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***LA DOULEUR EXQUISE: NEOLIBERALISM, RACE AND THE
UN/MAKING OF BLACKNESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY***

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Brandi Thompson Summers

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The Dissertation of Brandi Thompson Summers
is approved:

Professor Herman Gray, chair

Professor Dana Takagi

Professor Deborah Gould

Tyrus Miller
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

LA DOULEUR EXQUISE: NEOLIBERALISM, RACE, AND THE UN/MAKING OF BLACKNESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by

BRANDI THOMPSON SUMMERS

La Douleur Exquise: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Un/Making of Blackness in the 21st Century, examines how neoliberalism operates as a cultural discourse and the distinctive ways that race is deployed through the constitution of bodies and spaces. My data for the project draws on the cultural politics of aesthetics and political economies of redevelopment.

Using a mixed methodology of visual, textual, and ethnographic analysis, I examine two different sites of the discursive production of blackness and contemporary politics: high fashion and urban development. I develop an argument about the interrelatedness of neoliberalism, race, and aesthetics and maintain that neoliberalism embeds a particular logic about blackness that ought to be understood as an aesthetic politics or racial aesthetics. While scholarship on race and neoliberalism observe that neoliberalism dissociates race and racism from social actors and social formations, my project highlights aesthetics as a social formation, which is in turn an articulation of blackness specifically, and race, generally. By considering aesthetics, this project expands claims about neoliberalism and race that tend to highlight the political economic logics of how neoliberalism ideologically deploys race in service of capitalism.

The study has two components: first, I explore how blackness is deployed on bodies by explicitly focusing on editorial images in the high fashion industry, and by developing an archive of industry publications, fashion blogs, interviews with designers, stylists, magazine editors, photographers, models, and fashion writers that feature descriptions, responses, and conversations in the fashion world about the role of race in high fashion. Secondly, I use ethnography to explore the discursive meanings and expressions of blackness produced within physical spaces of everyday life as they develop alongside urban renewal efforts along the H Street, NE corridor in Washington, D.C.

I draw on African American Studies, Urban Sociology, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, and Visual Studies to guide my interdisciplinary exploration of fashion and urban renewal and their engagement with identity, visibility, and oppositional politics within the context of neoliberalism. Within each site, I empirically describe how blackness operates and identify the mechanics of how neoliberalism works as a system. To capture the importance of the everyday, I look to these innocuous spaces to concretely illustrate how neoliberalism appears visually and through discourses of racial authenticity, identity, and excess.

Dedication

For Cameron January, who gives my life purpose and meaning

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resilient, and able to accomplish any goal. With Rob in my life, I constantly want to do and be better. I am eternally grateful for his unconditional love and trust.

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INTRODUCTION: SIGHTS AND SITES OF BLACKNESS

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois prophetically declared that the problem of the twentieth century was “the problem of the color line” (DuBois 1965 [1903]). With the historic election of our first black American President, many believe that the twenty-first century has ushered in a new moment where race is no longer the central defining feature of American society. The mass media is replete with the idea that we are beyond, or “post-” notions of racial discrimination and President Barack Obama’s election (and re-election) are clear indications that we have achieved a truly “post-racial” America. I define post-race as the theoretical extraction of race from any meaningful dialogue about our economic, social and political conditions— or put simply, we are “beyond” race, since race is no longer a factor when considering the life chances of individuals. Post-racial discourse rests on the strategic disregard of racism by ignoring the implications of race. Identifying Obama’s election as evidence of our post-racial times illustrates a crucial function of post-race discourse – to diminish the current reality of racism.

Since Illinois Senator Barack Obama announced his run for office in 2007, race has been one of the most debated topics in the United States. The furor over his campaign and election highlights the centrality of race generally, and blackness specifically, to our lives. The language of post-race became a crucial element of the Obama campaign, which promoted a clear and explicit message that race would not be a defining feature of his candidacy. The mainstream news (and social) media

responded with countless pieces about the value of Obama's brand of post-racialism in bridging gaps between racially polarized communities. In fact, the day after Obama's historic win in November 2008, *The New York Times* ran a lead story entitled: "OBAMA: Racial Barrier Falls in Decisive Victory." The significance of Obama's election transformed the global configuration of racial discourse and the American social and political imaginary into an allegedly post-racial space, signaling a meaningful shift from civil rights era sensibilities about how we think about race. On the one hand, Obama's election indicated the triumphant arrival of post-racial America as a particularly modern phenomenon. On the other hand, his presidency also rekindled our commitment to positing race as visually constructed (Cobb 2011). Obama's campaign and election revealed that all of the post-racial fantasies about race and racial representation were tied up in the hopes and imaginations about Obama himself.

La Douleur Exquise concerns the everyday operation of race in this presumed "post-racial" moment. My goal is to expose practices of inequality that are created from the incorporation of post-race and diversity discourses into neoliberal logics, which specify certain visual/visible representations of race while concurrently promoting notions of universal progress and choice. I consider African American culture as a case study to chart the operation of race and inequality. My analysis of race is developed within the context of what is referred to as the post-civil rights, or

more specifically, post-Obama era,¹ significantly shaped by neoliberal formations that are characterized by an individualist, meritocratic, and a competitive culture purportedly sustained through free-market capitalism.

In theorizing neoliberalism, I draw on the work of Lisa Duggan (2004), who describes neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology that “organizes material and political life *in terms of* race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion. But the categories through which Liberalism (and also Neoliberalism) classifies human activity and relationships *actively obscure* the connections among these organizing terms” (p. 3). While I do not argue that there is one, all-encompassing neoliberalism, Duggan and others emphasize the significance of scholarly attention to specific contexts in which various modalities of neoliberalism operate (see Ong 2006; Rose 2006). Conceptually, Duggan challenges David Harvey’s Marxist research on the neoliberal dimensions of space, labor, and justice. The main difference is that she places race, gender, and sexuality at the center of her analysis. In particular, Harvey theorizes issues of identity and culture as disruptive in terms of the fundamental issue of class conflict. He argues that “‘progressive’ politics around special issues and the rise of the so-called new social movements focusing on gender, race, ethnicity, ecology, sexuality, multiculturalism, community, and the like” (1997:341) enfeebled working class politics of the 1970s.

¹ I attach the prefix “post-” to Obama to describe the current social and political climate not to signal a moment after Obama’s presidency, but to highlight the significance of his election and installment as the 44th President of the United States to the preoccupation with becoming a post-racial America. The “hope” and “change” slogans connected to his campaign signified a desire to see Obama considered a viable leader in spite of his race.

In my study, I provide a critical reading of how neoliberal discourses condition and shape understandings of race. With the changing nature of our social and economic climate, how does race still fit in? How and where does race work? What are the visual and discursive practices associated with the governing of race? How and where does neoliberalism produce new regimes of blackness and black subjectivity? For scholars of African American Studies, Cultural Studies, and Sociology who research the relationship between race, representation, and the political economy, neoliberalism introduces an interesting challenge to identify and describe the importance of racial meanings. In order to address these questions and illustrate the ideological connections between post-racialism and neoliberalism, I use high fashion and urban redevelopment to analyze how race and racial difference are linked to aesthetics as a way to marginalize conversations about the continuing significance of race as a valuable category of analysis. I specifically analyze editorial fashion images presented in two issues of *Vogue Italia* magazine, the first, an all-black issue, and the second an editorial spread, “Haute Mess,” which primarily features white models adorned with fashion accessories and bodily dispositions often attributed to lower- and working-class black women. Then, I provide a historical and contemporary analysis of the “revitalization” of a popular commercial district in Washington, D.C. – the H Street, NE corridor.

I identify the current conjuncture as *post-race neoliberal*, which I suggest is the intersection of post-race discourse and neoliberalism. Post-race and neoliberalist discourses go hand in hand as both reproduce the myth of American exceptionalism

under capitalism: through a commitment to hard work, fairness, and ethical play that anyone can achieve the American Dream. Obama's election feeds directly into this myth by suggesting that race no longer stands as a barrier to individual success. Appeals to fairness via universalism, explicitly deny the specificity of racial experiences and histories (Omi and Winant 1994).

I use the term "post-race neoliberalism" to represent a more expansive understanding of neoliberalism as a term for the contemporary organization of governance, the economy, and social life and in some cases biological life (given the recent popularity of ancestral mapping through genomic testing [see Duster 2003; Reardon 2009; Rose 2007; Nelson 2008]). Conceptually, post-race neoliberalism allows me to assemble the various elements and theories African American Studies, Visual Studies, Sociology, Media Studies, and Cultural Studies bring to bear. I argue that post-race neoliberalism operates in areas like politics and the economy, but I am curious what impact it has on everyday and popular imaginations of race. Furthermore, I claim that aesthetics and the stylization of blackness facilitate and execute the process of post-race neoliberalism.

In this study I ask: how and where does the current reality of post-race neoliberalism produce new regimes of blackness? How have discursive practices around race changed? How is blackness stylized so that the logic of post-race neoliberalism takes on a contemporary form that did not occur in the past? More importantly, how does the aestheticization of blackness act as a complement, rather than a threat, to emerging discourses of multicultural diversity? I argue that post-race

neoliberalism stitches multiculturalism into the narratives of renewal, globalization, and American progress. I propose to understand how these practices contribute to the propagation of racial inequality in the U.S.

Strange Bedfellows: High Fashion and Politics

I was immediately drawn to the excitement around the Obama campaign particularly in relationship to my scholarly investigations of culture and productions of contemporary black subjectivity. At first, I sought to research the ways in which blackness was deployed in traditional political organizing in Washington, D.C. While collecting data, I began to notice the increasing presence of non-traditional participants in the political sphere, especially fashion editors, designers, and models who aligned themselves with the Obama campaign and later, his administration. Notably, *Vogue Italia* editor Franca Sozzani was interviewed by countless media outlets where she credited the success of Oprah Winfrey and President Obama for her growing interest in promoting and supporting (diverse) black models and designers. Sozzani's fascination with Winfrey and President Obama, to me, exemplified the emergence of a particularly American form of blackness to the global stage, and with it came questions about the meaning and significance of blackness in the twenty-first century. That Sozzani's inspiration to produce an issue of *Vogue Italia* exclusively featuring black models stemmed from two exemplary and iconic black American public figures made me think about the pervasiveness of post-race discourse in an unlikely space. I thought about how the longing for a post-racial America provokes more global attention to blackness, as opposed to less. While post-race attempts to

minimize the significance of race in daily life, it also gives us permission to play with it. Within this post-racial moment (where one's racial identity does not hinder their success) blackness is disarticulated from its oppressive history, and is instead used as a site to celebrate difference.

I was curious about why Sozzani would choose to shine a spotlight on black bodies and black culture after witnessing the public achievements of two figures rather than promoting diversity in high fashion at an earlier historical point, when blackness most clearly signified abjectness. What is it about this Obama moment that Sozzani felt confident her niche publication, produced in Italy, would receive critical acclaim for releasing an issue devoted completely to black interest pieces and black models? To get at these questions, I needed to understand how blackness is thought in the high fashion industry and why an elite Italian publication chose to take up blackness in image. The sources to which I turned included models, photographers, and fashion writers like Robin Givhan.

In a telephone interview, I asked Ms. Givhan to share her thoughts on the topic of race and racial diversity in the high fashion industry. She said race is something that is very complicated and nuanced in fashion. Nothing is simple because choices appear to be driven by "pure aesthetics" and by subjective notions of taste and beauty. She explained that "race is like a paint chip" in fashion, where some designers use models of color to be provocative (not political) while others include a diverse range of models for purely aesthetic reasons. Givhan also suggested that many individuals in fashion seem to think of themselves and the practice of art-

making as disengaged from the social world around them. These astute observations immediately led me to think about the relationship of aesthetics to race. If in fashion, race is reduced to color, did the decision to produce an all-black issue of *Vogue Italia* also involve the recognition of blackness as an aesthetic feature? Her remarks also led me to consider the importance of thinking about race outside the category of identity – indeed, the decision to insert “blackness” into multiple images and runway performances was not driven by racial identity, per se, but color instead. It was at this point that I wanted to learn more about the unlikely marriage of race, politics, fashion, aesthetics and importance of blackness in emerging discourses of post-race, multiculturalism, and diversity.

Runway to Win and “The Incident”

I was able to experience interconnectedness of politics and fashion first-hand on February 7, 2012, at the “Runway to Win” cocktail reception in New York City hosted by American *Vogue* editor, Anna Wintour and actress Scarlett Johansson. For the event Wintour enlisted twenty-three designers to create merchandise to sell in support of President Obama’s reelection campaign. Proceeds for the purchases went directly to the Obama Victory Fund. The reception’s precursor, “Runway for Change,” included paraphernalia created by eleven designers in support of Obama’s first presidential bid. While I dined on complementary hors d’oeuvres and champagne, I glanced around the room to see a diverse sampling of actors, designers, singers, and affluent campaign donors. I saw this event as the perfect opportunity to meet major players in the fashion industry and therefore decided to introduce myself

to one successful and well-known American designer who stood nearby. This designer was very friendly and open, so I took the opportunity to discuss my interests in race and the fashion industry. To my surprise, she offered to introduce me to fashion insiders, including models, editors, and other designers. She gave me her email address and suggested I contact her with a “wish list” of those with whom I had hoped to interview. I emailed her the following day expressing my gratitude for her consideration and I provided her with a list of several key players in the fashion industry who I had hoped to meet.

Nearly three weeks later, I experienced what I believed was a considerable setback in my research project development. I learned from a close friend and political insider that the successful, well-known American designer with whom I spoke at the “Runway to Win” reception had contacted the White House expressing some reservations about talking to a student who was writing her dissertation about fashion, race, and Mrs. Obama. While I did not tell the designer that my project was related to the First Lady in any way, as described the topic appeared too provocative since it was “an election year,” and therefore the designer was discouraged from speaking with me.

At the time, the incident left me demoralized, however I quickly realized how crucial it was to my investigation of the role of race in high fashion as it pointed to the fears associated with conversations about race. I was also compelled by the assumption the designer made about my project relating to the First Lady simply because I mentioned term “race.” First Lady Michelle Obama, since 2008, had

become a media darling due to her impeccable fashion/style choices. She embodies what Leigh Raiford (2011), Nicole Fleetwood (2011) and Imani Perry (2012) refer to as iconic blackness in this period. Fashion stories that involve race most often refer to her in some way. Now, references to black style begin and end with the First Lady, or she serves as a model for aspirational, iconic black femininity.

The incident speaks to the power of race in a social, political, and economic climate that eschews race. Both traditional politics and fashion claim to be beyond or outside of race, though the mere mention of the word “race” causes turmoil. While I clearly touched upon a subject to which there is a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty, the incident also speaks to what topics and terms are (un)acceptable in certain spaces. The designer freely discussed the role and meaning of race in fashion at the “Runway to Win” event, however upon further reflection, I suppose she believed a conversation about race might jeopardize her access to a powerful, political, and decidedly post-racial space. Ultimately, the incident led me to question why individuals are afraid to talk about race in fashion but freely work with blackness in image.

Chocolate City dreams

It was my relocation to Washington, D.C. to research political organizing that enabled me to explore the rich, exciting, cosmopolitan environment of the city firsthand and discover the monumental changes taking place – including the transformation of the H Street, NE corridor. Prior to my decision to study the neighborhood, I spent several days and nights observing the goings-on of the

rebranded “Atlas District.” I was curious about the impact of post-racial discourse and neoliberal urban development strategies on this city that has been long defined by its blackness, and a city where America’s first black President resided. I started to discover similarities between the ways in which blackness was deployed in the high fashion industry and in the physical transformation of H Street – particularly how blackness was valued and used to invite spectators to the region.

Known as one of three neighborhoods devastated by riots following the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., H Street, NE was named *USA Today*’s top “up and coming” neighborhood. In recent years, community organizations and government agencies have placed significant efforts into the rebuilding and rebranding of the H Street NE, corridor, privileging “diversity” and the possibility of a global community. For the first time in years, black residents no longer represent the majority in Washington, D.C. and areas that were previously “off-limits” because of high rates of criminal activity, now boast new upscale restaurants, bars, eclectic furniture stores, and art galleries.

Given the history of the neighborhood, I was curious about the remaking and literal embodiment of H Street as a space of diversity. This remaking requires changing the prevailing narrative that defines the neighborhood as a “black ghetto,” or area of urban blight, to a more desirable narrative of diversity and multiculturalism. Therefore, I wanted to investigate how diversity has been discursively sutured to this neighborhood to produce a brand new spatial identity. As Stuart Hall (1996a) writes, identities operate “as points of identification and

attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, leave out, to render ‘outside,’ abjected. Every identity has at its ‘margin,’ and excess” (p. 5). I became interested in the incorporation and marginal excesses of blackness that do not fit into the revised story of H Street’s multicultural past.

Various scholars in Sociology, Anthropology, and Communication Studies highlight the neoliberalization of cultural spaces through the use of branding and marketing technologies to mark particular identities onto particular spaces, thus resignifying these spaces according to new rules of inclusion and exclusion (Dávila 2004; Hoffman 2003; Thomas 2009; Camp 2009; Londoño and Dávila 2010). These projects discuss the marketability and commodification of culture in terms of the racialization of space in places like Harlem, Brooklyn, and New Orleans. Similar to these scholars, I am interested in learning how racial difference is used to structure, govern, and commodify race, however I depart from them by emphasizing the aestheticization of race as a way to regulate difference.

Together, I investigate both sites to ask what claims do fashion and urban redevelopment make about their representations of blackness today? What does blackness mean, or more importantly, do in fashion and redevelopment? How does blackness operate in these spaces and what are the mechanics that show how neoliberalism works as a system? I saw the transformation of H Street as a compelling case, because unlike the exclusive and elite high fashion industry, the changing political economy of transitioning neighborhoods like H Street is a relatable phenomenon that is taking place across the U.S. amid widespread (white) population

shifts from the suburbs to the city. Thinking about the work of race in fashion is not extraneous but necessary to help us understand the relationship between race and value. In other words, the overarching role of fashion is to create a cultural definition of beauty – and beauty carries value. Therefore, the fashion industry helps us define who is of value and how much value. In discussing the production of blackness in the high fashion industry and the process of (de)racialization in the re-imagination of public space in a popular Washington D.C. neighborhood, I reflect on the usefulness of neoliberalism as an analytic to help explain how blackness is deployed for the reproduction of social inequalities.

I posit aesthetics as an explicit link between these two sites. The development and circulation of meaning in both rely on aesthetics to assign value to individual and collective bodies and spaces. In fashion, aesthetics determine the value of clothing, but also bodies, and vision. In urban development and planning, aesthetics, through the use of branding strategies, heritage tourism, and certain lifestyle programs, are used to attract commerce, customers, and residents. My project considers the function of race as an aesthetic feature and illustrates how (and why) blackness, in particular, is mobilized as style.

I provide a discursive analysis to locate the tensions between post-racialism and constructions of blackness within the context of contemporary neoliberalism. I look at how these tensions appear in our daily lives and constitute popular narratives that reflect desire for “a more perfect union” – casting out racism, sexism, and poverty in favor of universal social, economic, and political freedom.

In the aftermath of the civil rights era, I contend that this post-Obama moment is shaped by discourses of post-race, which indicates a neoliberal rhetoric of race that has infiltrated not only politics and economics but also culture (Hay 2003; Mukherjee 2006a; Goldberg 2008). Through textual, image, and media analysis in the elite fashion industry, I analyze how the racial logic of blackness is symbolically conceptualized, celebrated, and deployed as difference. I recognize the fashion industry as an “art world” (Becker 2008) that is guided by aesthetic practices, conventions, and values. I also use ethnography, archival research, and textual analysis to discover how multiple meanings of blackness and diversity have impacted the redevelopment of an ailing commercial corridor in Washington, D.C. I draw from these approaches to expose instances in which “black” space is used to substantiate multiculturalism. This dissertation identifies discursive productions like glamour and nostalgia that regulate and make blackness possible. Ultimately, I destabilize the implicit links between blackness and identity to uncover the sites and sights of blackness that operate under a condition that I have named, post-race neoliberalism.

The cultural logic of race in these neoliberal times

Neoliberalism grew out of the 1970s as a political economic term meant to characterize free-market reforms used to replace flawed state-driven economic development. Neoliberalism grew to become an expressly political project in its emphasis on a minimized state, decentralization, and the affirmation of individual rights. Most important to my project, neoliberalism also comprises of cultural elements. The terms structuring neoliberalism “obscure and mystify” various aspects

of life under late-capitalism, by concealing what Lisa Duggan calls “stark inequalities of wealth and power and of class, race, gender, and sexuality across nation-states as well as within them” (2003:5). In other words, discourses and ideologies of neoliberalism expose putative knowledges that are saturated with logics of class, race, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, rather than suppressing cultural and racial difference, neoliberalism produces difference.

Neoliberalism is based on the belief in the superiority of free markets to foster social mobility and prosperity. Whereas classical and neo-classical liberalism of nineteenth century Western Europe and the U.S. primarily emphasized small government and the individual liberty of white men to own property and vote, neoliberalism proposes that men and women, regardless of creed or color can enjoy these same rights. Several major policies that have been implemented due to neoliberalism include privatization, laissez-faire capitalism, deregulation, and significant cuts to welfare spending. Scholars recognize neoliberalism as an economic ideology that deploys market logic as a way to protect and promote social equality and individual liberties – while relying on the market to meet the desires and needs of individuals (Melamed 2006). Neoliberal ideology defines the state as inefficient and advances the notion that the intrusion of a powerful state constrains personal freedom (Jones and Mukherjee 2010). It is through the flows from our political economy to the realms of culture and society that we experience a conceptual shift away from the identification of structural problems and solutions towards discourses on personal responsibility (Hasinoff 2008; Thompson 2010).

I propose the need to recognize racial dimensions of neoliberalism to contemporary U.S. social, political, and economic culture. Rather than attempting to redefine neoliberalism, I am invested in queries about its deployment of race in the production of racial difference. I agree with David Theo Goldberg (2012) who insists that neoliberalism involves the amplification and intensification of individualism, privatization, meritocracy, and multiple modes of discipline and self-discipline. Neoliberalism's relationship to post-racialism rests on the fact that both require the continuous development of new markets and new identities to uphold them (Goldberg 2012:202). Both terms also employ an optimistic confidence in the power of unfettered choice, individuality, and "hard work" to achieve social wealth. Like neoliberalism, inherent in post-race discourse is an emphasis on individuality since race no longer holds us back from achieving success. Considering the logic of what I have named, "post-race neoliberalism," race can no longer be a determining factor of an individual's success since everyone has access to compete in the free market. Therefore, if you work hard enough, anyone can achieve the American Dream.

Envisioning a post-racial present

While use of the term "post-race" is a relatively recent phenomenon, the ideological retreat from race that post-racialism invokes gained traction with the academic discourse and political implementation of "colorblindness" in social analysis, policy, and legislation like Proposition 209 in California (1996), *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) in Michigan, and other challenges to affirmative action in higher

education and public employment.² The logic behind colorblindness posits that the state's practice of recognizing and categorizing racial identities is a racist and discriminatory practice. Where colorblindness was enacted as a discursive tool that involved the monitoring of race so that institutions "can be sure they are making 'truly color-blind' choices" (Mukherjee 2006a), post-racialism signifies a condition, a racial logic that sets the terms for how we (should) live. Today, post-race signifies a perceived "reality" – that with the election of President Obama, due in large part to the support of white voters, white Americans no longer harbor racial hostility nor mobilize oppressive stereotypes to limit black progress. Like colorblindness, post-racialism offers a way to talk about race as a visual idea and insist that we do not *see* race any longer (Cobb 2011).

Post-racial discourse appeals to both the political Left and Right and therefore behaves like an empty or floating signifier. In other words, the meaning of "post-race" is relational and is subject to redefinition by different groups at different times. For the Left, particularly white leftists, post-racialism delivers redemption from the guilt of being racist (e.g., voting for a black President absolves one from being racist). Furthermore, to exist in a post-racial America signals the triumph of the civil rights movement, and subsequent identity-based movements challenging racism and racist

² During California's general election in November 1996, voters passed Proposition 209. In an effort spearheaded by the conservative California Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI), the measure revised the California constitution to require that "the state shall not discriminate against or grant preferential treatment of any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting" (California Constitution, Article 1, §31a). In the first Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action in higher education since *Regents v. Bakke* (1978), the *Grutter v. Bollinger* ruling in 2003 upheld the University of Michigan Law School's affirmative action admissions policy.

practices. The Right, on the other hand, can latch onto the discursive emphasis of moving beyond historical context, which they believe was over-determined by race (Cho 2009). Therefore, post-race and post-racism discourse not only denies the existence of racism, but also accuses those who challenge racism as racist (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Post-racialism attempts to exceed the bounds of race through the denial of its historical conditions and contemporary existence (Goldberg 2012). Such cultural ideas of post-racialism proposed a shift away from America's sordid racial history to usher in a new historical moment when race no longer determines life chances (Cobb 2011).

This narrative of post-racialism is one of racial transcendence and universalism. As a "discourse of distraction," post-racialism appears in the form of images and messages of progress across different media (Ono 2010). Minh-Ha Pham (2004) points to such (false) universalism as the "mask of multiculturalism." In her analysis of how transnational discourses of multiculturalism operate in the representation of Asian bodies in popular Hollywood films, Pham argues that beneath the façade of progressive, racially-inclusive casting, multicultural representations open up a space for obvious racist stereotypes. A similar argument could be made for representations of blackness in film and popular culture, especially in the late-20th century. Since the election of Obama, I insist that representations of blackness have become more complex and nuanced. As I will show in the chapters on high fashion, blackness is not always represented by racist stereotypes, nor are black bodies necessary for the circulation of blackness in various spaces.

I characterize this the post-racial moment as distinct from the civil rights era of the 1960s, but an extension of the multiply characterized “post-” epochs starting in the 1990s. The use of “post-“ when considering broad cultural dynamics evokes the idea that we are experiencing a significant historical shift. Since the 1990s, African American cultural scholars have introduced terms like “post-black” (Golden 2001), “post-soul” (George 1992, Neal 2002), and “post-civil rights condition” (Shelby 2005) to describe the historical and cultural moment. They focus on the construction of black identity through historical traditions, institutions, cultural performance, popular cultural expressions, and the market economy (p. 668). These terms represent a generational and ideological shift from the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and highlight the intersection of blackness, identity, and aesthetics. Furthermore, the idea of post- provides the opportunity to move away from traditional notions of blackness to multiple, fluid and contingent notions of blackness that reconceive its complexity.

Scholars of African American Studies have focused on the art and politics of black vernacular expression in its attempt to subvert hegemonic representations of blackness (hooks 1992, Kelley 1994; Neal 2002; Watkins 1998). There is an inherent tension of racial identity in America that invites a freedom to self-identify as well as the pressure to be identified by certain attitudes and practices. Rather than researching the cultural strategies and practices employed by African Americans to resist and transform racist representations of blackness, I am invested in a discursive turn to post-racialism in the late-2000s with the election of President Barack Obama,

particularly the hegemonic discourses that place race both at the center and margins of American social, political, and economic culture. In particular, my study does not engage in questions about blackness as identity, rather blackness as an aesthetic. Therefore, I am not interested in measuring the increase or decrease in the number of black bodies in either high fashion magazine editorials or on H Street – such a practice reduces blackness to an identity. Instead, I consider blackness as an aesthetic that can be attached to black bodies, but is also present in objects, performances, language, etc. Nor do I account for the accuracy or inaccuracy of representations of blackness (including stereotype) – rather, I investigate the deployment of blackness as the result of a historically situated aesthetic formation. I will provide more detail in the following chapter.

My use of the term “post-race” vs. “post-soul” (or post-civil rights condition or post-black) does not negate the latter term’s continuing significance – in fact, I would argue that these moments are contemporaneous. Where post-soul focuses on the work of blackness and black cultural producers to challenge racism, “post-race” reflects a popular ideology that reflects hegemonic discursive claims to legibility and legitimacy in spite of continuing inequalities.

I conceive of “post-race” in a way that differs from scholars who advocate a politics and paradigm envisioning a world beyond race (Gilroy 2001). Instead I use the term as a discursive strategy used to promote the idea that race no longer matters. Therefore, the success of post-racialism requires the visibility of blackness to prove that we have transcended the need to consider race – post-racialism makes race as

increasingly part of a visual schema. On the other hand, devotion to post-racialism maintains that the presence of enduring inequalities experienced by African Americans are not due to institutional or structural constraints but to the cultural deficiencies of African Americans.

Post-racial visibility and representing blackness

Again, I suggest that an explicit emphasis on aesthetics is what is missing from the research that explains the operation of race and racism in terms of the current neoliberal turn. I look to aesthetics to see how the visual logic of race, specifically blackness, operates in this current landscape through various practices. In this way, I adopt Howard Becker's (2008) formulation of aesthetics as an activity or a practice, "rather than a body of doctrine" (p. 131). By aesthetics, I refer to visual and affective judgments of taste, and in some cases, beauty. I borrow from Clyde Taylor's (1998) interrogation of aesthetics in which he identifies the aesthetic as an ideological "system of representation and reception encoding the world for the spectator position of the Western upper middle class" (p. 14) that operates as a discrete category of perception with its own rules (p. 10). The aesthetic functions as a historically and culturally constructed category of knowledge. I suggest that there is a direct relationship between aesthetics and the ways that racial knowledge about blackness is organized today – an assumed knowingness related to how blackness is expressed, recognized, and visualized. I argue that an analysis of aesthetics will help reveal the quotidian operations of inequality since aesthetics have a tremendous influence on how we make sense of and affectively respond to the world, and use the

term “stylization” to operationalize the work of aesthetics. Specifically, I investigate how neoliberalism, through the aestheticization or stylization of race, produces subjects who help perform the work of disavowing race through its commodification.

My dissertation is a story about the kinds of ambivalences possible under neoliberalism and the connection between neoliberalism and race. I examine the neoliberal deployment of race in the age of post-race and use the fashion industry and urban redevelopment to show how race is both essential and irrelevant in the post-race neoliberal moment. In particular, I question what the in/visibility of blackness, as a racial logic, is asked to do for neoliberalism. Neoliberalism attempts to remove the subtle, mundane, quotidian, everydayness of race and racism. I take W. J. T. Mitchell’s lead and evade the choice between positing race as either an objective reality or a subjective illusion and instead recognize race as a medium “not simply something to be seen, but itself a framework for seeing through” or more importantly, “seeing *as*” (Mitchell 2012:13). In this way, race acts as “a vehicle for *both* fantasy *and* reality” (p. 14). While blackness has become hypervisible as a signifier of post-racial America, blackness has also been made *invisible* with reference to its cultural and social relevance.³ As Jelani Cobb (2011) asserts, “the notion of racial invisibility is proven by racial ubiquity” (p. 408). In other words, the increasing presence of black Americans proves that America no longer see blackness as a problem. An important element of post-racialism is its need to disavow the social, political, and

³ David Theo Goldberg (2010) argues that invisibility “suggests a hidden dimension, sometimes unknowing or inadvertent but more than likely planned, or at least ordered, structurally arranged, deeply embedded” (p. 91). Therefore the invisibility of blackness, like contemporary forms of racism, are not explicitly planned but still intimately tied to the conditions of post-race neoliberalism.

economic impacts of slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and various oppressive forms of discrimination against black Americans. Hence Obama's installment as President is visible proof that the achievement of African-descended people is not tethered to America's shameful past.

In this post-racial Obama era, visibility operates as a form of capital, specifically in popular culture. Visibility in popular culture provides certain access and mobility that previous civil rights discourses of organization, protest, and rights no longer accomplish. In the past, difference could be thought about in terms of simple binaries, e.g., insider/outsider, good/bad, high/low. However as we learn from Stuart Hall (1996b), prior to the civil rights movement when explicit forms of discrimination across racial, gendered, and class lines were common and acceptable, the conditions called for a cultural politics that required marginal groups to attempt to gain access to the "relations of representation" and alter the politics of representation while combating stereotypical images. More specifically, the cultural politics of the civil rights era were organized around the transformation of hegemonic regimes of representation in areas like music, literature, television, and film – where blacks were most often fetishized objects and rarely subjects (Hall 1996b). In order to contest the simplification of black subjects and challenge stereotypical images, black artists and cultural producers opted to focus on "positive" black imagery. Today, the emphasis on turning *bad* representations into *good* representations only flattens and suppresses heterogeneity.

Race is a slippery and convoluted term, one that is often studied by virtue of its effects – like the impact of racism on structural inequalities. Because of its slipperiness, race becomes more and more challenging to measure in everyday life. I investigate how blackness, as an instrument of race, operates in this contemporary, post-Obama era. My overall interest is in the complex and varied struggles that are taking place over the meaning of blackness today. My conceptual engagement with blackness stems from my acknowledgement of the formulaic confounding of race matters in the U.S. with blackness. Moreover, I agree with Sharon Holland’s astute observation that “when we see and say ‘race,’ regardless of how much we intend to understand race as being had by everyone, our examples of racial being and racist targets are often grounded in *black matter(s)*” (2012:4). Conceding the historical ties between race and blackness, this routine provides me with an opportunity to consider how the notion of post-race deploys blackness in the twenty-first century.

I use this project to flesh out the character of the moment in ways that help us understand race today. While I agree that “blackness” has multiple modalities and multiple meanings, I am particularly interested in the meaning(s) mapped upon the term in this post-Obama era. In my analysis of editorial images in high fashion, I am not concerned with the intention of the editorial staff, photographers, publisher, or even the models. Instead, I am interested in the function of the images and their fulfillment of a particular racial project (post-race neoliberalism). I advocate the centrality of images, as objects of visual culture, rather than language, to consider how they communicate notions of post-raciality. My analysis of H Street provides a

historical trajectory of the changing meaning and use of blackness in concert with the physical transformation of the neighborhood. I do not argue for a “true” representation of blackness, instead I look to the ways multiple definitions of blackness are deployed to achieve particular social and economic ends.

Next steps

Michel Foucault posits that the body is a site for the articulation of power relations. Here I argue for post-race neoliberalism to be viewed as a form a power that uses race as a project that is both bodily and at the level of scale or populations. While W.J.T. Mitchell argues that black people do not need to be racialized since “they are securely locked in the ghetto by their visibility and by the continued force of institutionalized forms of racism that are easily disavowed in an era of post-racial consensus” (2012:30), I take up questions of how the perpetually shifting meaning of blackness circulates bodies and spaces (and racialized bodies within racialized spaces), in both the presence and absence of identifiable black bodies. In light of this supposition, *La Douleur Exquise* is organized into two parts: 1) Black Bodies as Evidence: High Fashion as a Post-Racial Space, and 2) Black Space/Diverse Bodies: Locating Blackness in a Post-Chocolate City. Part I examines the stylization of blackness and black bodies through the work of racial performance and representation in high fashion, and the ways in which post-race neoliberalism disciplines the body in new ways to resist claims of racism.

In the first chapter I highlight pertinent research that enhanced my theoretical and methodological focus and provide further context for my key terms. I

specifically develop the term “post-race neoliberalism” to explicate our current racial regime. I then discuss the centrality of blackness to my project and conceive how aesthetics play a fundamental role in understanding the deployment of race using post-race neoliberal logics with my two proposed sites. I then situate my project in relation to scholars who theorize culture and identity formation under post-racialism and neoliberalism.

Chapter 2 features a combined analysis of activism in the fashion industry that calls for the representation of black models through the visible inclusion of more black bodies on the runway and in magazines, and a textual/image analysis of the July 2008 issue of *Vogue Italia*, “A Black Issue.” This chapter highlights the construction of black bodies as valuable in the fashion system as a mark of difference and evidence of diversity and renders the high fashion industry as a site of conflicting elements concerning the deployment and meaning of the black female body. In this chapter I argue that representations of the black models in the *Vogue Italia* Black Issue present the “glamorous” black model’s body as unthreatening, alluring, and integrated into dominant discourses of feminine attractiveness.

Chapter 3 foregrounds the value of diversity in the fashion industry and the structuring logic of race-neutrality in its presentation of blackness as style. To do so, this chapter provides a textual/image analysis of the “Haute Mess” editorial spread, featured in the March 2012 issue of *Vogue Italia*. To supplement the analysis of “Haute Mess,” this chapter also considers media accounts of the relationship between race, representation, and editorial fashion, particularly its coverage of controversies

surrounding blackface and other instances of racial performance. Together I argue that both the *Vogue* Italia Black Issue and the “Haute Mess” spread are plausible results of a post-race neoliberal philosophy and the high fashion industry in an era when race is no longer thought to be a salient social, political, or economic category.

The second section of the dissertation follows the history and transformation of a popular neighborhood in Washington, D.C. in order to focus on the racial constitution of spaces. Part II explores the conflicting, dividing, overlapping, and imagined lines in the physical and discursive development of blackness in an urban space. In particular, it interrogates the liberal discourse of diversity, multiculturalism, and the use of nostalgia in the valuation of a racialized urban space. Chapter 4 charts the unique history of the H Street NE corridor to illustrate the ways in which the meaning of blackness shifted over time. I then introduce institutional frameworks and programs that designate the corridor as a historically diverse space, which attempt to enact race-neutral policy, but nevertheless have racial consequences. This chapter lays the groundwork for specifying blackness in D.C. as a particular instance of the organization and mobilization of a post-race neoliberal racial logic.

Chapter 5 explores the discursive work of “diversity” in the physical transformation of the H Street, NE corridor. I show that race is imbricated in the physical rebuilding and symbolic re-imagination of H Street, NE. This chapter highlights the relationship between race, diversity, belonging, and urban development in the historical devaluation of H Street as a black space, and its revaluation as an

emerging multicultural neighborhood. Here, I highlight the remaking of blackness as a thread in the multicultural fabric.

The study ends by considering the implications of post-race neoliberalism and where else the stylization of blackness might matter. I also consider how the production of race as a medium provides insight into broader social practices of performance and identity.

CHAPTER ONE:

POST-RACE AND NEOLIBERALISM: A THEORETICAL INTERVENTION

“Blackness and black life become intelligible and valued, as well as consumable and disposable, through racial discourse. Blackness, in this sense, circulates. It is not rooted in a history, person, or thing, although it has many histories and many associations with people and things. Blackness fills in the space between matter, between object and subject, between bodies, between looking and being looked upon. It fills in the void and is the void. Through its circulation, blackness attaches to bodies and narratives coded as such but it always exceeds these attachments”

Nicole Fleetwood – *Troubling Visions*

My project contributes to theoretical scholarship in African American Studies, Cultural Studies, Sociology, and Visual Studies by exposing post-race neoliberal logics within a framework of racial aestheticization in a time when the nation is purportedly beyond considerations of race. I extend the research that reconsiders the relationship between aesthetics, visual culture, and race by using concepts like excess to expose the discursive framing of the black body in the field of vision (Fleetwood 2011). I recognize the importance of resisting the temptation to think of this conjuncture as merely an updated context for traditional and emergent forms of racial fetishism, appropriation, or calls for assimilation (Banet-Weiser 2012). Therefore, I shy away from analyzing representations of blackness that make claims about which images are positive or negative.

My work is in conversation with scholarship from different fields that, in combination, provide compelling theoretical approaches to consider the current reality of race. This review is designed to identify theoretical approaches to understanding race within the context of post-race neoliberalism. While post-race

neoliberalism characterizes the moment (signifies a new racial regime), it is in the stylization of blackness that we *see* a difference in how race operates – beyond the confines of identity and identity politics. This contemporary moment of neoliberalism is intensified by post-racialism in that it amplifies individualism, meritocracy. As a result, current conditions of white supremacy and the preservation of structural racism are ignored. The post-race neoliberal turn has taken away our language to talk about structural inequalities that are related to racial distinctions since we are now judged by merit. Neoliberalism delivers the language of individualism and is skewed towards individual embodied agents. This emphasis leads to the optimistic assumption that the problems of race can be resolved by the increased visibility of black individuals and ties blackness, as identity, to bodies. Therefore, using the racial logic of neoliberalism, the hypervisibility of black people/black bodies suggests that we have achieved social equity. During the civil rights movement, thought leaders demanded representation in the form of visibility. Now that we have increased visibility, I argue here that post-race neoliberalism takes away our language to discuss ongoing inequalities.

On blackness and identity

Blackness is articulated both internally through individual definitions and practices and externally through collective social systems. My focus here is on the meanings and deployment of blackness in the high fashion industry and urban redevelopment as external spaces. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the dialectical character of blackness between various individual, collective, and institutional levels.

Scholarly questions about the definition of blackness have been raised over the course of many years in various disciplines, especially amongst African American Studies and Black British Cultural Studies scholars. Traditional sociology's engagement with blackness goes back to the Chicago School in the early twentieth century through the work of Robert Park and his contemporaries whose pragmatic, deterministic approach to race relations reflected a combination of social Darwinism and the social construction of race. Park believed that racial groups have distinct attributes that are biologically determined and that these characteristics were a product of the environment. He defined *race relations* as the relations that occur between people "distinguished by marks of racial descent, particularly when these racial differences enter into the consciousness of the individuals and groups so distinguished, and by so doing determine in each case the individual's conception of himself as well as his status in the community" (1950:81). Since then, sociology scholars have researched poverty and the unequal distribution of resources, and racism to locate the causes and effects of race and racism by using discrete racial categories (Glazer and Moynihan 1963; Moynihan 1965; Wilson 1980; Massey and Denton 1993; Wellman 1993).

While race signifies differently across time and space, two parallel meanings of modern blackness, in terms of identity, have emerged throughout these conversations, and both were largely explored in the canonical texts of Frantz Fanon – race consciousness and color consciousness. First, race consciousness refers to shared customs, conditions, and culture that historically link racial groups. In his "Fact of Blackness" chapter in *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon refers to an

American brand of blackness in which black Americans, unlike Antilleans, cling to an essentialized notion of blackness in the face of racist attitudes and oppressive conditions held and promoted by the white majority. Secondly, Fanon points us to the phrase “color consciousness,” which signifies a visual and physical phenomenon of race (or in Fanon’s words, a “racial epidermal schema”), where race is determined by the color of one’s skin and shape of one’s features. Recognizing blackness through color consciousness has led to the formation of a political union, where people of a designated color scheme identify with one another. Fanon describes “the fact of blackness” as the feeling a black subject bears when “fixed” by the gaze of a white subject “in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye” (112). Fanon’s reading of blackness undergirds much of the scholarly research on blackness and black identity. His story exemplifies how one comes to know oneself as black.

My exploration of the centrality of aesthetics to understand blackness within this post-race neoliberal moment has been influenced by the theoretical and methodological work of innovative scholars who think and write about blackness outside the standard forms and categories of identity. One of my central arguments is that post-race neoliberalism disengages representations of blackness from identity and transforms blackness into an aesthetic. I argue that it is within the aesthetics of race that inequalities thrive. I theorize aesthetics is the paste that sticks blackness to particular bodies, spaces, performances, objects, and languages and I question what work blackness does in fashion and urban redevelopment.

To research changing discursive practices around race and the construction of new regimes of blackness in this age of post-race and neoliberalism, I rely on interdisciplinary scholarship from Saidiya Hartman (1997), Stuart Hall (1996a), Nicole Fleetwood (2011), and Richard Iton (2008) that considers the ways in which the discursive production and regulation of race intersects with visual culture. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman uses the Reconstruction period, marking the end of slavery in the U.S., as a fundamental site to analyze the legal and discursive production of black subjects. Locating her analysis in the post-civil war period, Hartman explores how both slaves and the newly freed similarly performed and conformed to the experience of subjection and how this constituted their blackness. In other words, blackness came to be tied to bodies that were performing labor since blackness was a position constructed in and through the experience of bondage.

In her readings of “how-to” etiquette manuals for those transitioning from “chattel to man,” WPA slave testimonies, popular 19th century theater, and legal cases, Hartman illustrates a paradox in the liberal discourse of “freedom” as it relates to the newly freed slaves – the paradox of “abstract equality” that “produces white entitlement and black subjection in its promulgation of formal equality” (Hartman 1997:116). In order for the state to absolve the contradictory “entanglements of bondage and liberty shaped by the liberal imagination of freedom” (1997:115), the state produced a narrative of slavery that positioned the institution “as a culture of deficiency and dependency rather than a system of labor exploitation” (Gray 2013:775), thereby holding the newly emancipated accountable for their

subordination under slavery rather than recognizing it as a totalizing economic, political and cultural system of exploitation and terror. So, for freedmen and women, the language freedom and rights “no longer becomes that which rescues the slave from his or her former condition, but the site of the re-elaboration of that condition, rather than its transformation” (Hartman and Wilderson 2003:185). Instead, Hartman highlights the “impossibility” of envisioning freedom without the limitations of personhood and “autonomy separate from the sanctity of property and proprietorial notions of the self” (Hartman 1997:115).

As it relates to this dissertation, Hartman’s identification of the impossibility of black freedom within liberal discourses of rights and freedom undergirds my exploration of blackness within the conditions of post-race neoliberalism. That the conditions of slavery were discursively transformed by the state to signify cultural deficiency makes the linkages between contemporary representations of black culture and abjectness (criminality, laziness, lasciviousness) all the more relevant and powerful.⁴

⁴ In September 2014, following the fatal shooting of an unarmed African American teen, Michael Brown, by a white police officer in Ferguson, MO, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote an article, “When Whites Just Don’t Get It,” in which he accused many white Americans of suffering from “smug white delusion” based on a Pew survey concluding that a majority of whites believe race gets more attention that it deserves. In his follow-up piece, “When Whites Just Don’t Get It, Part 2,” Kristof acknowledged that he received a significant amount of dissent from his readers, who while acknowledging wealth disparities between blacks and whites today, largely blamed blacks for their social and economic conditions. Some comments recycled “culture of poverty” arguments by emphasizing individual responsibility for “fatherless homes.” Others suggested that blacks are unsuccessful because of their unwillingness to work in contrast to immigrant Asian communities who succeed amid difficult economic circumstances. Still others justified the suspicion of black males by positing their inherent criminality (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-when-whites-just-dont-get-it-part-2.html>).

Hartman highlights a shift in the relations of power that rearticulated discourses of freedom to regulate emancipated blacks, manage and dominate the free black population, and consistently produce blackness as “abject, threatening, servile, dangerous, dependent, irrational, and infectious” (1997:116). Hartman, in essence, describes the process of the slave transitioning to a burdened, encumbered individual:

The nascent individualism of the freed designates a precarious autonomy since exploitation, domination, and subjection inhabit the vehicle of rights. The divisive and individuating power of discipline, operating in conjunction with the sequestering and segregating control of black bodies as a species body, permitted under the guise of social rights and facilitated by the regulatory power of the state, resulted in the paradoxical construction of the freed both as self-determining and enormously burdened individuals and as members of a population whose productivity, procreation, and sexual practices were fiercely regulated and policed in the interests of an expanding capitalist economy and the preservation of a racial order on which the white republic was founded (p. 117).

The liberal discourse of freedom that tied black bodies to implicit mechanisms of subjection and discipline acts as a precursor to contemporary post-race neoliberal promises of equality and equal opportunity. I consider the limits and “entanglements” of difference, as presented by Hartman, to explore the meaning and effects of the increased visibility of black bodies. Difference, as we learn from Foucault (1980), functions as a technique of power, which has very real social, political, and economic consequences. What remains consistent through much of the literature on difference is this alliance of difference and power in the making of particular subjects (Foucault 1977, 1980; Hall 1996a; Hartman 1997). But in this post-race neoliberal conjuncture, deconstruction makes these positions become unintelligible and different from the civil rights era because blackness no longer

signifies the same conditions of invisibility and inequality, but, I argue, is instead stylized to function as an element of optional identity. The deployment of blackness as an aesthetic that engenders difference is cloaked in diversity and “encourages visibility to expand markets and produce self-regulating subjects” (Gray 2013:776).

Implicit in this discussion about black bodies and blackness is Stuart Hall’s argument about the need to shift from identity to identification. Stuart Hall uses the introduction of the book *Questions of Cultural Identity* to take up the importance, use and meaning of the term identity and the process through which we come to know ourselves as subjects (Hall 1996a). He speaks to the instability of identity as fragmented, fractured and multiply constructed across different discourses, practices, and positions (p. 4). Hall diverges from Foucault and Althusser, whose theories of subject-making he finds limited. He argues that they do not account for the psychic or interior processes involved in subject-making. Identity is the modality by which the individual recognizes himself as subject. Hall defines identity as a temporary point of suture (imaginary/fantasized unity) between discourses and practices that attempt to interpellate us as social subjects of particular discourse *and* the processes that produce subjectivities. Identities are constructed within discourse and constituted within representation (within specific discursive formations, practices, representational schemes). They are the product of the marking of difference and exclusion *and* sameness, seamlessness or unity. Hall argues that identities are constituted in representation, and do not originate through the evocation of a historical past (1996a:4). Hall offers a discursive notion of identification and views it

as a construction; “always in process” – a condition that requires material and symbolic resources to sustain it.

Given this understanding of identity, how can we account for those characteristics, practices, and behaviors that fall outside of the boundaries of an assumed identity? In other words, what can we do with the excesses of cultural identities? Nicole Fleetwood (2011) provides an intricate discussion about black women’s performative enactments of *excess flesh*, which “produce a sharper lens to see the operations of the discourse of captivity and capital that frames the black body in the field of vision” (127). Fleetwood introduces “excess flesh” to illustrate how black women are represented and constructed as being in excess of normative ideals of white femininity. She analyzes the ways in which black female cultural producers engage “with the imago of black female excessiveness” (109) in art, commercial culture, and black popular culture.

In the art world, the operation of excess flesh is framed and judged in terms of taste, while in mass culture, excess flesh acts as a strategy to propel one’s commercial success by selling the oversexualized black female body. Finally, in black popular culture, excess flesh is evidence of black women’s overdetermined excessiveness. For Fleetwood, “excess flesh” is an enactment against the cultural imperative where blacks promote “a visibility of respectability and uplift” (p. 103). Moreover, excess flesh does not equal resistance despite its usefulness in opening the possibility for black female subjects that rejects “the aberrant representations of black the black female subject in dominant visual culture” (p. 104). I find Fleetwood’s theorization

of “excess flesh” useful to think about black women’s deployment of the excesses of blackness in various spaces. Although Fleetwood considers the black body, she is more interested in “how blackness gets attached to bodies, goods, ideas, and aesthetic practices in the visual sphere” (p. 20). Fleetwood certainly engages in conversations about black cultural practices and performances, however I take up her investigation of blackness, not as an identity, but as a discursive production whereas blackness becomes “visually knowable through performance, cultural practices, and psychic manifestations” (2011:6). The black body acts as a vehicle to carry the multiple meanings attached to it at different times.

For many years, scholarship on the visibility of blackness in the U.S. has focused on a multitude of theories and issues surrounding representation, specifically concerned with the presence or absence of African Americans, and/or the stereotypical ways they are portrayed when present. The United States experienced a particularly horrific history of a dominating visual narrative of blacks as object. As bell hooks argues, this history helped to construct “images of blackness and black people to uphold and affirm [white supremacist] notions of racial superiority, their political imperialism, their will to dominate and enslave” (hooks 1992:2). In contrast to these images, black cultural critics (beginning with the artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance in early twentieth century), became preoccupied with “positive” images of blacks to counter racist stereotypes and depictions. The debate over dualistic positive and negative, good and bad, images of blackness has been instrumental in shaping how blackness is conceptualized and made visible (Fleetwood

2011). Fleetwood proposes an analytic shift from these “politics of representation” that typically privilege corrective remedies for the excesses of blackness, and question whether we can use bodies that are always-already troubling in a visual discursive system as technique for doing political work. She provides an important way to reconceive the importance of positive or productive representations of blackness, by theorizing outside of the positive/negative binary and rejecting claims for a “true” or “accurate” representation of the black body.

Richard Iton (2008) joins this conversation on black identity, visibility, and excess through his analysis of the cultural practices, social movements, and intellectual and political formations that define black subjects in the post-civil rights period. He introduces the notion of an emergent black radical “superpublic,” which replaced the iconic black “counterpublic” of the civil rights era. Within the superpublic, the black body is replaced with an excessive, spectacular black body. Because mid-twentieth century black politics were organized around a critical *counterpublic* that engaged with a “politics of representation,” this *superpublic* is not critical in the same way. In regards to the “excess” of this contemporary superpublic, Iton maintains that the traditional black political establishment “would be particularly disturbed to the extent that black bodies are particularly subject to, or engaged and attracted by, this new visual apparatus and that black visibility and blackness – that fluid in/convenience – are read as being inherently unruly, surreal, outside the frame, and in need of discipline” (Iton 2008:106). Here, he points to the inability to contain black excess, and therefore it is expelled. Iton highlights the impossibility of

“seeing” race objectively and that the camera lens tends to “seek out spectacular and merely shocking, perhaps exciting images rather than provocative and paradigm-shifting ones,” nevertheless he points out that “the heightened predominance of the visual as the primary mediator of communication might both enable potentially novel forms of political campaigning” (p. 106). In terms of the dominance of the visual in the realm of black popular culture, Iton, referencing Said, discusses the violence of representation as well as the subjection, commodification and containment involved in all representative projects (p. 109). Iton, like Fleetwood, imagines possibility in the construction of new subjects being made in the space of the hypervisible. Excess, for both, is a mode to critique visibility and domination – especially, as I argue, in a moment of multiculturalism that finds too much blackness, whether attached to particular bodies, objects, or performances, unmanageable.

Post-race neoliberalism

The theoretical interventions of the aforementioned scholars inform my movement away from questions of identity in this exploration of the contemporary meaning and deployment of blackness by the logics of post-race discourse and neoliberalism. While post-race signals the end of race and the necessity of considering race in the operation of daily life, its connection to neoliberalism invites both the disavowal of racial considerations and the evocation of racial difference and individuality as a means to celebrate the arrival of our post-racial times.

The constituent elements/logics of post-race neoliberalism includes first, the recycling of culture as race, however instead of replacing culture with biological

conceptions of race, culture displaces racial references overall (Melamed 2008). Culture becomes detached from a long history of racial conflict and anti-racist struggles as the historical and structural causes and implications of racism are summarily dismissed (Giroux 2003). More specifically, race is dispersed “into an endless laundry list of characteristics such as ethnicity, nationality, and the catchall notion of ‘culture’” (Mitchell 2012:21). Emphasizing culture (e.g., practices, productions, customs, representations, ideologies) reveals a space for post-racial discourse to thrive where culture can matter as a foundation for an individual’s social and political status, but race does not. Secondly, within this conjuncture we experience an increased investment in (sometimes superficial) multicultural diversity evidenced by the celebration of diversity/difference in music, language, food, and style.⁵ This promotion of multicultural diversity as a social norm depoliticizes race and thereby negates its material significance as an indicator of structural disadvantage. A third logic of post-race neoliberalism privileges individualism and entrepreneurialism, which are couched as personal freedom(s) (Mukherjee 2006a, Melamed 2008). Or as Kobena Mercer surmises, “Be as visibly different as you want to be, says the all inclusive idiom of free market enterprise, but woe betide you if you try and make any critical or dissident claim on the basis of your pathetic little identity,

⁵ Patricia Williams (1989) argues that it is the paradigm of colorblindness and race neutrality that gives us a variety of cultural diversity experiments both inside and outside academia; including university theme houses, salsa dances, and soul food nights. “All of this is good, with the possible problem that in the exclusive celebration of difference, difference becomes a property launching us back into a complicated version of the first level of parole-evidence-sausage, so that: if white is good and black is good and white and black are different, then goodness must be different for each – or goodness becomes a limited property which is the subject of intense competition, as though it were some physical thing, a commodity, or object whose possession can know only one location” (p. 2143).

says the social authoritarianism of neo-liberal managerialism” (1999:57). Finally, this conjuncture is marked by the definition and recognition of race and racism by what is visible. As Imani Perry (2011) notes, “disparities and distinctions between groups are so visible that they cannot be denied” (p. 16), despite the prevalence of “color-blind racism” (Bonilla-Silva 2010) in which discrimination is identified by discrete and intentional acts rather than those that are subtle, unremarkable.

I propose that blackness needs to be seen in this post-race neoliberal conjuncture. Neoliberal discourse requires a visual representation of blackness that Patricia Hill Collins describes as “evidence for the alleged colorblindness that seemingly characterizes contemporary economic opportunity. A meritocracy requires evidence that racial discrimination has been eliminated. The total absence of Black people would signal the failure of color blindness” (2004:178). Nevertheless, I argue that blackness not only takes on different meanings than within previous conjunctures, but the mode by which racial difference is recognized (and celebrated) as multiculturalism/diversity rather than evidence of inequality, has also shifted. As bell hooks notes, the current commodification of difference “promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization” (1992:31).

Post-race neoliberalism shapes not only how we imagine race today, but also how we see it present in various aspects of life. In this way, the logics foregrounding

post-race neoliberalism help me to identify the discursive practices associated with the current conjuncture. I attribute the ambivalence associated with diversity, cultural familiarity, representation, and equality via “fairness” as a product of post-race neoliberalism (Melamed 2008). This ambivalence enables cultural racisms to be exempt from being recognized as racial issues. In my consideration of the ambivalence of race, I borrow from Bhabha (1994), who discusses the production of racialized subjects through the ambivalent process of disavowing *and* recognizing racial, cultural, and historical difference. I argue that this conjuncture is marked by an ambivalence around race in which we see two mechanisms of power and knowledge that center on race, 1) the disavowal of the significance of race and racial inequality through discourses of culture, class, aesthetics, nostalgia, and nation; 2) the hypervisibility of race in order to render different racial identities equivalent. The first practice involves the disavowal of race and racism, while the second practice includes the commodification and marketing of identifiable cultures as entertainment, where visual representation of diversity satisfies the liberal, civil rights-era demands for recognition and representation as symbols of progress. Furthermore, as Kobena Mercer suggests, “we now have a scenario in which the longstanding metaphor of minority ‘invisibility’ has given way to a new and wholly unanticipated predicament of ‘hypervisibility’” (1999:56). Or, as Jelani Cobb (2011) observes, following the election of President Obama, blackness must appear in the visual realm as hypervisible in order to designate and celebrate the end of race (racism).

The neoliberal language of choice (which includes aesthetic choice) allows for the perpetuation of racial inequality despite claims of racial neutrality. The invisibility of whiteness intensifies with the belief that race does not matter and achievement can be obtained equally by all. An emphasis not only on choice, but also diversity, multiculturalism, and notions of post-race provide ample space for inequalities to thrive. I argue that the production of race is an ambivalent practice that involves both the recognition and disavowal of difference.

As Herman Gray (1995) argues, with the rise of neoliberalism in the United States, conservative Republicans manipulated public debates “about welfare, big government, and federal spending” and they were able to do so “by conflating traditional liberalism with excess, radicalism, permissiveness, erosion, irresponsibility, and the ‘sign of blackness’” (p. 31). I suggest that within the post-race neoliberal conjuncture, aesthetics organize and make racial groups legible while masking the persistent structural inequalities impacting marginalized groups. In other words, race does not simply operate as an identity category, but has undergone a process of aestheticization that transforms it into a style for social consumption. Therefore, racism appears to be on the decline since it can no longer be located along the same racial lines and conventional racial categories. I propose post-race neoliberalism as a visual schema through which the “seeing” of blackness takes place today. This schema interprets events, behaviors, gestures, and images.

The cultural politics of visual representation works with post-race neoliberalism to illustrate evidence of its success. In other words, an increase in the

visible representation of blackness means that neoliberalism works, despite clear and extreme examples of political and economic inequality. Post-race neoliberalism *needs* a visual representation of cultural difference and diversity.

Post-race and neoliberalism in literature

Several different strands of literature help us think about the embeddedness of race and neoliberalism to the contemporary conjuncture – including a collection of scholars who theorize race and ethnicity as fundamental to the existence and spread of neoliberalism through its dissociation of race and racism individual agents and social formations (Melamed 2006; Shire 2008; Silva 2010; Goldberg 2009, 2012; Dávila 2012). A separate but overlapping group of scholars grapple with the current reality of racism and attempt to identify how this era of the post-racial differs from previous historical periods (Holt 2000; Brown, et. al. 2003; Jackson 2008). In their attempts to characterize the lived texture of race and racism in America, these scholars from different fields theorize that racial inequality has not evaporated, but has instead been retooled. They suggest that we cannot use the same theoretical framework from the mid-twentieth century to comprehend our current racial moment. In other words, we are at the limit of using certain categories to discuss race and how race and racism operate today. These authors highlight that the country's current commitment to racial egalitarianism and race neutrality rests upon the assumption that the civil rights movement was a success despite the fact that racial inequalities continue to exist in various sectors such as poverty, incarceration rates, education, and health, which continue to limit the life chances of communities of color. Even

when economic and social disparities between racial groups are acknowledged, responsibility (or more poignantly, blame) is often placed solely on individuals. I push theoretical underpinnings of these scholars further by focusing on aesthetics as a social formation through which race is articulated. Rather than simply stressing the ideological use of race in the service of capitalism under neoliberalism, I emphasize the commodification and aestheticization of blackness as style.

Any claims to identify and discuss the continuing inequalities African Americans experience are often countered by images of excessive consumption or iconic representations of black wealth and ostentation (hip-hop artists and moguls, reality television stars, sports figures). The circulation of these images is used to refute the disadvantages countless black Americans continue to face (Cobb 2011). Similarly, cultural representation has taken on a different meaning since the civil rights era, whereas the exclusion of marginal groups is not a simply problem of invisibility but one of the excess visibility of difference. A precondition, or perhaps a consequence, of the increased visibility of black bodies is that representations of blackness can take place without a meaningful discussion about continuing systemic inequalities. In other words, although representations of difference are plentiful, claims on the prevalence of racial inequality are relegated to the private sphere as inequality is attributed to individual thoughts and discrete actions (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Perry 2011). Leading scholars do not question if race functions in U.S. society, but wonder how race functions. The “post-civil rights condition” (Shelby 2005) I identify requires that we look to new spaces, develop new analytics, and vocabulary

to study race. In terms of its material consequences, race is currently mobilized as an explanation for failed policy efforts, disasters, and crises while structural elements are discounted – e.g., black culture implicated in the expansion of crime in the United States (Wacquant 2002). I argue that race is a logic through which the meaning of blackness comes to have certain significance and believe that race continues to be productive in producing blackness as a symbolic system imbued with particular meanings.

While many scholars have defined and defended the importance of considering the pervasiveness of both post-racialism and neoliberalism to the perpetuation of racism, few have thought them together as a distinct analytic. The post-racial perspective presumes that an individual's achievement is determined their qualifications and merit rather than by the affects of structural racism. Therefore, since race no longer operates as a system that upholds white privilege, instantiations of race can be consumed and expressed as cultural style. Neoliberalism's relationship to post-racialism rests on the fact that both require the continuous development of new markets and new identities to uphold them (Goldberg 2012:202). Both ideas also employ an optimistic confidence in the power of unfettered choice, individuality, and "hard work" to achieve social wealth. Like neoliberalism, inherent in post-race discourse is an emphasis on individuality since race no longer holds us back from achieving success. With hard work, commitment, and dedication, anyone can overcome challenges.

Post-race/colorblind

With the social and political eradication of the explicit and crude racism of the Jim Crow era, many believe that race is no longer the central defining feature of American society. Despite the racialized nature of most aspects of American life, politics and the media are replete with the idea that we are beyond, or “post-” notions of racial discrimination. Some scholars entertain the idea of achieving a post-race reality by extracting the language of race from our vocabulary altogether. In his more recent work, black British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (1998, 2000) clearly (and forcefully) articulates a post-racial social imaginary in which he declares: “race ends here.” Gilroy questions our implicit use of a term and analytic that we explicitly recognize as socially constructed. He posits the departure from the hegemonic discourse of race in favor of a more inclusive humanism. In *Against Race*, Gilroy criticizes blacks, in particular, of using race as a disruptive social indicator.⁶ Ultimately, Gilroy’s argument “against race” positions non-racism as the antithesis to racism, not antiracism because anti-racism essentializes race as a normative social formation.

Prior to the 2008 Obama election, a wide range of scholars discussed the emergence of colorblindness in the U.S. generally (Frankenberg 1993; Carr 1997; Crenshaw 1997; Williams 1998; Brown, et. al. 2003; Gallagher 2003; López 2006), and in relationship to specific arenas like education (Tarca 2005; Schofield 2006), and social policy and culture (Leonard 2004; Rodriguez 2006). Where most scholars

⁶ A perspective shared by legal theorist Richard Ford (2010) who criticizes mainstream media and civil rights leaders for participating in divisive racial politics.

agree is that colorblindness is an effective political tool that is executed by those who benefit most from its presence (Feagin and O'Brien 2003).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has written a collection of books and articles that critically engage questions of race and racism in America. He considers how colorblindness has maintained, or even exacerbated persistent forms of racial inequality since the end of the civil rights era. Originally written prior to the Obama election, but later updated to reflect the political shift, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's groundbreaking research in *Racism Without Racists* investigates the work of racial rhetoric in the post-civil rights era, and identifies color-blind racism as the prevailing ideology that reinforces white privilege and racial inequality in the United States. Bonilla-Silva describes colorblindness as a way to explain racial inequality today – “subtle, institutional and apparently non-racial” (2010:2-3). By maintaining that they “don't see color, but people” (p. 1), racist expressions from whites have been modified to reflect the transition to a post-civil rights era, exemplified by a move from overt to covert expressions of racism.

Drawing on interview data, Bonilla-Silva focuses on whiteness and white attitudes that compound the development of racism as a distinct ideology. He centers his analysis on rhetoric that whites employ to justify the perpetuation of racial stratification and inequality. Ultimately he finds that colorblindness has the same effect as overt racism: upholding white privilege. Indeed, Bonilla-Silva's work is crucial to understand the sociological significance of colorblindness within the post-race framework, therefore it seems sensible to probe different spaces, like high

fashion and urban redevelopment, that might best examine or explain its use and existence. On the other hand, unlike Bonilla-Silva, I center my analysis on blackness rather than on white people and white attitudes – particularly their racist beliefs towards black people. Placing the conversation outside the bounds of identity allows me to seriously consider the circulation and meaning of blackness that attaches to black bodies.

Since Obama's installation as President, some scholars research the effect of his election on representations of race in mass culture and politics in the "post-racial" United States (Gillespie 2010; Love and Tosolt 2010; Tesler and Sears 2010; Smith 2013; Wise 2013). Imani Perry (2011) also acknowledges a shift in our understanding of race and practices of racism from intentional to "post-intentional" racism. In *More Beautiful and More Terrible*, seeks to understand the permanence of racial inequality in the United States despite our presumed post-racial social and political environment. Perry analyzes racial narratives, racial categorization, surveillance measures, the relationship between race and value, and racial exceptions (e.g., "exceptional" figures like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey, whose successes support post-racial logics of equal opportunity) to investigate what she calls "practices of racial inequality" that underscore the embeddedness of racial privileging and disadvantage in contemporary American culture.

Perry understands racial inequality as part of a fundamental cultural logic in the U.S. and focuses on practices of inequality, rather than a static picture of racism, to help us move towards racial equality. She says, "practices of inequality even infect

our best-intentioned efforts to remedy the static, historically shaped picture of inequality. Therefore, these practices must be unraveled and exposed” (p. 6). She rejects the framing of racial discrimination in terms of intentionality, since this line of reasoning “doesn’t capture all or most discrimination, and it creates a line of distinction between ‘racist’ and ‘acceptable’ that is deceptively clear in the midst of a landscape that is, generally speaking, quite unclear about what racism and racial bias are, who is engaging in racist behaviors, and how they are doing so” (p. 21). It is not that people no longer have a bias against or antipathy towards certain groups, instead “the terms according to which that antipathy is ordinarily communicated and taught are no longer a matter of simple articulation” (p. 21). To consider the persistence of racial inequalities within a post-intentional framework provides me with the tools to investigate the meaning of blackness in conjunction with both the presence and absence of black bodies in both fashion and urban redevelopment. For example, while *Vogue Italia*’s editor expressed “positive” intentions to highlight the beauty of blackness in its infamous all-black issue as I describe in chapter 2, thinking beyond intention allows me to consider the discursive logic behind the presentation of blackness in both the all-black issue and the “Haute Mess” spread.

Culture, race, and neoliberalism

In contrast to David Harvey (2005) who frames issues of identity as distractions from the centrality of class warfare and breakdown of working class politics, I propose the need to recognize racial dimensions of neoliberalism to contemporary U.S. social, political, and economic culture. Rather than attempting to

redefine neoliberalism, I am invested in queries about its deployment of race in the production of racial difference.

Charles Hale (2005) explores the effects of what he calls neoliberal multicultural ideology in three ethnographic sites. The first involves a cultural rights case in San José, Costa Rica; the second analyses struggles for black and indigenous lands in Honduras and Nicaragua; and in the final case Hale examines Ladino (members of the middle-class, dominant culture) responses to the growth of the Maya movement in Guatemala. In all three cases, Hale finds that the politics followed the contemporary logic of neoliberal multiculturalism. In particular, marginalized and previously silenced groups attempt to challenge their oppressive conditions by using the representational mechanisms and language provided by neoliberal multiculturalism. For instance, in Hale's exploration of the cultural rights case in Costa Rica, he argues that the indigenous, the Awas Tingni, must emphasize their "authentic cultural difference" in order to convince the court that they deserve legal rights and protection under the law (p. 15). Furthermore, in order to attain cultural rights and recognition, these groups must adopt "reforms" based on the logic and values of neoliberal multiculturalism.

In another example, efforts to recognize black and indigenous cultural, political, and economic rights in Honduras and Nicaragua reveal a complex nexus between the World Bank, the client state, and the indigenous and black subjects as the latter group is expected to "use the system" – and receive support from the World Bank and recognition from the state – in order to "fight the system." To achieve land

rights, black and indigenous people must adopt “pragmatic” strategies that neither “contradict the principal tenets of the long-term economic development model,” nor “cross a certain line in the gathering of political clout, which would threaten established power holders and destabilize the regime” (p. 18). Hale expands our understanding of neoliberalism by arguing that it does not only rely upon “an aggressively individualist ideology of ‘economic man,’” but neoliberalism effectively integrates collective rights, “granted as compensatory measures to ‘disadvantaged’ cultural groups” (p. 12). His use of the term “multicultural neoliberalism” emphasizes this fundamental relationship between “new cultural rights and neoliberal political economic reforms” (p. 12).

While I do not agree that a cultural perspective on classical neoliberalism requires a turn away from the individualist values of “economic man,” I do find Hale’s theorizing of collective interests under neoliberalism useful to think about the ways in which racial recognition and representation is conceived through a neoliberal lens. In my project, I consider the multiple constraints and opportunities post-race neoliberalism brings to questions of racial inclusion and the marketability of difference. But I wonder, how must blackness “look” in order to be recognized and represented as such?

Hale exemplifies how neoliberal logic appropriates the leftist language of “progress” to account for the benefits certain groups receive once they are proven culturally/racially “authentic,” and therefore worthy of attention and preservation. Hale specifically points to the influence of the state in determining which groups are

entitled to resources in Central America – based on the government’s definition of indigenous or black ancestry. So, multicultural neoliberalism provides marginalized groups with the chance to develop their own identity through representational practices in order to receive recognition. On the other hand, other groups that are negatively racialized and therefore not deemed culturally or racially authentic, cannot gain full recognition. I consider parallels between the new racial configuration in Central American struggles for cultural rights that Hale highlights and representations of blackness in fashion and urban redevelopment in that they involve visible representations of race and culture that are viewed as progressive in some ways, but limiting in others. I specifically address questions of racial authenticity and the legibility of blackness in fashion and urban redevelopment under post-race neoliberalism. In fact, I wonder how blackness much be presented in order to gain cultural legibility.

Jodi Melamed (2006) adopts Hale’s term and situates it within the U.S. political economy. She uses “multicultural neoliberalism” to reference a Western form of multiculturalism that seeks to advance neoliberalism while concurrently exploiting racialized bodies to support the spread of global capitalism. Attached to neoliberal multiculturalism is an implied cultural logic – a symbolic influence that promotes the neoliberal tenets of personal responsibility and fairness embedded in privatization of the social and cultural realms. To resolve the contradiction between explicit racial inequality and fairness, people of color are held responsible for their cultural failings rather than the historical and structural dimensions of racial

essentialism (Melamed 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2010), therefore devising a discursive space for the circulation of racial stereotypes (Ono 2010).

In another context, David Theo Goldberg (2009) focuses on the cultural, historical, legal, and political elements of neoliberalism, a system whose underlying ideological features include the systematic privatization of resources and heightened individualism. He specifically analyzes the “threat” of race as it appears in multiple geopolitical settings marked by neoliberalism. He identifies neoliberalism as a large-scale global economic macrostructure that is the latest stage of capitalism. Goldberg argues that race (and racism) are vital components of both neoliberalism and modern globalization, despite neoliberalism’s attempt to signify the end of the politics of difference and race discourse since neoliberalism reveals the structures of a universal oppression that impacts everyone. In other words, neoliberalist thought proposes that cultural difference is no longer a useful way to account for social inequality. His use of “racial neoliberalism” points to the forms of racially-motivated neoliberalisms in multiple locations.

Goldberg evokes Gayatri Spivak’s phrase “critical regionalisms” to offer “a conceptual shorthand and methodological frame for considering the commonalities and divergences across regions regarding the historical force of race, and the resistances to racially driven exclusions, debilitations, and humiliations.” He continues by arguing that the “regional stretch undermines the narrow hold of national determination on racial definition and power, encouraging their critical analysis in the play of relations between the here and its interactive everywhere”

(2009:370). In essence, Goldberg uses “critical regionalisms” – racial americanization, racial europeanization, racial palestinianization racial latinamericanization, and racial southamericanization – to undermine common assumptions about the singularity and specificity of nation, space, and place in defining how race operates and instead provides a comparative approach to consider the centrality of regions. Specifically through his examination of the U.S.-centric *racial americanization* model, Goldberg describes a transition from explicit forms of racism (e.g., segregation) to subtle, silent forms that he names “born-again racisms.” This explicitly conservative paradigm unravels the social, legal and political progress achieved by the civil rights movement, and condemns those laws on the basis of race neutrality. The emergence of born again racisms highlights Goldberg’s argument that neoliberalism cannot be imagined without the history of race and racism – and it is the neoliberal condition that allows for racism to roam freely and undetected.

Considering racism(s) in a regional and global context allows Goldberg to show that racisms travel and interact with one another (p. 66-67). What these multiple forms of racism have in common is that they construct ideological systems to preserve racism by repudiating race and racism. By analyzing multiple continental manifestations of racial neoliberalism, Goldberg furthers a claim he made previously in his text, *Racist Culture* – that anti-black racism is a global, transnational phenomenon reflected by a set of practices that extract profit through the exploited labor and social, political, and economic oppression of blacks, Arabs, and indigenous communities in Latin America. This emphasis on anti-black racism points to the

global impact of America's racial history and contemporary configurations of race. Both Hale and Goldberg perform comparative analyses between different countries and regions to identify new racial hierarchies in a time of multiculturalism (Hale) and a time after race (Goldberg). Both also effectively develop and base their theoretical arguments on diverse cultures but link them under neoliberalism.

Besides Goldberg and Hale, several works across various disciplines have engaged with the question of how we think about race today, under neoliberalism. These scholars help guide me towards the understanding of race as an organizing principle of social life that is reinforced and modified by neoliberalism (Roberts and Mahtani 2010; Giroux 2005). Education scholar Henry Giroux (2005, 2008) analyzes neoliberal cultural politics and suggests that neoliberalism modifies race by disavowing its importance in social, political, and economic life. Geographers Roberts and Mahtani (2010) analyze neoliberalism and race as co-constitutive qualities that impact social relations, discourses, and policy. Rather than focus on "race and neoliberalism," the authors encourage the analysis of "race neoliberalism," which "delineates how race and racism are inextricably embedded in the neoliberal project" as part of a logic that replicates social inequalities (p. 250). Dana-Ain Davis (2007) examines contemporary understanding of racism in the context of neoliberalism – within a racial logic that repudiates explicit references to race. Similarly, Roopali Mukherjee (2006a) describes how race has been deployed in politics and media in a neoliberal political and cultural environment.

All of these studies point to the importance of examining the role of race and the global reaches of neoliberalism. While my own conception of post-race neoliberalism differs in its consideration of race outside of identity, I have been influenced by their assertion that the intersection of race and neoliberalism is a productive union contributing to the preservation of social inequalities. My attention to the unlikely space of high fashion to explore the reaches of neoliberalism, for example, adds a dimension that is rarely considered in existing literature.

Aestheticizing difference

With the political irrelevance and invisibility of race under conditions of neoliberalism, I argue that race transforms into aesthetic style. Blackness, in particular remains attractive, in this way since, as Harry Elam argues, “blackness functions as something that you can apply, put on, wear, that you use to assuage social anxiety and perceived threat: the desire to be included without the necessity of including black folk” (Elam 2005:386). This construction of race has an inherently aesthetic component to it, which helps me consider the circulation, legibility, and “stickiness” of blackness onto bodies and spaces. W.J.T. Mitchell (2012) writes, race is constructed from “words and images, the sayable and the seeable, discourse and concrete things, spaces and institutions, prohibitions and taboos, on the one hand, and sensuous experience on the other” (p.16), therefore I argue for the importance of understanding race as a visual, spatial, and bodily phenomenon. Several scholars have written about the practical and material significance of aesthetics and the influence of social and economic institutions on the production of artistic value

(Berger 1972, Wolff 1981). In fact, John Berger (1972) questions the significance of ideologies hidden within visual images. I argue that there is an inherent link between neoliberalism and the aestheticization of race.

I use the category of aesthetics and expand it into a formation – akin to a racial formation – as a way of understanding and seeing race and its social significance. I argue that aesthetics highlight how race is represented and given meaning in images, language, popular culture, media, and the mundane activities of daily life. It is a useful category/formation that is constituted in and through race. Borrowing from the language of Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory, I identify aesthetics as a “project” that highlights common sense assumptions about race and different racial groups.⁷ While I find the concept “racial project” useful in my characterization of contemporary racial aesthetics, my research pushes certain limits of racial formation theory. As they relate to social and political struggles, Omi and Winant’s theory clearly points to how we can explain practices, ideologies, languages, and policies that seek to exclude people of color and preserve spaces like elite institutions of higher education as exclusively white spaces. But how does their framework account for the *inclusion* of black bodies within these exclusive spaces? How could their framework account for the visual representation of blackness (in fashion and in urban development) outside of stereotype? Aesthetics, as a formation, expands the notion of a visual logic of race. I argue that the visibility of blackness

⁷ Omi and Winant (1994) define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed,” and this process is achieved by “historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized” (p. 55).

fulfills a particular goal of post-race neoliberalism. While I underscore the visual nature of race, I push this idea further by arguing that aesthetics organize race in particular ways. Through aesthetics, certain intonations of blackness function as a way to absolve the nation of its racist guilt, add a bit of spice and hipness, while in the context of neoliberalism, signal change without elaborating on continuing class divisions.

My perspective on the aestheticization of race under neoliberalism is informed by some of the scholarship on the relationships between neoliberalism and urban space, as well as neoliberalism and fashion. Aesthetics is an especially useful category to consider fashion's engagement with race. An important trend in the growing literature on fashion and media is an investigation of the effects of post-racial and neoliberal discourse on constructions and performances of race in fashion (Thompson 2010; Cefai and Indelicato 2011; Keller 2014). Nevertheless, very few, if any consider the role of aesthetics in the production of racial knowledge. Furthermore, many of these studies focus on the popular reality television show, *America's Next Top Model* (ANTM). For example, Amy Adele Hasinoff argues that discourses about "feminine racialization" on ANTM are indicative of "a new neoliberal rhetoric of race" prevalent in popular culture, in which race becomes commodified and politically invisible by the increased visual presence of racial identities. Similarly, Ralina Joseph (2009) maintains that the logic of post-race and post-gender identities discipline the bodies of ANTM contestants in that the aspiring models must take on multiple, sometimes conflicting performances of race and

gender in order to achieve commercial success. Lastly, Anjali Vats (2014) explores racial performance in the fashion industry, both within the context of reality TV, high fashion advertisements, and editorial images and evokes the language of “racechange” to signal the post-racial treatment of race as an accessory for white models to don.

While the aforementioned studies are effective in their attention to the work of neoliberal and post-racial rhetoric of race on reality television and in fashion generally, they tell us very little about the formation of an aesthetic logic of race outside of performance. I find Vats’s methodological approach to analyzing the performance of difference in fashion useful, however my project extends beyond the consideration of racial performance to include the ways that aesthetics and the stylization of race shows us not only how race is performed, but also thought and seen. My analysis of the fashion industry takes into account the multiple conversations that are taking place about the race and the fashion industry and I discuss the limits of arguments that call for the increasing employment of black models and the inclusion of more “positive” representations of blackness (vs. stereotypes).

With regard to the relationship between aesthetics and the urban landscape, urban sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers have written about the centrality of culture and class to urban spaces. In particular, they emphasize the role culture and ethnicity play in the symbolic and material transformation neoliberal urban locales (Dávila 2004; Greenberg 2008; Zukin 2010). In *The Cultures of Cities*,

Sharon Zukin (1995) analyzes the work of culture in cities that are primarily defined by contests over spaces and images. She provides descriptions of the political economy of New York City in the 1990s shaped by enduring competition between high culture, corporate culture, ethnic culture, and the informal economy (outdoor markets and sidewalk retail booths) to detail how the economic and cultural spheres are intertwined. Zukin emphasizes the importance of vision and visual culture to the transformation of urban space and argues that visual symbols of nostalgia and history are tied to urban spaces to visually re-present as idealizes public spaces.

Zukin highlights the importance of ethnicity to the shaping of urban public culture. She considers ethnicity an aesthetic category and identifies it as “a cultural strategy for producing difference” that “survives on the politics of fear by requiring people to keep their distance from certain aesthetic markers.” She goes on to say that these symbolic markers change over time, where in the 1990s, “Pants may be baggy or pegged, heads may be shaggy or shaved” but like fear “ethnicity becomes an aesthetic category” (p. 42). Similarly, Zukin also proposes that cultural diversity is “limited mainly to ethnic ‘color’ and remains on the level of cultural consumption by eating ethnic dishes” (p. 283). While Zukin’s framework grounds my own research, given my interest in the aestheticization of race, I update and extend her observations to account for changes in racial discourse by arguing for the need to consider how race as “color” does actual work to attract business, tourism, and new residents to H Street. I suggest that the deployment of blackness within the post-race neoliberal framework reflects a desire for blackness as diversity on H Street.

In *Naked City*, Zukin (2010) speaks to the marginalization of authenticity in urban places as “style” through the process of branding neighborhoods, producing heritage projects, and other commercial enterprises (like coffee shops or specialized furniture stores). These modern appeals to authenticity purportedly deliver alternative options for pleasure, consumption, and entertainment for upper-middle class tourists and residents, but further limits multiple uses of these “revitalized” urban spaces for working class residents. I relate these practices of branding and producing authenticity to the transformation and re-imagination of the H Street, NE corridor. Alongside efforts to rebrand the former riot corridor as a distinct cultural, culinary, and entertainment destination comes increased police surveillance, higher priced restaurants, streetcar track construction, bike lanes, and exorbitant parking meter fees that disinvite patrons and customers of the service businesses that overwhelmingly populated the corridor.

In addition to Zukin, Choon-Piu Pow (2009) investigates the role of the aesthetic in the rapid development of private middle- and upper middle-class gated communities in post-Socialist Shanghai. He positions the aesthetic in relation to a desirable “new middle-class lifestyle.” This middle-class lifestyle aesthetic includes the use of symbolic materials such as indoor heated swimming pools, tennis courts, spas, as well as garden landscaping, well-lit streets, and clean sidewalks. Aesthetics, for Pow, are directly tied to identity, civility, and pleasure since residential landscapes play “an active role in the performance of elite middle-class identities” (p. 373) and aesthetic sensibilities “actively construct gated communities as emblematic of the

urban good life” (p. 372). He explores the ways in which the aesthetic perpetuates the politics of exclusion and exclusionary practices in urban spaces as well as the affects of neoliberal ideologies on the aestheticization of space. It is Pow’s discussion of the depoliticization and aestheticization of class relations under neoliberalism that informs my study of H Street, however I consider the aestheticization of race and the promotion of diversity to reflect “questions of lifestyle choices, consumption patterns, visual pleasures and ‘good taste’” (p. 373).

Notes on a mixed methodology

La Douleur Exquise is an interdisciplinary project where my interest in analyzing the work of neoliberalism on the discursive production of racial logics led me to employ multiple methods – primarily textual/image analysis, ethnography, and archival research. My approach to examining bodies and space requires a focus on difference and power. Coupled with a core theoretical framework, I was able to address questions about the relationship between neoliberalism, value, and the stylization of race on bodies and the physical development of urban space.

High fashion and the black body

The fashion industry is an elite site that is governed by explicit aesthetic rules. The aesthetic logic of fashion can be understood as organized by what Howard Becker (2008) calls conventions, or implicit agreed upon rules that govern artistic production. In the case of high fashion, aesthetics supposedly trump any social considerations. Although these unspoken rules have circulated in the fashion industry

for a long time, they certainly map nicely onto the logics of neoliberalism, which emphasize individuality, creativity, self-discipline, etc. I explore this explicitly aesthetic arena to see how and where race is aestheticized through the organization and mobilization of certain racial logics. Acknowledging the body as the central trope of the fashion system, I consider Foucault's assertion that the body is a site for the articulation of power relations, therefore high fashion industry requires me to not only study black bodies, but also look at fashion as a discourse itself, and the process through which black subjectivities are made through this visual discourse.

Jennifer Craik (1993) describes fashion as a rich and productive site "because of its slipperiness – the ambivalence, polyvalence, semiotic smorgasbord and excess" (p. 8). I argue that fashion is an expressive site of the ambivalences of race today; it is an exception space of visibility that conveys a particular narrative of race. Fashion is a site where the visual and discursive meet. Where various forms of art symbolize perpetuity and durability, fashion, in this sense, is a particularly modern form and site that signifies the new and the now.

As a representational system, high fashion epitomizes hegemonic notions of femininity through its fetishization and manipulation of the body (Craik 1993:70). Therefore, fashion constitutes, it disciplines, it makes bodies and, I propose, fashion is a site in which blackness circulates and is both present and absent. Blackness and black life, as Nicole Fleetwood (2011) argues, "become intelligible and valued, as well as consumable and disposable, through racial discourse" (p. 6). It is through this circulation that blackness is both politically invisible and visually hypervisible within

the fashion site. I draw from the presentation of images in the high fashion industry to highlight instances when blackness is asked to prove a post-race and post-racist reality. In an industry in which models are celebrated for being “blank palettes” for designers and fashion editors to mold into a stunning work of art, I ask, what might black do here? As opposed to looking at questions of multicultural fashion – cultural artifacts (Puwar 2002), or the performance of racial identities (Kondo 1997), I aim to use this form of visual culture to understand how race is not only being represented in fashion, but it is also being aestheticized. Through the aesthetic transformation of race, the neoliberal dimension of it is being played out in the name of art and taste, making race visible even as it elides racism and locating (racial) difference under the rubric of multiculturalism. Therefore, the presentation of black bodies becomes less about their blackness, and more about their ability to sell a marketable black aesthetic. Within this highly visual and visible sphere, I look to the high fashion industry as an enactment of a particular kind of neoliberal project - the literal constitution of post-race neoliberalism.

Various scholars including Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, and Mary Douglas have indicated that fashion operates as a language and fashion photography, in particular, is the medium through which its language is spoken. Fashion, through fashion photography, offers an unmistakable vision/version of a social reality. Photographs were historically regarded as a code, bypassing spoken language and meeting the mind through the eye. Fashion images, in particular, engage the viewer aesthetically and affectively. According to Roland

Barthes (1990), the fashion photograph “has its own units and rules; within photographic communication, it forms a specific language which no doubt has its own lexicon and syntax, its own banned or approved ‘turns of phrase’” (p. 4). Unlike commercial fashion shots, high-end editorial spreads only tangentially promote consumption. Magazine photographs, specifically advertisements, are thought to contain visual representations of stereotypes. Fashion spreads have not received the same amount of attention. While most analysis of race in fashion magazine images focus on advertisements (hooks 1992, Strutton & Lumpkin 1993, Wilson & Gutierrez 1995, Baumann 2008), my textual analysis of the editorial images featured in the 2008 “A Black Issue” and the 2012 “Haute Mess” spread in *Vogue Italia* unearth the latent social meanings lodged within the images and signals post-race neoliberalism in practice as a visual form.

Vogue Italia (VI) is the least commercial of all other *Vogue* editions. The magazine is known for being edgy and controversial – often making overtly political statements about a variety of pertinent social, political, and cultural issues worldwide. Steven Meisel is often a featured photographer, specifically for the more provocative shoots. VI and Steven Meisel shot such gasp-provoking spreads as “Makeover Madness,” which provided visual commentary on our obsession with cosmetic surgery; “State of Emergency,” a terrorist-themed shoot that visually critiqued the climate of fear associated with the post-9/11 era. Despite its low circulation (only 145,000 per year vs. 1.3 million for American *Vogue*), VI has been designated as the world’s most influential fashion magazine. Or as Robin Givhan writes, *Vogue Italia*

is most known for its commitment to aesthetics, above all else and the magazine shuns

depicting the more practical, realistic elements of the fashion industry. It is unconcerned with being commercial. Its philosophy revolves around the high concept. Other, more commercial magazines might not go where it leads, but Italian Vogue provides inspiration (Givhan 2008).

Nevertheless, VI provides an important global referent for high fashion, art, and ideas “by making its statements through startling, provocative images rather than [sic] the written word” (Morean 2006).

The process of producing a photograph for a fashion magazine involves several steps and key actors. The fashion editor bears the responsibility of producing the fashion stories. Avant-garde magazines like *Vogue Italia*, typically use external stylists. For each fashion story, the editor or stylist determines how each model should look, which colors should be used in the backdrop, which garments should be used, and the overall feeling of the spread. It is the photographer’s responsibility to book their preferred models based on model books provided by modeling agencies. If model cards are not sufficient to determine which models the photographer wants, he or she might arrange a casting (Aspers 2001).

I chose to analyze editorial spreads because they are the product of a collection of efforts by fashion editors, stylists, designers, photographers, and models that make up an art world. Howard Becker argues that art worlds are made up of people “whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art” (2008:34). In the art world of fashion, editorial magazines and accompanying spreads are finite products

that represent the efforts and imaginations of major players that make up the fashion system. While the catwalk is an important site in the discursive making of a fashion model (Mears 2010; Entwistle and Wissinger 2006; Wissinger 2007, 2012), the editorial image incorporates symbolic objects, scenes, and codes that the catwalk does not. For example, as I present in my analysis of the “Haute Mess” spread in *Vogue Italia*, intentionally placed objects play an equally important role as the featured models and clothing in the production of meaning. In fact, some of the objects stand out more than the models (and are photographed without models present).

The editorial fashion space utilizes a different organizing logic than commercial fashion. In editorial fashion, race and other social considerations become ancillary to fundamental creative, aesthetic production of art – fashion producers simply make “aesthetic choices” (Kondo 1997). Editorial fashion tastemakers are not bound to considerations of the buying public, like in commercial fashion where consumer demographics play a significant role in the selection and representation of models (Mears 2010). In other words, editorial fashion is purportedly an elite site that is purportedly resistant to basic consumer and economic market pressures (Sadre-Orafai 2010). I wanted to explore and challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions that the editorial fashion space operates outside the racial logic of blackness.

Methodologically, I came to the editorial spreads in *Vogue Italia* because of the frenzy surrounding the 2008 release of the all-black issue of the magazine, but also because of editor Franca Sozzani’s increasing involvement in American politics and

interest in questions of race and racism in America and Africa, details on which I will elaborate in chapter 2.

Ultimately, I use my analysis of the fashion industry to see how neoliberal discourse produces certain racialized bodies in my effort to determine how the in/visibility of race works in a place where the discipline of the body attempts to erase blackness, and yet blackness still functions in that space. Therefore, a decision to reject black models for certain jobs can be explained as an aesthetic choice rather than a racist one. In the fashion system, the project of what kinds of identities are being made through fetish and a commitment to normativity is a racial project even if race is not named. Black bodies that function under that project can be African, Caribbean, mixed race, etc. (Mears 2010, Sadre-Orafai 2010). Therefore, in this new era, I propose that the meanings attached to skin color, hair texture, facial structure has undergone a significant shift with the emphasis on multiculturalism and the role of black difference (Bonilla-Silva 2010, Collins 2004, Melamed 2006, Shire 2008).

H Street and a post-Chocolate City

There are numerous accounts that have recognized Washington, D.C. as a “chocolate city” in form (politically) and content (demographic population). “Chocolate City” is a culturally resonant moniker, reaching beyond simple characterizations of majority-black urban centers. While Chocolate City was the moniker originally attributed to Washington, D.C., Parliament’s 1975 album “Chocolate City” and song of the same name opened the designation to include cities like Newark, Gary, and Los Angeles that experienced a shift in their demographic

populations once white residents fled to the suburbs and blacks became a clear majority. The term is linked to a broader notion of blackness rooted in and articulated with a prior cultural and political conjuncture. Even recently, during a contentious trip by the current Mayor Gray to New Hampshire to discuss the possibility of D.C. statehood, one Republican legislator said he would not allow his daughter to visit the nation's capital because he deems it too dangerous. The Chocolate City of the funk era was linked to an aesthetic of black empowerment and nationalism in areas like music, style, and other sites of cultural production. In contrast, the current post-Chocolate City aesthetic is directly linked to the marketing of a depoliticized black cool in the multicultural post-race neoliberal city. The "chocolate" in Chocolate City may no longer connote blackness as in the moment of integration, civil rights, black nationalism, and political organization, but instead signals diversity of an American sort, not African American. Chocolate City as a metaphor for the distribution of black culture was at one point fully saturated; the shift is the redistribution of black people and the claim on multiculturalism that is independent of black people.

The "new" (post-) chocolate city can be exemplified by the 2011 establishment of "Chocolate City Beer," which uses an insignia of a clenched fist, most notably associated with radical black power imagery. Some bloggers complained about the name of the company – "Two white guys running a brewery named Chocolate City is ridiculous" (Kitsock 2011). The brewery's ownership nevertheless, is multiracial: two black owners, two white owners. Jay Irizarry and Ben Matz, the two white partners, together founded the brewery. The two black

partners, Don Parker and Brian Flanagan, helped prepare the company's business plan and is a major investor, respectively. Irizarry explains that the name "Chocolate City Brewing" came from their desire to represent Washington as a neighborhood rather than as the U.S. capital. Their decision to use the clinched fist as their logo came from an interest in "iconic images" (Kitsock 2011). One can only assume that the symbol of the clinched fist represents the iconic imagery of black power, especially given the company's location in the original chocolate city. The company's re-appropriation of clenched fist imagery capitalizes on political resistance that now seems edgy and "cool" but was brutally repressed by the state, so its placement on a beer bottle explicitly depoliticizes (and aestheticizes) an important history.

For the first time since the 1950s, black residents no longer represent the majority in Washington, D.C. and areas that were previously "off-limits" because of high rates of poverty, criminal activity, and economic depression, now boast new upscale restaurants, bars, and art galleries. While much of the scholarship on D.C.'s unique cultural history has focused on areas like the 14th/U Street corridor, Columbia Heights, and Mt. Pleasant (Modan 2006, Williams 1988, Maher 2011, Ruble 2012), I wanted to focus on a neighborhood that has received less scholarly attention but is well known in the region. Blackness, specifically black Americanness, means and meant something very distinct in D.C. The riots of 1968 signaled an important shift in D.C. history. In its aftermath emerged a new relationship between the federal government and the District. Home rule meant that D.C. could, for the first time,

operate like an independent municipality, with several stringent rules attached. New provisions afforded many blacks with unprecedented opportunity. Nevertheless, D.C. remained a contentious environment for its high concentration of poverty, unemployment, and class and racial stratification.

My analysis of neoliberalism, race, and space specifically emphasizes Washington, D.C. as a (post-) chocolate city rather than commercial revitalization in general. Commercial revitalization is a term that is often used to describe the resurrection of retail activities in communities that were previously considered blighted, unwelcoming and dangerous. I examine the ramifications of changing demographics and how race (blackness) continues to figure into the reimagining and remaking of a neighborhood in conjunction with the discursive production and institutionalization of a post-race ideology. This market calculus calls for the increasing use of space organized around efficiency and individual responsibility to care, clean, and cultivate neighborhoods, streets, and blocks. The reimagining of the H Street, NE corridor involves contestations over the meaning of a space in terms of race – belonging and memory – and what the neighborhood should look like.

I turn to an explicit examination of a physical, urban space to demonstrate the ways in which race is similarly aestheticized, but the racial logic of blackness is organized in different ways that subtly transforms the space both symbolically and materially. To do so, I utilized various navigational tools to explore this rich space: I used archival research (thanks to the extensive records in the Washingtoniana Collection at the D.C. Public Library and the Historical Society of Washington D.C.)

to gain insight into H Street's rich history; I spent several days per week over the course of nine months observing activities on and around H Street NE to learn how the stylization of blackness works; I scoured newspapers, planning documents, zoning laws and hearing transcripts, neighborhood blogs, and listservs to discover how diversity was framed and discussed and how the attachment of race to space takes place; I spoke to current residents, past residents, bartenders, wait staff, and casual visitors to understand how multiculturalism on H Street operates; finally, I joined a restaurant tour of the corridor alongside several local hotel concierges to gain insight into the changing social and economic dynamics from business owners along the corridor, as well as the importance of food culture to the neighborhood. I use categories like cuisine, transportation, security, and historic preservation as anchors to demonstrate how stylized blackness is deployed to make the space palatable.

Throughout the course of my time spent on and around H Street, talking to residents, business owners, customers, government officials, etc., those themes emerged as ones that had the most impact on the changing landscape of the corridor. While on the surface some of the themes align with those that various gentrifying neighborhoods experience with the growing changes, but I chose to delve deeper to see how the categories were discursively held together.

I detail the history of the corridor specifically following the 1968 riots, when H Street was popularly identified in the media, amongst business owners, and District residents as a black ghetto. With its magical transformation, I wanted to see where "blackness" went. What is so interesting about a place like D.C. is that it is not only

recognized as “chocolate” because of the bodies in place, but also because of the space itself. “D.C.” is symbolically black while “Washington,” the federal city is symbolically white and transient. So, even when black people are displaced from a particular neighborhood, traces of blackness still remain. I wanted to know how and where and how is blackness recognized and deployed to generate value. Similar to how the fashion industry used specific representations of blackness to attract their readers, I wondered how blackness was constructed through cuisine, issues of transportation and parking, business development, security, and historic preservation. Again, while these themes do particular work in gentrifying spaces, I wanted to see how the racial logic of blackness, as mobilized in Washington D.C., intersected these spaces and in turn, what happened to blackness.

Placing these two sites together juxtaposes the spectacular and the mundane aspects of the marriage between aesthetics and race. I provide multiple levels and modalities of objects to offer a glimpse into the racial logics of post-race neoliberalism. Both cases open up questions of race, value, difference, and the discursive work of diversity in the making of bodies and spaces. I argue for the necessity of thinking these two seemingly different sites together. Individually, each would offer discrete pictures of how blackness operates in our post-race neoliberal times, however together, both provide a compelling account of how these practices infiltrate seemingly unrelated places at the same time. The practices of inequality are not isolated in one location but I argue they occur in both areas signaling the importance of looking at how blackness is thought today. Each speaks to the reaches

of neoliberalism in the perpetuation of inequality. Post-race neoliberal logic orders ideas about race and is uniquely tied to the material world in both the high fashion industry and through the re-imagining of a “chocolate city.”

PART ONE

Black Bodies as Evidence: High Fashion as a Post-Racial Space

CHAPTER TWO:
RACE AS AESTHETIC:
THE POLITICS OF VISION, VISIBILITY, AND VISUALITY IN HIGH
FASHION

“When White writers and mainstream media venues use the idea of postracialism to describe our contemporary climate, they contrast our (historically informed) visual expectations about performances of Blackness with Obama’s persona as representative of an alterative new Black aesthetics”

Jelani Cobb – “No We Can’t: Postracialism and the
Popular Appearance of a Rhetorical Fiction”

Over the next two chapters, I explore how the aesthetic is a process and set of symbolic codes that illustrate how post-racialism and neoliberalism operate. In this chapter, I will read the production of blackness in the fashion industry as an expression of the post-race neoliberal conjuncture. Aesthetics, in general, have tremendous influence on how we make sense of and affectively respond to the world – what we “see” contextualizes what we make of individuals, environments, and events. We need visual accounts to assign value to subjects, so in this way vision acts as a technology of power. Recognizing the power of fashion imagery in contemporary culture, I analyze how fashion images express knowledge about race. As an aesthetic realm, fashion is the place where vision, visual discourse and stylized bodies meet. In terms of race, I am curious how the aesthetic value of blackness today might reflect the current conjuncture.

The fashion industry is a discursive domain in which particular social bodies are presented, and fashion magazines are a product of cultural discourses and inscriptions. By analyzing the editorial images presented in the July 2008 “A Black Issue” of *Vogue Italia*, I decode what appears to be the “undecipherable” common sense of aesthetic judgment/color/race that is so prevalent in the fashion industry. I argue here the magazine issue presents blackness as commodity, while suggesting that race does not matter to the elite consumers of the *Vogue Italia* franchise.

Power produces blackness as color and culture in the fashion industry where the historical absence of black bodies in this exclusive space is overshadowed – black matters as an aesthetic or to provide “edge” or “cool.” In his influential piece “Ethnicity and Internationality: New British Art and Diaspora-Based Blackness,” Kobena Mercer argues that the hypervisibility of blackness was a consequence of corporate internationalism, which resulted in blackness being designated as cool and an accepted part of mainstream culture. The marketability of difference became a vital component of “new” British arts and Mercer highlights the practice of black artists conforming to the aesthetic norms in order to become visible. Similar to Mercer’s analysis of British art, I propose that blackness needs to be “seen” in this post-race neoliberal conjuncture, regardless of the fashion industry’s preoccupation with multiculturalism.

I begin by laying out the current racial climate in fashion – which has experienced an uptick in activism calling for a shift in the conditions that enable the exclusion of black models on the basis of aesthetic choice and instead include more

black models into the fabric of the fashion aesthetic. It is within and in response to this climate that, the Black Issue of *Vogue Italia* was produced - highlighting the productive capacities of power. In fact, I suggest, that the fashion industry as an institution considered this surge in social activism around race “as a site of calculation and strategy” (Ferguson 2012). Similar to Roderick Ferguson’s theorization of how the state, capital, and the academy used student protests to replace redistribution with the ostensible representation of minorities and minority interests, I discuss how the activism and reporting that aimed to disrupt the practice of excluding black models were met with the Black Issue. Ferguson writes, “hegemonic power denotes the disembodied and abstract promotion of minority representation without fully satisfying the material and social distribution of minoritized subjects, particularly where people of color are concerned” (p. 8). By emphasizing the need for representation in the form of visible black bodies, image activists limited the effects of resistance against racism in the fashion industry since the Black Issue’s embrace of black difference worked to consolidate post-race neoliberalism.

Re-Politicization of the Black Image in High Fashion

“If modeling is ultimately all about the luck of the gene pool – the right height, the right chin, the right eyes – how does one argue that anyone has a claim on a successful career doing it?”

- Robin Givhan, “Once Again, White is the New White” 2007

By the mid- to late-2000s, various controversies arose in the high fashion industry focusing on the form, function, and labor of women’s bodies. Protests emerged online and in print lamenting the need for difference and diversity in two

specific ways: size diversity and racial/ethnic diversity. In early 2007, during the Spring/Summer season of fashion weeks across the globe, designers and fashion editors experienced increasing pressure to avoid “superskinny” models on their runways and in photoshoots. While some designers embraced guidelines for the hiring of models, most designers resisted regulation and vowed not to make changes to the way they select models. Fashion veterans like Karl Lagerfeld responded to the effort to regulate model-hiring by calling it “politically correct fascism” (qtd. in *WWD* 2007). Others like Vera Wang expressed disappointment that “civilians” were adopting fashion standards, thus highlighting a clear distinction between high fashion as art in opposition to pure commercial consumption. Echoing this sentiment, Angela Missoni argued that models have been tall and thin since the 1940s “because professions that imply the use of your body apply different rules – from the training of astronauts to the bodies of sumo fighters” (qtd. in *WWD* 2007). In contrast to this position, *New York Times* fashion columnist Guy Trebay writes, “[v]ast numbers of consumers draw their information about fashion and identity from runways, along with cues about what, at any given moment, the culture decrees are the new contours of beauty and style” (Trebay 2007). In this way, the visual and textual language of fashion carries significant power in determining the aesthetic value of everyday individuals.

On the topic of racial diversity, questions of race specifically sparked debates about the representation of black models in high fashion. In October 2007, Guy Trebay wrote a provocative piece in *The New York Times* entitled “Ignoring

Diversity, Runways Fade to White,” in which he highlighted the gross numeric inequalities between white models and models of color (specifically black models) on the runway. The article surmised that the fashion industry is in direct conflict with the social climate of the United States, where “Oprah is the most powerful woman in media” and at the time, “Barack Obama is running for president.” Several image activists (primarily black current and former models, stylists, photographers, and designers) decried the hostile conditions that perpetuated the continued invisibility of black models on the runway and in elite fashion magazines. Explanations for the dearth of black models in high fashion have been framed in three specific ways. First, fashion tastemakers (bookers, editors, stylists, photographers) discriminate against black models, in some cases, openly (Mears 2010; Wissinger 2012). For example, until 2006, bookers explicitly denied consideration of black models by sending notices to agents that “no blacks/ethnics” were to be considered for some shoots and runway shows. In this case, the exclusion of black models is not a systemic issue but rather personal bias against blackness and black women that hinders the fashion industry’s quest for racial inclusiveness and diversity. Secondly, the decision to exclude black models represents an exercise of aesthetic “choice” and/or “freedom” (Sadre-Orafai 2010; Wissinger 2012). Elizabeth Wissinger writes: “When designers cater to their ‘creative flow,’ if they tend not to select black models it is because they do not fit the ‘color scheme’ of their aesthetic vision. Yet in response to designer Diane von Furstenburg’s exclusive use of black fashion models for a runway show, appeals to aesthetics were pushed aside by political concerns”

(Wissinger 2012:139).⁸ In other words, attention to race devalues the creative aspects of the work, while at the same time, attention to race satisfies liberal demands for visible representation and inclusion. Where inclusion is deemed political (and not aesthetic), exclusion is understood as aesthetic (not political).

Finally, bookers, photographers, and other image-makers justify the exclusion of black women because they proclaim their inability to find a suitable pool of qualified talent (Mears 2010). In some cases, the black female body is constructed as physically deviant and problematic. In fact, as Ashley Mears argues in her ethnographic piece about aesthetic choices made by fashion producers, stereotypes guide aesthetic decisions. In conversation with Mears, a former fashion model, some bookers lament:

“A lot of black girls have got very wide noses...The rest of her face is flat, therefore, in a flat image, your nose, it broadens in a photograph. It’s already wide, it looks humongous in the photograph. I think that’s, there’s an element of that, a lot of very beautiful black girls are moved out by their noses, some of them.”

“But it’s also really hard to scout a good black girl. Because they have to have the right nose and the right bottom. Most black girls have wide noses and big bottoms so if you can find that right body and that right face, but it’s hard” (Mears 2010:38).

⁸ Aesthetic justifications for the exclusion of black models are similar to the controversy in the late 1980s, when the first black Radio City Music Hall Rockette was hired. Prior to her hiring, the exclusion of black dancers was attributed to “the desire to maintain the aesthetic of ‘mirror image’ uniformity and precision” – not racism (Williams 1989:2138). Aesthetic symmetry could have been achieved in a variety of ways to include black dancers (hiring all black dancers, hiring fair-skinned black dancers, encouraging all of the white dancers to get a tan to match the black dancers, etc.). Having one black girl in the line would be a distraction. Underlying the supposed aesthetics of race is the cultural meaning of race in fashion, where like the Rockettes, “introducing blacks into a lineup will make it ugly (‘unaesthetic’), imbalanced (‘nonuniform’) and sloppy (‘imprecise’)” (1989:2138)

These justifications are particularly important in the context of post-race neoliberalism because they point to the ways in which participation and access are explained away by market considerations, individual choice, and/or cultural deficiency. Arguments about regulating the social conscience of the fashion industry emphasize both a commercial imperative as well as an aesthetic need for choice and aesthetic freedom thus fitting squarely within the broader neoliberal framework, which relies on the logic of the free market to resolve social and political issues.

Rather than recognizing the absence of black models in the high fashion industry as part of the structural conditions of fashion aesthetics (black models are not included because power has constructed various modes of aesthetics to recognize blackness as aberrant), their exclusion is framed seemingly as a disjuncture between social responsibility and aesthetic freedom/choice. In reference to the lack of diversity on the runway, Robin Givhan said in a *New York Magazine* interview that a significant change in the racial makeup of runway shows has not occurred because:

we're talking about integrating the runways in a way that is less dependent on an aesthetic mood for a season and more on a moral obligation. I think if you look back at history you realize that those sorts of changes that are rooted in morality have not happened out of the goodness of people's hearts (Soller 2013).

Givhan suggests that change will only occur through political and economic pressures from outside the industry, thus bridging the tension between both art and commerce and art and politics – pressures that can impact the aesthetic culture of fashion.

Nevertheless, in their attempts to maintain their pursuit of creative freedom, designers argue that the value of their creations are directly related to the extent to which they

are unburdened by the limits of political correctness (Sadre-Orafai 2010). Fashion designers' attempt to separate aesthetics from culture is quite an astute strategy to forestall political responsibility (or as Givhan sees it, a moral obligation), in favor of aesthetic preference.

Out of fashion

In September 2007, fashion veteran Bethann Hardison moderated a press/invitation-only symposium called “The Lack of the Black Image in Fashion Today” at the Bryant Park Hotel Screening Room in New York City. The event featured an exclusive group of top models and designers including Iman, Naomi Campbell, Tyson Beckford, Liya Kebede, and Tracy Reese. According to Hardison, the purpose of the event was to “raise consciousness and take responsibility” for the lack of exposure (Feitelberg 2007) and to unify powerful members of the fashion community to end the exclusion many black models faced. Participants discussed why black models have become invisible on the runway over the past several years and concluded that the dearth of black models on the runway and in magazines resulted from discriminatory employment practices. Furthermore, they concluded that despite claims to the contrary, racism, not economic considerations, drove the exclusion of black models in the fashion industry since according to Targetmarketnews.com, black women's spending power is estimated at \$20 billion. As Robin Givhan suggests, designers do not view black women as their customers (Hunt 2007). In fact, as Kenya Hunt reports the concept “of being ‘right now’ trumps social responsibility. Few view race within the context of diversity” – instead they

see it as an aesthetic issue (Hunt 2007). In other words, the inclusion of black models is based primarily on the decision to visually present blackness in ways that fulfill an aesthetic desire, rather than a political one. Bethann Hardison's quest for the inclusion of black models did not begin with this first symposium in 2007. In fact, in 1992, after the 1988 founding of Black Girls Coalition (BGC), the BGC held a widely publicized press conference where Hardison confronted the fashion industry about the lack of models of color in advertising campaigns, despite the significant purchasing power of black, Asian, and Latin@ communities. The 1990s saw an increase in the models featured in magazines and even on covers like Naomi Campbell, who was the first black woman on the cover of British and French *Vogue*, however the numbers of black models, in particular, remained low in editorial images (Hunt 2007).

Hardison's second and most publicized forum, "Out of Fashion: Absence of Color" was held a month later in October 2007 at the New York Public Library. With the industry still buzzing from New York Fashion Week in September, this time the event was open to the public and allowed approximately 200 people. The second conversation featured a roundtable that included a diverse sampling heavyweights from various fields of the fashion industry: stylist and consultant, Lori Goldstein; former model and agent, David Ralph; casting director, James Scully; designer, Tracy Reese; and of course, former model and agent, Hardison. Although the conversation began with Hardison's nuanced critique of the industry and its exclusion of black

models⁹, several of the themes that arose during the roundtable deflected questions of race. In an effort to display race neutrality, fashion industry tastemakers rely on ambiguous terms to avoid a direct reference to race. Lori Goldstein claimed that fashion shows are more rhythmic, mechanical, and homogenized today. She suggested that this change has nothing to do with the color of a model's skin, that designers are not necessarily looking for white models, instead "They are looking for strong girls that walk very strong, or they are looking for a 'Prada-esque' girls that get lost in the clothes... every designer has a vision. It's more about the type of the personality of the girl and not the color of their skin." To say that designers, stylists, bookers, are looking for models with "personality," "character," or "strong girls," allows them to avoid a discussion of race or explain how race plays a role in production and decision-making in editorial fashion. An emphasis on personality also captures the neoliberal narrativized theme of placing responsibility solely on the individual. African American designer, Tracy Reese, suggested that "laziness" was the culprit driving designers to exclude models of color. She said, designers are

not thinking about the world or the diversity of their customer base – how to complement and accentuate different types of women. And I think it's lazy and not modern...Every designer who thinks they're modern and cutting edge...Is it modern to discriminate on your runway? We have a broad

⁹ Prior to introducing the panel, Hardison stood at the podium and listed her ten "peeves": 1) oftentimes, image makers don't have an "eye" to locate black beauty; 2) deciding one top working girl of color is sufficient; 3) hearing the statement that "black covers don't sell;" 4) black models having to compete against each other and being encouraged to do so by their reps; 5) model reps saying "I already have a black model or two;" 6) fashion designers not feeling self-conscious about their lack of diversity; 7) image makers not making a conscious effort to demand black images continually; 8) model agencies keeping black models from being in black magazines; 9) making it hard for agencies to get black models where agents lose their drive; and 10) celebrity blacks coming into fashion industry in their nouveau riche style, not recognizing the problem, just enjoying the lights and media acceptance.

audience that we are selling to... To not address that one the runway is so old-fashioned.

Again, it is the deployment of such seemingly race-neutral cues like “personality” and “laziness” that shift the frame from an anxiety over the absence of the black body in high fashion to a simple recalibration of public visibility. On the other hand, Reese evokes the civil rights language of “discrimination” to chide designers for excluding black models. Nevertheless, as Tracy Reese’s comments suggest, the explicit visible recognition and representation of blackness is part of a postmodern turn that posits attention to blackness/diversity as worthy, marketable, and fiscally responsible.

Hardison’s third symposium of the series was held on January 23, 2008 at the Bowery Hotel in New York City – only a couple of weeks before New York fashion week began. This final gathering had the largest turnout with about 275 guests (designers, editors, models, agents, journalists, etc.). Prior to this open forum, Hardison sat down with a group of influential African American women: *The Washington Post*’s fashion editor Robin Givhan, *The Wall Street Journal*’s fashion editor Teri Agins, *Essence Magazine*’s fashion director Agnes Cammock, The Studio Museum’s Thelma Golden, and Barneys New York’s Dawn Brown, to discuss details about the forum (*WWD* 2008). At the event, Hardison rehashed several of the arguments she raised at the previous forum and invited audience members to approach the microphone and speak about the invisibility of black models in fashion. She also read a note aloud from *Vogue*’s Andre Leon Talley, who was unable to attend the event due to his prior commitment to the Obama presidential campaign, in

which he conceded that the “first thing to do is to accept the issue as a reality” (Feitelberg 2008, Sadre-Orafai 2010).

By the time Hardison hosted her first 2007 event, the topic of diversity in high fashion had been written about at length by *Women’s Wear Daily* (WWD)¹⁰, but the issue of diversity in high fashion was also picked up by various global news sources including *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *The Telegraph* as fashion weeks roared on in major cities. Fashion websites and blogs like style.com, models.com, jezebel.com, fashionista.com and publications like *WWD* began surveying the number of models of color used in runway shows and on fashion magazine covers to highlight the lack of diversity that continues to plague that fashion industry. Despite their efforts to cope with the invisibility of black models by highlighting disparities in racial representation in high fashion, framing the terms of black exclusion as a problem of representation and the practice of counting the number of non-white bodies on the runway only supports the expectation that “representation itself will solve the problem of the black body in the field of vision” (Fleetwood 2011:5). The trope of invisibility (as best articulated in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*) understood in conjunction with demands for recognition, creates “an equivalence between political empowerment and public visibility” (Mercer 1999:56). Older conceptions of representation were best applied when racism was inscribed in the law. To increase the number of black models on

¹⁰ Women's Wear Daily is a fashion industry publication that is published five times per week and is widely regarded as an invaluable resource for fashion news across the industry. The news daily is published by Advance, an umbrella company that also owns Vogue publisher Conde Nast.

the runway might simply satisfy a current market demand rather than shifting or re-imagining the meaning of the black body in fashion. Counting and cataloguing models of color cannot effectively dismantle the system that identifies black models as aberrant.

The incorporation of difference in high fashion is part of a larger social and political interest in diversity and multiculturalism since, as Trebay and Givhan often articulate, fashion does not exist within a vacuum but must respond to or be in front of the social, political and cultural environment of the time. Projects like the Black Issue do little to disrupt the conditions that exclude blackness as a suitable aesthetic in fashion at large, but are instead an abstract “valorization of minority difference and culture” and incorporate “difference for the good rather than the disruption of hegemony” (Ferguson 2012:8, 34). Cultural history plays no part in the representation of black models on the runways and in magazines. In fact, what matters is the visual display of racial difference – or how Suzy Menkes’ (2013) describes in her *New York Times* review “the joy of seeing a sea of black faces.”

Post-race neoliberalism, as a form of power, not only provides the language to exclude black models (most black models are unqualified, the mere mention of race devalues creativity, etc.) but also organizes the terms that activists use to combat these kinds of statements. Again, the terms by which Hardison, et. al., frame the invisibility of black models opened the door for the Black Issue of *Vogue Italia*’s explicit investment in the novelty of black difference to be the high fashion industry’s perfect strategic response. Furthermore, the productive possibilities of post-race

neoliberalism enable and encourage the proliferation of *Vogue Italia*'s Black Issue by intimating that a magazine intended to celebrate blackness is evidence of the hegemonic terms being challenged and overthrown. As Kobena Mercer explains, cultural difference has been "made highly visible as the sign of a 'progressive' disposition, but radical difference was gradually detached from the political or moral claims once made in its name" (1999:54). In this way, the fashion industry uses diversity and representation as strategy to manage real opposition and material change (Ferguson 2012).

Blackness as Style: Vogue Italia's "A Black Issue"

"[C]ommodity culture not only relies on the production of the same – at the most general level, in the fashioning of everything as a commodity – but also on the production of difference, given that 'diversity sells' ... or, more properly, given that certain constructions of diversity and difference sell"

- Claire Dwyer and Philip Crang, "Fashioning Ethnicities" (p. 412-413).

In July 2008, *Vogue Italia* released "A Black Issue" featuring only "black" models (with the exception of advertisements, which unsurprisingly featured mostly white models), as well as commentary on topics that would seemingly interest black people (e.g., First Lady Michelle Obama, Spike Lee's *Miracle At St. Anna*, pieces about *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines), signaling a presumable cross-identification between "nonblack" individual readers and an imaginary collective black audience (Newitz 2000). This glossy presentation of black interest pieces fit uniquely into this conjuncture in which diversity acts as "a matter of good public relations or a tool leveraged by the powerful to accomplish various ideological and institutional goals"

(Ward 2008:7). All of the images were taken in the U.S. (Los Angeles) and they represent a global production of black beauty (using models from America, Europe, and Latin America; American and European photographers; setting in the U.S.; Italian magazine using English headings and Italian prose). Sozzani's inspiration for creating the Black Issue began in late 2007 when she noticed how homogenous the runways appeared and expressed a desire to confront this aesthetic. She said, "I decided to do an issue only with black girls. People say, 'It's a ghetto.' But we do thousands of issues with Russian girls and it's not a ghetto" (Givhan 2010).

The first run of the July 2008 issue sold out in the United States and Britain, which led *Vogue Italia* to reprint several thousand copies for American and British audiences (the Black Issue did not sell particularly well in Italy). The Black Issue became the highest grossing issue of VI, the first time a Conde Nast magazine was reprinted to satisfy high demand. Conde Nast printed 10,000 additional copies that were polybagged with the tagline "Most Wanted Issue Ever" and "First Reprint." The issue provoked several conversations online and in print on the topic of race and racism in the fashion industry. Those who celebrated the issue praised its focus on "positive" representations in a world that so easily attaches to negative and stereotypical depictions of black women. Furthermore, the magazine was heralded for shining a spotlight on the notion that beauty comes in various colors, shapes, and sizes (Stewart 2008, Mower 2008). The issue also sparked controversy among detractors who spoke against the issue's tokenism, which could be seen as a way to overlook the lack of diversity in the high fashion industry.

Sozzani, who proclaimed the Black Issue as the proudest moment of her career (Misener 2011), denied the existence of institutionalized racism in the fashion industry, and instead explained the dearth of black models in magazines and on the runway as a matter of individual choice (i.e., black women do not choose to enter the profession at the same rate as white women) – signaling a key idea about how markets should work at every level of society under neoliberalism (Walden 2008).¹¹ Here, neoliberalism acts as the logic governing Sozzani’s comments in which the celebratory aims of the magazine issue are seamlessly connected to market goals. Therefore suggesting that if more black girls and women chose to become models, more black models would grace the covers of high fashion magazine and runway shows, despite dozens of published accounts of black models being rejected. One of the most recent examples was from Jourdan Dunn, a black British model of Jamaican ancestry who won Model of the Year in 2008, when she was just 17 years old. More recently, according to an interview in *Net-A-Porter* magazine, Dunn has experienced times when she was rejected because the client “didn’t want anymore black girls,” and once a white makeup artist refused to work with Dunn because she was black. Nevertheless, in these contemporary conditions, if you do not succeed, the failure is due to your own personal shortcomings.

¹¹ Patricia Williams (1989) shows that the U.S. Supreme Court used similar logic in the *City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Co.* decision where regardless of how uniform and exclusionary a social text may be, it cannot be considered exclusionary unless there is proof that people of color have any interest in receiving municipal contracts, in that case, or a job as a runway model, being featured in a fashion magazine, etc.



Figure 1 Four covers of the All-Black Issue. *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008)

The issue, which featured four different covers with four different models individually gracing each cover (Naomi Campbell, Jourdan Dunn, Liya Kebede, and Sessilee Lopez), provided a diverse sampling of editorial spreads (Figure 1). These spreads, adapted by famed Ghanaian fashion stylist Edward Enninful, included a “Beauty” pictorial; “Modern Luxe,” a photographic tribute and accompanying article about black high fashion models of the past and present; “There’s Only One Naomi,” an extravagant spread devoted solely to iconic model, Naomi Campbell; and “Champagne Furs,” an editorial spread featuring Toccara Jones, a plus-sized model who was first introduced as a contestant on Tyra Banks’s wildly successful reality TV show “America’s Next Top Model,” in fur garments and black lingerie. There has not been an all-black model issue of *Vogue Italia* or any other high fashion magazine since the original, however several global fashion magazines have featured either all-black spreads or black cover models over the past five years.¹²

¹² Some examples include: *Vogue Italia*’s February 2011 “Black Allure” spread, *Harper Bazaar*’s March 2011 “What’s Bright Now” spread. Black models graced the covers of *Vogue Germany* in May 2009, *Vogue Russia* in December 2008 and April 2010, *i-D* in September 2008 and 2009, *Vogue Australia* in May 2012, and *Elle Italia* in January 2010

A Black Issue

Now that I have identified the historical and political conditions under which the *Vogue Italia* all-black issue was produced, I use the remaining part of this chapter to provide an analysis of several of the editorial spreads featured in the issue.

Considering the West's particularly long history of representing the black female body in image, this analysis will highlight the multiple meanings of blackness produced through the visual presentation of black female bodies.

Blackness has operated as a longstanding boundary for white identity, culture, and values. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams (2002) provide a compelling and thorough account of how image technologies shape our vision/version of the world and all of its inhabitants. They offer three categories to distinguish the visual and historical representations of the black female form: the naked black female ("National Geographic" or "Jezebel" aesthetic), the neutered black female (mammy), and the noble black female (noble savage). Together, these well-rehearsed tropes have contributed to the over-eroticization of and colonizing voyeurism toward black female bodies, specifically in relation to the white female form. It is through the circulation of these tropes that the black female body is constituted as a discursive space for various inscriptions of value, legibility, and visibility.

Black paint chips

Despite an increasing number of black bodies presented in film, television, and other forms of media to satisfy liberal demands for diversity and racial inclusion,

“seeing black is always a problem in a visual field that structures the troubling presence of blackness” (Fleetwood 2011:3). Nevertheless, photographer Steven Meisel is heralded for his creative ability to “extract” the beauty of his models. Cathy Horyn of the *New York Times* proclaims: “What is striking about Mr. Meisel’s pictures, especially a portrait of Ms. [Tyra] Banks in a soft head-wrap and one of Ms. [Sessilee] Lopez in a neat brocade turban, is how much beauty and life he was able to extract from them, so that you almost feel you are seeing these women for the first time” (Horyn 2008). The images of Lopez and Banks resemble classic beauty shots, or headshots, that are most often used for cosmetics or hair advertisements (Figure 2). These poses are popular in commercial advertising because the camera not only showcases the intended product, but the viewer is also drawn to the model’s face. Because black women have historically been produced through visual signs as in excess of idealized white femininity, the presentation of Tyra Banks and Sessilee Lopez as “beautiful” demonstrates progress, notwithstanding the necessity of Meisel’s skill to re-present them. On one hand, the disavowal of race comes to light in terms of the definition of beauty – that black can now stand in for beauty where beauty was previously understood in terms of its proximity to whiteness. On the other hand, the experience of seeing these women for the first time highlights what bell hooks (1992) observes as the mark of privilege since “most white people do not have to ‘see’ black people.” Despite the increase in black bodies in popular culture, because whites are most consistently on display in film, magazines, television, etc., “they can live as though black people are invisible” (p. 168).



Figure 2 Sesilee Lopez and Tyra Banks in turbans. *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008)

The “newness” of black beauty is also reinforced in the magazine’s text. For example, as a way to explicate the prominent use of black fabric on the models, the text accompanying the four-page “Black on Black” spread reads: “Dramatization of the former little black dress! The black color enhances the most sensational new black beauty” (“*Drammatizzazione dell’ex-Little Black Dress! Il nero più colori esalta la nuova sensational Black Beauty*”).



Figure 3 Liya Kebede and Chanel Iman are “Black on Black.” *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008)

Again, blackness must be identified, not only in image, but also in text in order to engage the reader in the practice of linking blackness as race to blackness as aesthetic. The term “Black Beauty” – to reference the black models, is presented as a recognizable, fully-formed concept, like “Little Black Dress” – both written in English amid Italian text. Race and difference becomes legible aesthetically as color – the blackness of the bodies is equivalent to the blackness of the dress and darkness of the lighting – and is the perfect accessory that can adorn even the black body. Therefore, we see both the reinforcement and disavowal of black difference. Blackness as difference as color enhances the fashion spread since difference is seductive. The repetition of the color black (in text, on fabric, and on the skin) directs our attention to race as an aesthetic.

In the “Beauty” spread, again the photographer uses this opportunity to play with the code “black” as a marker of both the bodies and the fabric color (Figure 4). The geometric and animated spread features Chanel Iman in various poses portraying

an abstract, futuristic, perhaps post-racial, reference to blackness.¹³ In this spread, we see a literal recycling of blackness through the symbolic links of the color black (as paint) and the black body. Here, the black coating on Iman's face endows and enhances her with a particular aesthetic value to match the commercial value to she has in the market as a black fashion model. As Patricia A. Turner suggests, beauty in fashion is difficult to regulate, and specifically with black models "part of the problem is that their complexions become part of the fashion...It's part of what's worn, in the same way as shoes or hats" (Trebay 2003).



Figure 4 Chanel Iman as a blackened beauty. *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008)

These images signify the artistic/aesthetic link between the color black and the cultural meaning of blackness in relation to the production of subjects. On the other

¹³ In contrast to afrofuturism which works against the idea of a utopian, race-less future that is eliminated by the use of technology.

hand, the image disavows and decontextualizes her blackened face from the racial history of blackface,¹⁴ thus commodifying black as a marketable aesthetic.



Figure 5 Chanel Iman: Black excess/excessively black. *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008)

Nicole Fleetwood (2011) maintains that “the black [female] subject comes to know herself by being identified and called out as such and by the repetition and circulation of cultural narratives, most important are visual narratives, that restate and reconstitute the subject’s blackness and the cultural meaning associated with this denigrated position” (p. 82). The over-exposure of blackness in Chanel Iman’s “Beauty” spread could refer to what W.T. Lhamon calls “optic black.” Optic

¹⁴ Alessandra Raengo offers a compelling account of the relationship between blackface and the production of black subjects. According to Raengo, blackface “is an image of blackness as image of race. Its referent is not black people, but the epidermality of race, in other words, the fact that race’s scopisic regime is built on the blackness of the skin” (2011:160). She sees the commodification of blackness in the entertainment industry as “historical ontology” that hooks contemporary material culture to relations of slavery. She uses the film *Bamboozled* to illustrate that the commodity form in contemporary material culture is ontologically black.

blackness, according to Lhamon, is derogatory cultural imagery, created by whites and endorsed by blacks, as a form of social criticism that highlights the “refusal” of blacks to “fit.” Optic blackness is ultimately the performance of the excessive visibility of blackness. The commendation of this imagery by whites is to *visually* display their refusal to fit in (Lhamon 2005; Raengo 2011). Therefore, as discussed above, it is through the literal and excessive repetition of “black” (vis-à-vis black bodies, black paint, and “black” in text), that the black female subject becomes visible in this space.

(II) legible whiteness, visible blackness

Some of the spreads in the issue, notably “Elegance as Form” and “How to Dazzle” rely upon a muted color palette. In both spreads, the models primarily wore black clothes, while the classic styling of the models and elegance of the garments matched the minimalist background setting. The images in both shoots make clear nostalgic references to the history of fashion photography’s past, including the works of Horst P. Horst, Richard Avedon, and Irving Penn, whose shots were regularly featured in *Vogue* magazines in the early and mid-twentieth century. Meisel’s use of dimmed light, minimally decorated (if not barren) white sets, a focus on shape and form, and his use of black and white exposure speaks directly to these classic photographers. Meisel mimics the apparent simplicity of Irving Penn’s compositions, which concealed a formal complexity resulting from the particular elegance of the model’s outline, of the abstract interplay of lines and shapes, and of empty and filled space. While Penn’s “models and portrait subjects were never seen leaping or

running or turning themselves into blurs” (Grundberg 2009), Richard Avedon often captured “alive moments,” in which models were photographed in motion (leaping in the air, walking, running, etc.), as Horst P. Horst is known for using carefully crafted sets that incorporated shadows cast by the models, making them an important part of his composition.



Figure 6 Black “Glamer” *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008)

Meisel engages in the mimetic practice of re-inserting black female bodies into nostalgic narratives of American glamour, rewriting fashion history as inclusive and ignoring the implications of race and the social relations of a past that excluded or minimized the visual presence of black bodies in high fashion. It is through this representation of the black models’ bodies as glamorous that the “bourgeois ideal of femininity as a symbol of racial inclusiveness” comes alive (Cheddie 2002:65). Since glamour(ous) is a characteristic most often attributed to white women, the bodies of these black models are disciplined by their insertion into a glamorous space that was previously occupied by white models. Therefore, whiteness is produced and made

anew through this exchange (Butler 1996). Ashley Mears maintains that glamour works through disguise. Derived from the Celtic term “glamer,” which is a talisman or magic spell “that is cast to blur the eyes and make objects appear different from, and usually better than, their true nature” (2012:5), the glamour displayed in these spreads produces the beauty of these black bodies as equal to those of white models.

On the other hand, one of the images featuring Sesilee Lopez resembles an April 1965 photograph of Donyale Luna (née Peggy Ann Freeman) shot by Richard Avedon for *Harper's Bazaar*. Luna is styled in leopard and her body is positioned like a jungle cat as her hands are formed into claws. In Meisel's reproduction, Lopez wears leopard print and leaps in the air with her mouth agape, exposing her teeth, as if she is growling. Her “claws” are up in a defensive stance. Both images highlight what Janice Cheddie argues is the “imagining of the black body as a signifier, often simultaneously, of the modern (glamo[u]r) and the primitive” (2002:66) (Figure 7). Similarly, Judith Brown (2009) argues that Josephine Baker used the discourse of “primitivist glamour” to discover “the costs and benefits of self-creation as beautiful object” (p. 132). In these fashion spreads, the discursive production of blackness as glamorous re-positions the black body as primitive.



Figure 7 Sesilee Lopez leaps in 2012 while Donyale Luna claws in 1965. *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008), *Harper's Bazaar* (April 1965)

In “There’s Only One Naomi,” the iconic Campbell is displayed in a wealthy setting, in various sexualized poses. Extravagance has long been a defining feature of high fashion, “with couturiers fabricating spectacular fantasies of luxury for the upper echelons of society” (Arnold 2001:4). In one image, Campbell, surrounded by lavish jewels and trinkets, is posed atop an ornate desk. She wears no clothing; only Christian Louboutin black thigh-high boots, a chandelier necklace, a large white ring, diamond bracelets, and a black net to cover her face. Her purple jacket is casually placed upon a chair across from her (Figure 8).



Figure 8 “There’s Only One Naomi.” *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008)

Another image features Campbell perched on a large bed covered in fruit, desserts, and rose petals. Beside her on the ornate nightstand are more desserts, fruit, and candles. Campbell is wearing a black dress with sequins and feathers. One shoulder of the dress has fallen to expose one of her breasts. In her left hand, she holds a black fan with feathers. Her long, dark, straight hair covers the other side of her dress. She is looking directly at the camera, with her face slightly off-center. The image seems to connote opulence, gluttony, excess, wealth, waste, and fetish. She is there to be consumed. Naomi’s dress (and skin) are the only black items in the room, besides the bedpost. In the remaining images, Campbell dons black lingerie or appears to be in the state of undress, as her breasts are exposed in all but three images.



Figure 9 Black and decadent. *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008)

Naomi Campbell is the only model in this issue whose spread title identifies her by name. Naomi's "supermodel" status and wealth overshadow the complexities and anxieties of lesser-known black women. However, an effect of her naming is that the images carry with them Campbell's distinct biography. She cannot escape the fantastic stories about her anger-management challenges, stints in drug rehabilitation facilities, as well as her unwavering professionalism, remarkable figure, and her ineffable glamour. The significance of her identification and presentation in the spread also speaks to her iconic status as a black supermodel with a career in the industry lasting an unprecedented twenty years. As the designers Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana declared, Campbell is an "icon rather than a model" (Trebay 2010). Leigh Raiford (2007) defines iconic photographs as those images "that come to distill and symbolize a range of complex events, ideas, and ideologies." She goes

on to say that these icons “in turn become integral to processes of national, racial, and political identity formation” (p. 130). Similarly, Fleetwood (2011) speaks of the status of “iconicity” as the suspension of singular images and signs that come to represent historical occurrences and processes. Icons are discursive productions that are used as placeholders and help direct and distribute racial narratives. This means, as Selzer (2010) summarizes, that through circulation, iconicity “works to transform individuals into representatives of an imaginary type” (p. 17). At the same time, because icons are exceptions, they exceed the rules that bind them.



Figure 10 Naomi Campbell as iconic black beauty. *Vogue Italia* 695 (July 2008)

As Carol Henderson has argued, the black body operates as a “walking text” upon which particular social meanings are inscribed. In this case, Naomi is produced as an iconic, exceptional figure, so her presence in a stately mansion surrounded by various symbols of over the top wealth does not appear unusual. Therefore, any claims that link her to the history of the denigrated black female body in the visual

sphere can be disavowed. Naomi would qualify under what Imani Perry calls Black American exceptionalism, which she says is “a popular narrative, a cultural practice, and an interpretive frame...that shapes individual experiences and shapes how we evaluate the racial inequality that we ‘see’ on our city streets, in our office buildings, on our television and movie screens, and in our new media” (2011:131). Campbell is able to embody “an air of upper-class exclusivity and rarity,” despite the “construction of non-white ethnicity as vulgar” (Mears 2011:196). In this way, Naomi Campbell’s status as a black icon enables her presence in the industry to be read as evidence that her (black) “look” is desirable, as Franca Sozzani proclaimed in a 2011 interview with *Huffington Post* editor Ariana Huffington. Nevertheless, the discourse of glamour links Campbell’s black body – her partial nudity and sexualized poses – to primitivism and directly references black female bodies as always-already eroticized.

“A Black Issue” calls for the recognition of black beauty and glamour that has either been unrecognized or hidden from public discourse. The symbols lodged within the images connote the disavowal of black difference and a commodified hypervisibility of blackness as an aestheticized, yet socially and politically insignificant classification. Moreover, difference is a place in which subjects are made. As Alessandra Raengo argues, blackness and its accompanying visual representation “carries a series of promises, assumptions, and fantasies about what ‘black’ should deliver” (2013:17). It is easy to be seduced by the images. There is a

particular affective register of seeing black bodies in a high fashion magazine – for black women, many connect with the excitement of their presence; we long to be (re)presented in a space of exclusion. The post-race neoliberal rhetoric is seductive – it places emphasis on individual merit and accomplishment and highlights diversity and the “benefits” of explicit racial difference – a diversity that is obvious, visible, and recognizable.

One could argue that the *Vogue Italia* issue was an attempt to promote difference and diversity “without disrupting normative whiteness and truly integrating racial diversity beyond superficial representations” (Hasinoff 2008:328). The magazine issue shows that in this post-racial, Obama era, “all citizens are (now) equal under the free market” (p. 328), thus moving away from concerns that the consequences of race have any material significance. In this way, the black model’s body functions as a signifier of progress and change. Therefore, the fact that a relatively unknown black model like Arlenis Sosa, secured a lucrative cosmetics contract, and Jourdan Dunn was later featured on several magazine covers after the release of “A Black Issue” forestalls the possibility for tacit engagement on questions about the fashion system and the aesthetic logic upon which it depends as part of a racial project. Instead, the production of the magazine offers false promises of significant or structural change in the aesthetic logic of industry and instead provides an abstract promotion of representation.

The efforts led by Hardison, et. al. simply advocating for the inclusion of more models of color on the runway and in high fashion magazines coupled with the

success of *Vogue Italia*'s "A Black Issue" attempt to demonstrate the fashion industry's commitment to diversity and minority representation. Nevertheless, as I argue, "A Black Issue" reveals the fashion industry's success in deploying race as a marketable aesthetic. Since the release of "A Black Issue," Franca Sozzani has been publicly supported by Bethann Hardison and Naomi Campbell, who have both spoken in favor of Sozzani against charges of racism. Most recently, in January 2014, the "Business of Fashion" blog published an article by Jason Campbell accused Sozzani and the *Vogue Italia* website for segregating photographs of black models into a *Vogue Black* section. Sozzani launched the *Vogue Black* website in February 2010 with Hardison as the editor-at-large. She conferred with Hardison before producing the site (Givhan 2010). Sozzani released a response to Jason Campbell's article on the *Vogue Italia* website resisting this charge and countering that sections like *Vogue Black* and *Vogue Curvy* are meant to celebrate difference. In this note, Sozzani also defended her level of racial sympathy by highlighting her commitment to young African designers, and by including words of support from her friends Hardison and Naomi Campbell, thereby proving that she cannot be racist.

The terms by which Bethann Hardison and her colleagues construct the exclusion of black models invites "A Black Issue" to be a perfect and natural rejoinder. As Foucault writes, where power exists, "there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1978:95). I argue here that an industry discretely shaped by aesthetics, beauty, color, and bodies attempts to make race legible, while at the same time

attempt to re-signify its significance by rendering dark bodies equivalent and interchangeable with white ones.

Post-raciality is recognized here by presentation of blackness in image taken up by a white editor, photographer, elite fashion magazine (inspired by the visible presence of Obama and Oprah) rather than being directly tied to a black American political agenda – despite the activism introduced by Bethann Hardison and her contemporaries. Post-race neoliberalism, as it relates to the fashion industry, is a cultural logic squarely defined within a neoliberal economy and a postmodern, multicultural, and universal society. Black bodies are produced as valuable – for its “‘intensity of color’ and physicality” (Cheddie 2002:65) – in the fashion market even though black female bodies are not valuable in a civil sense. Post-race neoliberalism constructs black bodies as visible, visibility that proclaims the reality of post-raciality while at the same time visually affirming racial difference. As Dorinne Kondo argues, universality is too often “reified as the ultimate aesthetic goal, enshrining conventional notions of art as a transcendent realm apart from history, politics, and society” (1997:19). This confluence has created an environment in which cultural difference is desirable, insofar as it is marketable. In the following chapter, I discuss the high fashion industry’s direct engagement with the visual presentation of blackness as aesthetic by examining the “Haute Mess” editorial spread in the March 2012 issue of *Vogue Italia*. Furthermore, I consider the importance of diversity to the post-race neoliberal project and the visual presentation of race-neutrality in fashion. I argue for the importance of considering both “A Black Issue” and “Haute Mess”

together as part of the same post-race neoliberal conjuncture where the former demonstrates the visible necessity of black bodies and the latter visually eschews the need for (multiple) black bodies to evoke blackness.

CHAPTER THREE

“HAUTE [GHETTO] MESS”

FASHIONING COMMODITIES AND THE SEDUCTION OF BLACKNESS IN HIGH FASHION

In the fashion industry, aesthetics not only defines blackness in particular ways, but they also allow major players to play with the fluidity of blackness even (especially) when black bodies are not present. As Herman Gray (1995) writes, considering “the level of saturation of the media with representations of blackness, the mediascape can no longer be characterized using such terms as invisibility. Rather, we might well describe ours as a moment of *hyperblackness*” (p. 230). In this chapter I analyze the “Haute Mess” editorial spread in the March 2012 issue of *Vogue Italia* to demonstrate that “hyperblackness” does not only require the presentation of blackness in bodily form, but it can also reference symbolic renderings of blackness – without being named as such.

“Haute Mess” is a colorful, cartoonish, fantastical spread featuring several popular high fashion models including Coco Rocha, Joan Smalls, and Jessica Stam. The cover and corresponding spread, styled by Lori Goldstein, was received with both praise and backlash. First, the magazine was touted for featuring a black cover model, Afro-Latina Joan Smalls, for the first time in four years (Figure 11). But, because the (mostly white) models in the story wore extra long and excessively decorated fingernails and toenails, crazy hairpieces, and gold teeth, the issue received criticism for its blatant use of stereotypical imagery of poor, black women.

Hailed as both brilliant and racist, the spread is a visual smorgasbord complete with various model “characters” wearing high-priced, high fashion clothing, adorned by junk food, candy wrappers, and other symbols of American overconsumption, while the obscured faces of babies and male companies appeared in the distance. Even the cover text, “#overthetop,” connotes excess – which various scholars have pointed out, has a long history beginning most notably with Saartjie Baartman, colloquially known as the Hottentot Venus, whose spectacularization points to the representation of the black female body as perverted and excessive in its commercialization.

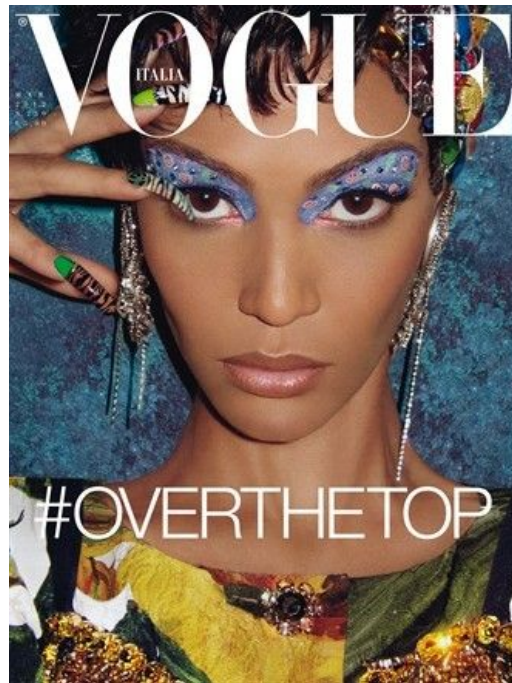


Figure 11 Joan Smalls covers “Haute Mess.” *Vogue Italia* 739 (March 2012)

Contained within the cover image is a complete “string of signifiers, associations, mythologies, and obsessions about blacks and blackness [that] are also being sold”

(Russell 1998:114), with the implicit association of black femininity and excessiveness being just one. The spread features a global circulation of symbols and is a creative production between an Italian-based high fashion magazine shot on location in Los Angeles.

As Bethann Hardison succinctly states, “Modeling is probably the one industry where you have the freedom to refer to people by their color and reject them in their work.” Similarly, fashion is one of the few industries where segregation is still acceptable – claims for “Caucasian only” or “No Blacks” are not uncommon nor deemed socially, politically or professionally reprehensible. I argue that race is both made and un-made in fashion on the one hand through the production/performance of “difference,” and on the other hand through the flattening of difference where difference generates cultural and economic value through consumption and celebration. I consider high fashion magazines as visual and discursive fields that according to Nicole Fleetwood (2011) mark the (black) subject within systems of visual discourse that exist prior to the subject.

My original plan for this chapter was to follow the discourses about race and the production of *Vogue Italia*’s 2008 “A Black Issue” as a visual representation of the post-race neoliberal conjuncture – where the visual presentation of blackness is heralded as part of an investment in a depoliticized, superficial multicultural diversity. I was immediately curious about the racial logic that tied the issue together. I saw “A Black Issue” as a production of blackness as style and a global presentation of black as beauty/beautiful despite historical references to blackness as a debased

culture and identity. It was after the release of “Haute Mess” that I came to see what was missing from the images in “A Black Issue”: stereotype, spectacle, parody, and performance (as play, fun, entertainment) of blackness. For Homi Bhabha, the stereotype operates like a fetish; it is a scene of subject formation. It reflects and responds to multiple desires: to make visible, to make knowable, to make present, to fixate (Bhabha 1994). As Ashley Mears (2011) argues, fashion producers “rely on conventions, imitation, and stereotypes to guide their actions. Their everyday understandings of femininity, race, and class construct beauty ideals they think will resonate with imagined consumer audiences” (p. 172). This recognition, structured by the logic of post-race neoliberalism, enabled me to see how the “Haute Mess” story shocked, disrupted, and contradicted the seamless celebration of blackness in “A Black Issue” – but still operated as a product of the same logic. Specifically, “A Black Issue” is offered up as evidence that we are beyond the bounds of racism inasmuch as the individual black models who appear in the issue have achieved success in the high fashion industry (despite the presentation of some as eroticized, sexualized, and primitivized visual subjects), while “Haute Mess” amplifies and perverts the excess of a constructed and stereotyped black cultural aesthetic. Both issues expose a space for post-racial and post-racism discourse to flourish. The presentations of bodies featured in both issues are produced at the intersection of heightened visual technology, commodity consumption, globalization, increased urbanization, and spectacularization.

In this chapter, I first discuss fashion's engagement with the visual discourse of diversity, where post-race neoliberalism encourages fashion to play with difference as an aesthetic – therefore racial performances and spectacles are not deemed racist. Although the previous chapter also highlighted the importance of diversity in the production of fashion images, the Black Issue of *Vogue Italia* demonstrated the necessity of visible black bodies, while “Haute Mess” shows why black bodies are not necessary to display blackness and fulfill the post-race neoliberal diversity project. I consider the discursive power of “race-neutrality” in the visual presentation of difference and how the economic market and technology are used to privilege white bodies. Next, I discuss how the high fashion industry creates a space for blackness through the performance of race as an aestheticized category. Recognizing whiteness as “the universal empty point” (Puwar 2002) highlights the ability of white bodies to occupy blackness because their bodies are racially unmarked. Racial performances in high fashion, like blackface, draw attention to this privilege especially. Finally, I read the production and consumption of blackness through racial performance by analyzing images from the “Haute Mess” editorial. Through my examination of “Haute Mess,” I identify the ways in which blackness is deployed as an aesthetic, rather than an identity, that can be inhabited then removed without significant political consequence. In other words, I consider blackness as constituted outside the category of race and identity, and instead constructed through aesthetics – while aesthetics are concurrently structured in and by race. Furthermore, the spread uses stereotype to mimic and play with purportedly excessive elements of black

culture – blackness as an aestheticized category comes to be made through such performances. I argue that in the high fashion industry, visual spectacles like “Haute Mess” traffic in the categories of difference, discursivity, and practice to produce black subjects.

The aesthetic value of diversity

In August 2013, *The New York Times* featured a story on the cover of their Fashion & Style section that explored the racial dynamics of the fashion industry. In the article, Eric Wilson details various accounts of discrimination by fashion designers, stylists, and photographers based on their “persistent lack of diversity.” Although the article focuses on the dearth of black models on the runway despite fashion’s claims of change and social progressiveness, one of the most interesting aspects of the article was a comment by Francisco Costa, the women’s creative director for Calvin Klein. Costa has been repeatedly criticized for selecting an overwhelmingly white cast of models since becoming the principal designer of Calvin Klein in 2003. In response, Costa claimed that there are not enough “top-level professionally trained” black models from which to select and “[w]e try to present a unique and interesting cast with as many exclusives as possible to create and emphasize that season’s aesthetic.” In other words, blackness is assigned a particular meaning in the aesthetic system of fashion – a space that retains a particular value to the fashion system itself. In conversation with fashion writer Robin Givhan, she supported Costa’s assertion that he preferred a more diverse runway, but because he had only recently been charged to lead design efforts at Calvin Klein, and the brand

was one of the creators of the “waif look,” he did not believe he could completely change course because the waif aesthetic and minimalism defined the brand. For Costa, it was not a matter of introducing diversity instead he considered aesthetics and what the Calvin Klein brand represented in the fashion world – sameness as a desirable goal. Hence, diversity (as an aesthetic) was not part of the desired vision for Calvin Klein. She added that once Costa feels comfortable and feels that his personal vision becomes part of the Calvin Klein aesthetic, he can add more models of color.¹⁵ By establishing whiteness as an aesthetic norm for the Calvin Klein brand through the exclusion of black bodies, Costa’s position furthers the dominating aesthetic system of post-race neoliberalism in which visible representations of cultural diversity operate as style – a style that cannot be considered part of the Calvin Klein brand aesthetic.

Exclusive fashion house, Dior, like Calvin Klein, has also been publicly criticized for not presenting diverse casts of models. Nevertheless, in July 2013, Dior revealed its collection and included six black models. Ironically, Dior and Calvin Klein share the same casting director, Maida Gregori Boina, who suggested that the Dior casting “was the result of the multicultural concept of the collection, not the criticism.” For the designer and casting director, the selection of mostly white models is purely an aesthetic matter – what Patricia Williams (1989) calls an “aesthetic of uniformity,” where whiteness on the runway represents precision, balance, and inconspicuousness. Here we see that black bodies are used to provide

¹⁵ Telephone interview with Robin Givhan, December 20, 2011

and represent a particular “multicultural” aesthetic, rather than representing racial and ethnic difference both as an issue of a relations of power and a source of protest or political empowerment. Using the logic of post-race neoliberalism, the deployment of black bodies used to realize a multicultural aesthetic and the presence of black bodies as legible resistance to racism are illustrations of separate spheres that are no longer linked. This decoupling makes these spheres become unintelligible, and different from previous eras since blackness no longer signifies particular conditions of inequality, but is instead aestheticized to function as an element of a multicultural aesthetic and an optional identity, ushering in a new regime Kobena Mercer calls “multicultural normalization” (Mercer 1999).

Hegemonic narratives of difference and diversity are part of the post-race neoliberal framework that relies primarily on “celebration” and/or fun/play, which allows for the representation of specific types of difference in the popular imagination. This emphasis on diversity only seeks to obfuscate various forms of inequality that depend on the maintenance of systemic racism, sexism, classism, etc. in order to prevail. Only specific forms of diversity are allowed to roam freely in the post-race neoliberal framework. Accordingly, a fundamental prerequisite of the increased visibility of difference is that these representations exist to thwart conversations about the presence of continued inequality.

Cultural difference has increasingly been positioned as a valuable commodity and is more visible than ever (Bonilla-Silva 2010, Collins 2004, Melamed 2006). Pushing the boundaries of existing definitions of beauty, value, and desirability, the

rise of multicultural imagery recalibrates the meaning of racial difference in an environment that is increasingly exemplified by its diversity. However, as Gomez-Peña argues, the location of difference under the rubric of multiculturalism “artificially softens the otherwise sharp edges of cultural difference, fetishizing them in such a way as to render them desirable” (2001:12). As diversity and cultural difference becomes the “new normal,” blackness is a position that is woven into the fabric of an increasingly large multicultural rug. Lisa Duggan and Sara Ahmed have both argued that institutionalized multiculturalism has much more to do with the unjust generation of profit rather than a predictor for increased social, political, and economic equality for marginalized groups (Duggan 2004; Ahmed 2006). Accordingly, in fashion, despite this increased interest in diverse cultures, “the universality of whiteness” remains an underlying feature (Puwar 2002:64).

Diversity is specifically profitable within a commercial vs. editorial fashion space. The color divide is evident where black women and other women of color are represented in high numbers within commercial modeling versus editorial modeling: “diversity is strategically sought – not to be obvious or too closely aligned with an affirmative action agenda – but just enough to increase the commercial enterprises’ market share by representing the demographic base” (Mears 2010:34). Therefore, in the fashion space, difference is depoliticized and through the influence of post-race neoliberal discourse, diversity becomes an economically valued commodity where it is relegated to the field of culture where it is to be consumed, celebrated, and enjoyed. Seduced by this logic, multiracial (black and Korean) American model, Chanel Iman,

in her July 2009 *Teen Vogue* cover shoot and interview with fellow black British model Jourdan Dunn, says: “I don't want to be known as the black model. I want to be recognized as Chanel Iman, a personality. Five years from now I see myself still working hard to get where I want to be, because I think big. I think the best. Maybe I think too large.” This emphasis on self-making and the achievement of success through hard work and dedication, while relegating racial identification to the margins, fits perfectly within the neoliberal story described above. Furthermore, I challenge the notion that the fashion system provides entry on the basis of merit – as Iman’s narrative suggests – and instead argue that access to the high fashion industry is organized racially.

Visibility, Technology, and the Myth of Race-Neutrality

“The assumption that the normal face is a white face runs through most published advice given on photo- and cinematography. This is carried above all by illustrations which invariably use a white face, except on those rare occasions when they are discussing the ‘problem’ of dark-skinned people.”

- Richard Dyer, *White* (1997)

“No black girls allowed” – race and the logic of exclusion in high fashion

Over the past thirty years, images of multicultural diversity have circulated in the fashion industry in new and important ways, signaling a form of both progressive politics and a fantasy of multiracial harmony. Despite the proliferation of multicultural iconography, one area where the visual presentation of racial diversity continues to lag is in the pages of editorial fashion magazines. Because of the common myth that “black models don’t sell,” fashion magazine editors maintain the

practice of excluding black models from the covers of their magazines. Jourdan Dunn, a popular black British model calls such practices “lazy” since there is no real evidence that such claims are true (Cartner-Morley 2013). But, as Ashley Mears (2010) and Joanne Entwistle (2009) demonstrate, editorial magazines base their decisions not on market demands, but on “taste.” Instead of a purely economically-based market, there is an aesthetic economy that guides decision-making in fashion (Aspers 2006, Entwistle 2009). Therefore, determining that black models are not valuable enough to appear on fashion magazine covers is not simply a question of economics, but of aesthetics.

As Foucault might argue, in order to uphold this belief about the inability of black faces to sell fashion magazines, discourses devaluing the black body must have “a repeatable materiality” – or reinscribe knowledges about blackness (Foucault 2002:122). Nevertheless, the logic of using mostly white models to grace the covers of fashion magazines in order to maintain respectable sales figures appears to be an essentialized belief that in the words of Roland Barthes (1972), “goes without saying.” Barthes considers depoliticization as a part of mythmaking. In fact, he suggests that the function of myth is to talk about things, “simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (1972:143). Therefore the myth that devalues black models can circulate as a function of what is deemed an aesthetic matter. I would argue that as much as the exclusion of black models on fashion magazine covers becomes depoliticized, so does the production of

an all-black issue of *Vogue Italia* and the subsequent all-black fashion spreads.¹⁶ In this way, both the presence and absence of black bodies in fashion lacks political salience and is instead cast out as part of mainstream culture.

The high fashion industry relies on a commonsense notion of how race is represented and seen in image. Ashley Mears uses the economics-derived concept of “locked-in” to explain the difficulty (and unwillingness) bookers and clients claim in reference to their inability to change the entire system of fashion – they rest on the idea that it is “just the way things are done.” A similar argument could be made about the use (or lack thereof) of black models for editorial fashion spreads and runway shows. I am suggesting that cultural, market, and technological structures impact decision-making as well as how blackness is “seen” in high fashion. Mears suggests that the paucity of black models in the high fashion space is a matter of conventions (2010). I would argue that these norms are embedded in the system, and technological apparatus, so that they become unrecognizable as having such power over the decision-making and ways of seeing.

On the historical production of white identity, Rhonda Garelick (2011) writes that fashion has historically been instrumental in the production of (racial) identities. In her article, she posits the direct relationship between Parisian fashion and Nazi fascism – a system that is rooted in the myth that “fashion can vanquish physical inadequacy and aging, conferring the beauty and youth we see on the runways and on

¹⁶ All-black Harlem Renaissance themed spread entitled “The Blackallure” was featured in the February 2011 issue of *Vogue Italia*. Photographed by Emma Summerton and styled by Edward Enninful, the 20-page portfolio showcased a diverse collection of young black models from all over the globe including Joan Smalls, Chanel Iman, Laïs Ribero, Melodie Monrose, Rose Cordero, Jourdan Dunn, and Sesilee Lopez.

every page of Vogue — a cult of physical perfection very much at home in the history of fascism.” The Nazi-friendly Vichy government in France engaged in what Foucault calls bio-power, or an apparatus through which our basic biological features became the object of a general strategy of power (Foucault 2009). For example, as the Vichy government adopted the Nazi standard of Aryan physical fitness, “more French fashion magazine began focusing on exercise and diet for women.” During the Nazi occupation of France in WWII, the Nazis, fans of the importance of fashion in French culture, allowed the industry to stay alive. “Lucien Lelong, a designer who supported Vichy and whose house stayed open during the war, saw couture as a political force: ‘Our role is to give France the face of serenity. The more elegant Frenchwomen are, the more our country will show the world that we are not afraid’” (Garelick 2011). This discursive construction of French culture fashioned a connection between “the cultural splendor of couture and Frenchwomen’s national, even genetic identity.” The overwhelming power of Nazism produced a discourse of the body that, according to Garelick, continues to have material effects on the current standards of beauty. In fact, as Garelick argues, the fascists’ ideal body type and the Nazi aesthetic “are the very elements that define what we call the all-American look” and are particularly “visible in the mythic advertising landscapes of designers like (the decidedly non-Aryan) Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein” (Garelick 2011).

Over-exposure: the problem of race as/in technology

Richard Dyer (1997) writes about the impact of race on the technological function of photography. He theorizes that while all technologies are technical in terms of their material features and function, they are also social – having economic, cultural, and ideological properties – and are therefore not race-neutral. In fact, the development of camera, stocks and lighting to normalize the white face provided an apparatus that “came to be seen as fixed and inevitable, existing independently of the fact that it was humanly constructed” (p. 90). Photographic lighting relies on “controlled visibility,” or as Dyer claims, its guiding principle is controlled visibility, which ensures “that what is important in a shot is clearly visible to the audience” (p. 86). The method of lighting (dim, spotlight, etc.) depends on the desired expression. Furthermore, photography and moving lighting both privilege and constitute whiteness. According to Dyer, this apparatus “was developed with white people in mind and habitual use and instruction continued in the same vein, so much so that photographing non-white people is typically constructed as a problem” (p. 89). Elaborating on Dyer’s theorization of the aesthetic technology of photography, I argue that within high fashion iconography the inherent problem of blackness upholds the aesthetic preference for whiteness (Fleetwood 2011). The idea that blackness causes trouble in the field of vision is central, as vision is contingent on a set of assumptions and relationships, therefore the mechanics of seeing come into view.

As I mention in the previous chapter, the logic of post-race neoliberalism relegates racism to the past and instead allows for the exclusion of black models in the high fashion industry to be justified as being, in part, an aesthetic rather than a

political or economic matter. Ashley Mears (2010) found that both bookers and clients blame “the market” for the racial imbalance in high fashion. As one stylist in her study said, “Okay let’s say Prada. You don’t have a huge amount of black people buying Prada. They can’t afford it. Okay, so that’s economics there. So why put a black face? They put a white face, because those are the ones that buy the clothes” (2010:37). This argument might make sense when discussing commercial products and fashion, but editorial tastemakers “are not beholden to the buying public, and for them, ‘the market,’ is a set of self-referential conventions about one another’s taste for the ‘edgy’” (2010:37). Here, I am suggesting that the umbrella of “aesthetics” also includes the aesthetic technology of photography, which favors, assumes, and constructs an image of white bodies within a discursive field that is organized according to a logic. It is this constructedness of the photographic medium that upholds preference for white. I agree with Dyer (1997) who argues that it might be true that the photographic apparatus has “seemed to work better with light-skinned peoples, but that is because [it was] made that way, not because [it] could be no other way” (p. 90).

Photographic technology has historically been calibrated to privilege whiteness and has also impacted how blackness is seen in the visual field. Photography is where the conventions of seeing meet the racial politics of meaning. The technology of images was originally designed to disregard the multiple and subtle shadings of darker skin. The racial politics of image production “extended into the aesthetics of the medium itself, which for its very beginnings was predicated on

the denigration and erasure of the black body” (Hornaday 2013). Even today, photographers must manage the inherent bias of their tools to capture an “accurate” depiction of darker skin. In my own experience, I was surprised to learn that the complexions of several popular new black models, particularly Chanel Iman and Joan Smalls, are significantly lighter in person than how they appear in magazines images and on television. Clearly, the impact of lighting on set continues to privilege white skin while rendering black skin darker than in reality, since cameras and lighting were developed to take the white face as the benchmark. In this way, technology is effective in assigning value to race and difference. Nevertheless, as Dyer (1997) argues, linking human subjects and the photographic apparatus is not just about achieving accuracy, because “getting the right image meant getting the one which conformed to prevalent ideas of humanity. This included ideas of whiteness, of what color – what range of hue – white people wanted white people to be” (p. 90) and, I argue, what color white people wanted black people to be. Therefore, it is both the aesthetic and technological construction of beauty that shape racial representation in fashion.

Blackness as Cultural Commodity – Defining a Market for Blackness in High Fashion

“Years ago, runways were almost dominated by black girls...Now some people are not just interested in the vision of the black girl unless they’re doing a jungle theme and they can put her in a grass skirt and diamonds and hand her a spear”

– J. Alexander (in Trebay 2007).

In her *New York Magazine* article entitled, “Why Fashion Keeps Tripping Over Race,” Robin Givhan (2011) notes that fashion’s global reach means that

“everyone isn’t hauling around the same societal baggage.” She goes on to offer examples in France and Holland, where the former embraces “exoticism” as well as the historical migration of expatriate African American artists. The latter is known for its association of blackface with “Black Peters,” who are recognized as Santa’s little helpers. Nevertheless, the celebration of exoticism and the practice of Dutch revelers wearing blackface during the Christmas holiday season, both have deep historical roots to the relationship between two colonial powers and their complex and patriarchal relationship with various African nations. In the same article, Givhan rhetorically asks if she should not have been “horrified” by Viktor and Rolf’s Spring/Summer 2001 decision to paint the faces and bodies of their models black for a collection called “The Black Hole” that “focuses on silhouettes.”¹⁷ Givhan suggests that the presence of these images and performances are a sign of the contemporary moment (in fashion) where people feel more comfortable playing with images that refer to race. But she acknowledges the difficulty of disaggregating these images from the historical legacy of blackface. She suggests when “it comes from an industry that is hurtful and dismissive it comes across as suspect” (Givhan 2011).

Although black bodies may not be desirable to the average fashion consumer, the popularity of blackface, “urban” shoots, and African-themed spreads shows that there is a particular interest in blackness despite the fact that most of these spreads do not include black professional models (in some cases black bodies are included in the

¹⁷ Ironically, Viktor and Rolf followed their 2001 effort with a corresponding “White” collection for the Spring/Summer 2002. In this runway show, none of the models were covered with white makeup to represent the “white” aesthetic.

background to add authenticity to the image). The preponderance of these images highlights the fashion industry's strong fascination with black bodies and black culture. It is the discourse of post-race neoliberalism that allows high fashion purveyors to enjoy blackness as exotic and fun, since blackness is deployed as a method of celebrating difference as novelty. In other words, post-race neoliberalism structures race so that it deploys blackness as a commodified style, a fashion accessory that can be used or discarded according to demands of the market – therefore, blackness serves a particular aesthetic function in fashion.

The cover image of a 2006 issue of *The Independent* features supermodel Kate Moss covered in black paint with the caption: “NOT a fashion statement – The Africa Issue.” Here, Africa is signified not through landscape or fabric colors, but through the blackening of Kate Moss's skin, as if her darker hue evokes kinship, devotion, or empathy to the fight against AIDS in Africa. This cover, in the most obvious way, attempts to simulate bodily features associated with blackness/Africanness by projecting a “direct quotation” of blackness through the appropriation of black skin (Black 2009). That same year, in February, photographer Steven Klein shot an editorial for *Vogue Italia* where white models were featured with obviously blackened skin.

One of the most provocative editorials of 2007 was in the August issue of *iD* magazine where black Jamaican model Sasha Gaye-Hunt, donned blackface and a colorful head wrap for a short feature on the controversial clothing store, *American Apparel*. The caption for the image read: “Sweeter than candy. Better than cake”

proclaiming Gaye-Hunt's body as edible. The viewer is literally invited to partake in what bell hooks calls "eating the other." In her study about the relationship between food, flesh, and racial identity formation, Kyla Wanza Tompkins identifies racist images from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that feature "the edible and delicious black subject" whose presence "reveals something larger about the relationship between eating and racial identity" (2012:1). In contrast to blackface where blackness is "put on," with images of the delicious, edible black body, Gaye-Hunt's hyper-blackness is "put in" (Tompkins 2012:11).

Following the immensely popular *Vogue Italia* Black Issue, Naomi Campbell was featured in the September 2009 issue of American *Harper's Bazaar* in an editorial called "Wild Things," where she was styled in various animals skins in an unnamed desert location. The shoot references back to images of Donyale Luna in the April 1965 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, photographed by Richard Avedon, with Luna in African garb. Like Luna, Campbell is styled in leopard print, however while Luna's hands gestured "in a claw-like action in one image and on all fours in another" (Cheddie 2002:66), Naomi Campbell is photographed in action. Her superimposed image is running alongside a leopard as if they are in a race. In this African-themed shoot, the landscape, colors, and Campbell's body are used to signify "Africa" and "blackness" while still pointing to her primitive exoticism.

Despite claims of achieving a post-racial America, since the election of President Barack Obama and the release of *Vogue Italia*'s "A Black Issue," the high fashion industry saw a significant increase in the production of visual representations

of racial drag and/or models in blackface for editorial spreads. In any other conjuncture, following the historic election of the first black president, one might be shocked to see so many instances of blatant racism, however now, blackness can be classified as an aesthetic rather than an identity, and the decision to play with these symbols reflects creativity and art. Below are a list of some of the most controversial editorial images that were featured in global high fashion magazines between 2009 and 2012 (the period between the release of *Vogue Italia*'s "A Black Issue" and "Haute Mess"):

- October 2009 – The body of Dutch model Lara Stone was covered from head to toe in a dark brown lacquer for the Supermodel issue of French *Vogue*. The 14-page editorial spread, photographed by Steven Klein, featured Stone in various poses, scenes, and garb, including embellished headpieces and outerwear.
- November 2009 – Sasha Pivavrova's nude body was covered in a black makeup as she modeled opposite Heidi Mount (sans black makeup) for the "Beauty" editorial in *V* Magazine. Pivavrova and Mount, both with mouths agape, pose in an embrace while the caption beneath them reads: "Black is the new Black"
- June 2010 – Claudia Schiffer performs various instances of racial drag for the 60th issue of the quarterly German magazine *Stern Fotografie*. In one of the images, Schiffer dons blackened skin, an Afro wig, and a fierce stance as she glares at the camera.
- October 2010 – In an editorial entitled "The Kid," Constance Jablonski poses with a black toddler in numerous shots as she is styled with darker skin and both blond and dark brown Afro wigs. The spread, for *Numéro Magazine*, was reportedly a comment on the growing trend of white celebrities adopting African children.
- May 2010 – For *Interview Magazine*'s "Let's Get Lost" editorial, Daria Werbowy was the only white model photographed amongst a collection of black male and female models. The black bodes of the accompanying models

act as the background to highlight both the clothing and Werbowy's white body.

- February 2011 – African American singer and actress Beyoncé Knowles “voluntarily” darkened her skin for *L'Officiel Paris* magazine's editorial honoring Nigerian singer and activist, Fela Kuti. She appears in both blackface and tribal makeup, while her garments were designed by her mother, Tina Knowles.
- Spring/Summer 2012 – Brazilian model Adriana Lima was photographed for Donna Karan's campaign following the devastating earthquake in Haiti. The campaign features several images of Lima in the foreground with young, black, presumably Haitian bodies lurking in the shadows of the background.

Blackface images in fashion are especially jarring in a contemporary context, not only because of the history of blackface minstrelsy, but because the discourse of post-race neoliberalism breaks the equivalency of race and identity to link race and aesthetics so that black is understood as color (skin, fabric – as we saw with the repetition of black in text, fabric, skin, and paint in the Beauty spread of “A Black Issue” featuring Chanel Iman), or black signifies wild and exotic. According to fashion historian Colin McDowell, “Models with non-white skin are increasingly visible – although rarely in the world of couture – as a way to give clothes a hint of exoticism and the glamour that comes along with it” (2013:19). Various scholars have used content analysis of fashion media to explore the ways in which women of color are represented (Arnold 2001, Baumann 2008, hooks 1992). In general, they have found that if darker hued women are included at all, they tend to be posed and styled “in exotic juxtaposition to the normatively white female body” (Mears 2010:24). Nevertheless, I disagree with Vats who suggests that the fashion industry's display of white models in blackface “highlights the underrepresentation of Black models in the

fashion industry,” since I argue that blackface in fashion (like in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) has more to do with constructing boundaries of whiteness than representing blackness. In other words, white women in blackface are not taking modeling jobs away from black women, despite what some white models may believe.¹⁸

The importance of whiteness as “the universal empty point” (Puwar 2002) matters here since white models can dress in and remove blackness at will, therefore playing with blackness without assuming the burden of race (Pham 2011). In Ralph Ellison’s timeless novel, *Invisible Man*, black boiler worker, Lucius Browkway, adds 10 drops of black liquid and dips his finger in Liberty Paint’s best-selling optic white paint. The Liberty Paint scene sets the stage for the argument that the production of whiteness requires the assimilation of raw black material, but this process and the traces of blackness must remain invisible. Nevertheless, as Raengo (2011) argues, “blackness has become a visual signifier which becomes more valuable the more it is removed from the sphere of production” (p. 164-165). Using the metaphor of the black body as edible, Tompkins suggests that with the ingestion of the black body, “the hegemony of the white body is ultimately only possible if the internalization of the black body is followed to its logical and digestive endpoint” (2012:113).

Referencing blackface and other racial performances, blackness must be both present and absent to be valuable in the fashion system. The absence of an actual black body

¹⁸ Crystal Renn was interviewed by *Jezebel*’s Jenna Sauer about her controversial shoot for *Vogue* Japan in which she donned eye tape to presumably make Renn look “more Asian.” In the midst of the interview, Sauer asked Renn about her thoughts on black face in fashion. She replied: “I am not 100% morally okay with [blackface shoots] – I would feel that I’m taking a job from one of them. I would feel that I’m taking a job from a black girl who deserved it” (Sauers 2011)

allows the darkened white body to operate as a “black” figure, which is “shaped to the demands of desire...screens on which audience fantasy could rest” (Lott 1992:28).

Hence, what is desired is a proximity to blackness. Blackness is a productive association that becomes a category to assign value vis-à-vis whiteness. Therefore, different bodies can now occupy the location of “blackness,” which had very specific meaning prior to this “post-” moment, before blackness was deployed as an aesthetic.

Vogue Italia and the Messiness of Race

“The industry looks at race like a paint chip. That is a welcome definition and disconcerting at the same time”

- Robin Givhan, fashion writer (2011 interview)

The title “Haute Mess” is a play on the phrase “hot ghetto mess,” popularized by the website hotghettomess.com, which satirizes various constructions of black poor and working class culture through the use of spectacular images. According to the website’s creator, attorney Jam Donaldson, the website was created “to usher in a new era of self-examination” by displaying a gallery of “the worst of hip-hop culture.”¹⁹ Donaldson uses the website as a technology of neoliberalism to police the boundaries of blackness by placing the bodies of poor black people under surveillance – in contrast to the cultural norms that position “respectable” black people as worthy of respect and citizenship. Donaldson employs respectability politics to manage the self-improvement and self-regulation of black bodies. As a result, Donaldson succeeds in reinscribing racist stereotypes of black people while supporting the post-

¹⁹ Donaldson, Jam. “Hot Ghetto Mess – From the Editor.” Hotghettomess.com. Retrieved December 7, 2011.

race narrative that racism is no longer as prevalent or destructive as in the past. Instead, what holds people back is inappropriate individual conduct, which includes personal style. By putting these individuals on display, Donaldson provided an opportunity for a range of interests including the news media, marketers, new media entrepreneurs, and the high fashion industry to co-opt these images and turn them into valuable and marketable racialized commodities.

The “Haute Mess” spread and commentary produced in reaction to it are indicative of the current palette of arguments about race and this conjunctural moment. The available commentary by left cultural critics starts with the assumption that producers are extracting or parlaying race. I questioned whether the scene simply depicted the “ghetto-fabulous” or “bling” cultural aesthetic, which Roopali Mukherjee argues is racial spectacle. Mukherjee points to “excess” as a response to late-stage capitalism, which positions blackness as a “social asset” and the ghetto as a “reservoir” of creative and aesthetic inspiration (Mukherjee 2006b:600). Upon its introduction in the late 20th century, the ghetto-fabulous aesthetic was once a political comment to capitalism and a signifier of youth rebellion. Ghetto-fabulousness displays conspicuous black consumption and connotes a rags-to-riches, class trajectory. The aesthetic signifiers include designer clothes, expensive gold and diamond jewelry, etc. Like many cultural productions and performances, the ghetto-fabulous aesthetic was reintroduced as a market commodity. By amplifying the excessiveness and hyper-visualizing this aesthetic, the “Haute Mess” spread succeeds in memorializing a static and outdated racial performance. The “playful” use of this

aesthetic freezes blackness in the form of a particular black “look”– best exemplified by Fanon’s sense of a racialized look.

The “Haute Mess” editorial story also refers directly to the infamous Bronner Brothers trade show that takes place in Atlanta, GA every year. The showcase, that annually features over 50,000 hairstylists, exhibitors, distributors, and students, ends with a festive hair show (highlighted in Chris Rock’s controversial docu-comedy “Good Hair”) where stylists from all over the country display their most outlandish hair creations for a large audience. To imagine the aesthetic style and design of the Bronner Brothers’ show (a black American production, with a black American audience and circulation) in an Italian, high fashion, minimally distributed magazine spread would be impossible at any other historical conjuncture but this one, where markers of race are hypervisible commodities *and* actively disavowed. Nevertheless, glancing at websites such as “Ghetto-fabulous, Edible Hairdos” you see where Meisel, Goldstein, and their style team derived their inspiration directly.²⁰ The bodies of these women are produced through both consumerism and creativity. Their bodies become the consumable commodities (candy-wrapper hair and nails) and allegedly canvases for their artistic expression.

The images presented in the story, according to its primary photographer Steven Meisel and editor, Sozzani, are supposed to represent extravagant “messy” drag queen culture. Sozzani responded to the uproar and cries of racism (again), from various blogs, by proclaiming innocence to any racist agenda. She defended the

²⁰ See <http://www.yummyucky.com/2011/03/gallery-of-ghetto-fabulous-edible-hair-dos.html>

spread against its charges of racism by suggesting that unlike previous spreads in the magazine (including a story featuring Kristin McMenamy as an oil-soaked bird on a beach), it was not at all controversial (Moss 2012). She explained that the shoot was an attempt to push people to be more creative and extravagant, since the fashion world is too bland and similar. Sozzani's use of "messy drag queen" culture to combat the "blandness" of the fashion world can be explained by bell hooks' astute argument that the commodification of otherness "has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling...ethnicity becomes a spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 1992:21).

Sozzani calls those who saw the spread as classist, "sick" and unable to read the images like a "normal" person. That Sozzani denies any connection to stereotypical representations of black culture and instead claims that the spread was generated as harmless fun and a nod to drag queens, only highlights the fact that deployments of race today are delinked from traditional understandings of race – where historical links to racism no longer apply. Sozzani is able to deflect cries of racism and instead attaches signifiers to drag queens, whose performances are rooted in black women's culture. Rather than recognizing drag queen culture as linked to blackness, she supports her project using the post-race neoliberal language of aesthetic creativity – where race becomes a depoliticized social construct. Here, Sozzani seemingly stages "messy" drag queen culture as an image of commoditized hybridity that conflates race, class, gender, and sexuality within the particular

totalizing logic of neoliberalism (Kuo 2005). She effectively silences the voices and visions of black cultural producers by employing what Stuart Hall calls “regressive modernization” in her “creative” assembling of editorial fashion and popular culture. By “regressive modernization,” Hall speaks to an attempt to discipline and “educate” society “into a particularly regressive version of modernity by, paradoxically, dragging it backwards through an equally regressive version of the past” (Hall 1988:2). I argue that the producers of “Haute Mess” deny race as an organizing and driving factor of their “messy” drag queen performance. It is this performance that is conditioned by proximation to blackness and the “language of creative license.” Such performances dislodge common cultural practices of racism from their repugnant history and reframes them as aesthetic choice, which further masks white privilege (Pham 2011).

As I reference above, the image of cover girl Joan Smalls acts as a tour guide to the fantastic and #overthetop world of a “Haute Mess.” At first glance, the images refer to stereotypical overrepresentations of black women as excessive, creative, gluttonous, lascivious, fertile, perverse, complexly un/feminine, irresponsible, and wasteful. Black women have historically been produced through visual signs as in excess of idealized white femininity; from mammy to the passing woman to the jezebel. The explicit white woman’s body, on the other hand, follows the norm of idealized femininity. Puerto Rican beauty Smalls’ lithe figure and light brown skin does little to disrupt the visual field. However, Smalls is placed in the scene to provide visual evidence that black and white bodies are interchangeable in this space.

In this multicultural era when racial performance and racial markers lack their political significance of the past, both black bodies and white bodies can play with race.

Picturing a “hot ghetto mess”

I use the remaining space of the chapter to delve into a closer analysis of “Haute Mess.” I argue for the necessity of examining these images in order to frame the aesthetic of blackness that is explicitly and implicitly embedded within each image – including those images where a human body is not displayed.

The first image of the spread, presented beside a cover page illustrating the “Haute Mess” title in colorful graffiti print, features a seemingly pregnant model who is dressed in a tight tube dress, seated at a diner booth. On her table are items from McDonald’s, Burger King, and Popeye’s fast food outlets (Figure 12). The model is also styled in an ostentatious way, with her pink hair reaching epic heights, interwoven with pink silk flowers and other garish accessories. Her eyes are decorated with colorful eye shadow featuring the Louis Vuitton logo. An adult bystander and baby in a stroller, presumably her partner and child, stand in the distance with their faces blurred. In this image, and most others included in the fashion spread, blackness operates as a central component of what Michael Schudson calls “capitalist realism,” the “imagination/visualization of a way of experiencing things that supports the material and social relations of capitalism. Fully self-contained and self-referential, capitalist realism occupies its own plane of reality that, just like the minstrel show, presents itself as mimetic but is instead fully simulacral”

(Raengo 2011:163; Schudson 1984). Although there is only one black body visually present, the setting enables the audience to fantasize about how additional black bodies could occupy the space.

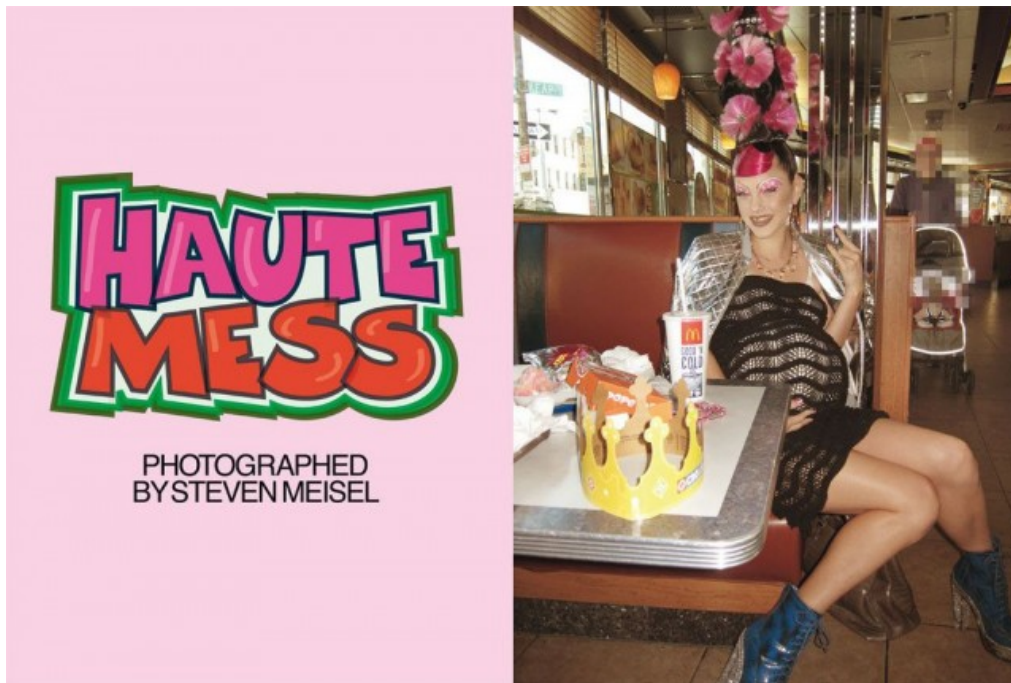


Figure 12 “Haute Mess” editorial cover. *Vogue Italia* 739 (March 2012)

Again, at first glance, the shoot appears to reference a stereotypical presentation of a particular black aesthetic, a modernized form of blackface. Explicit racial markers (e.g., cans of Colt 45 malt liquor) deploy blackness despite the fact that all but one of the models are not black. The use of these material in the spread evoke what Henry Louis Gates (1984) describes as a “naturalist fallacy,” which suggests that there is an expectation that visual signifiers of race consistently and authentically represent black people rather than social relations. Through the presentation of blackness as style worn by non-black bodies, we are led to believe that “the

boundaries of racial identity can be crossed, or at least blurred slightly” (Black 2009:247). It is through these discursive markers that blackness comes to life in image.



Figure 13 White models evoke “black” style. *Vogue Italia* 739 (March 2012)

With its display of hair weave tracks, colorful wigs, gold teeth, decorative finger and toe nails, etc., the “Haute Mess” spread reproduces what Nirmal Puwar’s calls the “amnesia of celebration” – the practice of forgetting the violence (in the form of harassment, discrimination, and fetishization) against women of color for wearing garments and accessories that are now celebrated on white bodies or deemed as fun play through aesthetic transformation. The white bodies that are adorned with these accessories remain white and look white, while maintaining the pleasure of whiteness, since white female bodies occupy the powerful, universal, unmarked

empty space (Dyer 1997), which enables them to “play with the assigned particularity of ethnicized female bodies” (Puwar 2002:76).

In this age of post-racialism, black bodies are not necessary for blackness to be observed. As Harry Elam argues, blackness can now “travel on its own, separate and distinct from black people.” Blackness, according to Elam, is of particular material value: “blackness functions as something that you can apply, put on, wear, that you use to assuage social anxiety and perceived threat: the desire to be included without the necessity of including black folk.” The problem as Elam identifies it, is that “it remains exceedingly attractive and possible in this post-black, postsoul age of black cultural traffic to love black cool and not love black people” (Elam 2005:386). Alessandra Raengo (2011) offers an important argument about the detachability of blackness from black bodies. Where blackness was previously made to adhere to bodies by what was considered natural, ontological, and visual, Raengo argues that its detachability is evidence of “a new phase of development of the commodity form, what [she calls] *blackness as phantasmagoria*, i.e., the stage in which an increasingly simulacral status of the visual develops its own, independent, social-materiality” (p. 172). Racial markers act as consumable elements of a black aesthetic. Because of post-race neoliberalism, race no longer occupies the same space of identity in the same ways it did during and immediately following the civil rights movement, therefore race is reduced to explicit and crude markers/accessories like the weave extensions, acrylic nails, wigs, excessive cosmetics, as well as fast food, baby

strollers, and “fierce” bodily poses. Here we see the discipline of the white body to adopt racial dispositions in a two-dimensional space.

Imani Perry (2011) discusses the popularity and profitability of racial performances, which are “repeatedly bought and sold.” She continues by arguing that the performance of race roles generates profits, however “they also operate to implicitly thwart the recognition of people of color who don’t occupy such roles. Moreover, the consumer package of the role or performance becomes overdetermined and collapses within it cultural attributes that becomes further devalued by virtue of their association with stereotype” (Perry 2011:173). Blackness as a performance requires a particular attitude, body position, glance, and look that transcends the medium of print – enables the performer to profess knowledge about the experience of being black and therefore accessorizing identity with cultural add-ons.



Figure 14 White models evoke “black” style. *Vogue Italia* 739 (March 2012)

Although the models are not constructed as black, blackness continues to be evoked. Similarly, in response to model Crystal Renn's *Vogue* Japan September 2011 editorial spread in which she dons tape on her eyes suggestive of old theater tricks to "look Asian," Min-Ha Pham writes that Renn's racial drag performance (also known as "yellowfacing") and her insistence that she did not attempt to "look Asian," "exemplifies how race is understood in this 'post-racial' historical moment." Racial discourse sounds like Renn's explanation in this moment of "post-racism." Pham indicates the post-racial narrative as one in which "race is simultaneously articulated through and disavowed by discourses of class, culture, patriotism, national security, talent, and, in the case of fashion, creative license" (Pham 2011). Rather than suggest that Renn did, in fact, attempt to take up an Asian identity, as Pham seems to suggest, Renn's performance helps us understand the deployment of race as an aesthetic in fashion.

The practice and performance of blackface during the nineteenth century, as Eric Lott (1992) suggests, was a way to make blackness "into a marketable thing of white interest...commodification is, in a sense, its *attraction*; it is what seems 'blackest' about [the racial economy]" (p. 44). This form of "fun" is distinguished from blackface, where the constructedness of "Haute Mess" is considered laughable rather than being a representation of natural or real characteristics of black women. The images reflect a racial structure "whose ideological and psychological instability required its boundaries to be continually staged, and which regularly exceeded the dominant culture's capacity to fix such boundaries," as Lott has written of 19th

century blackface performances (1992:27). I would argue that “Haute Mess” visually projects more than overt racial stereotypes – it literally exceeds the mere language of the stereotype. Unlike recent fashion spreads and advertisements where white models are literally painted black, the “Haute Mess” spread disengages from more overt historical references to racist performances and instead fosters a shrewder variety. Nevertheless, I lean on Stuart Hall’s (1978) claim that forms of racism that occupied previous historical eras can be in accord with new and emerging discourses of race and racial meaning.



Figure 15 Fun with fetish. *Vogue Italia* 739 (March 2012)

Given the current moment in race relations, as Bonilla-Silva (2010) identifies, race and racism operate in a subtler manner than in the past. Race, in this conjuncture, operates more like the “cheesy” films and television programs highlighted by Newitz (2000), since it does not take for granted that black women (and Americans) are

“naturally” excessive. Instead, the spread laughs at the history of black women being constructed in that way. This form of parody fixes the instability and ambivalence of race. Race is therefore commodified, rendered equivalent, and sold as a sensation (Newitz 2000). In fashion, history becomes fetish. Fashion images displace, justify, and recognize history and its importance by producing aesthetic references to it, while at the same time, disavowing it with the removal of certain aesthetics from their contexts and placement in a seemingly unrelated mode.

The images hail a particularly American version of cultural politics, one that appeals to Americanness, not just black Americanness. The images provide more than exaggerations of black women in the service of subordination. Instead, “Haute Mess” evokes notions of branding, consumption, commodity, and nation. Furthermore, the spread designates different cultures as equivalent, where their equivalences operate as humorous, fashionable, and marketable as entertainment. “Haute Mess” invites laughter “at something that seems utterly horrifying in its complexity: the totality of social connections and disconnections we call multinationalism” (Newitz 2000:61).



Figure 16 “Haute Mess” group fun *Vogue Italia* 739 (March 2012)

Hence, the reversal of white bodies as wasteful, hypersexual, excessive, immoral, unhealthy, and irresponsible, for those of black bodies bring with them a shield against critiques of black excess and abuse of the state – since they are white. The spread, in particular, allows us (and the featured models) to enjoy the story and avoid the “upsetting implications of objects” that speak to the reality of poverty (p. 75). The logic of using skin color to identify blackness allows for symbolic forms of blackness, as objects and accessories, to roam freely, unregulated by the same technologies, on the bodies of non-black persons. In this way, blackness is no longer tied to skin and instead can be exchangeable, distributed as style. According to Bhabha, the threat of mimicry “comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity effects’ in the play of power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no ‘itself’ (Bhabha 1994:90). The interaction of

mimicry with neoliberalism seems to re-attach the fractured pieces of race in that it makes blackness exportable and stylized. It is in fact the excessiveness of the performance that makes the image/style, black. Nevertheless, the whiteness of the white bodies in a black space brings with it the insurance against charges of abuse of the symbolic system. This reversal of bodies assures protection against the critique of black excess and racism more generally.

In a conversation about the contemporary music period and the appropriation of black music by white artists, Imani Perry notes: “I think what it reflects is that there is a sonic preference for blackness – the sounds of blackness – but there is a visual preference for whiteness in our culture, and a human preference for whiteness.”²¹ So, too, is the case in the fashion industry with the performance of blackness (using racial markers) by white models. What remains important is that the models in the images (with the exception of Joan Smalls) are obviously white – their visible whiteness is at the center of the artistic intent. The characters in the “Haute Mess” story must appear to be submerged in the culture of blackness. If mostly black or Latina models were to be used for the editorial, the implied pleasure and fun of the performance would be compromised and possibly deemed racist.

To think the issue featuring “Haute Mess” and “A Black Issue” together might seem counterintuitive since the latter issue was supposedly generated to celebrate black beauty, while the former was created as a creative and colorful aesthetic

²¹ The conversation between Perry and Marc Lamont Hill called “Justin Timberlake: ‘The 20/20 Experience’: Is There A Visual Preference for Whiteness?” took place on HuffPost Live, March 27, 2013 (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/27/justin-timberlake-the-2020-experience-is-there-a-visual-preference-for-whiteness_n_2965509.html)

challenge to the “blandness” of the fashion industry. Nevertheless, “A Black Issue” made “Haute Mess” possible. Under the conditions of post-race neoliberalism, the fashion industry needs a space to sell blackness without the use of black bodies. Representations of blackness simply as stereotype in “Haute Mess” and “A Black Issue” are exempt because of their claims to leisure, creativity, and fun. The intention may not have been to “represent” blackness or even to sell a particular black aesthetic, but that was the result.

“Haute Mess” has only one black body but blackness is everywhere – so, excess operates within the symbolic codes. This conjuncture allows both to happen simultaneously because in the post-race neoliberal renderings of the moment, this particularly American version of cultural politics presents excess as blackness, because it cannot portray excess as white. Similarly, “feminine racialization as a lucrative flexible personal asset creates a neoliberal racial visibility that requires profound blindness to current and historical injustices” (Hasinoff 2010:326). In other words, neoliberalism is inscribed on bodies/spaces in the name of representation and diversity through the aestheticization of blackness.

PART TWO

Black Space/Diverse Bodies: Locating Blackness in a
Post-Chocolate City

CHAPTER FOUR

ORGANIZING CHAOS: H STREET, NORTHEAST AND THE AESTHETIC DISCOURSE OF “DIVERSITY” IN A CHOCOLATE CITY

In the next two chapters, I continue to pull on the thread of blackness as an aesthetic under post-race neoliberalism, but turn my attention from fashion to urban redevelopment along the H Street, NE corridor in Washington, D.C. Before focusing on diversity and the contemporary production of value along H Street, I provide a detailed history of a period that is often mischaracterized, overlooked, or ignored, but plays an important role in the physical transformation of the neighborhood.

While unique in its complex and intricate variety, H Street, NE follows representative patterns of urban succession: whites (immigrants and native-born) move away from the city center leaving blacks in the blighted, neglected urban core that is described as poor, dangerous, and unlivable. Through gentrification, whites are now returning to the city because of their aversion to commuting and to rediscover the hipness of city life. The H Street, NE corridor is not unlike many other neighborhoods that have been a target for capital reinvestment through various neoliberal urban policies like public-private partnerships and public subsidies (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Dumenil and Levy 2004; Wilson 2007). However, in contrast to those newly (re)developed urban spaces that are advertised as transcending past historical race and class divisions to welcoming social difference (Florida 2002), institutional narratives about the H Street, NE corridor promote the area's cosmopolitanism as a necessary feature of its historical roots. It is this mobilization

of diversity as multiculturalism that the redevelopment of H Street takes up post-racial considerations. By implementing a discursive production of nostalgia, local government agencies and planners discursively suture the neighborhood history as racially diverse in order to attract tourists and consumers – thereby erasing its affiliation as a black space. I argue that blackness, today, shows up as a component of multiculturalism, because blackness has had particular significance and visibility in different points in history. By presenting the commercial corridor as a fundamentally socially inclusive space, diversity operates as “an innocuous, sanitized version of ethnic and racial differences, scrubbed clean of their potential anti-development, political or social content” (Mele 2013:599).

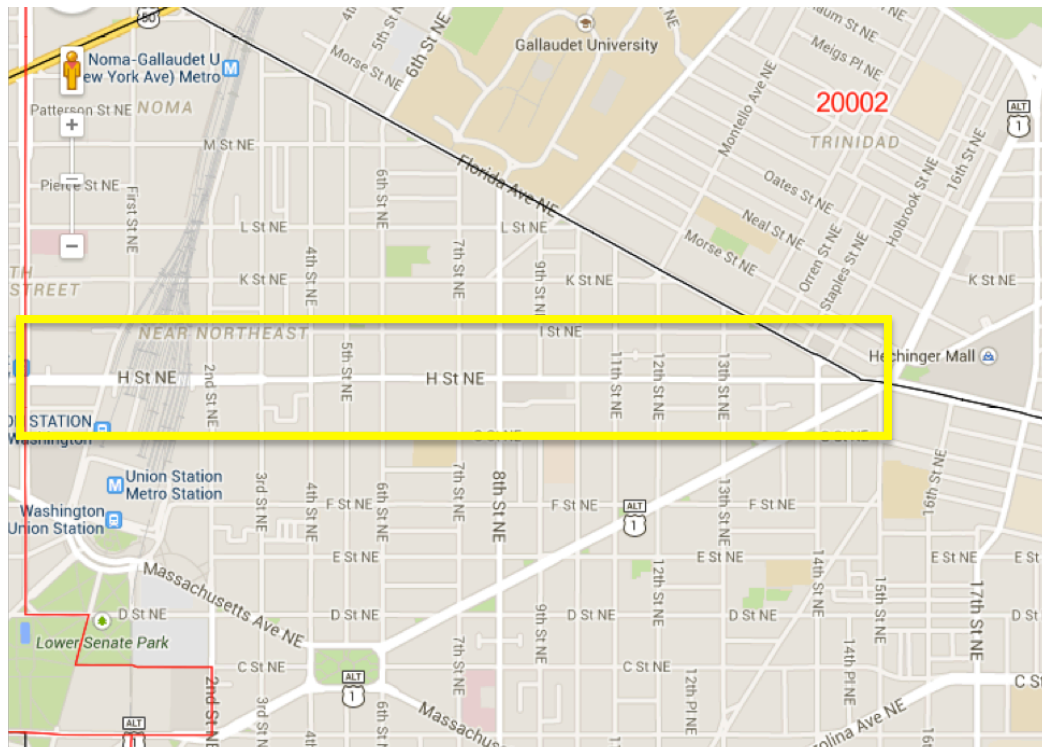


Figure 17 Street map of H Street, NE Corridor (via Google Maps)

In this chapter, I ask about the production of the narratives in this conjuncture. As Foucault argues, power is enacted through discourse – i.e. representations, practices, and texts through which meaning and knowledge and subjects are produced and contested – and therefore shapes the material objects of that discourse. While neoliberalism and neoliberal discourse have been successful in tying black bodies to inner city neighborhoods, the logics and narratives of this space as diverse are presented as objective and authentic truths, despite the fact that logics are socially constructed. Rather than telling an ideological tale about bad (rich, white, gentrifiers) vs. good (poor, black, abandoned), this is a case study about the making of space, culture, neighborhood, and community. This story is about the constitution of subjects in a “black” space, where subjects are being made.

It is not my goal to reinvent the scholarship of various urban sociologists, geographers, and anthropologists on neoliberalism as an urban and spatial phenomenon. Instead, I show how the discourse of post-race neoliberalism uses an ambivalent process of the disavowal and hypervisual representation of blackness, as difference, in order to render a neighborhood diverse. I begin with a background history of the H Street, NE corridor, with a specific emphasis on the 1960s, when the city experienced an outbreak of civil disturbances following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the period between the 1970s and early 2000s, a stage most often glossed over or ignored by official accounts of the neighborhood’s history. I provide a detailed history of the neighborhood and identify the processes that led to

the devaluation of H Street as a prototypical black space. I then discuss the institutional frameworks that use historic preservation and heritage tourism as discursive practices that produce and promote nostalgic narratives of H Street's multicultural history. Here I argue that dominant institutional discourses organize urban space. Nostalgia does the work of containment and regulation of blackness in the name of neoliberalism. Policies and regulations function as practices of power and the management through which space is constructed, contested, and reordered. Finally, leaning on Leland Saito's (2009) work on race and economic development, I highlight two local programs, with intended race-neutral policies that have racial consequences to demonstrate how, even in the most mundane spaces, "race is already present in the ideologies and practices of larger society that shaped the formation and implementation of policies" (p. 168).

H Street, NE History – The Changing Face of a Black Space

"Hey, uh, we didn't get our forty acres and a mule / But we did get you CC, heh, yeah / Gainin' on ya / Movin' in and around ya / God bless CC and its vanilla suburbs"
Parliament (1975) – "Chocolate City"

Washington D.C. has had a particularly long and unique black political history. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the District was the center for anti-lynching, anti-segregation, and voting rights campaigns. In the early 19th century, Washington welcomed runaway slaves and freedmen and women seeking refuge. Because federal legislators preferred to stay in Washington only a few months out of the year, blacks had more freedom and economic opportunities. Nevertheless, black

Washingtonians have suffered from years of social and economic policies that disproportionately effected them – race has been a key factor in many of these decisions often determined by politicians and leaders in the federal government. Washington, D.C. became the first major city with a majority-black population in 1957. However, the 1960 census failed to account for thousands of black residents in the highly impoverished slums, thus significantly understating the city’s black and overall population. In 1968, the city’s population total was informally revised upward to 854,000 with black residents representing 67% of the city (Gilbert 1968:3). Plagued by a sordid history between the federal government and black constituents, D.C. only received limited home-rule after the enfranchisement of blacks in other locations in the United States. The D.C. Home Rule Act was not passed until 1973. This act allowed the city to elect a mayor and city council members and designated an annual payment for the District, but final say over the District’s budget and legislative power over city matters remained with the House Committee on D.C., which also has the veto right on any city legislation. The federal government continues to have distinct power over and within the District politically. Residents have no voting congressional representation, despite the fact that they pay federal taxes, and have only been able to vote in presidential elections since 1964. As a result, D.C. residents live under some of the least democratic conditions in the country. Congress has the authority to approve or reject the city’s annual budget, and the power to repeal any law passed by the city council within one month of its enactment, for any reason.

H Street, NE: “riot corridor”

Like many urban neighborhoods, prior to the 1950s, the H Street, Northeast Corridor provided numerous retail options, eateries, and public spaces to black residents that were central to economic and social life. H Street, NE was known as a “viable black-business downtown district” (Brown 2007). Prior to the 1968 riots it was the most significant commercial activity center within the greater Capitol East area, the corridor was second only to downtown D.C. in the production of jobs and tax revenue. Retail anchors were Morton’s, Sears & Roebuck, McBride’s, and Hechinger’s. By the 1960s, H Street suffered at the hands of suburbanization in America, where (white, middle class) residents left the cities for the suburbs and utilized malls as their main shopping source. A combination of state and corporate divestment, abandonment, and disparaging representations of urban markets and black consumers left urban commercial corridors like H Street, NE to falter. Miriam Greenberg (2008) highlights the discourse of “urban crisis” that emerged in the 1960s with the increasing concentration of blacks and Latinos in America’s inner cities. Washington D.C. was unique in that blacks comprised a significant portion of the city by the 1950s and had been visibly present since the 19th century.

In the five years following the 1963 March on Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I Have A Dream” speech, black people in Washington, D.C. and across the rest of the United States experienced a profound sense of optimism due to landmark court decisions and legislation, a sympathetic president, and newfound forms of political power. However by 1968, it became clear that conditions had not shifted and instances of housing and job discrimination remained at significant levels.

While militant black leaders called for direct action to challenge the status quo, King maintained his belief in the power of nonviolence.

Rioting began on the evening of April 4, 1968, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee. Washington D.C. experienced a series of civil uprisings in three major hubs of black commercial and residential activity: the 14th Street, NW corridor, the Shaw district (7th Street, NW), and the H Street, NE corridor. The riots began in the heavily populated area of 14th and U Streets, NW then spread to other areas. The rioting on H Street, NE began a day after the uprisings on 7th and 14th Streets, NW. As *Washington Post* reporter Ben Gilbert recounts, excitement and tension filled the growing crowds on H Street, NE when a liquor store at 5th and H burst into flames leading to the establishment of the H Street, NE corridor as a “section of the city [that] was added to the list of those requiring extraordinary attention” (1968:71). The King assassination prompted hundreds of black Washingtonians in the most disinvested areas of the city to channel their frustration over their continuing social, political and economic marginalization (Gilbert 1968:19).



Figure 18 H Street between 12th and 13th Streets in 1968 (courtesy of the Associated Press) and in 2007 (courtesy of the *New York Times*)

The events began as an organized effort by Stokely Carmichael to encourage local businesses to close out of respect. Nevertheless, by the night of April 4, the activities of black residents escalated in dramatic fashion through the destruction of mostly white-owned businesses, specifically along the 14th Street, NW corridor and the Shaw district (Gilbert 1968:4).

The riots in D.C. were part of national discontent felt by blacks in various major cities including Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, over the stagnant “progress” of the civil rights movement and racial injustice. Feelings of isolation and abandonment reached their climax in 1968. While the horrifying assassination of King prompted the riots, the events were also “a lashing out at an amorphous ‘Whitey’ – not just the white man who had fired the fatal shot, but the whites who

didn't want blacks in their neighborhoods or schools, who treated them unfairly at the job, who seemed to value them primarily as captive customers for overpriced merchandise" (Raspberry 1988:A1). Howard Gillette (1995) explains that the riots occurred amid tense relations between black residents and the federal government, since urban policy experienced a dramatic change "as under a proclaimed War on Poverty the federal government directed funds to neighborhood-based organizations with the intent of enabling local residents to improve their own lives" (p. 170). Rather than acknowledging its responsibility in the systemic poverty and oppression of poor and working-class black residents, the federal government framed the problems facing these residents as an issue of adequate funding.

The economic situation for black Americans was dire before the riots. Blacks had the highest unemployment rate and the jobs they held did not pay well. These conditions were exacerbated by the fact that large sections of the city had inadequate public transportation, which precluded many African Americans from seeking employment in the white suburbs. Although Washington D.C. was legally integrated, in practice, the city was largely segregated with whites living in affluent areas (a few affluent blacks also lived in previously white, upscale neighborhoods), some "gray" areas where whites and blacks lived in the same vicinity, and poor neighborhoods that were mostly comprised of blacks where high rent, congestion, and substandard living conditions for residents prevailed (Gilbert 1968:5). The H Street, NE corridor, in particular provided its black inhabitants with very limited retail options, in contrast to whites living in more affluent areas. Gilbert writes:

Before the riot, the twelve blocks, from 3d Street, N.E., to the big intersection of H, 15th Street, Bladensburg Road, and Maryland and Florida avenues, had been a compact replica of the ghetto commercial strips along 7th and 14th streets, N.W., which were now burning. Crowded with liquor stores, groceries, carry-outs, and cheap cut-rate stores, as well as smaller and less imposing branches of the variety, clothing, and specialty-shop chains represented on 14th Street, it was a logical target area” (1968:79-80).

Gilbert interviewed several rioters after the disturbances and learned that they possessed a political shrewdness that was underestimated by the mainstream media that characterized the uprisings as irrational destruction that was generated solely because of the violent assassination of Dr. King. Instead, the rioters explained that they overwhelmingly targeted white-owned businesses known to discriminate against black customers and practiced a form of surveillance over black individuals who patronized their establishments. Some of those involved in the rioting used the opportunity to take items like clothing, shoes, alcohol, and whatever goods they could carry from these establishments because of what they felt was owed to them due to continued neglect from the federal government, job discrimination, underemployment, and residential price-gouging. The “looting” was part of a symbolic action to challenge the status quo. In fact, some of the participants said they distributed the goods they collected if anyone asked for them (Gilbert 1968:141-142,149).

The National Guard was called in to quell the tensions and worked with the local police to end the riots after five days (in conjunction with the deliberate withdrawal of riot participants). In the end, on H Street, in particular, 90 buildings containing 51 residential units, and 103 businesses were damaged during the riots.

Forty-one of the 90 sustained more than 50% damage. In comparison to 14th Street and 7th Street, H Street experienced the least amount of destruction, with total damage to the street estimated at \$1.8 million, compared to \$6.6 million on 14th Street and \$4.3 million on 7th Street (District of Columbia 1968). The south side of the street saw the most damage – specifically the blocks at 5th, 8th, 9th, 11th, and 12th Streets. Despite having less damage, business on H Street was decimated following the riots and several stores that were not completely destroyed never reopened (National Capital Planning Commission 1968:39). Accordingly, most of the damage on H Street was done to commercial businesses rather than homes. The “poor and marginal condition” of homes seemed to have little to do with the riots and more to do with the conditions of the area in general. Ultimately, a primary outcome of the riots was the destruction of the economy of a retail destination for black shoppers along H Street, NE.

First steps to recovery

In the years following the riots, the federal and local government, developers, and neighborhood organizations made strident efforts to rebuild H Street. Nevertheless, redeveloping the commercial corridor proved to be a challenge for business leaders and the local government to provide adequate solutions for the rebuilding of D.C. despite the fact that initial planning for the reconstruction of the damaged areas began almost immediately. The federal government provided funds to the new “independent” local government, who then empowered non-government organizations to oversee the rebuilding – a plan that drew ire from neighborhood

residents. Failed collaboration between these entities eventually led to the precipitous decline in H Street's economic value.

Of the three riot corridors, none was so slow in redeveloping as the H Street, NE corridor. In May 1968, congressional hearings were held to determine what had caused the riots. Various black D.C. residents spoke about the political, economic, and social assault on black people by the federal government as worse than the damage inflicted by the riots, highlighting "The Plan" – a conspiracy that black Washingtonians are being forcibly pushed out of D.C. and D.C. politics (by way of gentrification, economic and social policies, etc.) that has been a popular, though unsubstantiated, narrative among long-term residents since the 1960s. Testimony stressed "the sense that blacks still had not been sufficiently involved in the planning process" of the communities in which they resided (Gillette 1995:179). Racial tensions continued to plague the neighborhood as merchants and residents attempted to recover from the damage inflicted upon the area. The white merchants, who mostly lived outside of D.C., expressed a belief that there was a deep sense of resentment towards whites in the area. Several of these merchants believed "they had friends in their neighborhoods – until the riots" (Kaiser 1968:H3). Nevertheless, according to Marion Barry, then director of operations at Pride Inc., a black-run job-training program sponsored by the U.S. Labor Department, "the nation was divided into two cultures, one white, one black, and if the city was rebuilt the way it was for whites, it would be burned down again" (Gillette 1995:180).

While many of the white business owners on H Street blamed the local government and authorities for not providing adequate protections, others saw the destruction of H Street as an opportunity to rebuild this space using black developers and filling the corridor with businesses owned by black entrepreneurs to serve the overwhelmingly black residential population (Kaiser 1968). In fact, some merchants agreed that on H Street, “more black people should own and operate their businesses.” One white hardware store owner expressed his desire for “a Negro or Negro group to buy his store” (Kaiser 1968:H3). Representatives from Marion Barry’s Pride, Inc. called for the city government to cease rebuilding efforts along the riot corridors and instead implement their plan, that included: 1) The U.S. Small Business Administration to stop processing disaster loans for businesses destroyed by the riots; 2) the SBA and local lending institutions only provide loans to businesses that are at least 51% owned by blacks, since the loans are “economically unfeasible” because they will only be burned and destroyed again; 3) Black contractors be hired to convert burned sections of the neighborhoods into parks. They also proposed that the city government and lending institutions establish a \$5 million fund to provide black residents with long-term, low-interest loans in order for them to gain economic security. They proposed job training in business management and accounting, and implored the city to limit the number of liquor stores in black neighborhoods with the intention of controlling “quality, price, and credit exploitation.” Finally, they called for the closing of stores that sell “inferior merchandise” (*Washington Post* 1968:A21).

Pride, Inc. hoped to address several of the systemic challenges that prompted the riots and continued to plague the H Street, NE corridor and its surrounding neighborhoods.

Instead, Mayor Walter E. Washington, appointed by President Lyndon Johnson five months before the King assassination, decided that a non-government entity should be charged with rebuilding efforts, so the Reconstruction and Development Corporation (RDC) was established with a \$600,000 grant from the Ford Foundation (Asher 1968:B1). Progress towards rebuilding the areas stalled because most insurance companies refused to sell policies in the riot-torn areas. It was not until the summer of 1968 that Congress passed legislation creating a mandatory pool of insurance money to guarantee coverage to these merchants. The insurance policy did not cover acts of vandalism or broken plate glass, so many of the shopkeepers were unable to benefit from the legislation (Asher 1968:B1).

The Inner City Planning Association was formed in February 1969 and led by Rev. Walter E. Fauntroy. The organization was formed at the request of Mayor Washington and the Nixon administration to organize efforts to rebuild the riot-torn neighborhoods. The city offered Fauntroy's group a \$200,000 grant to initiate efforts. The initial funds came from the Ford Foundation's original grant to the RDC that was established to provide the relief Fauntroy's new group was then charged to do. In other words, since the RDC did not accomplish much, the mayor and Nixon officials appointed Fauntroy to do the job. Fauntroy, the founder of the Model Inner City Community Organization (MICCO), met significant opposition from organizations

(including MICCO) that claimed he was not a good representative for the black community (Jacoby 1969).

Another plan developed in April 1969 by the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), the Redevelopment Land Agency (RLA) and the RDC proposed a complete overhaul of H Street with retail stores on the ground floors of buildings and residences directly above, as well as build low- and middle-income housing (Braestrup 1969b). Because only the RLA had the authority to clear and sell land, it did not have the capital to help struggling businesses repair damage. As a result, more businesses closed and buildings were boarded up. The Model City Commission, along with city councilmembers from Stanton Park (an area surrounding H Street), protested federal and local government efforts and argued that residents and true stakeholders were being left out of the process. Although the NCPC, RLA and the RDC claimed to seek citizen input through the distribution of surveys, neighborhood activists resisted these efforts and claimed that they did not represent the interests of the H Street residents (Braestrup 1969b). The NCPC plan was revised several times and then languished. For years, developers found it to be nearly impossible to find financing for construction of commercial and residential projects along H Street. There were several “plans” to rebuild, but most were stalled or never got off the ground.

Ultimately, the D.C. government through the Redevelopment Land Agency began buying land along H Street wholesale, a total of 10 acres, with the intention of selling the parcels to developers who would in turn receive government assistance to

revitalize the corridor. As a result of these purchases, residents were pushed out of their homes and the market for businesses plummeted. “The purchase left the area with empty lots and boarded-up buildings, looking like a ghetto, repelling young home buyers who might have revitalized H Street” (Williams 1981:A21). City administrators made several unsuccessful attempts to make the H Street corridor more desirable and worthy of investment by designating it as a Capitol Hill neighborhood, which was already home to several young, white, upper-middle class families. Nevertheless, government administrators proposed countless programs throughout the 1970s yet “the casual stroller down H Street [in the late 1970s would] see basically a scene of decay, even devastation” (McCombs 1977a:A1). While the site of charred buildings were cleared away by the city, the families who shopped along the corridor remained – ignored and unsatisfied. As one resident in 1977 lamented, city officials

“talk around circles rather than getting to the point of what really needs to be done on H Street. Since 1968 there hasn’t been any improvement around here (as far as I can see). You’d think that the government would take an interest in the welfare of the people, but after the politicians get (elected), they turn their backs on the people. Here you have a community that’s been like this since 1968, but yet they can go across the sea and bring up Germany in 10 years (through the Marshall Plan following World War II)” (McCombs 1977c:A12)

Then city councilperson Marion Barry chose an H Street, NE location to outline his program for job opportunities and economic development during his run for mayor. “He said the H Street commercial strip, which has a number of boarded-up stores, a supermarket and several small business shops, reflected the ‘gross neglect’ of the mayor [Washington]” (Dash 1978:C1).

Although H Street was not as heavily damaged as 7th Street or 14th Street by the mid-1970s, virtually no work had been done (Meyer 1973:C1). Progress and change on H Street was particularly slow. One key factor to the delay in reconstruction was the Nixon administration's freezing of federal funds for urban renewal in the wake of several major program failures. It was not until 1974 that the funds were again released, and central projects on the riot corridors were able to continue. Despite receiving limited support from the federal government, it was also the image of H Street that created a unique challenge in finding developers. When city officials were able to locate compliant developers, inadequate financing and incomplete planning stalled construction plans – sometimes indefinitely. For example, in 1979, the city announced that an \$8-9 million shopping mall and residential complex was to be constructed on H Street between Eighth and 10th streets. This space, one of two sites purchased by the RLA under the city's urban renewal program, was sold to a Cleveland construction firm but the project was unable to secure financing for both the commercial and townhouse phases of the development (Hudge 1982:DC1).

Another project, this time by the federal government that served to further isolate the H Street corridor, was the construction of the H Street Bridge (colloquially known as the “Hopscotch Bridge” for the decorative mural that adorns it), which connects North Capitol Street to H Street NE. The Hopscotch Bridge was built in 1977 as part of the FHA's inner beltway system for D.C. and it replaced the underpass that once carried the street beneath the railroad tracks. Leland Saito (2009)

writes that highway projects between the 1950s and 1970s were inherently racialized “because of their disproportionate impact on racial minorities as compared to Whites and the way that local governments strategically developed and employed images of communities of color as ‘ghettos,’ ‘blighted,’ and ‘slums’ to justify the eradication of neighborhoods and displacement of residents and businesses” (p. 169). Even more than the long underpass of 1907, the bridge serves to visually isolate the northeast neighborhood. The bridge is both a physical and visual barrier, and some believe it was constructed as a strategic move to keep the predominantly black and poor dwellers of H Street away from downtown neighborhoods.

Economic downturn and the rise of a black ghetto

By the 1980s, H Street was firmly recognized as a black ghetto. Property values around H Street, NE (and D.C. as a whole) reached rock bottom and violent crime and drug use depressed the area. It was during the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s that Washington D.C.’s homicide rate climbed earning it the name, “Murder Capital.” H Street, NE became a symbolic space for mayoral candidates to promise to help spur growth and improve conditions in the city as a whole. Plans to designate the area as a space where black entrepreneurs and developers could bring the corridor back to life were abandoned because of changes in the economic market, according to former housing director James E. Clay (Bowman 1982b:B1). Many of the troubles that plagued the area before the riots continued to do so two decades after the riots had occurred – underemployment, inadequate outlets for youths, poor residential conditions, and poor commercial options. Very little had been done to the

H Street corridor despite constant planning efforts by city officials, consultants, local merchants, and citizens. The RLA ultimately reclaimed five city-owned parcels along H Street because developers did not follow through on their plans due to several years of inaction or financial instability (Bowman 1982a:DC1).

In 1983, *The Washington Post* ran an editorial that emphasized the inactivity on H Street and the other riot corridors, stating that the article “is a reprint of one that first ran in this space 12 years ago this week – and that could have run almost any day in the last 15 years” (1983:D6). H Street was not alone in its ruin since both 7th Street and 14th Street were also filled with boarded-up storefronts, “hookers, and junkies” (Williams 1981:A21). The following year, the local government retooled its 15-year old strategies for reviving the corridor, since a shift in economic conditions had “made the original proposals unworkable” (Bowman 1982b:B1). The D.C. government then proposed yet another redevelopment plan for the H Street corridor that would develop seven vacant lots owned by the RLA and would emphasize “its potential as a neighborhood shopping area rather than one that could attract shoppers from around the region” (Teeley 1983:B3). This plan opted for movie theaters and casual restaurants, as opposed to fast-food outlets, to draw traffic to the area. The plan also called for \$1 million towards aesthetic improvements to the streets – new sidewalks, curbs, benches, lighting, etc. (Teeley 1983:B3). Like most of the other redevelopment plans proposed by the government, this strategy failed to take hold in the midst of continuing controversies surrounding a misuse of funds by the H Street

Business Community Association (HBCA), which was tasked to distribute loans and grants to businesses for renovations along the corridor.

The physical environment of the H Street corridor featured a declining commercial infrastructure, boarded up homes and storefronts, and vacant lots. The area was overrepresented by the prototypical urban businesses like liquor stores, convenience stores, barbershops, beauty salons, nail salons, check cashing facilities, and carryout restaurants. When the Hechinger Mall was first built in the late 1970s, just a few blocks away from the heart of the H Street corridor, residents and community leaders saw it as a positive change that would offer residents retail options following the riots. By the early 1980s, the 30-store mall was seen as a hindrance to the developing corridor as it was siphoning off businesses and customers from H Street. For example, one of the anchor stores at the mall was a Safeway grocery store that was the largest of the supermarket chain on the east coast. Eventually, this location led to the closing of a small Safeway store at 6th and H Streets NE in 1984. With Safeway closing, revitalization efforts stalled even more and the building joined a collection of several vacant lots and struggling small businesses (Bowman 1982b:B1). The impact of Safeway closing not only had economic repercussions but social ones as well. To many residents around the H Street corridor, especially elderly men, the Safeway like many other businesses on H Street, served as an informal communication space where friends would gather out front to socialize, or in some cases attempt to make a few dollars by guiding customers home from the store (White 1984:B3). The reduction of public space that

serve as sites for social gathering, like this one, is a common outcome of the privatization of space and signals “a decline of opportunities for where alternative economic activities can take place” (Dávila 2012:11). Hylan Lewis wrote in the introduction to Elliot Liebow’s pioneering ethnography *Tally’s Corner* – detailing black men’s relationships with their families, work, and each other in the Shaw neighborhood of Washington, D.C. – that urban businesses like small grocery stores, carryout restaurants, record stores, and laundromats act as “part of a distinctive complex of urban institutions” that speak to the needs, desires, and limited choices of urban dwellers (Liebow 1967:xxvii). Following the departure of Safeway, several more stores closed and by 1985, more than 60 stores had closed along the H Street corridor since the riots. Approximately 150 businesses remained boarded-up or were among the many vacant city-owned lots (Mansfield 1985:DC1).

The “go-go economy” and the murder of Catherine Fuller

During the 1980s and 1990s, while neighborhood residents attempted to reconstruct the decimated retail corridor, what Natalie Hopkinson’s calls the “go-go economy” took hold and brought along with it various “informal economic arrangements that stayed off the IRS grid: everything from a network of geographically dispersed clothing lines to graphic shops that create event fliers and press T-shirts” (2012:89). “Go-go” is not only a style of music, but it also describes the space where musicians and their fans would gather – in backyards, street corners, parks, restaurants, nightclubs, skating rinks, firehouses, community centers, and college campuses (Hopkinson 2012). For the young black men and women who lived

around H Street, go-gos and street corners were sites of refuge since many complained “that they don’t have anywhere else to go or anything else to do” (Sargent 1984:A38). In particular, the intersection at Eighth and H Street was, and continues to be, a center of activity and a meeting place along the corridor for many years. This intersection resembled what John Jackson (2005) describes as a “reconfiguration of public space” that evolved after the introduction of the welfare state. He says:

The welfare state starts the process [of exclusive publicness] by evacuating privacy from the home, turning what was once intimate seclusion into a matter of public record, especially as social workers document the presence or absence of men in welfare recipients’ homes. In this context, access to privacy becomes a solely bourgeois privilege, and when this publicness is all one is allowed, privatization of public space may be the only obvious riposte. Flip-flopped feet on concrete sidewalks, bright pink rollers in unkempt and auburn-streaked hair, the slouchiest of stoop-sitting – they all assert a very powerful counter-privatization (p. 54).

Several bus stops at the Eighth and H Street intersection act as repositories for hundreds of people to congregate every day to travel to other parts of the city. In the 1980s, the corner housed a “dismal, trash-littered park [that was] used by neighborhood residents, young and old, as a place to play cards, to shoot the breeze, smoke, drink and talk” (Sargent 1984:A38). It was from this intersection that the “Eighth and H Street Crew” got its name. Sixteen members of the “crew” were charged with the October 1, 1984 slaying of 49-year old Catherine Fuller – often described as the most brutal murder in the city’s history. The unprecedented arrest of the sixteen youths allegedly involved in Ms. Fuller’s murder represented the criminalization of young black males that took place at an alarming rate in urban

centers during this violent era. As one 20-year-old resident of the area told *The Washington Post*, “What the police are calling gangs is really just groups of guys who know each other and hang out together, mainly at the go-gos” (Sargent 1984:A38).

The economic and social infrastructure that collapsed prior to the riots, continued to falter 20 and 30 years later. “There ain’t no community organization building – nothing out here to keep everybody busy and help us make no money,” one resident proclaimed. “So what are we supposed to do? Some youths are weak and dumb and don’t know how to get what they want. So, they just try to get what the next guy has...” (Sargent 1984:A38). In 1986 a new mall, the H Street Connection – which still stands – was erected on H Street between Eighth and 10th Streets, and a Dart Drug store sat on the site of the park where the Eighth and H Crew gathered prior to the murder of Catherine Fuller. In addition to the drugstore, the mall featured a police substation, and several clothing stores. While many residents hailed the new economic activity on along the corridor as a result of the new mall and future plans for a \$23 million, five-story office building set to accommodate 900 employees of the D.C. Department of Human Services, the extensive “street crime and drug trafficking associated with H Street NE” caused neighborhood merchants and residents to still be “concerned about the safety of their customers and about shoplifting in their stores” (Wheeler 1987:B1).

The 1990s ushered in a new set of challenges towards the redevelopment of H Street, NE with an economic downturn that effected the region. Notably, the federal government cut aid for economic and community development in 1990 because of

mismanagement by city officials (the funds were later restored in 1992). The corridor's only remaining supermarket, Mega Foods, also closed its doors in 1990 as well as the National Bank of Washington, and Fantles, a local drug store. But, it was also in the 1990s that the corridor began to experience some of the first signs of gentrification with an increase in the number of Asian and Latin American immigrants moving to the area as well as some young white families who could not afford property on Capitol Hill. According to the *Washington Post*, "Many H Street NE shoppers resent the gentrification, just as many black Washingtonians said in a *Washington Post* poll last year that they bristle at Hispanic and Asian immigrants who have taken over small businesses in black areas" (Fisher and Pianin 1988:A1). Despite the challenges, city officials, merchants, and residents organized a festival to celebrate the impending revitalization of H Street, NE. *The Washington Post* described the 1992 event:

The contrast between the reality of the Northeast Washington business corridor and the long-promised revitalization could not have been stronger. Almost a quarter-century after the 1968 riots, one of the city's main commercial strips of black-owned businesses yesterday again found itself looking forward by looking back (Escobar 1992:B3).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there were several efforts to spur black entrepreneurialism and pride along the corridor. Annual festivals along H Street were planned as a way to bring positive attention to the area that was populated with a mixture of new and old retail and service businesses, as well as several vacant storefronts, men drinking alcoholic beverages from paper bags, and shopkeepers

conducting business from behind bulletproof glass windows. The festival took a four-year hiatus between 1995 and 1999 because of a lack of funding.

Retail revival on a “Great Street”

Since the early-2000s, powerful funding mechanisms have been put in place along the H Street, NE corridor. In contrast to the previous three decades, with the dawning of a new millennium, city administrators implemented effective plans that began to transform H Street, NE into a 21st century version of the lively commercial corridor that thrived 50 years prior. In 2004, the D.C. Government, led by Mayor Anthony Williams, approved a Strategic Development Plan for H Street NE, which invested over \$300 million (mostly private) from 2nd Street to Maryland Avenue. The plan called for new retail, housing, and entertainment venues, as well as the establishment of a streetcar system, and more aesthetically pleasing sidewalks and public spaces. In 2007, H Street became the first area to achieve recognition as a Great Street, which means it was eligible to receive local government funds to spur retail growth. Under the direction of Mayor Williams, the Great Streets Initiative began in 2006 as a commercial revitalization program for gateway commercial corridors with depressed retail. Led by the office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) and in conjunction with the D.C. Office of Planning and the D.C. Department of Transportation (DDOT), the Great Streets Initiative helps with both exterior street infrastructure improvement – curbs, gutters, lighting, sidewalk widening, and interior space improvement through the dissemination of grants. Also in 2007, the D.C. City Council named H Street one of

six neighborhood retail priority areas and set aside up to \$25 million in tax increment financing (TIF) bonds to stimulate development along the corridor. With the TIF bonds, the area can capture excess tax dollars and use them for spatial improvements. H Street is a prime example of the TIF funding mechanism being extremely profitable, for developers particularly. The corridor generated approximately \$25 million in 2010 to be spent solely on efforts along H Street. No other neighborhood has experienced such a high tax increment. Nevertheless, H Street is also a unique space because it has been designated as the initial location of a new streetcar line, surging property and sales tax rates, and through the Great Streets Initiative, the city has paid a tremendous amount of attention and capital for aesthetic improvements.

In early 2008, Councilmember Tommy Wells, joined by former Mayor Adrian Fenty, announced the initiation of DDOT's landmark streetscape construction, for which the agency committed \$50 million in streetscape, safety, and transportation improvements along the H Street corridor. Mr. Wells spoke about the residents and businesses surrounding H Street, NE waiting patiently for the city to devote much needed energy and ideas to bolster commercial activity on the corridor. He said, "Today marks the start of an immense city investment in the future of this great street - over \$76 million between the streetscape project, new streetcars, TIF financing incentives, neighborhood and business grants, and a new dedicated shuttle bus to this corridor."²² In addition to the \$25 million TIF and the \$50 million streetscape renovation, the H Street, NE corridor also received \$600,000 for neighborhood

²² Source: Councilmember Tommy Wells website:
(<http://www.tommywellsward6.com/date/news/index.php?page=60>)

investment fund targeting community-based projects; \$500,000 towards reimbursable grants for façade and building improvements; and \$225,000 towards a dedicated, branded H Street shuttle bus to support small businesses linking passengers to Union Station and Benning Road Metro stations.

Despite various efforts to overcome the durable stain of the 1968 riots, the subsequent abandonment of the H Street, NE corridor drove the economic (and cultural) value of the neighborhood. This devaluation of the neighborhood was crucial to the creation of multiple opportunities for capital investment and profit generated from private investors purchasing of cheap blighted real estate. Along with an increase in property values, the neighborhood experienced a demographic shift that not only impacted the neighborhood's longtime residents, but they have also led to the loss of its "black identity" (Warren 2008). After failed plans to keep H Street, NE's "black identity," the local government in conjunction with planners, developers, and historic preservationists implemented measures that emphasized both race-neutrality and multiculturalism as a way to anchor the space and attract commercial and residential traffic. In addition to the structural implementations that were put in place, a discursive plan was executed at the same time – one that emphasized an early history of H Street, NE that avoided meaningful discourse about its most recent past. In order to erase the difficult past, historic preservation was used to legitimate the narrative.

Nostalgia and the Production of a Diverse Past

Maly et. al. (2012) define nostalgia as “a special type of memory, one that elevates pleasurable experiences and screens out more painful ones” (p.757). Furthermore, nostalgia involves an “active selection of what to remember and how to remember it” (Wilson 2005:25). In their study examining the nostalgic narratives used to construct and maintain white racial identity in Chicago, Maly et. al. find that current and former white residents often use the racially coded language of culture, crime, religion, and property maintenance to mourn the loss of a segregated white world. They maintain that the “memories of the loss of the old *white* neighborhood converge with the nostalgia for a time when ‘white culture’ was unquestionably synonymous with American culture” (2012:758). In the case of H Street, the nostalgic past focuses on a diversity narrative rather than one that emphasizes whiteness, nevertheless, like the neighborhoods studied in the Maly, et. al. study, nostalgia for the multicultural past “serves as a culturally sanctioned strategy for shoring up white privilege” (p. 758). Cultural and heritage tourism, the reintroduction of the streetcar, and high-end ethnic restaurants operate as cultural strategies to enhance the visual appeal of H Street (including the renaming of the area to “Atlas” after the historic theatre). Sharon Zukin (1995) attributes such changes to the institutionalization of urban fear in the 1960s and 1970s when these kinds of cultural strategies began as popular trends. Furthermore, introducing heritage tourism to transitional areas acts as “the harbinger of change, like the arrival of a yoga studio or a cupcake shop” (Wax 2012a). The power of local institutions is demonstrated by their influence on how the neighborhood is discursively conceptualized. This

construction of reality shapes and orders the environment, and ultimately designates who belongs and who does not. Therefore, the discourse places value in specific forms of ethnic/racial diversity, and invalidates the value of others (Maher 2011).

Like historic conservation, historic preservation, and activities like heritage tours act as aesthetic discourses about everyday life and institutionalized practices amongst city planners and developers (Deckha 2004). As Nityanand Deckha (2004) writes about gentrification in London, historic preservation “can mobilize new histories and uses of older spaces to become a vibrant cultural politics of space that reflects the new urban realities of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and diasporic cultures” (p. 418). As opposed to simply assisting in a nostalgic politics of heritage along the H Street corridor, narratives promoted by local preservation and heritage organizations couple with community development to produce an aesthetic discourse that celebrates the ethnically diverse heritage of the neighborhood. Historic preservation, in particular, operates in defense of the gentrification of urban spaces by “depoliticizing the processes of urban restructuring and working-class displacement through discourses of aesthetics, class and race” (Deckha 2004:403). Furthermore, historic preservation has played a significant role in the neoliberal “re-presentation” of the H Street corridor as a thriving multicultural commercial and residential space.

Long-time resident and local blogger Margaret Holwill spoke to me about her love of the area and shared her perspective that the H Street corridor is often mischaracterized as historically black when it has “always” been diverse. Margaret likened H Street to New Orleans, a city, she believes, has been historically diverse in

terms of race and class. Margaret continued by explaining that H Street had a large Jewish population and “to say it was historically black ignores the history of the area.” Furthermore, Margaret claimed that blacks and whites lived side-by-side for years, unlike other parts of the city that were largely segregated. The diverse history to which Margaret refers was prior to the late-1940s when the neighborhood became majority black. While reports funded and organized by the D.C. Office of Planning and the D.C. Department of Transportation (e.g., DDOT’s “H Street NE Corridor Transportation Study”) highlight the period between the 1870s and 1940s as H Street’s “hey day,” H Street Main Street’s Executive Director, Anwar Saleem (and several media outlets) establish the H Street, NE commercial corridor as a historically black neighborhood (see Lynch 2013). Nevertheless, reports organized by the local government recognize the period between the 1940s and the early 2000s as the neighborhood’s denouement.

The discursive production of nostalgia around the H Street corridor generates a contradictory construction of blackness that recognizes and commemorates black historical and cultural contributions to the neighborhood – through the recognition of buildings and public spaces that were constructed, developed, and/or patronized by black slaves and laborers, “while simultaneously insisting upon black social and cultural inferiority and indicting African Americans for perceived postbellum and post-civil-rights-era social ills of poverty, crime, immorality, educational inadequacy, and political corruption” (Thomas 2009:750-751). Unlike the multiple decades when the H Street, NE corridor and surrounding blocks were firmly an overwhelmingly

black space, institutional narratives of H Street's history – supported and promoted by the state – designate the “good life” as an important part of the past that was damaged and disrupted by racial change (Maly et. al. 2012). Responsibility for the disruption of this multicultural utopia “is generally placed on the shoulders of those labeled the destroyers - blacks” (2012:758). In 1984, for example, H Street corridor business owners hoped to change perceptions of the area as a black neighborhood in order to attract customers. According to the owner of a Hechinger Mall ice cream parlor, for the H Street corridor to flourish, “the key was changing the perception of the area as a ‘black area’... When people hear ‘black,’ they think low-income, they think negative – like crime and no taste. We had to look beyond the obvious... Ignore the H Street corridor and you will find a tremendous consumer market that has been grossly underserved” (Milloy 1984). More recently, business owners and community leaders emphasized the historical roots of H Street as ethnically and racially diverse. For example, at the 2010 opening of the Atlas Performing Arts Center's “Intersections” art festival, the festival's artistic director remarked that H Street “has historically been an intersection.” She goes on to list various ethnic groups – Italian, Jewish, and African American – that inhabited the neighborhood (Ramanathan 2010: WE41).

The re-telling of the H Street history positions it as a multicultural space that was momentarily decimated. In other words, blackness does not represent the “truth” of the area, instead black bodies are woven into the multicultural fabric of the space and their blackness needs to be disciplined to fit the seamless narrative of a diverse space that nurtures progress and opportunity for all. It is the discursive production of

a nostalgic multicultural past that regulates blackness in this urban space. The multicultural story about H Street, preceding the riots, requires black people to have been the passive recipients of the many opportunities and amenities provided by the neighborhood. The narrative suggests that while other neighborhoods were segregated, H Street welcomed people of all backgrounds, including black people, to take advantage of quality employment opportunities and to patronize shopping and entertainment venues. This story neither accounts for the establishments that remained segregated (or open to whites only), like the Atlas Theater, nor the abysmal social, political, and economic conditions black people faced with the advent of Jim Crow.

The D.C. Historic Preservation Office and the “Near Northeast Historical Study”

The discursive presentation of the H Street, NE corridor as a historical intersection of ethnic and racially diverse people is clearly illustrated in documents produced by local government agencies. An unpublished report entitled “Near Northeast Historical Study” was written in 2002, primarily funded by the D.C. Historic Preservation Office, a subsidiary of the D.C. Office of Planning.²³ The office functions as the mayoral administration’s agent for historic preservation in Washington, D.C. The “Near Northeast Historical Study” offers a detailed architectural, commercial, and cultural history of the area surrounding the H Street NE commercial corridor using data obtained from oral histories, newspaper articles,

²³ The study was also funded in part by Federal Historic Preservation Fund, National Park Service, with additional funding provided by the Capitol Hill Restoration Society.

archival materials, and in-depth interviews. One of the overarching themes of the report is a narrative of H Street's culturally diverse origins. In particular, the authors highlight the makeup of the neighborhood in the early 19th century as having an eclectic mix of recent immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Italy, England and Sweden, as well as newly freed slaves who had help build the White House and the Capitol.

According to the study, by the early 20th century, the neighborhood was comprised of a greater mix of ethnicities. The area saw an influx of immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Greece, China, and numerous Eastern European Jews. Furthermore, the authors suggest that the Near Northeast area was one of the few neighborhoods in the early 20th century that was known for its ethnic diversity. Of those black inhabitants who lived in the area, by the 1920s, they were able to procure "more substantial jobs" than work as unskilled or domestic laborers. In fact, the study confirms that black Americans on and around H Street NE worked as "railroad firemen, elevator operators, teachers, letter carriers, clerks in government offices, and skilled laborers at the GPO" (Schwartz and Layman 2002:52). The authors then identified neighborhood black professionals by name and address:

Burton G. Robinson, a Black physician lived at 702 12th Street and Peter Price, another Black doctor, at 1128 G. Harvey Lewis, a D.C. school principal lived at 822 12th Street, and George Lomax at 813 9th Street was a barber with his own shop. Linden Street was an enclave of middle class African Americans whose professions in 1920 included dentist, policeman, music teacher, photographer enlarger, and clerks in the Treasury and Post Office Departments (Schwartz and Layman 2002:52).

Although the narrative acknowledges that blacks continued to lag "behind whites in employment opportunities," they suggest that "there had been a decided improvement

in the status of some of those living in the study area in the ten years from 1910 to 1920” (Schwartz and Layman 2002:52). The practice of highlighting professional black residents despite the majority of black Americans who still suffered in poverty and from underemployment, suggests that by living in an ethnically and racially diverse community, these exceptional black professionals transcended the enduring systemic oppression of segregation and the aftermath of slavery. This practice also leads the reader to assume poor blacks (who are later implicated in the destruction of H Street) did not live in or near the corridor.

With the physical incorporation of black residents in the area, the study offers a story of interracial cooperation, with black and white people living, working, and shopping side-by-side. The report positions H Street, as an inclusive, black-friendly space, in particular contrast to downtown commercial districts where shop owners exercised their right to discriminate against black shoppers because of federally mandated segregation laws. The report states:

Although H Street did not have the large and exclusive stores to be found on F Street downtown, H Street businessmen competed for business in several ways. One was by offering longer store hours. With their eclectic mix of ethnic backgrounds, the merchants of H Street were also less tied to the conservative, southern attitudes of the more formal downtown stores. African Americans were welcomed to shop on H Street. Merchants would sell on credit and keep a running account for good customers. Informal oral history interviews with people who shopped on H Street in the 30s, 40s, and 50s, yield the same general impressions. A shopper could find almost anything he wanted on H Street; service was good; and the shopkeepers eager to please (Schwartz and Layman 2002:40).

While suggesting that black shoppers “were welcomed” to patronize stores on H Street, the authors insinuate that black people had a choice where to shop, rather than

having limited options under the social and legal oppression of the Jim Crow racial segregation laws, which were not officially abolished until 1965. Furthermore, this historical narrative suggests that black patrons were able and invited to shop at all H Street stores, like their white counterparts, however several accounts of the 1968 riots argue that most of the businesses that were burned or looted did not allow black shoppers or black customers were made to feel unwelcome (Gilbert 1968).

Nevertheless, the study hesitates to characterize H Street as a black area and instead identifies 14th and U Streets and the Shaw district (the two other riot corridor locations) as the centers of “commercial and social life for the African American residents of Washington” since black residents were unable to attend movie theaters and other entertainment venues on H Street (Schwartz and Layman 2002:57). Again, by classifying 14th and U Streets (affectionately known as “Black Broadway”) and the Shaw district as popular and necessary destinations for black leisure and entertainment reinscribes H Street as “multicultural” rather than “black.”

The study glosses over much of the period after the 1968 riots and is particularly silent on activities in the area during the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, the authors designated one short paragraph to describe the riots and a second longer paragraph to discuss planning activities in its aftermath. Neither the root causes of the riots, nor details about grievances expressed by the black community were addressed. Although the authors acknowledge a demographic shift in the late 1940s, when the black population became a majority, details about the H Street corridor

began to taper with their retelling of the relocation of immigrant families to more affluent areas.

The Near Northeast Historical study was funded by the Preservation Office and while it was not used to directly preserve architectural or artistic structures, its purpose was to preserve a particular narrative of H Street and connect this history with contemporary changes. Although H Street has been represented as historically a multicultural diverse space, its resemblance to other identifiably black neighborhoods suggests otherwise. The narrative that a high concentration of blacks shopped along the H Street corridor because of the discrimination they experienced downtown and in other segregated spaces suggests that H Street was somewhat of a utopic, colorblind space. In this way, the progressive narrative of H Street's storied past dissociates the corridor from local, regional, and national patterns of racial discrimination and violence by constructing the idea of a harmonious, multicultural commercial corridor where the racism that was experienced elsewhere was aberrant or absent (Thomas 2009:753). Furthermore, characterizing H Street as diverse historically masks the experiences of racialization in the 21st century beneath the discourse of cultural celebration and market competition.

Greater H Street, NE Heritage Trail – Cultural Tourism DC

The post-race neoliberal logics guiding the physical transformation of the H Street, NE corridor rely on narratives that celebrate racial and ethnic diversity. As part of a new economy to help spur growth and redevelopment in urban locales,

heritage tours establish a neighborhood's diverse historical identity for tourist and resident consumption. The heritage tour for the H Street, NE corridor is organized around themes that make the neighborhood appealing in today's world of post-race neoliberalism, including the incorporation of black heritage. The tour is shaped by racial logics that both celebrate diversity and overlook inequalities by emphasizing the neighborhood's "trend towards greater racial and economic diversity." This logic does not necessarily involve a strict adherence to the "positive" aspects of H Street's history, but the tour/brochure certainly makes the negative events seem insignificant to the overall cohesion of the neighborhood.

Cultural Tourism DC, the group that established the heritage trail, is a non-profit organization that works in partnership with local government agencies. The Neighborhood Heritage Trails are self-guided pedestrian routes that use signposts and accompanying brochures to share historical stories, maps, and photographs of Washington, D.C. neighborhoods. The "Hub, Home, Heart: Greater H Street, NE Heritage Trail," established in 2012, is the thirteenth walking tour created by Cultural Tourism DC and includes 18 signs that span 3.2 miles. Some of the signs identify the location of where Dr. Granville Moore, a black physician, practiced medicine for 50 years, and the Swampoodle region where "residents" (i.e., slaves) who built the White House and the Capitol lived. The heritage tour brochure engages in a form of respectability politics that highlight the contributions of black individuals, like Dr. Granville Moore, whose profession and service reflected positively on this sanitized history of H Street. To make H Street a welcoming space does not require the

exclusion of black bodies. Instead, the inclusion of contented black subjects speaks to this narrative.

By visually highlighting these designated moments in the neighborhood's history, Cultural Tourism DC effectively produces heritage by "retrieving the affective significance of places that may easily be ignored by residents – significance that must be ignored by developers, planners and revitalization experts eager for the creation of new land (and, hence, social) values" (Deckha 2004:404). Furthermore, efforts to preserve structures and spaces associated with the lives of immigrants and racial minorities reflects a shift in historic preservation – a field that privileged the history of white people (notably the work of well-known architects) (Saito 2009).

Funding for the project was provided by the District Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and Events DC, the official convention, sports, and entertainment organization for the District (formerly known as The Washington Convention and Sports Authority). The trail was developed in collaboration with its three co-chairs: Joe Englert (owner of several H Street restaurants and bars), Anwar Saleem (Executive Director of H Street Main Street – a non-profit community development organization that will be discussed in the following chapter), and Marqui Lyons (a long-time H Street resident).

The cover text of the "Hub, Home, Heart: Greater H Street, NE Heritage Trail" brochure characterizes the H Street, NE corridor as a "bustling working-class neighborhood [that] grew up here alongside the railroad and streetcar. Mom-and-pop businesses served all comers in the city's leading African American shopping

district.” It mythologizes the history of the corridor following the riots and invites visitors to “Discover how, even after the devastating 1968 civil disturbances, the strong community prevailed to witness H Street’s 21st-century revival.” By utilizing the nostalgic imagery of H Street as a lively, approachable community with enduring roots, the heritage trail produces the neighborhood surrounding H Street NE as a space that induces memories about a particular time “to be revived, salvaged, rearticulated into the present and extending the life of the conservationist into the past” (Deckha 2004:419). Although the brochure provides readers with an introduction to the H Street corridor as “the leading African American shopping district,” it also identifies the area as historically an ethnically diverse neighborhood since its early beginnings in the mid-19th century, prior to the construction of Union Station.

Like the “Near Northeast Historical Study,” the heritage tour brochure depicts a neighborhood filled with bustling retail stores, restaurants, and professional service offices “run by Jewish, Italian, Lebanese, Greek, Irish, and African American families,” where black shoppers were free to patronize shops “unlike those in downtown DC where African Americans met discrimination.” Although the brochure modifies language adopted by the “Near Northeast Historical Study” that suggests black patrons were encouraged to shop at all of the stores on H Street, the brochure euphemistically implies that H Street was a collaborative, multicultural space where different ethnic groups peacefully lived side-by-side, despite the racial turmoil and

tensions that were taking place within other D.C. neighborhoods and in most other major cities in the U.S.

The brochure and the accompanying signposts emphasize the overwhelming influence of entrepreneurialism along the corridor. Nevertheless, early signs of business acumen and savvy entrepreneurialism seemed to benefit white ethnic groups and not black entrepreneurs since by the 1940s, most of the European immigrants fled the neighborhood for more affluent and less racially diverse neighborhoods. This neoliberal discourse of immigrant success via dedication and hard work suggests that the challenges black entrepreneurs faced were problems of “self care” rather than structural or institutional forces (Wilson 2007) – despite the failure of several feeble attempts by the local and federal governments to develop the H Street NE corridor throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

The brochure highlights a demographic shift during the 1940s that saw “the children of H Street’s European immigrants [reach] adulthood and [move] on.” Since segregation remained in place in that period, “Churches found new congregations, and the city switched public schools into the ‘colored division’ to accommodate their increasing black population.” Following the 1953 Supreme Court decision to outlaw segregation in public accommodations, all of the public facilities on H Street integrated and like white residents around the city, whites living on and around H Street fled in droves and for decades “Greater H Street was almost completely African American.” With the intensification of black population growth around H Street, the brochure claims that the businesses along the corridor “continued to cater

to its neighbors and to commuters.” In other words, the businesses began to reflect the poor and working-class black population – a ghetto economy that featured liquor stores, secondhand stores, carry-outs, and corner stores.

In the years that led up to the 1968 riots, after desegregation, Washington, D.C. experienced heightened racial polarization as whites fled the cities for the suburbs. In the time between white flight of the 1950s and the 1968 riots, H Street not only experienced a demographic shift, but also an economic shift downward as the quality of services began to reflect this change. While the brochure does include a brief entry that quotes a *Capitol East Gazette* journalist claiming that the “riots did not happen in a vacuum,” the comprehensive narrative of the brochure focuses more on H Street as a historically inclusive, multicultural space.

The guide describes the violent aftermath of Dr. King’s assassination as the actions of “grief-stricken, angry men and women [who took] to the streets across the city – looting and burning.” While Dr. King’s assassination certainly spurred the event, to marginalize its inception as the emotional catharsis of the protestors repudiates the totalizing oppression that led to the riots and absolves the local and federal government of responsibility for this oppression (Maher 2011). Adding to the narrative that the “angry” men and women who destroyed H Street and other commercial corridors chose to do so out of grief, or perhaps greed, the H Street heritage tour brochure quotes a fireman who claimed that the area behind Morton’s Department store was ““a freeway for looters’ carrying ‘television sets, clothes, everything.’” Referring to Gilbert’s (1968) interviews with rioters, the guide offers

no context or indication that the looting was a form of symbolic action in protest against the deplorable conditions black Americans were facing, nor that some of the looters gave the goods away. In fact, the guide framed these actions as irrational. For example, the brochure highlights the looting that took place at Morton's Department store: "When Morton's first opened downtown in 1933, it was among the few white-owned department stores that did not discriminate in hiring or sales. In fact, owner Mortimer Lebowitz was a former Urban League president who had marched with Dr. King. Nevertheless, looters ransacked and torched his store here." This retelling suggests that the misguided and impractical protestors attacked a white ally who helped keep the neighborhood orderly and successful. The pamphlet later admits that the riots occurred in conjunction with high levels of black unemployment and underemployment, however painting acts of political protest and violence as irrational disorder undermines the resistance efforts of the disgruntled and underserved black residents coping with the conditions of inequality.

The H Street heritage trail guide ends with the introduction of the 21st century, when the corridor followed D.C.'s "trend toward greater racial and economic diversity." The guide provides few details about the period between the 1970s and early 2000s, however it attempts to portray H Street as worthy of quality redevelopment despite its turbulent past: "Although the H Street commercial corridor declined for decades, its heart – the surrounding, long-standing residential community – remained strong." While the guide portrays the H Street NE corridor as racially diverse, both historically and in the contemporary period, "African American

historians such as Maybell Taylor Bennett say it's especially important to Washington's black community at a time when census data shows that the District is no longer a majority black city, and historically black neighborhoods such as Shaw and H Street NE are growing ever whiter" (Wax 2012a).

Emphasizing narratives of a diverse past displaces the reality of structural inequalities that plagued the corridor prior to and following the 1968 riots and associates diversity with universality. The brochure's ambivalent description of the past celebrates the incorporation of black heritage by highlighting positive, progressive stories about black residents and customers, and minimizing less desirable details about H Street's recent past. Using the nostalgic narrative of diversity, the brochure discursively foreshadows a contemporary return to multiculturalism in an area that was momentarily designated as black. To say that the area was historically black is less desirable in this era. Nevertheless, blackness is disciplined in this story to fit within a harmonious narrative about H Street's ethnically diverse past. Even in its retelling of H Street's past, the heritage trail promotes diversity as interesting, cool, and I argue, decidedly post-racial.

Entrepreneurialism, Parking, and the Invisible Hand of Race-Neutrality

"They only want certain kinds of businesses on H Street now"

- Daniel, H Street, NE business owner

Various institutions have exercised power over the development process along the H Street Corridor since the 1970s. After the riots, the federal government, at the

instruction of Presidents Johnson and Nixon, designated funds to help rebuild the areas damaged during the riots. More recently, the D.C. Office of Planning, the D.C. Department of Transportation (DDOT), the D.C. Department of Small and Local Business Development (DSLBD), the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED), and several mayoral administrations have had a hand in planning various phases of its development. Acting independently and sometimes collaboratively, these agencies and organizations offer developers tax incentives to build upscale facilities and residential units vs. affordable housing units. While private corporations provide the investment capital to fund these projects, local agencies offer tax abatements, subsidies, and relaxed regulation to support development – a clear symbol of neoliberal development. For example, in 2010, Councilmember Tommy Wells introduced a bill that would designate \$5 million of the \$25 million TIF bonds towards the mixed-use development project on 3rd and H Streets (which currently houses a new Giant grocery store) towards the Steuart Investment Company as part of a tax abatement promised to the developer in 2009 (Neubauer 2010).

Generally, commercial revitalization utilizes various short-term strategies to aid small businesses in the area like “technical assistance, access to small business capital, corridor beautification, and area marketing” (Sutton 2010:354), and race-neutral discourses expedite the directives that support tax abatements, public-private partnerships, and other development practices (Mele 2013). Nevertheless, implementation of market-driven policies that emphasize growth (profit for

developers and property owners) has disproportionately adverse effects on black business owners. Commercial revitalization is inherently racialized in the absence of overtly racist and discriminatory practices, or as Saito (2009) argues, “there is a difference between purposeful state-sponsored inequality and policies that city officials believe are race neutral but have racial consequences” (p. 171).

H Street NE retail priority area grant

In 2011, Councilmember Tommy Wells proposed legislation for a grant program to benefit retail businesses along the H Street corridor between 3rd Street and the starburst. The act was proposed as part of the local government’s effort to improve the aesthetic appearance of the corridor and therefore attract more visitors to the area and to complement the TIF initiative that was already successful on H Street (generating vast sums of money for exclusive use along the corridor). After the “H Street, N.E., Retail Priority Area Incentive Amendment Act of 2010” passed, as part of the Great Streets Initiative, DMPED was charged with enforcing the new legislation. The agency then drafted the rules and regulations and disseminated a Request for Application (RFA) for the Retail Priority Area Grant (RPAG) to provide current H Street business owners and those interested in opening businesses along the corridor. The grant awards totaled \$1.25 million and were to be distributed in \$85,000 increments to qualified businesses. In October 2011, representatives from DMPED hosted their first information session. The meeting was well-attended and featured a demographically diverse sampling of current and budding entrepreneurs. A great deal of tension also filled the room – primarily because the RFA explicitly

excluded certain service-oriented businesses from applying for the grant. At the time, most of the businesses on the H Street corridor, especially those owned by black shopkeepers, were service-oriented. The specific language of the RFA (and the legislation proposed by Councilmember Wells) excluded the following entities from receiving the area grant: liquor stores, restaurants, nightclubs, hair salons, barbershops, and phone stores. Noticeably absent is the exclusion of nail salons, which since the 1990s has been an industry overwhelmingly managed by Korean and Vietnamese immigrants (Willett 2005).

While the frustrations many black business owners expressed were due in large part to the language of the grant, their vocal dissatisfaction reflected previously existing tensions that developed alongside H Street's changing environment. With the introduction of a crop of new bars, lounges, yoga studios, bicycle shops, and eclectic restaurants by local entrepreneur, Joe Englert, and the renovation of the Atlas Theater, these longtime business owners recognized the "new and improved" H Street catered to a different demographic. There was a clear divide between existing businesses that had weathered the riots of 1968 and had served their customers loyally for years and newer, younger entrepreneurs who saw untapped opportunities in this transitional space. The longtime, and mostly black business owners who lived through the riots and/or the subsequent decline were also challenged with six years of erratic construction projects on H Street for the streetcar lines. These businesses weathered the construction too and suffered because of the turmoil.

The details and tenor of the meeting were described in an article entitled “DC Government Bans Black Businesses from H St Grant,” published in *The Afro-American*. The article describes a heated debate among longtime minority business owners and city officials. The reporter claims that the D.C. government’s grant program provides little relief for longtime minority-owned businesses along the H Street corridor. During the meeting, participants questioned why barbershops and beauty salons are excluded from consideration – claiming racial discrimination since most of these shops are owned by black entrepreneurs. One business owner said he believed the goal of the grant “is highly questionable [because it excluded] certain businesses associated with small black businesses” (Mohammed 2011). The black business owners along H Street believed that the grant funding process was particularly planned against them and in favor of upwardly mobile newcomers who brought “nightclubs and tiny eateries” to the area. According to the reporter’s account, community activist and business owner, Pam Johnson, argued with Councilman Wells’ Chief of Staff, Charles Allen, who defended Wells’ legislation as being “fully vetted through the public hearing process” – thus suggesting that if the disgruntled business owners were unsatisfied, they could have introduced their constructive objections at community hearings. Johnson replied: “Black-owned businesses have weathered the storm via the riots of the 60s and crack epidemic since the 80s. Now with the D.C. government investing over \$50 million in the H Street Corridor and enacting policies that expedites the gentrification of H Street, it seems the Council wants to prevent our barber shops and beauty salons from receiving one

dime of the assistance that's being given to the gentrifying businesses" (Mohammed 2011).

In June 2012, I attended another informational meeting hosted by DMPED to answer questions about the retail grant and its application process for the third and final round of 2012. One of the first questions posed by the audience was by a white woman who asked for clarity on how a "beauty salon" was defined by the agency since barbershops and beauty salons could not receive grant funds. The DMPED representative appeared befuddled and asked one of her colleagues for assistance defining the term. They concluded that a beauty shop is a business that has dryers and sinks to wash hair. The audience member wanted clarity because she owns a holistic/wellness center. The DMPED representative explained that the decision to exclude certain businesses was based on "legislation" so DMPED has no power to make changes, instead they are simply "administering what has been handed down." In the end, the DMPED representative concluded that the inquiring business owner's wellness center would not be considered a beauty shop and she was therefore encouraged to apply for a retail grant. In this case, a beauty shop repackaged as a "holistic/wellness center" meets the demands of neoliberal privatization logics that require culture "to be ordered and orderly, as in commercially packaged or aesthetically pleasing to audiences" (Dávila 2012:11).

Although DMPED officials were charged with implementing the legislation passed by city council, they received the bulk of the blame for racial undertones embedded in the language of the act. Nevertheless, in reaction to the resistance

DMPED faced because of the legislation, in September 2012, Councilmember Wells modified the legislation to remove the language excluding barbershops and beauty shops. The amended act reads:

“Eligible applicants include retail businesses engaged in the sale of home furnishings, apparel, books, art, groceries, and general merchandise goods to specialized customers or service-oriented businesses providing a direct service to specialized customers or artistic endeavors, such as art galleries, theaters or performing arts centers. Special consideration shall be given to retail businesses that include entrepreneurial and innovative retail elements. **Eligible retail development projects shall not include liquor stores, restaurants, nightclubs, phone stores, or businesses with 20 or more locations in the United States**”

Although applicants were required to have a store front on H Street, NE, not on the side streets where leasing space was less expensive, changes to the legislation enabled several more black business owners to participate in the grant application process. Nevertheless, after three funding cycles, DMPED had significantly more funds than businesses applying for the grant.²⁴

One reason for the surplus in grant funds and the low turnout for black business owners could be the required “Clean Hands Self Certification” form. This document requires that business owners owe less than \$100 in outstanding debt to the D.C. government (this includes property taxes, business license taxes, unemployment insurance, and traffic fines). The disciplinary power of this application process is reflected in the solicitation of individual business owners to apply for the grant only if they are financially solvent and had owned up to all of their fiduciary responsibilities

²⁴ December 7, 2012 interview with Brian Kenner, former Chief of Staff, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED).

– thus regulating themselves and their businesses. Any business owners that are unable to perform these duties would be excluded from consideration.

Another reason for the low application numbers could be the grant’s emphasis on “retail businesses that include *entrepreneurial* and *innovative* retail elements” (emphasis mine). The term “innovative,” like “creative,” might be disinviting to business owners with certain skills, specifically related to invitations by the city government for new businesses on H Street. Interest in “innovative” businesses signals an entrepreneurial turn in urban planning “one that downplays citizenship and collective identities, and in turn emphasizes capitalist ideologies, encourages people to become entrepreneurial, commercially minded subjects, and which promotes private-sector solutions to social problems” (Barnes et. al. 2006:337).

With the rapidly shifting demographic, preference for “entrepreneurial” and “innovative” business have replaced a desire for simply profitable businesses. For instance, the decision to limit highly profitable beauty salons came even after H Street salons were graded an “A” overall in the Office of Planning’s Strategic Development Plan (2004) for their profitability, sophisticated ownership/management, demonstrated financial acumen, implementation of a marketing strategy, and thorough knowledge of their customer base. The neoliberal turn emphasizes entrepreneurialism as an integral element of economic growth, and therefore shies away from social welfare commitments. Despite the high tax revenue generated by beauty salons, barbershops, and other service-oriented businesses often run by black entrepreneurs, in a multicultural and economically diverse climate, creative and

innovative retail and service offerings are represented by Bikram Yoga and Metro Mutts (a pet supplies and pet sitting service business).

Performance-based parking

In the spring of 2009, D.C. City Council passed the “Performance Parking Pilot Zone Act of 2008,” to be enforced by the D.C. Department of Transportation (DDOT), which was enacted to manage curbside parking in high-density areas of the city, particularly newly major retail and entertainment centers. The first two locations for the program were established in the neighborhood surrounding the Nationals Ballpark/Capitol Hill and in Columbia Heights. The H Street corridor was the third location, established in 2012. The program was piloted on H Street, NE between 3rd Street, NE and 15th Street, NE. The program provides protection to residents and businesses by applying strict parking restrictions in residential neighborhoods and brief curbside parking meter limits to encourage high vehicle turnover. With such restrictions in place, the program’s intention is to foster a livable, walkable environment that reduces automotive congestion. Nevertheless, to limit the length of time vehicles are able to park on and around H Street disproportionately encumbers certain small businesses, like beauty salons, whose services often require two- to three-hour commitments. Presented as an apparatus of shared governance, Councilmember Tommy Wells in conjunction with DDOT hosted several public meetings about the proposed program for community members to review and comment.

At a February 2012 ANC 6C meeting, representatives from the D.C. Department of Transportation spoke about the implementation of performance-based parking zones on H Street, NE, which attempt to support residents and businesses while discouraging automotive transportation along the very busy and often congested corridor. The DDOT representatives discussed plans to establish “resident only” signs on one side of the streets surrounding H Street, and 2-hour parking on the other. Residents on performance-based parking blocks receive one visitor pass per household. White residents who spoke at the meeting, praised the department’s efforts and plans for implementation, while also asking questions about their ability to receive additional visitor parking passes. The frustrations displayed by black residents highlighted tensions with the increasing commercialization of the area. These residents complained about parking restrictions, the added presence of tourist traffic, and diminished access to resident parking passes.

One black business owner, Daniel, who spoke openly at the meeting, has owned a hair salon on H Street for over 15 years. The majority of his customers travel from Maryland and Northern Virginia and now have difficulty finding parking in the area. Prior to the implementation of the performance-based parking program, he lost clients throughout the construction of the streetcar lines since his customers faced difficulty finding parking or received tickets for parking in designated construction zones. Transportation and parking issues on H Street were particularly challenging during the construction, which began in 2008. Several months of intermittent disruption meant that many businesses along H Street lost customers

because the construction blocked parking spots and the entrances to several businesses. A disproportionate number of these businesses were black-owned. In contrast to the early years of his business when business traffic was sparse on H Street and he “had to step over crack heads,” the salon owner expressed his belief that many black business owners like him were being pushed out since “poor black businesses don’t get allowances and money.” The salon owner later shared that his business taxes have increased significantly in the past few years and soon he, and similar business owners, will be unable to maintain their business on H Street.

Daniel’s story is particularly compelling when also considering the Retail Priority Area Grant, discussed above, since many of the individually owned black businesses along the H Street corridor are service-oriented, like beauty salons and barbershops, rather than retail stores. The challenge for these shopkeepers with the implementation of policies that regulate and limit parking is that the policies demonstrate an explicit preference for retail businesses and restaurants, where customers are expected to patronize the establishment for shorter increments of time. Service businesses like beauty salons and barbershops, especially those that cater to black customers, often have their customers to remain in their location for two hours or more. Black beauty salons and barbershops have served as important discursive spaces for black cultural exchange – particularly social and political discussion. The relevance of barbershops to the black community, in particular, has been the subject of multiple scholarly studies (Alexander 2003, Harris-Lacewell 2005, Wright 1998, Wood and Brunson 2011) and popular films such as *Barbershop* and the sequel,

Barbershop 2. Barbershops and beauty salons are irreplaceable spaces where black men and women find “an emotional safe haven where the conversations are as varied as the patrons that frequent them” (Hart and Bowen. 2004:270). The effort Daniel’s customers put into traveling from other areas to his salon speaks to the social importance salons represent for his clients. The parking legislation is advertised as an effective way to protect the interests of both residents and the small businesses along the corridor by ensuring residents maintain adequate parking options (for themselves and their visitors), and by encouraging business patrons to shop quickly and efficiently. Specifically for the businesses, this plan lays the foundation for encouraging certain kinds of businesses (retail) and eschewing others (service-oriented businesses) that have withstood the previous challenges of the area.

The history of H Street tells the story of an identified black space that underwent significant challenges to achieve the political and economic infrastructure it needed to thrive. The area did not suffer from lack of attention or a commitment of funds, but a lack of sustainable options to adequately support the people who lived there. In the years following the 1968 riots, the H Street, NE corridor was deemed blighted, unwelcoming, and teeming with transient people who did not care about their own condition or the condition of their environment. Although the downfall of the H Street, NE corridor was due to a variety of factors, white renderings of blackness and the notion of a renewed black retail space worked discursively to forestall the restoration of H Street, NE. Blackness was not only economically unmanageable but

also socially undesirable in the redevelopment of the commercial corridor. With the decline of the welfare state and the retooling of government involvement under neoliberalism, the black space, and any potential for it, declined. Hence, the necessity for an institutionally supported (and funded) narrative of H Street, NE as a historically diverse neighborhood accompanied by recognizable symbols of blackness. How policies are designed and what legislation is enacted is underwritten by what I call post-race neoliberalism, which not only invests in the celebration of diversity and multiculturalism as valuable and productive social norms, but also emphasizes the importance of entrepreneurialism to overcome cultural limitation. The logic of post-race neoliberalism roams freely in the mundane spaces of the everyday but has lasting material effects. On the surface, these policies and practices appear to be doing the work of commercial revitalization – resurrecting retail activities in a community that was previously considered blighted, unwelcoming, and dangerous. I argue here that local government agencies, private developers, and historic preservationists work together to provide representations of a past that existed before H Street was “chocolate,” as a way to promote and develop the space. The following chapter will focus on the lived environment of H Street, NE today – as a valuable space of diversity. I will also explore the work of multiculturalism in the area that the current Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development, Victor Hoskins, calls “hip but has young families” and is “international, multilingual and diverse” (Flock 2011).

CHAPTER FIVE

H STREET MAIN STREET AND THE AESTHETICS OF COOL

“In cities, gentrifiers have the political clout – and accompanying racial privilege – to reallocate resources and repair infrastructure. The neighbourhood is ‘cleaned up’ through the removal of its residents. Gentrifiers can then bask in ‘urban life’ – the storied history, the selective nostalgia, the carefully sprinkled grit – while avoiding responsibility to those they displace. Hipsters want rubble with guarantee of renewal. They want to move into a memory that they have already made”

- Sarah Kendzior, “The Peril of Hipster Economics” (2014)

An April 2014 *New York Times* article describes the H Street, NE corridor as once a predominantly low-income, black neighborhood, now “increasingly mixed, racially and economically, as row houses within a block or two of the corridor undergo upscale renovations, property values rise and ethnic restaurants and fashionable pubs proliferate” (Meyer 2014). Now, the location of the H Street corridor is recognized as a particularly attractive space for commercial and residential development because of its proximity to Union Station (where the closest Metro stop resides) and because it is within commuting distance from Penn Quarter, Downtown, and other popular neighborhoods. The corridor is a hub of transition and transference as the Metro buses that ride along H Street and those that stop at the high traffic corner of 8th and H Streets, connect the H Street corridor with other destinations in the District as well as other cities in the region. The street continues to experience a heavy volume of automobile traffic, despite the influx of pedestrians and bikers during peak hours.

In this chapter, I argue that the category “diversity” has performed subtle yet significant discursive work in the development of H Street, NE. In terms of the

racialization of space, through the discourse of diversity, I explore how post-race neoliberalism shapes what and who is deemed un/desirable and legitimates practices of racial inequality without naming race. Furthermore, I analyze how the aestheticization of race, and particularly the stylization of blackness, facilitates the post-race neoliberal process. By using diversity to map the space, the development of H Street places emphasis on specific ideology of difference as multiculturalism and the role of diversity in the spread of neoliberalism.

The transformation of the H Street, NE corridor, in many ways, has followed a common model of gentrification that has taken place in urban centers across the U.S. Popular conceptions of gentrification involve the replacement of poor, and working-class urban residents with middle- and upper-middle-class households. Adding race to this equation, gentrification is also understood as involving the displacement of lower income blacks and other people of color with higher income white newcomers. In spite of countless definitions of gentrification, most scholars and the general public can abstractly account for feelings of neighborhood change – often signaled by the appearance of a Starbucks coffee shop (Kenney and Leonard 2001). It is when revitalization and reinvestment strategies are accompanied by gentrification that the overall impact on communities becomes more complicated since most residents see the benefits of improved physical and economic conditions and services.²⁵

²⁵ My use of the term “revitalization” borrows from Kennedy and Leonard (2001) who define it as “the process of enhancing the physical, commercial and social components of neighborhoods and the future prospects of its residents through private sector and/or public sector efforts. Physical components include upgrading of housing stock and streetscapes. Commercial components include the creation of viable businesses and services in the community. Social components include increasing employment and reductions in crime” (p. 6).

The H Street, NE corridor once signified a poor, black ghetto but has been reimagined to attract individuals with cosmopolitan tastes who value diversity. “Constructed multicultural urbanity” (Hackworth and Rekers 2005:232) is now used to attract new affluent residents, visitors, businesses, and developers. I am not telling a story about black displacement, as many discussions of gentrification necessarily do, rather the ways in which blackness, diversity, and urban development are co-constitutive in the remaking of H Street, NE. While the rebuilding and transformation of a neighborhood requires traditional economic components like labor and capital, “it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. The look and feel of the cities reflect decisions about what – and – who should be visible and what should not, on concepts of order and disorder, and on uses of aesthetic power” (Zukin 1995:7).

Borrowing from Brenda Weber’s brilliant formulation of post-Katrina New Orleans as a “body in distress that can only be effectively ‘healed’ through the design ministrations offered by the experts who populate makeover television” (2010:179), I call attention to the location of blackness in a post-race neoliberal context by positioning the post-riot H Street, NE corridor as an afflicted black social body that is only restored by the mobilization of diversity.²⁶ In other words, diversity acts as the antidote to blackness. As in the fashion system, blackness is deemed excessive and unwieldy if not disciplined, managed, contained or deployed for proper use. Despite narratives and representations that equate diversity and equality for all, the process of

²⁶ In addition to Weber’s study, there are similar analyses of urban reinvention in New Orleans (cf. Woods 2009, Thomas 2009) and New York (cf. Greenberg 2008)

(re)valuing H Street reveals the embeddedness of post-race neoliberalism in its transformation – “where a logic of seemingly [race] neutral market competition in the context of state absolutism prevails” (Weber 2010:179). In other words, the state has no bearing on dismantling systemic racial inequalities that are exacerbated by free market competition. I find Weber’s (2010) makeover metaphor useful in conceptualizing how the old “black” H Street, as a site of chaos, disorder, and pathology, required not only the rehabilitation of the physical space, but also of symbolic codes of blackness through the lens of a post-race neoliberal project. What manifests in the remaking of blackness on H Street is that the area has not been purged of symbols of blackness; instead blackness is transformed to become palatable and consumable while some of the constructed edginess remains – to add excitement.

I begin this chapter with a conversation about the emerging themes of de-valuation and re-valuation and the deployment of “diversity” to discursively produce post-riot H Street as a multicultural space, rebuilt by innovative entrepreneurial pioneers. I then discuss the ways in which creative ethnic cuisine is used as a discourse of cultural diversity on H Street and the ways in which post-race neoliberalism links culture, race, and authenticity to cuisine. As Sharon Zukin (2008) suggests, ethnic, gourmet, and/or organic restaurants in gentrifying neighborhoods provide a space for middle class urban dwellers to consume and perform difference. I end the chapter by analyzing the politics of aesthetics and belonging. In other words, I discuss how the aestheticization of space and race contributes to the structuring of H Street as both universal and exclusive in terms of belonging.

What Goes Down, Must Come Up: De-value and Re-valuing the H Street, NE Corridor

Several years of failed investment schemes plagued the H Street, NE corridor from the late 1960s until the beginning of the 21st century. As the neighborhood grew increasingly poorer and blacker, the closure of several key retail stores in the 30 years following the riots left large gaps in its streetscape. The early 2000s saw a turning point in the process of gentrification across the country – a particular form of gentrification that commodified ethnic diversity, turning it into a feature that brought added symbolic value to living there and added economic value to real estate prices. For example, Shauna, a young white woman, in her 20s, who moved from northern Virginia and in 2012 had lived in the neighborhood for a year and a half, explained that she and her husband chose to purchase a home there primarily because they believed that they could benefit financially from the increased value that would come as a result of the forthcoming streetcar – since streetcar service would presumably lead to the success of neighborhood businesses and increased property values. Furthermore, she extolled the increasing diversity that the neighborhood was experiencing as a clear virtue and a sign of positive change. Neighborhoods like the H Street NE corridor are appealing “for the capital that it may attract, never for the value it already represents to residents because of the histories, meanings, and value that it may sustain or help produce” (Dávila 2012:11).

It was not until the Williams administration, which stressed economic development through the proliferation of public-private partnerships, that changes

took hold and H Street attracted a number of investors, restaurateurs, and developers to transform the neighborhood. Rather than emphasize an expanded role for the local government, several of the programs introduced by the administration, like the Main Streets and Great Streets initiatives, largely supported entrepreneurial efforts towards the growth of small businesses. These initiatives limited the role of the local government in providing various services for its residents, in favor of free market approaches to economic development (Dávila 2004). As discussed in the previous chapter, plans for the redevelopment of H Street in the 1970s originally included significant involvement and decision-making power in the hands of local groups led by black residents and community leaders. The rebuilding of H Street was seen as an opportunity for the black community to control the money, jobs, and political power – an element that many black leaders felt was missing in D.C. (Jacoby 1969).

Organizations like Change, Inc., the Model Cities Commission, the Near Northeast Community Improvement Corporation, and the People's Involvement Corporation all requested access to local and federal funds to rebuild the tarnished corridor. Black residents living in the area wanted the corridor to be planned by black developers, built by black architects, and refreshed with local black-owned businesses, who they believed could adequately meet the needs of the predominantly working-class, black neighborhood that lacked political and economic support from the local and federal governments (Levy and Downie, Jr. 1970).

Plans to refurbish H Street, NE as a black-developed and black-operated commercial corridor was later deemed economically impractical and unfeasible.

Following the failure of lukewarm government-led efforts to revive the area, H Street, NE, de-valued as a black, poverty-stricken, blighted ghetto, was considered hopeless and stagnant by lending institutions, developers, small business owners, local government officials, and media outlets. The area was not worthy of investment or habitation. Like several neighborhoods in Brooklyn, NY that faltered during the 1970s and 1980s, the trouble with the H Street, NE corridor “was the sense of concentrated poverty and blackness in what should have been seen – and could once again be seen – as valuable” (Zukin 2008:740). By the mid-1970s, the average income of the neighborhood dropped substantially below the average for the city as a whole, and the neighborhood’s overall population declined from 75,000 in 1960 to 62,000 in 1975 (McCombs 1977a:A1). During this period, the H Street, NE corridor was littered with empty lots and boarded-up buildings, its residents and merchants lacked the social and political capital to spur growth and were deemed undesirable to loan officers who suggested that “those who seek funds to help their businesses will not be able to repay the loan” and were therefore denied the opportunity to rebuild their stores (McCombs 1977b:A12).

Three decades later, by the mid-2000s, renewed energy around the development of H Street – and the process of its re-valuation – placed particular emphasis on the corridor as a welcoming space of diversity. These efforts have not gone unrecognized. In 2011, *USA Today* (using input from geographer Richard Florida) ranked the H Street NE corridor its top U.S. neighborhood to explore. In 2012, *Forbes* magazine ranked H Street number six on its list of “America’s Hippest

Hipster Neighborhoods” (behind other popular, “diverse,” and controversial gentrified neighborhoods like the Mission District in San Francisco and the Williamsburg neighborhood in Brooklyn). Several stories about the transition of H Street suggest that early signs of gentrification – cleaning up the neighborhood, implementing various aesthetic improvements to the streets, increased presence of law enforcement – have been understandably welcomed by older black residents and store owners (Schwartzman 2006; Meyer 2007; Sullivan 2014). Despite national attention and local praise for the transition and aesthetic appeal of H Street, many of the problems that black residents faced since the 1950s – poverty, inconsistent and insufficient city services, limited retail options, lack of employment opportunities – continue to plague its longtime residents. In fact, some residents complain about the influx of restaurants and bars on H Street and limited retail options for black (working-class) customers (Young 2012a). Others see the changes on H Street as part of a strategic ploy to rid the area of black residents in favor of whites – who fled the city for the suburbs in the aftermath of the riots (Young 2012c; Schwartzmann 2006).

The charm of diversity

Current value on H Street, NE is abstractly conceived through material and symbolic representations of diversity, “hipness” or “coolness,” global cultures, and authenticity.²⁷ These discursive representations effect the resources the area receives.

²⁷ Diversity not only references racial and ethnic difference, but also exposes a previously tenuous relationship between hearing and deaf cultures. In fact, *The Washington Post* recognizes H Street as “the city’s nexus of deaf youth culture” given its proximity to Gallaudet University, a private university federally commissioned for the education of deaf and hard of hearing students (Samuels 2013). The employees of some of the newer eateries along H Street NE are required to learn basic

Resources like policing/surveillance, national media attention, and visits by political figures and celebrities increase as the area is deemed more desirable. Various actors (government, investors, residents) rely on representations of a neighborhood to direct funds and development. The importance of diversity and cultural consumption intensifies social and economic inequities by valorizing diversity in particular areas to make previously undesirable spaces popular. As Shauna, a young white newcomer in her 20s shared, when she and her husband first moved into their home, she discovered that their neighbors across the street and next door were “obviously selling drugs from their stoop.” At one point, two months after they moved in, a bullet pierced their front window and ceiling. She learned that an inhabitant of the home across the street shot his gun during a conflict with the next door neighbor over drugs and was later arrested. As time passed, she said both neighbors disappeared, and she assumed they were most likely in prison. Nevertheless, most of her residents are good, friendly neighbors, including the small number of Section 8 inhabitants, who she shared are “totally fine” with the exception of “just like one or two problem houses.” She added:

The change has been more kids of all races, first of all, and then another change has been a lot, I don’t know how many houses do we have, maybe like 30 or 40 on the block; at least 10 have been purchased, renovated – maybe not fully – fixed up and sold again or else they bought it. We have a ton of new neighbors, in a year and a half, of both races, both black and white...yeah, young couples or two roommates or something. And it’s a really good mix of black and white, probably like 60/40 African American. Everybody says “Hi” on their stoop and there’s a guy who doesn’t work, he has a shopping cart and

signs, like “thank you” and “hello,” and instructors at Gallaudet offer training to H Street business owners who are interested in catering to their growing deaf customer base.

he washes everybody's car. He'll like wash your car and you give him five bucks.

For residents like Shauna, racial (and class, to an extent) diversity directly impacts the desirability of a space in terms of its habitability. A comfortable mix of “both races” increases the value of the neighborhood. While occasional incidences of violence or criminal activity might have acted as deterrents to the increasing relocation of white newcomers to the H Street, NE corridor, such activities act as symbolic markers of black authenticity, thereby making the neighborhood “edgy.”

Diversity is conceptually inclusive rather than equal – though it creates the illusion of equality, therefore obscuring and concealing inequalities (Ahmed 2012). This capacity for illusion and the remaking of space links diversity as a discursive strategy to neoliberal urbanism since both rely on “symbolic economies” of consumerism, spectacle, architecture, heritage, tourism, real estate, and branding (Dávila 2012). Arlene Dávila indicates that these strategies “have been shown to be highly effective, not only in culturally remaking spaces but also in symbolically ‘softening’ the aggression of displacements and gentrification through developments wrapped in cultural offerings and choices that seem edgy, democratic, alternative, and even ‘authentic’” (2012:9-10). I argue that these strategies do more than “soften” the brutality of displacement, but through the depoliticization of cultural and economic difference, newcomers are able to ignore the modes and practices of inequality that existed before new residents moved in and those racial and economic disparities that remain and are exacerbated by their introduction to the space. So, the branding of H Street as anti-corporate not only adds value to the space, but this image also draws in

new residents and visitors, one of whom boasted about “a genuine H Street culture” that they do not believe “corporate America will ever take [...] over” (Meyer 2014).

Multiculturalism and diversity have also become positive characteristics for business and tourism (Hoffman 2003). This logic of difference as multiculturalism orders the political economy of the corridor. Culture and economics are not mutually exclusive categories. In fact, in these post-race neoliberal times, culture and commerce are co-constitutive. Diversity is incorporated as part of the vision for H Street’s future in the District’s official strategic plan drafted by the Office of Planning. In the early 2000s, the D.C. Office of Planning held multiple community meetings seeking input from local residents about their vision for the H Street, NE corridor. From these discussions emerged the theme “Respect for History, Heritage, and Diversity” for the purpose of land use, zoning, and development as a “shared vision” between residents and the local agency. According to the report, the neighborhood’s history, heritage, and diversity already provide “a strong foundation” for the future of the corridor (D.C. Office of Planning 2004:32). Throughout the plan, the term “unique” is used multiple times to describe the corridor’s social and physical environment. In addition to emphasizing the purported economic benefits of historic preservation and heritage tourism, “diverse” is one of the few descriptive terms also used to characterize the space.

In her account of how organizations and institutions use the language of diversity as a mode of celebration and value, Sara Ahmed (2012) argues that diversity ultimately adds value to what it has been attributed. In particular, she maintains that

diversity can be understood in market terms. Ahmed and others describe this stylization of pluralism as a Benetton mode of diversity, “in which diversity becomes an aesthetic style or way of ‘rebranding’” a particular space, institution or organization (Ahmed 2012:53). The enactment of diversity on H Street appears in different forms – on official statements, in photographs, etc. Branding efforts along the H Street, NE corridor fall in line with what Leland Saito (2009) describes as the outcome of the decline of manufacturing in U.S. cities. He speaks of the increasing importance of cultural production in the economic growth of urban centers in its ability to attract business and spur tourism.

The 2013 H Street, NE neighborhood profile brochure produced by the Washington, D.C. Economic Partnership (WDCEP), a public-private partnership that specializes in promoting business opportunities in D.C., provides general information about the corridor. In the organization’s attempt to attract business, the brochure enumerates the advantages of H Street’s cultural diversity and proclaims the street has “returned to its roots as a thriving, commercial hub, and is home to a diverse, cohesive community.” The brochure goes on to describe some of H Street’s attributes: “A revitalized visual and performing arts scene, hip bars and restaurants, art galleries, music venues and a boom of high-end condos and apartments are quickly reshaping the historic corridor” (WDCEP 2013). As Asch and Musgrove (2012) argue, public-private partnerships like WDCEP are in alignment with investors and hipsters who “highlight H Street’s early 20th century heyday as a bustling, working-class commercial strip – a history that sells well as entrepreneurs

seek to revive its commercial success by catering to a clientele interested in a gritty ‘authentic’ experience.” Instead of being overlooked, the black and working-class history of the neighborhood is embraced and commoditized. Therefore, the value of diversity is in the construction of a thriving, “cohesive,” hip, and upscale community that dissolves tensions between longtime residents and newcomers – all while respecting the history of the neighborhood.

The frustrations experienced by some longtime black residents were highlighted in a February 2012 *Washington Informer* article. The piece describes the complaints these residents have with the demographic shift of H Street. Where H Street merchants previously “catered to the tastes of Blacks, [they] now cater to others” (Young 2012b). Furthermore, some black residents resent the increasing presence of bars and restaurants along the corridor since “they are not offering any of the Black men a job” (Young 2012a). Similarly, black business owners along the corridor have expressed concerns that the changes to H Street, and the implementation of large-scale projects like the streetcar development plan, lead to “discriminatory tactics aimed at forcing minority operators out of business” in favor of white entrepreneurs (Rowley 2011). It is important to mention here that I mark the shift away from black enterprise (and aesthetics) on H Street not to memorialize the neighborhood’s glorious past, but instead to indicate the particular ways that governing, markets, and style are now organized around diversity.

H Street Main Street

Narratives about the diversity of the H Street corridor impact how bodies move through the space. These discourses shape what spaces and people are cool, safe or unsafe, and which establishments and bodies belong. To this point, the designation of H Street as a Main Street produces a fantasy of Americana with global cultures visibly present. The Main Streets program also impacts the political economy of the neighborhood by designating the area as economically viable and worthy of certain public services (trash collection, parking permits, police surveillance, etc.). Intended to “tell us who we are and who we were, and how the past has shaped us,” the program provides a clear example of the intersection of race, culture, profit, and nostalgia, as Main Streets are purportedly the universal “places of shared memory where people still come together to live, work, and play.”²⁸ As I discuss in the previous chapter, longing for shared memories of “the old days” and “the old neighborhood” requires the discursive production of a diverse, welcoming space linked to commercial and residential development.

The Main Streets program is a commercial revitalization strategy developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and coordinated by the organization’s National Main Street Center. The program is typically used in towns and small cities as a downtown development strategy. It uses historic preservation-based development strategies to revitalize commercial districts – with the goal of retaining a unique sense of place. There are currently eight Main Streets programs in Washington, D.C. In 2002, merchants on H Street received one of the city’s first

²⁸ Source: National Main Street Center: <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/>

urban Main Streets grants to develop the business corridor using the historic building stock as an asset. H Street Main Street is a non-profit organization that provides funds and technical assistance to businesses along the commercial corridor to spur retail growth and community development. It is a principal organization in the redevelopment/transformation of the H Street, NE commercial corridor. While each D.C. Main Street has its own by-laws and operating procedures, all Main Streets are led by an executive director, board of directors, and community development professionals. Unlike larger scale business improvement districts (BID), which rely on assessments at the expense of property owners, funds distributed to the H Street Main Street are managed by the Department of Small and Local Business Development (DSLBD).

The Main Streets program has four main components: 1) organization (creating a volunteer organization to assume revitalization management), 2) design (improving storefronts, building renovation and development, maintenance, and public infrastructure), 3) promotion (marketing the commercial corridor to improve its image and attract new businesses, customers, visitors and investors), 4) and economic restructuring (improve the local economy by helping existing businesses grow and attracting new businesses). The key principles that guide successful implementation of the program include first, an integration of all four elements of the four-point program. Second, use of private-public partnerships, and finally, each neighborhood must accurately assess its own assets and implement the four-point program based on community characteristics (Robertson 2004; Smith 2001). The

program does not address common urban factors like crime and homelessness and avoids issues of public safety and workforce development despite its emphasis on historic preservation and improving quality of life (Seidman 2004).

The Main Streets program hinges on commitment from the community on matters of promotion, marketing, and economic restructuring and diversification (Dane 1997). Promotion and design are two categories in which the H Street Main Street has been particularly successful and has devoted significant resources and time – from press exposure (local and national), to the H Street Festival, the H Street Main Street website, streetscapes, and signage. H Street, NE has been touted as a thriving Main Street and has been featured in numerous national publications and has won several awards. For instance, H Street Main Street won the 2013 Great American Main Street Award – success measured by vacancy rate: 30% in 2002, 2% in 2013. Anwar Saleem is a particularly effective leader because he not only grew up in the neighborhood (he witnessed the riots first-hand and his best friend was one of the few casualties during the disturbances), but he has also owned several businesses on H Street, and has a friendly rapport with the business owners and residents along the corridor. Saleem has a unique perspective as someone who grew up in the neighborhood and lived as a young adult along the corridor, and though he no longer lives there, he and his family are still very tied to the neighborhood through his work and his civic duties. Saleem can be credited for being a catalyst for the overwhelming success of the corridor. It has been under his leadership since 2006 that H Street has received an inordinate amount of local and national press attention, and his efforts

have led the annual H Street Festival to become one of the most highly populated events in the city. H Street Main Street is the primary coordinator of the annual H Street festival, which now draws a crowd of over 50,000 people each fall. Like many neighborhood festivals, the ten-block event features a wide sampling of food from food trucks and restaurants along the corridor, music, and other forms of entertainment. The festival is part of the revitalization scheme to bring more attention to the neighborhood. It features a wide array of people, music, fashion, and food. Outside the Washington Redskins football games, the H Street Festival is one of the most diverse (racially and economically) events in the area. The festival is slated to become one of the largest street festivals in the city.

An April 2012 *Washington Post* article highlighted H Street Main Street Executive Director, Anwar Saleem, and his presentation at the 2012 Main Streets Conference held in Baltimore, MD (Wax 2012b). The reporter claimed that Saleem's "Cinderella" vision of H Street took many of the audience members by surprise because their vision of D.C. was as a place that was great to visit during the day (museums, monuments, galleries) but a place to flee after dark. The Main Streets program strategy was appealing to Saleem because it had national recognition – "the most widely used and heralded method of downtown revitalization" (Robertson 2004:55) even though it was not typically used for urban centers. Despite their initial hesitation to implement the Main Street strategy on H Street because of its "rough" reputation, that National Trust for Historic Preservation worked with Saleem to

promote, redesign, and organize an economic restructuring of the H Street, NE corridor.

Saleem characterizes the neighborhood as predominantly and historically African American and believes the Main Streets program “saved” the neighborhood. He supports a program that ultimately uses a particular narrative to reimagine and package the neighborhood as “universal” and multicultural in order to attract commerce, but also wants long-time black business owners and residents to incorporate their experiences and family histories into the emerging multicultural narrative. In terms of branding efforts, Saleem has echoes some of the post-race neoliberal rhetoric by expressing his desire to sell multiculturalism and identify H Street as different than other corridors – to highlight the camaraderie of a multicultural space. “It’s a feeling. H Street has always been a warm place.”²⁹ At the same time, Saleem wants to support black entrepreneurs, but believes black business owners along the corridor need to take cues from successful white business owners. He has worked with Georgetown University to organize business summits to help grow retail on H Street by teaching small business owners how to change their business models and learn useful entrepreneurial strategies. Saleem and others have been quoted as saying that the H Street, NE corridor used to be a shopping haven for black customers (Meyer 2014). It was apparently a place where people could find anything they needed. Use of the Main Streets program infrastructure is an attempt to revisit a nostalgic past (whether it was the distant “multicultural” past, or the more

²⁹ Interview with Anwar Saleem, December 6, 2011

recent “black” past). Framing H Street as a black shopping mecca glosses over the fact that black activity concentrated on H Street because of segregationist policy that prevented them from shopping in other areas of the District.

Anwar Saleem is an interesting character whose relationship to the corridor is tied up in the complex web of race politics that post-racial neoliberalism has weaved. His ambivalent insistence on the presence of multiculturalism *and* blackness on the corridor can be framed squarely within the logic of post-race neoliberalism, yet somewhat outside of it. Saleem seems to understand and acknowledge the structural challenges black people have historically faced in their desire to live and work in the neighborhood. However, while he recognizes the strength of a multicultural aesthetic to drum up attention and business to the corridor, his belief that black business owners ought to take on the practices of successful white entrepreneurs ignores the structural barriers that limit the success of black entrepreneurs.

H Street NE: a cool, hot spot

In order to retain its new value, H Street must be constructed as an ideal space for investment – a place where people should spend their money, where difference does not threaten the seamless narrative of hip/cool authenticity, and be a haven for the (upper-) middle class away from sterile, predominantly white neighborhoods in Northwest D.C. Over the past decade, the H Street, NE corridor has experienced significant growth in entrepreneurial retail capital, or what Zukin, et. al. (2009) describe as “boutiques.” Zukin, et. al. define new entrepreneurial capital as small businesses (local chains or individually owned stores), “with a recognizably hip, chic,

or trendy atmosphere, offering innovative or value-added products (e.g., designer furniture or clothing, gourmet food) and enjoying a buzz factor in promotion, including heavy press coverage and online presence” (p. 58). I spoke to Mark Johnson, the co-owner of Hunted House, a vintage furniture store that resells unique items from local auctions and estate sales, and is located on H Street between 5th and 6th Streets. Johnson explained that he and his business partner decided to move their store from the trendy 14th/ U Street Corridor (where several other established vintage furniture stores reside) to H Street, NE in 2012. Mark shared that the rent is significantly higher on H Street, however they decided to relocate because it was “the place to be.” In their two years, business has been relatively steady, however not incredibly successful. Mark said he believes there is a solid customer base for the products he sells around the “Atlas Corridor” and his most frequent customers are nearby residents. In contrast to older retail stores, boutique businesses like Hunted House constitute a strong discourse of change and represent a shift to “social” entrepreneurialism, where business owners attempt to draw from the aesthetic tastes of the new residents.

Vestiges of H Street’s yesteryear are represented by stores like Murry’s, located on 6th and H Streets, NE. Identified on a large placard as “Your neighborhood food store,” Murry’s survived some of H Street’s most challenging times – poverty, gang violence, illegal drug distribution and abuse. While customer service is attentive and friendly, Murry’s is like many grocery stores in low-income communities that carry a small selection of fresh fruits and vegetables, and a wide

variety of packaged, processed food choices. The prices are steep compared to the nearby local grocery chain, Giant, or online grocery shopping services like Peapod. The white, one-story building, surrounded by steel gates erected to prevent shoppers and neighborhood dwellers from stealing shopping carts, does not fit the distinctive architectural aesthetic of H Street's refurbished Victorian dwellings. Like the Safeway store that inhabited the space before it, the wooden bench in front of Murry's serves as a social gathering place for older black men, and a place of solitude for others who wish to relax and read the daily newspaper.

Set to close its doors indefinitely by summer 2014, the building that houses Murry's, its accompanying parking lot, and the neighboring 5-story H Street Self-Storage facility will be demolished and replaced by a 101,000 square foot mixed-use development anchored by a Whole Foods Market. In the case of the Murry's/H Street Self Storage construction/demolition project, the designated Advisory Neighborhood Committee (ANC) worked with representatives from Insight Development (who bought the land) to "create a design that complements the historic fabric of H Street NE." In a February 2013 letter addressed to the D.C. Zoning Commission Secretary, the ANC 6A chairperson emphasized the committee's work with Insight Development, and their conditional approval of the construction if the developer agrees to preserve the corridor's "historic building fabric" and support the proposed designation of H Street as a historic district.³⁰ While ANCs play a large role in the

³⁰ This emphasis on the preservation of H Street's historic architectural aesthetic is in accordance with the H Street Strategic NE Development Plan of 2003, drafted by D.C. Office of Planning, which implemented a branding plan to H Street that divided the corridor into three distinct parts: between 2nd

neighborhood's development planning, they do not impact policy. Nevertheless, the destruction of the buildings that house Murry's and H Street Self-Storage removes an aesthetic that is "incongruous with the spirit of authenticity" the committee hopes to restore in its imaginative reconstruction of H Street's past (Zukin 1987:135).

Desire for retail businesses, like Whole Foods Market, that serve an upper-middle class customer base rather than service businesses that cater to a largely working-class, black consumer exposes a clear contradiction of neoliberalism: "its praise for entrepreneurship and individual agency in economic matters at the same time that it is characterized by the growing policing and restricting of the populations that have historically been most entrepreneurial" (Dávila 2012:49). Furthermore, changes to the commercial landscape of H Street (including the introduction of a Whole Foods Market) resemble other contemporary "revitalized" urban spaces that can be "paradoxically characterized by the simultaneous celebration of diversity on the one hand, and increasing isolation, boundaries, and separation between social groups on the other" (Walks 2006:471). This shift can be explained, in part by the infiltration of diversity discourses by neoliberal market logics, and by "the aestheticization processes which work to naturalize landscape tastes and to reify neighborhood forms and cultural difference" (Walks 2006:471). Not only are the processes of natural landscape tastes aestheticized, but also racial difference itself, in the form of "diversity." For example, the Whole Foods Market's Mid-Atlantic regional president spoke of the synergies between the Whole Foods brand and H

and 7th Streets is urban living; between 7th and 12th Streets is commercial retail; and between 12th and Bladensburg is arts and entertainment (D.C. Office of Planning 2004).

Street, NE. He specifically highlighted H Street's demographics as representing what Whole Foods values: "That neighborhood reflects a lot of what Whole Foods is about – diversity, passion for food, history. Things like that. That's what we are too. We are so in tune with that. That sense of community and pride" (O'Connell 2013). A press release announcing the new store also references the corridor's diversity as an attribute and implies that diverse communities with diverse, commodifiable cultural opportunities can benefit both old and new residents. The press release states:

The H Street Corridor is a thriving hub of diversity and cultural richness – a perfect match for Whole Foods Market's goal to support each and every community we're in... Whether you're a long-time resident or new to this neighborhood, we are proud to have the opportunity to join you and help write the next page of history. Being among the flourishing food scene, culture offerings of the arts district and the exciting mix of residents will make Whole Foods Market a great partner to those in the community.

Here we see diversity used by Whole Foods as a way to accrue value for both the Whole Foods brand and the H Street, NE corridor's brand. So, in the case of H Street, the neighborhood is both seen and aesthetically valued as a diverse space to corporate interests.

Hipster superheroes

The re-valuing of the H Street corridor as a burgeoning and inviting commercial corridor involves the acknowledgement of individual entrepreneurs for the neighborhood's renaissance. The significant role of entrepreneurs underscores the ostensible ineffectiveness and incompetence of government – signaling the need for private enterprise (Weber 2010). In other words, only hard-working entrepreneurs had the foresight and creative means to turn H Street around. In this case,

restauranteur Joe Englert and developer Jim Abdo are seen as pioneers and saviors. Englert and Abdo's projects attracted a diverse (particularly white and Asian), upscale clientele and changed the recognition of H Street from a blighted ghetto to an ideal space for urban living, commercial retail, global cuisine, culture, and entertainment. The *New York Times* described Abdo as a catalyst for the renewal of H Street due to his company's renovation of the Children's Museum, which he converted into high-end condominiums – the Landmark Lofts at Senate Square (Meyer 2007). Before becoming the Capital Children's Museum in 1979, the 140-year old collection of red brick buildings that house Senate Square was built for the Little Sisters of the Poor and Saint Joseph's Home – which closed in 1977 after 107 years as a direct result of the Hopscotch Bridge construction. Senate Square is positioned at the base of the Hopscotch Bridge, which connects to a large parking facility that was built to serve Union Station. Since its construction in 1977, the bridge has been viewed as a visual barrier between H Street and downtown neighborhoods. The bridge used to be isolated, but now as Senate Square and other condo buildings surround it, the Hopscotch Bridge acts as a connector to downtown and other neighborhoods, rather than as an obstruction. Seemingly, Abdo's initial project spurred tremendous growth, as the construction of more residential buildings continues in order to meet the growing demand for housing.

Joseph Englert has been profiled in several Washington-area publications over the past ten years for his commercial development projects in both the U Street, NW and H Street, NE corridors. Englert is known for opening quirky, eclectic

bars/lounges in underdeveloped areas. He is credited with transforming both the U Street corridor and H Street, NE into “two of the city’s hippest nightlife districts” (Sabar 2012). In fact, one 2012 article in the *Washingtonian* magazine identified Englert as the brains behind the renaming of the east end of the corridor to the “Atlas District” – named after the previously segregated movie theater that reopened as an arts and culture center in 2006 (Sabar 2012). The cover page of the article features an illustrated image of a bespectacled Englert wearing a decorative black T-shirt with the words “Stewed, Screwed, and Tattooed” fancifully adorning it. Englert’s glowing body appears to hover above the city below, as his head is level with the billowy clouds in the sky. Bright white rays emanate from behind his body and the brilliant sun shines from behind his back. Englert stands with his hands on his hips, and his chest moderately protruding. He looks like a larger-than-life, middle-aged, hipster superhero (Figure 18).



Figure 19 “Super” Joseph Englert (courtesy of *The Washingtonian*)

In this image, Englert embodies the anti-corporate image that brands H Street. Brenda Weber (2010) offers a useful connection between superheroes and neoliberalism. In her piece, Weber describes the glorification of (white) designers who have the power to enact “positive” change on the (black) social body through aesthetic means. She maintains that while their racial identity has nothing to do with their super-powers, superheroes are exceptional beings that are only summoned once governments cease to operate effectively. Weber uses the metaphor of superheroes to demonstrate how (white) designers are bestowed with the power of exceptionalism, which makes him or her “a singular being, the only person who might experience such social freedom” (p. 182). Englert’s brand of hipster entrepreneurialism reinforces the neoliberal logic that “suggests that if one person can transcend social

impediments so as to exist on a level field of achievement, all people can” (2010:182).

It is the east end, branded by the D.C. Department of Planning as the “arts and entertainment” section, that features numerous restaurants, lounges, music venues, and bars. Several of these establishments are owned by Englert, including Rock & Roll Hotel, The Pug, and the H Street Country Club. Keeping with the tradition of celebrating the corridor’s rebirth, Englert named his first restaurant (with a full-service kitchen) Dr. Granville Moore’s Brickyard (later shortened to Dr. Granville Moore’s). Dr. Granville Moore’s is a Belgian gastropub named after both a black doctor that treated patients on H Street during the mid-twentieth century and as a way to recognize the area as the former location of a brickyard. Back in 2005, when he ventured to open eight bars on H Street concurrently, Englert received heavy backlash from ANC community leaders and residents. In response, he posted a brazen note to a neighborhood listserv characterizing H Street as dangerous and undesirable, then providing his vision for new and improved corridor. He wrote: “it’s the two dozen or so homeless, urinating, yelling, screaming and guzzling malt liquor crazies populating the street corners that no one has the bravery to move along...I have a plan to clean up H St, to recruit not just restaurants, but bakers, chocolate shops, museums, flower shops and more to the strip. What have others been doing except for joining alphabet groups and simply talking, not doing?” Super-Joe exercises his social freedom to rescue H Street from the evil machinations of homeless offenders and drunken (black)

villains since ineffectual groups like the ANC and government agencies have been unable or uninterested in doing so.

Englert was recently interviewed by the *Washington City Paper* on his thoughts about the intended Whole Foods Market at 6th and H Streets. He sees the move as “sad” because for him, H Street represents a space that is unfinished, in transition, and he prefers it this way. He said that what he likes most about the corridor is that “it’s not yet baked... We don’t know what it’s going to be yet. You know what 14th Street is going to be. You know what Dupont is. You don’t know what H Street is going to be yet. Hopefully, it just remains strange and sort of uncompleted all the time, I think that would be really good.” He goes on to say that H Street has a particularly small town feel and despite his distaste for the word “diverse,” it is a great way to describe the area’s “mixed bag of people.” “It’s not smooth, slick. It’s just not brand name and perfect yet. It’s not Georgetown...it’s not really corporate” (Sidman 2013). Englert’s frustration seems to stem from his desire to prevent H Street from becoming a typical gentrification story like other D.C. neighborhoods. However, his plan to change H Street – rid the neighborhood of its dangerous elements – by incorporating amenities that do not reflect the needs and preferences of the residents.

The complexity of Englert’s desires maps perfectly onto the ambivalent struggles over the costs and benefits of gentrification. While Englert expresses his vision for an H Street that remains small and quaint in terms of its “feel” – thus resisting the encroachment of large corporate brands like Whole Foods Market – he

still supports the proliferation of amenities that appeal to households with higher income levels. Therefore, the diversity he seeks to maintain does not include an economically diverse population. Rather than acknowledging the clear racial and economic implications of supporting these amenities, he frames the issue as one that pits disingenuous corporations against an authentic, diverse, transitioning community.

In contrast to the transition of the 14th/U Street corridor (affectionately remembered as D.C.'s "Black Broadway"), which as one writer for the Root.com proclaims has been transformed as a result of "swagger-jacking," the H Street, NE corridor thrives on the discourse of diversity and the potential for a diverse, multicultural space.³¹ H Street is thought to have maintained a delicate balance "between hipsterization and its historic African American culture" while Mayor Vincent Gray emphasizes the desire to see the corridor grow, "but we want the diversity and affordability to remain intact" (Ritter 2013).

Haute culture and cuisine

Strategically, city planners and local government officials attempt to transform blighted urban spaces through art and culture as part of its symbolic

³¹ Stephen A. Crockett, Jr. describes "swagger-jacking" as a form of "cultural vulturism" of African American tradition that has taken place along the U Street corridor with the introduction of popular hipster bars and restaurants that capitalize on black culture. Spearheaded by well-known local entrepreneurs like Andy Shallal, Eric and Ian Hilton, and Joe Englert, establishments like Busboy and Poets, Marvin's, Blackbyrd (now closed), Eatonville, Patty Boom Boom, Brixton are all named after some individual or experience in black history (Crockett 2012). In response, other journalists wrote about the virtue of Washington, D.C.'s "culturally dexterous" residents and the benefits of encroaching diversity on spaces that were previously recognized as black (Cashin 2012). One *Washington Post* writer rejected Crockett's vision of "nouveau-Columbusing" – the practice of settling in a neighborhood and operating as if its history began the moment you arrived, like Christopher Columbus – and instead argues that black Washingtonians have an unrealistic view of the District as historically black and should recognize its diverse history instead of lamenting the impact of gentrification throughout the city (Yates 2012).

economy (Florida 2002; Zukin 1995; Banet-Weiser 2012). In particular, the deployment of ethnic cuisine as a form of aestheticized difference relies on “the exotic pleasures of ‘visible’ and ‘edible’ ethnicity” and emerges as “more or less neoliberal schemes engineered to ‘sell diversity’” (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2005:672). In Washington, D.C., the H Street Northeast Strategic Development Plan specifically incentivizes local entrepreneurs, including restaurateurs, to open businesses along the corridor. As Sharon Zukin (1995) argues, these restaurants are tied to “the quality of life” cities offer to middle-class residents, tourists, and corporate executives (p. 155). Some scholars have argued that ethnic cuisine has been used to both construct and blur the “boundaries between categories of people” (Douglas 1975:259) through the current discourses of diversity and multiculturalism (Gunew 2000; Kalcik 1984). Along with the popularity of farmers’ markets, ethnic cuisine acts as a metonym of difference and authenticity. The H Street, NE corridor is sprinkled with restaurants selling the trappings of a global village: Belgian mussels, Taiwanese ramen noodles, Lebanese falafels, German ales, Ethiopian injera – plus countless hipster bars, coffee shops, and bakeries. Unlike commercially constructed forms of ethnicity that represent diversity through ethnic-themed neighborhoods and their accompanying cuisines (e.g., “Little Italy” or “Little Ethiopia,” “Greektown,” “Chinatown,” etc.), the H Street, NE corridor produces diversity and authenticity through “creative-food” establishments that provide variations of local, organic, seasonal, ethnic, and/or fusion cuisine. Geographer Richard Florida’s best-selling book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) describes approaches for remaking urban

spaces as U.S. and Canadian cities introduced urban planning practices that targeted the addition of a “creative workforce.” His theory about the “rise of the creative class” posits that a “new” upwardly mobile class will work and reside in places that have strong creative and arts industries, as well as racial/ethnic diversity, café culture, art districts, unique architecture, and a strong and vibrant nightlife. While Florida has been hired to consult with American and Canadian city planners in their rebranding efforts, his neoliberal approach to urban design and planning focuses on the creativity of individual “entrepreneurs” and absolves the government of responsibilities to support wage-earners in an economic environment “that increasingly privileges self-employed freelance labor” (Banet-Weiser 2012:109). The discourse of “creativity” works in alignment with “diversity” and provides a charming backdrop for cultural consumption. Some narratives reinforce local discourses on shopping and dining that frame the consumer as an independent and active agent. These discourses, Arlene Dávila argues, “further a romanticized view of consumption and consumption sites as democratic spaces that are open to everyone, whether one comes to shop, browse, or hang out” (2012:24). Adopting this view only hampers an investigation of the “existing social inequalities that are actively reproduced in these spaces” (2012:24).

While many of the restaurants specialize in high-end ethnic cuisine, some like Little Miss Whiskey’s Golden Dollar, The Pug, Palace of Wonders/Red and Black, structure their menus and décor around whimsical themes. In March 2012, I joined a walking tour of the H Street Corridor that included 17 concierges from Washington D.C.-area hotels. The concierges organized the visit in order to learn more about the

area so they can be knowledgeable about where to send hotel guests. The H Street Main Street Executive Director, Anwar Saleem, acted as our tour guide. We visited restaurants like the now-defunct TruOrleans, which was started by three friends who wanted to provide “authentic” New Orleans Cajun cuisine. The chef and recipes originated from New Orleans and the interior décor included Mardi Gras beads and masks - reinforcing a popular narrative of New Orleans as a fun place to visit and party. Restaurants like Boundary Road are an example of trendy, new eateries that provide their customers with a casual and upscale dining experience. Like other hipster establishments, Boundary Road’s décor is minimal, rustic, and decidedly “urban” with exposed brick and communal tables, while the restaurant features local, organic food with an extensive and exotic wine and beer selection.

Smith Commons, a three-story restaurant-lounge that specializes in craft beers provides a similar casual-upscale décor with exposed brick, chalkboard menus, wood paneling, a fireplace, and dim lighting. The name “Smith Commons” refers to the owner’s, Bailey Real Estate Holdings, cheeky idea to use a common surname – Smith – that would be easy to remember. “Commons” references the commoner who comes to dine in their restaurant. Other establishments like Biergarten Haus, a German-themed beer house, invite a young crowd for an authentic German experience. They provide real Oktoberfest beers made in Munich and open at off-peak hours during popular European sporting events like the World Cup. Here, an ethnic German identity is folded into the ever-expanding multicultural story of H Street.

Cuisine along the H Street, NE corridor operates as one of the discourses of cultural diversity. Restaurants like Toki Underground and Ethiopic, while wildly different in terms of interior décor and style, provide “authentic” ethnic cuisine (Taiwanese and Ethiopian, respectively) that underscores the ways in which culture is deployed to increase capital. Toki Underground, which is ironically located on the top floor of a two-story building, above The Pug bar, is a particularly popular destination for residents, tourists, and celebrity chefs. The concept of Toki Underground, as described by its chef-owner Erik Bruner-Yang, is “everything I love about being Taiwanese. Everything I love about Asian culture, food, art, and fashion” (Kirylo 2011).

Like traditional ramen restaurants in Taiwan, the only other menu option besides ramen noodle bowls (and dessert) is a selection of Chinese dumplings prepared in a variety of ways. It is not uncommon to experience a two-hour wait time for two seats on a weekday evening. Toki Underground has very limited seating options (25 seats) and like most of the newer restaurants along the corridor, the host uses new technology (iPad) to make reservations, organize seating, and store customers’ mobile phone numbers so they can text them when a seat is available. Diners are made to sit on wooden stools and eat on an elevated glass and wooden bar while gazing at the decorative walls covered in colorful graffiti, mounted skateboards, and Taiwanese toy figurines encased in glass. The tiny kitchen is fully exposed, and diners can watch the chefs prepare each meal.

Similar to sidewalk seating options, which John Jackson (2005) describes as the deliberate performance of middle-classness in Harlem, several of H Street's newer restaurants, coffee shops, and cafés feature rooftop patios and second floor dining where customers can look down to those passing by on the sidewalk below. Jackson writes that the configuration of the sidewalks in front of urban restaurants "is a rendition of public space with recognizable middle-class implications – and it signals, from afar, just who belongs and who does not" (p. 53). Establishments like Toki Underground provide "presentational alternatives" and act as a "deliberate rejoinder" (Jackson 2005:54) to the Chinese carryouts and convenience stores along H Street that personify the space prior to its transition. Where Toki Underground and other newer restaurants offer an open, but intimate private space to its customers away from the bustle of the street, the older carryouts offer sterile environments where shopkeepers and their employees serve customers from behind bulletproof glass.

Race and whit(en)ing on H Street

While many of the restaurants, bars, and coffee shops along the H Street, NE corridor represent a distinctive culturally diverse collection, culinary signifiers of blackness remain. One notable example is the Horace and Dickie's Carryout, an eatery positioned along the H Street, NE corridor on 12th Street. Housed in a tiny one-story white concrete structure with a bright blue trim and a small, blue, removable sign with the name of the business, identification of its culinary specialties (seafood and chicken), and its telephone number – the design of the building complies with most of the unpopular structures built in the 1980s and 1990s along H Street, in

clear aesthetic contrast with the two- and three-story Victorian brick rowhouse-style buildings that populate the corridor.³² The carryout has one front window that is covered by steel security bars painted blue to match the blue trim surrounding the building. Inside, an illuminated menu sits on the wall behind the cashier and lists no more than fifteen items, while the space could probably accommodate as many as fifteen people at one time.



Figure 20 Horace and Dickie’s Carryout (photo by Brandi T. Summers)

In February 2013, *The Washington Post* Food section featured an article about fried whiting fish fillets, a popular Washingtonian comfort food that is most notably prepared at Horace and Dickie’s. The article highlighted the historical importance of

³² Current plans to redevelop the H Street corridor include the preservation of H Street’s “historic building fabric,” as Advisory Neighborhood Commission 6A Chairman David Holmes wrote to the Secretary of the D.C. Zoning Commission in February 2003. H Street’s development as a “vibrant” corridor relies on its “distinctive collection of historic commercial buildings that reflect that history of the people that lived, worked, and shopped there” (D.C. Office of Planning 2004:19).

fish(ing), specifically fried whiting fish, to black communities across the country. Whiting, the inexpensive, bland fish (also known as “lake trout” in Baltimore), had particular significance in the mid-1970s when Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam opened popular fish houses in Harlem and Washington, D.C. (Carman 2013). While most mainstream and upscale restaurant chefs are unfamiliar with whiting, the fish remains popular amongst black Washingtonians, and Horace and Dickie’s, which was featured on the popular Travel Channel program, *Man vs. Food*, continues to be a favorite neighborhood jaunt for longtime, new residents and visitors to the H Street, NE corridor.

The popularity and present-day success of Horace and Dickie’s, recognized immediately by the long line that spills out onto the street during the lunch and dinner rushes, demonstrates the ways in which food remains a crucial part of the remaking and reimagining of H Street – yet the carryout’s prominence in this space is now different than in the past. In the article, black Washingtonians share stories about their love of Horace and Dickie’s and how the food evoked positive recollections of family and community in the 1990s. Fried whiting sandwiches from the carryout conjure memories “of past times.” The narrative provided by the *Washington Post*, adds context to the history of Horace and Dickie’s as well as ties its notable links to black Americans and fishing during slavery. The story also creates a palpable narrative that adds cultural value to the presence of eatery along the historic corridor as it offers legitimacy to an establishment that could be otherwise recognized as a symbol of H Street’s unpleasant, recent past.

Horace & Dickie's opened in 1990, at a time when the culinary signifiers of blackness gestured towards segregation and urban blight. Fried fish, and other traditional comfort or "soul" food entrees, were historically essential to the black American community as they migrated from the South. The preparation and consumption of soul food was symbolically linked to the impropriety of blackness, accentuated by the heaviness, greasiness, and unrefined nature of the food, and as a result, the eating habits of black southerners "was naturalized as a matter of racial difference," and in contrast to white southern food choices, was "used as explanation and justification for segregation" (Bégin 2011:128). As cultural historian Camille Bégin writes, the restoration of southern-style cuisine after the Great Migration "took place in the northern and midwestern black metropolis, itself a crucial site of cultural and sensory identity building for the modern and urban African-American community" (2011:138). Fried whiting, particularly in Washington, D.C., has operated as "a symbol of the racial divide that has defined the city for decades" (Carman 2013). Now, culinary signifiers of blackness are indicative of diversity/multiculturalism where blackness is not located in terms of the social arrangements of race and practices of blackness but is transformed into a normative multicultural idea.

This transition is similar to what John Jackson identifies as a "racioscape," which he says "marks the color/culture compressions that pull far-flung corners of the African diaspora into greater and greater everyday contact" and speaks to "the inescapably non-*flow*like constancy of racial inequality as an effective analytical

template for understanding globality, diasporic relations, and transnational interconnections in the past, present, and foreseeable future” (p. 56). The success of popular establishments like Sidamo Coffee and Tea, which opened in 2006, Ethiopic in 2010, and the newest addition, Addis Ethiopian Restaurant which opened in 2014 by Ethiopian immigrants, who, according to their website, “came here in search of the American dream to become an entrepreneur” – embodying the ideal neoliberal enterprising subject – are offered as ideal examples of “freedom and opportunity” bestowed upon entrepreneurs along the corridor. The presence of these businesses signals a link between culture and diversity, fairness, and representation (Melamed 2006:19).

Sidamo Coffee and Tea is a small, quaint shop on the western edge of H Street, owned by husband and wife team, Kenfe Bellay and Yalemzwed Desta. The shop, named after an Ethiopian province known for coffee, not only features coffee blends from Ethiopia, but from several other countries in Africa as well. The causal space has five small round tables along the wall and one high-top table in front of the large bay windows with a perfect view of H Street, NE and 5th Street, NE. Sidamo treats its customers with a slice of Ethiopian culture each Sunday at 2:00pm when the shop owners perform a 30-minute traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony.

Yalemzwed Desta, or her sister, Yenu Desta, dresses in traditional garb and lays a green carpet on the sidewalk in front of the shop. Desta then roasts coffee beans over a propane flame while burning incense. Once the roasting process is complete, Desta walks around the shop for customers to smell the aroma. The beans are then ground

and added to boiling water to make a particularly strong brew. Small cups of the fresh coffee are passed out to customers, along with a small batch of popcorn.

Ethiopic opened in 2010 by another Ethiopian husband-and-wife team who were dissatisfied with the choices of Ethiopian cuisine in the District. The building where the restaurant resides was a former drug rehabilitation center. The space is beautifully decorated with Ethiopian paintings and sculptures, and columns adorned with letters of the Ethiopian alphabet. It is the marketability of diversity as multiculturalism that encourages particular expressions of culture in spaces like restaurants and coffee shops. In her discussion about neoliberalism's capacity to deploy multiculturalism, Jodi Melamed (2006) writes that neoliberal policy "engenders new racial subjects, as it creates and distinguishes between newly privileged and stigmatized collectivities," like Ethiopians, who have had a long and distinct history in Washington, D.C.³³ Under these conditions, we see the expansion of black difference from being tethered to black Americanness.

One of the newest additions to H Street, slated to open sometime 2014, is the H Street Organic Market, which will be located in a 3,000 square foot facility on the northwest side of H Street, NE at 8th Street, NE. The market was originally named Chez Hareg Organic Market after Hareg Messert, an Ethiopian native and former Ritz-Carlton pastry chef who distributes her vegan baked goods to regional Whole Foods Market's and who recently inked a deal with Costco Wholesale to distribute

³³ Shelly Habecker (2012) writes about the resistance of some Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants to racialization and their decision to identify themselves as culturally (and sometimes racially) distinct from black Americans, "by situating themselves outside of the American racial hierarchy" (1216).

her vegan cookies (Cooper 2013). Her cousin, George Ayele, owner of the H Street space, decided to change the store's name because Messert is not yet prepared to carry her popular cookies and pastries at the new location. Replacing the former Z-Mart dollar store, the market received an \$85,000 Great Streets Initiative program grant from the office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) to reconstruct the building.³⁴ The market will feature products from local farmers who participate in H Street NE's weekly farmer's market (Kaufman 2014). While the organic market is a stark visual contrast to the surrounding Chinese carryout, liquor stores, and check cashing facilities, it caters to new (overwhelmingly white) residents. The excitement around the opening of the H Street Organic Market³⁵ demonstrates the marketability of diversity and authenticity in contrast to Disneyfication and Walmartization of America, where both are deployed as a way to encourage "real estate developers to reinvest and [make] urban living marketable" (Zukin 2008:725). The H Street Organic Market operates as both a farmers' market and an ethnic food store – therefore fulfilling the need for "nostalgia for 'authentic'

³⁴ Source: <http://greatstreets.dc.gov/release/mayor-vincent-c-gray-and-deputy-mayor-planning-and-economic-development-victor-l-hoskins>. In the press release, Deputy Mayor Victor Hoskins listed H Street Organic Market (Chez Hareg) as "a market that will feature locally grown and sustainable products with weekly opportunities for shoppers to learn about healthier cooking techniques and new ways to use locally grown and seasonal goods." Other grant recipients on H Street NE included Cirque de Rouge – a modern art studio; Creative Hands Massage – a skin care, massage, and physical therapy business; RowHouse Company – an art supply store focusing on green, non-toxic children's art supplies; and Integrity Self MovementArts – a movement arts studio. Awarding these small businesses with lucrative grants follows a pattern of praise for new stores and restaurants by elected officials and community development groups that supports the logic of the establishments as "signs of capital reinvestment, enabling them to proclaim an urban "renaissance" or at least to hope for a new period of growth" (Zukin et al 2009:49).

³⁵ Several local blogs and websites like washingtoncitypaper.com, frozentropics.com, and elevationmediadc.com wrote about their enthusiasm for the H Street Organic Market to join the neighborhood, finally offering fresh, local, organic food choices to residents everyday of the week so they would not have to wait until the Saturday morning farmers' market.

neighborhoods,” which Sharon Zukin calls “traditional social spaces outside the standardized realm of mass consumption” (2008:736). Even with plans to introduce a Whole Foods Market to the corridor, the H Street Market’s firm identity as a small, local, organic market owned by Ethiopian immigrants works synergistically with the organic superstore, despite their direct competition for customers because, as Zukin argues “it is this synergy that creates the meaning of space as a whole as a site of authentic cultural consumption” (2008:737).

The owners of Sidamo, Ethiopic, Addis Ethiopian Restaurant, and the H Street Organic Market are all examples of what Herman Gray (2013) calls “self-crafting entrepreneurial subjects,” those “whose racial difference is the source of brand value celebrated and marketed as diversity; [subjects] whose very visibility and recognition at the level of representation affirms a freedom realized by applying a market calculus to social relations” (p. 771). H Street’s Ethiopian restaurants/coffeeshop conform to a preferred aesthetic that places recognizable Ethiopian cultural symbols on display for the enjoyment of their customers. Their presence and activities add to the “authentic” diversity of the corridor while working in concert with recognizably black American establishments like Horace and Dickie’s to convey an interest and acceptance of certain forms and amounts of blackness.

*Hipster Economics and the Aesthetic Politics of Belonging*³⁶

³⁶ My use of the term hipster borrows from Bjørn Schiermer (2013) who characterizes hipsters as “young, white and middle class, typically between 20 and 35 years old.” They are specifically known for gentrifying “former ‘popular’, working-class, ethnic or ‘exotic’ neighbourhoods [sic] in the big Western cities” (p. 170). Although I recognize that hipsters are not universally white, the use of labels like “blipsters” to signify “black hipsters” signals a distinction between black people who perform hipsterism and authentic (white) hipsters.

In a May 2014 piece on the *Al Jazeera* website, writer Sarah Kendzior lamented the encroachment of “hipster economics” on America’s urban landscapes. She defines hipster economics by the practice of urban decay becoming “a set piece to be remodeled or romanticized” (Kendzior 2014). Kendzior argues that gentrifying hipsters view poverty through the lens of aesthetics and therefore concentrate on aesthetics rather than people since “people, to them, are aesthetics.” If people are aestheticized, so are class relations, which are systematically “depoliticized and reduced to questions of lifestyle choices, consumption patterns, visual pleasures and ‘good taste’” (Pow 2009:373). The process of gentrification exposes how public spaces become privatized by (white) middle-class interests, and the transformation of urban space demarcates the boundaries of who belongs and who does not (Jackson 2005). John Jackson invokes Lefebvre’s concept of qualified spaces that are unclaimed by market forces in his discussion of the privatization of public space. He says that privatization

is not solely about how spaces symbolize (as black or white, rich or poor); it is also a rehearsal of social belonging tethered to people’s everyday practices and senses of self. To look out onto one’s public sphere and see what was another abandoned storefront (open space for all, especially the least successful) alchemized into a gourmet bakery for a growing middle class, is a different order of displacement entirely, a kind of psychological and semiotic displacement from the sites of one’s own, formerly less-fettered, everyday pedestrianism” (2005:55).

With the introduction of yoga studios, bicycle shops, hookah bars, tiny art galleries and vintage/antique furniture stores, on H Street, fewer and fewer shops speak to, serve, and reflect the everyday needs poor and working-class. Although Zukin, et. al.

(2009) suggest that boutique businesses arrive in gentrifying urban space as part of an emerging market that institutionalizes the consumption practices of more affluent and educated individuals, Jackson makes a much more nuanced argument about the privatization of public space and how public spaces obtain private, personal, and political meaning for residents. Nevertheless, it is in these spaces that market-driven consumption is depoliticized in favor of the aesthetics of “cool” – and where the streets become “little more than public playground for the authenticities monopolized by middle-class consumerism” (Jackson 2005:55). Furthermore, advancing neoliberal logic, the state should no longer be involved in the creation and management of change for individuals and spaces. Instead, the state’s role is to enforce neoliberal policy and surveillance (in Washington, D.C., through zoning codes, law enforcement, entrepreneurial retail grants, etc.).

H Street and “quality-of-life” aesthetics

All around D.C. there are examples of race, culture, and class clashes over the usage and aesthetics of space. In another riot corridor neighborhood, the Shaw district, new and old residents battled over the development of a multi-million dollar mixed-use affordable housing project. The chair of the local ANC and other residents spoke out against the building’s “unattractive” appearance, claiming that it resembled affordable housing built during the 1970s and 1980s – when the neighborhood was overwhelmingly black. In fact, all of the complaints directed at the development were concerned with “design aesthetics, building amenities and the threat that a 100 percent affordable housing unit posed to the community” (Ross 2013:15). Others saw

the project as an opportunity for poorer residents to achieve middle class status and “to ensure racial and social equity as the city prospers” (Ross 2013:16). One anonymous city official who supported construction of the building, and who grew up in Washington D.C., lamented the local government policies that have decimated so much of the black history and culture that previously thrived in the District. He says:

White liberals in D.C. don’t give a shit about social services because they’re not of that element. White liberals in D.C. are more about quality-of-life issues as it relates to the lifestyle they want to have. It is bike lanes. It is dog parks. It is about the state-of-the-art swimming facilities. It is about recreation centers. Capital Bikeshare. Car2Go. Streetcars. It’s about a way of life. Black folks want this stuff, they’re just not as passionate about it” (Ross 2013:16).

The official describes the difference between “white liberalism” and “black liberalism,” where black liberalism involves an investment in strategies that help the poor move towards the middle-class and ensure racial and economic parity. “White liberalism” involves lifestyle choices.

The policing of “quality-of-life” relates to the notion that whites are more interested in improvements to lifestyle (bike lanes, farmer’s markets) and blacks want equitable social and economic opportunities. While displacement, through a loss of access, is certainly taking place on H Street, I argue here that it is this exact tension between the polar class/race/lifestyles that spurs attraction to the area. According to Anwar Saleem, in the mid- and late-twentieth century, H Street used to be a destination where the mostly black shoppers could find basic everyday items and services. Revitalization efforts have led to the introduction of urban amenities and cultural alcoves that attract a different class of customers and tourists. This distinction between presumed black and white interests also highlights struggles over

entitlement between the new crop of residents, who have considerable education and access to resources and have invested their time and energy into the remodeling of the area, versus the old guard, who experienced the neighborhood's most challenging periods when they lacked adequate financial support from the government and other entities. Accordingly, lower-income black residents identify upscale retail landscapes with "white interests" and because they are interested in the benefits of improved services, these residents "resent the implication that white newcomers are responsible for the improvements" (Zukin, et. al. 2009:48)

Similarly, in 2006, the tense class and race dynamics of H Street were played out publicly over the opening of a Cluck-U Chicken franchise restaurant. The Cluck-U Chicken's owner, Bernard Gibson, dreamed of opening the restaurant on H Street because it was where his grandparents lived for several years (Schwartzman 2006). After receiving a permit for a sit-down restaurant, he opened Cluck-U on the 1100 block of H Street, NE. Challenges to Cluck-U came primarily from the neighborhood ANC whose commissioners argued that the restaurant was simply another fast-food establishment and was unwelcome along a corridor that was making great strides to raise its standards and transition from "a strip trying to shed its bedraggled past" to becoming "a gleaming urban paradise" (Schwartzman 2006). The ANC justified their challenge by suggesting their stance against Cluck-U was supported by zoning code. In this case, the ANC argued that a fast-food restaurant does not qualify as a sit-down restaurant, and therefore does not belong on the corridor.

In *Go-Go Live*, Natalie Hopkinson writes about her experience at Cluck-U Chicken and her dismay at the ANC's challenge to a business "so immaculately kept and [one that] offered chinaware and table service for patrons" (2012:95). While most of the ANC commissioners saw Cluck-U as a blemish to the redevelopment efforts on H Street, according to *The Washington Post*, one commissioner seemed discouraged that the efforts to close Cluck-U would further alienate longtime residents since the corridor needed to maintain its economic diversity by preserving establishments that were "welcoming and cheap for those who don't have a lot of money" (Schwartzman 2006). Some residents and activists, including H Street Main Street Executive Director Anwar Saleem, saw the challenge as further evidence of H Street becoming an unwelcome place for black patrons and black-owned businesses. Efforts by the ANC to challenge the presence of Cluck-U furthers a neoliberal logic in their attempt to improve quality of life along the corridor by admonishing fast-food franchises in favor of unique, appropriate entrepreneurial ventures. In other words, the ANC presents a clear anti-corporate, anti-chain restaurant stance, and praise for the healthy, local, organic food businesses offering an upscale environment that came to populate the corridor over the next several years.

Fast-food restaurants in urban environments are most prevalent in predominantly black and poor neighborhoods where "it is easier to get fried chicken than a fresh apple" (Brownell and Battle Horgen 2003:37). In the 1980s and 1990s, the corridor was littered with inexpensive fast-food restaurants due to its declining business climate, high crime rate, and inferior public services. The success of local

and national fast-food chains along the corridor was in part due to the fact that “chicken and fish fast food operations usually capture high sales in black neighborhoods, especially if the units are located in proximity to a major health service, drug store, supermarket, or liquor store” (Melaniphy 1992:83). Therefore, the visible presence of fast-food restaurants along the corridor signaled a clear association with the neighborhood as poor and black since such neighborhood features aesthetically align with race and class. Although Cluck-U provided the accouterments of a family-friendly, clean and neat dining experience, that the establishment was hailed as a fast food restaurant enabled the ANC to justify their objections using government regulations, thus exposing class-specific markings of space that define the boundaries of belonging on H Street.

More recently in 2012, *The Washington Post* published an article discussing the presence of roll-down steel security gates on the H Street, NE corridor as a relic of the neighborhood’s past in the face of a rapidly gentrifying space. Most of the current businesses along H Street reside in conjoined Victorian-era buildings that were formerly residences. In the early 20th century, several homes were remodeled to look less residential in order to accommodate small stores (adding new façades and shop front windows). The standard red brick of the older buildings was replaced with a sampling of textured brick in hues from deep red to tan, at the turn of the 19th century and have, since then, been amended with various colors like blue, black, green, and lavender. Decorative details were simplified and usually borrowed from the classical architectural norms. Contemporary shop fronts featured large plate glass

windows that more effectively display items within. Local government officials and residents speak of their desire to maintain consistency with the historical character and design of the neighborhood, like ANC6A's efforts to have development companies like Insight (who will oversee the destruction of Murry's grocery store and the H Street Storage facility) adhere to the corridor's "historic building fabric." On the other hand, several of the retail businesses that previously served long-term residents before the new development, like check cashing facilities, carryout eateries, discount stores, and liquor stores are primarily secured by both steel security gates on the exterior and bullet-proof glass on the interior, creating a discordant image of the corridor's revised aesthetic vision.

The corridor is also littered with vacant storefronts that are protected by steel security gates. H Street Main Street Executive Director Anwar Saleem wants to rid the corridor of the menacing gates and bulletproof glass that, for him, are aesthetic symbols of H Street's violent past and in direct contrast to the area's transformation and prosperous future (Wax 2012b). Nevertheless, some business owners, many of whom are African and Asian immigrants, are afraid to remove the doors, also known in the security industry as "riot architecture," for fear of robberies and/or violent break-ins. Both security measures make the shopkeepers "feel safe." For these business owners, the gates operate as a symbol of security. They must be taught to undo race and the racial implications of the gates. The new shopkeepers have not arrived with the same baggage or experience with requiring these symbols of security

since their customers have disposable income. The gates are visual and auditory markers that connect to the meaning of the space.

Anwar told me that he believes businesses applying for local government retail grants should be prohibited from utilizing the steel security gates. The local government's primary role is to enhance the entrepreneurial aspects of H Street's transition. Saleem's suggestion that the local government agency provide grants to entrepreneurs along the corridor revises the role of the state as a caregiver to a body of management in which the state dictates the aesthetic boundaries of urban space. In other words, the local government decides which individuals to reward and which to punish based on the role aesthetics play in organizing and assigning value, designating worthiness, and packaging forms of enterprise.

The trouble with Saleem's logic of barring businesses with steel gates from receiving government funds is not about the legitimacy of the business owners' fears. Original need for the gates arose from the deplorable economic and social conditions of the neighborhood following the 1968 riots, when theft and vandalizing reached significantly high levels. City officials, business owners, policy makers, and developers addressed these conditions by using urban revitalization as a strategy – leading to gentrification – rather than fostering equitable development.³⁷ Both crime and fear came to be linked to black bodies where the process of criminalizing black bodies (as the primary offenders, not victims of crime) and produced a fear of black

³⁷ Equitable development stands in contrast to gentrification since it involves the development and preservation of “economically and socially diverse communities that are stable over the long term, through means that generate a minimum of transition costs that fall unfairly on lower income residents” (Kennedy and Leonard:2001:4).

bodies. The result was the implementation of “riot architecture” in a primarily lower income black community. Anwar is implicated in the local government’s plans to shift not only the physical terrain but also the social reputation of the area. Ridding businesses of “riot architecture” does not delink blackness from fear or criminality, but it does absolve the state from taking responsibility for perpetuating systemic racial inequalities by disengaging racial inequality from history and social relations of power. Despite his support of black businesses and residents and his desire to maintain a culturally diverse neighborhood, Saleem’s promotion of post-race neoliberal strategies to create an equivalent playing field only reinforce the state’s absolution in responsibility for maintaining social and economic inequities.

The corner: Eighth and H Streets, NE

The concept of diversity – and its role in the reimagining of H Street – is not necessarily rooted in assorted demographic representation, but a discourse of diversity. Blackness is a necessary component of diversity – it indicates our successful transition into a post-racial social climate – and therefore black bodies must be present to add to this diverse space. For H Street, the 8th and H intersection is an important site for the corralling of blackness – managing the excess of blackness – in a specific location. The intersection served as an important juncture from the early- to mid-twentieth century when the streetcar was originally in service, which led to the commercial cluster that developed at the corner of 8th and H Streets (D.C. Office of Planning 2004:5). The intersection is now the city’s highest bus transfer point – the number one bus transfer location in the District, and is a central gathering

place for lower-middle class and working-class black city dwellers. The corner is currently flanked by several businesses that presumably appeal to working-class visitors like a drug store, athletic shoe store, a 7-11 convenience store, a McDonald's restaurant, a Chinese carryout, a liquor store, and a check cashing facility. Because the intersection is known for its high volume of black bus riders that travel across the river to Anacostia, blackness can be contained on this corner as the riders socialize and wait for their transit. There are no benches on H Street besides the trolley and bus depots, but on 8th at H Street, there is a collection of benches on each side of the street, spatially restricting riders to the corner. With the shifting economic conditions of the corridor catering to more affluent patrons, these black bodies are not invited to stay for long, only to share the space momentarily.



Figure 20 Retail on the northwest side of H Street at 8th Street (photo by Brandi T. Summers)

In order for the narrative of diversity and inclusion on H Street to survive and thrive (for developers, planners, and local government agencies to attract more attention to the corridor), blackness – as a form of difference and variable of multiculturalism – must be explicitly visible. The containment of black presence at the 8th and H intersection makes blackness less intimidating since the representation of blackness is intimately reduced to the body. Herman Gray argues that trouble arises when this difference “aligns with the history of subordination and collective struggles for freedom, and becomes the basis for attachment to indecipherable others desirous of social justice” (2013:780). Consistent with post-race neoliberal logic of diversity and difference, “race is visible but emptied, made an exception, not the matter. In particular, because blackness is everywhere visible, it is unremarkable, pervasive, and, in the face of differently valued and desirable immigrants of color (Asian high-tech workers and undocumented Mexicans [and Ethiopian shopkeepers]) perhaps even pedestrian” (Gray 2013:780-781). Furthermore, as Sharon Zukin notes, social diversity is managed through the explicit visual representation of different racial and ethnic groups. This acknowledgement can reflect on a visual recognition of “past” oppression since “establishing a visual order of cultural hegemony seems to equalize by identifying and making formerly ‘invisible’ social groups visible” (1995:274). The presence of black bodies congregating around 8th and H do not necessarily point to the social and economic disparities between the longtime black residents and newer white residents who inhabit the neighborhood, but instead shows

evidence of H Street as a welcoming, inviting space for all – while maintaining a modicum of edginess and perceived danger.

This discursive tethering of blackness to the corner of 8th and H is also exemplified by critiques of those moments when blackness spills out beyond the corner's designated borders. For instance, reports of a shooting that took place on December 21, 2012, in front of the DTLR clothing store at 9th and H Streets after the release of Nike's newest Air Jordan basketball shoes brought about dozens of implicit and explicit online comments about blackness on H Street. The incident was reported on several local websites and blogs, as well as in the *Washington City Paper*. Photographs accompanying the story showed a large crowd of young black men and women queuing up as police officers erected tape along the perimeter of the building.



Figure 22 Aftermath of shooting at 9th and H Street, NE (courtesy of dcist.com)

On the website dcist.com, several of the comments posted by viewers expressed their dismay that such an event could take place in 2012, and is instead reminiscent of H Street in the 1980s and 1990s. One commenter, “cardozomite” said: “I bet someone was playing Go-Go Music, too.” Others questioned and analyzed black “culture” and asked why black people are so fixated with basketball shoes and “do they spend as much on business shoes or clothing?” This practice of indexing or coding race of this sort “rearranges the importance of racism and pitches its reality toward some group dysfunction” (Davis 2007:351). These critiques of the “culture” of blackness as irrational and irresponsible are attempts to explain why black people “choose” to purchase needless accessories rather than adorn themselves with apparel that enables them to take on the appearance of productive, laboring citizens. Indeed, this view of the limits of black culture illustrates the myth of American exceptionalism under capitalism as it highlights the idea that any individual can choose to shed culture and cultural practices that limit their access to the American Dream. Rather than interrogating the social and economic conditions that encourage multi-billion dollar global brands like Nike and the National Basketball Association (NBA) to target young, working-class and poor people of color to purchase their goods by idealizing (proximity to) basketball as a way to transcend poverty and achieve wealth and fame, the post-race neoliberal logic invites spectators to harp on the outdated ills of black culture.

In comparison to the diversity of races and classes found at the eastern and western ends of the H Street, NE corridor, the intersection of 8th and H Streets, NE is

noticeably less heterogeneous providing clear markers of working-classness and poverty. Prior to the closing of the D.C. Economic Security Administration and Family Services Administration offices in 2013, the space that stretched between 6th and 8th Streets, NE was often inhabited by scores of black people, both young and old, perched outside the building, most likely waiting to be seen by agency representatives who provide family care and financial aid for poor D.C. residents. On most days, the dwellers, standing casually, looked disheveled. Women stood alongside their children, chiding them stringently. Young black women in long, colorful weaves, platform shoes, decorated nails, and knock-off designer bags would stroll up and down the street as young black men standing near the bus transfer stops would call out to them.

The intersection of 8th and H Streets, NE has had a particularly sordid history. As described in the previous chapter, attempts to relieve this intersection from its reputation as the gathering place of the “8th and H Crew” came in the form of several plans for commercial redevelopment. The H Street Connection shopping center that begins at the southeast corner of 8th and H opened in 1987, at that time was heralded as the centerpiece of redevelopment efforts on H Street. Its grand opening brought Mayor Barry, city council members and two marching bands, in part to celebrate the arrival of a Dart Drug store built on the site where Catherine Fuller was brutally murdered in 1984, but also to mark a turning point in the transition of the neighborhood (Marcus 1987). Most recently, the D.C. zoning commission has approved plans to demolish the one-story, suburban-style shopping center and build

an eight-story, mixed-use residential and commercial property in its stead. Various reader comments on blogs that discuss the redevelopment of the shopping center include those from self-described area residents who still avoid walking past 8th Street “due to the large numbers of people who hang out on the corners” and others who avoid taking the bus altogether because the intersection is “just too sketchy, especially at night.”³⁸ Though unsaid, race, in this way, operates as a cultural scheme for the production of difference (and danger), of which blackness is the chief signifier. At the 8th and H intersection, the fear of looming, “sketchy” black men and women on a busy street corner surrounded by commercial establishments, produces blackness, like fear, as an aesthetic category (Zukin 1995:42). Although Sharon Zukin argues that race and ethnicity survive “on the politics of fear by requiring people to keep their distance from certain aesthetic markers” like baggy jeans and shaggy or shaved heads (1995:41-42), I would argue that it is the aesthetic markers themselves, not fear, that produce blackness as style. In this way, the presence of these black bodies reflects a different narrative than how a “black” space would be identified in the past. Their presence is now valued as visible evidence of multiculturalism – even by those that describe the area as “sketchy.”

D.C.’s Department of Transportation has worked with the Rappaport Company, developer for the project, to protect the 8th and H intersection since it is deemed “an amenity at present.” (D.C. Zoning Commission 2010:128). Preserving the bus transit transfer point in its current location cannot be framed as a strategy to

³⁸ <http://www.popville.com/2013/06/foot-locker-closing-in-october-at-8th-and-h-street-ne/>

help poor and working-class black people maintain viable, affordable options for transportation. Instead it is recognized as part of a wider system of transportation that serves as a universal necessity for all city residents to benefit from the walkability of the neighborhood.

Newer residents and visitors complain about the corridor's limited transportation options (the closest Metro line is at Union Station, nearly one mile away from the center of the corridor) despite the fact that 8th and H is the busiest transportation hub in the city.³⁹ Introduction of the long-awaited streetcar system is expected to alleviate these concerns. According to the Smithsonian Museum of American History, streetcars were immensely popular to Washington-area residents in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. It was not until the 1910s that buses began to replace streetcars as a modern, luxurious form of public transportation. In 1962, the last streetcar ran in Washington, D.C. in the face of the increasing popularity of personal vehicles and buses.⁴⁰ In 2009, the city began the long and disruptive process of laying streetcar tracks along H Street, NE – wreaking havoc on several local businesses. The contemporary streetcar efforts seem to be less about providing a public transportation alternative but more about drawing visitors to the H Street, NE corridor. With the low price of \$1 for those with a SmarTrip card and \$2 cash, trolley service will be more inexpensive than the bus and most rides on the Metro train system. Some of the new neighborhood residents I interviewed suggested that their

³⁹ The prominence of this common assessment of the H Street corridor is ironic because transportation is not often cited as a hindrance for young revelers to visit the Georgetown neighborhood – another popular location featuring popular boutiques, bars, and restaurants.

⁴⁰ America on the Move exhibit, Smithsonian National Museum of American History “A Streetcar City” (http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/exhibition/exhibition_4_6.html)

decision to move to the area was prompted by their speculation that the streetcar would significantly raise the market value of their homes. The start of D.C.'s streetcar service, which is supposed to begin on H Street, has been delayed several times over the past few years. Nevertheless, the Mayor Vincent Gray-led administration has put forth significant efforts to promote the streetcar by disseminating "Friends of DC Streetcar" decal stickers and coasters to H Street businesses. Several of the restaurants display the stickers prominently on their front doors and windows.

Although the intersection of 8th and H Streets, NE operates as a vital transfer point for public transportation, the sidewalk is used as what John Jackson (2005) might call a form of counter-privatization. In *Real Black*, Jackson offers a useful discussion about public and private life in Harlem. Private spaces previously existed within the home, but with the introduction of the welfare state, private became synonymous with the street, since the state's management and surveillance of the poor turned "what was once intimate seclusion into a matter of public record" (2005:54). The street became the location where previously private activities and transactions took place. As a result, "access to privacy becomes a solely bourgeois privilege, and when this publicness is all one is allowed, privatization of public space may be the most obvious riposte" (Jackson 2005:54). Like in Harlem, gentrifiers who have begun to move into the neighborhood surrounding H Street deem such behavior inappropriate. One longtime black resident, George David Butler, spoke to the *Washington Informer* about his dismay at changes to the corridor. Butler spoke of an

afternoon in 2011 when police arrived at the Sherwood Recreation Center “because the new members of the community complained the annual Father’s Day celebration at Sherwood was too noisy.” While the event served as an important celebration for longtime residents in their quest to build (or perhaps maintain) social cohesion, the fête, put on by H Street merchants, “has taken place over the past 30 years without incident” (Young 2012b).

For years, many black Washingtonians have talked about “the Plan” to remove black people from D.C., and while there is little evidence to support an explicit strategy to do so, changes to the lived environment seem to favor residents with more access to capital and do not present opportunities for black residents to achieve a similar economic status. In the redevelopment of the H Street, NE commercial corridor, “diversity” is used to attract businesses, customers, and tourists to the area. The discursive logic of post-race neoliberalism reinforces the idea that diversity should be indicative of a desirable, valuable, upscale environment. It is through the work of diversity that H Street emerges as a hipster district. Sharon Zukin (2011) argues that the new identity that arises following the transformation of some urban spaces often utilizes aspects of the neighborhood’s past “and present itself as respectful of the community’s authenticity,” however through the “social and cultural networks new producers and consumers create, nurture, and often capitalize on a completely new sense of place” (p. 164). Discourses of diversity sustain neoliberal reforms throughout the District – while masking the significance of race and racism to

neoliberalism (Melamed 2006:1). Nevertheless, while diversity evokes difference, it does not provide commitment to redistributive justice.

Infusing a desire for “diversity” into the reimagining of urban space allows for the local government, developers, entrepreneurs and new residents to ignore the conditions that made the H Street, NE corridor black and poor in the first place. While the intentions to redevelop the area are not to displace black residents, local efforts to construct a “multicultural urbanity” attract a diverse sampling of young, upwardly mobile professionals (Hackworth and Rekers 2005). Emphasis on (cultural) diversity replaces social justice issues with the notion that a successful commercial corridor will be universally beneficial despite the fact that the largely poorer, black residents will no longer be able to afford not only housing, but also the services and dining options along the corridor. A consequence of a diverse space is often the disinviting of black residents.

The absence of a welfare state and the minimized role of the state as protector/provider, requires people to learn to govern themselves. The state no longer supports groups against oppressive conditions – the revised role of the state is to support individuals and monitor social responsibility – therefore public space becomes a showcase for the entrepreneurial. Using this logic, the history of the revival of H Street following the riots points to an ineffectual local government and unruly people who were unable to fix the neighborhood’s problems. Ineptitude, absence, and neglect from the local government required the involvement of private sources, sometimes in collaboration with public sources. This is especially relevant

in terms of business ownership on H Street. Small black businesses have increasingly had a difficult time remaining on H Street. While some believe the business owners must conform and “learn to be like white businesses” in order to thrive in the corridor, others recognize that black businesses are priced out since the taxes have tripled and quadrupled since H Street has become more popular. Nevertheless, racism and other forms of inequality that takes place here is not overt, but subtle, where euphemisms like “creativity,” “diversity,” and “cultural vibrancy” are used to disinvite. H Street remains raced and the management of blackness produces a specific form of inequality in a different guise. In other words, it is not simply the production of blackness that has now been claimed in the name of diversity and multiculturalism on H Street, rather it is the production of black inequality and disadvantage.

CONCLUSION:

THE RACIAL AESTHETICS OF NEOLIBERALISM

On September 26, 2013 American designer Rick Owens put on a runway show highlighting his prêt-à-porter collection for Spring/Summer 2014 Paris Fashion Week. The show featured an architectural stage design at the Palais Omnisports de Paris Bercy (a multi-level arena), where a collection of African American step team members from black college sororities descended the stairs wearing garments from Owens's newest line. The runway show displayed a parade of blow-outs, afros, sleek ponies, and do-rags in muted earth tones – grayish green, chocolate, cream, white – accompanied by scowls, grimaces, screams, grunts, groans, and grit, moving to syncopated beats. The women engaged in a traditional step routine center stage before a bemused Parisian audience. The performance has been framed as celebration of racial and body diversity, as well as age diversity since the steppers ranged from 22 to 40 years old. Besides the inclusion of atypical models, the performance brought stepping to an international stage.

Stepping is a performative tradition started by black fraternities and sororities in the early-twentieth century. These organizations, many of which have missions that promote social and economic improvements for black people, formed on college campuses at the turn of the 20th century in response to the social and cultural isolation black students experienced on segregated campuses. Stepping uses dance and performance as a technique of storytelling where steppers incorporate personal and

social references to contemporary events (Fine 2003). Stepping and step shows are rooted in a long history of African dance and black performance rituals, however the performance at the Rick Owens show resembles the post-civil rights “shout ‘n foot stomp ‘n tribalism” dance formats that grew out of students dissatisfaction with campus facilities in the 1960s. Owens’s use of a performance ritual so deeply embedded in African American cultural and political history speaks to his attempt to show/prove about this post-racial moment. While the “models” signal difference on one hand, their presence also illustrates post-racial unity; that a white man from California could identify with and whose work could be personified by a step troupe of forty, mostly black, women. To no surprise, since the 2013 performance, some of the women who participated in the show have been photographed for various fashion magazines wearing clothes from exclusive designer brands like Etro and Alexander Wang. They have also performed at events celebrating “diversity” on college campuses (Givhan 2014).

Owens said that he used the women to perform and embody his own “personal aesthetic,” an aesthetic that is rooted in “nontraditional beauty, confidence, and power” (Givhan 2013). According to Owens, he “was attracted to how gritty it was, it was such a fuck-you to conventional beauty. They were saying, ‘We’re beautiful in our own way.’” The “grit” they wore on their faces purportedly represented “fierceness,” or as Robin Givhan describes the expression as “the mask of cool” (Givhan 2014). Aside from the “coolness” of the performers, the show has also been lauded within various fashion circles as a powerful statement. Some of the terms

used by fashion writers to describe the performance include “embodied viciousness,” “angry beauty,” “real women,” “mean-mugging,” “authentically fierce, provocative, and chic,” while touting Owens for his fearlessness, bravery, and creativity in designing such an unconventional show. Owens was clearly successful in his attempt to shock and disrupt the fashion world in the service of capital/profit by adding the aesthetics of blackness to his show – a gesture that would be welcomed by *Vogue Italia* editor Franca Sozzani who, as I mention in chapter 3, finds the fashion world dull and bland. The Rick Owens fashion show provided the audience with a visual representation of black bodies representing blackness and diversity.

Owens delivered blackness and the black bodies of his performers as visual spectacle – another example of fashion's engagement with diversity, race, and representation. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord theorizes the spectacle as both a political and aesthetic regime. He writes “The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.” He adds, “The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized” (1967/1994:12-13). The show provides a narrative about how blackness is framed, in this post-race neoliberal moment as a desirable, engaging, ruthless, and radical aesthetic that can be pleasurable consumed by all.

The Rick Owens S/S '14 fashion show illustrates the seductiveness of this post-race neoliberal moment as I discuss in my dissertation: post-race neoliberalism places emphasis on the individual and highlights diversity and the “benefits” of

explicit multiculturalism (a diversity that is obvious, visible, and recognizable). Like the “all-black” issue of *Vogue Italia*, the Owens show offers false promises of change in the industry by incorporating an abstract promotion of representation. One could argue that the Rick Owens show was an attempt to promote difference and diversity “without disrupting normative whiteness and truly integrating racial diversity beyond superficial representations” (Hasinoff 2008:328). Shows that in this post-racial, Obama era, “all citizens are (now) equal under the free market” (p. 328), thus moving away from concerns of structural racism.

One of my goals in *La Douleur Exquise*, was to learn more about the ways in which discourses of post-race and race neutrality intersect with diversity to (re)produce race and racial inequalities. To do so, I explored the interrelatedness between race, value, and aesthetics through the lens of post-race neoliberal discourse. My project points to the relationship between aesthetics and the ways that knowledge about race is organized to reflect a commonsense notion of how blackness is expressed, recognized, and visualized. While race and aesthetics are embedded and tangled together, I found that neoliberalism repurposes and reassembles race. Post-race neoliberal logic holds that blackness is something to watch, practice, perform, and duplicate. The persistence of racial inequality remains at issue today as it has historically, regardless of claims that we are beyond racial considerations, or are colorblind.

This project places the language of exclusion – easily marked before civil rights – to the margins in my attempt to consider the deployment of blackness in our

post-race neoliberal times. In considering what the signifier “black” does after the election of President Obama, exclusion no longer does the work of identifying injustices like it did in the past. President Obama’s election provides a modern alibi for how racism is systematically denied. Blackness is deployed to evoke both sameness and difference at the same time. Blackness is required in order to make claims on the success and durability of the post-racial. I now wonder what kinds of politics are possible in the space of blackness. Blackness itself is a space of practice and productivity, where a different kind of politics is possible – where blackness is not mimicry, aping, desire, or loathing. If, as Nicole Fleetwood argues, black bodies are always trouble in a discursive system (of vision), can you work with that trouble as an entry-point to do political work? Can you shock the normative out of its normativity? While the logics of neoliberalism disempower histories and positions, I suggest there must be other models to imagine the presence of multiculturalism without turning blackness into either a thread sewn into multiculturalism’s growing tapestry or a symbol of disenfranchisement. How might we imagine these communities coming together without turning them into marketable points of difference? My project also leads me to consider additional sites where the stylization of blackness matters. My dissertation did not fully address multiple dimensions of gender that inform the presentation of blackness as an aesthetic. To that end, I wonder whether gender performs the aesthetic work of difference and whether gender operates in a similar fashion to race within the post-race neoliberal framework.

My dissertation is largely concerned with discourse and its role in the maintenance of inequalities. I particularly emphasized struggles over the de-valuation and re-valuation of blackness as a discursive strategy. The practices and processes through which race takes on meaning – vision/visibility as a social construct – operate at the level of discourse (Hall 1990). I questioned what the visibility of blackness, as a racial logic, is asked to do in neoliberalism and discovered that it must either disappear or intensify. In order to destabilize a system that distributes value unequally one must recognize how inequalities are produced within that system. Despite neoliberalism’s success in obscuring the origins and effects of inequality, it nevertheless operates collaboratively with the postmodern turn in which dissent is strategically enveloped, or perhaps, co-opted in the service of capitalism. Fredric Jameson eschews the language of co-optation as it relates to cultural politics in our postmodern era since both subtle and overt forms of resistance are equally “disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it” (1991:49). We learn from efforts led by Bethann Hardison in her quest to increase the presence of black female bodies in the high fashion industry (and also perhaps Anwar Saleem’s efforts to support the growth of black businesses along the H Street corridor) that articulating one’s disapproval of inequities sheds light on the issue, but despite valiant efforts to impart change, they re-inscribe the stylization of blackness by simply calling for visible representation. These efforts highlight the challenges involved in building

resistance against post-race neoliberal logic with tends to embolden post-race/colorblindness as commonsense and superficially celebrate diversity.

In my quest to unveil the work of blackness within the aesthetic formation of race, I discovered not only the similarities between how blackness is thought in both the field of high fashion and in urban design/planning/redevelopment, I learned that the sites are opposite sides of the same coin. Where fashion readily admits its engagement with race as an aesthetic (or “paint chip”), it eschews any relationship to social or political quests for equality. On the other hand, the supporters and architects of redevelopment along the H Street, NE corridor identify their commitment to valuing racial diversity in order to serve the diverse social and economic lifestyle interests of both old and new inhabitants, while it denies using blackness as an aesthetic to attract more capital to the area. Taken together, post-race neoliberalism provides the language and methods to designate racism (identified as individual and explicit forms of discrimination) as a figment of the past in both spaces.

In Part I of the dissertation, I demonstrate how the practice of producing race as style breaks the equivalency of race and identity to race and aesthetics so that black as race is understood as color (skin, fabric) or the exotic in high fashion. I navigated terrain between the celebration of *Vogue Italia*’s “A Black Issue” and the intense criticism of “Haute Mess” to illustrate their connectedness. The celebration of blackness looks both like “A Black Issue” and the Harlem Renaissance-themed “Black Allure” spread (in the February 2011 issue of *Vogue Italia*), as well as the “Haute Mess” editorial and the May 2013 *Vogue Netherlands* editorial, “Heritage

Heroes,” created in honor of fashion designer Marc Jacobs’ “tribal influences,” which features white models in blackface allegedly reflecting the styles of cultural icons, Josephine Baker and Grace Jones’ contribution to fashion. These are the seemingly different yet deeply connected ways fashion celebrates blackness where the former examples reflect the desire for a proper black subject, while the latter recognize the increasing play and stylization of blackness and black culture as instantiations of difference.

I discussed the resurgence of image activism that attempts to confront the exclusion of black bodies in fashion in Chapter 2. These activists frame the discussion of black exclusion in terms of representation rather than redistribution. Their dissent reflects the confluence of commodity culture and race, which involves the celebration of the culture itself, celebration of greater visibility, and emphasis on visibility and image without structural change. I show that running black bodies through the fashion system does very little to disrupt the system itself. In fact, this temptation to add more black bodies to balance the fashion industry received an equal and appropriate response with the production of a magazine issue that only displayed black women. In “A Black Issue,” we witness an attempt to represent a certain history and visual performance of blackness, yet there is something that exceeds the capacity of representation to capture. The production of “A Black Issue” takes place at the intersection of an aesthetic system where color has its own history, and race and bodies possess another. In fact, the color black functions according to an explicit aesthetic logic where the attachment of the color black to bodies matters.

Nevertheless, various representations of successful black celebrities, politicians, models, and athletes contain significant symbolic value that enhances the ideological varnish of neoliberal logic, which promotes individualism, privatization, and colorblindness. These conditions lead to the logical necessity of producing “A Black Issue” and the *Vogue* Black website, which highlight personal uplift stories and iconic images of black “glamour.”

In Chapter 3, the idea that blackness causes trouble in the field of vision is central (Fleetwood 2011). Revisiting Nicole Fleetwood’s argument, if vision is essential to how race is seen and we analyze race-making processes (media, representation, etc.), we must consider how the social is visually constructed. For example, considering the role of photography or modernist aesthetics and imperialism and the role of the black body – photography aesthetics and race are bound up with each other. They are foundational to the construction of each. In this chapter, I highlight the neoliberal treatment of race as style – a fashion accessory that can be used or discarded according to market demand aesthetics. Neoliberalism opens up a space to play with race that is less weighted – emptied of political implications. Establishing black look(s) in “A Black Issue” allows for “Haute Mess” to claim ignorance along the lines of race. Although the scene gives the appearance of equality in the form of harmless “fun,” the field is organized to privilege whiteness and demonize mythologized/fetishized notions of blackness. Blackness in this case becomes part of the multicultural fabric that belongs to everyone. Using black bodies could be considered transgressive therefore using white bodies for the editorial

alleviates the pressure of being a political statement while using racial markers (like cans of Colt 45 malt liquor and hair extensions). In other words, displaying black bodies in a historically white space is political. On the other hand, using white bodies in a historically white space alongside black racial markers is fun. Despite the editor's objections, "Haute Mess" operates as an ideological map that rests on racial fantasies about black femininity and class to infer its meaning.

In Part II, I emphasize the remaking and embodiment of H Street as a space of diversity. This process required that the prevailing narrative of the neighborhood as a "black ghetto" or an area of urban blight be transformed to a more desirable narrative of historic diversity and multiculturalism. Neoliberal discursive logic stitches multiculturalism (in the form of black, brown, and white bodies, and global cuisine) into discourses of urban renewal and American progress. Therefore, conflicts, deep antagonism, racism, and the workings of capitalism that accompany gentrification are masked and muted through a desire to create a stable, coherent, unified, and digestible narrative.

Chapter 4 detailed urban development, black capitalism, and local policy that shape the context of the H Street, NE neighborhood. This chapter describes the conditions within which neoliberalism produces blackness and details the long march of blackness to become diversity. I also detailed the production of a narrative about place, how blackness came to be mobilized to generate a nostalgic narrative about the neighborhood's multicultural past. Despite an interest in (need for) diversity, institutional measures introduced by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and

Economic Development and the D.C. Department of Transportation were in direct challenge to sustaining traditional black business ventures (like barbershops, beauty shops, etc.) and instead called for black entrepreneurs to found “creative” and “innovative” businesses. Such policies and programs demonstrate how race operates today – not explicitly in its recognition of difference in the maintenance of inequality.

In Chapter 5, I illustrate the ways diversity discourse makes blackness one of many inflections. H Street acts as a neoliberal zone that affirms blackness by using it as an entrepreneurial machine of development. This site produces discourses that chart the rise of neoliberalism and within it I provide discursive sites – ethnic restaurants and cuisine, crime/security, design/architecture – to analyze the work of diversity as rooted in cultural and structural economy, which led to the resignification of public space. Various actors rely on representations of a neighborhood to direct funds and development. H Street is a place where difference acts as an enhancement. In light of H Street’s violent past, the narrative describing its history must reinvent itself in order to write the violent times away and repurpose the neighborhood for a new market and a new time. Nevertheless, the trace is present, even in the most aggressive attempts to eschew the past. It is through statements about diversity (as introduced by Whole Foods, local restauranteurs, the D.C. Office of Planning, Main Streets programs, etc.) that the political economy of the H Street, NE corridor is organized.

Returning to the Rick Owens fashion event during Paris Fashion Week, I am reminded that it is easy to be seduced by such jarring, fantastic, and spectacular

images. According to Robin Givhan, Owens and the dancers cried after their performance, as did several members of the audience (Givhan 2013). Like the editorial spreads in the “all-black” issue of *Vogue Italia*, images from the show (both photographic and video) invoke extremely ambivalent sentiments. On the one hand, it is quite easy to experience the pride and joy of these women, many of whom had never traveled outside of the US, take a free trip to one of the world’s preeminent fashion capitals, and disrupt the traditional visual field of high fashion by inserting their non-traditional style, bodies, sound, and color in front of an adoring audience. Within the post-race neoliberal framework, these women can be mobilized to represent the benefits of assimilation, access, and freedom in America regardless of race. On the other hand, placing their black bodies and a black American cultural form on visual and sonic display in order to mark the post-racial moment on the global stage speaks to the depoliticization and aestheticization of race and racial inequality both at home and in France (where French colonial subjects are fighting their own battle against the hegemonic narrative of “race-blindness”).

While fashion provides us with some of the extreme examples of the transformation of race into an aesthetic, I cannot overstate the importance of recognizing the profundity of racism as quotidian and mundane because of its embeddedness in multiple social, economic, and political systems. Whether it is in the context of “equitable” urban redevelopment or cultural appreciation, racism is not as spectacular as proponents of the post-race narrative might want it to portray it. Racism is everywhere. It is everyday. It is so commonplace that we often miss it.

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