

Fanya walked over to the window. Before her spread the city, roofs, towers, bridges, skyscrapers. The city from a height. How infinite, how many-sided was the beauty of the word! She had thought that beauty, strength, power was only in and about Henry Scott. Now she new that beauty was everywhere. Some of it very old like the imperishable beauty of her father. And some, like—the tranquil isolation of this woman—taking into her heart her people.
Fanya turned back to Miss Hoffman. “I’ve been Israel in the wilderness making a false image.”

In this moment Fanya experiences an epiphany about her native culture that moves her to integrate her Jewish values with her American life. She realizes that the only way she can continue to live in the world is by acknowledging that she can choose for herself to embrace those parts of her Jewish culture that are meaningful to her. Yet even upon recognizing this, she knows that returning to the ghetto (as Adele had done in Arrogant Beggar) is impossible for her: she thinks, “The dirt, the noise, the suffocating crowdedness of the tenements—she had outgrown them all. The old life of the ghetto was as much behind her as Henry Scott. No, there was no going back. But how go on?—Where?” Fanya eventually settles on Oakdale, a suburb, because the city feels unlivable.

*All I Could Never Be* was Yezierska’s last novel, although she lived for almost another forty years. In her autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, she explains, “The publicity for each new book had repeated the Cinderella rise from rags to riches. But it was a stale story now. I had written myself out. I could drive myself no longer. Now I had to face the fact that the books published after *Hungry Hearts*, instead of

---

74 Ibid., 194-195.
75 Ibid., 218.
getting better, were becoming thinner and thinner.‘’\textsuperscript{76} Throughout the 1930s she lived in poverty after both \textit{Arrogant Beggar} and \textit{All I Could Never Be} sold poorly. Yet by 1950 her memoir suggests that her relative silence over those eighteen years had granted her a perspective to synthesize what Fanya learns in \textit{All I Could Never Be}: that the only way for an immigrant like her to find grounding within American landscapes is to take time to determine her own values. In \textit{Red Ribbon} she turns to herself as a subject so that she can speak most candidly about her experience being a model immigrant, or a “Sweatshop Cinderella,” on display.

\textbf{3.3 Correcting the Mirror in Red Ribbon}

It is in \textit{Red Ribbon on a White Horse} that she describes her experience working in Hollywood on the set of \textit{Hungry Hearts} as like living “in a glass-house with crooked mirrors. Every move I made was distorted,” she writes, “and every distortion exploited to further the sale of \textit{Hungry Hearts}.”\textsuperscript{77} After eighteen years of silence Yezierska uses her memoir to return to the frustration that many of her protagonists felt throughout her novels. Sonia, Adele, and Fanya all felt exploited by their partnerships with Progressivist reformers, and all experienced difficulty determining how to continue living under that knowledge. In \textit{Red Ribbon}, Yezierska narrates herself, too, as a Jewish immigrant woman who has found it difficult to define herself as someone other than a

\textsuperscript{76} Yezierska, \textit{Red Ribbon on a White Horse}, 121-122.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 81.
“Sweatshop Cinderella.” In this section, I argue that we can read Red Ribbon on a White Horse as Yezierska’s attempt to correct the crooked mirrors so that she can better represent herself. In telling her own story, Yezierska displays a candor and vulnerability that allow her to produce herself as a subject who exceeds the Sweatshop Cinderella narrative. She produces for herself a narrative space not guided by her ability to “succeed” or “fail” in becoming an American subject. Instead, she corrects the mirror to, as she says herself, “creat[e] and recreat[e] self out of [her] defeats.”

Unlike Sullivan’s autobiography, Yezierska does not narrate her story from birth. She neither tells of her childhood in Poland, nor of her years living in the Lower East Side, nor does she mention her multiple marriages or her daughter. Rather, she opens her story with a phone call from her agent that Samuel Goldwyn in Hollywood wants to make a film out of her short story collection Hungry Hearts. As she rides the train from New York to Los Angeles, she feels “suspended in timelessness—sand, sky, and space.” She continues, “What a relief it was to let go—not to think—not to feel, but rest, silent—past, present and future stretching to infinity.” She imagines that her journey westward to Hollywood will allow her to become unstuck from her life in New York. She already knows that her reputation does not match her experience of herself. When she sees a stack of newspapers with her image reflected on its pages with headlines like

78 Ibid., 220.
79 Ibid., 34-35.
“‘Immigrant Wins Fortune in Movies,’” “‘Sweatshop Cinderella at the Miramar Hotel,’” and “‘From Hester Street to Hollywood,’” she feels disconnected from the stories written about her. She explains, “There was a picture of me above those captions, but I couldn’t recognize myself in it, any more than I could recognize my own life in the newspapers’ stories of my ‘success.’” In leaving New York, Yezierska hopes that her Hollywood picture will allow her to tell a story that better reflects her experience.

Initially, the abundant resources in Hollywood seem to offer her space to write her story afresh. When she finally arrives at the studio, the sight of her new writer’s desk confirms for her that in Hollywood she will have resources she has never known before. She writes:

I opened the drawers of my desk. They were full of white and yellow sheets and envelopes of all sizes, a whole box of carbons. Abundance now, and once I had counted every sheet bought in the five-and-ten store. I had used grocery bags, scraps of wrapping paper, and the backs of envelopes. Now I could be a glutton with paper. Writing and rewriting each page a thousand times without worrying about the cost.

Whereas her experience in New York has been framed by hunger, she is now granted the opportunity to be a glutton. If in New York she felt that the Sweatshop Cinderella

---

80 Ibid., 40.
81 Ibid., 42.
82 Earlier she describes her life in New York as “struggling with hunger and want.” Ibid., 31.
narrative followed her too closely, here she finds she will have unlimited space and resources to tell new stories from her world.

Yet even in a world of abundant resources, Yezierska finds that her Cinderella story is stickier than she thought. When she is invited to a party at the writer Rupert Hughes’ house, she “knew too well it was not me that had been invited to the dinner, but the ‘Sweatshop Cinderella’ the papers had made of me.”\(^{83}\) She continues:

> Leaning against the cushions of the car that was taking me to the home of Rupert Hughes I caught the sight of my straggling hair in the mirror. I smoothed it back as best I could. I looked down at my plain blue serge skirt, my thick-soled sandals. Why had I never dressed like other women? It wasn’t just a matter of being poor. The poorest shopgirl with her mind on style managed to look as smart as other showgirls. I never could or would fit into the up-to-date clothes that everybody else wore. Even now when I no longer had to search through bargain basements, now that I had money enough to shop at the best stores, perversity made me cling to my pushcart clothes. Even in Hollywood I wanted to be myself—whatever that was.

> Immediately the other side of me protested. What’s wrong with looking like Hester Street? I am Hester Street. Why should I be afraid to be what I am? Why should I dress up to meet them? Would they dress down to meet me? The familiar feel of the creases in my blouse, my unpolished shoes, the shines of my old skirt reassured me that with all the change around me, I was still unchanged. I was still myself.\(^{84}\)

---

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 56-57.
In this moment, as Yezierska looks in the rearview mirror reflects an image of herself that stands apart from the “Sweatshop Cinderella.” She begins to realize that while she cannot control how newspapers write about her, she also has the capacity to present herself as “myself—whatever that was.” Her first interpretation of the reflection that looks back at her is that she is not enough—not stylish enough, not Hollywood enough, not American enough. Yet as she maintains eye contact with the image that looks back at her, she begins to reinterpret this image much more kindly. She finds comfort in the fact that her reflection is undeniably herself.

This moment of gazing at her reflection in the mirror allows her to reflect upon her own writing process—a theme that continues to frame the rest of the story. At the party she meets the writer Alice Duer-Miller, who tells Yezierska that she finds writing a story so easy. Rather than forcing herself to agree with Duer-Miller, Yezierska instead candidly shares her anxieties about writing. She tells her:

“How I envy your clarity![…] And the ease with which you turn out one novel after another. I never know what I’m trying to write until it’s written[…] I only want to take the hurt out of my heart when I write. But the minute my pencil touches the paper, I begin to worry how to write instead of going ahead and writing. And I become stiff and self-conscious. Is it he fear of being a foreigner that makes me want to explain myself so much? But I’ve had moments when I was so filled with the life I’ve lived I felt myself flow out into my words. These rare moments when I was
my real self, I took back the fraud, the humbug, like God absolving the Prodigal.”

Yezierska, in her conversation with Duer-Miller, begins to remember that in her writing practice she has found moments in which she can accept herself as an anxious, imperfect writer. She reinterprets those moments in which she feels as though she has failed herself in her writing—when she has been too worried, too stiff, too self-conscious—as part of her writing process. As she finds space for herself to be “Hester Street,” she also finds space to incorporate the stress of being an immigrant writer, and feeling as though she has to represent Jewish immigrant women, as a part of what makes her writing process and her writing itself her own.

Once Yezierska begins to gain insight into her own writing process, she is able to identify those external pressures that produce a sense of alienation from herself. Still in Hollywood, Yezierska remembers a fiction teacher who chastises her for writing “emotional hodgepodge—-not a story.” He continues, “A story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end[...]So you think you’re clever enough to discard the rules and create your own form?” As she remembers this moment she recognizes that the imperative to leave her emotions out of her writing is arbitrary, as is the insistence upon her fiction occupying a particular narrative structure. In Hollywood, her team of writers has decided that the sad ending to her story is too depressing, so they hire Montague Glass.

85 Ibid., 60-61.
86 Ibid., 78.
to rewrite the film to add “laughs and a happy ending.” This culminates with Yezierska’s realizing that Hollywood is not space in which she can survive. “In Hollywood,” she writes, “the whirling race toward the spotlight, the frantic competition to outdistance the others, the machinery of success had to be kept going. The clock ticked off the minutes, prodding: Produce! Produce! Produce another best seller or get the hell out of here!” The competition of Hollywood determines those more productive writers as “successful,” but for those who struggle to write as quickly, only, “failure.” Yezierska realizes that “[she]’d live [her] life writing and rewriting her story.” She begins to look at her fiction, in which she fervently tried to determine how to properly resolve the tensions her protagonists experienced, as fundamentally flawed because she was not yet ready to answer their questions. She thinks to herself, “The story of my life is a big order… It would take me a lifetime to write it.”

The poverty she experiences during the 1930s makes it hard for her to feel like a success. Yet at the narrative’s end, Yezierska pauses for a moment to reflect upon the

\[\text{Ibid., 82. Hungry Hearts the film is largely based off of Yezierska’s short story “The Lost Beautifulness,” from the larger collection Hungry Hearts. In “The Lost Beautifulness,” the protagonist Hanneh Hayyeh paints her the interior walls of her tenement home white so that it will look more like middle-class housing. When she shows this to her landlord, she expects that he will be pleased with her for taking the initiative to upgrade his housing. Instead, he raises the rent on her because the apartment is now more valuable. Hanneh Hayyeh takes him to court, where the judge finds that he has the right to do so, and she ends up homeless. In the film version, the court sides with Hanneh Hayyeh and she receives a large settlement that allows her to move her family out to the suburbs, white picket fence and all.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 87.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 78}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 79.}\]
story she has written. Just like the beginning, she is riding a train—this time, to Fair Oaks, New York, where she now resides. She remembers when she moved there that she had “actually believed I could slough off my skin and with this new home begin a new life.” But such an endeavor, she recognizes is fundamentally impossible: “The ghetto was with me wherever I went,” she realizes. As she rides the train, she reflects upon her process of writing her autobiography:

Even when I began this story, long before I went to Fair Oaks, I did not know how it would end—that is, the meaning of the end. I thought I was writing the downward career of a failure. Goldwyn would have summed it up in a phrase: “From an author in Hollywood to a pauper on W.P.A.”

I wanted to unburden my shame for having failed. But on the train as I faced my disgrace, I saw that Hollywood was not my success, nor my present poverty and anonymity, failure. I saw that ‘success,’ ‘failure,’ ‘poverty,’ ‘riches,’ were price tags, money values of the market place which had mesmerized me and sidetracked me for years.

Whereas Yezierska had struggled for decades under the feeling of not being successful enough, not feeling wealthy enough, not feeling simply “enough,” she faces her disgrace to recognize that her sense that she is a disgrace is but a distorted reflection. She recognizes that she can choose to accept narratives about herself, or she can choose to

---

91 Ibid., 203.
92 Ibid., 219.
93 Ibid., 218-219.
recreate new signposts by which she can better understand herself. But as long as she buys into the “money values of the market place,” she will never feel enough.

At the end she turns to the same transcendentalism that structures Sullivan’s writing; but whereas Sullivan embraces transcendentalism to create a blueprint for how others can develop as democratic subjects, Yezierska’s turn to transcendentalism allows her to instead come to embrace herself holistically. Her friend Marian Foster sends her a letter that quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson. The letter reads: “‘When a man has got to a certain point of truth in his career, he becomes conscious forevermore that he must take himself for better, or for worse, as his portion.’”

Yezierska thus concludes her autobiography:

The power that makes grass grow, fruit ripen, and guides the bird in its flight is in us all. At any moment when man becomes aware of that inner power, he can rise above the accidents of fortune that rule his outward life, creating and recreating himself out of his defeats.

Yesterday I was a bungler, an idiot, a blind destroyer of myself, reaching for I knew not what and only pushing it from me in my ignorance. Today the knowledge of a thousand failures cannot keep me from this light born of my darkness, here, now.

Through writing her autobiography, Yezierska comes to an understanding that the immigrant cannot wait for others to validate them as sufficiently American, effectively acculturated, or deserving of a better life. By writing and rewriting her story, Yezierska

*94 Ibid., 212-213.
95 Ibid., 220.*
recognizes that the *only* shot at happiness that an immigrant might experience (a happiness that “now [comes] unbidden” for her) emerges not through reform, but through self-determination.
4. Build Bridges Not Walls: Richard Wright’s Blueprint

At the beginning of the second section of his 1945 memoir *Black Boy*, Richard Wright has left the Jim Crow South to pursue a better life in Chicago. Wright hopes that Chicago will offer a landscape free from the horrors he experienced in the US South. But he instead finds that one type of horror is replaced by another “unknown terror.” As he explains:

I looked northward at towering buildings of steel and stone. There were no curves here, no trees; only angles, lines, bricks and copper wires. Occasionally the ground beneath my feet shook from some faraway pounding and I felt that this world, despite its massiveness, was somehow dangerously fragile. Streetcars screeched past over steel tracks. Cars honked their horns. Clipped speech sounded about me. As I stood in the icy wind, I wanted to talk to Aunt Maggie, to ask her questions, but her tight face made me hold my tongue. I was learning already from the frantic light in her eyes the strain that the city imposed upon its people. I was seized by doubt. Should I have come here? But going back was impossible. I had fled known terror, and perhaps I could cope with this unknown terror that lay ahead.¹

Wright makes it clear in this passage that the architecture of the city does not stand apart from the isolation he feels but rather promotes it. He sees Chicago’s architecture as a system connected through “angles, lines, bricks and copper wires,” hardened lines of interconnection that do nothing to counter the sense that the world is “dangerously

fragile.” He feels alienated. The skyscrapers block his vision; the sounds of the city disrupt his ability to interpret human language. As he sees his Aunt Maggie, he quickly realizes that his experience is not specific to him. He later claims, “what moved me above all was the frequency of mental illness, that tragic toll that the urban environment exacted of the black peasant.”

In this chapter I explore Wright’s intensely architectural imagination. Through *Black Boy*, Wright relies on architectural metaphors to give expression to his lived experience. Repeatedly he describes his experience as one in which he “face[s] a wall” that produces cognitive alienation whether he is in the Jim Crow South or the urban North. In effect, Wright argues through *Black Boy* that the very architecture of Chicago—as well as the figurative and literal architecture of the United States—is irrevocably entrenched in racism. Yet, at the end of the memoir, he imagines that the very act of writing allows him to build an imagined architecture beyond the walls. He writes:

I picked up my pencil and held it over a sheet of white paper, but my feelings stood in the way of my words. Well, I would wait, day and night, until I knew what to say. Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.

---

2 Ibid., 284.
Wright ends, that is, where he begins: with an explanation of his motivation for writing his life story. Like Sullivan, he offers his life as a paradigm, but where Sullivan is motivated by his utopian dream of unity, Wright begins with the recognition of the impossibility of that dream. In its place, Wright writes his life as an architected space of inhabitation that allows for the potential to create community out of a landscape produced by alienation. In place of a vision of democracy as unity, he offers a bridge of words as a structure of connection that can begin to transcend the walled existence he has encountered as he has moved through the racist spaces of America.

Since the spatial turn of the 1990s, architectural and literary critics such as Dell Upton, Craig Evan Barton, Craig L. Wilkins, and William A. Gleason have supported Wright’s analysis that architecture both metaphorically and literally structures how Americans consider race.5 As Barton writes:

As a social construct and concept, race has had a profound influence on the spatial development of the American landscape, creating separate, though sometimes parallel, overlapping or even superimposed cultural landscapes for black and white Americans. The spaces forming these landscapes were initially “constructed” by the politics of

---

American slavery, and subsequently “designed” by the customs, traditions, and ideology emanating from the Supreme Court’s “separate but equal” finding in Plessy v. Ferguson, as well as the 20th century ‘Jim Crow’ statutes.”

Barton of course refers to the architecture of segregation—that white bodies and black bodies have been historically kept in separate spatial environments that were never equal, and that juridical decisions have continued to enforce segregation well into the twentieth and even twenty-first century. But in a particularly compelling account, architect and architectural scholar Craig L. Wilkins argues that the relationship between architecture and race runs deeper: that the architectural imagination in the United States is indubitably invested in whiteness. For Wilkins, rearchitecting race relations is not as simple as designing integrated space. He argues that John Locke’s theory of democracy, built upon the four pillars of “space, property, law, and government,” undergirds Western architectural practice. As space becomes enmeshed with delineating what is one’s property, and since the black body has been historically considered property within the United States, American architecture as the practice of “bounding [American] space” is fundamentally hostile to the black body. Since Lockean space posits that space

---

6 Barton, :Foreword,” xv.
7 Wilkins, The Aesthetics of Equity, 7-8.
8 Ibid.
exists before the body, the body is an apparatus that enables space to become visible: it is through the body and its relationship to other bodies that space becomes knowable.⁹

In The Aesthetics of Equity, Wilkins posits that as American architects became trained and eventually licensed through American architecture academies, they became disciplined into understanding space in this Lockean sense. And so long as architects understood space in these terms, there was no way for the architect to design non-racist space. As he explains:

Lockean space dichotomizes and polarizes the predominant understanding of space by legitimizing its inherent whiteness as the defining factor of environmental desirability, informing us that any other space created in this system will inevitably be measured against its original—white—paradigm and will always be found wanting, no matter what its construction and/or similarities.¹⁰

Wilkins contends that whiteness—a certain prescription to Western values, a certain ability to be disciplined into a particular type of democratic creature, and above all, a particularly pale phenotypic presentation—shapes the standard for a desirable community. And in such a context, the black body will always be understood as undesirable, unfit to be a particular democratic creature, and fundamentally subpar to the white standard, if not overtly hostile to the preexisting Lockean order. In short: the

⁹ Ibid., 11.
¹⁰ Ibid., 22.
black body is not wanted in American space, even as American space purports to be democratic.

Wright was aware of the concept of racialized space. His friendship with key members of the Chicago School of Sociology is well known, among them, Louis Wirth, who developed the term “urbanism” in order to name the unique features of city life.11 Scholars disagree about how Wright came to know Wirth: William R. Nash argues that Wirth’s wife Mary, a social worker, met Wright’s family through a routine visit.12 Robert Butler, alternately, argues that Wright met Wirth through their mutual involvement in the John Reed Club, a collective of Marxist intellectuals and artists.13 Wirth introduced Wright to Robert Park, who pioneered the field of urban sociology and argued for the centrality of space to the formation of a social imaginary. Wirth also introduced Wright

11 In his 1938 essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” Wirth remarks, “Nowhere has mankind been farther removed from organic nature than under the conditions of life characteristic of great cities. The contemporary world no longer presents a picture of small isolated groups of human beings scattered over a vast territory, as [William Graham] Sumner described primitive society. The distinctive feature of the mode of living of man in the modern age is his concentration into gigantic aggregations around which cluster lesser centers and from which radiate the ideas and practices that we call civilization.” Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” American Journal of Sociology 44, no. 1 (July 1938): 1-2.
12 William R. Nash, “The Chicago School of Sociology and the Black Chicago Renaissance” in Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 468. Nash writes: “T]he immediate cause for Wright’s in-depth exposure to Chicago sociology was the chance assignment of Mary Wirth, Louis Wirth’s spouse, to the Wright family’s case. She introduced the aspiring author to her husband, who provided Wright with an informal curriculum in sociology and, along with his research assistant [Horace] Cayton, discussed the readings with his new protégé at some length. As a part of this discussion, Wirth introduced Wright to the concept of “urbanism,” which the sociologist defined in a landmark study entitled “Urbanism as a Way of Life.” Building on [Robert] Park’s 1915 “The City,” Wirth suggests the existence of a mode of experience that unites the denizens of a particular urban environment and thereby shapes patterns of behavior in the given city.”
to St Clair Drake, Horace R. Cayton, and E. Franklin Frazier, all three black sociologists
who, as Gerald D. Jaynes has argued, popularized ethnography as a method to “address
the issues people find most pressing in their lives and [to connect] their predicaments to
larger matters of social structure.”¹⁴ As Carla Cappetti and others have argued, Wright’s
tutelage under Wirth, Park, Cayton, and other members of the Chicago School of
Sociology taught him to apply principles of sociology to his observations of black urban
life.¹⁵ Yet, Wright gave back to the field of sociology as much as he learned. His
relationship with Cayton would be instructive in the development of Cayton’s co-
authored study of black urban life since the turn of the twentieth century, Black
Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City.¹⁶ Wright penned the introduction to
Black Metropolis when it appeared in 1945, the same year that Black Boy was published.

In this chapter, I argue that Wright imagines that black writing can allow
readers across race to recognize the interconnected nature of human life. Furthermore,
Wright’s texts suggest that the recognition that racism structures connection among

¹⁴ Gerald D. Jaynes in “The Chicago School and the Roots of Urban Ethnography: An Intergenerational
Conversation with Gerald D. Jaynes, David E. Apter, Herbert J. Gans, William Kornblum, Ruth Horowitz,
James F. Short, Jr., Gerald D. Suttles and Robert E. Washington,” Ethnography 10, no. 4 (November 2009),
376.
¹⁵ Carla Cappetti, Robert Bone, and William R. Nash have been particularly instructive in demonstrating the
influence of these sociologists on Richard Wright. See Carla Cappetti, Writing Chicago: Modernism,
Ethnography, and the Novel (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), 194; Robert Bone, “Richard Wright and the
Chicago Renaissance,” Callaloo 28 (Summer 1986): 448-449; William R. Nash, “The Chicago School of
Sociology and the Black Chicago Renaissance” in Writers of the Black Chicago Renaissance, ed. Steven C. Tracy
urban subjects will create a consciousness that is the first step toward rebuilding a desegregated urban environment. Black Boy bears witness to Wright’s understanding of the spatial expression of racism and to the bridge-building he hoped his words could achieve. His 1937 essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” which argues for writing’s centrality in the development of a black consciousness, manifests the strong influence of the Chicago School sociologists and suggests an evolving interest in the connection between writing and architecture. In what follows, I will trace that influence from the essay to Black Boy and Wright’s 1940 novel, Native Son, to show how Wright used multiple forms and genres to offer sociological glimpses of black life under both the Jim Crow south and the urban north. I will connect the sociological valences of these writing projects to Wright’s use of “walls” as metaphor and show how he eventually came, in Black Boy, to lay plans for a world beyond architected racism through the figure of the bridge. I argue that the “bridge” as a structure invites the reader to imagine democratic community in the United States as one not constituted upon establishing likeness with other members of the community, but in connecting through differences. In doing so, Wright’s text invites readers—regardless of their racial identification—to participate in a multiracial project to end white supremacy.

4.1 Wright’s Blueprint
In 1937, the writer Marian Minus asked Wright to guest-edit an issue of *Challenge*, a journal dedicated to black uplift, which she co-edited in New York with Dorothy West. Wright used this opportunity to rename the journal *New Challenge*, promote himself as the issue’s editor, and feature his own essay at the center of the magazine.\(^\text{17}\) That essay was titled “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” Critical of Wright’s meddling in the wellbeing of *Challenge*, Verner D. Mitchell and Cynthia Davis describe the essay as “a manifesto… that ridicules the writers of the Harlem Renaissance…as ‘French poodles’ that showed off their parlor tricks for white patrons.”\(^\text{18}\) Looking back from the perspective of a half century, the critic Barbara Johnson is more generous, contending that “Negro writing… could fulfill itself only by becoming at once black and red.”\(^\text{19}\) As Wright applied a Marxist lens to black writing, he argued that black writers needed to shift from imagining their readership as sympathetic white folk to imagining a broader, black audience. As the critic V.P. Franklin summarizes:

> Wright believed that African-American culture was a source upon which the artist could draw for inspiration, but he was more concerned about the social consciousness of the black writer. He argues that while African-American workers had demonstrated a consciousness of the sources

---


\(^{\text{18}}\) Ibid.

of their oppression, the literary works by most African-American writers did not reflect this awareness.\textsuperscript{20}

In this essay, Wright most centrally argues that Black writing can be a space through which to promote this social consciousness. Black writers, he argues, have never bothered to “address… the Negro himself, his needs, his suffering, his aspirations.”\textsuperscript{21}

Whiteness has always been the imagined recipient of black texts.

In this section I address “Blueprint for Negro Writing” within the context of segregation. I argue that Wright’s “Blueprint” argues that black writers can begin to be able to overcome segregation not by showing white audiences that black people are just like their white counterparts, but rather by writing literature that features the honest expression of black experiences. Wright argues that articulating the range of experiences that differentiate black experiences from that of their white counterparts can allow black and white readers to develop a consciousness that sees the luxury of whiteness as directly connected to black struggle. By imagining his treatise as occupying the form of a blueprint, Wright argues that the black writing that could emerge from his essay had the potential to lay plans to a world free from racism.

As Wright developed “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” his friend Louis Wirth was writing “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” an essay that codified the idea that segregation is an effect of the chaos of urbanism. Wirth writes:

Place and nature of work, income, racial and ethnic characteristics, social status, custom, habit, taste, preference, and prejudice are among the significant factors in accordance with which the urban population is selected and distributed into more or less distinct settlements. Diverse population elements inhabiting a compact settlement thus tend to become segregated from one another to the degree in which their requirements and modes of life are incompatible with one another and in the measure in which they are antagonistic to one another. Similarly, persons of homogenous status and needs unwittingly drift into, consciously select, or are forced by circumstances into the same area.²²

In his description of segregation as a process in which “persons of homogenous status and needs unwittingly drift into, consciously selected, or are forced by circumstances into the same area,” Wirth presents segregation as passive, a force that happens to people rather than a phenomenon that people actively create. But as Rashad Shabazz has recently argued, the black ghettos of the South Side were not spontaneously produced by custom, habit, or taste; rather, restrictive covenants made possible by “contract law and deed restriction” actively created segregated neighborhoods. Shabazz dispels Wirth’s conception of segregation by framing restrictive covenants as “the tactical and

sociospatial tool that carved up the city’s geography along racial lines, fostering deep and profound unequal distribution of resources based on color.”

As Michael Carriere has argued, Wirth’s development of “urbanism” as a concept directly paved the way for urban planners to regard the Black Belt in Chicago as “chaotic and unplanned,” as if racial segregation were not a phenomenon deeply encoded in the DNA of American landscapes. At the same time, sociologists, urban planners, and architects, including Sullivan, were also beginning to study how they might “organize” life that is “chaotic and unplanned” through a conscious engineering of social space. In “Blueprint,” as Wright offered a direction for the future of black writing, he focused on the recasting of black consciousness damaged by centuries of racism and decades of segregation as a necessary precursor to the organization of black space. Wright reframes sociological conversations to insist that black people can and should imagine themselves as drawing a blueprint for a world segregated in practice as well as principle.

In “Blueprint,” Wright asks his reader to “ask questions, to theorize, to speculate, to wonder out of what materials can a human world be built” apart from the segregated

---

24 Michael Carriere, “Chicago, the South Side Planning Board, and the Search for (Further) Order: Toward an Intellectual Lineage of Renewal in Postwar America,” Journal of Urban History 39, no. 3 (Apr. 2013): 424. In this essay, Carriere shows how the South Side Planning Board called upon Louis Wirth directly in their attempt to revive South Side black neighborhoods. The SSPB eventually called in Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe to help them plan a space they believed to be better organized.
world that already exists. Wright argues that black writers have never had the opportunity to ask this question. “White America” has never allowed black writing to emerge as a deliberate form of art that has potential to shape the lives of white and black readers alike. Like Sullivan, he turns to a metaphor of the garden. If Sullivan earlier imagined the garden as a space through which the child can grow as a democratic subject, Wright shows that black people have been excluded from this project. As he writes:

White America never offered these Negro writers any serious criticism. The mere fact that a Negro could write was astonishing. Nor was there any deep concern on the part of the white American with the role Negro writing should play in American culture; and the role it did play grew out of accident rather than intent or design. Either it crept in through the kitchen in the form of jokes, or it was the fruits of that foul soil which was the result of the liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro “geniuses” and burnt-out white Bohemians with money.

Wright argues that black writing, under white America, has never been pace to grow with an intended design; black writing has never been cultivated in order to allow black life to flourish. In some cases, he sees the creativity and humor of black folk creeping into kitchens like weeds untended—uncultivated, but intent to grow nonetheless. In other cases, he sees black writing as growing from that “foul soil” produced from “white

26 Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” 97.
Bohemians” paying black people for their own entertainment. Regardless of whether black writing grows like weeds or from that foul soil, Wright argues that black writing has been given little space to challenge the pre-existing racial order. Black writing, in these forms, can instead confirm existing stereotypes that narrate black people as inferior to white people.

Wright argues that black writing has for too long tried to appeal to a modern belief in the universality of humankind. At the time of his writing, Wright argues that previous black writing has “assumed two general aspects: (1) It became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of ‘achievement’; (2) It became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice.” In arguing that black writing has “assumed...aspects,” Wright asks his readership to consider the directed orientation of these texts. The first iteration of black writing emphasizes ornamentation: an architectural element associated with antiquated design forms among the bourgeoisie in the United Kingdom, Continental Europe, and the United States in the Victorian era.

27 Here Wright might be referencing black art more generally, especially the rise of Black and Tan clubs, in which black musicians played jazz for integrated audiences. Though Black and Tan clubs were critical in the development of jazz music, often black performers had to perform minstrelsy. Thomas Brothers writes specifically about the Creole Band, a jazz group from New Orleans that regularly performed at the Lincoln Gardens in Chicago: “The Creole Band’s skit was performed in front of a backdrop painting of a plantation, with log cabin, the master’s big house, and ‘many little darkie huts’ scattered amidst blossoming cotton fields. The musicians dressed as slaves. After a long work day they decided to wander over to the cabin of Old Black Joe, portrayed by Morgan Prince, who wore black grease paint, a long coat, simple hat, gray beard, and a wig. With a full moon rising slowly in the background, Bill Johnson began to play My Old Kentucky Home on his string bass, his music magically putting ‘vigor into the old man’s rheumatic knees,’ as one reviewer put it.” See Thomas Brothers, Louis Armstrong, Master of Modernism (New York, Norton: 2014), 26.

28 Ibid., 97-98.
second iteration occupies the space of a plea: a verbal form asking that Black bodies be inducted into modernity. The two versions are united by their desire to occupy forms already entrenched in particularly modern conversations. Both forms imagine humanity in a universalist capacity—that the black writer must do certain things in order to prove their humanity.

In Wright’s time, “ornamentation” was both racially loaded and out of style. He knew this as a reader, writer, and urban subject. In fiction, the long-winded hyper-stylized Victorian prose had long given way to a shorter, starker realist diction; in architecture, the architects had for decades privileged efficiency and functionality over decorousness. By the time Wright composed “Blueprint,” Sullivan’s desire for architecture to express function had become a global trend. But while Sullivan flirted with ornamentation if he felt it served the organic spirit of his building, other architects eschewed ornamentation wholeheartedly. Most notably, the Austrian architect Adolf Loos issued a polemic now known as “Ornament and Crime” when he delivered a series of lectures between 1909 and 1910. In this speech, Loos named ornamentation as proof that some cultures were less evolved than others. While “amoral” populations like the

“child” or “the Papuan” did not know better than to use ornamentation to express their base eroticism, modern Western men, Loos argued, should know better:30

Wright’s linking of ornamentation to achievement indicates that he may have been familiar with these debates: that he knew that ornamentation was once a “hallmark of achievement” but now might instead inadvertently reinforce the stereotype that black people are less evolved than white America—that they are arrested in nineteenth century conceptions of style while white America has started embracing new ideals. And yet, the “educated Negro pleading with white America for justice” occupies the flip side of the achievement coin. Unlike antiquated ornament, the plea is direct and forward: neither coy nor subtle in its demands to be heard. We might imagine the plea as the literary mirror of the functionalist building structure: both forms are unornamented and exist to serve an essential function. The plea as a practice, like ornament, calls upon a white readership to recognize the utility of reconceiving of black life as capable of absorbing modern values, and thus able to enter modernity.

30 In “Ornament and Crime,” Loos argues that the modern man who uses ornamentation is either a criminal or a degenerate, thus stigmatizing anyone who would dare to use it in architecture, craft, writing, and more. Loos writes, “One can measure the culture of a country by the degree to which its lavatory walls are daubed. Whit children it is a natural phenomenon. Their first artistic expression is to scrawl on the walls erotic symbols. But what is natural to the Papuan and the child is a symptom of degeneration in the modern man. I have made the following observation and have announced it to the world: The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use.” Conflating the use of ornamentation with smearing feces, Loos casts ornamentation as the result not just of a natural desire for the modern subject to overcome, but also as a perverse desire that the modern subject should consider shameful. See Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” in Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts, ed. David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown (Upper Saddle River, NY: Prentice Hall, 2011), 123.
As Wright mobilizes the word “plea,” he almost certainly aims to criticize sentiments like the ones popularized by W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 essay “The Talented Tenth.” In “The Talented Tenth,” Du Bois advocates that the United States invest in the university education of a promising ten percent of black Americans, who would in turn be able to uplift the remaining ninety percent. Du Bois’s essay circulated in *The Negro Problem*, an anthology of essays published by Booker T. Washington. Washington’s introduction describes “The Talented Tenth” as “[a] strong plea for the higher education of the Negro, which those who are interested in the future of the freedman cannot afford to ignore.” In this essay, Du Bois calls out to white people to allow black men to enter universities so that black people can better participate in modern American life.

Strikingly, Du Bois turns to architectural metaphors to imagine how educating black people within the university system will change American life. Early in his essay, Du Bois quotes this statement by the white abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman:

> Before [the noble influence of educating black people], the country only blossomed even in bondage, like a fine plant beneath a heavy stone. Now, under the elevating and

---

cherishing influence of the American Anti-Slavery society, the colored race, like the white, furnishes Corinthian capitals for the noblest temples.\textsuperscript{32}

In forwarding Chapman’s sentiment, Du Bois imagines that the end result of educating the black man is not black liberation, but bettering the United States as a whole. By her reference to “Corinthian capitals,” Chapman argues that through education the black person can reproduce classical structures precious to the “City Beautiful” movement. The plea imagines black bodies as a potential untapped resource for bolstering American strength and beauty; it does not imagine that black subjectivities may have desires to build apart from the vision of America. Du Bois himself argues to this effect, asking the reader:

Do Americans ever stop to reflect that there are in this land a million men of Negro blood, well-educated, owners of homes, against the honor of whose womanhood no breath was ever raised, whose men occupy positions of trust and usefulness, and who, judged by any standard, have reached the full measure of the best type of modern European culture?\textsuperscript{33}

In stating that black people can be people of “trust” and “usefulness,” Du Bois too writes to persuade the white reader that black people are a people of accomplishment. By the


\textsuperscript{33} W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” 41.
plea Du Bois begs for the black person’s entrance into America with a promise that in the face of injustice, the black body will not act violently.

By describing this second aspect as “a plea for justice,” Wright argues that previous black writing has for too long tried to prove to white America that the black subject is already modern. In “Blueprint,” Wright wants black writers to abandon this project. Du Bois’s “plea” is a demand for inclusion within white Corinthian capitals; Wright’s blueprint calls for black writers to develop their own aesthetic practices. For to imagine black liberation as a demand for inclusion enables white people to maintain power to allow or disallow people of color to share in the democratic project. White people maintain the right to define the democratic project’s parameters—in effect demanding what behaviors and obligations black people must fulfill before they can participate in the democratic city.34 And so under this second aspect, in which the “educated Negro plead[s] with white America,” the educated black person asks permission to join white America—not to change it, but to be allowed a part of it. The undergirding assumption that accompanies this plea is that the black writer who asks for justice also asks to participate in whiteness. By demonstrating their education, black

34 In the past several years, we have seen this same argument reproduced in Ferguson, Baltimore, Charleston and elsewhere: too often, white pundits, bloggers, and social critics argue that the rioting following the killing of unarmed black men demonstrates a problem with black America—that black Americans have not yet demonstrated the ability (or interest!) to join white America is a just, civil, democratic society. These moments prove to me that Wright is just as pertinent as ever, and should be required reading for all residents of the United States.
writers show they can “responsibly” participate in white America without augmenting American values. I put “responsibly” in scare quotes to emphasize, too, that an undergirding of Wright’s phrasing constructs the black writer as infantilized by the “adult” white America.

Instead of trying to prove black humanity, instead of begging for justice, Wright argues for the cultivation of a writing practice that focuses on four elements: “the problem of perspective,” “the problem of theme,” the “autonomy of craft,” and “the necessity for collective work.” Through these four elements, Wright argues that black writers can cultivate a higher “level of consciousness.” If ornamentation and the plea were structured by appeals to the universality of humankind, it is instead the specific experiences of black people that drive the cultivation of these four elements. “Every iota of gain in human thought and sensibility should be ready grist for his mill,” Wright claims, “no matter how farfetched they may seem in their immediate implications.” That is, in attending to what specifically informs a black writer’s life, the black writer will begin to utilize these four elements. Wright’s blueprint is a blueprint of particularity.

36 Ibid., 106.
37 Ibid., 103.
Wright’s architectural consciousness emerges in his development of “perspective” as a term that bridges the literary, the cognitive, and the architectural. As Wright defines it:

Perspective is that part of a poem, novel, or play which the writer never directly puts on paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too close and the result is blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is the neglect of important things.\(^{38}\)

Perspective is an extra-textual space that enables writers to see their own “struggles, hopes, and sufferings” as beyond their own experiences. Perspective is a function of distance, a space beyond the literary that enables writers (and by extension, readers) to act as interpreters of their lived experience and their world.

If ornament and the plea appeal to a sense of universality that did not recognize the unique station of black people in America, perspective enables writers to capture the relationship between groups of humans without relying upon a language of shared sameness. As Wright argues, “The Negro writer must create in his readers’ minds a relationship between a Negro hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.”\(^{39}\) Perspective, when taken at the right distance, would allow a reader to see that the men who loll in swivel chairs might have

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 104.
immense power over the black female cotton picker of the south, but that the men in swivel chairs would also be negatively impacted should she and her fellow cotton pickers stop picking cotton. In this short sentence, Wright creates an imperative for the black writer to stop speaking to a white population, but rather to speak connections between people who seem disparate from each other. By linking the men in swivel chairs with the black women who pick cotton, Wright names a spatial discourse that thinks beyond local connections.

Wright argues that by building these connections, black writing has the capacity to remake the human world. Establishing perspective allows the black writer to work toward the production of an affective realism that validates the pain and suffering that any minoritized person might experience. As Wright explains:

> The world has grown huge and cold. Surely this is the moment to ask questions, to theorize, to speculate, to wonder out of what materials can a human world be built. Each step along this unknown path should be taken with thought, care, self-consciousness, and deliberation. When Negro writers think they have arrived at something which smacks of truth, humanity, they should want to test it with others, feel it with a degree of passion and strength that will enable them to communicate it to millions who are groping like themselves.\(^40\)

Wright argues that in writing what feels urgent and what feels real, black writers will be able to give expression to those who do not write. It is through these “step[s] along this

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 106.
unknown path” that a new world order can be built. The materials of this world are not concrete, stone, and steel, but rather “thought, care, self-consciousness, and deliberation.” Through these materials Wright believes that a larger social consciousness can be designed that will make white supremacy unviable.

The task of building this new world is incumbent not just on black writers, but on everyone. Wright imagines this as a multiracial project that will be led by black writing: this is in part what he means by “collective work.” As he explains:

This problem [of black isolation], by its very nature, is one that must be approached contemporaneously from two points of view. The ideological unity of Negro writers and the alliance of that unity with all the progressive ideas of our day is the primary prerequisite for collective work. On the shoulders of white writers and Negro writers alike rest the responsibility of ending the mistrust and isolation. By placing cultural health above narrow sectional prejudices, liberal writers of all races can help to break the stony soil of aggrandizement out of which the stunted plants of Negro nationalism grow.41

In order for black art to take root, and for black life to flourish, white writers (and white readers) must work to make an environment in which these things are possible. For if white people maintain an architecture of white supremacy, black people will find themselves in a landscape in which it is impossible for black life to flourish. If at the beginning of his essay Wright imagined black writing taking seeds in plantation fields,

41 Ibid.
he now imagines a garden—perhaps an urban garden—tended to by writers and readers of any race who are committed to black liberation. He amends Sullivan’s metaphor of the garden to argue that “cultural health” should be the goal of black aesthetics rather than “democracy. “An architecture of segregation cannot be supplanted by an architecture of acculturation or an architecture of integration, but by an architecture of care. In developing this architecture of care, Wright wants to cultivate a cultural landscape that allows black life to thrive.

And so in naming his essay a blueprint, Wright does not just imagine black writing as a spatial practice, but imagines that black writing can occupy an active role in constituting lived experience. When Wright theorizes writing as a spatial form, he argues that black writing can lay plans to a world as “something becoming” rather than something “fixed and admired.” The contemporary philosopher Elizabeth Grosz argues a similar point: in writing about the “closet” as a structure that imprisons queer subjects, she writes that “minorities…aren’t ‘imprisoned’ in or by space, because space…is never fixed or contained, and thus is always open to various uses in the future…Space is the ongoing possibility of a different inhabitation.” Just as Grosz imagines space as a condition of mutability, of futurity, Wright imagines that black writing can allow black subjects to occupy the position of creators in a world that seeks their exclusion. Wright

42 Ibid., 98-99
argues that black writing in his present has the potential to stage a different world for future residents of the same city blocks in which he and his fellow black migrants reside; writing allows black subjects to create the terms of their inhabitation in space.

In both *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Wright uses architectural metaphors as a mode to build this “deeper consciousness” among his readers. In *Native Son* he crafts a story around the character of Bigger Thomas, a twenty-year-old black man seemingly already doomed to be named criminal by his black masculinity. The novel chronicles Bigger’s apparently inevitable descent into criminality as the result of his efforts to avoid what he knows to be the expectations of a racist white culture. Each of the steps of this descent represents his attempt to avoid the misinterpretation of that culture. It is a journey with a spatial dimension, beginning with his finding himself in the wrong bedroom at the wrong time and culminating in what Wright depicts as his inevitable imprisonment. In a letter to the reviewer David L. Cohn, he explains, “I wrote *Native Son* to show what manner of men and women our ‘society of the of the majority’ breeds, and my aim was to depict a character in terms of the living issue and texture of his daily consciousness.”

In doing so, Wright argues that a person’s subjectivity is produced out of the circumstances of their everyday lives. But as Wright continues to write, and as he turns his writing upon himself in the form of a memoir, he turns to walls to depict the effect of

---

segregation upon the psyche of black subjects under Jim Crow. Throughout the narrative of *Black Boy*, Wright continually encounters walls as structures that limit not only his own consciousness, but the consciousness of everyone to whom he lives in proximity—white or black. In doing so, *Black Boy* heightens the architectural-cognitive framework started in *Native Son*. It is in his own journey from *Native Son* to *Black Boy* that we can see Wright most closely working out his blueprint.

### 4.2 Walls and Segregation

In *Native Son*, Wright crafts a story that shows how urban environs under Jim Crow limit the potential of urban black masculine subjects. *Native Son* follows the journey of Bigger Thomas, a twenty-year-old black man from a cramped kitchenette in the South Side of Chicago with his family to a tiny prison cell on death row. As Rashad Shabazz has argued, Bigger experiences his kitchenette home as carceral.\(^{45}\) Early in the novel, Bigger remarks to his friend Gus, “Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and we can’t. It’s just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I’m on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence…”\(^{46}\) Bigger experiences the world as

\(^{45}\) Shabazz, *Spatializing Blackness*, 33-34. Shabazz’s study of Wright offers a fantastic history of how developers built kitchenettes as an “antidote” to the housing crisis in part produced by the volume of Black migrants coming to Chicago from the Deep South.

Manichean, in which blackness itself seems to constitute a prison. Furthermore, Bigger experiences his existence as one in which he has no agency. As he says to Gus, “I reckon we the only things in this city that can’t go where we want to go and do what we want to do.”\textsuperscript{47} Bigger does not experience life as a subject, but rather as an object—a thing—trapped in his South Side environs and his black body.

When Bigger physically leaves the South Side to work as a chauffeur for the Dalton family, he contrasts his feeling of South Side carcerality to the spaciousness he sees in his employers’ environs: “[W]hile walking through this quiet and spacious white neighborhood, [Bigger] did not feel the pull and mystery of the thing... The houses he passed were huge; lights glowed softly in windows. The streets were empty, save for an occasional car that zoomed past on swift rubber tires. This was a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded.”\textsuperscript{48} He experiences the luxury of the neighborhood as one that is not only unavailable to him, but one guarded from him: created in the name of keeping bodies like his own away or at least contained in carefully circumscribed service roles. Even as he literally walks the streets of this neighborhood, it continues to register as a “cold and distant world”—not one accessible to his body.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 21
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 43-44.
As he gets to know the Dalton family, he immediately can see that the luxury of their white and affluent neighborhood is made possible by the maintenance of his own poverty. Although Mr. Dalton supports the NAACP, and both he and his wife identify as philanthropists (Mr. Dalton says of her, “She has a very deep interest in colored people”), they are also the slumlords who own many South Side kitchenettes—including the very one the Thomas family lives in. The Daltons do not seem to recognize this moral contradiction, but Bigger notices it immediately; he cognitively “blot[s] out” his discomfort so he can continue to work. Thus the text suggests that racism is not unilaterally apparent to all of the characters. Bigger must perform additional affective labor in addition to his waged labor.

The Daltons’ twenty-three-year-old daughter, Mary, and her boyfriend, Jan, like Bigger, see Mr. and Mrs. Dalton’s contradictions. When the two of them insist that they accompany Bigger to a black-owned diner, Mary expresses to Bigger that she, too, feels limited by the racialized geography that structures Chicago living:

“You know, Bigger, I’ve long wanted to go into these houses,” she said, pointing to the tall, dark apartment buildings loping to either side of them, “and just see how your people live. You know what I mean? I’ve been to England, France and Mexico, but I don’t know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so little about each other. I just want to see. I want to know these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they

---

49 Ibid., 47.
50 Ibid.
**must** live like we live. They’re **human**...There are twelve million of them...They live in our country... In the same city with us...”\(^{51}\)

As Mary narrates herself as a world tourist—as someone who has “been to England, France, and Mexico”—she also recognizes that the tragedy of racism is such that she feels she cannot tour neighborhoods only miles away from her own. She frames this as blindness; in the darkness of not knowing what lies beyond the racialized landscape she, Jan, and Bigger inhabit, Mary gropes about in her conversation with Bigger to confirm that the shared humanity of white people and black people

“**must** live like [white people] live.” The ellipses between her sentences communicate how unsure she is of this proposition. In looking Bigger in the eyes, she seeks confirmation from him that his everyday life—his home—must be just like hers.

In part, Mary cannot imagine a black home as different from a white home because to do so would to be to acknowledge that people like her father—a millionaire real estate developer—have made millions by architecting impoverished black neighborhoods. That is, Mary’s proximity to black poverty is not just that it is ten blocks away from her, but also, and more significantly, that her inherited wealth is contingent upon the maintenance of black poverty in a literal sense. So even Mary—a character sympathetic to the racism black people experience—wants to confirm that black life is

---

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 69-70. Emphasis original to the text.
exactly the same as white life to alleviate her culpability. She imagines herself not just as a tourist, but as a *comfortable* tourist—one who is not alarmed by the differences she may encounter: one who will find the humanity she encounters to fit exactly into a paradigm she already knows. Within this framework, Mary shores up a sense that touring black space will not threaten her inherited geography. The discord between Mary’s expressed yearning to tour black space and Wright’s constant discomfort as he navigates white space is palpable. For Mary simultaneously casts the black body as entirely other (she wants to “just see how [Black] people live”) but also as indistinguishable from the white body (“they must live like we live”). Wright, by contrast, knows there is nothing that fundamentally divides the Black body from the white body except for white supremacy.

Mary’s expressed yearning to find likeness as she tours black space produces what I call a geography of comfort. As Mary imagines blackness as in proximity to whiteness—as she imagines Black homes as “ten blocks away,” and black people “liv[ing] like we live”—she imagines her whiteness sinking into black neighborhoods in a way that feels comfortable to her, with little regard as to how her white body would alter black space. Her expression of proximity is in effect a yearning for there to be an ease to racial reconciliation. It is a desire for what Sara Ahmed calls “comfort”:

> There can be comfort in reflection. Note that there is an invitation in proximity, to become more alike, to acquire a better likeness. The word ‘comfort’ suggests well-being and satisfaction, but it can also suggest an ease and easiness. Comfort is about an encounter between bodies
and worlds, the promise of a ‘sinking’ feeling. If white bodies are comfortable it is because they can sink into spaces that extend their shape.\(^5^2\)

The idea of the comfort produced by reflection helps to explain Mary’s interest in seeing and tour black space as emanating not from a desire to ameliorate the conditions that produce white supremacy, but rather from a desire to see her whiteness flourish in neighborhoods in which she does not yet feel comfortable. That is, her desire to tour black space is a desire to expand her zones of comfort. Yet Ahmed’s theorization of comfort reminds us that to expand a zone of comfort, to operate under a geography of comfort is also a colonial act: it is a desire to “sink in,” to extend whiteness’s shape. The problem is that as white bodies extend their shape, blackness is pushed out of spaces that are already cramped and crowded.

Under the conditions of white supremacy in the United States, a geography of comfort allows white people to feel easy at the expense of all others. In *Native Son*, Wright shows how such a geography produces a geography of discomfort for black people. These two geographies exist together for Wright, which he expresses through Bigger Thomas’s response to Mary and Jan’s racial tourism:

[Jan and Mary] made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of

shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowing region, a No Man’s Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that the white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform his, held him up now to look at him and be amused.⁵³

While the couple smile and hold Bigger’s hand, he is taken out of the moment of their encounter and transported to a space he names a “No Man’s Land.” This space is created by the white gaze, for it is produced out of Bigger’s deep sense that Jan and Mary do not see Bigger as a person with full humanity, even if they think they do; he knows rather that they see him as a male body with black skin that, should he reciprocate their smiles and hand-holdings, will prove to Mary and Jan that they are sufficiently down with the cause. That is, he emerges not as a person but as a racialized locus that will allow them to sink into the space of an interracial friendship. So the space of “No Man’s Land” is literally a space where the black body is barred from meaningful interrelation with another human, black or white. It is a space where the black body has no ground on which to stand. It is a space where the black body is insurmountably walled in.

As Native Son mobilizes Bigger’s sense that he lives in a “No Man’s Land,” the text argues that an architecture of segregation disables the possibility or sincere

⁵³ Ibid., 67.
interpersonal relation, both interracially and intraracially. Relation as a word spans the geographic and the familial; in a Lockean sense, to think of oneself as in relation to another is to fix both oneself and the other on a map, but in a different sense to think of oneself in relation/as relation to another is to imagine oneself as kin, as alike. Wright’s experiences in the US South showed that white people consistently refuted the idea of interracial relations based on equity as they insisted upon white supremacy. But in the urban north, Wright finds that white people, especially those sympathetic to the plight of black folk, overcompensate and imagine themselves into the subjectivity of their black neighbors. This produces a sense of alienation for Bigger, as for Wright.

The metaphor of the wall permeates the entirety of Wright’s memoir, though readers of *Black Boy* at its time of publication would not have had access to the full text. *Black Boy* is a text in two parts: the first fourteen chapters, “Southern Night,” details Wright’s childhood and adolescence in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Memphis. The second part, “The Horror and the Glory,” narrates Wright’s young adulthood in Chicago. When Wright submitted his manuscript, originally entitled *American Hunger*, to Harper and Brothers in 1943, they asked him if he was willing to publish “Southern Night” separately to ensure better sales. As a text by itself, “Southern Night” affirms an idea that the US South is a spectacularly brutal space for black people and imagines the urban north as a potential site for freedom from racism. Though some of “Southern Night” was published in Wright’s own lifetime in various magazines, it was not
published as an entire work until 1977, when Harper and Row printed “The Horror and the Glory” under the title *American Hunger*; in 1991, the two sections were finally printed together. For the past twenty-five years, readers have finally been able to read *Black Boy* as the memoir Wright imagined it to be. Through both “Southern Night” and “The Horror and the Glory,” Wright narrates American segregation in both the south and the north through the metaphor of the wall.

Indeed, the very first scene the reader encounters shows the young Wright attempting to burn down walls as he accidently sets fire to his grandmother’s house in Mississippi while playing with his brother. Terrified by what he has done, Wright crawls under the house and hides form his mother under the chimney, recalling, “I had not really intended to set the house afire. I had just wanted to see how the curtains would look when they burned.” The walls became a “sheet of yellow,” as “[t]he fire soar[s] to the ceiling.” While the young Wright burns down the curtains, yearning to see beyond the space enclosed by the walls and windows of his grandmother’s home, the fire and the smoke it produces only create new walls of fire that continue to obscure his vision. Furthermore, Wright becomes increasingly afraid that he has threatened the life of his entire family and that he will be punished severely for it. He was right to be

56 Ibid., 2.
afraid. He is “lashed so hard” when he is found that he “los[es] consciousness… beaten out of [his] senses.” Far from allowing Wright space to explore beyond a walled architecture, the fire produces a literal loss of consciousness—a loss that is literally and figuratively antithetical to Wright’s “Blueprint.”

Wright’s childhood in the US South unfolds in episodes that seem to teach him the same lesson over and over: that under white supremacy, white people will never be able to see him as a human being with complex experiences. This realization comes to a head when Wright decides that he will help his family out financially by offering to work in the service of white families. He is fired from his first gig after his employer accuses him of stealing; next, he is directed to a second family who wants a “boy” to help with farm labor reminiscent of slave labor: milking cows, feeding chickens, serving meals to the family. As a child mostly raised in urban centers like Jackson and Memphis, Wright does not know how to milk a cow. The woman who wants to hire him is incredulous. Wright recalls his attempt to explain to the woman that not all black boys are alike:

I said nothing, but I was quickly learning the reality—a Negro’s reality—of the white world. One woman had assumed that I would tell her if I stole, and now this woman was amazed that I could not milk a cow. I, a nigger who dared to live in Jackson… they were all turning out to

---

57 Ibid., 5.
be alike, differing only in detail. I faced a wall in the woman’s mind, a wall that she did not know was there.\textsuperscript{58}

In order to understand the limits of the white imagination Wright conjures an image of a wall that bars the woman and Wright from fully seeing each other. The wall he imagines in the white woman’s mind structures how the younger Wright “learn[s] reality;” it contours the boundaries of his imagination. The wall not only prevents the white woman from knowing Wright, but it also obscures Wright’s sense of any particularity among white people.

The single wall in the woman’s mind at the narrative’s beginning becomes a million walls by the narrative’s end. The end of “Southern Night” frames Wright’s escape toward the urban north as a chance to escape racism, but “The Horror and the Glory” chronicles Wright’s disappointment in the urban north about which “Southern Night” had been hopeful. Wright continues to experience anguish and torment, even as he gets involved with members of the Communist party. Yet, he finds that the Communist Party does not allow Wright to freely express his criticisms of the party itself. He becomes isolated once again as the members of he John Reed Club begin to exclude him from gatherings. At the climactic scene toward the end of the narrative, Wright finds himself beaten and bruised after being violently tossed out by white and black communists alike at the 1936 Mayday parade. He continues to march anyway,

\textsuperscript{58} Wright, \textit{Black Boy}, 148.
gaining strength from the words of “the Internationale” interspersed throughout this section. Reflecting upon the stories he has written, Wright opines:

   Somehow man had been sundered from man and, in his search for a new unity, for a new wholeness, for oneness again, he would have to blunder into a million walls to find merely that he could not go in certain directions. No one could tell him. He would have to learn by marching down history’s bloody road. He would have to purchase his wisdom of life with sacred death. He would have to pay dearly to learn just a little.  

In this moment, Wright is convinced that the walls are not protective—as one might imagine—nor do they bear the load of human creativity. Rather, they separate humans from one another, fracturing any sense of shared oneness across humanity. They also disrupt any sense of wholeness on the level of the subject. The experience of a black person navigating through American landscapes, Wright argues, is the experience of “blunder[ing] into a million walls to find merely that [one] could not go in certain directions.” Yet the walls are not constituted by explicit instruction; instead the black subject has to collide with racist encounters in order to feel the limits of life under a racist architecture.

   What emerges as particularly pernicious about life in Chicago for Wright and his characters is not the explicit signs of segregation that constituted the US South, but the geography of comfort that privileges the ability of whiteness to expand rather than an

\[\text{59 Ibid., 382.}\]
attention to the conditions that reify white supremacy. In that same letter Wright wrote to David L. Cohn in response to *Native Son*, he insists that “The Negro problem in America is *not* beyond solution.” Latent within Wright’s texts is the suggestion that if black people were allowed to determine their own geographies, urban life would not exist as Wright knew it: that the white imagination under a Lockean paradigm cannot seem to allow for the notion that black bodies, when no longer walled in, *might indeed* fundamentally alter the landscape of the city—and that this alteration would enable black liberation. If Barbara Fields argued in 1990 that “[a]ll human societies, whether tacitly or overtly, assume that nature has ordained their social arrangements,” then perhaps Wright is suggesting that through his writing, blackness has the potential to expose the unnaturalness of the Lockean order. Or perhaps more significantly, blackness has the potential to undermine American space. For blackness does not just have the potential to change how white people might be able to constitute space, but blackness might also alter how one can theorize democracy, or build community.

Building community in urban space is risky. It necessitates building relations with strangers: it requires an ability to disband comfort as a meaningful rubric. Although his memoir is bounded on either end by Wright’s fury that he feels constrained by segregation, he replaces one spatial metaphor with another, more hopeful one, turning

---

60 Wright, “Reply to David L. Cohn,” 62.
away from the metaphor of the wall to imagine that the memoir might act as a bridge: a structure that allows him to imagine an American geography not framed by oneness or wholeness, but by finding a connection that links two separate spaces.

4.3 Bridge Building; Memoir Writing

The scholar of autobiography Trudier Harris argues that the black autobiographical tradition is one framed by “witnessing”—an action framed by its ability to narrate the injustice black people experience in the United States. In an essay surveying the totality of African American autobiography, she writes:

Arguably, witnessing is the guiding motivation and creative force behind African American autobiographical writings. Few early African American writers wrote simply for the sake of doing so; careful readings of her work will reveal that even Phillis Wheatley, writing in the eighteenth century, had motives beyond mere art for the sake of art. Writing in the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass established a pattern that dominated the first several decades of African American autobiographical composition—to write in the service of the people. Douglass and other literature, formerly enslaved persons used their pens to convey what American slavery was like and to incite morally outraged persons—especially sympathetic northern white—to work toward its abolition.62

To frame a black autobiographical text as that which can be witnessed imaginatively archives the atrocity black people experience; it can be called upon again and again to


168
prove the existence of white supremacist atrocity. While this can be powerful, it can also come at a great psychic cost: as Saidiya Harman observes, to think of black autobiographical writing as testimony can put “the spectacular character of black suffering” constantly on trial. In this section I argue that Wright’s use of “witnessing”—his use of the testimony—does not just archive the suffering he experienced. Instead, by imagining his memoir as a “bridge of words,” Wright imbues his memoir with perspective that allows his readers to link their own experience—no matter how similar or different it might be—to Wright’s story. Wright’s “bridge of words” shows that all readers—in his time and our own—are implicated in Wright’s story, though not unilaterally so.

The “bridge of words” as a metaphor for understanding the function of autobiography allows the text to have power without the reader necessarily identifying with Wright’s struggle itself. The autobiographical theorist Leigh Gilmore argues that a more traditional autobiography—like Sullivan’s autobiography, for example, which engages the techniques of the Bildungsroman—depends on the reader seeing a likeness between themselves and the text itself. She explains:

If you are an autobiographer, then you stand in the place of the representative person. Your position there enables the kind of identification that characterizes autobiography. If you act, then, as a mirror of the self (for me), then in my

---

identification with you I substitute myself for you, the other. If I am barred from doing that by your nonrepresentativeness, I withdraw my identification and, quite likely, the sympathy that flows from it.  

Gilmore here notes that autobiographies like Sullivan’s—which imagine the autobiographical subject as standing in for the cultivation of any subject—rely upon readers to see themselves represented in the text. This model of autobiography is framed by a model of sympathy. As the moral philosopher Adam Smith theorized, sympathy depends upon the sympathetic person “plac[ing themself] in [the other’s] situation.” He further explains, “[W]e conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence from some idea of his sensations.” Likewise, an autobiography like Sullivan’s asks readers to similarly imagine themselves as having the same successes Sullivan experienced in his early career. Yet, for people who have been historically and systematically excluded from professional environs and the democratic project at large, this theorization of autobiography might read as extremely alienating. *Black Boy* as a text makes identification impossible as a way to relate to his text.

The metaphor of the wall—walled cities, walled consciousnesses—suggest that segregated architectures are fraught and fractious. Structures of white supremacy are architecturally embedded in American landscapes, and white sympathetic readers

---

cannot simply opt out or, conversely, believe they can fully imagine black suffering. But
Wright does not just make this identification impossible: he also makes it unattractive.
By “Blueprint” Wright states an explicit exhaustion with narratives of inclusion: he
instead calls for black writing to lay plans for a world becoming. I return to his closing
paragraph—one that would have been missed by original readers of the text because of
Black Boy’s fraught publication history:

I picked up my pencil and held it over a sheet of white
paper, but my feelings stood in the way of my words.
Well, I would wait, day and night, until I knew what to
say. Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a
vast unity, I wanted to build a bridge of words between
me and that world outside, that world which was so
distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.\footnote{Wright, Black Boy, 383-384.}

Here Wright evades the representational as he claims he has “no vaulting dream of
achieving a vast unity.” By this closing paragraph, Wright manifests his blueprint in the
form of the memoir as bridge—a form that encompasses Wright’s earlier call for
engaging perspective and “the necessity of collective work.”\footnote{Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” 103-105.}

By imagining his memoir as a bridge of words, Wright names his own text as
world-building. “A bridge of words” does not seek to establish likeness but instead
thinks through models of proximity. A bridge allows us to think of human life as
interconnected; that perspective need not be fixed, as he argued in “Blueprint.” The

\footnote{Wright, Black Boy, 383-384.}
\footnote{Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” 103-105.}

171
“bridge of words” imagines the social order as changeable. The “bridge of words” marks that attempt to overpass the chasm between white and black space, white and black consciousness. In doing so, Wright theorizes life writing as a project that enables constructive relation between bodies across difference. Rather than creating relation through identification, the bridge of words instead produces relation through spatial conjunction. To imagine the memoir as a bridge invites a theorization of the autobiography or memoir that attempts to dismantle an architecture of segregation by replacing a structure of separation with a structure of connection.

It helps to think literally about what it is that a bridge does: a bridge is a structure that overpasses space that was previously deemed impassable—be it a river, a street, a body of water. As one walks across the bridge, a structure that exists in three-dimensional space, one gains access to an increased number of perspectives in the x-, y-, and z-dimension. Yet a bridge does not present perspectives in any particular progressive fashion; a bridge can be crossed in one direction, or the other, or someone can walk upon a bridge, stop, and even turn around. A bridge is both a structure of travel and rest, of observation and daydreaming, of safety (in the sense that it provides safe transfer from one place to another) as well as danger (there is always the fear of falling, the fear of the structure crumbling beneath you). The bridge is a space of a proliferation of perspectives: up and down, left and right, optimistic and pessimistic, vital and lethal, fixed and moving. In a sense the bridge signifies the possibility of
passing the impassable—but it makes no promise about what might be learned or seen along the way.

What does it mean to imagine memoir as a bridge? On one level, to think of memoir—or even story—as a bridge is to think of the memoir as a text that guides the reader through impassable space. In his chapter “Spatial Stories” in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau argues that “every story is a travel story—a spatial story.” Every story navigates and guides as it provides narration and plot, if applicable. Though de Certeau wrote in 1980, more than forty years after Wright’s “Blueprint” and thirty-five years after *Black Boy*, De Certeau’s ideas about storytelling and travel help clarify Wright’s spatial theories of black writing. Wright gestures to the spatial implications of narratives, surely; but de Certeau more directly writes about narrative’s ability to set and move boundaries. As de Certeau writes:

What the map cuts up, the story cuts across. In Greek, narration is called “diegesis”: it establishes an itinerary (it “guides”) and it passes through (it “transgresses”). The space of operations it travels in is made of movements: it is topological, concerning the deformations of figures, rather than topical, defining places. It is only ambivalently that the limit circumscribes in this space. It plays a double game. It does the opposite of what it says. It hands the place over to the foreigner that it gives the impression of throwing out. Or rather, when it marks a stopping place, the latter is not stable but follows the variations of encounters between

---

programs. Boundaries are transportable limits and transportations of limits; they are also metaphorai.69

De Certeau first distinguishes between the work that maps do and the work that stories do; as maps visually lay out space in two-dimensions, they separate one space from another as they mark neighborhoods, city limits, bodies of water: all of which emerge as either impassable (in the case of water) or constitutively different (the resident of one neighborhood might occupy a different status than a resident of an adjacent neighborhood).70 The story, however, occupies space differently; it is not two-dimensional, but multi-dimensional as narratives occupy multiple perspectives and tell a story over time. As it formulates a plot, so it guides; as it moves us through topologically different spaces, so it transgresses. Where the map is fixed and unchangeable, the narrative is ambivalent; it welcomes a plurality of interpretations.

Where the map establishes fixed boundaries, so the story acts as a corrective to the fixity of space; under the conditions of a story, boundaries emerge as “transportable:” able to be pushed, moved, reconstituted. So perhaps considering Wright’s project as a “bridge of words” invites the reader to see the walls in their life from a new vantage point. Through reading Wright’s memoir, perhaps, the white reader might recognize the cognitive boundaries that allow them to maintain white supremacy

---
69 Ibid., 129.
70 Of course, it is important that I note that we are talking about map technologies available to de Certeau in the 1980s. Interactive technologies have opened up new opportunities for what maps can do.
without confessing to promoting racist ideologies. Through reading Wright’s memoir, perhaps, the black or non-white reader might be able to see more clearly the structures that keep white supremacy in place.

Although *Black Boy* is now over seventy years old, its lessons remain relevant throughout the twentieth century and into our present day. In 1974, Angela Davis—perhaps deliberately picking up Wright’s metaphor—asserted in her own autobiography that “Walls turned sideways are bridges.” Davis’s assertion is provocative: in imagining bridges not as a structures distinct from walls but rather as the same structure reoriented, Davis imagines the bridge as more than a means to take black bodies out of ghettoized space. Instead, she produces the bridge as a structure that manifests through the process of disabling architectures of segregation. The bridge is a condition of the wall’s dismantling.71 Davis’s formulation, one that comes decades after Wright’s publication of *Black Boy*, enables us as readers to fully understand the stakes of this imaginative project. For if indeed bridges are walls turned sideways, then the bridge as reading and writing practice signals an inversion of segregated living. If the wall signified for Wright a desire to shore up white safety, then the bridge signifies the attempt to let go of white safety as

71 Though Davis’s autobiography postdates Wright’s life (and also predates the widespread circulation of *The Horror and the Glory*), the two writers seem strangely in tune. As Wright heavily uses walls as a metaphor throughout *Black Boy* only to conclude with a bridge, so Davis names her fifth chapter “walls” only to follow it with a last chapter, “Bridges.” Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 281, 347.
a meaningful rubric to guide desegregationist practice. If, as Craig Wilkins has argued, black architects have been unable to cultivate black architectures, then it seems as though the bridge might be an opportunity to imagine what a black architected city could look like.
5. Epilogue

When I started this dissertation, I could not have imagined that as I would be completing it, Donald Trump would be president. Like more than half of the voting electorate, I was and remain vehemently opposed to Trump’s professed xenophobic and racist practices.\(^1\) Fortunately for this dissertation, and unfortunately for the world, Trump’s electoral win shows me that the problems I raise in this dissertation have not yet been solved.

As a nation, the United States continues to think of democratic living in architectural metaphors structured by inclusion and exclusion. Two weekends after Donald Trump’s first week in office, I gathered with friends at Halifax Mall in downtown Raleigh for an event called “No Ban, No Wall, No Fear: A Day of Action,” an event organized by local grassroots leaders in response to a series of Executive Orders that Trump’s administration issued in his very first week of office. The first affirmed his campaign promise that he would build a wall on the United States/Mexico border; the second banned the entry of anyone coming to the United States from seven Muslim-majority nations.\(^2\) The combined effect of these Executive Orders seemed to devastate

\(^1\) To say the least.
almost everyone with whom I spoke. After the first week in office, people from all over the country gathered at airports to support refugee populations arriving in the United States amidst confusion about what refugees should now do. But a week later, only two weeks into Trump’s term, many faces looked fatigued. The air was cold, the mood somber. The reality that the next four years would be in part shaped by persistent opposition to the White House was beginning to set in.

In the midst of experiencing the sadness and fear produced by the Trump administration’s xenophobic actions, I forgot to show up with a sign, let alone take the time to make one. This forgetting might be willful. I always find it so hard to summarize the rage, confusion, despair, and hope that brings me to attend rallies, marches, and demonstrations in any one pithy phrase. So I spent some time walking around the demonstration before it began, reading the signs other people wrote. A young white woman standing over to my left waved one that read “Protests are the new brunch.”

There were signs in Spanish and Arabic; signs that spoke of hope, signs that lambasted Trump. But there was one sign that caught my eye: more than one person waved it, and I had seen it weeks beforehand in D.C. at the Women’s March. The sign said, “Build bridges, not walls.”

Of course I thought of Richard Wright when I read this sign; it showed me that Wright’s message is exactly as relevant in 2017 as it was in 1945. As I have been reading and thinking about the bridge, it has not always been easy for me to imagine how this translates into praxis. In Trump’s America, it is doubly hard. But I know that others have already been living Wright’s bridge through everyday practice and social activism.

I saw a glimpse of this myself in August of 2016, when I followed a call from the Triangle Regions’ Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) chapter. Black activists had called on SURJ to join them outside of Durham’s police station to protest the $70 Million+ construction of the new Durham Police Headquarters. SURJ is a national organization that “moves white people to act as part of a multi-racial majority for justice with passion and accountability.” Rather than asserting whiteness as a “majority” position that needs to be maintained, SURJ frames itself instead as seeking to join a multi-racial majority with other people who want to work to dismantle white supremacy.

It was an unbearably hot day, one of those Southern summer days where you can see the heat shimmer from the pavement. I walked with two friends across downtown. As we gathered outside of the Durham police station, we found the other protesters from SURJ collected under a yellow banner. One of the organizers called the

---

dozen or so of us together in a circle. She asked us to ground ourselves, take a deep
breath. She asked us how we were feeling. A guy piped up, “Nervous.” The organizer
agreed. She took a sip from her water bottle, and told us that she was unsure if there
would be confrontations with the police. She told us that she was not sure of exactly
what she needed to do. She asked us to think of writers, artists, and activists who
inspired us to be there that day. Others offered names; I was too shy to say Richard
Wright. She then told us that we were there to amplify the message produced by the
black organizers of the protest, which was: Black Lives Matter; Disarm/Defund the
Police. We were not to add anything extra to the message. We were told to think
carefully about when it was most appropriate to join chants: the logic behind this was to
acknowledge our differences. Not all rallying cries are meant to be shouted by white
people—to take up some of these cries would be to overwrite their potency.

As the protest started, the dozen or so protesters with SURJ and I gathered at a
busy street intersection. The leaders of SURJ and the black organizers of the protest
agreed that putting white bodies in the intersection was a safer choice, so we stood there
with our large yellow banner and blocked oncoming traffic. Blocking the intersection
allowed the black protesters to gather more closely together and participate more
centrally in the protest. Standing in the intersection, I could not always hear what was
being said. It was so hot that it was hard to focus on much of anything. But the space felt
like a glimmer of what the world could look like if white supremacy were to be
defeated. And in that moment, I felt hope that even when the world feels dire there are still people willing to do the hard work to build a more just world.
Works Cited


Biography

S. Abigail Seeskin was born and raised in Saint Louis, Missouri. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where she majored in English and minored in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She earned her Masters of Arts degree in English from Duke University in 2014, and will complete her Ph.D. in English from Duke in 2017. While at Duke University, she has been the recipient of the Graduate School Fellowship, the Fred and Barbara Sutherland Fellowship, the Robert K. Steel Family Graduate Fellowship, and the Reynolds Price Fellowship.