SINCE THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM, municipal leaders from Oakland to Brooklyn have celebrated, as the American inner city—left for dead in the 1980s—has been seemingly brought back to life. Of these urban success stories, Washington, D.C. ranks among the most dramatic. While precipitous rises in black poverty and crime rates during the Reagan-Bush era encouraged black and white middle class emigration from the city, a reversal of demographic fortune beginning in the Clinton years elevated the District’s population 16% by 2010. Buoyed by a marked return of federal employees to inner city residency during George W. Bush’s ballooning investments in the global war on terror, D.C. led all major American cities in median income by 2011. Despite the persistence of the moniker “Chocolate City,” Washington’s recent economic and demographic success has consistently failed to reach the city’s black working class and poor populations. Median income growth’s upward pressure on cost of living necessitates the displacement of the poor, a category that almost exclusively attends to black communities in the region. Amidst its largest population boom since the 1950s, the nation’s capital has lost 94,703 or a staggering 25% of its black population to emigration, incarceration or death.

Recent urban history has documented the existence of black-white coalitions in Philadelphia and Miami who advanced regional economic prosperity at the expense of black residential security. Yet scholars tend to emphasize post-civil rights black city leaders’ participation in “revanchist” or punitive responses to poverty as an obstacle to economic development. This essay examines the way creative reforms serve as illustration of what Miguel de Oliver calls...
“therapeutic diversity,” an essential balance within the emotional ecology of urban environments ejecting black residents.³ By traveling the first D.C. heritage development project located within a historically black neighborhood, I examine its rhetorical and spatial vernacular for narratives and routes that naturalize Shaw residents as middle class heteronormative and politically moderate. Also called respectability politics, these modes and eras of black life—reduced to public signs, photographs and placards—closely align with the political values and ambitions of post-1990s gentrifiers.

Planted along a guided tour that snakes through the neighborhood’s commercial and residential areas, the 13 placards along the “City within a City, Greater U Street Heritage Trail” educate new residents about the bygone sights and sounds of African American neighborhood history from the end of the Civil War, through the early 1970s. The project also marks a major turning point in the racial politics of creative development and gentrification in the nation’ capital. While black Washingtonians organized against white planners’ callous disregard for the stability of their communities during the height of federally subsidized “urban renewal” at mid-century, support for and opposition to urban development in the District no longer neatly falls along a black-white political axis/binary. Since Marion Barry’s infamous arrest for crack-cocaine possession in 1990, subsequent mayors Sharon Pratt, Anthony Williams, Adrian Fenty, Vincent Gray, and Muriel Bowser have consistently incentivized white middle class residency through both revanchist and creative modes of urban reform, including significant investment in heritage development.

Unlike revanchist strategies, that deploy wrecking balls and billy-clubs to clear undesirable populations, heritage development manages potential intracommunity tensions between new and old residents by projecting narratives that frame once deviant neighborhoods as historically friendly to a moderately multicultural, upwardly mobile middle class and inscribing them directly into the landscape. In her keynote address at the U street trail’s 2001 launch event, D.C. Congressional delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton lauded organizers for both “redefining tourism” and “redefining a heritage,” establishing a new public reputation for a neighborhood mired in generational poverty and drug-related violence in recent years. Indeed, the U street trail was the culmination of a 12 year collaboration between incorporated non-profits Cultural Heritage DC and the Washington Historical Society, the District office of community development and Shaw landowners across the color line who were, and remain, deeply passionate about sharing their neighborhood’s rich history with the world. Brought together by their desire to “preserve black life” in a neighborhood nationally recognized as bent towards death and devolution, this local coalition organized the restoration of the Lincoln Theater, the True Reformers Building, the 12th street YMCA and the storied Howard Theater.⁴ The U street trail connects and unifies these efforts, establishing a new mapping of Shaw that naturalizes upward mobility, cultural development, and economic growth as heritage, rather than invasion.

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The preservationists who led the U street trail project were expansive about their vision for its positive influence on the emotional and political climate of a transitioning community. In 1990, black Washingtonians made up 71% of the census tracts that house the U street trail. By 2010, a decade after its unveiling, white Washingtonians made up 65.4% of those same neighborhoods. The success of the U street trail indicates the political implications of these demographic shifts. As will be discussed below, efforts to produce heritage development in Shaw during the Carter and Reagan years fell apart, as some black community activists framed preservation as a colonial Trojan horse. The U street trail’s existence speaks to a major revision in post-civil rights black political history, replacing an explicit territorialism with the valorization of integrationism. The sudden introduction of white residency in Shaw during the Clinton years catalyzed local media concern about the “great beige experiment” of our century. In response, Henry Whitehead, local history expert who independently organized historic walking tours in Shaw before the installation of the U street trail, told the Washington Post that “history can be a unifying thing [that provides] common appreciation of what was accomplished by the other.” Whitehead was not alone in his optimism. Gay activist and dogged Shaw booster Jeffrey Koenreich, who led the drive to restore the Lincoln Theater and co-authored funding for the establishment of the Greater U Street Historic District, proclaimed that, “black history belongs to everyone. It’s American history.”

While supremely well intentioned, these and similar statements expose the U street trail as a geographic illustration of racial liberalism’s facilitation of contemporary black displacement. Pursuing “understanding,” “belonging” and peaceful cohabitation as independently valuable development goals, the U street trail wraps the speculative land market’s demand for greater white residency at the cost of black displacement in the soft multi-colored cloak of multiculturalism. The trail, to repeat Henry Whitehead’s point, produces “common appreciation” of black life, at a moment when land profiteering aggressively alters the racial and political animus of the common within inner city life. In Jim Crow Nostalgia, Michelle Boyd reveals heritage development in Chicago’s Bronzeville as a stage for intracommunity disputes over whether working class or middle class black Chicagoans held the most legitimate claim to the neighborhood’s past legacy and present landscape. Here I set aside an ethnography of the public-private coalition that gave birth to the U street trail and, instead, follow literary theory’s decentering of author intent to recast its imagery and route as advancing the notion that the significant arrival of middle class, socially normative homeowners represents a form of cultural inheritance, rather than displacement.

Given the neighborhood’s troubled history, the U street’s trail’s effort to tether this diverse range of normativities proved multivalent, and this essay captures three of its spatial and rhetorical strategies. In each section, I travel a portion of the U street trail to unpack its participation in the public retrofitting of urban blackness generally and immediately. First, I engage the trail’s representations of black family life, with an emphasis on childhood development during the New Negro Era. While U street trail placards represent Shaw history from the end of slavery until just before the 1968 D.C. riot, the vast majority of attention is devoted to the interwar


7 Ibid, last accessed August 24, 2014.

years and Washington’s New Negro era. Here, black respectability politics align with the childhood development ambitions of white parents moving into Shaw in search of safe play spaces and schools. Second, I engage the implications of one of the trail’s major elisions, the Frontiers Housing complex on 14th street NW. Symbolic of a decades long local struggle for affordable housing, the Frontiers project is not included within the trail’s narration of local civil rights success. By contrast, Frontiers has been more prominently featured on gentrification blogs like “The Prince of Petworth,” where new white residents fantasize about the inevitable departure of Frontiers and its “loud,” “messy,” and “criminal” residents. Finally, I juxtapose the trail’s final

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9 My analysis here owes much to critical black spatial-studies scholars, including Clyde Woods and Katherine McKittrick, who have identified the way spatial excisions often contain transcripts of racial hierarchy. See
marker—a depiction of Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park from the 1920s—with Essex Hemphill’s description of queer black life in and around the park in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when AIDS, heroin and crack-cocaine ravaged DC. In his 1992 essay, “Without Comment,” Hemphill narrates an alternative queer heritage route, one that speaks to the potential for memorializing the history of black Washingtonians evicted from the city’s heritage trails.

HERITAGE DEVELOPMENT AND RACE IN THE POST-SEGREGATIONIST CITY

Heritage tourism within racially or ethnically marginalized inner city neighborhoods emerged as an economic development strategy in the late 1970s, alongside critical shifts within urban planning's approach to sustaining the life of urban neighborhoods. As historians of urban development note, naturalist, medical and biologist rhetoric has animated the discipline of urban planning since its inception. The notion of a neighborhood “life cycle,” however, was first expansively articulated by Edgar M. Hoover, a University of Pittsburgh economist, and Raymond Vernon, the inventor of product life-cycle theory in their 1959 book Anatomy of a Metropolis: The Changing Distribution of People and Jobs within the New York Metropolitan Region. Anatomy narrativized urban decline in five progressive “stages.” Heavily influenced by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) redlining “risk rating” standards, Hoover and Raymond argued that Stage 3 was the pivotal “downgrading stage,” typified by increased housing density, “slum invasion,” and the “spread of more or less segregated ethnic and minority groups.” Planning historian Jay Metzger notes that Hoover and Raymond merely gave metaphor to planners’ long held belief that cities were biological entities, bent toward decline.

While planning theory continued to stigmatize integration throughout the 1960s, the profession underwent a major sea change during the 1970s. The 1974 Community Reinvestment Act generated a new market for planning theorists able to frame integration as a social and market good in need of support. Title I of the law calls for “the promotion of an increase in the diversity and vitality of neighborhoods through the spatial deconcentration of housing opportunities for persons of lower income and the revitalization of deteriorating neighborhoods to attract persons of higher income.” Yet as planning consultants at the Real Estate Research Corporation (RERC) pointed out in a 1975 report to the federal office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the CRA provided scant guidance to municipalities on how to attract persons of higher income into the inner city.

The RERC’s report filled that gap by downgrading Hoover and Raymond’s concern with the macroeconomic trends of a metropolitan ecology to a more anthropomorphic rendering of the neighborhood. “Like the life cycle of people—childhood, adolescence, working years, retirement—the life cycle of a neighborhood is a little different for each case.” Still, RERC consultants pointed out that unlike humans, neighborhood life, “has . . . the power of regeneration.” For RERC consultants, the most critical determinant of a neighborhood’s regeneration lay within what they called “the household decision” or “the impact of people moving in, moving out, deciding to stay or deciding to look elsewhere for housing.” Rather than envisioning racial groups as

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13 Ibid, 15.
14 Ibid, 15.
competing for survival, RERC consultants called on policymakers to understand neighborhoods as being in competition with each other to amass household decisions.

While many urban scholars now question whether implementing diversity oriented development can predict population growth, the RERC’s reframing of neighborhood life cycle theory as a competition between communities proliferated from the realms of planning theory into urban neighborhoods in mid and major cities across the mid-Atlantic during the 1970s and 1980s. Mid-atlantic preservationist movements were contemporaneous with a nationalized “Back to the City” that sent a generation of white progressives into cities from the Castro to Philadelphia.16

In Shaw, black Washingtonians met these national trends with staunch resistance. In 1976, 1977 and 1983, Shaw residents pressured the city council into blocking white preservationists’ attempted annexation of 14th street NW into the Dupont Circle Historic District.17 Ibrahim Mumin, then head of the Shaw Area Project Committee, described preservationists’ efforts as “a land grab by the middle and upper middle class Caucasians that live around Dupont Circle to extend their political influence in the city.”18 In the early years of Marion Barry’s administration, black communities in and outside of the city had secure access to well-paying city and federal jobs, and were disinterested in urban development projects initiated by outsiders. Even as the Black Power movement’s revolutionary Marxism was broadly abandoned by black Washingtonians by the mid 1970s, residents retained their investments in the movement’s territorial politics and understood their ability to prevent white invasion as essential to the lifeblood of their communities.

Yet as greater numbers of whites moved into Shaw in the late 1970s, media coverage moralized the struggles of intrepid white homeowners in Shaw, locked in a daily battle for stability against uncivil and immature black neighborhoods. As self-identified urban pioneer Don Grafer told the Washington Post after suffering four break-ins in 1976, “The pioneers had to battle the Indians and now we have to battle the blacks. The whites don’t like when the blacks move to the suburbs and the younger blacks don’t like it when whites move into the city.”19 In 1980, the Post brought readers the harrowing story of the Zimmermans and the Aylestocks, liberals who had bought homes in Shaw, the city’s last frontier” with the dream that Shaw would become the next “fashionable Washington address.”20 Neither family, however, got what they bargained for. Soon after moving in, husband and father Dan Zimmerman was non-fatally shot during an attempted armed robbery. “I came here as a laidback liberal. And that didn’t work. When I was lying there on my living room floor bleeding for 45 minutes, I got scared and then I got angry. I have a right to live here. I decided then that I wasn’t going to leave with my tail between my legs.”21

Political and criminal resistance to whiteness represented what the RERC consultants would describe as negative input into the feedback loop between potential homeowners and their

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21 Ibid.
neighborhood. “Both consciously and unconsciously householders are evaluating their neighborhood on the basis of what they see, hear and read. A householder gets some pretty important ‘feedback’ when he or she goes to the bank for a home improvement loan and gets turned down. A growing number of minority children may frighten white households. Neighborhood feedback is a critical input to the household decision to stay or move.”22 By obliquely positioning the concerns of black households’ struggles against discriminatory lending and white households’ desire for racial homogeneity as equally rational forms of “neighborhood feedback,” RERC promoted the notion that all neighborhoods should be accessible, while discouraging mass in-migration of minority households into white neighborhoods.

Throughout the 1980s, Shaw remained overwhelmingly black, but shifting tide of national politics crippled the community’s economic health. The Reagan Administration’s severe cuts to aid for cities and federal social and research programs trickled precarity down to black neighborhoods across the city, including middle class strongholds like Shaw. While theft in Washington never reached levels akin to Philadelphia, New York or Chicago, the city’s crack-trade-fueled murder rate made national headlines during the H.W. Bush Administration. By 1989, the District would be dubbed the nation’s murder capital; the exception which proved the rule of life in inner city neighborhoods around the country. Coverage of the murder rate in Washington seemed to mirror the language of urban planning consultants, as Shaw became represented as a place beset by the failure of childhood development and maturation in black households. Investigative documentaries like PBS’ “The Throwaway People,” (1989) sensationalist journalism like The Economist’s “There are No Children Here,” (1994) and bestselling monographs like Leon Dash’s When Children Want Children (1989) and Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Children (1996) communicated to the nation that Shaw was overrun by an underclass ruled by black girls thrust too early into motherhood and black boys who harbored a too-adult willingness to commit deadly violence.23 Whether in solidarity or recrimination, representations of violent, pseudo-adult black urban youth suffused the national consciousness on a number of scales and laid the foundations for the reconstruction of racial difference in a post-segregationist capital city.

The U Street trail then, in form and route, constantly rehearses a resolution between planners’ belief that inner city neighborhoods needed interracial residency to thrive and the widespread racial stereotypes that black people’s self-destructive culture worked against the health of the neighborhood by replacing this Shaw with one amenable to economic development, child-rearing, and peaceful cohabitation with whites.

**A MATURE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK LIFE AND POLITICS**

Because the trail is a spatial project, it does not offer a linear narrative of either African American political history or the human life cycle. For example, travelers begin at Thirteenth and U Streets NW; the first placard is visible soon after one exits the nearby “U Street/African-Amer Civil War Memorial/Cardozo” train stop. There, and at the next two markers further east on U Street, travelers learn about early twentieth-century black commercial and recreational history along the

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23 Perhaps the best evidence of the ubiquity of life cycle metaphors within media coverage of urban land value appreciation in recent years is that a search on ProQuest of “news” databases for “back to life” and “urban” or “neighborhood” or “inner city” yielded 2,906 results. 83 results were published between 1980 and 1990. 430 results were published between 1990 and 2000. 1,355 results were published between 2000 and 2010. 1,033 results were published from 2010 to 2014. Between 1925 and 1980, the search yielded 5 results.
U Street corridor. The fourth marker, entitled “Civil War Camp to Victorian Neighborhood,” takes viewers back to the mid-nineteenth century via a short history of the Cardozo area, a likely destination for slaves escaping southern plantations. In the aggregate, the trail illustrates black bodies at every stage of proper Western human and cultural development, starting with infancy, transitioning into prepubescent childhood, followed by scenes of adolescence in secondary school and college, with love, marriage, reproduction, and, eventually, retirement (Fig 3).

The trail’s fifth marker, “Howard University sets the standard,” located at Tenth and T Streets NW, informs travelers of General Oliver Otis Howard’s legacy as a sponsor and generator of black genius, particularly in the field of childhood education and development. Howard’s expertise in K–12 education seeded Washington’s segregated black schools, making them nationally recognized as among the best in the nation. Yet against the backdrop of gentrification, Howard’s educational history resonates with the concerns of urban newcomers in the pioneer movement. Two years after she covered the Aylestocks and the Zimmermans, Linda Wheeler brought Post readers to Jim and Mary Claire Bond, who had purchased and renovated a “140-year-old Federal Period house on Capitol Hill” in 1977. Jim, who worked for the Senate Appropriations Committee, and Mary Claire moved into the neighborhood when they “were childless.” After the birth of their eldest daughter, the Bonds began to worry about their children enrolling in public schools with “low standards,” a condition of unevenly distributed resources between urban and suburban school systems. On average, private schools in DC, which in 1982 taught 71 percent of the District’s white pupils, cost $3,000 per year, a number that far outstripped their solidly middle-class government salaries. Faced with the imagined underdevelopment of their children, the Bonds also abandoned their homestead for Arlington, Virginia, and its middle-class and partially integrated public schools. Though their departure lacked the virulent animosity toward African Americans expressed by the Aylestocks and the Zimmermans, it nonetheless communicated that inner-city residency threatened the proper development of the white child, valorizing childhood

\[24\] See the trail booklet: Paul K. Williams and Kathryn Smith, City within a City: Greater U Street Heritage Trail (Historical Society of Washington, DC, and DC Heritage Tourism Coalition, 2001), no page numbers.
development over the “excitement” of the city. In emphasizing Howard University’s expertise in early-childhood education, the trail’s fifth marker both assuages the echoes of concern surrounding the racialized politics of secondary education and speaks to the specific desires of post-Clinton gentrifiers, who, unlike pioneers in the late seventies and early eighties, explicitly understand reproduction and child rearing as part of the settlement project.

Central to the trail’s presentation of proper black political and human development are New Negro notions of black independence and “self-help.” Thus, from the Howard University marker, the trail takes travelers slightly south and east until they arrive at the “Home Away From Home” marker in front of the Thurgood Marshall Center for Service and Heritage (Fig 4). The building, the tour booklet tells us, began its life as the Twelfth Street YMCA in 1917. Although the black YMCA in DC was founded by Anthony Bowen in 1853, it lacked a building until the early decades of the twentieth century. The increased influence of Jim Crow Democrats in the federal city in the early twentieth century inspired DC’s black elite to turn inward and self-finance institutions that would serve the community. Between 1907 and 1912, the YMCA raised over $100,000 to construct a building and hired black architectural pioneer W. Sidney Pittman, who also happened to be Booker T. Washington’s nephew, to design and build the Twelfth Street Y. While the black elite constructed similar institutions in New Negro hubs around the nation, staking a claim to black independence was particularly bold in the District, where the lack of local government and the fact of federal dependence bottlenecked political influence to those able to curry favor and patronage from white federal officials. The presentation of the Twelfth Street YMCA along with the “True Reformer Building” located at trail marker 2, speak to the trail’s investment in pointing

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25 Williams and Smith, City within a City, n.p.
out that the “City within a City” referenced in the trail’s official title was, as the booklet indicates, “financed, designed and built by and for African Americans, an extraordinary phenomenon in the early 20th century.”

Yet the nation’s black fraternal organizations, particularly the Free Masons, who were enormously popular in the District, were also concerned with “maintaining a distinction between stages in the male life cycle” among African American men. Many black intellectuals believed that the stymied intellectual production and moral development of the black poor at the turn of the century could be located in the pre- and postemancipation southern economies’ exploitation of black child labor. Black Progressives warned that wage work kept black children out of school at a sensitive moment in their intellectual development. Actively participating in the production of sociological knowledge concerning the many “social ills” of American metropolises, elite black Washingtonians were also worried that participation in the wage economy increased the likelihood that black children would be exposed to immoral activities, particularly given the way residential segregation concentrated nonheteronormativity within black urban neighborhoods. Independent YMCA gyms allowed black elites to assure parents in newly arrived southern migrant families that if they sent their male children to this “home away from home,” they would be put through the paces of exercise and physical exertion, without the hard lessons of wage labor. Moreover, as Martin Summers’s work indicates, establishing clear lines between black childhood and adulthood shored up the legitimacy of black adult claims to manhood and its attendant privileges in the early part of the twentieth century.

However, even as images of black youth athleticism on the Twelfth Street YMCA trail marker invoke black communities’ historical efforts to ensure proper black early-childhood development, the trail divorces those struggles from then-accepted pseudoscientific knowledges that simultaneously emphasized black youths’ capacity for wage labor or criminal violence and argued that black adults were too “childlike” for proper citizenship. Instead, the marker manages incoming residents’ concerns about the criminal potential of black youth in a post-urban-crisis city. The ideal visions of black childhood on the trail implicitly rationalize the aggressive criminalization and incarceration of contemporary black youth, another mode of urban displacement, by offering up imaginings of ideal black childhood as the “exceptional” cases that acquit punitive approaches to poverty from charges of racial bias.

Instead, images of proper black childhood are linked to sober, mature forms of black civil rights activism. At Fifteenth and T Streets NW, travelers encounter the tenth marker, “Strong Families, Pre-eminent Citizens” (Fig 5). Like many markers along the trail, this one intermixes imagery of stable reproduction alongside images of civil rights activism. Here we see Charles

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27 Williams and Smith, *City within a City*, n.p.
Hamilton Houston, colloquially known as “Mr. Civil Rights,” alongside a black-and-white portrait of the Ridgely family. The Ridgely’s family portrait was taken at Addison Spurlock’s photography studio. A Spurlock portrait was one of the most popular means to intraracially communicate one’s location within the realm of respectability, and the placard tells travelers, “if your wedding wasn’t photographed by Spurlock it didn’t happen.” It is not coincidental that at the precise moment of gentrification, this marker includes an image of stable family life alongside a memorial to the ideological father of civil rights legalism and the integrationist wing of the black freedom movement. Touring whites are informed about the Brown v. Board of Education decision and the noncontroversial push for equality before the law, but not of struggles over land and property that were directly connected to integrationist politics. At Fifteenth and T, heritage planners combine images of stable and innocent family life with an “innocent” form of black activism that does not challenge the presence of white visitors in Shaw. Instead, new residents are offered images of African Americans who made similar life choices to their own and who align with a palatable brand of racial liberalism.

AVOIDING THE FRONTIER

After leaving the Twelfth Street YMCA, I walked south and east to take in the marker honoring the Lincoln Temple United Church of Christ at Eleventh and R Streets NW, but then got a little turned around. According to the map in the trail booklet, I was meant to travel east from Lincoln Temple on R until I reached Thirteenth Street. There I should have turned north to see the Whitelaw Hotel, a famous destination for traveling black talent at the height of the jazz and blues era, at Thirteenth and T. Instead, feeling confident of my knowledge of the community, I stopped following my map and kept walking on R until I reached Fourteenth Street NW. After realizing my error, and recognizing my ambivalence toward the Whitelaw Hotel, I turned north on Fourteenth Street and came across a building that heritage planners could not have intended travelers to see. Between Riggs and S Streets NW stand the “Frontiers” condos (Fig 6). In addition to contributing to the colonial metaphors piling up in this essay, the Frontiers resolves the...
“failures” of the “monstrously” sized Robert Taylor Homes or Pruitt-Igoe by offering condo-style developments within public housing. Frontiers was part of a range of public-housing initiatives in the seventies that attempted to offer a close facsimile of suburban life to attract the black middle class back into the Chocolate City and to strike a path out of poverty for the “ambitious” among DC’s black poor. James Bank, the highest-ranked African American at the National Capital Housing Authority, introduced Frontiers by asserting, “We want to make sure these are potential home owners—that families understand they have specific responsibilities.” 32 Fifteen years later, the Frontiers condos grabbed headlines again when the Reagan administration made them a test case for their “turnkey” program, another renter-to-homeowner scheme more explicitly targeted toward the underclass.33 Yet only two years after Reagan relaunched Frontiers, mismanagement in the Barry administration left the townhouses entirely abandoned. In that same year, the National Homeless Union staged a squat-in campaign to shame Barry for allowing the condos to remain abandoned while the city’s homeless population continued to grow.34 If folded into the narrative of the trail, the building has the potential to offer walkers an important and complicated history of the nation’s struggle to rectify the city’s massive black-white property gap.

Yet Frontiers’ somewhat-messy history is only a part of why the heritage route bypasses this section of Fourteenth Street NW. In the present day, Frontiers is a lightning rod for ongoing conflicts between middle-class, working-class, and poor black residents and incoming gentrifiers. In DC, self-described gentrifiers narrate the shifting development and demographic trends of transitioning neighborhoods on a number of blogs, the most famous of which is by Dan Silverman, the self-anointed “Prince of Petworth.” According to his blog’s “About” page, Silverman moved to Petworth, a small neighborhood within the broader Shaw area, from nearby Woodley Park

34  Ibid.
in 2003, two years after the opening of the U Street Heritage Trail. Silverman’s blog has “been quoted or featured in the New York Times, Financial Times, Washington Post, Washingtonian Magazine, NBC Washington, and many other local publications.”\(^{35}\) Along with breathlessly anticipatory coverage of new commercial developments, the blog keeps tabs on “crime” and has made Frontiers an object of displacement fantasies. In a 2011 post titled “Development Scuttlebutt: Developers Working on Acquiring Property at 14th and S St, NW,” Silverman reports that “a pretty reliable source” had clued him in on an unknown development firm’s recent acquisition of the Frontiers property and their plans to transform it into “a commercial building with retail on the ground floor.”\(^{36}\) Unleashed by the anonymity provided in the Prince’s comment section, readers expressed near-unanimous joy at the prospect that the “sketchy” residents of Frontiers might soon be a thing of the past. As “me” writes, “I am actually pretty excited about this. I have been mugged twice in front of these Frontier houses, on 14th street. I swear I almost feel like I have PTSD when I walk by there now.” In reply, another “Me,” this time capitalized, advises the poster to “start carrying a thick sock full of pennies when you walk around there. You can lay a serious whooping on a mugger with one of those.”\(^{37}\) On the 14th and You blog, coverage of the proposed buyout turned even more intense. “White Guy” remarked, “This is absolutely the best post ever. Demolishing the Frontiers and building something better in its place would be the best thing ever for the 14th and S hood. Goodbye drug dealers and your sketchy family members. Hello gentrification!”\(^{38}\)

Stymied by postracial etiquette, the posters rationalize their excitement at black displacement with oblique references to racial stereotypes, alluding to the close relationship between black people and welfare. As “Charlie Jones” writes on Prince of Petworth, “that block in front of Frontiers is always covered in trash and chicken bones. I don’t walk my dog there anymore. Also, I don’t think it’s low income. I saw someone pull into the parking lot once in a Range Rover.” Soon after Jones’s comment, “Anonymous” corrects this analysis: “Right, because I’ve never seen someone on food stamps driving an escalade or Mercedes.” Properly chastened, “Charlie Jones” admits his error by posting, “ah, maybe i’m being a little naive. i guess i was thinking that since there are income requirements for stuff like that, someone couldn’t afford a nice car. well, i guess they probably can’t. some people spend money when they don’t have it.”\(^{39}\) Back on the 14th and You blog, posters express anxiety that the current residents will fail to recognize the wisdom of selling. As “Scott” exclaimed, “What an opportunity! Those residents will never see something like this happen again. I hope that somebody is advising them and not letting any ignorance stop them from such an incredible offer. This could change their lives for the better.”\(^{40}\)

It is not surprising that gentrification blogs would allude to welfare cheats, muggers, drug dealers, and “chicken bones” in their attack on the Frontiers development. But just as important are less explicitly racist posters concerned that black residents might let “ignorance stop them


\(^{37}\) Ibid.


\(^{39}\) “Development Scuttlebutt.”

\(^{40}\) “In Case You Missed It.”
from such an incredible offer.” Here, posters reveal the way notions of black immaturity continue to circulate, and even fit within ostensibly liberal rhetoric around urban development. When blog posters worry that Frontiers residents will miss out on a once-in-a-lifetime chance, they accurately diagnose African Americans’ uneven access to upward mobility. Simultaneously though, they blame the potential ignorance and financial irrationality of black people; little else could explain resistance to the commonsense reasonableness of profiting through sale. Gentrification in fact relies upon black urbanites being disciplined into normative relationships with capital, maturing into the kinds of citizens who “help themselves” instead of asking the state for a “handout.”

While heritage planners’ decision to skip by Frontiers illustrates the trail’s relationship to digital and material land speculation in Shaw, the trail’s eleventh marker, “A Shared Neighborhood,” excavates a building demolished in 1974, the Portner Flats, in order to suggest that peaceful racial integration is a cornerstone of Shaw’s history. The Flats, according to the U Street booklet, “was occupied by white residents until the end of World War II…. In 1945, the Portner Flats became the Dunbar Hotel, at one time the largest black hotel in the nation.” Here, planners reposition patterns of white flight and racial secession as integration, as evidence that Shaw has been a “shared” neighborhood rather than a community that quietly transitioned from white to black, as so many inner-city neighborhoods did at midcentury. To its credit, white flight in the District was a bloodless affair in comparison to Chicago, Detroit, Boston, and most of the Sun Belt states. Still, in their reframing of white flight as “sharing” a neighborhood, planners reveal the ways similar slippages continue to structure public discourse about gentrification.

PLANNING FOR QUEER TIME: ESSEX HEMPHILL’S SHAW

Despite the spatial dominance of the heritage trail’s narrative of Shaw history, other black Washingtonians have mapped alternative geographies of the U Street Heritage Trail. Specifically, black gay poet, essayist, and native Washingtonian Essex Hemphill’s 1992 collection Ceremonies offers literary mappings of the surrounding area that capture the ambiguity of Shaw’s transition from the seemingly reckless adolescence of the eighties into the rational, more “adult” black urbanity of the gentrification/neoliberal era. Ironically, Ceremonies was also Hemphill’s last published collection of prose and poetry before he lost his life to AIDS in 1995. Always passionate, but almost never romantic, Hemphill’s work in Ceremonies is a long meditation on DC’s changing landscape amid the ravages of the city’s HIV/AIDS crisis. Yet while some might position Hemphill’s work within the emerging polemical tradition within black gay male writings at the height of the epidemic, here I want to position Hemphill as part of a long line of subaltern queer black urban theorists, a group that includes June Jordan, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, and Alain Locke, among others. Hemphill continues these writers’ exploration of what Julie Abraham calls the “city of feeling,” as their analyses and representations of black urban life emphasize the affective consequences of racialized ghettoization.41 Still, nearly all the above writers produced their work against the backdrop of black struggles for full citizenship and so, more often than not, their poetry, fiction, and essays were folded into the intellectual arsenal of racial liberalism.

41 Julie Abraham, Metropolitan Lovers: The Homosexuality of Cities (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
Differently, Hemphill’s work in Ceremonies is critical of easy notions of community, family, and belonging, all of which historically undergird black political self-narration in Washington, particularly during the Barry regime. His work documents a range of “risky” behaviors in black Washington and positions queer black bodies as equal parts “at-home” in and profoundly vulnerable constituents of a rapidly vanishing Chocolate City. In the essay “Without Comment,” Hemphill introduces readers to black cruising geographies that once existed in Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park, the final destination on the U Street Heritage Trail (Fig 7).42

The stately park, as the U Street trail booklet tells us, was designed by heiress and local celebrity Mary Foote Henderson. It opened in 1936 and at the time was situated between a white neighborhood to the west and a black neighborhood to the east. Echoing the language of the placard marking the Portner Flats, the trail booklet tells readers it was “a public space shared by both races in segregated Washington.”43 By the late sixties, Meridian Hill was located just at the edge of what commentators had begun to call “the Shaw ghetto.” The U Street booklet points out that the park remained “vibrant” throughout the seventies but has little to say about the eighties and nineties. When travelers encounter the placard, they are presented with Meridian Hill as a pristine urban “oasis” in black-and-white photographs taken during the Jim Crow era and with the park’s present-day cleanliness, an outcome of more aggressive management under Anthony Williams. Travelers are encouraged to believe that little has changed in Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park from the Jim Crow era to the present.

In “Without Comment,” Hemphill fills the historiographic gap created by the U Street Heritage Trail by narrating black life and death in the park during the eighties. For Hemphill, the park functions as an archive of radical black politics, a temporary home to drug addicts and vandals, a marker within “a Black gay ghetto called Homo Heights,” a zone of black

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42 Here the slash between Meridian Hill and Malcolm X refers to the fact that cultural nationalists renamed the park Malcolm X park in the late 1960s.

43 Williams and Smith, City within a City, n.p.
juvenile recreation—but lacking traditional safeguards—and ultimately a tomb for queer black Washington. Taking readers north on Sixteenth Street NW along the route of the S2 bus line from downtown to suburban Maryland, Hemphill writes:

At its side, in the middle of a Black gay ghetto called Homo Heights, sits the once glorious, mystical park called Malcolm X by black cultural nationalists, although its official name is Meridian Hill. At dusk it becomes a Black gay cruising ground, while during the day it serves as one of the city’s open-air drug markets. Vandalism and graffiti now mar its classic beauty like brutal knife wounds that have become keloids. Gloom and danger are ever present in the piss stained air, air that is often thick with marijuana smoke and always filled with the hawker’s cry of drug dealers. And although children romp and wrestle on these grounds, and soccer players kick the game ball back and forth, the men appear who cannot contain their loneliness till dusk. For Black gay men, this park, elegantly appointed with gushing fountains, grand stairways, moonlit plazas, and statues of Dante and Joan Act—for Black men seeking the kisses of one another, Malcolm X/Meridian Hill Park is now nothing more than a tomb of sorrow.44

In the hands of another author, Hemphill’s narration of Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park might appear as another artifact of sensational concern about social death in the inner city. However, Hemphill reworks the affective politics of nostalgia by reminding us about the intertwined relationship between sexual ecstasy, drug abuse, and AIDS, a nexus that bound gay-identified black men together in historically unprecedented ways. Resisting the emotional manipulations of liberal muckraking, Hemphill’s tone is remarkably neutral, listing his description of “pathological” behavior with the casual style of a grocery list. This move stands in stark contrast to the polemical style of other essays and poems in Ceremonies, particularly the harrowing poem “Tomb of Sorrows,” which returns readers’ attention to the pain that drives compulsive, risky sexual behavior among Black gay men in Malcolm X/Meridian Hill Park.

Moreover, Hemphill’s narration of Malcolm X/Meridian Hill Park repositions discourse around land value and the life cycle in ways that suggest that developers and land speculators are actually drawn to, rather than repelled by, black death. In the subsequent paragraph, Hemphill recalls waiting for a transfer from the X2 bus to the S2 bus at the corner of Fourteenth and H Streets NE. There, he tells readers:

From the corner of 14th and H you can view the warscape of AIDS and the remnants of casual sex zones reduced to rubble by the aggressive development of downtown. It is interesting to observe new, postmodern office buildings rise on soil where the seed of gay men was once spilled with reckless abandon. Ten years ago this corner was a sexual crossroads. On either side of 14th street, from H to I, there once stood thriving porn shops, movie galleries, and nude dance clubs. A block east of 14th on 13th street, the raunchy Black Gay Club, the Brass Rail, was bulging out of its jockstrap. Drag queens ruled, B-boys chased giddy government workers, fast-talking hustlers worked the floor, while sugar daddies panted for attention in the shadows, offering free drinks and money to any friendly trade. Everybody was seeking a sex machine. White folks were sneaking in for their “Black-dick-fix. Sometimes the dose was fatal.”45

In Hemphill’s work, sites of queer black community, even those noted for their “reckless,” and thus immature, sexual behavior, existed not on the margins of the city but were central nodes that brought together the ugly merger of pleasure and speculation that lies at the heart of modern gentrification. While the heritage trail offers the creative class a safe means to consume black culture, Hemphill’s reference to “white folks” seeking a “Black-dick-fix” in the context of the “aggressive development” of downtown speaks to more violent patterns of cross-racial consumption followed or preceded by black displacement. Or rather, Hemphill’s analysis demands that we recognize the hidden violence of the U Street trail, a violence compounded by its obfuscation within the discourse of “heritage,” “diversity,” and “sharing.” Hemphill’s work also predicts the coming middle-class settlement in Shaw by positioning the “new, postmodern office buildings,” structures that will employ Washington’s soon-to-arrive post-Fordist middle class, as emerging directly out of the “warscapes of AIDS” and from the “soil where the seed of gay men was once spilled with reckless abandon.” Hemphill’s juxtaposition draws a comparison between Washington’s professional class, who, to paraphrase Halberstram, will operate within the normative “9–5” time of capitalism, and the “recklessness” of urban constituents who pursued pleasure over upward mobility or cultural reproduction. Yet the location of new development offers stark, if anecdotal, evidence of developers’ desire for land cleared away by disease and marked by black death.

Traveling to Meridian Hill Park today reproduces the experience evoked on the U Street Heritage Trail marker. The landscape is clean; the statues are well maintained; there is a powerful sense of the rest of the city fading into the background. Meridian Hill, it seems, has always been this way. But Hemphill’s writings disrupt this too-easy melding of past and present and erects a memorial, a tomb, to queer black Washingtonians pushed out of the city by land speculation and the necropolitical management of Washington’s black AIDS epidemic. Like Frontiers, this version of black Washington cannot appear on the heritage trail. Its memorialization of nonnormative black lives raises uncomfortable questions about the persistence of black-white gaps in AIDS diagnoses and treatment in Washington in the present day.

CONCLUSION

As noted above, D.C. Congressional delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton endorsed the 2001 launch of the U street trail. Yet other members of the Shaw community found tragic irony in the fact that the U Street Heritage Trail was launched in the midst of rapid displacement of longtime black residents. In their coverage of Holmes Norton’s speech, the Washington Afro-American quoted local ACORN director Will Ward, who summed up heritage development this way: “I think that it’s back-ass-wards that they displace a population then celebrate the Black History in the U street area…. As the city redevelops, we are not keeping the neighborhoods intact. For the U street area, people who used to live there before gentrification are now renters in P.G. County.”

However accurate Ward’s description, I contend there is little irony to be found in the simultaneity of memorialization and displacement. Rather the U street trail performs a version of what Renato Rosaldo calls imperial nostalgia or a “particular form of nostalgia” wherein people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed. In this case, the U street trail...
is calibrated within the logics of post-civil rights urbanism and multiculturalism. As the census tracts surrounding the trail became majority white over the last fifteen years, the U street trail replaces the displaced black poor with illustrative representations of African Americans’ historic participation in an idealized middle class life cycle from the gradual maturation from childhood to adulthood, an appropriately timed marriage, the ready acquisition of private property, sober minded anti-racist activism, and the active reproduction of these formations in old age. In order to reassure newcomers that they are engaged in social reproduction rather than displacement, the trail avoids sites that reflect the “immature” black nationalism of the 1970s and the seemingly anti-life behavior of the 1980s. In their stead is a vibrant black neighborhood that can belong to “everyone.”