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From What Remains: The Politics of Aesthetic Mourning and the Poetics of Loss in Contemporary African American Culture

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**FROM WHAT REMAINS: THE POLITICS OF AESTHETIC MOURNING
AND THE POETICS OF LOSS IN CONTEMPORARY
AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE**

A Dissertation Presented

By

KAJSA K. HENRY-SEABROOKS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of English

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DEDICATION

for abraham, the one we loved and lost

&

my mother, who prayed this into existence

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I came to Massachusetts in 2006, lost and unsure if I even wanted to pursue this path towards the doctoral degree. However, come I did, on a cold and snowy day in January. I had left everything I knew: my family, my boyfriend, the dirt roads of my hometown, and the warmth of the Florida sun. Only a day later, I watched, standing in the driveway of Herter Hall, with tears streaming down my face, as my sister and father drove away more than a little scared and definitely ill-equipped in my too-thin coat for the weather. However, I survived and thrived with the help of those I met along the way and those who were back home praying for and supporting me.

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ABSTRACT

FROM WHAT REMAINS: THE POLITICS OF AESTHETIC MOURNING AND THE
POETICS OF LOSS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

SEPTEMBER 2016

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While critical analyses of loss and mourning in African American studies have tended to focus on narratives that primarily concentrate on the Atlantic slave trade/slavery and music, particularly blues and gospel spirituals, this project advocates reimagining the boundaries of our discussions of loss to include other art forms, including assemblage art and performative dance. *From What Remains: The Politics of Aesthetic Mourning and the Poetics of Loss in Contemporary African American Culture* includes the assemblage art of the 1966 exhibition *Signs of Neon* and Tyree Guyton's ongoing *Heidelberg Project* that respond to the violence of urban rebellions and decay and Ralph Lemon's performative piece, *Come Home Charley Patton*, which responds to foundational themes and sites of loss connected with racialized violence of the Twentieth Century. I also include two novels by John Edgar Wideman, *Two Cities: A Love Story* and *Philadelphia Fire*, which explore the 1985 bombing of MOVE. *From What Remains* attempts to reinterpret loss as traditionally understood in African American communities to instead consider its function as a philosophical and aesthetic theory in art that

expresses and mourns various forms of loss. The artists' desire to speak about and through complex losses requires them to confront structural limitations of their chosen aesthetic form and the difficulties of naming and representing loss. Thus, I analyze the ways in which—through nontraditional and multi-genre aesthetic forms—this art merges the material and symbolic “remains” of violated African American landscapes, bodies, communities, and psyches. Therefore, we see these artists sharing an interest in experimental visual and textual forms, including literary montage, assemblage, collage, and performance that rhetorically account for fragmented archives, absences, and disconnection. Through a process of seizing and reconfiguring what “remains” of loss, the artists expose and participate in a politics of mourning where they must respond to changing social, political, and physical landscapes.

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INTRODUCTION

In the opening pages of *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant gives the clearest philosophical explanation of the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on the identity, language practices, and modes of being for those who endured and died. Through a poetic stance, Glissant characterizes the process as connected to three spaces, or as he names them, abysses—the belly of the boat, the sea, and the space where the memory of what has been lost. All three involve a disruption in time and a connectedness to a space that is marked by pain and suffering. However, within the abyss of the slave ship, the sea, and the shores of the “new” world, a rebirth occurred involving a painful process of remembering and forgetting. As John Drabinski and Marisa Parham note, “For Glissant, the Middle Passage does not suppress the past; it drowns it. What remains in the New World are fragments—fragments come in from the sea that together generate an unprecedented composite culture that can never be reverted to a single origin” (3). Yet, the experience of those who died in the abyss of the ship and the sea persists in the memory of those who did survive to the new land and became this “continuous/discontinuous thing” that “served as the alluvium of these metamorphoses” (Glissant 7). So out of this traumatic memory and the forging together of bits and pieces of a past life, comes a new identity or sense of Relation, one that exists within a three-dimensional time-space continuum. It is an identity that is fraught with a sense of dislocation, chaos, hybridity, and fragmentation, but one that is productive and allows the enslaved the ability to see and use the past differently for the future. For this group, Glissant believes that a return to the past should not be a search for some nostalgic recovery, but should be led by a full awareness that what once was no longer exists.

Although the complexity of what I see as Glissant's philosophical view of loss cannot be taken up fully here, he does provide a mode of entrance into the questions that guide this study concerning loss and the expression of loss through various aesthetic forms. Glissant traces the limits and benefits of the process through which the enslaved forged an identity from the fragments. He also positions art, which resides at the "intersection of trauma and beauty," as a central part of this process and points to Toni Morrison as an example of an artist that interacts with this complicated history (Drabinski and Parham 3).

In a meditation about writing *Beloved*, her fifth and most celebrated novel, Morrison reveals a process of composing using material and symbolic remains very similar to the critical process outlined by Glissant.¹ After discovering the story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman accused of infanticide and the inspiration for the character of Sethe in *Beloved*, Morrison recognized the lack of details about Garner's "interior" life in the newspaper accounts of her story.² Additionally, Morrison noticed similar occurrences in slave narratives where there were often silences during the authors' portrayal of particularly traumatic incidents. These gaps, she believes, serve as evidence of their inability to fully bear witness to the horrors of slavery and the inaccessibility to the tools needed to tell their story. Morrison identifies in the slave narratives what Glissant describes as a forced poetics or a counterpoetics, which involves

¹ Glissant includes Morrison in a list of authors that he sees as performing the work of "creative *marroonage*" (72).

² During January of 1856, Margaret Garner, along with her husband, four children, and a host of other fugitive slaves, attempted to escape from Kentucky to Ohio and to freedom. Before enjoying the benefits of their efforts, however, their pursuers discovered them. Upon discovery, Garner killed a daughter and attempted to kill her other children instead of allowing their return to slavery. Garner's actions became the topic of discussion in local and national newspapers and placed her in the middle of a popular legal battle, not only for the murder of her child, but also her use as a pawn in the political debates concerning fugitive slave laws.

“any collective impulse toward a form of expression that, as it asserts itself, simultaneously confronts the *lack* that makes it impossible—not as impulse, which is always present, but as expression, which is never achieved...Forced poetics occurs whenever a drive for expression confronts something impossible to express” (236). While here Glissant references the tension between the languages of Creole and French in Martinique and the “natural poetics” of Caribbean writers, his theory also suggests that the loss of “natural” language practices is only one of the more visible indicators of a much deeper loss experienced as a result of this traumatic experience. He notes that Africans who experienced the transAtlantic slave trade were unmoored from their origins, and then rendered incapable of naming what had been lost during this complex web of betrayal, guilt, socialization. The renegotiation of what remains beyond dispossession and the broken capacity to express the transAtlantic passage’s compounded traumas spawns a new identity and a new language. The writers of the slave narratives had to confront the need to tell of their subjection through a language that served to demean them and through conventional genres unable to fulfill the task. Glissant suggests that Morrison, along with other authors who attempt to recover the lost internal lives of the enslaved, performs “creative *marroonage*,” which works to counter the literature of “delusion” that painted the enslaved in unrealistic terms. Therefore, the act of writing becomes an “act of survival.”³

It is clear that Morrison, in a manner very similar to Glissant, views loss as a political and creative force, which allows her to present an aesthetic and political

³ While historical *Marroonage* refers to the act of those who escaped slavery to create independent societies on the outskirts of plantations in a number of French, English, and Spanish colonies, Glissant’s extension of the term to describe the “numerous forms of expression [that] began to form the basis for a continuity” of Caribbean literatures serves to show its value as a site of resistance.

challenge to the processes of memorialization. In a project of “literary archaeology,” Morrison finds and constructs a history from these gaps and absent words, using the surviving images that suggest the presence of buried and usable histories. She acknowledges the role of the images in her creative process: “which is why the images that float around them []—the remains, so to speak, at the archaeologist site—surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth” (“Site of Memory” 115). Using her imagination, she creates the inner worlds of her characters by drawing on the absent presence of the terror and loss that the authors could not or would not express.⁴ In *Beloved*, Morrison illustrates the tortured relationship of the enslaved with this new land through the ghostly figure of Beloved as a reminder of the millions who died in the multiple sites of the abyss, the scars on Sethe’s back as evidence of the horrors of slavery, and the image of Homewood as a place of both fond and painful memories. *Beloved* operates not only as a space for understanding the degrees of loss for Garner, but by aesthetically reimagining slavery, Morrison also calls attention to the losses of familial ties, language, rituals and practices, and ancestral origins for many of those a part of the African diaspora. The novel itself functions as a type of memorial when she dedicates it

⁴ When Morrison describes her writing as an attempt to “rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate,” (110) she highlights her goal to create a counter form of history and memory through what was later labeled as a neoslave narrative, a subgenre of African American literature that imagines and explores the innermost thoughts of slaves that is often missing in the original slave narratives. There have been a number of scholars who have helped in naming this subgenre of African American literature. Bernard Bell describes these novels as fabulation, a term he borrows from Robert Scholes, to define the narratives as indicative of “a return to a more verbal kind of fiction... a less realistic and more artistic kind of narrative” (284). Ashraf H. Rushdy defines a neo-slave narrative as a contemporary novel that assumes the form, adopts the conventions, and takes on the first person voice of antebellum slave narratives. Arlene Keizer calls them contemporary narratives of slavery, which highlight the narratives exploring the themes of trauma and loss.

to the 60 million or more Africans who died in the abyss of the middle passage.⁵

However, *Beloved* acts more as a countermemorial that embraces the ephemeral, deconstructs the memory being remembered, and resists redemptive narratives.⁶ Morrison performs creative marroonage by establishing an aesthetic form that uses the remains of physical and symbolic loss as a way of naming what has been lost and its importance.

Morrison and Glissant, and by extension, artists who also attempt to create art through a forced poetics, view loss as having aesthetic, productive, and militant qualities.⁷ All of the artists of this study create works that show them contending with the absence of necessary language to completely express the impact of actual and symbolic losses on a larger cultural body. The artists embark on a search for forms that will allow them and their audience to engage with the physical and symbolic loss associated with culturally important moments and spaces for African Americans. The presence of a collective sense of loss and thus the need for mourning in the midst of these changes force artists to recognize the limits and benefits of aesthetics in naming and expressing loss. In this project, I trace how this poetics of loss may begin with events associated with death or dying, but works *through* the body either through various artistic and memorial

⁵ In a 1988 speech discussing her fifth novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison acknowledges the lack of and the need for a memorial for slavery: “There is no place, here, where I can go, and think about or not think about, or summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of, slaves. Or, just one. Something that reminds us of the ones that made the journey, and those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby, there is no three-hundred-foot tower, there is no small bench by the road, there is not even a tree, scored and initialed, that I can visit, or you can visit [...]”⁵

⁶ A countermemorial or countermemorial refers to memorial or monuments that resist the traditional forms and premises of traditional ones, especially that they must be redemptive. Instead these memorials/monuments are often ephemeral, deconstructive, and anti-redemptive in order to reclaim agency over history and to critique it. James E. Young was one of the first to study these in his 1992 study of Holocaust Memorials that emerged from a group of German artists in the 1980s.

⁷ In their 2002 study of loss, David Eng and David Kazanjian suggest that instead of “imputing loss as a purely negative quality,” it should be apprehended “as productive rather than pathological, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary” (ix).

practices to consider the larger dimensions of loss that occurs within the psychosocial realm. The losses that occur here can be labeled as symbolic and include the loss of community, origins, nationhood, and other abstract ideals. While symbolic losses are those intangible feelings of grief that can often remain unnamable, the absence of the lost object can thwart the development of self and cultural identity. I suggest that the manifestation of this politics and poetics of loss can be found most readily in the aesthetic structures that writers and artists employ in their efforts to commemorate both symbolic and actual loss. While this poetics of loss may draw on some elements of African American processes of mourning, it also allows us to consider how symbolic losses challenge the traditional forms of mourning. How does one mourn for symbolic losses that are central to the development and retention of a cultural identity? What role does aesthetics play in these efforts?

Although loss in African American culture has been indelibly and intimately connected with the history of slavery, only focusing on this history of enslavement belies the complexity through which loss operates within African American culture. *From What Remains: The Politics of Aesthetic Mourning and the Poetics of Loss in African American Culture* motions us to view loss and mourning beyond the limits of slavery and strictly through the lens of death and dying. As Karla F. C. Holloway observes in her study of death in African American culture, the end of slavery did not signal the end of violent attacks on African Americans. Instead, “The twentieth century rehearsed, nearly to perfection, a relentless cycle of cultural memory and black mourning. Black deaths and black dying have cut across and through decades and centuries as if neither one

matters more than the incoherent, associative presence of the other” (*Passed On* 1).⁸ In her assessment, death has not only shaped the existence and actions of the black community, but created a generic form, the mourning story or “cultural narratives that are ‘passed on’ in both senses of the expression—they are stories about death, and they are shared within the culture and from generation to generation [...] to perform perversely both a descriptive and prescriptive ritual” (Holloway 32-40).⁹ Likewise, Paul Gilroy suggests that a “rapport with death” is

integral, for example to the narratives of loss, exile, and journeying, which, like particular elements of musical performance, serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory. The telling and retelling of these stories plays a special role, organizing the consciousness of the “racial” group socially and striking in the important balance between inside and outside activity—the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and performative, that are required to invent, maintain, and renew identity (198).

This engagement with death that Holloway and Gilroy identify occurs through oral, visual, and textual narratives that participate in rituals of mourning. While death, and subsequently loss and mourning, play such a central role in the lives of African Americans, it has been severely undertheorized, especially amid the changing physical and social landscape of the post-Civil Rights era.¹⁰ If the argument that mourning and

⁸ Holloway’s observation seems to focus more so on physical loss, but as this study shows, these same deaths signal the presence of symbolic losses that have very real material and political affect on those who engage with spaces and remains of these losses. A few other studies, such as Sharon Patricia Holland *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* and Abdul R. JanMohamed’s *Death Bound Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death* make interesting claims about the influence of the death drive on identity creation in African American culture.

⁹ For instance, the story of Emmett Till’s murder is one such passed on narrative. The continued literary treatments of Till’s murder symbolize that through narrative and visual mediums artists have attempted to “look” upon Till’s face from multiple angles, but the “work of mourning” remains unfinished. The material remains call attention to what symbolically remains tied into the death of Till.

¹⁰ Although, I focus on this particular period, the entire history of enslavement, reconstruction, segregation, and integration has determined the relationship of African Americans to people and places throughout the United States. The result has been the development of a collective identity that accounts for the absences and fragmentation created by these experiences of loss.

historical thinking share similar memory practices and outcomes for developing collective identities holds true, then theorizing about loss has an important role in understanding the intergenerational challenges of addressing and mapping the effects of cultural trauma.¹¹

Critical analyses of loss and mourning in African American studies have focused mainly on narrative, and that primarily on the Atlantic slave trade and slavery, or music, particularly blues and gospel spirituals. This project advocates reimagining the boundaries of our discussions of loss to include other art forms. I argue that much can be gained by treating assemblage art and performance art together with literature. Thus, I bring together the artists of the 1966 exhibition *Signs of Neon* and Tyree Guyton's *Heidelberg Project* (which responds to the violence of urban rebellions and decay) with Ralph Lemon's *Come Home Charley Patton* (which performs loss by staging and mapping his responses to sites of racialized violence throughout the American South), and two novels by John Edgar Wideman, *Two Cities: A Love Story* and *Philadelphia Fire* (which explore the 1985 bombing of MOVE). *From What Remains* attempts to reinterpret loss as traditionally understood in African American communities to instead consider its function as a philosophical and aesthetic theory in art that expresses and mourns various forms of loss.

The artists' desire to speak about and through complex losses requires them to confront structural limitations of their chosen aesthetic form and the difficulties of naming and representing loss. Thus, I analyze the ways in which—through nontraditional and multi-genre aesthetic forms—this art merges the material and symbolic “remains” of

¹¹ Rösen, Jörn. “Mourning by History—Ideas of a New Element in Historical Thinking.” *Historiography East and West*. 1.1 (2003): 13-38.

violated African American landscapes, bodies, communities, and psyches. Therefore, we see these artists sharing an interest in experimental visual and textual forms, including literary montage, assemblage, collage, and site-specific performance, rhetorically accounting for fragmented archives, absences, and disconnection. Through a process of seizing and reconfiguring what “remains” of loss, the artists expose and participate in a politics of mourning where they must respond to changing social, political, and physical landscapes. In an effort to trace these various manifestations, I define and identify key features of “a poetics of loss,” particularly within alternative ways of mourning.

In the rest of the introduction, I develop a spatial-materialist understanding of loss by combining a historical, cultural materialist, and interdisciplinary methodology that I will later use to read the chosen textual and visual based art. As will be clear, I participate in current efforts to bring a spatial lens to studies of death, dying, and mourning that move the discussion beyond traditional spaces of death, such as cemeteries, memorials, and hospitals, and away from traditional definitions, forms, and purposes of mourning.¹² My study also connects with scholarly efforts to understand melancholia as a political and cultural formation. As a result, my study goes beyond, but includes, loss associated with death to include other more symbolic forms of loss, including the loss of loss itself.¹³ The spatio-historical dimensions of these events, along with the materiality of loss in its presence and absence used to develop the art, provide intersections between the event, the body, and an act of mourning. Therefore, developing

¹² A few texts that can be included in these efforts include *Deathscapes: Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance* (2012) and *Memory, Mourning, Landscape* (2010).

¹³ In her afterword for *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Judith Butler asks “After Loss, What then?” She notes, “And perhaps most difficult, the loss of loss itself: somewhere, sometime, something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it; a fractured horizon looms in which to make one’s way as a spectral agency, one for whom a full “recovery” is impossible, one for whom the irrecoverable becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency” (467).

a spatial-material understanding of loss provides the necessary framework for analyzing the works in this study and revealing how the artists animate and make loss useful as an aesthetic property.

Developing a Spatial-Materialist Framework of Loss

Recently, critics who study cultural or social histories of loss draw on language associated with death to think through the processes of mourning. For example, Kathleen Brogran's *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American History*, Sadiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, and Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* all draw on this language of death and loss to consider how slavery influenced historical practices during the time period that they address. Unremembered or ungrieveable losses force communities to confront intentionally buried traumatic memories. Therefore, metaphors of haunting and ghostliness are often used to understand the relationship between the present and what *remains*, either in ways that are visible, but more so in ways that are hidden and unacknowledged. However, as these studies also show, the discussion of remains should not stay in the realm of abstraction, but also name the spatial and material realities of loss. The idea of remains offers a rich basis for developing an understanding of the material and spatial dimensions of loss. Material remains, such as grave markers, photographs, decaying buildings, and consumer trash, come to represent or form extensions of the body that remind us of what or who has been lost. The presence of such remains in certain spaces or places suggests that racialized violence and death leave physical traces on the landscape, which helps to locate the ways

that the racial politics of space and memory determine psychological, physical, and political realms of Detroit, Philadelphia, Watts, and other sites of violence throughout the American South. By engaging with the remains of a traumatic past within these spaces, the artists animate the history and memory of racialized moments of violence to participate in a critical dialogue with loss and its remains.

In an effort to establish the parameters of a spatial-materialist understanding of loss for this study, I begin with a discussion of mourning and melancholia, which are both processes that engage with loss and its remains. Theoretical formulations of melancholy or melancholia have taken on various meanings throughout the course of history. It has been understood as a disease, a mood or affect, and, currently in its cultural form, as an impetus for political dissent and reaction.¹⁴ Despite these various formulations, two common understandings of melancholia emerge: it is either a disruptive force that impacts social interactions and the procurement of a healthy self-identity or it is figured as a productive, creative force that draws aesthetics, protest, and politics together. Most literary and cultural studies of mourning and melancholia begin with Sigmund Freud's 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," which provides the widely recognized definitions of mourning and melancholia. However, more contemporary discussions of mourning and melancholia note the limits of Freud's definitions to consider the cultural function of mourning and its influence on aesthetic practices. So although I begin with Freud, I do so to provide an understanding of the important interventions that current studies of mourning and melancholia make in regards to race, gender, collective bodies, and class. Expanding the theoretical study of loss and

¹⁴ See Jonathan Flatley's chapter on "Modernism and Melancholia" in *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (2008) for a complete history of melancholia.

mourning to include scholars such as Glissant and artists like those who participated in *66 Signs of Neon*, Guyton, Wideman, and Lemon, introduces culturally specific theories of mourning and melancholia.

Freud provides a general understanding of mourning and melancholia as the ways in which humans respond to loss. He defines mourning as “the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, and ideal, and so on” (243). Mourning facilitates the eventual ‘withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one’ (243). Freud’s understanding of mourning treats it as an individualized process and presents successful mourning as a “working through,” followed by a universally accepted process of attachment, loss, grieving, mourning to reattachment in response to the loss of the beloved person, object, or ideal.¹⁵ He suggests that working through is a necessary and natural process that allows the libido to detach from a lost object to encourage the emergence of an uninhibited ego. The “work of mourning” tests reality for evidence that the loss is gone and checks to see if the ego is able and ready to make other attachments by reinvesting interest and energy into other people and activities. The grieving person recalls and relives the painful memories until the energies of attachment are relinquished and neutralized.

While originally for Freud mourning was a helpful process to “move on,” melancholia involves an unhealthy incorporation of the loss in one’s self. He notes that in mourning “it is the world which has become poor and empty” due to an apparent loss,

¹⁵See Homas’s discussion of the foundational moments and theories that developed into a formalized process in *Symbolic Loss: the Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century’s End*. Ed. Peter Homas (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000) 1-40 and Gorer, Geoffrey. *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (New York: Arno Press, 1977).

whereas “in melancholia it is the ego itself” that is “poor and empty” (246). Melancholia “establishes an identification of the ego with the abandoned object” (243), which results in an inability to mourn. Therefore, Freud asserts that the key difference between mourning and melancholia is that melancholic subjects refuse to accept the loss, choosing instead to incorporate the object into the ego. Their feelings toward this lost object are then directed toward the ego where “the shadow of the object fall[s] upon [it],” which since it remains can result in the destructive repetition of experiencing loss. The melancholic knows that he has lost someone, but not “what he has lost” in them. The result is an inner sense of loss that Freud identifies as present through various mental features which are common to both mourning and melancholia but in varying degrees: painful dejections, loss of interest in the outside world, and the loss of the capacity to love, which prohibits the work of mourning.

It is Freud’s revision of his earlier distinctions between mourning and melancholia in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) that has served as the foundation of thinking about melancholia’s involvement in the development of a personal and collective identity. Instead of the view that repetition of the loss causes emotional harm, here Freud suggests that it is through the cyclical processes of melancholic attachments and detachments that our ego forms. The traces of these losses comprise our egos or identity. It is in this change that Tammy Clewell suggests that Freud “helps in revising our understanding of what it means to work through a loss. Working through no longer entails abandoning the object and reinvesting the free libido in a new one or accepting consolation in the form of an external substitute for the loss” (61). Instead, melancholia becomes a productive process of creating an identity through the accumulation of these

experiences of loss. In the revised, Freudian-based understanding of loss, mourning and melancholia are central processes in the development of not only individual identities, but also in defining a collective identity. The value of constructing a cultural understanding of mourning and melancholia, and by extension psychoanalysis, lies in developing a philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic based understanding of loss. Echoing Glissant's sentiments, this approach considers how and why individuals and groups detach from certain objects internally and as prompted by outside experiences but retain others that help to shape collective identities. Although Freud's definitions of mourning and melancholia focus mainly on the loss of a loved one, he does suggest that abstract ideals that take the place of a loved one can also prompt mourning. For instance, he uses the examples of national belonging or liberty. National identity and liberty are individually felt, but collectively shaped by outside social and historical forces. However, Freud does not go on to address the group aspect of these ideals or distinguish between the mourning of these abstract losses versus a loved one. It is these oversights that have prompted other scholars to usefully address issues of collective mourning and the presence of symbolic or abstract losses mainly through a focus on melancholia.¹⁶

Therefore, loss and responses to loss can be important in the development of individual and collective identities. In *Symbolic Loss*, Peter Homans's expands Freud's acknowledgement of the presence of abstract loss to explore it within historical and

¹⁶ The development of theories about "culturally instituted" forms of melancholia, which often link loss with politics, can be found in Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2000), Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*, David Eng and David Kazanjian's essay collection, *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2002), Peter Homans's essay collection, *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End* (2002), Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* and Rhanna Khanna's *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2003). Other more African American specific studies include Sara Clarke Kaplan's article, Jose Esteban Munoz, and Rolland Murray

cultural contexts. Instead of the mainly physical loss involved in Freud's individualized process of mourning, Homans believes symbolic losses have "sociohistorical, cognitive, and collective meaning" that require collective acts of mourning (20). Thus, "the processes of mourning, ordinarily thought of as a response to the death of a loved other, also have validity for understandings of cultural history, groups, and symbols" (x). Homans defines symbolic loss as "a set of symbols that give meaning to one's experiences of life and the world, and this loss [is] not worked through (mourned) but rather [is] reworked by being made into an object of study" (38). In this sense, symbolic losses are psychosocial in nature and often not tangible, which causes them to often be unacknowledged or ambiguous. Since these types of abstract losses are often an essential part of the development of a collective identity and a self-identity within this collective body, the various rituals of mourning that communities perform to mark, name, and regain what has been lost takes on political importance. For instance, as I show in the first chapter, the art of *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* use the physical remains of the riot/rebellion to call attention to the loss of safe and self-sufficient communities and the social policies that helped to contribute to their decline. Homans's definition of symbolic loss and Glissant's theory of Relation share similarities because both identify a process of coming to terms with what has been lost and collecting the remains into a productive process.

However, just as we see in Glissant's theory of what the enslaved went through to create a collective identity and understand their experience, the process of reworking loss into an object of study does not result in uncomplicated mourning. For the majority of the artists of this study, their art remains questioning and unfulfilling in a number of

ways. For instance, Wideman continuously highlights the inefficiency of language and allows silences to pervade his works. These moments become spaces of introspection where his critique of loss is the strongest. Homans notices that that there is often a lack of creative repair or recovery of the loss when attempting to come to terms with symbolic loss, and more often disillusionment, disappointment, or despair occurs: “Some sort of combination of ‘resignation,’ along with some mourning, is the best way to describe the most common form of this kind of ‘coming to terms with the past’” (20). He suggests that when groups confront symbolic loss it is through a combination of melancholic attachment to remember the losses crucial to a cultural identity. In addition, groups engage in mourning to forget loss and forge a new identity. It is the impact of trauma that hinders this process of mourning: “Clinically, the ability to mourn is a response to a loss that can be remembered and worked through in memory over time. On the other hand, a loss that is traumatic does not permit this work of mourning to take place; rather, all such efforts take the form of repetition” (Homans 27). While for Homans this signals an inability to mourn, for African Americans, as Glissant, Holloway, and Gilroy recognize, the repetition or return to certain events through narrative and performance, even if it cannot be fully worked through, is necessary because what was lost, even if it is not recoverable, is essential for remembering the past and creating a new identity. A continuous state of mourning, or melancholia, provides an “ongoing and open relationship to the past [...] allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects” (Eng and Kazanjian 4). Art is one way in which this relationship continues and symbolic loss made into an object of study.

For the communities and artists in this study, the process of engaging with loss and making it into an object of study is not a simple one. While a continued engagement with what remains helps to politicize loss and serves to resist forgetting, it also forces an ongoing relationship with moments of violence that may prompt feelings of guilt, fear, or shame. In *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, David Eng and David Kazanjian extend Homans's observation by focusing on what remains after loss as a way to understand what has been lost.¹⁷ Referencing Walter Benjamin's historical materialism, Freud's later realization that melancholia is essential to the process of mourning, and Judith Butler's revised Freudian notion of melancholia, they conclude that "melancholia is the precondition for both the ego and the work of mourning. It is precisely the ego's melancholic attachments to loss that might be said to produce not only psychic life and subjectivity but also the domain of remains. That is, melancholia creates a realm of traces open to signification, a hermeneutic domain of what remains of loss" (4). Continued attachment to what remains after the experience of a loss helps maintain a dialogic relationship between the present and the past. For Eng and Kazanjian, only the remains offer us the opportunity to linger over object-loss: "loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained" (2). Melancholia, or in this case the refusal to mourn, is a productive

¹⁷ Both of these works, *Symbolic Loss* and *Loss: The Politics of Memory*, along with an updated examination of mourning and aesthetics by Tammy Clewell in *Mourning, Modernism, and Postmodernism*, represent a longer tradition of questioning the ways in which mourning have changed within a postmodern and modernist context. A few critics, such as Patricia Rae, Alessia Ricciardi, Dominick LaCapra, Jahan Ramanzni, and Seth Moglan have all studied mourning in literary modernism. Taking their cues from assertions made by Gregory Gorer and Phillippe Ariés that mourning practices of the 20th century had become private and death tame, all of them present their view on the shift and even if a shift ever occurred in mourning practices.¹⁷ In addition, Andreas Huyssen, Ihab Hassan, Jacques Derrida, Patricia Waugh, have continued the debate in their questioning of postmodernist literature and history. As a result, these studies anticipate and ask similar questions as Homans, Eng, and Kazanjia, which in term reflects why critics are focusing more on mourning within cultural, national, and historical boundaries.

means to keep the absent and lost object present. It is through this relationship that sites of memory and objects provide access to the past and what was lost. Similar to Homans's conclusion that incomplete mourning happens in response to symbolic loss, for Eng and Kazanjian, the lost object also cannot be fully mourned or recovered. This inability to fully mourn signals a melancholic attachment to the lost object, which they see as both productive and hopeless: "a politics of mourning might be described as that creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history" (2). Since this engagement with sites of memory and a traumatic history support the foundation of the process of identity making, they encourage us to view loss "as productive rather than pathological, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary" (2).¹⁸ In its productive state, loss is a political and creative force in countering and recovering what has been lost because "avowals of and attachments to loss can produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternative meanings" (5). The study of loss goes beyond studying its connection with subjectivity; it also includes the exploration of "the numerous material practices by which loss is melancholically materialized in the social and the cultural realms and in the political and the aesthetic domains" (5).

While this view of melancholia as productive has gained traction, it has also been met with resistance. In his essay "*Against Melancholia*," Greg Forter identifies two reoccurring problems in the recent ways in which in which melancholia has been

¹⁸ Pierre Nora defines "lieux de memoire (site of memory)" as "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists" (284).

critically taken up. The first involves the belief that mourning involves forgetting the lost object, which then positions melancholia as the only way in which to retain the memory traces of the lost object. However, if this is the case, adhering to the clinical view of melancholia as a pathology, the melancholic subject cannot name or identify what has been lost. Forter suggests that the “melancholic’s unconscious incorporation ...*prevents* the object from being remembered, in part because it confuses self and other”, which makes it impossible “for the other to become an object of memory or consciousness” (138). The second is Forter’s suggestion that current scholarship by Moon, Novak, and Muñoz celebrates melancholia in a way that disregards its *affective* quality or the way that it throws one into an aggressive cycle against one’s self. Both of Forter’s criticisms seems intent on keeping Freud’s original distinctions in place, while suggesting that everyone mourns or grieves in the same way. As Glissant, Eng, and Kazanjian show, bodily, material, and ideal remains allow access to what has been lost and art allows one to engage with the melancholic object without being consumed by it. The artists of this study, Glissant, and Morrison suggest that while the recovery of what has been lost may not be possible, it is in the attempt, through the seizing of what remains that melancholia provides a way towards mourning.

For the sake of this study, I view melancholia as a productive process that creates a relationship between the past and the present through what remains. I combine the notion of physical remains and the more abstract metaphorical remains, such as symbolic loss and memories, which are projected in bodily, material, and philosophical forms. Sites and objects of memory help to sustain our relationship to a traumatic past, while also allowing the possibility of incorporating the loss in a way that allows both

remembrance and forgetting to take place. Loss takes on various material forms, such as that of memorial, a dance, and even absence that allows it to be represented and retained for political and aesthetic purposes. Thus, I also consider mourning as “inherently spatial as well as temporal phenomenon, experienced in and expressed in/through corporeal and psychological spaces, virtual communities, and physical sites of memorialization” (Maddrell 123). Importantly, as Avril Maddrell recognizes, mourning includes the “individual mappings of bereaved peoples experiences of significant spaces/places and how these changes over time, how they are expressed through performance in space, written as corporeal, landscape, or literary texts; and how these individual [and collective] emotional maps impact on particular places” (123). These experiences with death, dying, and mourning have importance in the cultivation of a sense of self and connectedness to others and also helps give a sense of places to spaces where culturally traumatic and violent events took place. A focus on processes of melancholia draws our attention to the complicated internal work of mourning in conjunction with the rituals and objects of mourning and its ability to reimagine the disruptive forces that impact social interactions and the procurement of a healthy self-identity. Positioning it in this way, we can see melancholia as a productive creative process that has political implications when art provides access to the remains of loss and the critique of them.

Art serves as an important part of this process of addressing loss and its remains, especially in response to events and moments of racialized violence. In this sense, the animation of loss through what remains resonates with the work that Julia Kristeva and bell hooks have done in considering the role of the artist in the processes of mourning. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*, Kristeva highlights the intermediary position of

the artist in the process of mourning. She argues that the artists who attend to loss use a ritualized process of remembering. While she believes that it is the job of the psychoanalyst to curb melancholia by naming suffering, elaborating on it, and dissecting it into its smallest components, when a psychoanalyst is not available, literary and artistic creations provide a temporary substitution (92-106). The artist or the author apprehends the melancholic spirit to create a symbolic sign that represents the loss in a tangible object, which shows the authors simulating the act of mourning. For a group that has consistently resisted the claims of psychoanalysis, the artist or author has played an important role in addressing loss.¹⁹ A larger issue within studies of mourning and loss, and by association psychoanalysis and trauma studies is the need for a more diverse reading of loss and mourning to account for cultural differences.²⁰

Understanding that loss leaves behind bodily, material, and ideal remains draws our attention to the validity in understanding that living requires being shaped by the threat or experience of loss. A politics of mourning governs how we choose to respond,

¹⁹ Particularly within African American studies, literary theorists often view psychoanalytical readings warily because of the fear that they will once again be used to render African Americans as socially, morally, and mentally deficient. Despite these concerns, “race” and psychoanalysis have converged in African American literary criticism. The methods proposed by scholars who attempt to read the two distinct and often antagonistic areas of study together show the limits of such approaches and provide an understanding of what exactly a turn to psychoanalysis allows literary scholars to explore.¹⁹ Claudia Tate is one of the first black critical theorists to champion for the revision of the tools and concerns of psychoanalysis as a means of thinking about race in the United States and its representations in African American literature. Other works that consider psychoanalysis and race include Hortense Spillers “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), the anthologies *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1997) and *The Psychoanalysis of Race* (1998), Barbara Johnson’s *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (1998);

²⁰ My work builds on the work done by such scholars as Claudia Tate, J. Bouson Brooks, Hortense Spillers, Rhanna Khanna, Anne Anlin Cheng, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, and bell hooks, who have asked us to rethink the possibilities that psychoanalysis has for understanding African diasporic histories of loss. Aesthetic productions serve as key objects for understanding how symbolic loss has been addressed within the culture, especially to experiences of loss beyond a context of slavery and death. A recent collection of essays, *Come Weep with Me: Loss and Mourning in the Writings of Caribbean Women Writers* has made significant strides in understanding how loss and mourning function in response the issues facing a postcolonial world and particularly how women of African descent respond to it.

remember, and even forget these experiences. The presence of loss does not signal an end to relationships, but instead fuels ritualized social practices associated with mourning that allows for the retention of racialized memory. Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Hockey, who study the relationship between material culture, memories, and death, suggest that death is rewritten onto objects that mediate our relationship with death and the dead. By extension, in whatever form these objects are apprehended and placed into a museum, an archive, or other memorial spaces or used as an image or material for artistic purpose, they help to recall the deaths of others and what their loss signifies to us. Interactions with these objects and the spaces they occupy are given meaning because of memories and “the cultural meanings ascribed to spaces of the dead and dying [that] are invoked through social practices and it is this nexus of social space and practice that reproduces potent death-related memories” (Hallam and Hockey 5). For instance, completing mourning rituals by traveling the route of the Freedom Riders, creating assemblage art as acts of remembrance, and performing dances seems similar to Paul Gilroy’s suggestion that a “rapport with death” is integral “to the narratives of loss, exile, and journeying which [...] serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory. The telling and retelling of these stories play a special role, organizing the consciousness of the “racial” group socially and striking the important balance between inside and outside activity--the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and performative, that are required to invent, maintain, and renew identity” (198). The repetition of stories and the making of art that speaks to these cultural specific moments of loss suggest these wounds and losses are still

widely felt. Therefore, when artists respond to these moments through a mode of melancholia, we access and engage with the past to succinctly address symbolic loss.

The idea of remains offers a rich basis for developing a theory of loss because it allows me to examine spatial forms of loss associated with death and ideological loss provoked by capitalist materialism and traumatic memories. For this study, I establish the parameters of “remains” within two contexts: material and symbolic. Material remains denote bodily remains and the material objects that come to represent or form extensions of the body, such as grave markers, photographs, slave castles, decaying buildings, consumer trash, and other objects that remind one of what or who has been lost. The presence of such remains in certain spaces or places suggests that racialized violence, death, and the legacies of slavery leave physical traces on the landscape. We can see this in the urban spaces of Detroit and the Watts community that continue to deal with the aftermaths of the riots.

Beyond the material remains that include bodily and spatial traces, the psychological scars of collective trauma also mark histories of loss.²¹ These wounds denote a loss that has not been fully mourned or understood. As a result, symbolic remains refer to abstract losses that are psychologically felt and comprise our self-identities. Considering the symbolic losses or remains to the era after and immediately preceding the Civil Rights movement and during its waning, which many place as the

²¹ Kai Erickson defines a collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma” (231-241). Collective trauma often concentrates on the relationship between the survivors and witnesses, or descendent, of particular group or cultural traumas, which includes “onlooker trauma,” “secondary PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder),” or “transgenerational trauma”.²¹ Cultural trauma is linked to individual trauma because many of the problems reflected in individuals may also highlight issues that affect a collective body.

period after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s in 1968 or represented by those born after 1960, we find progress in some areas, but disillusionment in others. In addition, racism during the post-civil right era took on a different face and role.²² Although the outcome of the movement was to produce equality and better living and working conditions for African Americans and others, the multiple race riots that defined the 1960s and well into the 1990s, the bombing of the predominately black organization MOVE in 1985, the systemic “lynching” of black men, and African Americans questioning their relationship to a collective body and history show that the expected outcomes did not take place. Thus, many of the aesthetic works of this era reveal artists choosing the above mentioned themes and events as inspiration and subject in their particular mediums and genres. While the material loss associated with such events may be visible, the larger symbolic losses, often tied to racial politics, may remain hidden.

For all of the art in this study, the landscape and the artists' interaction with the traces of the event informs the structural elements of the art, either materially or through the absence of any evidence it occurred. The artists of *66 Signs of Neon* respond to the riot/rebellions of the 1960s by creating alternative spaces and objects of mourning. Wideman questions the multilayered impact of the bombing of MOVE in 1985 in Philadelphia that destroyed an entire city block of homes and disrupted a working class black neighborhood and the connection of that with the neighboring Pittsburg. His narrative strategies and the exploration by the main characters of a changing landscape show them negotiating and making sense of the remains of the event. Since Lemon's travels take him to places associated with the Civil Rights Movement, he maps his own

²² Smith, Robert Charles. *Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Now You See It, Now You Don't*. SUNY series in Afro-American studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

narrative of loss about the importance of remembering these moments. In the case of all these events, the material, bodily, and ideal remains left in their wake and the lack or refusal of memorialization demonstrates how memory of these events have been contested and denied, yet unable to be forgotten and fully mourned. In their efforts to remember, the artists in this study draw on what is essentially an archive of loss that sees absence, fragments, and trash as productive materials for calling attention to the past and its impact on the creation of personal and collective identities. As they engage with landscapes of loss through embodied and memory-making ways, or acts of mourning, they also invite their audiences to do the same.

By purposefully returning to scenes of death and interacting with the spaces in which it occurred, these artists explore mourning stories that repurpose racial memory to expose the voids found in the historical record and the “wounds” that exist in the African American collective psyche. Places, such as the racially charged sites that Ralph Lemon visited during his research for his production “Come Home Charley Patton,” show this relationship. These places become what Pierre Nora calls “lieux de memoire,” or memory sites, which also include monuments, museums, archives, and historic spaces. Sites of memory seem to occupy a spatial location between memory and history because they only appear when we become conscious of a loss and what to retain what remains of it. Thus, sites of memory are the sites where groups maintain gendered, national, or racial identities and sites of mourning and look for a reinvigorated sense of relation to the past and other members of the group. Even if no physical memorial exists to mark the place, the memories of what took place there still remain.²³ The artists draw on tropes of loss

²³Nora, Pierre. “Between History and Memory Les Lieux De Mémoire.” *Representations*. 26 (1989): 7-24.

that show the “interplay between what is made visible and what is buried, that which is retained and that which is lost in the material culture of deaths, has an impact in terms of the possibilities of memory and forgetting” (Hallam and Hockey 9). The intent, then, is to make particular events socially visible through strategies of framing, displaying, or narrating through a technique of juxtaposition, which becomes the key technique through which these artists examine such themes as absence and presence, collective and individual stories of loss, and ruin and hope. As Eng and Kazanjian describe it, “the ability of the melancholic object to express multiple losses at once speak to its flexibility as a signifier, endowing it with not only a multifaceted but also a certain palimpsest-like quality” (15). The structural impact on the narratives, art, and performance is the presence of objects expressing multiple losses and the layering of voices, characters, genres, and place.

In the first chapter, “Urban Riots and the Aesthetics of Ruin and Hope in *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project*,” I expand the discussion of the riots/rebellion of the 1960s beyond the social-political context to look at the art that recalls the 1965 Watts Riot and the 1967 Detroit Riot. I turn my focus to the *66 Signs of Neon* exhibition and *The Heidelberg Project* and their engagement with assemblage or junk art. I read the assemblage art that emerged in these urban cities where racialized violence occurred using a spatial, material, and aesthetic understanding of the urban ruins and melancholic objects that contribute to the poetics of loss that defines this art. Since the art is deeply engaged with the racial and economic histories of Los Angeles and Detroit, which includes the rebellions that forever changed the social and physical structures of these cities, I first establish the politics of space and memory that shape the socio-political

identity and power relations of Detroit and Watts. I suggest that the actions of the rioters, the burning and looting of buildings and destroying property, were a response to the spatial and material conditions in which they lived. Since the artists of both projects draw on these spatial and material conditions, the art cannot be divorced from the context in which it was produced. Next, I explore how assemblage art provides the artists the ability to have a sensory engagement with the urban ruins and melancholic objects whose rhetorical properties contribute to the aesthetic and thematic structures of the art. Assemblage offers a method for the artists to create a language through the alternative visual strategies of assemblage art—deconstruction, reconstruction, and juxtaposition—to critically assess the multiple layers of loss that are central to the contexts in which the artists create. Since *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* gesture toward contentious memories of violence and rebellion, which have not had extensive memorialization, the art develops through a counterpoetics of assemblage that I suggest is defined and shaped by loss. In creating the art, they engage in counter forms of mourning and provide the opportunity of mourning to the audience. As a result, *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* reflect a hopeful, but conflicted sense of relation that the artists have with these spaces, the riots, and to a collective memory and identity.

In the second chapter, “The Narrative Texture of Loss in John Edgar Wide/man’s *Two Cities: A Love Story* and *Philadelphia Fire*,” I argue that a linkage exists between Wideman’s experimental narrative strategies in *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities* and his exploration of loss as an important site of meaning in African American culture. By looking at the two novels together, we find illustration of Wideman’s belief that the relationship between “form and meaning is organic,” and that each novel allows him to

"invent new ways" to explore similar themes from different angles. "Each book," Wideman discloses, "is a redefinition of what counts and how it counts and how you can capture it" (77). So, rather than reading the works distinctly, which is the course critics have often taken, it is interesting to read them together as a part of Wideman's larger philosophical project where the subject is the ethical and formal representation of loss. Wideman's philosophy and poetics of loss reveal themselves in his reoccurring focus on loss associated with black boys and the community, along with his valuing of a collage-like way of seeing, thinking, and writing. The result: complex, polyvocal, and deeply textured novels engaged in a discourse of race, space, language, and memory. It seems that, for Wideman, the bombing of MOVE in 1985 stands as an ideal event through which to explore the violent history of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and by extension the nation, in regards to African Americans, with a particular focus on the loss of black boys to violence. In this chapter, I explore his use of artist figures, a photographer and a writer [Cudjoe and himself], to suggest the linkages of these events. All of the artists see the world in a fragmented way, but also as connected through time and space. The result is their creation of art that draws on fragmentation and juxtaposition as modes representing symbolic loss. In sum, I believe that John Edgar Wideman's experimental narrative strategies reflect his intense interest in a dimension of loss that exposes the relationship between collective, spatial, and racial histories of loss and individually felt loss. Similar to Tyree Guyton and the artists of the *66 Signs of Neon* exhibition, Wideman draws on a collage inspired aesthetic as a productive means to represent loss that leaves physical and psychological traces.

In the last chapter, “The Performance of Loss in Ralph Lemon’s ‘Come Home Charley Patton,’” I turn my attention to Ralph Lemon’s 2004 production of “Come Home Charley Patton,” the last of his three-part project entitled *The Geography Trilogy*. The performance marked the end of a ten year project for Lemon in which he personally struggled with his relationship to traditional modes of dance. Thus, the project marks his use of the stage to develop a multilayered mode of representation that connects the present with the past and the individual with a collective history. In “Come Home Charley Patton,” his development of a decidedly postmodern aesthetic to create a collage of bodily movements, mediums, narratives, and objects show his effort to contemplate his relationship to a collective identity shaped by a shared history of violence. Thus, we can consider the ways that his travels throughout the South became an act of mourning and explore the influence of the demands of mourning on the narrative strategies employed in “Come Home Charley Patton.” In this chapter, I consider the ways that Lemon’s entire “Come home Charley Patton” project, which includes the performance in 2004 and the complementary text of drawings, photographs, and experimental journals of his travels, is an attempt to mourn and access the remains of a legacy of racialized violence. His travels throughout the South highlight the absence of memorializing efforts in regards to events associated with the Civil Rights Movement and others. However, his project also exposes the difficulties in developing a sense of relation to this past and creating a form of remembrance that expresses reconciliation between collective and personal memories. In the first section, I establish a theoretical framework to read the performance by examining Lemon’s own efforts at mapping loss. Next, I look more closely at Lemon’s choices of media and explore why a multi-genre approach reflects his struggles to find a

form that can fully represent the multiple positions he places himself in relation to the history he is exploring. Finally, I explain how Lemon's marriage of aesthetics and mourning in "Come Home Charley Patton" connects to a larger body of African American literary and cultural productions that are shaped by and explore loss as a means of formulating a sense of relation.

In the conclusion, I end the dissertation by reflecting on the project's progression from the beginning research question to the remaining questions about the connection between mourning and aesthetics.

CHAPTER 1

URBAN RIOTS AND THE AESTHETICS OF RUIN AND HOPE IN *66 SIGNS OF NEON AND THE HEIDELBERG PROJECT*

*These fragmentations only mean that
I am fragmented;
that as I symbolize what you say and agree
can I then leave you
to set these lines in order,
assemble them into a book
and, by the first strong winds,
permit its leaves to be torn from its cover.*

*Let them fly high
and, like leaves light
into the lap of the Universe;
separate of and by themselves
within, without, complete, yet incomplete.
-- Noah Sylvester Purifoy, 1966*

In 1966, a few artists who witnessed the 1965 Watts Rebellion participated in the art exhibition, *66 Signs of Neon*.¹ Organized by Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell, the exhibition featured at least six other artists and sixty-six pieces of art created during a month long period.² What makes *66 Signs of Neon* culturally and aesthetically important is that the artists used materials left in the wake of the six day violence to create their assemblage or “junk art.” Purifoy explains that “*while the debris was still smoldering, we ventured into the rubble like other junkies of the community, digging and searching,*

¹ I recognize that the terms used to name these events that occurred in the 1960s are highly contested. But, since I am focusing on the memory of these events from artists who viewed them as politically and socially motivated, I use the term riot or rebellion interchangeably and often adopt the riot/rebellion. Looking at the art in this way helps, I acknowledge the validity of Maulana Karenga urgings to: “protect and preserve the cultural and political integrity of the historic event in terms of how it is remembered and interpreted as an act of collective resistance rather than a riot.” However, I retain all original usage of all terms by the authors I cite or when it is historically necessary.

² There are conflicting accounts of the actual number of art pieces that were ultimately shown. Some say there were fifty, others say sixty-six. Also, some of the participants went on to create similar pieces or rebuild pieces from the exhibition that were lost.

but unlike others, obsessed without quite knowing why.” The product of their obsession was art that recalls the riot by drawing inspiration from the defining features of the ruined and burning landscape. The use of tropes of ruin, loss, and renewal allow the artists to preserve the dynamic nature of the riots, but these tropes also help to define the processes of the artists as interactions with what is essentially a site and objects of memory. *66 Signs of Neon* reflects the artists’ efforts to reconcile the tension between their dual purposes: to document the loss through the very materiality of the event and to promote a sense of hope and healing rising from the ashes. The artists’ use of the physical remains and their sensory engagement with these spaces are an attempt to maintain sensory relation to the urban space, while offering the art as a mode of critique and an act of mourning. Although little of the exhibit remains, *66 Signs of Neon* illustrates how assemblage art participated in a discourse of space, race, and memory during this contentious era in US history. The exhibition extends our understanding of the relationship between the contextual landscape and the formal qualities of assemblage art.

Looking only at *66 Signs of Neon* and the 1965 Watts Rebellion would provide an interesting avenue to discuss the overarching questions this study raises about the rhetorical strategies of alternative aesthetic forms that engage with *affective, melancholic,* and *racialized* spaces of memory in order to examine more symbolic forms of loss. However, I extend my examination to include Tyree Guyton’s *The Heidelberg Project* (1986) in Detroit, Michigan that contemplates the urban crisis miles away from the streets of Watts and more than twenty years later. Guyton started *The Heidelberg Project* after the period normally associated with the Civil Rights Movement, but Detroit itself is emblematic of its legacies—the gains and the failed promises of that era. *The Heidelberg*

Project performs a geographical exploration of loss through houses overflowing with materials of human consumption left after years of urban decay and neglect. These images of degeneration have come to define Detroit and has helped it to earn it the title of urban ruins. While Detroit's decline began long before the 1967 rebellion/riot, it is often hastily labeled as the key determining cause of the "white flight" and decline that would take place in the subsequent years and that continues today. Surrounded by mounds of industrial waste and abandoned homes, Guyton chose an art form that allowed him to turn that refuse into art as he attempted to reclaim a sense of connectedness to the city and the community. Thus, *The Heidelberg Project* has deep connections with the 1967 rebellion not only because of Guyton's personal history with Detroit, but also because he works with the physical detritus from a landscape shaped by over twenty years of racial and social politics. Guyton's struggles with the local government, which has on two occasions destroyed parts of the project, and the multiple attempts by arsonists to burn the houses down prove that his choice of materials visually exposes contentious memories in a very public way.

While *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* exist within different spaces, they both involve artists regenerating the physical remains left after racialized violence into productive mediums critiquing the cultural and memory politics that govern these racialized and ruinous urban spaces. Guyton's work is complementary to the *66 Signs of Neon* exhibition because of this shared use of assemblage, but also because both Purifoy and Guyton describe their philosophy of assemblage art as a communicative process that creates a relationship between the viewer and the artist for the purpose of change. The process of assemblage allows the artists to establish a relational experience between the

physical landscape and material objects and the affective experience of these spaces. A comparative reading of *The Heidelberg Project* and *66 Signs of Neon* shows that their assemblage art draws on a rhetoric of ruin and hope through which the artists design spaces of memory that recall the racialized violence of the 1965 Watts and 1968 Detroit riots/rebellions.

In this chapter, I begin with a spatial, material, and aesthetic reading of Detroit and Watts as affective landscapes. Since the art is deeply engaged with the racial and economic histories of Los Angeles and Detroit, which includes the rebellions that forever changed the social and physical structures of these cities, I first establish the politics of space and memory that shape the socio-political identity and power relations of Detroit and Watts. I suggest that the actions of the rioters, the burning and looting of buildings and destroying property, were a response to the spatial and material conditions in which they lived. The remains of this violence inspired artists to experience the spaces as affective and memorial landscapes that cannot be divorced from the context in which they're produced. However, the impact of the riots on the community remains an ambiguous loss that cannot always be measured and named. Then, I explore how assemblage art provides the artists the ability to have a sensory engagement with the urban ruins and melancholic objects whose rhetorical properties contribute to the aesthetic and thematic structures of the art.

Assemblage offers a method for the artists to create a language through the alternative visual strategies of assemblage art—deconstruction, reconstruction, and juxtaposition—to critically assess the multiple layers of loss that are central to the contexts in which the artists create. Since *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project*

gesture toward contentious memories of violence and rebellion, which have not had extensive memorialization, the art develops through a counterpoetics of assemblage that I suggest is defined and shaped by loss. Finally, I look closely at specific pieces from *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* to show how the artists use the process of assemblage to perform acts of mourning that reflect a hopeful, but conflicted terms of relation among artist, space, memory and collective identity.

Urban Ruins as Affective and Racialized Landscapes

Most studies of the riots/rebellions have focused on naming the social conditions that led to the uprisings, outlining the specifics of the events, and suggesting solutions to rectify these problems. However, what has been missing from the conversation, and what this project provides, is an examination of if and how these communities respond to the ideological, spatial, and emotional shifts produced by the riots/rebellions through acts of memory, particularly in the form of art. The first step in reading *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* as engaging with a politics of space and memory requires a shift in how we read the impact of racialized violence on the history and landscape of these cities. While any attempt to fully draw out the multiple and complex socio-historical contexts of *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* would require much more space than this chapter allows, I do want to frame my discussion of the art around the racialized material and spatial nature of the rebellions/riots to show how structurally and thematically they served as an influence on the form that these projects would go on to take. They serve as memory and metaphor for the artists. If, as Dori Laub argues, “art inscribes (artistically bears witness to) what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times” (xx), then the turn towards art for these artists became a

form of witnessing where they accessed their reality to present counter-memories.³ Their testimony has a double function of producing social discourse and initiating individual and cultural mourning, thus, a key feature of this assemblage art is its ability to remind us of the event that was central to its production.

The multiple riots/rebellions in major U.S. cities that occurred at the height of the Civil Rights Movement (1954-68) suggest that a large number of black citizens saw violence as a means to address their experiences with a spatialized form of power maintained by discriminatory and exclusionary laws and practices. The cities that experienced the most deadly and costliest riots/rebellions, like Watts (1965), Detroit (1967), and Newark (1967) all share similar “complex and interwoven histories of race, residence, and work in the postwar era” (Sugrue 5). However, attributing the changes in these cities to the violence that occurred over a few days overlooks the very real ways that “race” served as an integral part of the various systems of regulation that governed these cities long before the occurrence of the riots.⁴ The current melancholic state of both Watts and Detroit, with their deeply scarred landscapes, economic struggles, and the declining populations, suggest that the remains of the past informs the structures of these cities. The causes and ills associated with the rebellions/riots have not been fully

³ Here I draw on Dori Laub’s characterization of the role of the “secondary witness.”

⁴ In her study of six riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, Janet Abu-Lughod argues for the use of “controlled comparisons” that could possibly lead to “our understanding of the evolving nature of racial/class/cultural cleavages in the United States. Because the three cities differ in terms of their spatial forms of segregation, their political cultures, and their legal and police practices, such comparisons may allow us to move beyond simple generalizations to a deeper understanding of how space, racial politics, and police practices interact with generic underlying grievances to move race relations ahead or backward” (14). Bayard Rustin proposed this view one year after the 1965 Watts Rebellion: “Viewed by many of the rioters themselves as their “manifesto,” the uprising of the Watts Negroes brought out in the open, as no other aspect of the Negro protest has done, the despair and hatred that continue to brew in the Northern ghettos despite the civil-rights legislation of recent years and the advent of ‘the war on poverty’” (Rustin 140).

addressed by the African American communities or the cities themselves because a politics of memory has dictated responses to these violent events. However, the memory of the riots/rebellions is built into the landscape and history of Detroit and Los Angeles, but as a disenfranchised or ambiguous loss because it is often difficult to concretely trace what has been lost.⁵

For the hundreds of thousands of African Americans who came to these cities from the South in search of economic and spatial freedoms, Los Angeles and Detroit simultaneously became spaces of home, loss, and disillusionment.⁶ A number of studies have begun the process of highlighting how “race” during this second Great Migration influenced the physical, political, and social structures of major U.S. cities, including Detroit and Los Angeles. These studies help in considering how the riots/rebellions were reflective of the often contentious relationship between “race,” space, and power that impact the political, economic, and emotional well-being of urban residents. The riots/rebellions of the 1960s showed that the more visible gains of the Civil Rights Movement in the South, such as integrated schools or buses, did not address years of exclusionary institutional and structural practices that impacted the quality of life for African Americans, especially those living in urban areas. Understanding this helps us to better examine why *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* emerged from these

⁵ Doka, K. J. *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books: (3-11).

⁶ For more information on the experiences of African Americans during their migration period, see Gregory, James N. *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York, NY: Random House, 2010; Griffin, Farah J. *"who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

cities as discursive art projects that engage with the city as an archive and landscape of loss through the very urban ruins that contain traces of this past.⁷

The history of Los Angeles from the view of its African American residents reveal how the racialized spatial dynamics of the city contributed to the violence that erupted in Watts on August 11, 1965.⁸ During the “Second Great Migration” period, over five million African Americans left the South and headed north and to the west in search of employment and a better quality of life. However, while these migrants found some degree of success and housing choices, their choices were still governed by racial politics.⁹ These migrants found that Los Angeles was not the promise land that W.E.B. Du Bois in *Crisis Magazine* suggested in 1918: “Los Angeles was wonderful. The air was scented with orange blossoms and the beautiful homes lay low crouching on the earth as though they loved its scents and flowers. Nowhere in the United States is the Negro so well and beautifully housed, nor the average efficiency intelligence in the colored population so high. Here is an aggressive, hopeful group-with some wealth, large

⁷ George Lipsitz’s “How Racism Makes Place,” Josh Sides and Thomas J. Sugrue’s *The Origins of The Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* For Sugrue, in his study of Detroit, deindustrialization and racism helped to fuel the urban decline that occurred in post-World War II US cities: “coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economic, and politics in a particular historical moment, the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, set the stage for the fiscal, social, and economic crises that confront urban America today” where African Americans disproportionately bore capitalism’s creation of economic inequality (5). “How Racism Makes Place” is one of the few texts to link the ways space is racialized to a number of cultural productions where space is central to its meaning. The current interest in Detroit as an urban ruin and the Los Angeles studies of the 1990s laid the foundation for explaining the various processes of production that have created these global cities. However, by placing the urban riots/rebellions of the 1960s at the center of the history of these cities forces a reexamination of how the social construction of race restructured the landscape and social structures of these cities before and after the riots/rebellions.

⁸ For a full historical background of the Watts Riots, see Fogelson, Robert M. *The Los Angeles Riots*. New York: Arno Press, 1969;.Boesel, David, and Peter H. Rossi. *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy of the Ghetto Riots, 1964-1968*. New York: Basic Books, 1971; and Horne, Gerald. *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995.

⁹ Sides, Josh. *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

industrial opportunity and a buoyant spirit.” It is estimated that “at the peak of the migration in 1943, more than six thousand African Americans came to Los Angeles each month, and more than two hundred thousand arrived in the 1940s” (Sides 43). However, the access to jobs decreased because of increased population and shifted demands for industrial production in both Northern and Western regions of the country. The racialization of space within the city influenced the demographic makeup of neighborhoods, but also affected key industries, such as schools, criminal systems, education, and medical care, in terms of who had access and who did not. Practices of exclusion and discrimination were deliberate efforts to make sure African Americans stayed in their *place*, but it also had an impact on how black citizens viewed their relationship to the city and their participation in the exchange of material goods and cultural production. The Watts and Detroit rebellion/riots show how some of the residents viewed this relationship in their destruction of places of material exchange and even in the looting of objects.

So for some, the Watts riot/rebellion came as a surprising development during a time of great change in the nation, but for many members of that community it was a necessary reaction to a combination of years of economic decline, ineffective social programs, overt policing, and the establishment of invisible, but real physical boundaries. Martin Luther King Jr.’s visit to Watts at the height of the violence where he urged the riot participants to stop the destruction vividly illustrates the different, but also innately similar, fight for civil rights in urban centers. During his visit, members of the audience booed King and vowed to keep rioting. Later, even he would conclude that the riots were “*environmental* and not racial. The economic deprivation, social isolation, inadequate

housing, and general despair of thousands of Negroes teeming in Northern and Western ghettos are the ready seeds which give birth to tragic expressions of violence” (my italics; King 17 Sug 1965). He noted that the riots were “the beginning of a stirring of those people in our society who have been passed by the progress of the last decade” (Du Bois). The Watts Rebellion changed Los Angeles in very real and definable ways, including the increased interest in social movements and the art scene. The creators of *66 Signs of Neon* used assemblage art as means of countering how the riot/rebellion would be remembered as the artists posed questions about the landscape that examined how the past remains a part of the present in liminal, but very real ways.

For Detroit, a similar story of prosperity and decline for African Americans can be traced to the material and spatial colorlines of the city and the nation. Detroit is a city in economic and physical ruin, but at one time it was the symbol of American progress and innovation. Indeed, the 1967 riot marked a visible disconnection between the city as the symbol of progress and the reality of it for the residents who live there. Most current descriptions of Detroit focus on the evidence that the city has experienced loss. This includes a detailed recounting of the number of residents who have left, the buildings in various states of decay, the large voids in the city’s landscape left by destroyed houses, the jobs lost, and the city’s crumbling infrastructure.

Describing a major city in the United States as a ruin may seem strange since, traditionally, ruins recall ancient times and landscapes. However, the urge to label the decaying urban centers of the western world as ruins has gained popularity.¹⁰ Labeling

¹⁰ Similar interests in urban ruins seem more pervasive in parts of Britain with the publication of Tim Edensor’s *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics, and Materiality*. In recent years, scholars, artists, and photographers show an increasing interest in what is being called America’s urban ruins. A number of online virtual memorials feature Detroit, Rhode Island, New York, and other major US cities; these

Detroit as an urban ruin calls attention to the layered, broken, and hidden narratives of its marginalized population. Furthermore, the decaying, transitional space reflects the post-Fordist era of the city. The urban ruins of Detroit tell a story of physical loss, and also embodies the symbolic losses of safe communities, a strong economic system, and the neglect of spaces important to African American history and culture. In his discussion of Detroit, Jerry Herron observes that “For both good and ill, the city has one resource that suburbs and edge cities don’t; it has a past” (159). For Herron, then, an attraction to the history these ruins recall is not, as it is for Andreas Huyssen, a nostalgic wish for modernism.¹¹ Instead, they mark Detroit as America’s first postmodern city because the absences, historical traces, and erasures indicated by a declining population, abandoned homes, and large swaths of pastoral landscapes signal an end to the promises of modernism. In many ways, Detroit and the other cities throughout the Rust Belt serve as representations of the failure of capitalism and the resulting urban ruins as the consequences of modernity. But, for the large number of African Americans who came to Detroit and to Los Angeles in search of better economic opportunities and freedoms not experienced in the South, these ruins also signal the failure of those promises.

The ruinous landscape of Detroit and the destroyed state of Watts after the rebellion visually recall the historical memory of violence and resistance and prompt the melancholic ruminations of these artists. Since structurally ruins denote the palimpsest nature of the city and the accumulation of time, the rebellions/riots themselves are

websites add a new dimension to the function, shape, and purpose of memorializing. In their architectural uncanniness, they reveal the way in which America remembers. More so than any of the other cities, Detroit has figured prominently in the renewed, or perhaps continuing, fascination with ruins. One popular website, *The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit*, houses hundreds of photographs that document the steady decline of Detroit’s downtown area.

¹¹ Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

particular moments comprised of cultural, economic, and political characteristics that help in shaping the meaning of the city. However, only certain narratives about this past gain potency and others are forgotten. For a country that loves memorials and monuments, the lack of physical, concrete sites memorializing the Watts or Detroit riot/rebellions and the people who were killed is telling in how particular moments in America's history are deliberately forgotten, but can become a part of the melancholic narrative of the cities. Kenneth E. Foote acknowledges, sites of violence involving minorities in American history are often invisible or unmarked because "their invisibility can be traced to issues of unresolved meaning and to conflicts over memory. Some have yet to be fitted into encompassing interpretive scaffolding; the traditions that will guide their shaping await invention or are now emerging" (293). Reading these cities as ruins help to negotiate the space between the past and the present or what remains and what has been lost. The ruin trope reflects the two forms of violence that have shaped the memory and identity of Watts and Detroit: the violence of the riot and the institutionalized violence of legal segregation, economic deprivation, and now gentrification that influences the social landscape before and after the riots. The absence of such memorial efforts shows that the meaning and causes of the rebellions/riots continue to remain sites of contestation.¹² Therefore, because of the nature of the riots, any efforts to memorialize them confronts a politics of memory that is also caught up within cultural and national identity politics.

¹² When the riots/rebellions do appear in discussions of the Civil Rights Movement, they are often distanced from other more visible events, which occurs because of their violent nature, but more so because the impact and meaning of them continue to be contested. However, this lack of memorialization also reflects the larger issues regarding the remembrance of the Civil Rights Movement as a whole, which I will explore more fully in the third chapter, and even the place of the riots within this narrative.

Spaces and acts of memory are often the staging grounds for contesting and presenting alternative narratives and these art projects are no exception. So although the 1965 Watts Rebellion and the 1967 Detroit Riots have not been integrated into the “official” memorial culture of the cities, it is important to begin looking at ways that they *have* been remembered and often in untraditional ways.¹³ Pierre Nora’s conceptualization of “lieux de memorie,” or sites of memory, helps in considering the urban ruins of Detroit and the destroyed city blocks of Watts after the rebellions as memorial spaces that exclude, but cannot escape memory’s remains. Nora observes that “Memory is blind to all but the group it binds— which is to say, as Maurice Halbwachs has said, that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual . . . Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects (Nora 9). In Nora’s assessment, memory embeds itself in spaces, but also in the things, bodily movements, and images that force remembrance. Metaphorically, then, the memory of the violence and death associated with the rebellions/riots can be felt through an affective experience with the ruins. The urban ruins provided the artists of *66 Signs of Neon* and Guyton with alternative spaces through which they could explore terms of relation that disrupts and challenges mainstream narratives of public violence.

The current interest in urban ruins usually turn to the terminology of ghosts and haunting as a way of exploring the impact of these remains of the past on the present, but

¹³ For instance, after the Watts Rebellion, many of the community members turned to the arts as the means of working through the meaning of the event. In “The Ceremony of the Land,” Johnie Scott, one of the more notable of these writers, would go on to describe the Watts Art Festival that took place in honor of the one year anniversary as a tribute “to the dead of the riots” (45).¹³ However, the Watts Arts Festival became a site of contestation between the city and community organizers and even among those who thought that memorializing the rebellion through art form or any form was not right.

for this study I resist this urge. Instead, I extend the idea of ruination to include “the material remains or artifacts of destruction and violation, but also to the subjectivities and residual effects that linger, like a hangover, in the aftermath of war or violence” (5).

Linking the ruins to violence, in this case the riots/rebellions, we are able to see the ruins beyond the physical aspects of the decaying building or the abandoned object to see how the socio-historical, especially racial, practices of these cities contributed to their construction.

Instead of thinking about the impact of the rebellions/riots in abstract form, I consider the very real ways that the violence inscribes the memory of these events on spaces in material and immaterial ways. The presence of charred buildings, the smell of smoke, or the absence of buildings or people shows how the ruinous city space embodies not only physical loss and decay, but also signals the symbolic loss of safe communities, strong economic bases, and the hopes of those who came to the cities in search of a better life. The urban ruins of Detroit and the ruins left in the wake of the Watts Riots are linked to what Robert Ginsburg calls symbolic ruins that moves us from aesthetic feeling to the moral sentiments of loss, pride, identification continuity, suffering, and survival (107-08).¹⁴ Thus, memory materializes through the very image of the ruins. Their multilayered narrative power includes the art that uses them as material and metaphor.

Ruins themselves develop their meaning through a poetics of loss that draws on their function as material and metaphor. They straddle the two dimensions between what is absent and what is present by bringing the past and the present into close proximity.

¹⁴ Ginsburg, Robert. *The Aesthetics of Ruins*. New York: Rodopi, 2004. 107 110.

Through the juxtaposition of various objects and landscapes in various states of decay and renewal, the impact of past events and the hope for the future remain inevitably connected. The result is a rhetorical power that draws on the characteristics of ruins and hope. Four elements of ruins find a complementary presence in the art of assemblage: fragmentation, the interplay between absence and presence, the shifts in meaning from the material to the symbolic, and juxtaposition as the form of choice. The fragmented nature of the ruins suggests a break in the normal order with the violence of the rebellions/riots signaling the need for a shift in the racialized social and economic policies of these cities. However, these ruins are also sites of memory or melancholic spaces that invite moral, aesthetic, and emotional fascination. Viewing ruins in this way is not unusual, however, reading urban ruins influenced by racialized violence through this lens, invites a rethinking of the relationship among cultural memory, mourning, spatial remains, and melancholic objects. If, these particular urban ruins can be read as melancholic because they recall the unresolved feelings associated with the riots/rebellions and race in general, then what type of form do aesthetic responses considering these spaces and events take? The urban ruins provide the material remains and the aesthetic qualities and form for *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project*. Through assemblage, which allows the juxtaposition of these remains to occur in ways that make what is absent presence, the symbolic loss associated with the ruins finds representation. By drawing on the fragmentation, playing with the relationship between absence and presence, recognizing the presence of material and symbolic remains, and using juxtaposition to create meaning, the artists of this chapter turn to assemblage art

that draws all of these rhetorical elements together in an effort to create meaning and suggest a path towards mourning.

Assemblage Art, Urban Ruins, and a Poetics of Loss

Assemblage art, usually defined as a hybrid form of sculpture closely related to collage, draws on discarded, manufactured objects, printed matter, or other unconventional materials. These items are then juxtaposed and manipulated to produce three dimensional art or larger scale environmental works. William E. Seitz first notably used the term assemblage in the 1960s to describe the works of a set of artists emerging in Southern California.¹⁵ In their efforts to examine a changing postwar America, these artists often combined photography, poetry, and sculpture, which produced innovative forms. Seitz saw assemblage as not just a technique, but “a complex set of attitudes and ideas” that often rejected prescribed definitions of beauty and blurred the lines between aesthetics and politics (10). Since these artists embraced unconventional materials and held alternative beliefs about beauty, the art world did not fully embrace assemblage or trash art as valid works of “art.” Therefore, the artists often created communities that would support each other or adapt characteristics of groups already somewhat accepted, like jazz musicians or the Beat poets.

The African American California based assemblage artists faced similar questions about the validity of their works as art, but also faced another level of exclusion from

¹⁵ See William E. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, who defined some of the key styles and characteristics of assemblage and helped to establish it as a reputable and recognized art form. Rachael Farebrother has briefly discussed the African roots of collage and the influence of African art on artists like Picasso. The exhibition featured 252 works of assemblage and collage art from 141 artists and included works by early 20th Century artists like Picasso, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and Kurt Schwitters who were seen as predecessors of the postwar American artists like Bruce Conner, George Kienholz, and John Chamberlin.

mainstream art museums and studies because of racial discrimination.¹⁶ Despite their exclusion from studies and exhibitions, it is important to note that a number of African American artists chose assemblage art as their form of choice and developed their own artistic spaces during this era. The interest in this form in the area has led some to include these artists under the umbrella of the Black Assemblage Art Movement. The processes attributed to assemblage, using found objects, rejecting “traditional” definitions of beauty and art, and the mixing of high and low culture, have long been a part of the black aesthetic and were defining features of the Black Arts Movement.¹⁷ Thus, while the mainstream California Assemblage Movement no doubt played an influential role in the art that the black artists contributed to the *66 Signs of Neon* exhibition, mainly because it gave credibility to the use of everyday items as materials of art, these artists developed an aesthetic view of assemblage that allowed them to apply it to the context of what it meant to be African American within the social, spatial, and cultural dynamics of Los Angeles. Years later, Guyton would also find that assemblage art, with his more environmental-based form, philosophically and aesthetically allowed him to be a witness for a dying, but hopeful community. These artists take on the role of secondary witnesses, drawn to re-presenting the past by reanimating the remains into art that critiques and remembers.

¹⁶ While there are many studies of the collage and assemblage movement in Los Angeles, the works of African American artists are conspicuously absent from these accounts. For instance, Brandon Taylor’s *Collage: The Making of Modern Art* (2006) makes no mention of African American artists in his chapter on the California Collage art scene; although, he does note that the migration of African Americans to the area brought jazz, which influenced white assemblage artists and writers who experimented with collage in style and form. His study of collage and assemblage does not include works by African American artists, such as Melvin Edwards and his *Lynch Fragments* (1963) or Ed Bernal’s contributions to the *War Babies* exhibition in 1961. Also, since the text traces the collage form through the 20th century, he also fails to include African American artists like Kara Walker, Senga Nengudi, Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, and David Hammons, who were all influenced by the assemblage art emerging from California.

¹⁷ Rachael Farebrother explores this use of collage in *The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance* (2009).

The use of assemblage art as a means to explore the remains of the aftermath of destruction, violence, and display of rebellious spirit suggests that the form and process of assemblage in some way suited the work of attaching meaning to the riots/rebellions. In *African American Art and Artists* and *Black Artists on Art*, one of the few studies to appear on the California African American Assemblage artists during their period of production, Samella Lewis believes that this group of assemblage artists (Saar, Outterbridge, Purifoy, Casey, and Andrews) used their art to speak to the “liberation of the human spirit and the plight of blacks past and present” (5). While Lewis does not divorce the social concerns of the art from its more formal components because she sees both as informing the other, she never quite explains *how* the assemblage *form* itself was born out of the socio-political context and how and if this impacted the aesthetic process of assemblage art.

However, more recent exhibitions and the studies that have emerged from them, such as *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980 (2011-12)* and *Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrent in L.A. Paintings and Sculpture 1950-1970 (2012)* attempt to answer this question through a reassessment of the relationship between African American artists, the California art scene, and the Black Arts Movement (BAM) in Los Angeles. Efforts to align *66 Signs of Neon* to the BAM context has been led by Kellie Jones, the curator of *Now Dig This!* Jones believes that assemblage for these artists served as a form of critical practice and as a remark against 1950s consumerism. For her, the concept of transforming the commodity into art reflects the idea of taking something discarded and making it into something new: “assemblage was a clear metaphor for the process of change— the transformation of psyche and social existence— required of art

in the rhetoric of the BAM, art that “advance[d] social consciousness and promote[d] black development” (“Black West,” 49). Her work shows the validity of Daniel Widener’s call to extend the scope of the study of BAM and postwar African American politics beyond Newark, Chicago, and Detroit. In his own reassessment, he sees the artists of *66 Signs of Neon* as a part of a larger political-cultural discourse that brought together voices of dissent and change from a number of cultural and political organizations to use community based arts to forward political and social ideals. In her contribution to *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, Wendy S. Waters even attempts to link Guyton’s *The Heidelberg Project* to the BAM by suggesting that it works to “bring back cornerstones of the BAM: “‘Black’ issues of identity, historical consciousness, struggle and uplift (127).¹⁸ The defining philosophies of assemblage art and the BAM outlined above do seem to share a similar spirit in the combining of politics and counter aesthetic forms. However, the particular contexts of *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* invite other avenues of criticism. *66 Signs of Neon* and the *Heidelberg Project* developed within spatial and temporal contexts shaped by racialized violence and even, as in the case of *66 Signs of Neon*, used the remains left after the violence. Therefore, the need exists to establish some of the philosophical and aesthetic theories of assemblage art that defined the California African American assemblage movement and beyond.

Most studies of assemblage agree that its formal properties depend on materials or objects, the multiple contexts that helped to produce it, and the philosophical

¹⁸ Interestingly, Walters also picks up on the discursive pattern of juxtaposition in the works of other artists in Detroit, particularly a mural in Detroit called Blacktronic Science. For her, as in my study, the formal aspects of the art recalls the ways in which the past and the present merges.

underpinnings that fuel its creation. For Seitz, objects lend meaning to assemblage art because they contribute two poetic features: associational density and temporality. He asserts that “assemblage involves a poetics by virtue of its objects, which bear traces of time and associations to prior functions, and by virtue of the rhetorical interchange it sets up between objects” (15). In this sense, poetry and visual poetics share similar strategies, such as juxtaposition, irony, and metaphor, which helps keep the context, the time and the place, of their production visible.¹⁹ Stephen Fredman notes that the three poetic elements outlined by Ezra Pound were essential to Seitz’s theoretical framework, particularly Pound’s description of *logopoeia*. Pound defines *logopoeia* as “‘the dance of the intellect among words,’ that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we expect to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play” (16). Words do not exist in isolation, but gain meaning through the context in which they are found and through the rhetorical devices that writers employ. By suggesting that the process of assemblage is similar to that of a poet, Seitz proposes that assemblage develops its own poetics through the interplay of objects that also find expression through modes of juxtaposition and metaphor.²⁰

Considering the importance of the site and time of production of not just the objects, but also the art pushes our understanding of why the artists of 66 Signs of Neon and Guyton chose assemblage. In his study of postwar assemblage, Fredman notes that

¹⁹ In *The Art of Assemblage*, Seitz names three levels of signification through which objects provide meaning: “that of tangible materials, that of vision, at which colors and other formal qualities alter each other and blend like tastes or scents, and finally that of ‘literary’ meanings” (83).

²⁰ Pound defines *logopoeia* as “‘the dance of the intellect among words,’ that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we expect to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play.”

assemblage “often moves beyond purely formal concerns to stage interactions among the clusters of associations accruing to the mundane objects it employs” (15). While early collage mostly worked by strictly using the formal elements of the objects, assemblage artists drew on their spatial and temporal contexts, which included the symbolic and affective qualities of their chosen objects. For him, assemblage “initiates an art devoted to contexts, building works not around a central idea, theme or symbol but by plucking and arranging images, materials, language, or even people from the surrounding milieu” (Fredman 3). For the artists of *66 Signs of Neon* and Guyton, who engage with objects and landscapes of memory shaped by racial violence, their process works through a spatio-temporal contextual practice that shows them drawing on the energy associated with the remains of the violence. The objects took on meaning in excess of their physical qualities that found expression through assemblage art. The artists of *66 Signs of Neon* and Guyton found a process and language in assemblage that allowed them to express hope even amongst the remains of loss.

The art of *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* develops through a poetics of loss, which finds its structure in the material and symbolic form of the ruinous landscape and the melancholic affective qualities of the objects. Everyday objects materialize the memory of the Watts riot/rebellion or the urban decay in deindustrialized Detroit. In their use of these objects, the artists draw on their symbolic meaning, which metaphorically fuses the physical with the material objects that comprise assemblage art. John Outterbridge, an assemblage artist closely associated with the California assemblage movement during the 1960s, claims that in assemblage “you use whatever is available to you, and what is available to you is not mere material, but the material and essence of the

political climate, the material in the debris of social issues. At times even the trauma within the community becomes the debris that artists manipulate and that manipulates the sensibility of artists” (362). This complementary exchange captures the relationship between the physical and social landscape and the aesthetic sensibility of the artists who engage with them. The objects retain their original physical attributes and use value, but as Outterbridge observes they also take on the symbolic affect and meaning because they indicate the loss associated with actual and social death. Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Hockey, who study the relationship between material culture, memory, and death, suggest that loss is often rewritten onto objects, helping to mediate our relationship with death and the dead. In whatever form, objects, images, practices, places, and spaces used in memory practices conjures up the deaths of others and how they relate to our lives. In this particular case, the urban space and melancholic objects participate in these acts of memory.

In the next two sections, I look more closely at the processes of the artists and the qualities of the art of *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* to trace the influence of the affective landscape of urban ruins and the politics of memory on the poetics of loss that shapes their assemblage art.

66 Signs of Neon and the Rhetoric of Ruin and Hope

On August 11, 1965, the arrest of Marquette Frye by California highway patrolman Lee Minkus sparked the violence that would leave much of the main section of Watts in flames and ashes. According to who is telling the story, Frye was either wrongfully stopped because of racial profiling or he was stopped because of reckless and drunk driving. Whatever the case, a crowd of over 300 onlookers and Frye grew

increasingly agitated in response to the incident that mirrored decades long racial profiling and because of rumors that Frye's mother was assaulted by police on the scene. By the next morning, Watts was in flames. Angry citizens took to the streets in protest and the violence, including looting and setting fires, which would go on for six days until the National Guard rolled in to quell the violence that had traveled throughout Southern California. "Viewed by many of the rioters themselves," Bayard Rustin observes, "as their "manifesto," the uprising of the Watts Negroes brought out in the open, as no other aspect of the Negro protest has done, the despair and hatred that continue to brew in the Northern ghettos despite the civil-rights legislation of recent years and the advent of "the war on poverty."

At the end of the week long violence, thirty-four people were dead, 1,032 injured, and 4,000 arrested. The property damage was estimated at \$40 million making it one of the costliest and deadliest of riots that would take place in the latter part of the 1960s. In an effort to determine the causes of the event, a special commission appointed by the governor would publish the McCone Report, detailing the impact of economic conditions, police and community relations, and education disparities as all contributing to the riot.²¹ However, while acknowledging the shortcomings of government systems and far-reaching racial discrimination in hiring, housing, and education practices, the commission failed to lay out specific plans for how to address these issues.²² Much like the Detroit Riots, historians often label the Watts Rebellion as *the* cause of the decline in the area without much consideration of the intertwined racial and economic pasts that

²¹The McCone Report can be found here:
<http://www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/cityinstress/mccone/contents.html>

²² See Bayard Rustin's article in *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971.

fueled the violence.²³ While the McCone Report failed to implement real solutions, many organizations in the area would begin to develop their own programs that often had the support of federal and local money.

After the Watts Rebellion of 1966, art became one of the central means through which leaders and organizations hoped to draw on the spirit of rebellion to promote continued cultural consciousness and community healing.²⁴ As John Outterbridge, one of the African American assemblage artists during this time, observes, “The period of the sixties was one of enhanced vision of how art and culture could effectively participate to help build a community, break existing moulds [sic] and create an interest in social change” (363). The Watts Summer Arts Festival serves as one of the only collective acts of memorialization of the rebellion. The festival has continued throughout the years with brief interruptions because of money and philosophical conflicts, as a performance of memory that serves an important role in helping the community establish an identity and keep alive the memory of events in a way that is accessible. Another key feature of the festival is that it allows the people of Watts ownership of public space to complete these acts of memory. Claiming Watts as a site of memory despite the absence of an “official” plaque or monument helps to challenge the notion that these markers are the suitable forms for modes of remembering. Instead, the various contributions to the art scene, the

²³ Edy, Jill A. *Troubled Past: News and the Collective Memory of Social Unrest*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.

²⁴ Paul von Blum sees the art after the riots as shifting in themes from that produced before the riots. He also saw a change in how artists administered, organized, and created venues for black art (243). He finds that the social, artistic, and cultural funding that was pumped into the area as a preventive against future riots helped to fuel this rise in the production by black artists. For a quick overview of the various galleries and art shows in the Los Angeles area that promoted and fostered African American art see Paul Von Blum. “Before and After Watts: Black Art in Los Angeles” in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*.

rise in social organizations, and the efforts by the residents of Watts to reclaim the space as home suggest that they drew on the traumatic remains and made them objects of productive study. As a part of the festival, *66 Signs of Neon* provided a means for the community to examine the physical and psychological remains of the rebellion.

The exhibition first premiered on April 3, 1966 at the inaugural Simon Rodia Commemorative Watts Renaissance of the Arts Festival held at Markham Junior High School in honor of Simon Rodia, the creator of the most recognizable structures in Watts, the Watts Towers. Interestingly, the exhibition itself was designed to create meaning through the juxtaposition of various art forms. In conjunction with the exhibition, George Handel's biblical oratorio, "Israel in Egypt," played in the background.²⁵ A few months later, the exhibition was included as a part of the Watts Summer Arts Festival and would later go on tour throughout California and then across the United States. Purifoy and Powell began constructing the art and calling the project "Signs of Neon" to acknowledge the melted signs found up and down 103rd street. Using the three tons of debris collected by Purifoy and Powell, Max Neufeldt, Arthur Secunda, Ruth Saturensky, Debby Brewer, Gordon Wagner, Leon Saulter and Frank Anthony, along with Purifoy and Powell, produced sixty-six pieces of art. The artists who contributed to *66 Signs of Neon* were a diverse group and in its diversity represented the hopes of Purifoy that *conversations* would take place through the art. This desire to communicate with the outside world began with the bringing in of white artists working outside of Watts to participate in *66 Signs of Neon*, but Purifoy's description of *66 Signs of Neon* shows that

²⁵ In a nod to the nature of the exhibition as an act of mourning, the first act of the oratorio mourns the death of Joseph, shows the Israelites enduring the plague in the second act, and in the third act celebrating their deliverance.

it went beyond this. He labeled the exhibition as “a one-to-one format of communication between individuals who otherwise would not or could not communicate. The ultimate purpose of this effort, as we conceived it then, was to demonstrate to the community of Watts, to Los Angeles, and to the world at large, that education through creativity is the only way left for a person to find himself in this materialistic world” (interview).

While Purifoy began this search by bringing in white artists, his idea to get feedback from the audience during the exhibition’s travels allowed these conversations to take place in a different form. At each exhibition site, there was a private booth and pad for the visitors to record their comments. Some described it as “scrap metal salad,” “shredded newspapers,” “400 frenzied orangutans hurling paint cans,” a “demented junkman’s paradise,” “You people, citizens of Watts, Los Angeles, USA did it-saw art in a calamity or made it so,” and “the highest form of the artistic spirit is here in abundance.” Despite the variances in the responses, it is clear that the art communicated in some way with the audience. Purifoy would later go on to extend his view of what it meant to create art from the debris, but his interest in the rhetorical aspects of assemblage art continued to be central to his philosophy and is central in how we understand the works as using a poetics of loss.²⁶ In fact, for Purifoy, “the debris from the riot is what finally launched [him] on [his] own course,” which shows that he had a clear understanding of the valuable language that assemblage art afforded him and other artists.

Purifoy’s labeling of the objects that he collected as “artifacts of tragedy,” shows that he recognizes the shift of the objects from purely physical objects to objects of

²⁶ Although only a few pieces of the exhibit remain and only a few are documented in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, an extensive analysis of all of the art that was a part of the exhibition is not possible, but enough remains to examine the artists’ process and the resultant art for clues for how the artists of *66 Signs of Neon* chose to name and represent loss.

loss. It was the remains of the six days of violence---charred pieces of wood, melted neon signs, shards of glass—that served as the material of choice for the artists of *66 Signs*. Before the riots, many of the burned or looted stores and objects signified the residents’ uneven participation in the cycle of capitalism.²⁷ After the riots, these same objects did not become trash, but became remains of this past and the acts of racialized violence that transformed Watts into a place where people died, physical structures burned, and the idea of progress towards equality shattered. Using objects left in the wake of the riots, the artists of *66 Signs of Neon* drew on this rich context that defined 1960s Los Angeles to give their art meaning and purpose. The objects were clearly linked to the events of that five day period because they had the physical indicators, such as “charred wood and fire-moulded (sic) debris.” As Purifoy recalls, he and Powell felt an attraction to the objects even months later: “often the smell of the debris [...] turned our thoughts to what were and were not tragic times in Watts: and to what to do with the junk we had collected, which had begun to haunt our dreams” (1). The objects worked on a sensory level as representations of past events and as unsettling melancholic reminders of it. Purifoy’s classification of the objects as *haunting* also suggests the presence of an immaterial meaning. His shift from a focus on the ephemeral remains to the symbolic and psychological impact that he feels illustrates the shift from artifacts to objects of memory. In her analysis of *66 Signs of Neon*, Sarah Schrank recognizes the symbolic meaning of the objects by naming them “the debris of want and frustration” and a part of the “artful criticism that commented on the city’s enduring social crises” (686). Drawing on both of

²⁷ Guy Debord, in his 1965 article “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy,” labeled as “a rebellion against the commodity, against the world of the commodity in which worker-consumers are *hierarchically* subordinated to commodity standards” (<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/decline.html>).

these aspects of the physical detritus left in the wake of the violence and the currency of assemblage art, *66 Signs of Neon* gains meaning through the interaction between the social contexts, the formal aspects of the art form, and their sensory engagement with the physical remains of loss.

Watt's six days of violence left physical remains that transformed the city's landscape to one of ruin. Katharina Schramm believes that "violence leaves traces. Be it habitually remembered or consciously evoked, it has profound effects on individual consciousness as well as collective identifications. Moreover, the memory of violence is not only embedded in peoples' bodies and minds but also inscribed onto space in all kinds of settings: memorials, religious shrines, border zones or the natural environment" (5). Therefore, although today the sites may not be marked by a plaque, monument, or memorial indicating where the riot took place or where people died, the impact and the remains of the event are evident in how the landscape has since been physically and socially constructed. For Watts, the memory of the riot was inscribed on the landscape in the form of empty lots, empty storefronts, destroyed buildings, and mounds of smoldering debris. The target of much of the violence was the local markets and stores, which were slow to be rebuilt or never rebuilt at all. Additionally, thirty-one of the thirty-four people who died during the riot did so at the hands of the Los Angeles police and members of the National Guard. Their deaths within this space imbue it with a sense of loss in two ways: the actual loss of life and the subsequent ways that their lives have been deemed unworthy of traditional memorial forms. As a space that is transformed by death, an element of the sacred enters the landscape of the ordinary and the everyday.

The space suggests the possibility for engaging with the remains and absences that embody the loss.

However, the process of assemblage allows the artists and the viewers the ability to see the objects differently, but also themselves as reflected through the art. Purifoy claims that “if junk art in general, and 66 in particular, enable us only to see and love the many simple things which previously escaped the eye, then we miss the point.” For Purifoy, the creation of the art went beyond the aesthetic shift of the objects, but what was most important was the impact on the viewer: “There must be therein a ME and a YOU, who is affected permanently. Art of itself is of little or no value if in its relatedness it does not effect change. We do not mean change in the physical appearance of things, but a change in the behavior of human beings. And changes in behavior are effected through communication.” While it seems that here Purifoy is suggesting that the aesthetic qualities of the work are secondary to their political function, if we return to the poem that serves as the epigraph of this chapter, we see that the fragmented form is what allows him the opportunity to converse with the viewer. In the poem “Seeing,” Purifoy privileges the fragmented form as providing the necessary means for the interaction of the viewer with multiple layers of art. He asks them to piece together their own meanings: *that as I symbolize what you say and agree/ can I then leave you/to set these lines in order/assemble them into a book/.*” The fragmented form forces the viewer to engage with the art on a deeper level because it becomes the burden of the viewer to find meaning that is not explicitly stated. It is through juxtaposition that these multiple levels of meaning are even possible. The objects move from the past into the present, which allows the artists and the viewers to reactivate, experience, and discuss the implications

of the multiple layers of loss embedded in the riot. Purifoy's focus on the change that occurs in the viewer suggests that assemblage encourages the viewers to see new systems of relation through key components of a rhetoric of ruin—fragmentation and juxtaposition. Looking closer at some of the art, we see the artists' view of fragmentation as a way of representing various perspectives.

Arthur Secunda's "The City" depicts the urban space as an intricate maze of connected parts and uses the physical characteristics of the collected objects to represent the spatial conditions of the city. The piece is made up of a number of gear parts that extend upwards into space, resembling the rise of skyscrapers. The inability to find a beginning or an end in the piece captures the essence of closeness that is what one experiences in the city. It highlights one of the biggest issues in city living: the lack of space. His use of the gears, which rely on all of the parts moving together to work effectively, shows that movement (or lack of movement) in one area can cause a shift in another, which metaphorically represents the inability of its inhabitants to fully extract themselves completely from each other. Thus, Secunda's mirroring of the physical structure of the city allows him to consider the emotional impact of living in a city where space is regulated by racial and economic politics. While he uses the physical characteristics of the collected objects to consider the spatial dynamics of the city, Secunda's "The City" also reflects the ability of assemblage to provide various modes of seeing.

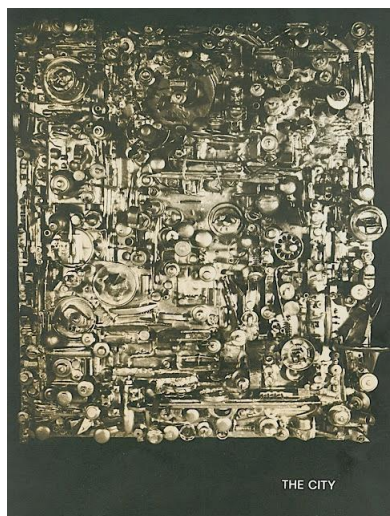


Figure 1. Arthur Secunda. *The City*, 1966

“The City” calls attention to a larger symbolic condition of city living by playing with the visual poetics of the piece.²⁸ Secunda’s perspective, as well as that of the viewers, is from a detached position outside and above the city. The piece mirrors what the city’s skyline would look like from above, therefore, Secunda and the viewer occupy an outsider’s perspective of the city. While this perspective could represent Secunda’s position as a white outsider artist, he moves beyond this simple reading with his inclusion of a magnifying glass (not displayed in the figure above). He invites the viewer to examine the piece, the city, and the riot/rebellion more closely.

Despite the way the news portrayed the riots as an isolated incident confined to the people of Watts, the racialized processes of Los Angeles as a whole contributed to the concerns and frustrations of the participants. Since Secunda produced “The City” for an exhibition in remembrance of the riot/rebellion, the inclusion of the magnifying glass may also point to the need for a greater examination of the root causes and impacts of the

²⁸ One of the white artists that Purifoy invited to contribute to the exhibition and one of the more successful artists associated with the project, Secunda would later go on to create over fifty paintings, collages, and assemblages as a part of his “Watts Series.”

riot/rebellion not only for Watts, but for all of Los Angeles. Secunda uses the concept of assemblage not only as a creative method, but he also understands the city itself to be a site of assemblage because it is “spatially processual, relational, and generative nature, where ‘generative’ refers both to the momentum of historical processes and political economies and to the eventful, disruptive, atmospheric, and random juxtapositions that characterize urban space” (McFarlane 651). Secunda draws on and critiques these characteristics in “The City” with his re-creation of its structural elements.



Figure 2. Noah Purifoy **Watts Riot**, 1966

In one of the only remaining pieces from the exhibition, “Watts Riots, 1966,” Purifoy also questions the changing spatial dynamics of the city while specifically confronting the loss of the city as a homespace. At first glance, the piece appears to be an abstract painting of a house in the early stages of decay, but with a closer look, the actual wood panels that he used emerges as the “walls” of the piece. The “house” represents the community of Watts itself. In the center lies a large painted black rectangular shape, which gives the impression of a window. However, the only window of the “house” is cloaked in blackness. If a window provides a way of looking in or out and Purifoy makes it black, then he suggests that the piece, the viewer and himself are collectively looking in and peering out of a space of blackness. What we should see: the community of Watts,

the hope of recovery and growth are bleak, obscure, occluded. For the residents of Watts, it was both home and now a site of loss. However, for those attempting to examine the structure of Watts from the outside, their perspective is also limited to what they can or are willing to see. Purifoy's placement of the "window" in a central place in the piece shows that perspective influences how we see the events of that summer in 1965 as a "riot" or a rebellion. Recognizing that it is both, depending on one's perspective, shows that Purifoy's understanding of assemblage as a medium through which to question perspective allows us to engage with the larger symbolic issues that lie at the heart of the riot/rebellion.

Purifoy's philosophy on the function of assemblage art not only appears in "Watts Riots, 1966," but also his poetry that finds greater meaning when read together. In his poem "Seeing," Purifoy admits the need to find a medium that will help him to see the community around him with new eyes. He writes: *"If I could see it differently/For what it is or is not/Still flat out and piled up /In another way yet the same way/I'd offer it up/Then Free I'd be from guilt for letting it pile up/And scatter out, and separate itself/.....from itself"* (line number/page number?). In the poem, he makes allusions to the piled up rubble and trash left after the riots and the symbolic layers of issues that plagued the Watts community. Purifoy hopes that assemblage art will provide a way to see both the objects and the community in new ways. Therefore, by creating the art, Purifoy hopes that it will help alleviate a sense of guilt that he feels for the years of neglect that has contributed to Watts being a wounded and wounding place. Even a year after the riots, much of Watts remained in disarray although a number of programs fueled by government dollars and the ideals of radical and social organization.

By naming the piece “Watts Riots, 1966” and not for the year the riots actually occurred, he acknowledges that it is this sense of loss, surrounding home, security, and community, continue to be felt. So while one critic suggests that this piece is a “celebration of destruction,” it is not a celebration of destruction, but a reimagining of the ruins to name what has been lost, which is the first step in mourning. Purifoy locates the ruins as aesthetically and symbolically valuable because they help to disrupt and challenge our ways of seeing by putting the past (through the objects from 1965) and the present into a strange moment of juxtaposition.

However, in “Seeing” and even in some of his later interviews, Purifoy seems conflicted in whether or not the art is capable of addressing the multiple layers of loss he finds through his engagement with the landscape and objects. Like many of the artists and art in this study, Purifoy and his philosophical belief about assemblage contain a degree of ambivalence that questions if art can work in ways that facilitate mourning. Collette Chattopadnyay notices that in Purifoy’s works, social issues are “less graphic than in the works of his contemporary, Kienholz, or his successor, Hammons” (6). Instead, he sees Purifoy as working within the abstract realm to “construct works that are layered in terms of materials and metaphors” (Chattopadnyay 6). For many of the works in *66 Signs of Neon*, the abstract and metaphorical nature of the art has often led to readings that do not attempt to explore the larger issues embedded in them. The use of the abstract and the metaphorical properties of assemblage art was true for most of the artists of *66 Signs of Neon*.²⁹ So while the messages embedded in “Watts Riots, 1966”

²⁹Many of the scholarly considerations of Purifoy’s work, and *66 Signs of Neon* in general, give the art a cursory reading and often does not examine the symbolic nature of the abstract images and modes of juxtaposition that he uses.

may not be explicitly stated, the piece addresses racial, economic, and political issues and does so through the use of the abstract images of a house and window. The layered meaning of both of those elements in terms of a loss and a recognition of that loss require us to read all of the art of *66 Signs of Neon* through a contextual lens.

Purifoy continues to explore the symbolic losses, this time connected to class and material conflicts, through the image of a wounded man in one of the more recognizable sculptures from the exhibition, “Sir Watts.”³⁰ “Sir Watts” is made of metal shaped into the torso of a knight with armor, but with no head or arms. The other distinguishable objects Purifoy uses include the store counter bell mounted on the shoulders and the drawers that serve as the bottom half of the torso. Purifoy also mentions a purse serving as the head of the image, but that is not present in the reproduction found in the exhibition guide. The composition of the piece reveals Purifoy’s views on the effectiveness of the leadership and the relationship between the community and merchants. Purifoy takes a historical image of nobility and power and places it in a modern day setting of Watts, which seems far away from British cultural traditions, to explore the lack of protection in Watts. The inclusion of the store counter bell and the purse recall the looting and destruction of many of the white-owned businesses during the riots/rebellion. Depending on who you ask, the looting aspect of the rioting was either an opportunity to show the natural inclination of African Americans to steal or symbolic of the economic and material inequalities across various classes³¹ “Sir Watts” comments on

³⁰ Purifoy describes his calling of the piece “Sir Watts” as a pun, a “tongue in cheek”

³¹ Put in Bean’s article and Debord’s article. There are a few others that need to be cited here as well as evidence of the conversation (Robert Gooding-Williams and Carmichael).

the declining congenial relationship between the inner-city merchants and the residents and the material destruction that occurred during the five days of violence.

Although “Sir Watts” has on armor designed to protect, it has obviously proven to be ineffective. Purifoy exposes the entire chest area and fills it with charred safety pins that spill from the “wound” or hole in the torso. Purifoy’s juxtaposition of the knight as a symbol of protection yet nonetheless wounded, invokes the question: “who will defend Watts during this new season of loss?”.



Figure 3. Noah Purifoy. Sir Watts, 1966.

However, it is the art that gave the exhibition its name, the series of pieces that used the drippings of melted neon signs, that most concretely captures the material and economic factors involved with the riot/rebellion. The exhibition catalog only includes one of these types of sculptures, “66 Signs of Neon,” accredited to Powell. Often unnamed, these drippings were attached to long metal rods in interesting positions and sold to collectors. The neon signs connect with Los Angeles’ long history with the neon sign; it was the first city in the United States to use the neon signs to catch the eyes of

potential customers and they could be found up and down the major commercial street of Watts. The neon signs are essential to the economic history of the city.

Therefore, in their melted state, the signs suggest the opposite of their once material use. The riots resulted in a defamiliarized landscape that allowed the signs to become objectified symbols of grief, loss, and now mourning that has taken place within the space. They were now symbolic of the failure of American consumerism and perhaps confirms Guy Debord's description of the riot as a "rebellion against the commodity." Although Purifoy does not provide any thoughts on the significance of naming the exhibition after these melted signs, the exhibition's title shows how a rhetoric of ruin structures it. The compositional state of the neon signs show them suspended in a position that links their past and present form. By maintaining the melted state of the signs, Purifoy and Powell saw the objects themselves as materials of memory capable of highlighting the symbolic associations with the economic conditions that helped to fuel the rage expressed by the riot's participants.

Since the art recalls the riot through its very form, we can look at the art for traces of the symbolic loss that they collectively recall through their rhetorical choices. Thus, the metaphorical images found in most of the art in *66 Signs of Neon* position the subject of the rebellion/riot as the opportunity to examine the conditions of urban living and what was symbolically lost and how it could serve as an opportunity for rebirth. Purifoy's other contributions to *66 Signs of Neon*, such as a "Breath of Fresh Air" and "The Phoenix," done in conjunction with Powell, while taking the remains of the violence also look beyond the destruction to highlight the hope felt during recovery efforts after the riot/rebellion. These pieces focus on a theme of "rising from the ashes," which was a

common theme of the art that “The Phoenix” most obviously draws on the theme of renewal through his imitation of the posture and outline of a bird of Egyptian mythology that lived for five hundred years, then consumed itself in flames and was reborn, purified and regenerated to live again. In “Phoenix,” Purifoy and Powell placed a large bent piece of metal onto a twelve foot pole that extends into space. The sculpture reflects a bird-like form with a beak and wings that are folded down as if preparing for descent.

By placing the metal on such a tall pole, the artists intimate the experience of flying and provide the sculpture with the perspective necessary to view the landscape. The process of rebirth that the phoenix takes is similar to the process that the objects take in their transformation from material objects to objects of memory and then materials for the art. A phoenix experiences a physical and symbolic transformation, as they are literally reborn from the ashes. At the completion of the transformation, only smoke and the ashes, or the remains, exist to remind us of this process. “The Phoenix” connects these features of a phoenix with the forever present image of burning during the riot and with the recitation of the catchphrase, “burn, baby burn,” made popular by a local radio DJ, Magnificent Montague, well before the riot and became the rallying call during the riot. “The Phoenix” embodies a sense of loss because it recalls the processes of life and death, but captures a sense of hope that a new Watts could emerge from the ruins. And, what identity would or should rise during this mythic process of death, purification, and regeneration? For a short period, it was a conflicted identity that attempted to use the spirit of the riot in more productive renewal and uplift of the community.

Debby Brewer’s “Sunflowers” thematically connects with “The Phoenix” because both illustrate a metaphorical cycle of death and life. In this piece, Brewer aligned

numerous hubcaps into a row to give the appearance of sunflowers open to the sun. By positioning the objects as growing from the ground and their placement on the grounds of the Watts Towers as shown in the photograph included in the catalog, “Sunflowers” shows that the changes that were needed after the riots needed to grow from the people of Watts. The lifecycle of an actual sunflower goes through a pattern of growth, death, and re-growth from a simple seed planted in the ground. It also thrives on being in direct sunlight. One of the major features of sunflowers is their heliotrope process where the flowers stretch itself towards the sun. A sunflower is a symbol of hope and metaphorically reminds us of the cycle of life and death. From being a part of the landscape, the sunflowers draw on the memories embedded in the landscape and invite us to think about the possibilities of what else could grow from them. Just like “The Phoenix,” it draws on ruin in service of showing the power of the presence of hope.

As we see in the structural and thematic elements of some of the art of *66 Signs of Neon*, the landscape and the remains of the riots help to support the reading of the exhibition as an act of memorialization. *66 Signs of Neon* included art that spoke to the ruin and destruction, but also embodied a sense of hope rising from the ashes. Purifoy even positioned assemblage art as being able to provide people an avenue to make sense of the world around them: “Common objects that were important to people transfigured into works of art could serve as signposts to a future society that would be based on liberated consciousness rather than servitude” (page number). Purifoy’s declaration echoes that of Outterbridge who saw the materials available to the artists as including not only physical remains, but also the psychological remains of a wounded community. The linkage of Purifoy and Outterbridge’s philosophical views of assemblage have been key

to seeing that the art was created to identify and name a sense of loss. Although not clear to Purifoy and Powell when they were first drawn to collect the objects, Purifoy later goes on to provide the philosophical foundations for many in the California African American Assemblage art movement and has continued to influence these artists.

For Purifoy, art healed Watts because it gave people a process for bringing together the remains of the past into a viable future. He defines art as

a product of the creative process. You make a picture. It's a mere product. The creative process has all the steps and the guidelines to enable the artist to paint a picture or make art. The creative process answers all the questions regarding what the artist should do to end up with a picture that somebody would find value in.

So the error we make is never looking at the creative process, but looking at the product, which is art. Now, my theory is that it is not art that's applicable; it is the creative process that's applicable. (qtd. in Smith 169).

The process through which the artists created *66 Signs of Neon* reflects a process similar to that of how a community responds to the remains of loss. The art draws on the visual language of a landscape ravaged by violence and remains charged with memories and loss, which leads to an art form that is built through the layering and juxtaposition of objects that have both physical and symbolic properties and meaning. The formal process of juxtaposition suggests an effort to represent what is seen by the presence of the objects, but also what their presence signals as absent, which is usually more symbolic in nature.

Purifoy acknowledges that he did not have a language or form that he felt able to express his feelings. In assemblage, Purifoy finally found a form and a language. He

admits, “I had these things inside of me ready to be expressed, but I didn’t have a media through which to express them, I tried education, that didn’t work. I’d try this and that, didn’t work. It didn’t communicate to the people my deep feelings. So I was almost always at a loss to feel that I was understood. And art, being a nonverbal language, enabled me to feel I at least understood myself, if others didn’t” (Interview). In his effort to find this language, Purifoy invites us to look not just at the product, but also the creative process of assemblage. It is a process, I suggest, that visually names and represents loss. This poetics of loss becomes even clearer as we turn to Guyton’s *The Heidelberg Project*.

The Heidelberg Project: Urban Ruins and the Poetics of Assemblage Art

Like *66 Signs of Neon*, *The Heidelberg Project* is also a discursive art project that engages with questions around race, public space, and the city as a landscape of loss. By drawing on the physical and symbolic nature of Detroit through his use of urban ruins, Guyton illustrates the key ways that assemblage art gains its meaning. Ruins are sedimented traces of the past that Guyton apprehends as a mode of contestation of what Detroit was and what it could be in the future. *The Heidelberg Project* transforms the physical materials to highlight these symbolic losses and provide evidence of what has been lost, but also the hope that he still has for his neighborhood and for Detroit. Guyton belongs within the tradition of a collage aesthetic because he draws on the tenets of assemblage art, using discarded manufactured objects in 3-D forms, and combines it with site-based practice by using abandoned homes and empty lots located in a once vibrant black working class neighborhood of Old Germantown, or what is now called the McDougall-Hunt neighborhood. Although he does not use objects that have a direct trace

to the riots like *66 Signs of Neon*, he does draw on objects and landscapes that symbolically represent the shifts that took place in Detroit often linked to the riots. Just like the assemblage artists of *66 Signs of Neon*, Guyton used found materials from his neighborhood, but since his work interacts with standing architecture, involves painting, and sculpture, it is difficult to classify the work into a genre. However, for this study, it is Guyton's use of urban ruins that most closely links his works with the artists of *66 Signs of Neon* use of objects and landscape left after the Watts riot. While urban ruins have often been discussed in nostalgic terms in regards to Detroit's past history as an international model of industry, Guyton interacts with them as objects and spaces of memory that recall the spatial dynamics of race in Detroit, which includes the 1967 riot.

The Heidelberg Project began in 1986 during a simple act of Guyton cleaning a paint brush on the side of an abandoned house next door to the house he shared with his grandfather. From that one bright stripe of color, an entire block of colorful, multi-layered scenes of sculptures, paintings, and assemblages would grow into an open-air museum. Guyton, who grew up on Heidelberg Street, returned to the area in the 1970s after serving in the army during the Vietnam War. After his return, he worked as an autoworker in a Ford plant and then later as a firefighter for the city of Detroit. Later, he would heed his calling to become an artist: "I had a vision, a greater power talked to me. I stepped out of that house, across the street on Heidelberg, and heard God calling to me. I thought I'd lost it. But I saw the project unfolding before my eyes" (qtd. in Wasacz and Krieger). He now creates art full time and has traveled the world collaborating with other artists and producing art that he believes can change the world. While the project has

received worldwide attention and draws thousands of visitors every year, it has also been a site of contestation.

At the most basic level, *The Heidelberg Project* became a process of remembrance and mourning for the neighborhood and city that Guyton once knew. From the materials that Guyton uses to the story of its induction, challenges, and its current state, this aura remains. He talks of the project as a form of healing for him and the community. It was his belief that he was led to become an artist by his Grandfather and God. In 1986 as he drove around Detroit he noted all of the blight that overwhelmed the city and the street where he grew up on, so he decided to make art that said something about it. In the documentary on the project, *Come Unto Me* (1999), Guyton links the decline of Detroit to the 1967 riots as he remembers when the riots happened. The documentary shows him driving through Detroit, and he admits that he sees the people of Detroit reflected in the decay and blight. He wonders how he can change the state of what he saw. His desire became to speak a truth that would make people *see* what was happening. His conflation of the objects with the people of Detroit speaks to the memories and stories that these objects tell about the rise and fall of Detroit. In his works, he illustrates the tumultuous history of Detroit and its impact on the residents through its current physical state. The reimagining of the objects as materials with aesthetic value symbolizes Guyton proclaiming the residents of Detroit, even in the midst of decay and ruin, as having value.

Unfortunately, Detroit is more so defined by what is not there and what has been lost over the years. All of the present day descriptions of it recall the people who have left, the destroyed houses that have left huge voids in the city's landscape, the loss of

jobs, and a decline in the infrastructure of the city. Scholars, artists, and photographers show an increasing interest in what is being called America's urban ruins.³² A number of online virtual memorials feature Detroit, Rhode Island, New York, and other major US cities. These websites add a new dimension to the function, shape, and purpose of memorializing, and they expose ways in which the architectural uncanniness of the ruins expose a new discussion of memory and space in the United States. Detroit with its many documentaries, photographs, and websites, such as *The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit*, has figured prominently in the renewed, or perhaps continuing, fascination with ruins as each attempts to document the steady decline of Detroit's downtown area.

The ruinous city space embodies not only physical loss and decay, but also symbolic losses of safe communities, strong economic bases, and basic human needs. A once thriving middle class black neighborhood would find it full of abandoned homes and increased levels of crime. Indeed, the 1967 riot marked a visible disconnection between the city as the symbol of progress that it once stood for and the reality of the residents who live there. How then does the art of *The Heidelberg Project* speak to this disconnect? Through what medium or language does Guyton choose to explore the riots and its historical contexts as the visual representations of the end of modernist hopes? If we relate the theoretical understanding of ruins as a site of aesthetic potential to how Guyton approaches it, then we see his use of ruins as a creative space that has meaning in what is absent and what remains. It is a space of continual transition and change where

³² Similar interests in urban ruins seem more pervasive in parts of Britain with the publication of Tim Edensor's *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics, and Materiality*.

Guyton captures in *The Heidelberg Project* that the urban ruins he engages with are caught in a realm between life and death.

In *The Heidelberg Project*, these urban ruins mark a rupture between history and memory or what Nora defines as lieux de memoire. The art produced in reaction to these urban spaces and the histories of the riots aid in questioning and transgressing these borders. The urban landscapes are central to understanding how cities have chosen to remember, disremember, or forget the riots. Therefore, Guyton's choice of the language of urban ruins allows him to irritate Detroit's layered history that continues to be structured by questions of race, space, and memory. *The Heidelberg Project* prevents the meaning of the ruins from being restricted to the rise and fall of Detroit as a powerful industry player because *The Heidelberg Project* uses these same ruins to recall Detroit's tumultuous racial history and his own personal history with his community.

It is within the heart of these ruins that Guyton chose to live and create, which allowed him to construct art that draws on the characteristics of the destroyed and the discarded. Watching the *Come Unto Me: The Faces of Tyree Guyton*, a documentary filmed in 1999 about the project, only gives a small sense of what it must be like to walk through the color filled street with houses overflowing with objects seemingly haphazardly placed, but with a sense of order and meaning. In *Afterculture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History*, Jerry Herron gives one of the best descriptions of the project to date:

The houses literally vomit forth the physical elements of domestic history; furniture, dolls, television sets, signs, toilets, enema bottles, beds, tires, baby buggies come cascading out doors and windows and through holes in the

roof, flowing down the outside walls and collecting in great heaps on the lawn, so that the whole world looks like some kind of man-made lava flow. The magma of discarded lives: these visible tokens of a humiliated history. (199)



Figure 4. Fun House, from “The Heidelberg Project” (1991).

The objects that Guyton comes to use throughout *The Heidelberg Project* performs a similar purpose to those used in *66 Signs of Neon*. Although these objects were not directly related to the 1967 riots, they signal the layered history of loss for the city of Detroit that includes this context of race, memory, and space. His work takes on the ruinous quality of the landscape through the stark juxtaposition of the remains of consumerism into a systematic expression of disorder. From what remains of decades of loss, Guyton openly critiques commodity culture and the haves and have-nots. The objects that Guyton uses in *The Heidelberg Project* bring the past and the present together in a startling illustration of Detroit’s layered history of loss. However, his art brings the attention back to the loss experienced by the people who called Detroit home through the uncanny presence of artifacts that seem to exist separate from their previous owners, but that recall both their absence and presence. Guyton’s use of houses as his canvases and objects of commerce mournfully recall their absence. These objects and spaces serve as placeholders to name and represent loss.

In *The Heidelberg Project*, grief does not come with the loss of a person, but the loss of an abstract ideal. *The Heidelberg Project* mourns the loss of what Detroit once was and could be. The ruins are a reminder of how far Detroit has fallen since the heyday of its moniker as the motor city and the home of Henry Ford is its high levels of poverty, population decline, and the physical decay left in the wake of the mass exodus of more than a million people to the suburbs of the city and elsewhere. The buildings that lie in ruin in the downtown area of Detroit were spectacular buildings that once were a part of a great plan to create circuses around the city. These plans were abandoned and soon Detroit was left to fend against the decrease in manufacturing jobs. The remains of that glorious past allow Guyton and the viewer to move seamlessly from the past, present, and to a hopeful future. Efforts to destroy Guyton's art are an attempt to erase the memories of the violence of racism and capitalism. The material traces of the almost unimaginable conditions of living in a wounded and wounding atmosphere turn into affirming beacons of hope and evidence that *life* is present on Heidelberg Street.

At the intersection of his subject and purpose lies Guyton's understanding of his method and the significance of his choice of materials. He finds his compositional form in the corruptive nature of life that now seems to govern the lives of people living in Detroit and cities like it. He sees himself as providing a "message of hope" in a new compositional form that must also acknowledge the "life" of chaos that he hopes to capture using a new way of seeing beauty. The result is art that juxtaposes order and chaos, beauty and ugliness, and the past and present lives of the remains. He describes the process of creating as allowing him to "venture off into space" to find himself "traveling into the unknown of my subconscious mind" (vii). For him, the beauty of the

art comes from the symphony created by the multiple pieces colliding to produce new meaning or what he describes as energy. This energy consists of “colors, textures, the wind, the rain, the snow, and found objects” (vii). The art becomes “energy in a negative space” (v). Thus Guyton’s choice to make the art colorful shows his hope to make the community alive again. The colorful assemblages and installations become the medicine that will make the community and others well again. He says that he sees in the junk a metaphor for the craziness that he felt in his own life, which is also an apt descriptor for his experience within the city. His desire to put order to it and to make sense of it shows that assemblage became the avenue through which he gained voice to express what he was feeling and seeing. The project represents a sense of freedom for himself and the community, so that they were both free to see that there was an alternative element of beauty to the landscape.

For Guyton, his art is colorful medicine to make the community and others well again. He says that he sees in the junk a metaphor for the craziness that he felt in his own life and we can deduce an apt descriptor of the city. He wanted to put order to it and to make sense of it, so that the art was an avenue to give voice to what he was feeling and seeing. The defining word for the project is freedom because Guyton was looking for ways to free himself and the community to see other perceptions of their city.

His essay that comes at the beginning of *Connecting the Dots*, a text that documents the history of the project, tells an interesting story of how he views himself as an artist. The focus of the essay fluctuates between two influences, the government and religion, which combines as the lens Guyton uses to create art that critiques the social

structures that government produces through the God-inspired vision that he believes he was given.

Turning to look at some of the assemblages more closely, three of them share a direct link to the physical landscape of Detroit. Guyton uses visual markers and particular remains to denote a sense of the loss of the human element of the city. For instance, in “Animal Party” Guyton nailed dozens of stuffed animals onto the sides of an abandoned home on Heidelberg to highlight the greening of Detroit and its return to a more pastoral setting. The rise in abandoned houses and empty lots caused a rise in the animal population, which Guyton illustrates. While highlighting this aspect of the decline of Detroit, Guyton draws our attention further to remind us of the loss of the residents who abandoned their homes for multiple reasons, including the loss of property values and viable jobs. Through his choice of objects, he narrates an aspect of Detroit’s story, the people that are often forgotten. However, as a part of mourning and memory, objects function as metaphorical and metonymic traces of corporeal absence.³³ His framing of this absence of people in juxtaposition with the abundance of wildlife is indicative of “the interplay between what is made visible and what is buried, that which is retained and that which is lost in the material culture of deaths has an impact in terms of the possibilities of memory and forgetting” (Hallam and Hockey 9). The recovery of the residents’ discarded stories, which Guyton mimics in his process of collecting and layering objects, allows for a reinterpretation of the fragments—the remains that exist outside of dominant social, economic, and political perspectives.

³³ Ash, 1996; Pointon, 1999; Hallam & Hockey, 2001

On another level Guyton forces viewers to confront unsettling aspects of the rise in abandoned buildings and homes, these spaces becoming sites of crime and terror. Abandoned homes often became havens of illicit activities, which included drug use and rape. One of the first houses Guyton composed that highlighted the terror of these spaces was the “Baby Doll House.” Guyton constructed this assemblage using multiple baby dolls that were mangled, dirty, missing arms, hanging upside down, and riding on broomsticks. In an interview Guyton says that each doll “represents something. They tell the horrors of drugs and the pity of a neglected child.” The stark juxtaposition of the traditional use of dolls as objects of comfort with how Guyton stages them exemplifies the way that he represents loss through the form of an actual material object. By using these dolls in various states of decay and in an uncanny way, their presence reminds the viewer of what and who has been lost or is in danger of being lost. They become carriers of affect of a loss that lingers unnamed in this space of memory and in these objects of memory. After seeing the house, one journalist wrote, “If the house had a voice it would have wept and squalled, ‘this is what we have done to our children’” (Noriyuki 1996). Guyton uses *The Heidelberg Project* to teach the children of the neighborhood how to re-imagine their present and their future and create beauty from the ruins.



Figure 5. “The Obstruction of Justice House,” *The Heidelberg Project* (1995).

Guyton continues his linkage of social commentary and art in the Obstruction of Justice (OJ) House created in 1995 in response to the demolitions by Mayor Coleman in 1991. The exterior of the house and roof have references to the current social climate at that time, particularly the O.J. Simpson trial. The house was tagged with references to the police and the LAPD, and the façade of the house surrounded by objects, which includes many of the objects found elsewhere in the project like paintings of shoes, vacuum cleaners, political advertisements, and car hoods with Guyton’s signature faces and colorful polka dots. Drawing on the visual spatiality of the term “obstruction,” the house is completely covered by objects, including the windows and doorways that are obstructed from view. The house stands as a symbolic “obstruction” itself to the city officials who continue to target the project in the name of “justice.” Again, Guyton juxtaposes objects and using space within the art to represent the tension between loss and hope. Unfortunately, on May 3, 2013, arsonists partially destroyed the “OJ House”. In early 2014, arsonists also destroyed the “Animal Party House;” The Heidelberg Project has lost a total of five houses to arson. In response, Guyton issued a statement that shows

his resiliency: “Our work is not about tangible “things,” it is about the Power of the Human Spirit. We recognize that there is a fire in you and we are here not to extinguish it, but to offer you a better reason to fuel it. Though you have tried, you cannot destroy the Heidelberg Project; it’s bigger than all of us now” (Official Statement; website).

Despite these multiple attacks, Guyton vowed that the *Heidelberg Project* would continue to inspire and grow the feeling of hope!

Through the positioning and choice of objects, Guyton creates a layered narrative that extends his canvas into the empty lots that line Heidelberg and even a neighboring street to continue his exploration of absence and loss. As with the houses, he creates assemblages from everyday objects that signal a larger historical loss. For instance, “Souls of the Most High” brings together personal memories of Guyton’s grandfather, Grandpa Mackey, about slavery and lynchings and Guyton’s own story about his mother’s lack of money to buy him new shoes. Guyton links the story of his having to wear secondhand shoes because he grew up in a family of ten children being raised by a single mother, his grandfather’s brother telling stories about slavery and the loss of family as a result of being bought and sold, and the lynchings that Grandpa Mackey witnessed in the South. Tyree asked Grandfather Mackey if he ever saw the people who were hung, but his grandfather only remembered seeing their “soles” and “souls.” By tying the shoes to the trees using the shoestrings and allowing them to hang downwards, Guyton mimics the posture of the lynched bodies, which creates a melancholic landscape. The shoes transfer this feeling of unsettlement and mournful quality because the space and the objects work to establish the politics of its meaning. The assemblage recalls those who died as a result of racially motivated violence, as the shoes serve as the remains of

their existence. Thus, the interaction between the shoes and the layered quality of assemblage prompts the act of remembrance. However, “Souls of the Most High” also highlights how assemblage comes to bear on the present when Guyton intertwines his own experiences with this shared history of loss. Like shoes symbolically experience all of the events of its wearers, “Soles of the Most High” illustrate the movement between the past, present, and future and also the connective thread between a shared history of the South and the urban center of the Northern urban center of Detroit.

For Guyton, loss, whether collective, artistic, or personal has been central to the majority of the incidents in his own life. He lost three brothers to violence in the streets of Detroit. However, assemblage and mourning met when Grandfather Mackey died, as Guyton attempted to remember his contributions to the project and to his life. Guyton created a sculpture in the shape of a casket and placed it in the middle of Heidelberg Street and covered it with a sheet and some of Grandpa Mackey’s ties. At Grandpa Mackey’s gravesite, Guyton buried Grandpa Mackey’s shoes alongside the grave. In these two acts of mourning, it is the objects that Guyton draws on to aid him in an act of commemoration that connects the gravesite and the melancholic spaces of Heidelberg Street. Guyton used the ritualized practices of art to ritually practice mourning. Similarly, Guyton did something similar after the demolition of parts of *The Heidelberg Project* in 1991. A mourning ceremony, attended by supporters of the project, was held to mourn the demise of the houses that were destroyed and the spirit that city officials and the detractors of the project hoped to destroy. In a symbolic gesture, the ruins of these houses were buried, spirituals were sung, and those in attendance walked in a circle around the grave. Both sets of mourning rituals suggest that the assemblage art of *The*

Heidelberg Project provided Guyton and others who interacted with the site a means for addressing and expressing loss.

However, many others do not see *The Heidelberg Project* as art or as a form of mourning. Throughout the existence of the project, some members of the community staged protests, wrote letters, and asked the city council for help against the presence of the art. The conflict reflects the age old question of what is art and also a deeper issue of bringing the past into the present. One woman said that art was not meant to be outside, but should be “in a caged museum.” Another labeled it as a hazard and rodent filled. One of the community leaders said that if it was art and for the community then the people needed to understand it and that it should be put together in a way that encouraged understanding. Although Guyton was discouraged by the demolition of the houses in 1991 and some of the community’s dislike of the project, he was happy that the project forced them to talk where before the community had been quiet about the state of their existence. However, the project has been targeted by arsonists and has experienced at least a dozen fires in 2014 alone. It may be because *The Heidelberg Project* visually exposes an image of Detroit that many want to see buried.

Guyton’s view of *The Heidelberg Project*, and assemblage art in general, places the same demands on it as an expression of inner pain or as a means to interact with this pain as Purifoy does when describing his relationship with assemblage. Guyton says,

I believe that my job as an artist is to help people to see! I wanted to use my talent to bring about positive change in my community. I did not set out to create controversy but then you can’t bring about real change without controversy. Changing my own mind empowered me to do something that would get the

attention of others. I had a vision to create an art project in my community—a community that had become a war zone. [...] Changing my mind and seeing with my eye of understanding helped to eradicate my fears and limitations. Social change must start with self and then you can change the entire world around you! (Qtd. in Whitfield)

In the documentary, Guyton refers to words spoken by Jesus: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28 KJV). He sees this as an invitation that everyone whatever their affliction or color or ugliness still have a place and, for him that place is Heidelberg Street. All things are beautiful once again if we look at them through the eyes of Christ. There is life and beauty there. He describes his process as an artist as taking objects that have been discarded and gathering them together to create a harmony and rhythm that speaks. Thus, what you find in *The Heidelberg Project*, which is clearly demonstrated in *Come Unto Me*, is the desire for the art to spark a conversation.

CONCLUSION

The Heidelberg Project and *66 Signs of Neon* perform cultural work and acts of mourning within the unconventional memorial sites of urban ruins and using the remains of racialized violence. As a result, both of the projects help to extend our definitions of memorial spaces, objects of memory, and the function of mourning. The projects align the process of assemblage and the resulting art with the process of finding a language to express and define the loss experienced by the residents of Watts and Detroit. The interactions of the artists with the melancholic objects and the affective landscape allow them access to the physical traces of loss and symbolic remains. By placing the objects,

with their own multi-layered meanings, in new degrees of relation, and engaging with the cities as affective and racialized spaces, the riots/rebellions take on new meaning. The reimagining of the objects into art becomes a way of recalling the importance of the riots because “In the absence suggested by death we find potent cultural material and strategies, including objects, visual images and texts that constitute systems of recall for person and social groups that have been threatened or traumatized by loss” (Hallam and Hockey 7). For the artists who lived with the absences and the remains of loss, assemblage became a strategy for remembering and critiquing the very historical and economic contexts that helped to spur the riots/rebellions that forever changed the physical and social landscapes of Watts and Detroit. However, the process of assemblage, since it drew on the language and conditions of loss of its contexts and objects, presents the viewers with possible ways to confront physical and symbolic loss.

The juxtaposition and fragmentation involved in assemblage serves as a way of figuring loss even beyond the art. By tracing the transformation of these objects from commodities to objects of memory, from the riots/rebellions that connect us to the long history of the racialization of these urban spaces to the aesthetic engagement by the artists, I find that the assemblage art of *66 Signs* and *The Heidelberg Project* is textured and structured by these various movements. The entire process of assemblage is an embodied act of memory because it requires an engagement with the landscape through the body and with objects embodied with memory. Tim Ingold has said that even “to perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past” (152-53). As

landscapes of violence and memory, Watts and Detroit are also landscapes of loss. As the artists engage with ruinous urban landscapes and material objects that recall various moments and conditions of loss, they drew on the collage-like aesthetic of assemblage to piece together material and immaterial traces of what has been lost and what remains. For the artists of *66 Signs of Neon* and Guyton, assemblage art allowed the artists to shape loss into a form that they hoped would be replicated in the process through which the community could rebuild the community. The hope found through the process of assemblage was that the ruins and the lingering remains, both physical and symbolic, could be incorporated into an identity that sees value in fragmentation and that allows for the emergence of a new identity.

Similar to the process outlined by Glissant, discussed in the introduction, where African Americans took the fragments of loss to develop an imperfect foundation of an identity explained in the introduction, the artists take the imperfect beauty of the ruins as their inspiration for turning the remains of violence into art that serves an ethical, political, and aesthetic function. Examining Watts and Detroit through the lens of ruin and melancholy, we see cities defined by multiple degrees and layers of loss. So despite the lack of such usual markers of remembrance like a memorial, statue, or even a plaque, Detroit and Watts bear physical and psychological remains of those violent days that operate in much the same way. These are the remains that become the material of art that attempts to remember and that shows the artists drawing on the productive qualities of loss. Both *66 Signs of Neon* and *The Heidelberg Project* show the artists apprehending urban ruins and melancholic objects of loss as productive material. The artists of *66 Signs*

of Neon and Guyton view the ruins as a creative space that allows them to generate art that spatially resists and establishes meaning through what is absent and what remains.

CHAPTER 2

THE NARRATIVE TEXTURE OF LOSS IN JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN'S PHILADELPHIA FIRE AND TWO CITIES: A LOVE STORY

In the opening chapter of *Two Cities: A Love Story* (1998), the narrator describes Mr. Mallory on his daily walk through Philadelphia as he mourns the loss of his friend John Africa. Mr. Mallory desperately yearns to ask him “What kind of world is this, John Africa? Homes bombed. Women and children roasted alive. A man shot, burned, chopped to pieces, swinging through the air in a bucket” (7). The John Africa Mr. Mallory searches for is a fictionalized version of the actual leader of MOVE, an organization started in the 1970s that was determined to liberate Life (with a capital L) from the world system of capitalism. The event that Mr. Mallory alludes to is the vicious bombing of MOVE’s headquarters on May 13, 1985 by government officials that killed eleven people, including five children, destroyed sixty-one homes, left 250 people homeless, and created a community unable to forget. As Mr. Mallory travels through not only Philadelphia, but also Pittsburgh taking pictures, he creates a map of loss as he attempts to capture the tumultuous relationship between these cities and their inhabitants. Mr. Mallory’s mournful search for Africa and his “words to make sense of no sense” mirrors John Edgar Wideman’s own efforts to construct a narrative in *Two Cities* that can effectively answer the questions of why the bombing of MOVE took place and, more importantly, what it means. Throughout the novel, the bombing serves as the event that allows Wideman to engage with the racialized and wounded urban spaces of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh that have been constant settings for his fiction and nonfiction. For instance, *Philadelphia Fire* (1991), where Cudjoe, a writer, searches for the “story of a

fire and a lost boy” (7), also specifically references the bombing of MOVE and fictionalizes the story of one of the survivors. In this novel, Wideman also features characters who are searching for answers not only about the bombing, but their own personal losses and misfortunes.

Wideman’s reasoning for why he keeps returning to write about the bombing shows that he recognizes its place within a larger contested relationship between “race,” violence, urban space, and memory. He believes that “certain public events occur and they have a lot of significance, they define powerful currents, they are events we shouldn’t ignore, that we shouldn’t forget, that we should try to make sense of” (99).

Wideman goes on to explain that

The concerted, ruthless campaign of a city government-ironically, a city government under the control of a black mayor-to destroy difference is one of the most important public events that I've observed. It was particularly important because it was buried. A whole city is afflicted by amnesia...I think that... if we look at certain events long enough and hard enough through the lens of fiction, maybe we can learn more of what we need to know. If we don't try, if we don't fight for the little light there is, then we're going to suffer... [I]n *Philadelphia Fire*, I'm trying to make myself stop, look, listen, and think about what's happening to us. ("Interview" Rowell 58)

Philadelphia Fire and *Two Cities* are Wideman’s attempts to stop the wheel of time to look at the bombing as an event that must be remembered and excavated for what it tells us about American society. While the bombing may have prompted Wideman to write, he makes it clear that the issues involved with the bombing did not end or begin on May 13, 1985. As Robin Wagner-Pacifici observes “the MOVE conflict was a strange hybrid, a charged space at the intersection of race, modernity, class, nature, urban life, and culture” (x). Therefore, the destructiveness of the bombing exposes long existing tensions

between Philadelphia police and its black citizens and presents Philadelphia as “a peculiar synecdoche for the nation, a part that skews the whole” (Otter 280).

Thus, although Wideman clearly draws on the historical context of the bombing, these novels are not documentary narratives or fictionalized recreations of the actual event. In fact, the bombing actually floats behind the scenes as a signifier of the presence of a racial wound that is an impetus to write and a metaphor that structures the novel. As Cudjoe notes: “no one gets by without loss. The reality, inevitability of personal grief and racial insult’s double-whammy, that’s always collective and personal” (113). Loss inflicted by racism moves the personal and the public into a shared space. So while the novels illustrate characters confronting personal losses, such as Margaret Jones in *Philadelphia Fire* or Kassima in *Two Cities*, their stories combine with that of the bombing of MOVE as indicative of collective wounds that have much deeper roots that are tied to the urban landscape.

Wideman proposes that the “lens of fiction” is one way to attend to a “wound, a disturbance, something we wish to change,” which is a label he assigns the bombing of MOVE (166).³⁴ In addition to his own aesthetic practices as a writer, Wideman includes Cudjoe, another writer, and Mr. Mallory, a photographer, to test the validity of his assertion that the artist has a critical stake in healing a wound. Similar to Wideman, these artists struggle to find a form to represent the loss that they see. All three artists—Cudjoe, Mr. Mallory, and Wideman—represent loss as highly textured and as crossing

³⁴I suggest that it is a wounding experience for Wideman because of its appearance in two of his novels and mention of it in a number of interviews. It appears to be an event that he finds resonates with his own life since he grew up in Pittsburgh and saw the impact of urban living firsthand with the imprisonment of his brother and son. In addition, his continued use of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh as settings for his novels reflects a deep-seated need to expunge his own wounding experiences and those of the nation.

boundaries between time, space, and personal and collective memory. In their representations of the multifaceted form of loss that racialized violence takes, the resulting art also has formal properties that rely on the exchange between what is absent, and consequently present, to consider the cultural, physical and social properties of the processes of remembering and forgetting involved with the bombing and its larger historical contexts. From what remains of the bombing of MOVE—the memories, traumatic effects, and physical traces—Wideman positions the bombing as a metonym for those who experience Pittsburgh and Philadelphia as wounded and wounding spaces. While loss and mourning thematically structure the creative searches of Cudjoe, Mr. Mallory, and Wideman in *Two Cities* and *Philadelphia Fire*, loss also gives the novels their textured and multi-layered structures. Wideman’s narrative strategies of dislocation, fragmentation, and juxtaposition attempt to weave together a narrative collage that includes a deliberate play with language, shifting points of views or narrators, and the blending of past, present, and future time. In *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities*, Wideman confronts the ontological and representational crises of loss and presents the multilayered mourning of racialized violence.

Despite the fact that the bombing of MOVE floats behind the major plot lines of *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities* and serves as the event that motivated Wideman to write, the majority of the scholarship do not extensively consider the melancholic force of the bombing on the themes or structures of the novels. However, much of the criticism on Wideman usefully focus on his play with language, the experimental structures of his novels, and the importance of the city as setting, which I suggest are all reflections of Wideman’s efforts to name, represent, and mourn losses that are spatial, personal,

collective, and racialized. Critical attention to Wideman's work has been led by James W. Coleman and W. Laurence Hogue, who consider the experimental nature of his novels as reflective of their postmodern context of production and Wideman's struggles to assert cultural forms of language practices involved in storytelling. Others, such as Madhu Dubey, John Pierre Richard, and Mary Paniccia Carden read the urban setting as central to Wideman's narrative strategies in *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities*. More recently, critics like Sam Otter and James Richard Giles place Wideman's works in conversation with other American novels and their engagement with violence, race, and freedom as central components of an American experience. In his essay "'And the Arc of His Witness Explained Nothing'": Black Flanerie and Traumatic Photorealism in Wideman's *Two Cities*," Tyrone R. Simpson, II begins the work of reading Mr. Mallory as a traumatized character and his photos as a sign of his wounding and that of the city. My reading builds on these discussions, but I do so by placing the bombing of MOVE, with its unfinished sense of mourning and multiple layers of loss, at the center of our understanding of the novels. Doing so actually brings many of these established themes and Wideman's use of a collage aesthetic into a more nuanced relationship.

Therefore, unlike these other studies, I approach this chapter with the belief that Wideman's experimental narrative strategies are indicative of his efforts to create a discourse that engages with loss in its collective, spatial, and racialized forms. By looking at novels together, we see illustration of Wideman's belief that "form and meaning is organic," and that each allows him to "invent new ways" to explore similar themes. "Each book," Wideman discloses, "is a redefinition of what counts and how it counts and how you can capture it" (77). Since both novels I suggest attempt to aesthetically respond to

the bombing in some way, then reading them together reveals how Wideman re-imagines the novel form for a philosophical project, where the subject is the ethical and formal representation of loss. So, in thinking about how the novels enact loss, beyond the most visible use of creating characters dealing with loss, we can look for performative structures that attempt to mark and account for gaps and ruptures, persistent failures of historical coherence and language, and other figurations of loss.³⁵ Figurations of loss are those figures, images, and narrative strategies that become representative of something larger, the symbolic loss that become linked to the dead and the absent. These figurations draw the personally felt losses of the characters into what Mr. Mallory labels as an “arc of suffering and loss” that includes the bombing (174). The writing (the form) organically derives from the circular and layered structure of the sense of loss (meaning) that Wideman attempts to represent.

Since the bombing of MOVE is not a well-known “mourning story,” I begin by focusing briefly on the historical account of the actual event to draw out why the event lies at the intersection between race, modernity, class, nature, urban life, and culture.³⁶ From there, I establish why viewing loss as central to Wideman’s strategies as a writer is both accurate and often overlooked by scholars who prefer to focus on the changes in his narrative as linked with his movement away from Eurocentric narrative forms to more African American based ones. While this may be true, it also oversimplifies Wideman’s participation in a larger discourse on language (verbal and visual), “race,” and loss that is taking place in these novels. Then, I examine how Wideman uses characters in the novels

³⁵ This is a term Angela B. Moorjani uses in *Aesthetics of Loss and Lessness* and it works in this instance to define the ways that loss can be marked through narrative means.

³⁶

to evaluate and attempt to understand the bombing, the other historical losses that are linked to it. Further, I explore personal or strongly felt losses that the bombing or its themes force Wideman's characters to confront, especially Simba serving as a melancholic object for Cudjoe. Therefore, I look for the ways that the psychological impact of the bombing remains evident in how these characters remember or repress the it AND how their own personally felt losses affect their inability to mourn the bombing or its larger themes. After attending to the characters, the final section of this chapter returns to the overall shape of the novel and Wideman's development of a poetics of loss that draws on a collage inspired aesthetic. Wideman's choice to use artists, who are also struggling to find a form that reflects their ways of seeing loss, mirrors his own efforts.

The Politics of Mourning the Bombing of MOVE

Narrative accounts of the May 13, 1985 police bombing of the MOVE organization in Philadelphia always begin with a litany of losses: eleven dead (five children), sixty-one homes destroyed, 250 people left homeless, and a community unable to forget. The bombing left only two survivors, Ramona and Birdie Africa, but created lasting memories that survived the baptism of fire that engulfed the street of Osage Avenue and the surrounding street. Although most news reports or book length studies of the bombing begin with this methodical listing of the facts, the story of the Bombing of MOVE begins much earlier and the incident, if viewed as a racialized cultural trauma, reflects losses even greater than the material and physical losses. The MOVE bombing gave visual, undisputable evidence of the racialized politics of space that define the lives of those who live in many of the United States' inner cities. A lack of consensus about

the events of that day and the ambivalence shown towards the bombing of the MOVE organization has affected the ways in which it has been mourned, but mostly forgotten.

MOVE was founded by Vincent Lephart, who with the help of Donald Glassey, an employee at the University of Pennsylvania, composed a three hundred-page document, "The Guidelines," which later served as a guidebook for the members of MOVE and implored the citizens of Philadelphia to embrace revolution. After changing his name to John Africa, Lephart, became the leader of the radical organization, which was first known as the Movement, and later just MOVE. By choosing a back to nature lifestyle, the group rejects the notion of material wealth and instead works to live by a philosophy that is shaped by oppositional theoretical and cultural practices. Although the actions and lifestyles of MOVE seem extreme to many and some of their actions questionable, such as yelling at neighbors through bullhorns, the ideological underpinnings of the organization actually posited persuasive ways of combating the traumatic experiences of urban living under the burdens of poverty, drugs, and violent persecution. However, their beliefs and practices, which seemed to go against the very foundations of American society, forced the group into a liminal position within the communities in which they lived, the city, and the nation.

During the 1970s, Philadelphia, like many major U.S. cities (e.g. Watts and Detroit discussed in the previous chapter), experienced declining industrial production, increasing levels of unemployment, and a decreasing middle class who left for the suburbs. During this time, Frank Rizzo served as the mayor of Philadelphia for two terms. Under Rizzo's tenure, racial tensions in the city rose, especially since the promises of the Civil Rights movement were not completely realized. During this time, the MOVE

organization grew and captured the attention of their neighbors and city officials because of their alternative lifestyle and their disregard for paying utility bills or following city ordinances. The group was under constant surveillance and on two occasions before the bombing, city officials attempted to forcefully evict MOVE members from their houses. The most violent of these occurred on August 8, 1978 in the Powelton Village neighborhood. After a fifty week long standoff, the incident ended in a blaze of bullets that left a Philadelphia police officer dead and nine members of MOVE charged with the murder. Despite faulty evidence presented by the police and prosecutors and the indignant pleas of innocence by the MOVE 9, they were found guilty and given thirty to one hundred years in prison. Some of the members were never directly linked to the shots that killed the officer, but were convicted on charges of conspiracy. The members and their supporters continue to decry the convictions and the life sentences of the nine members. After this incident, the conflicts between MOVE, the city, police officials, and the community escalated even as African Americans made gains on the political front by gaining public offices.

In 1984, Wilson Goode was elected the first black mayor of Philadelphia, and he faced the task of dealing with the MOVE conflict compounded by his predecessors, Frank Rizzo and Bill Green. Between 1978 and 1984, MOVE members say they were constantly harassed by the police, which included brutal attacks against pregnant MOVE women. The discourse surrounding the group presented them as different, outside the norm, and, therefore, dangerous. How then did a group of people who had adopted a lifestyle built upon principles of peace and self-preservation provoke such anger that would warrant dropping a bomb on their house? The answer to this question, for each

segment of the city involved, demands a detailed look at the racialization of space in Philadelphia that goes beyond the parameters of this study. However, the entire MOVE conflict, including the responses of the larger Cobbs Creek community during and after the bombing, presents an opportunity to investigate the ways in which communities decide who, what, where, how and why to mourn.

The members of MOVE attempted to create an island in the middle of the city where they controlled their way of living, but their efforts to claim a space for themselves were fervently denied. City living is governed by a racial and economic politics, which the MOVE organization recognized and tried to fight against. MOVE's efforts to claim their own space and their belief system put them at odds with two groups: the government who constructed the city's zones and the working class community in which they found themselves. For many within the larger black community of Cobbs Creek, MOVE represented a separatist and "backwards" looking position that they were striving to leave behind. Looking more closely to the intra-racial politics of the conflict, we see that MOVE was against the very culture of materialism that the residents of Cobbs Creek were striving to obtain in their pursuit of the "American Dream." MOVE was anti-technology and anti-system. It seems that the community perceived MOVE in conflicting ways, as radically extreme and a nuisance or as a help-heal-the-neighborhood group.

For city officials, it was clear that the group's philosophies did not fit into their vision for the city. The group did not fit into the ideal "city on the hill" that William Penn describes in the epigraph that Wideman ironically uses for *Philadelphia Fire*: "Let every house be placed, if the Person pleases, in the middle of its platt...so there may be ground on each side, for Gardens or Orchards or fields, that it may be a greene Country Towne,

wch will never be burnt, and always wholesome.³⁷ The city that Penn designed is one of order and control, but Wideman presents the city in both *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities* as one being ravished by a smoldering fire of discontentment and rage.

As the narrator in *Philadelphia Fire* notes, “Everybody had zones. Addicts, prostitutes, porn merchants, derelicts. Even people who were black and poor had a zone. Everybody granted the right to lie in the bed they’d made for themselves. As long as they didn’t contaminate good citizens who disapproved” (46). These zones are designed to operate as islands constructed by a number of racial and class borders. As the bombing highlights, this freedom to have one’s own zone is not in fact true. MOVE’s efforts to claim a space was met with violent opposition. At the root of the public official’s bombing of MOVE was an effort to police bodies and spaces. No longer was the house on Osage a private space, but it was now deemed a public space where the members of MOVE had made transgressions that made it “necessary” for their death. In other words, they attempted to break the racial and philosophical barriers that had helped to construct the city.

On May 12, 1985, police attempted to serve arrest warrants to members of MOVE. Police Commissioner George Sanbor addressed MOVE on that morning by saying, “Attention MOVE, this is America. You have to abide by the laws of the Unites States” (8a). The meaning is clear. The house on Osage was not an island unto itself, but governed by external rules that MOVE did not believe in or abide by. After a ninety

³⁷Mary Carden reads his use of this as placing the story within the discourse of a national narrative on father and son relationships and the history of whites and African Americans in Philadelphia. Mary Paniccia Carden *Contemporary Literature* Vol. 44, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 472-500 Published by: University of Wisconsin Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209029>

minute gunfight, which allegedly began after MOVE members shot from the roof, Sanbor, with Goode's consent, gave the order to drop the bomb. The bomb sparked a fire, which was allowed to burn unheeded for too long, destroying houses along the 6200 block of Osage and the adjacent street. Only two survivors were able to make it out of the burning house, Birdie and Ramona Africa.³⁸ In the end, eleven MOVE members, including John Africa were killed. Within days of the bombing, the physical remains from the bombing, except the chimneys, fire walls, and ashes, had been removed in an attempt to quickly *move on* from the tragedy. It was an event to be buried and forgotten.

Despite their desire to quickly move on from the bombing, the ordeal remains at the forefront for those who suffered immense loss. Although the commission investigating the bombing cited city officials for gross negligence and concluded that the bombing "appeared to be unjustified homicides which should be investigated by a grand jury," no one has ever been criminally prosecuted for the murders. In fact, Mayor Goode went on to serve another four year term. Over \$42 million was paid for damages and rebuilding efforts over a span of twenty years, yet West Philadelphia residents and members of MOVE and their supporters continue their efforts to keep the story relevant through interviews and various protests. Each year, the group holds a commemorative celebration in honor of the murdered. Yet, a lack of closure still remains for a number of people affected by the bombing. The community lies in disrepair and the rebuilt houses remain empty in this once thriving black middle class neighborhood. In 2005, after years of complaints by residents about the poor workmanship of the replaced houses, the city government attempted to buy out the remaining residents with plans to raze the entire city

³⁸ Update on the Survivors.

block. As of 2015, a few families, including Gerald Renfrow, a longtime reside of Osage Avenue, continue to refuse to sell or forget. In a 2005 interview, Renfrow says "They want us, the people, physically out. When we're out, that means there's no one left on Osage to tell the story of what happened" (qtd. in Sullivan). In a 2015 NPR interview, Renfrow continues to question the city's decisions on that fateful day and afterward. The multiple conflicts between MOVE and the city of Philadelphia recall the racialized spatial politics that defined the race riots of the 1960s discussed in the previous chapter.

The bombing of MOVE, like the riots and rebellions discussed in chapter one, recall a history of government policies designed to police and control black bodies, which, if acknowledged by and enfolded into the language of the nation's memorial culture, would force an unwanted examination of these practices. The multiple conflicts between MOVE and the city of Philadelphia resonate with the conditions that fueled the race riots of the 1960s. Similar to what we saw in chapter one, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, just like Watts and Detroit, are defined by the voids, ruins, and gaps that mark their landscapes, symbolically telling stories that vary from master narratives. Despite the physical remains of cities wounded by racialized spatial politics, the symbolic losses experienced during such moments are often ambiguous for the communities involved and the larger national context. Not content in allowing the bombing to be forgotten, in *Philadelphia Fire and Two Cities*, Wideman exposes the politics surrounding the bombing by exploring how "race" as an ideology, as practice, and as history impacts communities and cities by showing how the personal losses of the characters exist within a shared radius of loss.

The Narrative Texture of Loss

For Wideman, collage provides the ordering properties to make sense of a loss that traverses time and space; a loss that he sees as directly influencing modes of expression. Similar to the artists in chapter one, Wideman finds that collage functions as a form of resistance, helping him move beyond the restrictions of the novel form in representing loss. Through collage, he finds a way to break the silence surrounding not only the bombing of MOVE, but also the other forms of loss that happen within a wounding, urban setting. Collage collapses distance and time to create meaning through the mode of juxtaposition of the scraps of remains—physical, ideal, and bodily. In a 1988 interview, Wideman admits that he is drawn to what he calls the “texture of the narrative,” which he describes as a mixture of “letters, hymns, poems, song lyrics, thoughts, speech, time present, time past, future time, philosophical discourse, scattin, etc, etc...a kind of collage...you find in someone like an Eliot, but that you also find in traditional African art...an eclectic combination” (“Interview with John Edgar Wideman” 77). Tracie Church Guzzio sees this as a “revisioning of the term, the form, and the genre of history and its claims to objectivity itself,” which Wideman does by implementing a jazz aesthetic that allows him to take these “riffs” from genre to genre” (26). Wideman’s proclivity in utilizing a textured narrative puts him, as he acknowledges, within a long lineage of artists who draw on a multilayered aesthetic to move beyond dominant formal conventions. While Wideman indicates that he is drawn to the juxtaposition of multiple strands of genres and voices as a way of visualizing his writing process, it also is a means for him to address loss in its multiple forms.

The cultural and theoretical importance of loss to Wideman’s critical ontology is both thematically and formally rendered in *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities: A Love*

Story.³⁹ Wideman's concern with his "being" as a writer and an African American reveals itself in his playful use of language, the shifting and multiple points of views he stitches together in these novels, his almost obsessive exploration of the palimpsest nature of racialized violence in urban spaces, and the self-referential nature of his works that comment on his struggles as a writer. Since many of these characteristics are associated with postmodernism, Wideman's works are often read as representative of a postmodern aesthetic.⁴⁰ However, there have been just as many efforts to read his works as drawing on African American philosophical and expressive traditions.⁴¹ While it is possible to ask which of these traditions Wideman draws on the most, it is a question that Wideman does not make easy to answer or, I believe, even posits as a valid inquiry. He strategically evades the question by drawing from both traditions to show that what really concerns him are questions of language and form. The attempts by critics to put him strictly within a certain literary tradition often overlook the fact that Wideman recognizes the tension between the narrative strategies he chooses and his authorial intention. Thus, we often see in his works a continuous interrogation of narrative's ability to fully capture the essence of what he is after. But on more than one occasion and in different ways, Wideman suggests that his experimental style reflects an effort to engage with "an

³⁹ Here I am on drawing on Carrie Noland and Barrett Warren's recent attempt to link the aesthetic and ethical qualities of diasporic and avant-garde writers. Drawing on Michel Foucault's belief of a "constant interrogation of being," they locate three moments involving this interrogation: (1) a moment of critique, an interrogation of "what we are," (2) a historical analysis of how we came to be "what we are"; and (3) an experimental moment in which techniques are invented or retrieved in order to lend voice to a latent, unpredictable, not yet congealed self" (10).

⁴⁰For instance, see Hoem, Sheri I. "Disabling Postmodernism: Wideman, Morrison and Prosthetic Critique". *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 35.2/3 (2002): 193–210. Hogue, W L. *Postmodernism, Traditional Cultural Forms, and African American Narratives*. , 2013. Dubey, Madhu. *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Coleman, James W. *Black Male Fiction and the Legacy of Caliban*. Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

⁴¹ Heather Russell Andrade uses Holloway's term of plurisignant narratives that "strain against the literal narrative structure for an opportunity to disassemble the text through their diffusive character. Karen F. Jahn with the jazz.

aesthetic tradition [that] remembers its roots, the social conditions (slavery, oppression, marginality) and the expressive resources employed to cope with these conditions, the counter-version of these conditions it elaborated through art” (“The Architectonics of Fiction,” 44). By linking the often violent and deadly social conditions that African Americans experienced to the art that attempts to remember and forget these conditions, Wideman highlights the ways in which loss shaped the majority of African American experiences and how art has been one of the central means that African Americans attempted to counter a history of subjection. Wideman draws on the characteristics of this tradition by working within the representational tension. As he subverts and utilizes certain strategies and draws on a cultural framework of storytelling, he writes through a strategy of counterpoetics, which as I suggested in the introduction is at the foundation of a poetics of loss.

In *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities*, we find wounded artists and other characters attempting to find a method to articulate a loss that is personal, but bound up with historical loss. In his own formal choices, he retains the absences, disjunctions, and silences as evidence of the impact of loss that remains after the initial wounding. In a 1988 interview, Wideman admits that he is drawn to what he describes as the “texture of the narrative:” “letters, hymns, poems, song lyrics, thoughts, speech, time present, time past, future time, philosophical discourse, scattling, etc, etc...a kind of collage...you find in someone like an Eliot, but that you also find in traditional African art...an eclectic combination” (Coleman “Interview with John Edgar Wideman” 77). In *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities*, he illustrates this by juxtaposing multiple characters attempting to mourn accumulated and multiple layers of loss that move from the personal to the cultural. The

result: complex, polyvocal, and deeply textured novels that enter a discourse of race, space, language, and memory in the shape of the novels and in the resulting aesthetic and philosophical views of Cudjoe and Mr. Mallory. Similar to the artists in chapter one, Wideman finds that collage functions as a form of resistance and a challenge to the conventions of the novel. For Wideman, collage provides the ordering properties to make sense of a loss that traverses time and space; a loss that he sees as directly influencing modes of expression. Through collage, he finds a way to break the silence by collapsing and creating meaning through juxtaposition.

In his essay, "In Praise of Silence," Wideman expands on these characteristics of African American art when he locates the process of becoming, of claiming an identity and traditions, as happening within the space of silence where what remains from the past must contend with the present. He acknowledges his writing as his "attempt to define African American culture, to explicate its heavy debt, its intimacy with silence" (643). A "sign of silence" presides over much of his work because he focuses on "characters who can't speak, won't speak, choose never to speak until this world changes. Stories and essays whose explicit subject or theme is silence. My impulse to give voice to the dead, the unborn, to outlaws and outcasts whose voices have been stolen or muted by violence. Alternate forms of speech, in my fiction, which celebrate the body's ingenuity, how it compensates the loss of one expressive sense with eloquence in another" (643). Here lie the keys to understanding the formal and thematic concerns of *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities*. He recognizes silence as created by social boundaries that determine who may speak and what may be said. Therefore, his interest in the MOVE organization, which has been commonly labeled as radical and anti-capitalist, shows his desire to listen to the

voices that remain on the fringe of society. In addition, many of the characters in his novel, such as Cudjoe or Mr. Mallory, maintain an outsider position that often allows them a different perspective and access to information. Most importantly, Wideman's interest in the converging force of silence and time underscores his search for alternative forms that could perhaps provide a new way of seeing.

Wideman explains that the performative nature of silence has an expressive history all its own. He notes: "The more I write, the more I realize how deeply I'm indebted to a communal experience of time and silence, an African-American language evolving from that experience, a language vernacular, visceral, sensuous, depending on the entire body's expressive repertoire, subversive, liberating, freighted with laughter, song and sigh, burdened and energized by opposition. African-rooted, culturally descended ways and means of speaking that emerged from the dungeon and dance of silence" (641). The product of these experiences is the development of a vernacular discourse with varied discursive strategies to give voice to a body of knowledge that is not always readily accessible. Since Wideman locates African American's relationship to silence as beginning in the bowels of the slave ships, this is a discourse rooted in the ways the body and the community resists and compensates for being disconnected from a communal language and forced to learn the bitter language of subjection. The enslaved were bound between the need to speak, but also forced to use this "new" language of violence. Wideman perceives their experience in the following way, which deserves to be cited at length: "You realize you're learning a new language even as you swallow the bitterness, the humiliation of learning the uselessness of your own. Much of this learning and unlearning occurs in silence inside your skull, in the sanctuary where you're

simultaneously struggling to retain traces of who you are, what you were before this terrible, scouring ordeal began. In order to save your life, when you attempt to utter the first word of a new tongue, are you also violating your identity and dignity? When you break your silence, are you surrendering, acknowledging the strangers' power to own you, rule you? Are you forfeiting your chance to tell your story in your own words some day?" (642).

Since this is not a voluntary process, Wideman's observation contains echoes of Eduoard Glissant's definition of a "forced poetics." For instance Wideman finds values in the gaps and the unrecoverable modes of expression and knowledge as spaces where now all stories can be true.⁴² Wideman's style trajectory shows him trying to utilize a narrative form that compensates for the seen and the unseen, time, space, and imagination. Although Wideman recognizes the ability of art to excavate, examine, and counter loss through self-definition, self-preservation, and resistance, he also acknowledges the impossibility of reclaiming a "natural" poetics.

Wideman's poetics goes beyond using a vernacular language, it must also account for a "hard, unclean break" that defines African American traditions. He believes that this "partially accounts for key postures that are subversive, disruptive, disjunctive" ("The Architectonics of Fiction," 44). So, when critics position Wideman as employing similar techniques as the avant-garde artists and modernist authors he admires and often parodies, we can also suggest that what we see is his expression of a culturally informed poetics of loss. He explains that he is drawn to the subversive, disruptive, and disjunctive as he turns "form into something that is a very personal means of expression" (Interview-

⁴²Wideman has a collection of short stories entitled *All Stories are True*.

-From "Brothers and Keepers 569). This prompts him to “compos[e] in non-traditional means” and produces “a very complex kind of narrative, a very thoughtful narrative” (569). Wideman allows his works to retain the evidence of this process of remaking language into a space of revision. Thus, he finds value in a collage-like form because it disrupts traditional modes of narration and bridges gaps between time and space.⁴³ Looking closer at Cudjoe’s, Wideman’s, and Mr. Mallory’s shared aesthetic beliefs, we find a philosophy and form of loss that critiques not only traditional modes of representation (the novel and the photograph), but also the English language.

In *Philadelphia Fire*, we find that the various stories that Wideman draws together within this textual montage may seem unrelated on the surface, but actually reveals his philosophy of the ethics and representation of loss.

The “Story of a Bombing and a Boy” in *Philadelphia Fire*

Philadelphia Fire is divided into three parts with each part having a different narrator. A third person narrator serves as the guiding voice throughout part one, which focuses on Cudjoe, a writer and former “son” of Philadelphia, and his search for Simba Africa, the only survivor of the bombing in the novel. As Cudjoe maps loss throughout the urban spaces of Philadelphia, he contends with his own feelings of guilt, loss, and disconnection from the community and his sons. Throughout his search, he becomes an interviewer and a witness when he listens to the experiences of Margaret Jones, the basketball players in his old neighborhood, and his old friend Timbo. At the end of the novel, we return to Cudjoe’s perspective in the final pages of the novel as he attends a

⁴³ I classify his narrative processes as collage-like because he does not draw only on the characteristics of art labeled as collage forms (Cubism, Dada, Abstractionism), but also collage as it relates to musical forms (fugue, jazz).

memorial service for the killed members of MOVE. Part two introduces Wideman as narrator who provides a first person insight into his goals and process as the fabulator, his need for Cudjoe as his “airy other,” and his battles with language and silence that he shares with Cudjoe. Part three of the novel is told mainly from the point of view of J.B., a homeless man who labels himself the “maker of the city” as he also recognizes the layers of loss that comprises its foundation (156). The narrator of each part calls attention to their connected and multiple losses—a loss of community, a spirit of protest, a better future for the children—to critique and explore a number of historical and social contexts of the bombing of MOVE. Although this summary simplifies the deeply textured narrative of *Philadelphia Fire*, it also gets to the heart of the novel’s purpose. Using the multiple narrators with their own perspective of what is “wrong” and how to solve it, Wideman directs our attention away from seeing the bombing as an isolated, singular event, but as only one of many examples of racial violence that shapes Philadelphia’s history. As a result, Wideman positions MOVE not as an isolated group of “others,” but as members of a collective body that loss binds together.

While the bombing operates as an absent presence in the novel since the actual events are never represented in *Philadelphia Fire*, Wideman explores the remains of it to consider the community’s symbolic and actual losses through Cudjoe’s efforts to find the “story of a fire and a lost boy” (7). Cudjoe gathers evidence of the emotional and spatial remains of the bombing and its melancholic impact on various segments of the population. As a way of gaining first-hand knowledge of the bombing, Cudjoe begins by interviewing Margaret Jones, a former member of MOVE. Jones’s testimony to Cudjoe provides insight into the group and purposely shifts attention away from an outsider

perspective of the group to one who knew the group on an intimate level. She describes MOVE as intent on the preservation of life and emphasizes that King, a fictionalized version of John Africa and leader of MOVE in the novel, viewed the city as a death force that fed on the weak and the sick.⁴⁴

She remembers his assertion that “Society’s about stealing your life juices and making you sick so the Tree dies” (10). Her description of MOVE presents the group’s desire for a peaceful and harmonious existence with the land and how MOVE viewed the city as a space of terror. Her description of the emotional impact of that day shows the traumatizing effect the bombing has on her sense of self and relation to the murdered. Jones says, “Almost fell out my ownself watching them stack the stretchers in ambulances” filled with bones and ash (18). She experiences a physical reaction that shows her feelings of attachment to those lost. She tells Cudjoe that she still can’t believe that eleven people were murdered and burned “up like you burn garbage?” (17). She asks, “Why’d they have to kill them two times, three times, four times? Bullets, bombs, water, fire. Shot, blowed up, burnt, drowned. Nothing in those sacks but ashes and a guilty conscience” (18). Her anger and the unanswered questions that linger suggest that Jones is mourning something that she cannot fully name, but that she recognizes in the way that the city guiltily tries to frame the aftermath of the bombing.

For Jones, the remains of the bombing become a part of the palimpsest history of Philadelphia embedded in its streets, in the gaps where houses stood, and in the physical traces left behind. In response to Cudjoe telling her about his intention to write a book

⁴⁴ Although Wideman changes the historical detail that there were two survivors, the character of Margaret Jones resembles a number of statements made by Ramona Africa, one of the survivors, and Louise James, a former member of MOVE.

she tells Cudjoe, “Don’t need a book. Anybody wants to know what it means bring them through here. Tell them these bombed streets used to be full of people’s homes. Tell them babies’ bones mixed up in this ash they smell” (19). Her comparison of the murdered members of MOVE with ash and smoke illustrate the relationship between the physical losses, the deaths of MOVE members and the destroyed houses, and the symbolic losses, the loss of a sense of community, a spirit of protest, and the destruction of children, which remain long after funeral services are held or houses are rebuilt. Similarly, Cudjoe’s attention to the physical remains throughout his search shows his awareness that through them he can trace the multiple strands of loss the bombing originated. The fact that the bombing remains largely undocumented, Cudjoe must be content with looking for fragments of the bombing.

Cudjoe, as a secondary witness to the bombing, constantly highlights the material remains of the bombing, like smoke and ash, whose physical properties highlight the absence and presence of the dead members of MOVE. He actually gains knowledge of the event by walking through the neighborhood and mapping the remains of the loss that he feels, sees, and associates with the bombing. When Cudjoe arrives to Clark Park, he notes “twenty blocks west the fire had burned. If the wind right, smoke would have drifted here, settled on leaves, grass, bushes. Things that eat leaves and buds must have tasted smoke. Dark clouds drifting this way carried the ashy taste of incinerated children’s flesh. Could you still smell it? Was the taste still part of what grew in the park? Would it ever go away?” (28). Cudjoe’s observation reflects his belief in the lingering effects of the bombing as it continues as a social presence in the elements of nature that define life. The ash and smoke become the embodied remains of the dead

members of MOVE that should serve as a symbolic irritant to force the community to acknowledge the impact of the bombing. Earlier in the novel, it is the smoke that draws Cudjoe back to Philadelphia. He reveals: “I could smell the smoke five thousand miles away. Hear kids screaming. We are all trapped in the terrible jaws of something shaking the life out of us” (22). The smoke reactivates Cudjoe’s memories of the Philadelphia community he grew up in and prompts him to return with the hopes of finding Simba.

Although he focuses on his interaction with the landscape to attempt to learn about the bombing and find the boy, Cudjoe also learns the community’s story by talking with the basketball players in Clark Park and Timbo, one of his friends from the past and now the mayor’s right-hand man. The response of each reflects their relationship to MOVE and intraracial politics involved in remembering MOVE. One player wonders if the mayor will be stepping down as a result of what happened. Another claims the mayor won’t step down because “all he did was torch a few crazy niggers” (41). The player continues, saying that the “mayor don’t run the city, city runs him” and acknowledges that if the mayor had been white, the entire city would have been in flames from outrage. One believes that the mayor is only there for “nigger control” (42). The conversation continues with the players continuing to discuss how race influenced the community’s reactions about the bombing and the power structure of the mayor’s position.

However, Timbo describes the mayor’s role differently and gives his opinion of MOVE’s philosophy. He believes that “King and his bunch of loonies” were “embarrassing. Trying to turn back the clock. Didn’t want no kind of city, no kind of government” (81). He positions MOVE’s philosophy of living as counter to the mayor’s efforts to revolutionize the city economically and that the press used MOVE as a way of

questioning the mayor's power. The basketball players and Timbo give a sense of the outsider position of MOVE, which helps to explain the community's refusal to register their deaths fully as a loss. As we will see later, only a handful of the city's residents attend the first memorial for the murdered.

Despite their feelings about MOVE, Timbo and the basketball players do name the symbolic loss of a sense of relation for those residents who viewed the city as a home space. The bombing of MOVE not only changes the spatial determinants of the citizens who lost their homes, but also reflects the effect of gentrification and urban decay on the community. So while the bombing is a blatant attack against the rights MOVE claimed in their zone of the city, the gradual decline of affordable housing and areas of blight enacted another form of violence. One basketball player expresses excitement over the new homes being built on Osage Avenue, another wonders "how you spoiled to have a neighborhood with no stoops?" (42). Since stoops often served as natural spaces for gathering and fellowship between neighbors, the lack of them in the replaced homes shows the lack of care taken in the rebuilding of the houses to serve the needs of the community. The stoop serves as a transitory place that connects the public with the private and provided a space where the type of basketball court philosophizing appears in conversation. The absence of the stoops as a ritualized space of communion disrupts the mourning process for the community. The basketball player's recognition of the need for a shared space that is conducive for testimony and Timbo's documentation of the changing city demographics show the widespread impact of the bombing and its relationship to the larger dynamics of the city.

As evidenced in Jones's testimony and the observations of Cudjoe, Timbo, and the basketball players, despite its disavowal, the bombing turns Osage street and surrounding streets from spaces into places, sites that display a certain temporal consciousness. It is a site that is able to conjure up particular feelings of despair, loss, and guilt because there is a cultural investment in recognizing it as a place of trauma. However, unlike traditional memorials where we find monuments, markers, or museums, the site of the bombing lacks all of these. Cudjoe alludes to the sites of memory created to remember the Jewish Holocaust and the absence of such remains in the case of the bombing: "no warehouse of shoes and eyeglasses and clothing left behind to convict the guilty" (48). Cudjoe realizes that "all the evidence up in smoke...The dead were dead" (48). What Cudjoe is really wondering is how then does the community mourn without the traditional markers that something has been lost. Cudjoe must contend with a lack of evidence and changing perspective on what and how to mourn. While the bombing is clearly a site of contention, it is not clear if the members of the community fully recognize what has been lost and how to mourn for losses that fall into the categories of abstractions and ideals. Cudjoe feels and senses the loss that has ravaged the community, but he also cannot always name what has been lost or understand how it should be mourned.

While Cudjoe struggles with how to name his connection to the loss he feels, the narrator describes the city as a space that perpetuates loss and whose spatial and temporal order is defined by gaps, ruins, and scars. As one critic notices, "*Philadelphia Fire* is obsessed with the city's unwholesomeness and with burning, local and general, literal and metaphoric" (Hume 3). The novel begins with Cudjoe in the idyllic and pastoral setting of an island that has been ravaged by a storm, but the narrator quickly encourages the

reader to take that image of the “green and dying” island and “set it down in the ‘city of brotherly love’ seven thousand miles away, in a crystal ball, so it hums and gyrates under its glass dome” (5). By juxtaposing the natural scene of destruction and the urban setting of Philadelphia, the narrator invites us to consider the similarities of the two. The narrator asks the reader to place the Philadelphia scene in a “crystal ball” so that “nothing outside the sealed ball touches what’s inside. Hermetic. Unreachable. Locked in and the key thrown away” (6). It is Philadelphia that the narrator wants to shake up to reveal its layered histories and cosmological dimensions. The phrase “green and dying” illustrates the inherent contradiction of a city growing through reform projects while some areas still show evidence of decline, decay, and neglect. The phrase highlights the discrepancy between our view of a city as alive and teeming with people and energy and the undertone of loss that MOVE, the narrator, and Cudjoe all agree is always evident even beneath a landscape of beauty.

It is these two descriptors, “green and dying,” that mark Cudjoe’s view of Philadelphia throughout the novel as he describes the city as “millions of eyes” (53) or as a wounded and rotting man.⁴⁵ Wideman writes

If the city is a man, a giant sprawled for miles on his back, rough contours of his body smothering the rolling landscape... a derelict in a terminal stupor, too exhausted, too wasted to move, rotting in the sun, then Cudjoe is deep within the giant’s stomach, in a subway surface car shuddering through stinking loops of gut,

⁴⁵Wideman depicts Philadelphia in the novel similar to how he describes Pittsburgh in *Brothers and Keepers*: “Memories of the streets are dense, impacted. Threads of guilt bind each tapestry of associations. Guilt bright red as the black blood sealed beneath Homewood’s sidewalks. Someone had stripped Homewood bare, mounted it, and ridden it till it collapsed and lay dying, sprawled beneath the rider, who still spurred it and bounced up and down and screamed, Giddyup. I knew someone had done that to Homewood, to its people, to me. The evidence plain as day through the windshield of my car: an atrocious crime had been committed and I had witnessed it, continued to witness it during those short visits home each summer or for the Christmas holidays, yet I did nothing about what I saw” (39-40).

tunnels carved out of decaying flesh, a prisoner of rumbling innards that scream when trolleys pass over rails embedded in flesh Same filthy-windowed PTC trolley car carries you above and below ground, in and out of flesh, like a needle suturing a wound. (20-21)

The narrator configures Philadelphia as a wounded living thing overwrought with loss and Cudjoe as deep within its innards. His presence there allows him to see what is needed to repair the wound.

Therefore, as a way of reestablishing a sense of relation to the city and its residents so that he may begin the work of mourning, Cudjoe attempts to reconnect with the community members by visiting particular spaces within the city. However, when he first arrives at Clark Park, one of his past haunts, he notes that the court seems “forlorn, abandoned” (30) and he feels a sense of loneliness. He begins to imagine the scene as a film with him in it, “a solitary figure,” who is “caught up in reverie, shuttling at warp speed between times and places” (31). Cudjoe positions himself as separate from the community and this lack of connectedness is also reflected in his game as he gets a chance to play again. He notices the changes in the style of play and in his abilities: “Game was rag ass. Too much like one on one” (35). Cudjoe bemoans the absence of team play that he once knew, but he still reserves hope of the basketball court serving as a space of mourning and playing as a period of communion. After the game, the events of the day turn into stories remembered and shared. As Cudjoe sits listening, he wonders, “*If he told his story to the other men, if he wasn’t a newcomer content to listen to the others, if he wasn’t too tired and beat to say his own name three times in a row, his story would be about night dropping on the city, how deep and how quietly it settles over the park. Nothing the same now*” (my italics; 40). He wants to explain how nightfall is intent on “hiding things” and “about things changing” (41). He wants to reclaim his connection by

repeating his name in a way that marks his presence and provides an avenue for remembrance. However, Cudjoe continues to see himself as an outsider and his hesitancy to tell his story prevents him from sharing with the other players his understanding of the way the city works and what is needed to change it. His awareness of the loss he feels and sees, along with the strong affinity he feels towards Simba, prompts Cudjoe's desire to write a communal story. Cudjoe "knows it would make a good story. They'd all be in it. Would the players testify, help him tell his story as they cool out after the game?" (41). Cudjoe understands that his story is tied up with theirs and that hearing each one and placing it next to his would help him explain why he left, why he returns, and why the silence about the bombing of MOVE must be broken. The playing of basketball and the period after the game metaphorically represent the structure of the community and the inability of one person to repair the loss. Cudjoe's hopes imply that it takes an entire body working together to challenge the shift in the sense of connectedness he sees within the community.

Cudjoe finds further evidence that the community refuses to mourn the bombing when he attends the memorial service for the MOVE members marking the first anniversary of the bombing. Although wary of the goals set forth by the memorial service himself, Cudjoe still attends it because it was a public forum for mourning. The printed program describes the intent of the memorial: "*through observance, atonement, education, and cultural expression we aim to confront and move beyond the horrors of that terrible day, to contribute to healing the wounds of our city and its inhabitants, and to aid in the development of humane and peaceful methods of resolving our community's problems*" (191). The program reiterates much of MOVE's mission found in "The

Guidelines,” but also promotes the memorial as a means for healing and moving forward. The service opens with a cultural expression through drums that Cudjoe describes as playing “a hymn to death and rebirth by fire” (196). He highlights the role that drums have played in African mourning rituals and that here the sounds mark both the beginning and ending of life. He also notes that the beating of the drums replace the need for words as they can perform the duty of transmitting cultural knowledge. Others on the program read poems and elegies. Each act shows the participants’ attempt to mark the importance of the lives lost, the “ones gone who must not be forgotten whose names face us today crying for vengeance, justice, for vindication, and peace” (197). Each act of mourning draws on various modes of narrative: singing, speaking of poems and their names, and playing of music.

The memorial celebration has all of the usual elements of mourning, but is missing the community’s presence and support. As Cudjoe looks around the mostly empty Independence square, he wonders if something happened to make no one show up. He feels as if he is “exposed, out of place, out of sync, like the few chumps mulling around the square” (191). His hope to be a silent observer is dashed by the absence of others. Cudjoe, like the members of MOVE, is oddly outside of the bounds of the community and time, but he imagines himself as a pied piper encouraging the people to participate. He wants to remind them that the celebration was about them, and that it could have possibly been them “burnt and boiled and blowed up like the rest” (193). Cudjoe makes a connection between his imagined scenario and the bombing of MOVE as a continuation of racial terror. Upon arriving, Cudjoe imagines the Square filled with ghosts from a July 4, 1805 incident where free Philadelphia African Americans were

chased away from the day's celebrations.⁴⁶ These ghosts signal for Cudjoe. He warns that "here you are again making no connections, taking out no insurance. C'mon. Follow me. Before they decide to sweep your corner clean" (193). However, Cudjoe only *imagines* this speech in many of the same ways he only *imagines* sharing his story with Jones and with the basketball players. On these occasions Cudjoe fails to enact a witness and testifier dynamic of support, which some trauma theorists have upheld as central to healing.⁴⁷ However, what Cudjoe does offer is an alternative view that allows the imagining to stand in for the gaps and failures of language. In doing so, he alters the testifier/witness dynamic.

So, within the novel, the reader does see efforts to mourn the victims of the bombing, but since the reader sees the memorial from Cudjoe's perspective, it also seems lacking and unfulfilling. Cudjoe distrusts the memorial's ability to provide the necessary mourning because he knows that it does not address the psychosocial aspects that lie at its foundation. Instead, he focuses on the silence, the ghosts that he sees in the Square, and the physical remains of unfinished mourning, the returned balloons that land on the ground, the fluttering scraps of paper, and the unused candles. These objects find meaning through their proximity and use in recalling the dead. Thus, they serve as material memories of the murdered members of MOVE. By focusing on their continued presence even after the ceremony ends, Cudjoe recognizes that they also signal a residual loss that has not been worked through during the ceremony. The site of the memorial, Independence Square, denotes the irony that two groups of African Americans, over a

⁴⁶Gary B. Nash acknowledge this incident in *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (1998): 172-211.

⁴⁷ Here I am thinking of the work of Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, and Lawrence Langer.

century apart, were striving to enjoy the promises of democracy and claiming a space as their own faced opposition. Thus, the remains make vivid the sense of loss that connects the bombing of MOVE to that day in 1805 as a part of a palimpsest of loss that structures the city. Cudjoe's participation in this ritual of mourning is unfulfilling because he has not found Simba, the melancholic object that defines and powers his search. Cudjoe's search for Simba illustrates the paradoxical tension between his need to conclude his mourning and also access the pain of.

It is through his search for Simba that Cudjoe addresses the symbolic losses associated with the bombing. For Cudjoe, Simba functions very similarly to the collage-like description of a melancholic object discussed in the previous chapter and introduction. Wideman draws on Simba's function as a melancholic object to link the personal losses of Wideman as author, Wideman as character, and Cudjoe with the collective losses of the bombing. Simba's absent presence, like the bombing itself, makes him into a necessary object of memory for Cudjoe and for Wideman-- a surrogate figure through which they can address the overwhelming loss of black boys through violence. Cudjoe characterizes Simba as three things: "a brother, son, a lost limb haunting him since he read about the fire in a magazine" (8). Each placeholder reflects a relationship that is defined by a temporal and physical bond.

The purpose of Simba's figuration as a brother, son, and lost limb becomes most clear in a dream sequence that Cudjoe describes to Timbo about a boy, hanging, in a lynched position, from a basketball goal in Clark Park. The dream itself is an indicator of Cudjoe's melancholic attachment to Simba because it reflects the need to deal with it outside the realm of reality. In the dream, Cudjoe describes the boy as "hanging there

with his neck broken and drawers droopy and caked with shit and piss” (93). While Cudjoe does not definitively state that the lynched boy is Simba, several indicators suggest that it is. The presence of kids singing what Cudjoe describes as unintelligible songs that remind him of those sang during the Civil Rights Movement help to remind us of Simba’s status as a hero for the children of the city. Earlier, Timbo has suggested that the Kaliban Kiddies Korps view Simba as a survivor, someone who had been through the fire and survived. So their singing of protest songs around the lynched body suggests Simba’s martyrdom and their apprehension of his death as productive and militant. However, Cudjoe sees much more in the lynched boy: “Its me and every black boy I’ve ever seen running up and down playing ball” (93). It is the loss of the potential of this boy and the possibility that it could be any black boy that weighs most heavily on Cudjoe.

By having the boy hanging at the basketball court, the same one that Cudjoe has earlier described as a communal space of healing, Wideman draws attention to the importance of the community to recognize Simba as a reminder of the bombing: a singular act of violence echoing the long history of racialized violence.

Simba’s lynching posture links him to a chain of historical loss connected with black males who were tortured and murdered through the act of lynching. In this case, the lynched black male body, as a metaphor, does not signal sexual impotence. Simba’s broken body personifies controlling tactics enacted on black bodies, tactics that maim the growth of the community. The image of a lynched black male body that once signified the threat of racial terror now stands as an image of the state of urban conditions that have led to a rise in black boys dying in large numbers as a result of violence. Cudjoe

illustrates the mutability of Simba to recall these perceived losses by characterizing him as a lost limb. Cudjoe's metaphor for Simba brings to mind the studies of patients who have physically lost limbs, but still experience sensations and/or pain in the now empty space. Scholars have limited conclusions for why patients develop these symptoms, but most conclude that for the patients who experience it, the pain is very real for them.⁴⁸ In the way that Cudjoe employs it, the phantom limb metaphorically recalls the process through which personal loss becomes a collective loss felt by those who do not necessarily experience the original wounding, but through a mode of affect feel its impact.

In part two of the novel, Wideman as character describes the loss of a child as an "emptiness as tangible as a photo" (119). It is a feeling that can be shown around, but that "has no name, no place. A negative marvel, a phantom pain incomprehensible" that resides in this space (119). He continues:

I know the pain is not in my leg because my leg is gone. No word for the space where the absence of a leg is real the pain is real. No word for the confusion. My life forming around an absence we've been in the habit of calling one thing, but now it's another without a name, but I must speak to it, of it, exist with the pain of its presence and absence speaking to me a hundred times a day, every day. (120)

Wideman highlights that what we see as one loss is in fact many and words often fail him in being able to give shape to the multiple absence. All he knows is that his life is shaped around something that is painful in its absence and as an embodied presence in Simba. Simba, who begins as a reminder of the bombing, also becomes an embodiment of other symbolic losses that Wideman hopes to name through him.

⁴⁸For more information see Crawford, Cassandra. *Phantom Limb: Amputation, Embodiment, and Prosthetic Technology*, 2014.

As a result, Cudjoe (and by extension Wideman as character) develop a melancholic attachment to the boy because he is not sure how to mourn for him due to the layered losses Simba represents. A sense of guilt hinders and motivates his actions. Cudjoe admits that “He must find the child to be whole again...He knows the ache of absence, the phantom presence of pain that tricks him into reaching down again and again to stroke the emptiness. He’s stopped asking why. His identification with the boy persists like a discredited rumor” (8). His repetition of stroking the absence that he feels but cannot see indicates Cudjoe’s almost obsessive need to find the boy and shows the energy that he has invested in Simba as a symbolic object he desires on his path towards wholeness. In a sense, then, Cudjoe remains haunted by the figure of Simba. He becomes a shifting image that highlights Cudjoe’s relationship with his son and the writer’s relationship to language. The pain that is left in the space of emptiness highlights that something is gone, but also forces the remembrance of what has been lost.

Although Simba is lost and never found, a pattern develops where his absence is made present through Cudjoe’s and Wideman’s sons. Both Cudjoe and Wideman share a sense of guilt as they question if they have done enough to save their own children. Cudjoe wonders: “What would [I] say to Simba if [I] ever found him?” (92). The reader soon realizes this obsession has less to do with Simba, and more about the guilt surrounding his own unresolved losses. This sense of guilt prevents Cudjoe from completely mourning Simba because he has made him a crucial part of how he defines himself as a father and as a member of the community. His inability to find him signals to his failure to save his own sons and become a leader in the community again.

Cudjoe's actions in the lynching dream discussed earlier reveal this guilty association with Simba. He tells Timbo that as he walks to the basketball court his legs fail him and he falls to the ground. He describes himself as "chopped on the ground, rolling around with half my legs gone but I'm also a witness, upright, floating somehow staring down at the basketball court" (93). Cudjoe physically experiences the pain that the lynched victim may have felt. He loses his legs, which connects with his description of Simba as a lost limb. His own amputated legs highlight his feelings of hopelessness and the degree to which he identifies with Simba. However, Cudjoe's prone position is not entirely one of defeat because he still labels himself as a witness, and he only briefly loses the use of his legs.

Cudjoe's changing postures mimic his journey thus far to become a truth seeker. The journey in finding the boy mirrors his own struggles to make it to the light and generate change in terms of writing the novel and staying involved in the intellectual movement. So what Cudjoe remembers about the dream is the weight that he feels: "What I'm left with, what I'm certain of is not very much at all. But indelible. Real. The singing. The broken neck and slumped body. The weight" (94). The weight that Cudjoe feels here is a sign of the responsibility that he embodies and carries around with him. It is similar to the weight he feels earlier in relation to the balloons. Cudjoe wonders if he can bear the weight of being the survivor and continue the fight. Cudjoe thinks that articulating his loss would give him safety and healing, but finds that it does not: "Thought *telling* you might help. But it doesn't. I feel myself beginning to invent. Filling in the blanks but the blanks are real. Part of the dream" (my italics; 94). Cudjoe's description of his efforts to remember voices the dilemma that he also finds himself in as

testifier. He must resign himself that the blanks are a part of the story because they signify what is remembered and what remains repressed. Therefore, these gaps suggest the presence of a symbolic loss that even the testifier may not be able to identify.

Although Cudjoe has proclaimed that he cannot explain his melancholic attachment to Simba, the dream indicates that he recognizes Simba as a reminder of the bombing and as an embodiment of the continuing ills of urban living. So for Cudjoe, Simba's representation as an ongoing attack on black males, which the lynched position and location of the body seem to suggest, forces Cudjoe to recognize the need for action, but his feelings of guilt cause him to over-identify with Simba and remain stagnant. He cannot differentiate his loss from what he sees in Simba. For him, the impact is the same. This realization hinders his journey towards wholeness that he says depends on his finding Simba and writing a book about the bombing.

However, the memorial ceremony does force Cudjoe to confront his ethical relationship to the bombing as illustrated in the connection he feels with the release of balloons, one for each lost member of MOVE. Cudjoe notices that three balloons resist the ascent into the air as if suggesting the need for them to remain visible and thus remembered. He believes that the three balloons had "formed a kind of family, hovering above the stage, resting, trapped. Afraid to let go. To be. Gone" (197). Cudjoe recognizes his own physical attachment to the balloons: "As the balloons raced away they emptied him. His lungs. His heart. He knew the precise moment when the string snapped. A kind of twang, pop. He has no more to give. The string's played out." (198). Cudjoe's response to the balloons, in their role as metaphors for the murdered, expose the sense of relation he feels toward the murdered members of MOVE in their shared sense of being

“outside.” Therefore, the pop signals Cudjoe successfully mourning the lost sense of attachment to the community. Strangely, this final section of the novel does not mention Simba, but instead features a Cudjoe who seems to be embracing the process of mourning. However, he still cannot name exactly what it is he is mourning, which is another sign that he is mourning in response to symbolic losses and not the murdered MOVE members. He wonders: “What had those balloons been to him? Why had he been tied to them, drawn after them, emptied, when they swept away?” (198). Unable to name the source of his connection, Cudjoe is unsure if he can continue in the role as witness and promoter of change. He has placed finding Simba, writing the novel, and memorializing the murdered members of MOVE as necessary elements of this role. Nonetheless, he now questions his ability to participate in the process of mourning because he wants to run until he can find words adequate for the job.

His indecision is linked to a failure he finds in language to accurately describe his feelings. Cudjoe wonders “why didn’t words rise and fly like balloons?” (198).⁴⁹ He sees an inadequacy in words, so even when Cudjoe tries to remember the names of the dead, he cannot. He comes to the conclusion that “Words are shell, husk, earthbound” (198). He equates words with those things that are left behind, that cover meaning, while the balloons have a certain kind of freedom because of their ability to move. The names Cudjoe has been trying to remember take on similar qualities as “they became something else, whisked away, elsewhere, where they would always be, waiting, gone” (198). In another twist, the names are linked to the basic elements of every living thing:

⁴⁹ Françoise Pallau-Papin has suggested that the balloons achieve what is usually reserved for epic characters: “they have channeled their destructive power, their explosive energy, into a search for meaning, and their quest is celebrated like that of a legendary hero in the final performance” (652).

“Fire...Water. Earth. Air. Names bound those elements, twisted around them, held them close, breathed life into their combinations. Binding. Pulling.” (198). Instead of providing a definitive way for coping with loss, Wideman relates the bombing to unexplainable degrees of nature. Cudjoe wonders at the power that giving a name to something that exists gives to these elements and if finding a name for his feelings would help him to explain the unexplainable.

Cudjoe and Wideman as character and author share a need to tell stories about lost and wounded boys and the struggle to accomplish successful storytelling. In part two of the novel, Wideman as character hinges the success of working through the loss of his son, sentenced to life in prison, on writing his son’s story. Wideman as character describes his son in terms similar to those used by Cudjoe about Simba—a son and a lost generational link, which he links to a larger wound and to the city. He says that his son suffers from a mental illness that is “just as real, cruel and destructive to mind and body as a gunshot wound” (116). He wonders “Why would we allow anyone, adult or child, to suffer untended, along, an agony enacted not deep in the forest but in a so-called civilized city, in a building with a number, on a street with a name, in a cell with a tiny window we pay people to watch?” (116). Wideman makes a connection between the woundedness of his son and the feelings of hurt and grief Simba and others who live in the city, on a street like Osage, may feel. While Cudjoe appears sincere in his efforts to write the novel about Simba at some points, Wideman as character wonders “Will I ever try to write my son’s story?” (115). He links his diminishing “narrative faculty” as a direct result of his not dealing with the topic. Wideman as character and author remains in a cycle, like that of

Cudjoe, of inventing, hiding, and writing about many places at once. The performance of loss comes in the form that the novel takes.

Looking at the struggles of Cudjoe and Wideman as character together is helpful because Wideman positions them as parts of the same person. This split indicates Wideman's efforts to develop a coping mechanism for the loss he is experiencing. Wideman as character asks a series of questions trying to figure out their relationship: "Why this Cudjoe, then? This airy other floating into the shape of my story. Why am I him when I tell certain parts? Why am I hiding from myself? Is he mirror or black hole?" (122). Wideman fails to answer this question, but looking at the similar ghosts haunting each, we can read Cudjoe as Wideman's effort to turn himself into an object and subject for a melancholic observation.

The parallels between Cudjoe and Wideman as character reflect the psychic splitting that Wideman employs in his development of Cudjoe as a character. Both feel like they have failed the community in terms of promoting change. Most importantly, both are searching for a way to tell the story of their "lost sons." Wideman continues this question for narration about the losses associated with not only the bombing, but urban living in general through the photographer lens of Mr. Mallory in *Two Cities*. In *Two Cities*, the bombing of MOVE, Mr. Mallory's photographs, the love story between a woman strangled in lament and a man contemplating his past, map Mr. Mallory's "arc of suffering and loss" as he travels through the cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

The "Arc of Suffering and Loss" in Two Cities

Two Cities resonates with *Philadelphia Fire* on so many levels that they can almost be read as two parts of the same story. Wideman wishes to tell about the tolls of

urban living. Both narratives contain traces of the MOVE bombing, while artists consider symbolic losses alongside Wideman. However, *Two Cities* is the more complete of the two novels in terms of providing the reader with a clearer set of plot points, so the poetics that Wideman presents in the rhetorical shape of *Philadelphia Fire* finds its rhythm in *Two Cities*. The disjunctive nature of *Philadelphia Fire* gives way to a clearer path of connection between the losses that each character experiences and their relationship to the symbolic losses that he highlights as central to the MOVE bombing. While in *Philadelphia Fire*, the focus was on the written word, in *Two Cities: A Love Story*, Wideman moves his attention to visual artistic expression as a means for documenting loss.⁵⁰

As the subtitle of *Two Cities: A Love Story* suggests, the novel has at its center the love story between Kassima, a black woman who is searching for ways to deal with the loss of her husband to AIDS and two boys to violence in the same year, and Richard, who at one point mourns for black boys lost to a culture of violence, convicting him of his own shortcomings as a father. However, their love story is interrupted by the residual effects of Kassima's past and the death of Mr. Mallory, who has his own love affair with photography. Mr. Mallory, a veteran who rents a room from Kassima, travels around the city taking photographs for his unnamed and one-sided collaboration with the artist Giacometti before his death. His death marks a turning point in the novel that allows the linkage of multiple losses ravaging the Pittsburgh community. However, it is primarily

⁵⁰ In *Philadelphia Fire*, Wideman questions the power of the photograph to preserve and connect generations. He says that a "the photo, tough mysterious, offers proof and promise" (119). The photo provides a tangible expression for what has been lost: "You can carry it around. It's there to show anyone you choose to show it to. You can relate the names, the unusual circumstances, the failure of blood and family and time persevere. This emptiness, this not having is so palpable you can pass it around a room" (119).

through Mr. Mallory's remembrance and longing for John Africa, a fictionalized recreation of the leader of the MOVE organization that we met in *Philadelphia Fire* as King, that the bombing of MOVE has any bearing on the novel's plot. In fact, Mr. Mallory shows a degree of mourning for Africa and the other victims of the bombing missing from *Philadelphia Fire*. But, similar to Cudjoe, he sees in the bombing an "arc of suffering and loss" that forces him to question the dynamics of urban life through his camera lens (174).

As scholars repeatedly note, Mr. Mallory's photography and his ability to traverse different places and times documenting what is seen and hidden recall Wideman's interest in narrative play as a way of contemplating historical loss.⁵¹ Wideman himself says that Mr. Mallory's photography "opens Great Time, the past that's always present and not only has he traversed spiritually and immense difference and stayed connected, but he has the means to communicate that journey and some of the places he's been to other people" (572-73). In her article, "Black, Not Blank: Photography's (Invisible) Archives in John Edgar Wideman's *Two Cities*," Petra Dreiser usefully classifies Mr. Mallory's photography as developing a method of archival study that uncovers the "power of vision, in its ability to lay bare not just external surfaces but, more significantly, the internal structures at work underneath these surfaces" (Dreiser). Similarly, Tyrone R. Simpson reads Mr. Mallory as a "black flaneur" who extends Benjamin's characterization into a postmodern setting. He sees Mr. Mallory's taking of photographs as a form of redemption: "Mallory's photographic enterprise hopes to break the cycle of trauma that is often bequeathed to ghetto youth and inculcate an emboldened

⁵¹ It is only in the second wave of studies on Wideman and mostly from scholars outside the United States that we find any critical attention to Wideman's later novels.

sense of responsibility among its viewers to resist race-based oppression” (224).

Importantly, Simpson traces Mr. Mallory’s development of a form and language that addresses what Simpson labels as the multiple presence of trauma:

The desire to be an articulate witness of Gus’s death moves Mallory to abandon language in favor of what he assumes to be the more realist representational technology of photography, whereby his stylized form of picture taking— a style which Michael Rothberg would call traumatic realism— constitutes only a partially referential representational practice. (222)

It is “through this photorealism of trauma, [where] Mallory not only draws a parallel between his injury and those of other black urban Pennsylvanians who subsist in ghettoized conditions, but he also creates a visual memorial that engenders communal self- reflection” (222). However, Simpson links Mr. Mallory’s “original trauma” to the death of his friend Gus, which discredits Mr. Mallory’s own assertion that it was the ruins left after the bombing that began the photography project he embarks on as he travels from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. So while Mr. Mallory was drawn to the photography in search of a language and form after Gus’s death to counter the silencing of the truth by “official” language, it is the bombing of MOVE and John Africa that continue to repeat as Mr. Mallory contemplates his death and his life’s work. Through the lens of his camera, Mr. Mallory captures the traumatic layered history of the cities by reordering the spatial and temporal dimensions of the cities, which causes him to conflate the losses he experiences and records while in the army, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh, within the same arc of mourning.

Mr. Mallory’s arc of mourning includes his experiences as a soldier, the family he left behind, the current state of Pittsburgh, and most obviously the bombing of MOVE. The place of the bombing of MOVE within this arc of suffering comes in two important

chapters: “Missing John Africa” and “Philadelphia.” In “Missing John Africa,” Mr. Mallory bemoans the loss of Africa, who he believes would have the “words to make sense of no sense” (8). He imagines them having conversations about the fire and how the members of MOVE were preparing their bodies and minds for battle. While Simba is a haunting figure symbolic of Cudjoe’s need to make sense of the bombing in *Philadelphia Fire*, Africa operates in a similar way in *Two Cities: A Love Story* for Mr. Mallory. Mr. Mallory remembers Africa as understanding urban living better than anyone else he knows. For instance, he remembers Africa saying that the “it’s man’s law fucking up the world. No air to breathe, no water to drink. No room to run free. City’s sick. People can’t live like they do much longer” (172). Although Africa shifts in and out of the narrative, Mr. Mallory wonders how to create a more permanent space for him, so that he can remain as a much needed memory. In an effort to establish this space and to give honor to an otherwise unceremonious death, Mr. Mallory performs a ritual of mourning for Africa. Snatching Africa from the bridge and throwing him over the “bloody rail,” Mr. Mallory notes that he lands into a traditional funeral posture with his head attached by a winding sheet similar to what was done for Emmett Till. In this act of mourning, Mr. Mallory hopes to give Africa a peaceful burial and establish his presence as a guiding force. As Africa floats down the river, Mr. Mallory calls after him wanting to use a name he can’t remember. Later, we find out that Phaeton is the name he always calls Africa. Mr. Mallory describes Phaeton, as the “doomed, outlaw son” (144).⁵² By contrasting Africa to this Greek mythological character, Mr. Mallory positions him as one who had the ability to set the world on fire. In some versions, he survives and in others he dies. By

⁵² Although it is not apparent which version of the myth Wideman refers to, most of the ones that mention Phaeton agree that his effort to drive his father’s chariot ends in entire cities being burned.

providing Africa with a name other than “Dogman,” which many in the neighborhood call him, Mr. Mallory again attempts to retrieve Africa from the ashes by giving him a name of prestige.

This opening chapter also reveals traces of the way the MOVE bombing connects with Mr. Mallory’s artistic practice. The fact that the bombing prompts Mr. Mallory to embark on his unnamed project suggests a link between his photography and his process of mourning it. In “Philadelphia,” Mr. Mallory immediately recognizes the impact of the bombing of MOVE and its aftermath as he travels over thirty blocks to Osage street to capture what he calls the “scene of the crime” where “clanking machines [were] digging, lifting, tossing, scattering their remains” even as the smell of their burning bodies hung in the air (175). He informs the reader that “the last photo he snapped before he left Philadelphia, *or was it his first photo*, the ruins of the house on Osage Avenue where John Africa and his people murdered” (my italics; 174). Mr. Mallory clearly positions this picture, although he had taken many pictures before, as the beginning point of the project that he would later continue when he moved to Pittsburgh. As he stands in the ruins, Mr. Mallory says that he “sees their invisible presence in the vacant space he shoots over and over, shooting and not allowing the film to advance, shooting till the film snaps off its spool and then shooting some more” (175). He finds within the ruins the embodied presence of the murdered, which leads to his efforts to aestheticize the loss he feels through photography. Mr. Mallory attempts to transform loss from an immaterial substance into a material form, a photograph, as a method of preservation and condemnation.

It is through his photography that Mr. Mallory is able to see a connection between the eleven victims of the bombing and the stories of imprisoned or soon to be imprisoned young men he later sees on the street. During one of his photo sessions, Mr. Mallory questions the boys on what is seemingly their lack of concern about the community. He says “You are our soldiers, our blue warriors aren’t you. Where were you when we needed you. When the police army attacked John Africa and his people, when they slaughtered women and children and burned down our neighborhood. We need you then. Where were you” (99). His ability to see the connectedness of the loss that they represent with that of the bombing allows him to question the role that some members of the community play in its own demise and their inability to see it. In doing so, Mr. Mallory makes definitive claims about the continuity of loss and the generational effect on the community.

By juxtaposing the two sets of photos, the ones from Osage and that of the boys he sees on the streets, Mr. Mallory connects them in the same “arc of suffering and loss” (174). He wonders if the “small lives” of the eleven “even the score” and if the stories that are his and theirs, “so thick, so thin, piled one atop the other,” will ever end or if multiple generations will be “tangled up in this misery” (174). Mr. Mallory makes definitive claims about the continuity of loss and the generational effect on the community. Later, he places his stories about his time as a soldier in Italy where he was wounded and his friend was killed while on an excursion with local white women alongside these other stories. The dying in Italy connect with the Kent State Massacre and the bombing of MOVE in a song: “*All dead in Ohio...All dead in It-a-ly. All dead on*

O-sage-Ave” (his italics; 197).⁵³ He sees them all as a part of the “same dying. Same lies to cover it up. Same clean slate” (197). After his time in the war, he decides that he wants to find “a way, an art to record the struggle, the give-and-take, the dance of light and dark I’d witnessed” (179). Mr. Mallory’s photography allows him to view the trajectory of his life as connected to the loss experienced by others, but the novel also includes the stories of the other characters, Kassima and Robert, within this arc of loss and suffering.

Kassima finds beauty in Mr. Mallory’s photographs and understands his intention because of her own experiences of loss that finds expression in his photographs. Kassima, having lost her two sons to the violent streets of Pittsburgh and her husband to AIDS while in prison all within one year, is a character physically and emotionally ravaged by her grief. She describes the feeling of remembering her loss as an “explosion of cold, cold white heat going off behind your eyeball, deep inside your skull” (58). The impact of it is swift and unexpected, but lasting. She tells Robert that she felt “diseased” after losing both her husband and two sons, and that it was only when she read *her* story in the book of Lamentations in the bible that she wanted to live. Kassima recognizes similarities between her story and that found in Lamentations because the city adopts the voice of a widow who bemoans the loss of her children.

Wideman’s choice of Lamentations is thematically related to his view of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh as two cities whose inhabitants must see and acknowledge the state of their community. In the rest of Lamentations, Jeremiah laments the destruction of Jerusalem by the hands of the Babylonians. Written in poetic form, the

⁵³ Here Mr. Mallory knowingly changes words to the popular song “Ohio” by Neil Young that he wrote in response to the Kent State Massacre that occurred on May 4, 1970. It is an apparent attempt for Wideman to link government sponsored violence against American citizens who protest.

chapters focus on the damaged souls of the inhabitants and God's judgment. Each chapter focuses on a particular aspect of sorrow to reveal what one learns from and through it. At times, Jeremiah speaks and at others times the city speaks and is personified as a woman and a widow. In one verse, the city says "The LORD is righteous; for I have rebelled against his commandment: hear, I pray you, all people, and behold my sorrow: my virgins and my young men are gone into captivity" (chapter: verse translation?) Jeremiah views the desolate streets and remembers the bloody battles and what has been lost. The tone of Lamentations remains hopeful, but still maintains the voice of a suffering people in the form of an appeal. It seems that Wideman's interest in the book of Lamentations is not only because of its themes, but also the structural elements of the book that draw on poetic language to help highlight the themes. If we look closer at Lamentations, we can also notice that the verses shift from one voice to another, from Jeremiah to the city, without any clear indication that the shift is taking place. In *Two Cities*, as well as *Philadelphia Fire*, Wideman draws on a similar narrative structure and the voices of Kassima and Richard often merge with those of Africa and Mr. Mallory.

Kassima's relief in finding her story within the pages of Lamentations shows that much like Mr. Mallory, she has been searching for ways to name her loss. Although she had to look up the word lamentation, which the "dictionary said grief and mourning and deep regret. Said it could be a song or poem...Said it could be a person wiling, letting other people hear the grief inside," Kassima recognizes her story and that of Pittsburgh (53). In the only verse she shares with Robert, we find the city mourning the loss of his young people and men:

*My eyes flow with rivers of tears
Because of the destruction of my people...*

*The Children beg for food,
But no one gives them anything
The old men have left the city gate,
The young men their music.*

Kassima, because she sees her story in that of the Jerusalemites, describes Lamentations as the “story about people beat down so low they got to pray for a reason to pray” (54). However, it is not just her story, but also that of other mothers who have lost sons. Kassima knows if she told her story, “a woman lost a son in Detroit or Cleveland or Philadelphia or Los Angeles, California know just what I was talking about” (51). She sees her loss crossing temporal and geographical boundaries and connecting with other mothers losing their sons in urban cities across the United States. While Kassima embodies the role of widower, she also becomes the prophet when she shares her story alongside Mr. Mallory’s photographs. Therefore, Kassima’s loss and her understanding of its ramifications highlight a constant theme throughout *Two Cities* and *Philadelphia Fire*: the mourning of the loss of black boys.

Very similar to the way in which *Philadelphia Fire* ends, *Two Cities* ends with an obviously changed form of traditional mourning ritual in response to the deaths of black boys. Instead of a place to bury the dead peacefully, the funeral home becomes an extended site for the violence that has ravaged the city. Since Mr. Mallory shares the funeral home as a penultimate resting place with a murdered young gang member from the boys in red, the opposing gang arrives, dressed in blue to disrupt the space of mourning. Their presence there evokes not traditional rituals of mourning, but the rituals associated with gang life. Stuck in the middle of all of this chaos are Mr. Mallory, Kassima, and Richard. The scene of violence becomes a representation of their own stories of loss and the story demands release.

At the end of the novel, Kassima occupies a similar position as Jeremiah when she begins to preach to the crowd gathered outside of the funeral home to tell her story. Kassima's sense of loss and the need to mourn the loss of Mr. Mallory prompts her to challenge the boys in blue who disrupt the normal processes of mourning in search of revenge. Unable to witness the destruction the crowd of "blue" wields on Mr. Mallory, whose casket has been mistaken for that of the rival gang member, Kassima pushes her way through the crowd. She describes herself as "losing track of what's out there and what's just in my head, just cold and trembling and pictures in my mind taking me back, way back, deep back in my sorrow and anger and pain" (236). In the scuffle Mr. Mallory is unceremoniously toppled out of the casket and exposed to the world. At the sight of this, Kassima is moved to reprimand the crowd. In Kassima's sermon to the crowd, the losses she has suffered and the arc of suffering Mr. Mallory documents in his picture-taking project merges. She opens the box and spreads the photographs over the crowd and at Mr. Mallory's feet. She encourages them to see themselves in Mr. Mallory and what he has captured in the photographs. She tells them to "Look. Look what you've done to him. Look what you done to yourselves" (238). Kassima does not remember what she said as she preached, but she does remember some in the crowd picking the pictures up, looking at them, and sharing them with the crowd. The novel ends on hopeful notes, similar to what we see in Cudjoe's decision to stay and fight. But Kassima is also wary of a "storybook ending" and resists the notion that she could be loving a man and carrying the possibility of having another child. The possibility of mourning and healing are only wishes and are not completely fulfilled.

Even Robert, who suffers from his own feelings of guilt and loss never get to perform the act of mourning he desires for the unknown boy in Room A. However, his meditation coincides with Kassima's mourning of her sons and Mr. Mallory's elegies to the stricken city. As he contemplates going in the room to pay his respects, he gives us insight into the regularity in which black boys die. He says that "he hated the idea of any boy dead. Intended to peek in at him. More than a peek. In his way a mourner. He mourned all the young men killed and crippled in the streets, mourned for the killers, for the survivors who will show up at the funeral parlor today to mourn, the ones who will come to grieve and find themselves shut out again, their grief mocked crammed into a narrow our" (221).

Robert does not note only the contemporary instances of black boys dying, but links it to his seeing Emmett Till's body when he was young. He remembers Till's mother yelling, "*I want the world to see what they did to my baby*" (his italics; 223). He believes that everyone in Homewood, should be there shouting the same phrase because "Something terrible happening to everybody every day in Homewood" (222). Despite wanting to play the role of mourner, he also wonders, who is to blame? He finally says that it is not just about the red and blue, but the color of these boys skins. However, he does not give himself or the community a pass. He admits that he has been in a mode of inaction; he was "party to the slaughter" (223). By admitting this, Robert, much like Cudjoe, displays a sense of guilt and feelings of loss that paralyze him from doing anything to change the situation.

By adding his feeling of loss to those of Mr. Mallory and Kassima, Robert completes the arc of suffering that Wideman uses to connect all three characters. All

three characters attempt to speak about the symbolic losses that they feel and see in the community, but it is only Kassima who actually gains a degree of success in verbalizing her feelings. Mr. Mallory's photographs that are deliberately superimposed or double-exposed remain unreadable. Robert never does make it to the room to tell the dead boy his thoughts. Despite this, there is a shared vision of hope that each maintains. By attempting to produce a visual poetics of loss in Mr. Mallory's photographs, Wideman gets closer to finding a language that allows him to account for the photographic image that straddles the space between completed mourning and melancholy. As Mr. Mallory demonstrates here, art allows one to traverse space and time through technique and modes of seeing. The problem that arises is how to merge the external, urban landscape and the internal postmodern consciousness of the members of the community.

His project is to bring visual order to the community he captures on film, and through his photographs he seeks to realign our recognition of the connective thread that exists between everyone. His urge to do this determines his search for a form and defines his politics of loss. However, just as Kassima is uncertain of what they see in the pictures, the reader is left wondering if they see what Mr. Mallory attempted to capture: the texture of loss. Mr. Mallory's method of photography helps lead me to my final section on how loss impacts the form of the artists in *Two Cities* and *Philadelphia Fire*.

The bombing of MOVE and the Shape of the Novel

In *Philadelphia Fire*, Cudjoe and Wideman as character struggle with a dilemma similar to that of Mr. Mallory, finding a form, a language, through which loss can be captured. For Cudjoe, this struggle becomes most evident in Wideman's character's recounting of Cudjoe's attempt to direct a production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Wideman as character proclaims that the play is the “central event” of the novel (132). He assures the reader that “though it comes here, wandering like a Flying Dutchman in and out of the narrative, many places at once, *The Tempest* sits dead center, the storm in the eye of the storm, figure within a figure, play within play, it is the bounty and hub of all else written about the fire” (132). Wideman views the storm as a concentric circle that has meaning within meaning, an image within an image, but how does it stand in juxtaposition to the bombing? The play actually does weave a path through the layers of loss that the novel explores because Wideman believes that the play highlights the root, the origin of the problems that MOVE experiences. They share the same center that Wideman links to conflicts surrounding space, language, and power. For instance, Cudjoe describes the play to his students as “this immortal play about colonialism, imperialism, recidivism, the royal fucking over of weak by strong, colored by white, many by few, or you will, the birth of the nation’s blues seen through the fish-eye lens of a fee fi foe englishmon” (127). Wideman links the bombing of MOVE in 1985 with a fictional, but realistic account of European colonialism and imperialism dating back hundreds of years that shaped the lives of millions of Africans who called the Americas home.

Although the centrality of the play to the novel is not readily apparent, Wideman’s disclosure that “Tempestats also means time” suggest that the novel is about the layering of time (107). He confirms this a few pages later: “This narrative is a sport of time, what it’s about is stopping time, catching time. See how the play [the *Tempest*] works like an engine, a heart in the story’s chest, churning, pumping, tying something to something else, that sign by which we know time’s conspiring, expiring” (133). By breaking the novel into three parts with each having multiple voices, Wideman suggests a

chaotic melody of ships sinking, society dissolving, and a society out of time. Cudjoe consigns this when he notices that “centuries out of kilter, askew, but no one understanding the problem. Just this queasiness, this uneasiness. This tilt and slow falling. You are in a city. You look up and can’t see the stars and that doesn’t bother you as much as it should. You don’t know what’s wrong but maybe more’s wrong than you want to know” (43). In Cudjoe’s recounting of the genesis of his idea to put on the play, we learn that it was his way of getting at the root of the problem. The play is a gift to the community and a way of saving the children by giving them command of the Queen’s English and being able to define themselves and speak of their own existence. He believes that Shakespeare understood the wounding power of colonialism. He wants to show the children how we arrived to this “very moment in our contemporary world” and how it hatched from a “whole long-suffering thing in embryo, rotten in the egg” (128). He develops his own style of “hippy-hop cadence and blues notes” and tracks a lineage of “blue spirits” or melancholia from Adam and Eve to Shakespeare’s Caliban to the killing of Medgar Evers where folks are “commiserating about what’s been lost, how things used to be, before the fall, and they still unfallen, naked of memory and meant to picture past or future” (130). He creates a historical arc of suffering and loss, but, again, how does this relate to the story that Wideman wishes to tell about the bombing of MOVE and his struggles to do so?

In “The Conscious and Unconscious Dimensions of Calibanic Discourse Thematized in *Philadelphia Fire*,” James Coleman sees Cudjoe (and by extension Wideman) as unable to break the hegemony of the legacy of the calibanic discourse because of his failure to put on the play and Wideman’s failure to tell his son’s story.

Instead, Coleman insists that Cudjoe is lacking the “resources and the power to change the meaning that is so deeply embedded in American and Western discourse” (19). His observation does have some validity. Ultimately, the play is not performed; it is rained out. The book Cudjoe wants to write about Simba remains unresolved by the end of the novel. And Wideman does not write his son’s story. While a failure of narrative exists on multiple levels of the novel, Coleman overlooks that Wideman recognizes the inevitability of his project because he sees that the *flaw is in the English language itself*. Within this language are histories of pain and loss, but Wideman believes that the key to escaping this is by playing with traditional narrative strategies. Therefore, a number of possibilities exist for why Wideman brings Shakespeare’s play into sharp contrast with the bombing, but I only want to focus on two that relate to how I see Wideman developing a poetics of loss.⁵⁴ During a practice for the play, Cudjoe takes on the speech of not “great great great greater than god grandfather Caliban,” but Prospero. He positions himself as Prospero so that he may lead the kids to knowledge, as Prospero gave Caliban a language, to serve as their “band leader.”

For Cudjoe, it is about *inventing*, or in this case, *reinventing* the story through a different lens. This is what he learns from Shakespeare: the key to power is through “putting words in people’s mouths” (130). He tells the children that “he did it all with one

⁵⁴ A few critics, such as James W. Coleman and Rob Nixon, have suggested that by including a revised version of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* that Wideman is entering into a long legacy of black male fiction that engage with the legacy of Caliban that has everything to do with colonialism, the power of language, and subjecthood. Coleman sees as the influence of a Calibanic discourse, which he defines as “the perceived history and story of the black male in Western culture that has its genesis and tradition in language and linguistic signs” (3). As Nixon notes, *The Tempest* became popular during the period of 1957-1973 when a number of African and Caribbean intellectuals chose to use the play as a strategy to promote decolonization by “adopt[ing] the play as a founding text in an oppositional lineage which issued from a geopolitically and historically specific set of cultural ambitions” (558).⁵⁴ In many of these works, the authors revise the story to give Caliban the linguistic power to speak his feelings of dispossession.

stroke of the pen. Set this nigger [Caliban] free” (131). So, by taking the position of Prospero, Cudjoe sees himself as “model and teacher” to unteach them the roles in the play that predicated their future position as the heirs of Caliban (131). He wants the play to light the match of “his fiery storm of protest. In this void. This dry wilderness of the United Emirates of North America” (128). He wants to loosen Caliban’s pain that “causes his tongue to thicken and twist. Old injuries can’t be undone. You hear them every time he opens his mouth” (142).⁵⁵ Wideman as character even invites us to “begin with a double meaning. If Cudjoe did not live to see his play hatched, he did spin from the endless circle of its possibility that second meaning cached in the drama’s title: time. Borrowed time, bought time, saved time. So this narrative is a sport of time, what it’s about is stopping time, catching time” (133). He links the destructiveness of the storm with the passing of time. By placing the play at the center of the novel, Wideman highlights his endeavors to excavate a history of loss that he sees as directly connected to the loss of language. Thus, the storm is a structural and thematic model, one that finds resonance in the discordance and layering characteristics of collage. The shape of *Philadelphia Fire* shows Wideman’s belief that historical loss cuts across time, space, and people, but that art helps to suture loss that is often named as one thing, but is always something else as well.

With the aid of other artists, such as Alberto Giacometti, Romare Bearden, and jazz artists, among others, who also draw on the successive interplay of voices, sounds, and images that show his contemplation of visual and textual representations of loss,

⁵⁵ Here in the speech that follows from Caliban, Wideman suggests that the key to Caliban’s release is sleeping with Miranda and leaving Prospero’s ability to perform genocide, incest, miscegenation, infanticide, and suicide behind. I really don’t want to go into the sexual politics of this although Coleman touches on it briefly.

Wideman guides the reader down a path toward understanding the relationship between the novel and why (and how) Wideman chooses to write about the bombing of MOVE. Looking at the artists he quotes in *Philadelphia Fire*, such as Zastesky or the appearance of Giacometti in *Two Cities*, the majority he is drawn to fight against their medium and see a *lack* in its ability to fully represent what they wish to represent. In addition, both Giacometti and Zastesky use their artistic practices as a means for addressing and dealing with loss. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, Wideman indicates that he is attracted to the juxtaposition of multiple strands of genres and voices as one way to allow readers to witness his method of writing. This juxtaposition also becomes a means for him to address loss in its multiple forms.

In part two of *Philadelphia Fire*, he shares excerpts from A.R. Luria's *The Man with a Shattered World* in this section provides the necessary link between the psychological experience of loss and the shape of the novel. First published in 1972, *The Man with a Shattered World* combines the journal entries of L. Zasesky, who suffered a severe brain injury, with Luria's neuro-physiological reading of Zasesky's journey to find words to describe the moment he was wounded. Zasesky explains the struggle to remember and give shape to his memories:

But it was so hard to write. I'd get an idea of how to describe the moment I was wounded and the period right afterward when my illness began. At last I'd turned up a good idea. So I began to hunt for words to describe it [...] I'd try to clamp the words to the idea as much as I could. But what a torture it was [...] So, before I could go on and write my story, I had to jot down various words for the names of objects, things, phenomena, ideas [...] Finally I managed to write a sentence expressing an idea I had for this story of my illness. (107)

Zasesky's process illuminates many of the classic conditions of a traumatized individual and the processes that one goes through when moving towards healing. Zasesky locates

the gap that exists between his past and his present and the connection between his psychological and physical wounding. Both affect his efforts to remember and give narrative form to his fleeting memories. The relationship between Zasetzky and Luria, the traumatized and the witness, and formal qualities of *The Man With a Shattered World* produce a dual effort to re-externalize the wound. Thus Luria and Zasetzky's intertwined stories mirrors Wideman's position as storyteller (and also Mr. Mallory's as I will explore) in relation to the wounded characters who populate the novel.

Through the juxtaposition of the excerpt from Luria with his own declaration of how he struggles to find a mode of representation, Wideman uses spatial proximity to perform an act of mimesis. Although, he does not state that he feels the same way as Zasetzky, the proximity of the scenes and the look into Wideman's writing process reveals the similarities. With only a line separating the two sections, Wideman as character, discusses his routine that he takes to write. He knows that he must take "one step at a time—a discipline, but also letting it happen—rediscovering the routine's logic, appropriateness, rather than simply repeating by rote something that's worked before—a question must be answered" (108). As a path towards answering this question, Wideman finds possible answers in the quotes that appear in this same section.

Following Wideman's declaration, a collage-like list of quotes appear that illuminates solutions to the issues he finds in the bombing or that relates with his struggles to adopt an appropriate form. Wideman makes no statements to cohesively link the quotes or relate them with the bombing. The reader must attempt to find the relationship, which is what collage as an art form promotes. These quotes combine to create a logical map through which Wideman moves in formulating the questions he asks

and the answers to these questions. Other than Zasetky, this section includes fragments from Gaston Bachelard, Mazisi Kunene, Paul Éluard, Herbert Blau, Harold Courlander, and a brief section of a newspaper article recounting the details of a letter by Ramona J. Africa. Each fragment comments on destruction, constructing meaning through fragmented parts, how one survives, and what remains.

Wideman's inclusion of these quotes in *Philadelphia Fire* and then his use of artists in both *Philadelphia Fire* and *Two Cities*, artists who want their art to capture the essence of the communities from which it springs, suggest that Wideman sees hope for successfully mourning the victims by retaining and reattaching communal relationships through self-imposed critiques of the black community that question individual responsibility. He also does this by inviting comparisons between Mr. Mallory's method of photography discussed earlier, Cudjoe's writing method, and his own. One of the connections that we see is that Mr. Mallory, Cudjoe, and Wideman cannot focus their writing on only one time or place. Their relationship to time marks them as dislocated from the present. They all see history, the nation's and their own, as a palimpsest. Cudjoe explains that "he must always write about many places at once. No choice. The splitting apart is inevitable. First step is always out of time, away from responsibility, toward the word or sound or image that is everywhere at once, that connects and destroys" (23). Cudjoe's admission explains why he sees so many intertexts with the story he wants to write about Simba. He sees the failures of his past, both personal and political, and the hope that Simba represents.

Wideman finds himself with a similar struggle. When he began his examination of the bombing, it is obvious that many more issues arose. In *Philadelphia Fire*, the quote

Wideman includes from Giacometti, who has an even greater presence in *Two Cities*, provides a window into understanding this struggle. Giacometti is quoted as saying:

the more I looked at the model, the more the screen between his reality and mine grew thicker. One starts by seeing the person who poses, but little by little all the possible sculptures of him intervene. The more a real vision of him disappears, the stranger his head becomes. One is no longer sure of his appearance, of his size, or of anything at all. There were too many sculptures between my model and me. And when there were no more sculptures, there was such a complete stranger that I no longer knew whom I saw or what I was looking at. (103)

Thinking about this quote in relation to the rest of the novel, we note that Wideman cannot maintain his focus on Cudjoe's search for Simba. In Simba, he sees his own concern for his imprisoned son and the lost potential of black boys.

For Mr. Mallory, the struggle to reconcile the many times and places of life together, especially in his photography, leads to disappointment: "Sometimes things seem crystal clear as long as he studies each part, makes his peace with it. Another story altogether when he tries to string parts together. Doesn't matter how familiar this moment or that moment might be. He is lost, lost trying to figure out the space where they are supposed to connect. Strange but true. He's lived long enough to gather plenty of pieces of the puzzle, long enough to know he'll never find a way to fit them together" (6). In a show of solidarity with other artists who think, see, create and feel through a collage aesthetic, Mr. Mallory notes the similarities between Giacometti, Romare Bearden, Thelonious Monk, and even to gypsy singers, blues musicians, and those who sing gospel music. He asks Giacometti if he has ever heard of Bearden because his paintings are similar to what he tries to do in his photography. He describes Bearden's paintings as "many paintings in one, overlapping, hiding and revealing each other. Many scenes occur at once, a crowd hides in a single body. Time and space are thicker" (117). Mr. Mallory

admits that his photography is his own effort to seek the “truth” of Bearden’s paintings by “letting through some of the light and dark of layers beneath and above. Like a choir singing. Each voice distinct, but also changing the sound of the whole, changing itself as it joins other voices” (117). These paintings are similar to what Mr. Mallory sees in Monk’s piano solos that weave together old songs in new ways to produce music. However, he wonders if all of their (Mr. Mallory, Giacometti, Bearden, and Monk) efforts are “all lost causes” (119). While Mr. Mallory finds his project as unsuccessful because of these disjunctive and fragmented parts, Wideman embraces the absences, disjunctions, and silences as evidence of the impact of loss that remains after the initial wounding.

Mr. Mallory notes that a philosophy of seeing is at the heart of the formal properties of his work and others that he sees as sharing his aesthetic sensibility. It is a philosophy that is shaped by the loss that each sees and tries to capture through the lens of his camera. Mr. Mallory recognizes the painful presence of loss in multiple art forms: in gospel he hears “music full of violent unwelcome in strange lands, the pain of exile, war, hunger, yearning for a home never seen never touched except as absence. I hear layers of ancient suffering in gypsy music, hear what I wish my pictures would say, if they could sing” (119). Mr. Mallory’s efforts as a photographer have been shaped by his striving for a language, a visual language that can account for the ache, and the phantom loss that remains both absent and present. He positions himself as somehow in search of something different than the others because he does not want “pretty postcards with the world arranged nice and neat” (118). He does not “want to hide the damage,” but instead, he desires to “enter the wound, cut through layer by layer like a surgeon, expose what lies

beneath the skin” (119). The only way that he can achieve this is by reclaiming a lost way of seeing; a language that allows him to account for what has been lost.

Mr. Mallory’s description of the language he is in search of brings us back to Cudjoe’s questioning of the weight of words mentioned earlier. For Mr. Mallory, his first language has “no country, no name, or many names, most of them ugly” (128). It is a “despised, motherless, fatherless tongue” (128). But the language Mr. Mallory wants to remember is the “love and power of the language spoken by the people who taught me to feel, to live in a body” (128). Through his pictures, Mr. Mallory wants to keep the ancestors alive, to “recover what the oldest voices taught me” (128). Mr. Mallory refers to his first language in terms that have been frequently used to describe the ancestral lands of Africans torn from their homes to be enslaved throughout the world. He notes a lack of identifiable origins and links to a language outside of the English language system that has been used to demean and degrade African Americans. The method of photography he chooses, of superimposing images, shows an effort to move beyond the limits of photography and what the camera sees. In each frame, through each shot, he hopes to find what he has been looking for, which is once again unnamed, but has much to do with reclaiming humanity. The succession of multiple frames and their resulting illegibility highlights Mr. Mallory’s ideological dilemma. While he strives to create a visual language to name a layered sense of loss, even he admits that no such method exists.

Through these multiple layers of loss or the “texture of the narrative,” a form emerges where Wideman explores the undeniable relationship between the cultural trauma of the bombing and the varied experiences of each characters’ grief. Through the

textured nature of the narrative—elements of surrealism, collage, blues, jazz, and montage—that defines Wideman’s poetics, we must not forget *why* he chooses to combine analytical, textual, and visual montages of loss. I have argued here that he draws on the tenets of a collage aesthetic to develop a philosophical and formal exploration of loss through which Wideman gains access to an alternative system of knowledge where the juxtaposition of multiple stories, points of views, and mediums allow him to actively engage with the symbolic losses that go beyond the physical losses associated with the bombing. Therefore, reading Wideman as strictly a postmodern author restricts our view of the historical and political implications of his consideration of the bombing of MOVE. The complex textuality of these works calls attention to the presence of an absence that defies representation and marks an ontological void.

CHAPTER 3

A GEOGRAPHY OF MOURNING: MAPPING AND PERFORMING LOSS IN RALPH LEMON'S "COME HOME CHARLEY PATTON"

In 2004, Ralph Lemon presented "Come Home Charley Patton," the last of his three-part project entitled *The Geography Trilogy*. The performance marked the end of a ten-year journey for Lemon during which he struggled to define his relationship to contemporary modes of dance. He describes *The Geography Trilogy* as being "about how [his] particular modern sensibility relates and/or clashes with the evolving act of refined order [he] find(s) in so-called traditional forms" (256). While Lemon suggests that the genesis of the project was connected with his desire to find new interactions with the stage and to participate in what he calls "collaborative conversations," the project became much more than that. For Lemon, the research process for *The Geography Trilogy*, of which he published narrative accounts for each of the three parts, became just as important as what we see performed on stage. In these narratives, we find more evidence of how Lemon's aesthetic sensibility grew beyond the stage and how the embodied, performative research he conducts gets performed in a familiar space of the stage. The three performances show evidence of his play with form as he integrates his interest in literary, ethnographic, and visual studies with the stage and modern dance forms. *The Geography Trilogy*, especially "Come home Charley Patton," is not only an extended effort by Lemon to develop a form, but it also involved his understanding of the black dancing body as a multilayered site of memory. He admits that for him *Geography* was not just a performance, but an "anthropological collaboration about being American, African, brown, black, blue black, male, and artist" ("Tree" 8). Using the body as the

foundation of his research, Lemon creates and examines a complex archive of pain and loss.

As the name of the series suggests, place is central to Lemon's efforts to understand each of these descriptors that comprise his identity. In the first performance, "Geography," Lemon travels to the Ivory Coast and Ghana in hopes that the sense of relation he felt, or *should* feel, with Africa would help him develop a new relationship to the stage. Ann Daly describes the performance as being "about the space that marks identity and that is marked by journeys, and in particular by the African diaspora. And it's about ritually transforming stage space from the secular to the sacred" ("Afterword" 201). In the second installment, "Tree," Lemon heads to China, India, Japan, and Bali in search of a sense of spirituality accessible through dance. In this performance, he continues his focus on the space of the stage as being the place where he can "go beyond" limiting structures of time and space. While both performances allowed Lemon to have conversations that crossed cultural and spatial boundaries, ultimately, he felt unfulfilled and dissatisfied because he did not find a sense of relationship between the audience and the performers as he had hoped. However, in "Come home Charley Patton," Lemon's search for a new experience with the stage comes full circle when he travels to the South or what he calls the "ground zero of black American experience." Lemon recalls an encounter with a member of his technical crew with a child watching the performance who asked what the performance was about. He replied that "it's kind of about being black in the South, in America, now and not so long ago, but it's also kind of about being anyone anywhere anytime" (219).

While the performance reveals some sense of Lemon's process of translating this research to the stage, in March of 2013, Lemon finally published the companion text to "Come home Charley Patton," which gives greater detail about his travels and his aesthetic process. For four years prior to the 2004 production of "Come home Charley Patton," Lemon created what was essentially an archive of loss by mapping his travels from reaching from the streets of St. Louis, Missouri, his hometown, to the dusty back roads of Mississippi. First, along with his daughter, Lemon traveled the route that the Freedom Riders, a group of African Americans and whites determined to integrate the continental bus system, took in 1961. He also visited emotionally charged spaces where lynchings or events associated with the Civil Rights movement took place, such as Medger Evers's driveway and the Edmund Pettus Bridge that was the site of the Selma to Montgomery March. At the majority of the sites along the route of the Freedom riders and at other places associated with the movement, he performs a series of what can best be understood as mourning rituals, or, as he describes them in the program notes for "Come home Charley Patton," counter-memorials.

By naming the acts counter-memorials, Lemon recognizes his performance series as drawing on memorializing efforts that take on a decidedly nontraditional and anti-redemptive form. It is a form that allows him to consider narratives that run counter to "official" histories of the Civil Rights Movement, but that also reflects his struggles to find a language of mourning capable of representing the various losses he uncovers on his journey. During his assessment of Holocaust memorials and art about the Holocaust, James Young highlights the politics of counter-monuments or counter-memorials in the remembrance of an event or the person. According to Young, artists

who are drawn to the poetics of counter-memory, consider it their task "to jar viewers from complacency, to challenge and denaturalize the viewers' assumptions...[These] artists renegotiate the tenets of their memory work" (28). Extending this idea to performance, Lemon provides a greater understanding of the possible rhetorical forms counter-memorials can take when he stretches the physical and generic parameters of dance in his contemplation of how the body can be a source for exploring the memory of histories of loss that have defined black America's experiences. While Lemon's use of the term counter-memorial marks a departure from the focus of these German artists who wanted to challenge the premise of the monument, they share a similar motivation to decentralize and promote alternative means of mourning. However, as we will see in this chapter, Lemon pushes us to consider the body itself as a performative site of memory that works to remember an event or person.

In "Come home Charley Patton," Lemon frames, displays, and narrates his research through elements of modern dance mixed with installation art, technology, jazz, and social dances. Thus, Lemon's work in "Come home Charley Patton" is difficult to characterize in terms of one particular genre. Since his origins began in the dance world, Lemon is often labeled as a choreographer, but as his relationship to dance has changed, *The Geography Trilogy* shows that he seems more intent on exploring the performative quality of other mediums. During the ninety minute performance, the audience experiences an intricate collage of mediums, messages, and objects that includes dance, documentary video, an animated computer-generated James Baldwin, a reading of excerpts from "The Summer Tragedy," a short story by Arna Botempts, installation set scenes with collapsible ladders by the sculptor Nari Ward, clips from African American

dance scenes and Lemon's research travels, and objects such as horseshoes, ladders, and water hoses. Although named for Charley Patton, an influential Mississippi delta bluesman, "Come home Charley Patton" also includes music by Nina Simone, the Smiths, Verdi, Rev. Gary Davis, and others. While each genre provides Lemon with something that the other does not, his engagement with various mediums also signal an uneasy relationship between an artist, his medium, his theme, and his audience. I suggest that Lemon's layering of multiple mediums show his attempt to find a form and bodily language through which he could represent to account for the loss that he finds amid his various archival processes.

In a separate, but related, research endeavor, Lemon also visited the homes of early 20th Century blues musicians relatives where he conducted a series of "living room dances." During these visits, he performed a series of "living room" dances where he usually danced to the songs of whatever blues musician he was in search of that day. He would dance his version of the buck dance and ask for feedback from his often captive audience. Sometimes they would offer to perform their own version, provide suggestions, or participate by clapping and patting their feet. Although the acts of mourning and the living room dances occur in different spaces, Lemon's process and purpose for doing both draw on his desire to create a connection between the space and an embodied cultural memory. He finds in the living room dances the perfect relationship between the audience and the performer. As I will explain later, the buck dance provides a form and conceptual framework of how the body can embody and transfer cultural memory as a way of mourning. He uses this form and, more importantly, the questioning sense of relation that it affords him, to bring his research for "Come home Charley Patton" to the

stage. Therefore, examining the paratexts of Lemon's research journey alongside the performance provides a fuller sense of the multilayered questions that Lemon raises about performance structured through a poetics of loss.

To understand the complexity of his effort, I consider the ways that Lemon's entire "Come home Charley Patton" project, which includes the performance in 2004 and the complementary text of drawings, photographs, and experimental journals of his travels, is an attempt to mourn and access the remains of a legacy of racialized violence. His travels throughout the South highlight the absence of memorializing efforts in regards to events associated with the Civil Rights Movement and others. However, his project also exposes the difficulties in developing a sense of relation to this past and creating a form of remembrance that expresses reconciliation between collective and personal memories. In the first section, I establish a theoretical framework to read the performance by examining Lemon's own efforts to find an affective and aesthetic language as he maps loss across a number of sites. I read these interactions through a theoretical framework of mourning and melancholia to show that they provide Lemon with a social and aesthetic understanding of loss that he then uses to construct the movement on the stage. Next, I look more closely at Lemon's choices of media and ask why a multi-genre approach reflects his struggles to find a form that can fully represent the multiple positions he places himself in relation to the history he is exploring. Finally, I explain how Lemon's marriage of aesthetics and mourning in "Come Home Charley Patton" connects to a larger body of African American literary and cultural productions that are shaped by and explore loss as a means of formulating a sense of relation.

The Search for an Affective and Aesthetic Language of Loss

The majority of biographies of Lemon separate his performance career into two periods: before and after the 1995 disbanding of the Ralph Lemon Dance Company, which Ann Daly describes as, the “prototypical downtown dance troupe: abstract, formalist and technical.”⁵⁶ Lemon was one of only a few black postmodern dancers who were a part of the downtown, avant-garde, or postmodern dance scene in New York City that began in the early 1960s with the Judson Church Theatre Group.⁵⁷ Since all of the dancers in his company were white and he did not discuss “black” themes, others, and even Lemon himself, describe his work during that time as “Eurocentric.”⁵⁸ In *Geography: Art/Race/Exile* (2000), the book he published alongside the first part of *The Geography Trilogy*, he recounts being aware of how others viewed the lack of “blackness” in his dancing:

Once in a small New England college, I watched Talley Beatty (a contemporary of Alvin Ailey) walk out of a performance of my work. Later I heard that he thought that he was going to see “black dance.” I was never invited to any of the black dance conferences that meet annually. To this day I have not been to one and I don’t know what they do there. I suppose I am not considered a “black artist.” This is not painful; most of its hearsay. Much of the conflict part I’ve made up, but I do feel slightly insulted. (35)

In an attempt to address his absence from the “black” dance scene, Lemon gives an anthropological biography connecting his experiences as a black man and as a dancer to address this question of “black dance” and his connection with it.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Daly, Ann. "Conversations About Race In the Language of Dance." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 06 Dec. 1997.

⁵⁷ These descriptions will be used interchangeably to discuss a very specific time period between the 1960s to the present.

⁵⁸ Towards the end of the dance company, Lemon added an Asian woman and an African American man.

⁵⁹ In almost every interview, Lemon must address this question of how his work engages with the history of racism.

Lemon views his trajectory as a dancer largely as circumstance, which contributes to the sense of ambivalence that structures much of his relationship with his subject and the idea of a shared racial identity. Early on in *Geography: Art/Race/Exile*, Lemon shares the impetus for *The Geography Trilogy*, which he admits was sketched out quickly while on his way to meet the director of the Yale Reparatory Theatre, the financiers of the project. However, after his description of the project, Lemon, in response to questions from Tracie Morris, a longtime friend and poet, explains his absence from the “black” stage and his interest in black themes in a section entitled “A Partial Autobiography of Race and Art” (32). First, Lemon links his absence to his growing up in Minneapolis, Missouri, a largely white and rural city, where his parents moved after living in his birth city of Cincinnati, Ohio. He describes Cincinnati as the last place he *remembers* himself as a “Negro” (32). His parents were both from the South (Georgia and South Carolina) and were a part of that generation of African Americans that migrated North during the early part of the 20th Century. He includes stories about his first time being called a “nigger,” how his heart was broken by a black girl, and his interactions with both his white and black friends. Additionally, he shares that he married a white woman and had mostly white friends while attending the University of Minnesota. Secondly, Lemon links his absence to his first experiences with dance that came under the direction of two white women instructors, one of which told Lemon his dance training had robbed him of his “true soul” (33).⁶⁰ Lemon recounts his experiences as a way of suggesting his dance style was normal and natural; he says that he was “never confused” about his identity. However, he admits, “*Geography* might be the opportunity to rewrite and or edit my

⁶⁰Lemon studied with Nancy Hauser in Minnesota and then Meredith Monk in New York.

history, my tradition—or perhaps I hope to surround myself with an imagined new American past time” (38). So, despite his efforts to dismiss this question of his relationship to “black dance,” it is clear that it is precisely his uncertainty about the relationship between his black body and multiple spaces and movements that structures the entire *Geography* project.

Beatty’s response and Lemon’s feelings of disconnection from this aesthetic prompts the question, what is “black dance”? As Brenda Dixon Gottschild notes, this is a question that has been the “subject of controversy and unease” since the 1960s.⁶¹ In one of her previous works, Gottschild traces the differences between Eurocentric and Africanist dance aesthetics. Her study gives much needed background to this question of what is “black” dance and how those who attempt to define it from both inside and outside of it, contributes to an entire group of choreographers being on the margin of studies of “black dance” AND postmodern dance. In a classical Europeanist dance aesthetic, the movement centers on an erect, almost rigid spine with the body moving within a vertical alignment, upward and outward. However, she found that an Africanist aesthetic includes high-affect juxtaposition (i.e. the comic and tragic in close proximity), polycentric (energy, focus, and gravity shifting through multiple body parts) and polyrhythmic or polymetric movement (different body parts moving to two or more meters or rhythms). She also notes that it often values individual and group improvisation and embraces conflict, which is revealed in the presence of “difference, discord, and irregularity” that is unresolved in the performance (*Digging the Africanist Presence* 13). These aesthetic language differences, along with the long history of racism,

⁶¹Gotschild sees the use of the term as mostly a result of white scholars attempting to name the distinctive style of African American scholars after the rise of Alvin Ailey.

help explain why critics position the white dancing body as the proper or standard form and the black dancing body as vulgar and undisciplined (*Black Dancing Body* 16).

Therefore, the term “black dance” carries with it negative connotations, which is why many of the African American dancers Gottschild interviews, such as Joan Myers Brown, Marlies Yearby, and Lemon, have an uneasy relationship with the moniker and see it as aesthetically limiting. However, despite numerous considerations, the questions still remain: is “black” dance the work created by artists who are black or is dance “black” because it thematically deals with African American social history or employs Caribbean or West African cultural forms? For many of these dancers, they do draw on this social history and these movements classified as “black,” but they also draw on forms and movements from various genres and would define their process of dancing one of experimentation as they search for an aesthetic language. While “black dance” is often seen as a syncretic fusion of European and African elements as a result of the complex history of enslavement and colonization, the same cannot be said about studies of “classical” or “traditionally” European dance. It is often viewed as pure and without outside influences. Therefore, this question about the defining features of “black dance” helps in understanding the disconnect between choreographers like Beatty, Ailey, and others associated with the African American concert dance scene and younger black choreographers like Lemon, Gus Solomons, Jr., Joan Miller, and Bill T. Jones, who embraced a more experimental dance aesthetic and did not put their racial identity at the center of their art.⁶² Much of this conflict, then, has to do with how scholars label and demarcate various types of dance and eras.

⁶² For a fuller exploration of black postmodern dance, see Carl Paris’s essay, “Defining the African American Presence in Postmodern Dance from the Judson Church Era to the 1990s.”

Lemon's movement from the downtown scene to the themes we find in *The Geography Trilogy* highlights the problem of these demarcations because "Come home Charley Patton" shows that he does not discard his interest in experimental, postmodern dance forms, but uses these forms to explore his self and racial identities. In his efforts to think through this relationship, Lemon's search to understand the various levels of his identity fueled his shift away from a strict focus on dance to other mediums as an "exploration of foreign physical and language sensibilities, how they collide and intersect within my conceptual formal concerns" (46). Although the shift may seem abrupt, Lemon always saw himself as not just a dancer, but also as a visual artist. At the University of Minnesota, he was a literature and theater arts major and actually came to dance late. "Come home Charley Patton" shows Lemon blurring the boundaries between modern dance and other performance forms, such as installation art, technology, jazz, and social dances.

Thus, Lemon's work in "Come home Charley Patton" is difficult to characterize. Since his origins began in the dance world, he is often considered a choreographer, but as his relationship to dance has changed, the performance shows that he seems more intent on exploring the performative quality of other mediums, such as diaries, drawings, documentary, art installations, and of course dance. Despite the diversity of his work with each medium displays an uneasy relationship between an artist, his medium, and his audience. The relationship between Lemon's form and research process reflect his need for a bodily language that can account for the loss that he finds along his various archival processes. The layering of multiple mediums and his revision of the buck dance show his attempt to find a form through which he could begin to speak of his process of mapping

and representing loss. In “Come Home Charley Patton,” Lemon uses dance to animate spaces of death, both social and physical, through a performative language of loss.

Although Lemon hasn’t been the subject of extensive scholarship, the few considerations of his work have picked up on the dimension of loss, ritualization, and the importance of the buck dance to “Come home Charley Patton.” Although he focuses mainly on Lemon’s most recent project, *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?*, which extends many of the themes found in “Come home Charley Patton,” Ryan Platt reads the performance as deeply connected to issues of mourning since it came after the death of Lemon’s longtime partner, Asako Takami, and Lemon’s interactions with Walter Carter, a man in his 90s Lemon met while researching through the South. He believes that Lemon was in search of “representational forms that could communicate his personal grief and the cultural dislocation at the root of African-American identity” (72), which he attempted to do through the buck dance. Platt concludes that Lemon’s efforts in *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere* shows the possibility of movement to “perceive traces of historical events and experiences in everyday movements such as vernacular dance and gesture, whose performance kinesthetically awakened dormant memories” (81). In “Ritualization of the Past: Ralph Lemon’s Counter Memorials” Nicholas Birns observes that Lemon “uses body movement in a way that internalizes the unseen journey that led to the performance. The body serves as a distilled history, a vehicle to communicate historical information” (18). In her studies of “Come home Charley Patton,” Katherine Profeta notes the importance of the “paratexts” that comprise Lemon’s archive and valuably traces his extended interest in the buck dance. However, all of these studies take a very limited view of how and why

Lemon engages with the buck dance and constructs an alternative archive of history and memory. I offer a theoretical framework that draws together his performative research archive, the buck dance, and the actual performance to consider how a poetics of loss structures all of them.

Lemon's performative research was motivated by a personal interest in histories of the South and a professional desire to expand the formal qualities of his dancing. In this way, Lemon's motivation to engage with loss connects with Wideman's view for why he was drawn to the bombing of MOVE. In both the memorial acts he completes, his living room performances of the "buck dance," and his stage performances of "Come home Charley Patton," he attempts to develop a mode of representation that connects the present with the past and an individual with a collective history. Lemon's travels to the emotionally charged places in the South show him returning to familiar motifs in African American cultural production, the violence of the Jim Crow South and the South as a homespace, through his representation of a "black" body in pain and the histories of loss that permeate the landscapes of the South. However, "Come home Charley Patton" marks a departure from other considerations of the black body in pain because of his linkage of the lynched body, the dancing body, and the body in mourning through an array of contemporary media and materials multi-genre project from what Marianne Hirsch defines as a "postmemory" perspective.⁶³ The term identifies a relationship between generations who survived and witnessed historical or collective trauma and those who came after and remembers the events through stories, images, and other remains of that

⁶³ Hirsch first proposed the term in her 1993 article "Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory She continued to develop the concept in her later work, particularly in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (2006) and *The Generation of Postmemory: Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012).

experience. In her later work, Hirsch makes the distinction between "familial" and "affiliative" postmemory. For this study, Lemon's relationship to the events that he seeks falls more into the affiliative realm and more concerned with postmemory as a type of inter- or trans-generational (mediated) memory that recalls the structure and function of memory, particularly in its affective force ("The Generation of Postmemory" 107). However, postmemory reflects a different relationship to the past than memory because of generational distance and because in Lemon's case it does not involve a directly personal connection. Hirsch explains that postmemory's connection to the past is "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation [...]. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present" ("The Generation of Postmemory" 107). It is through this perspective that Lemon attempts to develop a sense of relation to the visual poetics of the black body in pain that is questioning and unsure of the relationship. The sense of being connected to, but removed from the moments of loss he mourns becomes one of the central motifs of the entire project. Since the lynched black male body, and, as Lemon demonstrates, the places where the lynchings and other racialized violent acts took place, remain charged sites of pain, "Come Home Charley Patton" becomes a performance of loss that binds him, the audience, and the ghosts of the past together.

The performance of the counter-memorials at sites connected by racially charged collective memories show Lemon mapping the interconnections between loss, memory, and the black body for him personally and as a part of a collective.⁶⁴ I choose to use the

⁶⁴ 'Collective memory' designates the shared knowledge of past experience held by the members of a select group. Developed by the French sociologist in the first half of the twentieth century, the concept stresses the relation between memory and its social context.[1]

term mapping to describe this process because Lemon himself uses this term, but also because it accurately captures the relationship between the geographical or spatial, material, and psychological remains that come to comprise Lemon's archive. However, Lemon goes beyond mapping physical locations and collecting physical materials, he also conceptually maps a sense of loss that pervades these sites of memory and the sense of relation that he feels to this history. Unlike the German artists mentioned above who were worried about the "overconsumption of memory," Lemon's concern lies with the absence of memorialization at the spaces he visits and even the ephemerality of his own efforts to remember through performative acts. The information that Lemon gathers on these trips provides the archive, even in its fragmented and often elusive form, that he draws on to develop the structure and choreography of "Come home Charley Patton."

Mapping Loss through Performative Research

Lemon's development of an archive relies on his interaction with the space using his dancing body and his existence in a "black" and male body. His intent: to uncover the physical and symbolic remains of a genealogy of violence and memory. However, instead of relying on traditional forms of archival memory, which usually exist materially in the form of documents, such as literary texts, letters, films, maps, and objects, Lemon's performances—the counter-memorials, the living room dances, and the physical journey itself along the trail of the Freedom Riders—uses and creates more of what Diana Taylor calls the "repertoire" in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. She believes the repertoire "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge" (24). Since Lemon's archive focuses on bodily

interactions with the sites he visits, it remains open, adaptable, and accessible in ways not associated with a traditional, material based archive.

The performative research that Lemon conducts, his travels and ritual acts of mourning, move beyond the type of information gained from empirical and qualitative research to also include the symbolic data found through the body during Lemon's attempt to map, mark, and later perform an embodied cultural memory of loss. Lemon notes the presence of physical, archival memory, such as during the visits to regional and small museums where he finds some evidence of the recent past, but he is more drawn to the spaces where forgetting seems more prominent than remembering.

The questions that Lemon poses begins with the multiple types of body. It is not just his body as a black man, but as a dancer. Since it is this "dancer body" that performs on the stage, interacts with the places he visits, and communicates with others during his living room dances, Lemon provides another set of questions about the challenges of performing loss and mourning. Lemon's attempt to create a bodily language that accounts for the knowledge that he gains physically, emotionally, and mentally from his research trips later is a study in the representation of loss. Nicolas Birns observes that "*Charley Patton* uses body movement in a way that internalizes the unseen journey that led to the performance. The body serves as a distilled history, a vehicle to communicate historical information. The overall conception, along with the other media—voices, music, drawings, videos—offer multiple ways to communicate this information" (19). Lemon uses the body as a vessel of history and memory and the bringing together of multiple media is his efforts to renegotiate the limits of representation when it comes to loss.

Lemon notes the presence of physical, archival memory, such as during the visits to regional and small museums where he finds some evidence of the recent past, but he is more drawn to the spaces where forgetting seems more evident than remembering. By visiting spaces marked by violence, Lemon suggests that these spaces retain, even in their most altered states, traces of these violent events or, at the very least, culturally important memories. In her study on the relationship between violence, memory, and space, Katharina Schramm notes that “the memory of violence is not only embedded in peoples' bodies and minds but also inscribed onto space in all kinds of settings: memorials, religious shrines, border zones or the natural environment. The process of the identification of memory with place is not at all self-evident, as it implies the complex entanglement of procedures of remembering, forgetting and the production of counter-memories” (5). Often, Lemon found these sites full of regular pedestrian life or a natural beauty that belied the horrendous violence that took place there. At one point, Lemon even notes that “Alabama is scenically one of the most beautiful places I’ve traveled” (27). However, despite the beauty of Alabama or the everydayness of the other places Lemon visits, as Schramm notes, “violence leaves traces” (1). It is these traces, or the remains, of violence that Lemon searches for and attempts to access and document using traditional archival methods and a less traditional method of accessing somatic, and perhaps traumatic, memories through ritualized acts or performances.

As a way of disrupting this sense of normalcy, Lemon embodies and materializes absence and the dead as a way of bringing the memory of the events into a present cycle of memory. For instance, at Selma’s famous Edmund Pettus Bridge, the site of “Bloody Sunday, 1965,” where state and local police officers attacked Civil Rights Protesters as

they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery, Lemon decides to create an act of remembrance for the event. He chooses not to dance, but to dress up in ancient overalls and drop albums, like Elton John's *Madman Across the Water*, Harry Belafonte's *Day-O* and a Scottish bagpipe version of *Amazing Grace*, down the length of the bridge. He calls it an "art prayer" (55). Lemon offers his actions as a prayer of remembrance of the loss that took place there and the important role that music often played in the protests. He honors the event in ways that draw on the spirit of the march, while attempting to embody the experience of the marchers by wearing overalls and walking the bridge. In this same section, Lemon juxtaposes this story with his visit to Medgar Evers's house, where Evers was shot and killed in his driveway. Here, Lemon bows in the driveway. Lemon's bow is a sign of honor, but also an act of remembrance. Lemon's actions on the bridge and at Evers's house are examples of the form that his counter-memorials at these various sites take: he questions, draws on physical and symbolic remains, and performs an embodied memorial act.

In one of his more dance-based counter-memorials, we begin to see how these moments helped to structure the performance aspects of "Come home Charley Patton" and his effort to represent his struggle in producing a sense of relation to this history. To honor and remember Willie Minnifield, a man falsely accused of killing a white woman with axe and burned at the stake in Yazoo City, Mississippi, Lemon dances on an abandoned outdoor stage in Yazoo City to John Hurt's 1928 recording of "Louis Collins." Hurt mournfully recounts the death and burial of Louis Collins as he sings

Oh, kind friends, oh, ain't it hard?,
to see poor Louis in a new graveyard
The angels laid him away
The angels laid him away,

they laid him six feet under the clay
The angels laid him away⁶⁵

Lemon admits that although Hurt was not from Yazoo City, the “song seems appropriate, somebody mourning somebody else, its simple and hypnotic tone a sublime activation” (113). Lemon’s recognition of Hurt’s linkage of his art with mourning mirrors his own efforts to link dance and mourning as he attempts to remember the life and death of Minnifield. Also, Lemon’s choice of an abandoned stage to complete his dance shows his continued interest in spaces that seem devoid of memory. His choice shows a privileging of more affective remains and his attempt to activate and engage with those remains through dance. In Lemon’s reenactment of the Freedom Riders’ journey and his counter-memorial performances like that in Yazoo City, we can see that his process is really about questioning the relationship between identity, memory, language (verbal and bodily), and place.

Although Lemon seems to feel a sense of relation with this history of the Civil Rights Movement and the South, it is a relationship that he cannot always fully articulate. Mieke Bal notes the often difficulty of reconciling the personal and collective memory because for her, “Memories do not allow the distinction between private and public...Cultural memory is collective, yet, by definition, subjective” (180). Lemon illustrates the subjective nature of his attempt to access the South as a homespace and the Civil Rights Movement as a culturally important era in his life by attempting to establish a bridge between his personal history with the history he uncovers throughout his travels in the South. For instance, he begins *Come home Charley Patton*, the book, not with the

⁶⁵I found a transcription of this song at <http://www.elyrics.net>.

information that he found during his travels, but with his own search for family history and some of his experiences in St. Louis as a child. He even dedicates the book “to his family.” By framing the book with this statement, he makes the project decidedly personal and his desire to find a connection to the South and his ancestors at the heart of his research travels. The first part of the book recounts various moments in his life, which includes his trips South to visit family and photographs of his family. However, Lemon provides what he calls an “incomplete chronology” of events in chart form that begins with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and include events associated with the Civil Rights Movement, moments that artistically influenced him, and a few life-changing moments from his life, which separates, but also intertwines his family stories with his performative based research journey.

By the end of his trip, or at least by the time he wrote the narrative, it is obvious that Lemon begins to understand that his family’s history is tied up with a history of a racialized and collective loss. He links the two aspects of his journey with a simple statement: “There is something about being in the South that is heartbreaking. I discover this is not just a family matter” (17). As a further attempt to meld the personal with the collective, Lemon labels his trip South in 1999 to reconnect with his family’s history “Routing a Reconciliation” and his travels retracing the route of the 1961 Freedom Riders as “Routing a Reconciliation II.” Labeling both trips in this way connects them as a joint effort to reconcile his relationship the history of his family with that of a larger African American community. Through these multiple levels of juxtaposition, Lemon establishes a connection between his personal memories and a larger history of loss, but also begins his shift towards understanding the body’s ability to be contemplate the relationship

between “race,” space, and memory. Lemon’s reenactment of the Freedom Riders’ route is a ritualized practice of memory that collapses the past and the present and the material and the symbolic. Iain McCalman and Paul Pickering suggest that reenactment reveals “a yearning to experience history somatically and emotionally—to know what it felt like” (6). Providing a form of “affective history,” reenactment allows performers and spectators alike “sympathetic understanding” (8) of what original participants might have experienced, and serves a crucial role in “the creation and contestation of public memory” (12). Similarly, Diana Taylor notes that “performed, embodied practices make the ‘past’ available as a political resource in the present by simultaneously enabling several complicated, multilayered processes” (68). Lemon’s reenactment of the Freedom Riders’ route is one such embodied process that enables mourning while also politicizing the remembrance of the history of loss associated with the Civil Rights Movement and the legacy of lynching that he attempts to feel and understand. While Lemon relies on reenactment in both his travels along the route of the freedom riders and in his embodied acts of memorialization at sites of lynchings, Lemon resists any efforts to categorize his actions as being in any way redemptive or that his embodiment of various bodily postures of those who were lynched allows him to fully feel what it was like for them.

Lemon’s choice to use the term reconciliation to label his journey South highlights the ways that mourning structures his engagement with these sites of memory and cultural forms of loss. While his research raises questions about the validity of collective memory, he must also contend with what has been lost and is unrecoverable. As one of the goals of the mourning process, particularly in relation to the search for justice, reconciliation denotes an attempt to arrive at some form of truth about a past

event that allows one to move forward without the memory of injustice restricting growth and friendly relations. For Lemon, the reconciliation involves coming to terms with the multiple layers of his identity as a black man, and using his body through dance to understand and represent this violence. However, Lemon does not enter into this “routing” with a belief that any form of reconciliation is possible. He understands the impossibility of mourning what are essentially symbolic losses even as he attempts to find ways to mourn. As with any group-based memorialization efforts, memory politics govern who, what, and how the movement has been remembered. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall notes “the civil rights movement circulates through American memory in forms and through channels that are at once powerful, dangerous, and hotly contested” (1233). Naming the journey in this way is a strategic effort to address the lack of memorialization of the Civil Rights Movement and the feelings of disconnect that seems present for a number of African Americans who came of age after the Civil Rights Movement. While the Civil Rights Movement marked a definite shift in the United States that provided economic, social, and political gains for African Americans and other minority groups, now as more and more scholars and artists look back to this recent past in the name of remembrance and assessment, the Movement takes on new dimensions, particularly when framed around questions of loss and mourning. Lemon’s *Come home Charley Patton* project suggests an alternative memorial form that draws on the knowledge that Lemon gains through his interactions with charged sites of memory marked by racialized violence.

By moving through multiple cities in search of the symbolic and material remains of the riders’ journey and the violent experiences of victims of lynching, Lemon connects

the past with the present through these reenactments, living room dances, and counter-memorials. Since all of these actions can be read as acts of mourning, they transform the spaces into liminal memorial spaces. Within these spaces, Lemon is able to transition between and connect personal and collective mourning in what are very public and affective spaces. However, the mapping of grief and loss that Lemon performs faces a dilemma in its availability to others as a form of possible mourning because of the ephemeral nature of performance. Despite heeding the impulse to end *The Geography Project* by coming “home” to the South, Lemon does not describe or enact the return in nostalgic terms, but as one defined by disconnection, absence, and loss. He says,

It seemed to me to be important to deal with this idea of home as memory, or home as remembering, because when you leave home ... returning is about what's not there anymore. So I really just sort of amplified that, and I took in my whole personal history as an African American and my more personal remembrance of the civil rights movement. It was a remarkably charged time for me growing up, so I just kind of used that as a map. (Aurora 9)

Lemon positions home as a physical place, but also as a metaphor for the process of embodying, gathering, remembering, and using a set of memories that includes what is both absent and present. Intentionally not capitalizing the “h” in “home” in “Come home Charley Patton” reflects Lemon’s efforts to de-center the traditional definition of home to see the South as an important space for a collective body and his sense of relation to this history and memory.

Therefore, the tone that Lemon takes in the narrative exposes the ambiguity in his sense of relation that he feels and does not feel with this violent history.⁶⁶ For instance, he has a revelation about his own aesthetic attempts at recovery while talking with a group of recovering drug addicts. He acknowledges that the only thing left for him and them is “recovery” because they had lost “what was meant, violent, and resistant” (34). Although able to think and say what they want, Lemon notes that it was all a performance, just like his “fake questions, a coded message, an affirmation really, for full-blown racial injustice or integration as I see it, and my confusion with what to do with this modern-past inequality and faux-freedom, what I witness, right here, better to create Africa with wings, real ones, that sprout from the shoulder blades” (34). Lemon questions the depth of freedom in the face of the continued impact of the racial history of the US. Instead of facing this realization, Lemon desires to retreat and invent about an even further past and invent that which he does not have access to. Lemon’s characterization of the dilemma he faces reflects a desire to mourn or maintain a sense of relation, but perhaps reveals that he has lost the deep emotional impact of racial injustice needed to cement the relationship. While Lemon desires to in some way mark what had happened at each of the places he visit, he is also confused at how exactly to do it in places that showed no evidence of the past pain and violence that took place there. He says “I found confused and fleeting ways to make my presence known in these highly charged spaces that are not the same space of forty years ago. That have elusive memories. But the civil rights movement did happen”

⁶⁶ Cathy Caruth extends this point, claiming that “[t]he historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated” (17), but that recounting a trauma story, as through reenactment, is “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of survival” (7 original emphases).

(27). Lemon's assurance, to himself and the reader that the Civil Rights Movement did happen, is telling. He recognizes that because of the limited amount of material remains there is a risk that some may doubt its occurrence or that it may be forgotten. Therefore, a sense of mourning that attempts to acknowledge what has been lost defines Lemon's actions.

Lemon considers a number of alternative ways of completing the work of mourning so that he may find a way to share with a larger audience the affective knowledge he gains through his engagement with landscapes of violence. He carries this linkage of performance and mourning, which he develops while working within and through absences and fragmented memories, to his process of developing "Come home Charley Patton" and in its final form. Although Lemon gains affective knowledge from his experiences visiting these landscapes of violence, when it came time to transfer this knowledge to the stage, his archival research, particularly that involving the buck dance, provided the motivation and key elements of the form that the performance took. In this next section, I will explore how Lemon used the buck dance to gain affective knowledge of a black body within a Southern space.

Affective Knowledge, the "Buck Dance," and the Performance of Loss

Lemon's interest in the buck dance comes long before we see it in its modified form in "Come home Charley Patton." Profeta traces his almost obsessive engagement in her article "Ralph Lemon and the Buck Dance." Profeta, a longtime friend of Lemon, is in a unique position to follow the various incarnations of the buck dance from Lemon's early dances to the "death" of the buck dance in "Come home Charley Patton." She labels this as Lemon's journey from a "largely schematic Buck Dance towards a more stylistic

reinvention,” which she reads as making visual Joseph Roach’s assertion that “like performance, memory operates as both quotation and invention, an improvisation on borrowed themes, with claims on the future as well as the past” (qtd in Profeta). The original movements of the buck dance remain unknown, but it has been linked to dances performed by enslaved Africans on the plantations in the south and during post-Reconstruction. Profeta also notes that the buck dance culturally symbolizes a key ingredient in the painful tradition of minstrelsy and physically serves as an ancestor of modern day tap dancing. Others have suggested that the buck dance was often used as way to distract slave owners and overseers from plans of resistance. Lemon’s first interaction with the Buck Dance came in 1991 in a piece entitled *Solo*. He later performed it again ten years later in *The Buck Dance in Tree*. It would appear again during Lemon’s research sessions for “Come home Charley Patton” where the dance, in its modified form, serves as the basis for the movement throughout the performance. Looking at the various shifts in how Lemon uses the dance reveals the role that the dance plays in helping him to work through feelings of loss to finally arrive at a conflicted understanding of what the dance had meant to him as a dancer and as an African American. Lemon’s choice to use a dance with questionable origins and various incarnations will feature prominently in understanding his various performances as developing through a counter form of memorialization. Lemon’s engagement with the Buck Dance in “Come home Charley Patton” shows his attempt to use the dancing body to tell a narrative of a long history of racialized subjection and spectacle.

Previously, race had been intentionally absent from much of the work that Lemon did with his dance company, but *Solo* was created at the behest of Marda Kirns who

suggested that he should work with the theme of race. Lemon has been so removed from the “black stage” that he has been absent from many of the earlier studies on twentieth century black dance because most of the performers in his company were white and because he chose to perform more experimental based dance. Thus, *Solo* shows Lemon beginning to tease out an association with a “new” subject, and in the process, he forges a creative process focused on combining dance, history, and memory that will continue even in his project “How Can you stay in the house all day and Do Nothing” (2011), which is an extension of the “Come home Charley Patton” project. *Solo* also shows the beginnings of Lemon’s choreography showing influences of literature and forms of research methods.

Lemon’s use of the buck dance in *Solo* shows him beginning to break the dance free from its negative connotations by infusing it with elements of his postmodern dance. *Solo* begins with Lemon wearing an “Ubangi Mask” and lying on the stage in a pool of light. After pressing play on a tape recorder and the sounds of “Niggers are Scared of the Revolution” by the Last Poets fill the stage, Lemon dances a very traditional form of the Buck Dance mixed with elements of jazz. In juxtaposition to the dance, Lemon includes a tape recording of an interview with LaVaughn Robinson, a tap dancer, who gives his opinion on the Buck Dance. Robinson says that it came out of the plantation era, but that it was inferior to tap because it did not tell a story. As Robinson talks, Lemon dances in a more postmodern style and removes the racist mask. However, as Lemon shows in the next scene and in his subsequent engagements with the dance, the Buck Dance does tell a story, one of innovation and subjection. Again Lemon takes to the stage, but this time he removes his shirt and dances to no music. There is only the sound of his bare feet hitting

the floor and the harmonica he attempts to play while dancing.⁶⁷ Profeta reads in the dance, because of his bared chest, a reference to slavery and that his choices show him attempting to recover the dance from its connotations as a dance of spectacle to a dance of memory to show that it could be used to tell a story. However, his shifting relationship with the dance signals much more.

The role of memory in his engagement with the Buck Dance becomes even more obvious in the first part of *The Geography Trilogy*. In *Tree*, he juxtaposes a Chinese folk musician in blackface playing the *san xian*, a traditional instrument reminiscent of the American banjo, with the Buck Dance. Since performances of Lemon's earlier *Solo* performance were not available, it is difficult for me to trace the technical changes that he makes in this performance, but Profeta notes that in the *Tree* version, the "dance is a little off center, a little wobbly, almost drunken" (Profeta). This differs from the more traditional style Lemon performs in *Solo*. By tracing these changes, we see the process through which Lemon develops a more personal relationship with the dance. He is also beginning to grapple with the technical elements of the dance as he breaks them down and incorporates the interpretations of others in order to rebuild it for his purposes. He embraces the tortured history of the buck dance to create something from the remains of this history and the memory of subjection that is reflected in his black male body. It appears that for Lemon the buck dance embodies or symbolizes a psychological conflict between freedom and objectification. It is a conflict that illustrates the common space occupied by African Americans as they deal with the remains of a history of loss. His expansion in "Come home Charley Patton" of the technical elements of the buck dance

⁶⁷ This summary and description of the performance relies heavily on the work of Katherine Profeta because I was unable to secure a copy of the performance.

found in *Tree* reveals that his performances, whether in workshops or on the stage, reflect his efforts to work through his relationship to the dance. He finally came to partially understand the role that the dance would play in his representation of his travels on the stage. In “Come home Charley Patton,” the bodily movement becomes even more exaggerated with sloping, hunched, almost falling, off-centered movements that Lemon and the other dancers embody.

However, before I move to a discussion of that performance, it is important to explore how his research travels influenced his understanding of the dance and how it changed the way he viewed his interaction with the stage and the audience. The translation of this onto the stage shows the effect of these histories of loss on the movement and the thematic choices Lemon would choreograph. However, despite this experience with the buck dance, Lemon does not return to it until almost ten years later after the disbandment of his dance company and his search for a new project. The question that arises: why does Lemon return to the buck dance, which has no identifiable origins or definitive movements, during a project where he is searching for a relationship to a recent past of the Civil Rights Movement and incidents of lynchings? What connections does he find between the bodily movement and performance of the dance and that of the countermemorials and travels that he does as he embodies these various spaces and moments of pain?

Particularly during each of the living room dances, Lemon explores the connective threads that exist between the body, memory, and the interchange between the audience and the performer. For instance, in the home of Mrs. Mitchell, the cousin of the wife of Fred MacDowell, a famous Mississippi blues artist, Lemon performs for her

while she shows her enjoyment by tapping her feet and exclaiming that yes that was how they used to dance. However, Lemon is aware that this is not how they used to do. Despite the fact that Lemon is not doing the “buck dance,” his body acts as a medium of memory and movement in the hope that the boundaries of time and space can be crossed. Lemon’s encounter with Otha Turner, a 101 year old black man living in Senatobia, Mississippi, offers insight into the types of questions Lemon poses and the conclusions that he draws from the living room dances. During his visit, Lemon asks Turner to dance. During an interview, Lemon explains that although Turner was probably *not* performing the buck dance, “it was a dance that was very, very much about a black body in the South and all the history and culture that that holds doing this dance that he probably did a long, long time ago and that his body still remembers. So that was enough truth for me” (Aurora Interview). Lemon sees Turner’s dance as a form of collective memory that is linked to a cultural identity and heritage. Since the larger frame of reference for Turner’s dance is the South and what that space has meant on a collective and personal level, the significance of the dance goes beyond aesthetic properties and instead becomes a space of contestation and resistance. For Lemon, Turner embodies the history of a black body being in the South and surviving, which allows Lemon, by embracing this embodied trace of memory, to challenge the parameters of what constitutes an archive. This trace, even in the absence of definable movements linked to the buck dance, has enough knowledge through which he can create his own ritualized form of memory through his representation of this absence in *Come home Charley Patton*.

I suggest that Lemon uses the buck dance as a way of creating counter-memories during his research travels throughout the South and as a form through which he can

express his experiences with loss. Michel Foucault defines counter-memory as the use of history in a way that subverts nation-related, ceremonial, and disciplinary orders of memory.⁶⁸ As Lemon attempts to move away from the usual forms of remembrance, he presents an alternative to the current memorialization efforts surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. He not only uses history and memory as key to his performances, he questions our relationship to both and even his representation of it. Lemon uses a socially produced dance with no known origins and multiple influences and uses it in a performance that is about temporally and spatially specific events, but also about his and the audience's relationship to this past. The buck dance allowed him to make sense of his travels and put it into a form that he found created a reciprocal relationship between him and his audience. The knowledge that Lemon collects during the living room dances becomes a part of the archive that structures the movements found in *Come home Charley Patton*. In particular, Lemon uses Turner's dance captured on videotape, which he repeatedly watched and studied in an effort to translate the buck dance and the larger theoretical implications of the encounter with Thomas to the stage. Through the artistic connection that he forges with the buck dance during these living room dances and his mapping of memory and loss, Lemon finds that performance can incorporate personal and collective history and allow him to speak a language of loss. While the buck dance illustrates Lemon's attempt to use bodily memory as a means of accessing the past, it also becomes the medium through which he explores the ways in which embodied memory can transcend the spatial and temporal boundaries enforced by the stage. In conjunction

⁶⁸ Foucault, Michel, Donald F. Bouchard, and Sherry Simon. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1977. Print.

with the knowledge he gains during the “living room dances” and the buck dance, Lemon’s journey throughout the south also provides archival material for the production of “Come home Charley Patton.”

The creative process through which Lemon combines the affective knowledge he gains through the buck dance and his countermemorials is most evident in his visit to a site in Duluth, Minnesota where the lynching of three black circus employees of the John Robinson Show Circus, Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Issac McGhie, took place on June 15, 1920. The men were hung from a street light after being falsely accused of raping a white woman. Instead of finding a marker indicating the horror that took place there, Lemon finds a traffic light marking this space of death. In an effort to complete some type of ritual of mourning, we see Lemon in a videotaped record of the visit contemplating the best way in which to commemorate the men’s murders. Lemon’s first act involves embodying what he thinks Elias’s last trip down Second Avenue was like; he bumps into walls and cars and falls when appropriate. At the site of the lynching, he leans against the wall of an old Shriners building, picks up a pebble, tosses it in the air, sits down, looks up, and just stands. Finally, he finds that simply lying down, arms by his side in a posture of death, commemorates the moment the best. He recalls “I lie down on my back on the sidewalk for a long time...lying on the ground I could have been any of them, Issac or Elmer or Elias. Hard to tell from the old blurry photograph; three bodies in dungarees and overalls, with white shirts torn off, tied and twisted around their waists” (158).

By lying on the sidewalk in the Duluth scene, Lemon articulates the relationship between the event he is remembering and the position his body occupies. Lemon’s

description of the photograph of the lynching, which later became postcards, focuses on the position of the bodies. In the scene, two men hanged from the street light with stretched necks. One of the men has their hands bound in front, the other is bound in the back. The third man lies on the ground. In his various reenactments, Lemon moves from being Elias to being any one of them. Two of his other dancers, David and Djedje, also take turns, stepping into the pain of others, which allows them to reenact the pain of violence and to give it language. Afterwards, Djedje tells the drunks watching that “there’s nothing you can do to change what happened, so in my mind I reached out to them...memorials are about healing” (158). Djedje’s statement shows that he recognizes the inaccessibility of the pain that the men felt, but that memorials are also about reactivating memory, which is needed because the story of the three men at the time of Lemon’s visit did not seem as if it was one that had been “passed on.” It was only in 2003, after Lemon’s visit, the community erected the Clayton Jackson McGhie Memorial using the images of three local area black men because no pictures of those killed exists, except the one that documents them in death. Again, the “standing in” that occurs in the memorial and the Lemon’s and the other dancers’ performance of countermemorials bridge a gap between what is personally and collectively felt. Lemon takes knowledge that he learns through this affective and performative research to the stage of “Come home Charley Patton,” which serves as a supplement to the archive and not a replacement as he attempts to transmit his knowledge gathered through his attempts to “come home.”

“Come home Charley Patton” opens with Lemon’s attempt to provide the audience with a way to understand the upcoming parts of the performance. A series of images, which includes horses, a scene featuring a Stomp girl and drummer, and a

countermemorial Lemon performs wading in the Mississippi River while reading excerpts from “A Summer Tragedy” play on a large video screen locate upstage. Objects that will have reoccurring presences throughout the performance, such as a plywood board that Lemon engages with that plays homage to performance artist Bruce Nauman, the installation of a collapsible ladder by Ward, a wood horse by Douglas Irving Repetto, and iron horseshoes that Lemon throws to the ground. The result is a layering of objects and images that suggest a relationship that is not immediately apparent. However, each item suggests a relationship with the stage or with memories that Lemon uses to call attention to the multiple relationships one can have to the story he is trying to tell. For instance, the board that Lemon either lies under or positions in juxtaposition to him at various angles recalls Nauman’s 1969 video recording *Wall-Floor Position* that was about using the body to investigate the role of the artist in relationship to the stage and the various psychological states and behavioral codes involved in that. Lemon tells us that he wants to “recreate” Nauman’s work in order to “place our physical history and the body art politics in what I feel is a historically major movement work about a body negotiating a wall and a floor” (167). So, Lemon takes a dance performance created during the Civil Rights Movement that had not thought about the politics of a black body within that space. Therefore, Lemon takes that inspiration to explore the relationship between his, the performers, the audience, and all of those people, dead and alive, that were a part of his research. It is also the body, in its multiple forms, that he uses to investigate it. It is the repetition of the themes of space, violence, and embodied memory within this five minute period that we see the poetics of the performance of loss he has attempted to create. He has transferred what he thinks he has learned from his research

onto the stage, but the result whose meaning is clear only through multiple points of juxtaposition.

His goal is to find a form, a movement and narrative structure that creates this understanding between him, his archive, and the audience. James Baldwin provides parts of the structuring form of the performance. On the stage opposite of the screen the stage, slightly elevated, a video mediated image of Baldwin watches the actions on the stage and the audience and eventually speaks. His voice is the first we hear: “Um, I recognize this landscape. The interior and exterior landscape. The tortured and noble and suffering and loving...it illuminates the people all around me” (219). It is these themes of torture, resilience, and suffering that best describe the movements of the dancers and even the stories of the people that Lemon encounters, and he draws a connective thread between the physical landscapes Lemon map, but also the symbolic and emotional landscapes of loss. Towards the end of this opening scene, Lemon finishes with Bontemps’s short story and connects multiple stories that intersect with it. He then asks Baldwin: “Where is the center...or some focal point?” (220). Baldwin responds by telling him to make everything be seen through John. After Lemon expresses displeasure with the name choice, a voice from offstage asks “How ‘bout Elias?” Lemon responds with “Yeah, Elias. And what was that you said? If *he* moves here, *he’ll—I mean I’ll—*jump there, and then if *I* move here—*I mean me!* And *I* do this, *he’ll go—I’ll—*jump? Uh to do that. And when *I* make my next move, *he’ll—*then I got *him*. Or something. And it always worked. Sorta” (my italics; 221). Here, Lemon introduces the real and fictionalized character of Elias who serves as the focal point of the performance, but he also transposes his subject position with that of Elias. Elias is the name of one of the men lynched in Duluth and the

fictional son Lemon gives Jennie and Jeff in “A Summer Tragedy.” The movement of the dancers replicates this theory of reaction: if one moves there, then another moves here. The story is not just his, or Elias’s, but all of the black men who were lynched by angry mobs. Since he dances a version of the buck dance as he says this, Lemon also connects the buck dance to his portrayal of the intertwined stories of him and Elias. So, when he performs these countermemorials and use the buck dance to activate memories, he shifts the view of the past as closed, inaccessible, and fixed in meaning to a past that is open and available.

In “Come home Charley Patton,” Lemon frames and performs the experience of this countermemorial in Duluth in two ways that reveal how mourning shapes the rhythm and posture of the movement of the dancers and the juxtaposition that occurs between the dance and the layered environment of the stage. Lemon explains the process that he and the other dancers took in an attempt to translate his research experience into a language with spatial and bodily properties. After returning to the workshop space, Lemon and the dancers drew on words associated with the countermemorial at the site in Duluth to create a dance scene of the same title. The keywords included:

Walk
Press a button
Make circle
Back against a wall
Look up
Pick up a coin lying on the ground
Toss it in the air
Lie on your back
Reorder as you wish. (159)

If we turn to the performance, the movements of the dancers in the second scene entitled “Mississippi/Duluth,” a five minute sequence, draws on the posture, balance, bearing, and

positioning of the body associated with the actions of these words and phrases. These dancers are then joined by the other dancers in a straight line across the stage. In his attempt to understand the two places together, he draws on performative techniques to portray these connective threads. In the opening of the scene, the two women dancers emerge from opposite sides of the stage, but cross and finally connect in a straight line with the other three dancers at the back of the stage. The other dancers take the stage and they all stand in a straight horizontal line across the stage. A lazy, rhythmic tune begins and, almost as if they are attached by an invisible string, each performer builds off of the movements of the others to perform a slowed down and deconstructed buck dance. The movement continues to be punctuated by a slow, but swinging beat that gives their dance a ghostly appearance and feel. Each dancer's personal iteration of Lemon's research and the buck dance combine to reflect Okwui's, one of the female dancers, admonition in a later scene to "respect the experience." Lemon gave the dancers the opportunity to interpret his research through their own context. The result was each doing the buck dance slightly different.

Lemon's juxtaposition of the two places, Mississippi and Duluth, highlights that the two places project similar feelings of danger, pain, and loss that he experienced in both places. The dancers suggest that danger is nearby which is reflected in their movements. "The Duluth scene serves as a point of concentration for the sense of the body as existing amidst danger, which suffuses Charley Patton" (Birns 21). This translates into the movement that we see on the stage. The dancers are almost possessed with the need to move as they throw their bodies to the floor and from side to side with abandon. After the syncopated buck dance, the dancers break into a series of dances that

build off of the energies and actions of each other. The dancers either run as if being chased or they fall to the floor as if flung. Other dancers hit their bodies repeatedly and violently. These movements are punctuated by moments of Okwu's breathing that sounds like the labored breathing of Lemon in the video clip he plays at the opening performance of him reading in the waters of the Mississippi River. A high pitch whistle and stomping also breaks the silence of the dance. Throughout, they simulate the words listed above by throwing their bodies in the air, picking items off of the floor, and hurling themselves to the floor. When one falls to the floor another falls, sometimes with all of them falling into positions very similar to that of those who were lynched in Duluth. This is repeated throughout the five minutes scene and it also appears again later in the performance. In this entire scene Lemon makes a statement about the function of memory that is shared and represented. The positioning and movement of the bodies tell a story of memory and violence that connects the two places and the affective knowledge Lemon gained from them.

Lemon returns to this Duluth countermemorial in one of the last scenes as a way of connecting all of the parts of the story he has been telling concerning him and Elias. As he is talking about his journey to Duluth, however, he also links his story to the time that Elias went to Duluth and got in trouble. He shows a clip of one of his memorial sessions at the site of the lynching. As he narrates the scene, Lemon stands inside Ward's installations, which is an enclosed area resembling a hallway and that has two ladders attached from the top. In the notes of the performance, Lemon refers to it as the "memory room." While the audience is able to see at least one of Lemon's countermemorials, his narration of the scene is needed for this particular audience to understand his actions. At

this point in the performance, we see evidence of Lemon's struggles to find a form that embodies the memories and experiences that he wants to share. The multiple paratexts: the diary, the images, the installations, and the memorials he left behind at the various motels, which would help support the audience's understanding of the scene, is absent. Lemon must provide the audience with some of this background information as he agrees with Baldwin's assertion that this was "an act of sympathy."

The merger of the buck dance with the visible violence of the water hose scene is where we see the present and the past and the individual and collective history collide. In what is the most memorable and striking scene of the performance, Lemon merges all of the questions he has raised about his form, purpose, and research travels again through the buck dance and the story of him, I mean Elias. During the ending of "A Summer Tragedy," where Jennie and Jeff kill themselves by driving off a cliff into water, Lemon adds their fictional son to the story as a witness to their deaths. It is Elias who takes the stage with the memories of that day and the days of his arrest in Duluth. Lemon/Elias takes to the stage on an elevated platform standing in a spotlight, which suggests a stage within a stage. It highlights the connectedness of this scene with the rest of the performance, but also the fact that he wants to draw attention to the performativity and importance of the moment. Lemon begins to dance to the music that has played during the more obvious moments when the dancers modified buck dance happens. His movement recalls the same movement, his interpretation of the buck dance, which he uses to open "Come home Charley Patton." As Lemon dances, one of the other dancers violently sprays him with a water hose. The scene becomes reminiscent of the attacks on the marchers at a number of civil rights demonstrations. The water batters his dancing

body. He flails, falls down, but continues to dance. His tenacity reminds us of the actions of the civil rights marches and it reminds us of why Elias performs this dance after he is wrongly arrested. The bodies of the lynched males in Duluth, Lemon, and Elias become one. As he dances, the other dancers return to the stage in their own frenzied versions of the buck dance. The music and bodies become frenzied in the glare of spotlights. The dancers draw on the movement of each other to further illustrate the merger of history and the embodied remembrance of it. The aesthetic and philosophical arrangement of the “Come Home Charley Patton” shows that a performance of loss involves the reconfiguration of our connections with the past, creative forms of substitution, and a discursive that incorporates and recognizes those or what has been lost.

In particular, Lemon’s use of the buck dance throughout the performance, particularly in moments where he attempts to map points of intersections between various events, allows Lemon to question the ways in which embodied memory can transcend spatial and temporal boundaries enforced by the stage. The appearance of the buck dance in *The Geography Trilogy* seems appropriate given that the tensions he explores in the project between history/memory, subjection/agency, along with his play with form, also exists in his engagement with the buck dance. In his research on the buck dance, Lemon finds a similar set of questions, but more importantly he recognizes the dance as denoting the experience of a black body in the South. In “Come home Charley Patton,” he attempts to capture this same experience through the dancers that attempt to portray what he felt as a black, male, and dancing body as he locates himself within a long narrative filled with a history of subjection and spectacle. Through his research of the buck dance, Lemon finds a performative language that structures the performance while also suggesting a

commonality between what he learned while researching the buck dance and following the trail of the Freedom Riders. Looking at the various shifts in Lemon's relationship with the buck dance reveals his conflicted understanding of what the dance means to him as a dancer and as an African American and its role in helping him to develop an intricate understanding of loss and performance.

CONCLUSION

In the previous chapters, I used the spatial-material conceptual framework developed in the introduction to read the assemblage art of the artists of the 1966 exhibition *Signs of Neon* and Tyree Guyton's *Heidelberg Project* that respond to the violence of urban rebellions and decay, John Edgar Wideman's interest in the bombing of MOVE in *Two Cities: A Love Story* and *Philadelphia Fire*, and Ralph Lemon's *Come Home Charley Patton*, which responds to foundational themes and sites of loss connected with racialized violence of the Twentieth Century. I showed that by seizing and reconfiguring what "remains" after violent events, these artists and writers expose and participate in a politics of mourning that is inextricably caught up in a politics of identity. By studying a wide range of genres, I traced the manifestation of what I am calling a poetics of loss in African American visual and textual art that performs aesthetic mourning across generic boundaries. The experimental formal qualities of visual and literary montage, assemblage art, and the performative mapping of loss, which draw on a collage-like form, show these artists' efforts to find a form to signify loss and rethink the boundaries of a cultural poetics and collective memory. It is a loss embedded in the urban landscape and embodied in materials left in the wake of racial violence and the visual poetics represented through fragmentation and ruin. It is a loss linked to the black body in pain and the sense of relationship that these artists unwillingly feel with the image of the black lynched body. The result is art that works through a counteraesthetics and establishes counter forms of mourning. Although hoping to prompt remembrance, the writers and artists in this study also use this as an opportunity to search for a sense of

relation to a past, presumably collective history and to critique elements of a materialist and racist society.

When I began this project, my guiding research question was if art used by artists to mourn culturally traumatic moments in contemporary African American culture shared a similar rhetorical language? Throughout this study, I presented loss as a theoretical and philosophical framework through which we can use to understand African American art that often explodes generic boundaries and that attempts to conduct the process of mourning. I followed the embodied processes of each of the artists who collected and created an archive of the fragmentary physical and psychological remains to understand the impact of the Watts and Detroit riots/rebellions, the Civil Rights Movement and lynchings, and the bombing of the MOVE organization, what emerged were a surprising number of shared characteristics, particularly in form. All of the artists, perhaps influenced by the fragmented remains of their archives that crossed personal and collective borders and their engagement with racialized spaces or landscapes [urban cities, the South], which have not been fully integrated into the memorial culture of the United States, developed alternative and creative forms of mourning that drew on the fragmented, scarred, and ruinous shape of these landscapes and the physical and symbolic remains of their research archives. The result: forms of aesthetic mourning that are necessarily fragmented, incomplete, and questioning.

At the conclusion of this project, I remain struck by the limited study of how art becomes the site where artists help to expose the material and psychological remains that complicate the processes of remembering and forgetting. Therefore, very similar to the ways these artists draw conclusions about their own work, this project remains

incomplete and questioning. The relationship between aesthetic practice and the act of mourning is even more relevant in addressing modern day moments of racialized violence. Beginning with the deadly journey through the middle passage to the multiple instances of deaths during the twentieth century and now twenty-first century, as a result of racialized violence, this assertion certainly seems to prove the truthfulness of such an assertion. Considering that the so-called birthplace of the “race” of African Americans was in the bowels of the slave ships during the middle passage suggests that loss would be an apt descriptor of the experiences of those who survived the journey, those lost along the way, and even those who remained behind on the shores of Africa. The long history of dispossession marks the historical experiences of African Americans as one that has been particularly marked and defined by a dimension of loss, but it has surprisingly remained undertheorized beyond the historical context of slavery. Hopefully, this study begins to fill that void to think about loss as both an impetus for creation and a theoretical foundation for defining a collective identity.

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