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Writing the Urban Discourse
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Imaginary: Louise Meriwether's
Daddy Was A Number Runner
by E. Lâle Demirtürk

Starting with the Great Migration in the early twentieth century, the city has emerged as a site of racial geography that constructs blackness and whiteness in terms of spatial definitions.¹ The racialized urban space introduced a cognitive map of the predominantly white city where the ghetto became “an ideological construct” (Sugrue 229) even more than a physical one. Since the 1960s black ghettos have become the subject of serious sociological research that analyzes inner-city communities in close scrutiny.² The sociopolitical and ideological constructs that caused the spatial isolation of black Americans were achieved by “a conjunction of racist attitudes, private behaviors, and institutional practices that disenfranchised blacks from urban housing markets and led to the creation of the ghetto” (Massey & Denton 83). Since the historical frame of reference of the term “ghetto”³ signifies a spatialized term, it also signifies, as the Kerner Report of 1968 suggests, that “white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto” (qtd. in Bernasconi 345).⁴ The fact that blacks are confined to the black ghetto is a forceful statement on the ideology of whiteness: the historical and political agency involved in the creation of the ghetto signifies “the collapse of public institutions”⁵ in the city since the mid-1970s (Wacquant, 438). Hence, the black ghetto,

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in Joe W. Trotter's terms, draws attention to "the presence of white racism in the socioeconomic and political life of the city" (4).

Segregation in ghettos has caused unemployment and the social isolation of black people, "reducing their chances of acquiring the human capital skills, including adequate educational training," that facilitate upward mobility (Wilson, "From Institutional to Jobless Ghettos" 121). The neo-racist strategy of racializing urban space in an attempt to pathologize black bodies results in seeing drug use, unemployment, prostitution, welfare dependency, and teenage childbearing as a natural outcome of the decline of inner cities. The 1965 Moynihan Report conceptualizes the black ghetto as a site of pathology, because of the socioeconomic system responsible for the black urban poor which causes other forms of pathology.⁶ The pathology of the ghetto is also at the basis of the culture-of-poverty argument that proposes the thesis that people are poor because their culture is defective, blaming the victim in its assertion that "basic values and attitudes of the ghetto subculture have been internalized and thereby influence behavior" (Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* 61). Starting in the 1960s, urban studies of ghetto life have utilized research data to show "how the experiences and the patterns of conduct of ghetto residents are shaped by powerful structural constraints in urban American society" (Wilson, "Introduction" xii). Sociologists investigate measurable conditions and observable social behaviors in terms of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. But "urban culture has other dimensions that do not lend themselves so easily to quantitative analysis or narrative description" (LeGates & Stout, "Introduction" 91). Here, ghetto fiction plays a crucial role, as literary representations of the ghetto show different dimensions of ghetto life which cannot be measured by quantitative analysis. By its definition, ghetto fiction as an urban cultural genre forms a city discourse in which the black ghetto is the site of devalorization against the "white" city. Textualizing the ghetto becomes a way of seeing the city.⁷ We see ghetto residents are not passive victims; on the contrary, they struggle to find effective strategies of survival. Racialized urban space creates an ambivalence that obscures the interactions between the black ghetto and the white city. The ghetto signifies the social construction of a marginal space, reconstructing the city "as a mechanism of spatial exclusion, surveillance, and social control" (Smith ix).

In this context, Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970) belies the culture-of-poverty argument in both depicting black individuals' struggle for a better life and in privileging the point of view of the black ghetto resident. As ghetto fiction, Meriwether's novel re-

structures the “urban imaginary”⁸ in situating our city-centric consciousness within the black ghetto. Here the primary focus is on the refabrication of the ghetto imaginary, shaping the critical lens through which we experience the racialized and gendered urban spaces in which we live. The novel represents the ghetto as an intervention because it threatens and challenges the social stability of the white city. Nellie Y. McKay notes that *Daddy Was a Number Runner* “is the single fictional account in our literature of a year in the life of a young, black, adolescent girl, growing up in Harlem in the middle of the Great Depression” (McKay 209). Twelve-year-old Francie Coffin sees the city from within the narrow confines of the ghetto. The novel is not just about the disruption of Francie’s family but also about the day-to-day challenges of Harlem. The poor housing conditions, crime and violence, sexual harassment, unemployment, and welfare dependency construct the Harlem ghetto as a place that leaves the characters with no real role models. The sense of physical and social isolation from the white city invites a forceful critique of American sociopolitical institutions because all the businesses, including numbers running, are controlled by white officials whose exploitative business invades the black ghetto and contributes to the decline of the inner city.⁹

We are introduced to the poor ghetto housing conditions in the Coffins’ apartment. The ceiling has “big leaks” (18) which the landlord does not even care to repair. As Francie goes to Mrs. Mackey’s to collect numbers for her father, she sees no difference between the “funky”, bad-smelling hallways and the streets, representing the everyday environment of the black urban poor: “The curbs were lined with garbage cans overflowing into the gutters, and a droopy horse pulling a vegetable wagon down the avenue had just deposited a steaming pile of manure in the middle of the street” (12). The streets represent the site of danger, crime, and violence in the forms of prostitution and gang fights, as well as police brutality. Some streets are more dangerous than others. Francie’s father forbids Francie and Maude to walk on the street where prostitutes such as Sukie’s sister, China Doll, work. It is also the street where her pimp, Alfred, beats China Doll in front of a crowd. The positioning of individuals in the streets of Harlem signifies the direction of their lives. Francie’s father beats his son, James Junior, with a strop because he drops out of school and hangs around with the Ebony Earls gang. The sister gang at Francie’s school, the Ebonettes, is also involved in comparable attacks on white teachers: “They fought with razors and the Ebony Earls would beat up anybody that messed with their sister gang” (25).

An old drunken black man on the street is brutally treated by the police: "The cop kicked his behind and then brought his nightstick down on the man's shoulder. . . . He didn't have to beat him up like that, I thought. He's just a helpless old drunk" (57). In contrast, the bloody fight between two black gangs (Ebony Earls and Harlem Raiders) is completely ignored by the police even though the boys are wounded and taken to Harlem Hospital.

Sexual harassment is a key factor in the process of growing up female in the ghetto, and poverty is the motivating cause of the harassment. Frances is innocent enough to let the white man in the building feel her body for a dime without ever realizing that it is sexual harassment. The baker, Max, feels her body in exchange for extra rolls, and the butcher, Mr. Morrinstein, squeezes Francie's breast in exchange for extra soup bone: "Anytime I came to the butcher and no one else was there I had to stand still for this nonsense" (43). It is only when Francie starts menstruating that she keeps her mother's advice of avoiding men. She begins to resist sexual harassment by flinging a white man's hand back at him in the movies when he stimulates her sexually, and by refusing Max's request to touch her even if she cannot get the extra rolls. When Max insists, she kicks him in his private parts and is victorious. When Sonny tries to rape her in the building and she is not physically strong enough to stop him, Vallie saves her. Francie's father watches out for Francie and Maude: "And Daddy was always chasing us out of 118th Street" (26). Sexual harassment is also a gradual process of transition to prostitution: when Alfred has sex with Sukie and wants to make her a prostitute, China Doll kills him to protect her sister.

Unemployment and poverty determine the lives of all the black residents of the ghetto. Robert is unemployed and moves in with his mother-in-law. He is involved with politics and does not make the effort to find a job when Elizabeth does the laundry work. He becomes a street speaker for issues involving blacks. Francie's father lost his house-painting job during the Depression, causing the family to move from Brooklyn. He has become a numbers runner, while playing the piano at rent parties to earn a few dollars. Since the family's money is insufficient for food, he unwillingly consents to his wife's finding a job as a domestic in the Bronx.

Poverty forces black families to get access to electricity by using jumpers so that the meter does not register. When the Coffins' janitor Mr. Edwards is angry at the bankers' changing the winning number because too many people hit it, he is killed. The welfare system is also built

upon economically exploiting the black urban poor. The night before the social worker comes, Francie's father reminds Francie, Sterling, and James Junior once again that they are Yoruba's children, and that his grandfather was a runaway slave who survived in the swamps for seven years. He tells the stories to teach them that they are not ordinary people, rather that they are dignified children who have a past "to be proud of" (82). The social worker, whom they nickname Madame Queen, humiliates them by cutting off relief when she learns that Francie's father has become a janitor and has not told her. It is out of utter hopelessness that Francie's father leaves numbers running and turns to gambling at nights, "sometimes not getting home at all" (163). Pride and dignity are also reinforced by the mother in a different way: when Francie asks for a nickel from the janitor her mother beats her with a strop without even listening to her explanation. Francie eats at Father Divine's¹⁰ with that nickel simply because the relief food is inedible.

Poverty also affects black families in the South, causing them to migrate to the city. The Snipes family, whom Mr. Coffin runs into on the street and brings to sleep downstairs in the basement, failed to survive in the South. Their baby died because of malnutrition. The Coffins share a meal a day with them, but since they cannot find a job in the ghetto, they end up returning to Virginia where "at least they wouldn't freeze to death while starving" (134). Poverty also causes the breakdown of the black family in the ghetto: when Francie's father fails to dissuade James Junior from playing hooky with the street gang, he kicks him out for living with Belle, one of Alfred's girls. Francie works briefly as a domestic but when she risks her life cleaning windows from the outside, her mother makes her quit: "Long as I live you don't have to scrub no white folks' floors or wash their filthy windows. . . . Somebody in this family got to finish school" (191-192). Sukie's father, Papa Dan, is always drunk, her sister is a prostitute, and her mother cooks for a private family. It is only at Papa Dan's funeral that China Doll and her mother hug each other for the first time.

Education as a key to social mobility is the goal the parents set for their children, as Mr. Coffin continuously tells his children; the young ones will have "a better chance up here in the north" (83). Ironically enough, education never means much in the black ghetto, for it doesn't help ghetto inhabitants get good jobs. The sewing teacher Mrs. Abowitz believes Frances will be a good seamstress but will never be a secretary: "I don't know why they teach courses like that to frustrate you people" (144). Hopelessness causes Ebonettes such as Luisa and Saralee

to lack all ambition to graduate, and when Sterling graduates, his father can provide for him only to get a dead man's suit from the pawnshop, which Sterling refuses to wear. Although Sterling wins a medal for high grades, he finally gives up on education and finds a job as an undertaker. The drop-outs demonstrate anthropologists' findings that "young people in the ghetto experience strong peer pressure not to succeed in school, which severely limits their prospects for social mobility in the larger society" (Massey & Denton 13).

Corruption determines daily life in the Harlem ghetto. If the police are paid off enough, they never arrest anybody. But when another numbers runner is arrested, Francie's father is also arrested. Harlem business relations are controlled by the forces outside the ghetto, and black ghetto residents who protest racial injustice are treated as public enemies and teargassed by the police. A Puerto Rican boy is beaten and shot by the police in the basement of the store when they discover he stole a pocket knife: "They drug the poor child down to the basement and shot him dead" (146). The riots of protest following reinforce the assumption that ghetto inhabitants are potential criminals. When the white man who had molested Francie is mugged and killed by the Ebony Earls, the boys, including Mrs. Maceo's son Vallie and Francie's brother James Junior, are arrested for murder; these boys had been drawn to the gang "to become somebody" (34). As Vallie and the Washington boys await electrocution, Mrs. Caldwell cries over her son Vallie. The ghetto swallows up young black boys and girls because their only role models are gang members and prostitutes. Maude wants to be "a prostitute" when she grows up. Sterling is influenced by the gang to give up on his education: "How many firms gonna hire a black chemist?" he asks (170).

The black community's activism, however creates a space that runs counter to the culture-of-poverty argument. Adam, a black activist, cares for his community. He leads rent strikes, opens a free food kitchen in Harlem feeding one thousand people a week, and preaches at the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Robert is a street speaker on the Ethiopian issue. The streets are not merely sites of crime and danger but also of black consciousness-raising efforts to keep the communal bond between the black people in the ghetto and elsewhere.

In Meriwether's novel, thus, the ghetto is not represented as merely a place with pathological implications but as a site where there is a strong sense of community. Neighbors help each other out: Mrs. Caldwell and Mrs. Coffin share food and problems. Communal support is also manifested on joyous occasions. When Daddy hits the numbers, the neigh-

bors get together for a night of celebration. When rents are paid and shopping is finished, there is money for Francie's piano lessons. The sense of community is necessary for survival in the face of white surveillance: when the cops come to arrest him, Francie's father has no numbers on him because the janitor, Mr. Edwards, has warned him about the police waiting for him in his apartment.

Representations of black ghetto residents transgress negative white stereotypes of blacks. China Doll always watches out for her sister Sukie so that she will not be sexually and economically exploited. Mr. Coffin embodies pride and honor. Francie's mother commands Sterling to speak nicely of his father although the father walked out on them: "Your father is still the head of this house . . . and as long as you live you will respect your father" (202–203). These literary representations of ghetto residents point to the discrepancy between the actual events in Harlem and the manner in which they are represented in the newspapers. The survival strategies of the ghetto residents suggest that they are people capable of action rather than mere victims of hopelessness and white oppression. Human interdependence in the ghetto is necessary because "staying alive from one day to the next, physically and emotionally, depends on everyone's helping and being helped by others" (McKay 216).

The city is conceptualized by Francie, who walks to 110th Street, looks across Central Park at the lights in the skyscrapers, and feels excluded from the white city. "That was another world, too, all those lights way over there and this spooky park standing between us. But what good would those lights do me anyway? I bet they didn't even allow colored in those big buildings" (77). Her longing for being "over there instead of stuck here in my black valley" (173) is set in direct contrast to the crowded streets of Harlem where there is neither security nor freedom of action on the sidewalks: "And how crowded the streets were, people practically falling off the sidewalks, kids scrambling between your legs almost knocking you down. There was something black and evil in these streets and that something was in me, too" (174). Harlem is represented by Meriwether as a site of confinement that menaces individual black lives within the domain of life-long poverty: "We was all poor and black and apt to stay that way, and that was that" (208). Growing up female in the black urban ghetto, "a carceral space" (Kennedy 93), means growing up feeling entrapped by race, class, and gender.

Harlem has been described by Chester Himes as "a city of contradictions. A city of Negroes isolated in the middle of New York City" (Himes qtd in Lee 55). Similarly, Meriwether's novel reconstructs Har-

lem with the paradoxical representation of crime, economic exploitation, and unemployment on the one hand and love, friendship, warmth, and interdependence on the other. The idealistic virtues of education, hard work and social mobility seem to be undermined by the politics of race that prevail as the major determining factor in the ghetto. While the ghetto is represented as a dysfunctional site of crime, it embodies the racialized and racially exclusionary definition of spatial location in the American city. The idea of the city as a synthetic totality is broken by the intervention of the ghetto, which brings a new legibility to urban representation.

Meriwether's novel constitutes the public imaginary about the black ghetto while setting it in conflict with the dominant urban imaginary. It is a novel with a distinctly local ambience, organized around the symbolic importance of racialized urban space. It transforms the black ghetto into a key site of collective memory within the broader city-centric consciousness, creating symbolic spaces out of the streets where political meetings take place to contain the world in a nutshell. It is in these spaces, however, that racial/cultural and gender identities are forged and maintained. It is also in these spaces that the city becomes illegible, for it is no longer a text for understanding the world in contrast to the city which "has traditionally acted as a place where different groups have come to escape the surveillance and order of small communities, to engage in the delight of difference" (Stevenson 59). The novel negotiates the discourse of the city as the site of individual and collective confinement. Here, the representation of the ghetto by Francie, as a black ghetto insider, may serve for understanding and shaping urban discourse. Theo Goldberg suggests that "individuals are defined and define themselves as *subjects* by way of social discourses. Discourses are the intermediary between self and society; they mediate the self as social subject" (57). But urban subjects in the ghetto construct discourses that mediate black selfhood as a social subject of the racialized urban space rather than that of the white city. The black ghetto is a site that problematizes the white city because it signifies racial and social inequality. Although long-term poverty and social dislocations (i.e. joblessness, crime, welfare dependency) may indicate a site of pathology, Meriwether also emphasizes that the black ghetto is not a monolithic place of criminals and delinquents, for the community in the novel is highly diverse. In that case, aspects of ghetto behavior depicted as "pathological" by social researchers have to be reinterpreted. Ghetto fiction is functional in the sense that we see black individuals demonstrate their ability to sur-

vive in an impoverished urban space. Such fiction, thereby, helps us shift our focus from the impact of racism to economic subordination and to black ‘achievement.’

In the final analysis, the black ghetto deconstructs the urban discourse of “the collective city”¹¹ as a site of “shared spaces, a place of parallel and sometimes intertwined lives, joint projects, externalities, and neighborhood effects” (Short 23). If civil society emerges from the shared space of the city, as Short argues, then the presence of the segregated ghetto destroys the possibility of a civil society built upon the vision of shared spaces, regardless of race. Since ghetto fiction is historically situated, “its models are configured in reality and fitted to inform our urban understandings and projects” (Bremer 196). Literary representations of the black ghetto can help us deconstruct the impact of the racialized urban space on black individuals, while offering some prescriptive models of what dimensions the democratic city can assume. The major transformation in the ghetto’s predicament requires “the committed empathy of those who now consider themselves privileged and immune to the ghetto’s flagrant pathologies” (Clark 222) in order to mobilize the strategies of understanding and power in society.

As the black ghetto resident is vulnerable to the structural transformation taking place in the city, the ghetto is constructed as a site of white surveillance. Since what the ghetto means to the black urban subject is “a reflection of the ghetto in which the white lives imprisoned” (Clark 240), the black ghetto represents the ghettoization of the white mind. In this context, *Daddy Was a Number Runner* displays the need to deconstruct the black ghetto as “a basic institution of American urban life” (Massey & Denton 8).

NOTES

This essay was originally presented at the 16th annual conference of the American Literature Association in Boston, MA, May 25–26, 2005.

1. In his book entitled *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996), Thomas J. Sugrue argues that most white observers viewed “visible poverty, overcrowding, and deteriorating houses [as] signs of individual moral deficiencies, not manifestations of structural inequalities.” (9)

2. In their “Introduction to Part 2,” in Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout, eds. *The City Reader* (1996; New York: Routledge, 2000), LeGates and Stout note that there has been extensive sociological research on the black ghettos of the United States focusing on the social pathology of inner-city communities:

“Beginning with W. E. B. DuBois’s study of *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and continuing through the work of E. Franklin Frazier (*The Negro Family in the United States*, 1939), St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (*Black Metropolis*, 1945), and Kenneth B. Clark (*Dark Ghetto*, 1965), African American scholars have taken the lead in examining the social and cultural dynamics of ghetto communities in America’s northern cities. More recently, an important debate, called the ‘underclass’ debate, arose concerning the plight of the mostly Black residents of American inner-city ghettos. Among the principals in that debate are Charles Murray, a white libertarian conservative, and William Julius Wilson, an African American sociologist” (90).

3. Robert Bernasconi, “The Ghetto and Race,” in David Theo Goldberg and John Solomos, eds. *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), p. 340. Bernasconi contends that the word itself was introduced for the first time in the sixteenth century to describe a segregated town or city in which “Jews were confined at night, at which time members of other groups were forbidden entry.” In the twentieth century, however, the word came to be used more broadly, while it continues to signify segregation at its basis. The ghetto now refers to “any area of a city or town in which the living quarters of an ethnic minority are concentrated, although the term is usually reserved for poor, densely populated, inner-city districts.” Bernasconi argues that some believe that the “true” ghetto implies imposition by law, but there are also others who argue that the term “ghetto” is applicable if “the place where almost all members of an ethnic group live is racially segregated, and if it is difficult for them to move to an area that is not racially segregated . . .” (340). Loïc Wacquant, in his article “Gutting the Ghetto: Political Censorship and Conceptual Retrenchment in the American Debate on Urban Destitution,” in Malcolm Cross & Robert Moore, eds., *Globalization and the New City: Migrants, Minorities and Urban Transformations in Comparative Perspective* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), claims that semantics of the word “ghetto” in the USA over the past century displays “a sharp break with the established meaning of the term: from the 1860s to the 1970s, the ghetto always conjugated ethno-racial separation with socio-spatial enclosure.” He argues that starting with the 1980s the issue of race seems to disappear when a group of analysts “propose to equate ghetto with any perimeter of ‘extreme poverty,’ no matter its ethnic composition and institutional make up” (32–33).

4. In *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton note that President Lyndon B. Johnson, in the aftermath of riots in the 1960s, appointed a commission chaired by Governor Otto Kerner “to identify the causes of the violence and to propose policies to prevent its recurrence” (3). The Kerner Commission held: “Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto” (qtd p. 4).

5. In his article, "The Ghetto, the State, and the new Capitalist Economy" in *Metropolis: Centre and Symbol of Our Times*, Philip Kasinitz, ed. (Hampshire: Macmillan P, 1995), Loïc Wacquant suggests that "[o]ne of the reasons at the root of the demise of the 'Black Metropolis' is distinctively political: it is the *collapse of public institutions in the urban core* resulting from the policy of abandonment and punitive containment of the minority poor pursued at all levels of government since the mid-1970s" (438).

6. William J. Wilson corrects the distortion of reality about the Moynihan Report that occasioned controversy. Although the Moynihan Report has always been used as evidence for the culture-of-poverty argument, the arguments against Moynihan's position were solely based on his vision of the ghetto as a site of pathology. Such was not entirely the case. See Wilson, "Introduction," Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (1965; Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1989), xiv.

7. Richard Lehan, in *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998) says "[t]extualizing the city creates its own reality, [and] becomes a way of seeing the city" (291). Here, it may be applied to the ghetto as text shaping a perspective of the city.

8. Edward W. Soja, in *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), defines the urban imaginary as "our mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces, and communities in which we live" (324). Likewise, Liam Kennedy, in *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), also suggests that "urban imaginary" "is not a unified construct, but rather a confusing and conflicting ideological terrain of values and assumptions, fears and desires, in which race plays an important structuring role" (2).

9. See Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?': Black Harlem In the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), pp. 38 and 102 on how numbers running worked in attracting white bankers to Harlem for economic exploitation.

10. See Greenberg, *'Or Does It Explode?': Black Harlem In the Great Depression*, pp. 59–60.

11. In his article, "Three Urban Discourses" in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, eds., *A Companion to the City* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), John Rennie Short lays out three fundamental discourses of the city: "The Authoritarian City" as a site of "social aggregation that involve[s] compulsion, order, and discipline as well as freedom, anarchy, and self-realization" (18); "The Cosmic City" as "a religious artifact" (22) whose "site and shape echoed religious cosmology" (22); and "The Collective City" as a site of "collective provision, collective consumption, and the workings of civil society" (23). He argues that civil society "has emerged from the set of rules and practices established in the shared space of the city." (24)

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