

THE MOBOCRATIC CITY:  
RACE, SPACE AND CITIZENSHIP IN NINETEENTH CENTURY PHILADELPHIA

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PHILADELPHIA

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## ABSTRACT

### THE MOBOCRATIC CITY:

#### RACE, SPACE AND CITIZENSHIP IN NINETEENTH CENTURY

#### PHILADELPHIA

Andrew Crocco

Carolyn Marvin

This dissertation focuses on publics and the public sphere to argue that communication theory should investigate connections across discourse, space, and practice in the creation and maintenance of publics. I chose antebellum Philadelphia as my test case for two reasons. First, theorists such as Jurgen Habermas have identified the antebellum period as the time when the public sphere ceased to be maintained through face-to-face relations and became connected by means of the news media. Second, tremendous social and political conflict also characterized this period when categories considered by communications theory to be discursively constructed, such as “race” and “nation,” were contested and revised. The majority of archival evidence tells a different story, one in which spatial relations and material conditions defined the public, and the act of being in public was a contested mode of political communication. Antebellum Philadelphians attempted to define, shape, and communicate public opinion through the development of the material city and the spatial practices of its inhabitants.

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## **Introduction**

### **The Problem**

The field of Communication has traditionally understood culture as a set of symbolic practices that construct, maintain and transform the human perception of reality, principally achieved through language.<sup>1</sup> This philosophy is called social construction. The bulk of communication research has focused on two modes, transmission and ritual, to conceptualize the manipulation of people, things and information across space, and the manipulation of symbols and signs to bind society together in time. However, social construction too easily reduces all life to language and symbolic systems. It has great difficulty explaining the durability of certain ideas and social relations, and has little to say about practice, materiality, and affect. It posits a world all too conveniently accessible for academic scholars, in which the entirety of experience is contained in thought and discourse. The construction metaphor itself seems ill suited to such immaterial applications.

By contrast, environmental determinism overstates the environment's causal influence on human behavior. Environmental determinists act according to the belief that by constructing cities to accord with certain aesthetic, civic, or economic principles, designers can encourage a desirable set of behaviors and worldviews in inhabitants. The perils of environmental determinism are the denial of human agency in response to environmental conditions and the problematic belief that clear laws explain how one stable variable interacts with another to produce a predictable and identifiable outcome. Despite these shortcomings, the environmental determinists were right about the fact that place does matter.

The tensions between these two positions seem ripe for exploration. The potential benefit is a framework that simultaneously accounts for language, biology,

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<sup>1</sup> Carey, J. (1989) *Culture as Communication*. Berger & Luckmann. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality*.

and the material world, or people, things, and ideas, to state it slightly differently. Following John Law and Chris Otter, I argue that we cannot understand the social world if we separate the social, perceptual and material. We must consider them woven together into what Law calls a “materially heterogeneous” whole; what George Marcus and Erkan Saka call “a configuration of relationships among diverse sites and things;” and Bruno Latour calls the “entanglement” of things and people.<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation focuses on publics and the public sphere to argue that communication theory should abandon its narrow focus on discursive constructions and investigate the connections across discourse, space, and practice in the creation and maintenance of publics. I chose antebellum Philadelphia as my test case for two reasons. First, theorists such as Jurgen Habermas have identified the antebellum period as the time when the public sphere ceased to be maintained through face-to-face relations and became connected by means of the news media. Second, tremendous social and political conflict also characterized this period when categories considered by communications theory to be discursively constructed, such as “race” and “nation,” were contested and revised.

The majority of archival evidence tells a different story, one in which spatial relations and material conditions defined the public, and the act of being in public was contested mode of political communication. Antebellum Philadelphians attempted to define, shape, and communicate public opinion through the development of the material city and the spatial practices of its inhabitants. To support this argument, I employ the city-as-assemblage frame of analysis. Urban assemblage theory reminds us that cities and publics are historical accretions of both

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<sup>2</sup> Law, 2009; Marcus, G. and Saka, E. “Assemblage”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2006. Vol. 23 (2-3) 101-109. Latour, B., & Weibel. P. Eds. (2005). *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.



social and bio-physical forms, which get produced through relations between nature and culture. Urban infrastructure and the public realm develop interdependently.<sup>3</sup>

This dissertation uses the concept of urban assemblage as a toolkit of ideas rather than a theoretical framework that explains anything in and of itself. Each chapter begins with a story built from the historical archive about people, places, and events. Each chapter ends with a theoretical discussion that compares the evidence to our inherited ways of thinking about urban publics and the development of city cultures. By piecing together the components of a framework, through storytelling and analysis, the project mimics the thrown-together experience of the city in a way that is always partial and never completely coherent. Rather than flattening every seam and smoothing every edge, my goal is to look to rifts, ruptures, and redundancies in how we think about urban publics to achieve a way of thinking that encompasses multiple modes of human experience and expression.

### **Structure**

Chapter 1 uses a review of the relevant historical and theoretical literature to introduce the idea that place is not only an archaeology of power embedded within a particularly geography. Place is an ongoing process, which is constantly recreated by the actions and interactions of humans and non-humans. In the case of antebellum Philadelphia, examining the discursive and spatial processes by which the city was constructed, contested, and maintained will reveal what was meant by “Philadelphia,” and to be a Philadelphian. From William Penn’s founding until the Civil War, Philadelphia partly developed according to a White upper class vision for city. Chapter 1 traces the ways in which this vision was employed to order urban space according to cultural codes and value hierarchies of people and places. Place, and

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<sup>3</sup> Gandy, M., “Rethinking urban metabolism: water, space and the modern city.” *City*, 8:3, 363-379. Gandy, M. (2005). “Cyborg Urbanization: Complexity and Monstrosity in the Contemporary City.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 29:1, 26-49.

the sanctioned and unsanctioned practices and actions within that place, are central features of the argument being advanced here about construction of identity, community, and the public within the highly racialized arena of antebellum Philadelphia.

The Philadelphia imagined in Charles II's *Charter*, Penn's advertisements, the stock company, and Holme's grid was what Henri Lefebvre calls conceived space, a representation of space intended for instructional, didactic, and instrumental uses tied to relations of production.<sup>4</sup> In these early days, "Philadelphia" was simultaneously a scheme for ordering the material environment as well as a governing code used to shape the practices that took place therein. Philadelphia was always becoming and yet ever to be realized; it was inspiration for what the environment could become if properly transformed; and it was the spatial definition of social practices that would define both the place and its people. Chapter 1 ends with a discussion of the most prominent exception to Philadelphia's upper class: the wealthy businessmen and abolitionist James Forten.

Chapter 2 looks at the environmental conditions that defined a geography of alterity in Philadelphia's slums. It focuses on the Cedar neighborhood, around Cedar Street which today is called South Street, and Moyamensing, the district across Cedar immediately to the south of Philadelphia city. In terms of race and class Cedar defined the boundary of civilized life in Philadelphia County. A close examination of reformers' writings about ghetto conditions underscores the extent to which maintaining proper order of one's environment was a critical precondition for civilized life and a basis for claims to citizenship. Ultimately, Philadelphians were judged for their ability to control their surrounding environment, to order it in ways that supported shared ideas of progress and prosperity. To shape one's environment was

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<sup>4</sup> Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Cambridge: Blackwell. P.38-40.

a sign of civility; to be shaped by it was a mark of primitive dependence. This chapter examines the ordering schemes of the White ruling class, the mob, and the Black elite. The ordering schemes of the poor, particularly the Black poor, are not captured within the archive. That poor African Americans and Whites ordered space to prioritize survival and some small degree of community must be inferred from the records of other groups.

Just across Cedar Street, Moyamensing rebuked the idealized concept of Philadelphia with slum conditions that threatened this concept. The narrow streets, cramped courts, and hidden alleys that characterized most of Moyamensing were the spatial antithesis to the grand buildings, markets, and promenades of Philadelphia. In Moyamensing, lines of sight were obscured by informal architecture that crowded lanes and alleys. As a result, social order broke down and people were degraded.

Chapter 3 takes the riots of the 1830s and 40s as its central theme. In these decades, mobbing destroyed lives and livelihoods in Philadelphia's African American neighborhoods with exceptional consistency. Residents were attacked in the streets. Homes and businesses were torn apart and burnt to the ground as mobs carried out nearly continuous campaigns of expulsion against Black residents. Two decades of riots in Philadelphia reveal a pattern of contests over space that amounted to the purification of a district by the enforced segregation and planned eradication of African Americans.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The exact identities of the violent White perpetrators are not clear from archival evidence. It was most likely a mix of individuals from different class and ethnic backgrounds who carried out attacks. African American leaders believed that Irish immigrants, who competed with African American workers for jobs, lived in the same neighborhoods, and were tenaciously loyal members of hose companies and gangs were often to blame. However, the archive does not prove their claims and police records from the era were insufficient. It is likely that men from Germany and Sweden, as well as Scotland and England, joined in the riots. Some would have been recent immigrants, and some would have been born in America. Rumor also

Each riot provided its own lesson about how the White majority would govern the African Americans of Philadelphia. The 1834 riots announced that the city was not to be shared. A strict segregation of space between White and Black would be enforced. In 1835, riots effectively isolated poor African Americans in the "infected district" of Moyamensing, wholly destroyed their homes and community, and left them with no place to call their own. The destruction of Pennsylvania Hall in 1838 meant that the mob interpreted racial uplift as amalgamation. Such amalgamation was offensive to the public interest and therefore required a violent response. The riots of 1842 sent the message that any public demonstrations of political ambition or group solidarity on the part of Philadelphia's African Americans would not be tolerated and would be suppressed with violence. Finally, the California House riots of 1849 announced the practical end of integrated spaces in Philadelphia, even in private establishments in the poorest communities. Lines of segregation would be enforced to ensure the purity of racialized distinctions.

Chapter 4 builds on the ideas of the pollution and purification from Chapters 2 and 3 to argue that attempts to purify space mirrored attempts to realize a purified citizenry of exclusively White men. Drawn from accounts of the Moyamensing slums, it argues that the environment was understood as an extension of the body and that the purity of the environment was closely linked to ideas about public culture, social order, and citizenship.

Proponents of African American disfranchisement, which passed the Pennsylvania State Constitutional Convention in 1838, used Black Philadelphia neighborhoods, particularly Cedar and Moyamensing, to argue that African

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had it that Southerners in Philadelphia, including medical students at the University of Pennsylvania, joined in the riots. See, Kilbride, D. (1999). Southern Medical Students in Philadelphia, 1800-1861: Science and Sociability in the " Republic of Medicine". *The Journal of Southern History*, 65(4), 697-732.

Americans were a degraded people who ruined the environments they inhabited. Philadelphia's influential Quaker population fought for African American equality at the voting booth and led the Abolitionist movement in the city. Quaker abolitionists widely believed Philadelphia's African American population was in need of reform, but they argued that schools and hospitals were more effective than prisons. Their commitment to equality took the form of advocacy for improvement rather than punishment or banishment. Poor African Americans could be molded into proper citizens, if placed in the right environments, Quakers argued. Black leaders urged African Americans in Philadelphia to exercise the utmost restraint in their public appearance. They understood public space as a stage on which both virtue and vice played out. Advancement would not come, they reasoned, if White men and women were able to view evidence of Black degradation in Philadelphia's public spaces.

These fears were augmented by news reports that depicted Black Philadelphians as drunken and disorderly, acting wholly outside the boundaries of civil practice. Finally, Frank Webb's novel *The Garies* argues that in the county of Philadelphia, the identity of a place was closely aligned with that of its inhabitants, a damning curse for any African Americans hoping to be welcomed as Philadelphians. Health and happiness were impossible goals for Black Philadelphians under constant threat of violent expulsion, according to Webb, one of the most able chroniclers of the African American experience in Philadelphia during the nineteenth century.

## **Method**

This project was inspired by two frustrations. The first has to do with what I take to be a general lack of attention to spatial and material conditions in historical and social scientific study. Scholars from these fields seem to share a tendency to privilege rhetorical and textual modes of expression. To this end, culture has often been understood as the product of words and ideas rather than as something to be

explored spatially and materially. My second frustration is with the specific renderings of violence and their interpretation in narratives of American history.

Too often scholars write as if violence is something already understood, undeserving of inquiry and explanation, and only ever a destructive force. With regard to the development of the mid-nineteenth century, scholars have failed to grasp what a generative force violence was to the development of antebellum Philadelphia. Violence is portrayed somewhat simplistically as the sporadic and inevitable explosion of human passions. In particular, riots come and go, punctuating urban life according to predictable rhythms. Scholars note these conflicts, offer statistics on the number of fatalities, and move on, but the constancy of violence makes it no less remarkable.

Violence has been a generative force shaping the experience and development of American cities from their founding to the present. Violence and the ongoing contest over space is a main character in the ongoing story of urban America. What is interesting about violence in the context of antebellum Philadelphia is the way in which arguments about public space, especially regarding territoriality, identity, and behavior within that space, were implicated in the riots that erupted so regularly in Moyamensing.

This dissertation focuses explicitly on violence, chiefly riot and arson, and argues that through violent practices Philadelphia was made and maintained. The project is founded upon the idea that place is in fact practice. From shifting tectonic plates, to insects transforming soil, to sewer systems, to paved and repaved streets, buildings rising and falling, and people interacting with all of it, place is never static. This project uses the daily news, diaries, strangers' guides, philanthropic reports and other evidence to demonstrate how the city of Philadelphia and the distribution of power within it were made and maintained through spatial relations.

These sources have been offered to readers before, but the stories of human misery associated with physical violence and degraded environments are largely absent. Slum exposés, dispatches from riots, and editorial opinions about the wretchedness of poverty have not gained sufficient attention in most historical accounts of the period. Only through a fresh look at the descriptions available in the daily news, personal letters, philanthropic reports, police and coroner records, and related ephemera can an accurate picture of the period's intense racial conflict over claims to public space and the riots they spawned fully emerge.

Contemporary theorists and historians have overstated the dimensions of the antebellum print world. Contrary to ideas about a republic of letters and national public sphere, textual communities in the mid-nineteenth century were local, isolated, and geographically dispersed. Forms of public communication were still mostly embodied and face-to-face. No national conversation connected readers of important texts. Trish Loughran, an American scholar of English and History, shows this in *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870*. Although I learned of this book late in my project, her argument aligns with the one I am making here and grounds my claims in a deeper body of evidence. The image of geographically dispersed audiences united by the idea of America is a recent construction. In its place, this project substitutes texts that pay almost obsessive attention to local concerns. As Loughran shows, material and infrastructural improvements connecting geographies in networks of transportation and communication were required before texts could circulate widely.

The dissertation relies on newspaper accounts, philanthropic surveys, and speeches. As text-based communities, each can be broadly categorized. Quaker newspapers such as *The Friend* generally endorsed abolition and equality through peaceful means. Although Quakers were often prominent members of Philadelphia

society, many of them regularly interacted with poorer neighbors in the poorest communities. Quakers sponsored and executed the major surveys of Black neighborhoods and property that are discussed in subsequent chapters.

Black abolitionist newspapers such as Frederick Douglass' *The North Star*, Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, and the *Pennsylvania Freeman* all advocated full equality for African Americans. They differed from each other over whether full integration into White society was the goal of equality. Black abolitionist newspapers represented the voice of elite Blacks, rarely if ever including reports from the poorest African Americans. They included detailed reports from the riots and gave voice to the Black middle class experience of violence in the antebellum period, while leaving silent those who were most affected by riot and arson. The poor and working class appeared sometimes by name, more often anonymously, as the objects of White hatred and symbols of the Black struggle in America.

Whig papers such as *The North American* generally condemned violence as a violation of law and order without taking a position on any of the political questions being fought over. They neither advocated abolition as did many radical Republicans, nor did they condemn African American insolence as did many Democrats. Its editors and reporters remained at a distance from their subjects and regarded riots and arson as offensive to law and order. The *Public Ledger* fell into this camp. First published in March 1836, the *Public Ledger* also chose to condemn violence while avoiding taking sides on questions of equality. This newspaper serves as the most important source for this project because of its rich records of slum life, riots, and arson. The paper distinguished itself among an array of competing papers by offering a new daily edition for only one cent. William Swain, Arunah Abell, and Azariah Simmons, all from New York, were its publishers. The *Ledger* professed to be a non-partisan paper in a market crowded with the printed mouthpieces of various political



interests. Insofar as the accounts of poverty, riots, and municipal governance from the 1830s to the 1850s are concerned, they remained faithful to this pledge. By the time the *Ledger* was feeding readers with the latest details of Pennsylvania Hall's 1838 destruction, the newspaper's circulation had climbed to 20,000 out of a population of nearly 200,000. Even with this depth of market penetration, reporters and editors rarely ventured into the slums and never gave voice to their residents.

Another category of papers can be characterized as anti-abolitionist and White supremacist in orientation. Within that group are the *Colonization Herald*, which promoted sending all African Americans back to Africa, and the *Philadelphia Daily Focus*, a Democratic and anti-abolitionist newspaper. These newspapers flatly rejected the Black slums as worthy of inclusion in Philadelphia society. They spoke out against emancipation and equality, often basing their judgment on their reporting of degraded Black people, their actions, and offenses.

Two newspapers, *Niles' Register* and *Hazards' Register*, were each edited compilations of newspapers from around the country and did not carry an overt editorial strain. *Niles'* and *Hazards'* both compiled articles from papers across the political and geographic spectrum. As such, they were excellent samplings of different political viewpoints, Whig, Republican, and Democrat. They offered a patchwork view of Philadelphia from multiple perspectives. Even with their broad scope, the perspectives missing were those from the slums.

Overall, the White textual community was interested in calling attention to Black misery, albeit for different reasons. Abolitionists and Quakers did so to publicize their plight, ask readers for aid, and combat injustice. Colonization men did so to advocate for the removal of African Americans based on their supposed inability to succeed in America. Each group used text as a one-directional medium

wherein the poorest and most vulnerable were represented to readers through the perspective of reporters and editors.

The Black textual community took a very different approach. Its leaders avoided any public visits to the slums and rarely ever mentioned them in speeches, except to offer criticism of alcoholism or revelry. Instead, Black leaders publicized rational arguments in favor of equality and emancipation. These media focused more on exemplary African Americans who counter stereotype rather than the poor who confirmed it. As a result, the most destitute Black Philadelphians remained mostly invisible to a Black media elite who were trying to minimize the appearance of misery and suffering in their ranks. To draw attention to this phenomenon within their community would, presumably, only confirm the judgment of Whites who saw the entire community as degraded and unfit for citizenship.

My strategy for sampling text sources was to read as widely as possible in print and online archives. My intention was to capture voices from across the political spectrum, including Black and White abolitionists, anti-abolitionists, and centrists. Throughout these chapters, I quote directly from primary source materials from the archive. I do not quote nineteenth century actors from twenty or twenty-first century sources, save for one or two instances in which I was unable to locate the original and the source provided an excellent addition to my argument. My aim is to give the reader direct access to the original materials as much as possible, and so I have conducted my work in the archives accordingly.

Additionally, I sought out a high volume of print materials to develop a sense of the content and tone of the daily news. I read through as many news archives at The Library Company of Philadelphia, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and The University of Pennsylvania libraries as possible. I sampled newspapers, survey reports, strangers' guides, traveler's reports, city mystery fiction, novels, and painting,

all of which appear in the chapters that follow. Newspaper authors and readers formed textual communities that attempted to make sense out of the activities of daily life, which will be a subject of further discussion in subsequent chapters.

Survey reports drafted by philanthropic institutions such as the Quakers, or the Society of Friends, provided unique insights into the ways of living and material circumstances of impoverished communities for their largely sympathetic readers. Exposé journalism printed in daily newspapers offered similar accounts to less sympathetic audiences. These newspapers' intentions were less directed towards philanthropy and more towards entertainment even titillation. Each source was a form of prosthetic knowledge for literate Philadelphians that gave them mediated experience of places they would most likely never inhabit. These texts extended the range of urban spaces familiar to the reader and offered the experience of "knowing" unfamiliar places. For comfortable, literate Philadelphians, reading these accounts in the comfort of their own middle class settings, the ability to experience the slums vicariously and pass judgment on their denizens extended their sense of responsibility for and control over city spaces beyond their own neighborhoods. As news reports, text became a spatial discovery tool that provoked readers to respond in a variety of ways, inspiring benevolent and reformist impulses in many Quakers, abolitionists, and other friends of the poor, and more antagonistic reactions in many others.

Likewise, strangers' guides rely on text to frame the experience of the city. Carried in-hand, the books guide pedestrians through the city via routes that highlight prominent social, economic, and political institutions. The historical and present city is rendered in its most idealized form, according to the myths of Penn's founding and the values of the American Revolution. The pedestrian body gains a first-hand experience of the urban environment mediated by the discourse of the text. The

meaning of the city and its monuments is consistent across these texts. One vision of the city structured the experiences of many visitors, whose interactions with it and its residents could be used to ignore, confirm, or deny the published representation.

Travelers' reports flip this relationship, using one embodied encounter with the city to offer an experience to many who will never visit. The text of travelers' reports collapsed distance by allowing a reader in London access to Philadelphia. The reading community lacked the experiential knowledge to refute the account. The reports of two British Quakers present the slums as priority stops on a tour examining Philadelphia County. They add to the dissertation evidence of how accounts of the county, including its slums, traveled far from Pennsylvania.

City mysteries, a form of popular fiction, literature, and painting all fashion an imagined Philadelphia from actual pieces of the city's environment and history. Text is used to recreate the city and expose its truths in ways that non-fiction accounts cannot. Frank Webb's *The Garies and Friends*, the second novel ever published by an African American, captures the violent contest over urban space. It also provides the perspective of an African American author whose novel drives home the point that even as wealthy landowners in a free northern city, African American lives and property could be destroyed at any moment.

The circulation of information involved visibility, that is, who is made visible and who is concealed. Text practices exposed the bodies of Philadelphia's poor while concealing the bodies of the author and the reader, each safe in his or her own space, where the surveillant eye of the press never followed.<sup>6</sup> Texts circulated

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<sup>6</sup> I am influenced here by Carolyn Marvin, who calls text a "a characteristic bourgeois device to manage and control bodies." Marvin defines literacy as "a set of variable and culturally specific techniques for organizing, expressing, and performing social relationships around the interaction of texts and bodies." Marvin. C. (1994). "The Body of the Text: Literacy's Corporeal Constant." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 80:2. 129-149, p.129.

widely, introducing a facsimile of the poor into new contexts and spaces throughout the northeastern and mid-Atlantic states, while providing no opportunity for those same poor to represent themselves or contest their representation.

Many archives are now online, a fact I took advantage of by organizing my search by both chronology and keyword. I read accounts of the days leading up to the riots, the days of the riots, and the days after the riots in several prominent newspapers. I also used keyword searches for phrases like “riot” and “Moyamensing” to capture any articles that might have escaped my first efforts. The combination of thematic and chronological searches yielded enough results to code and categorize for analysis. Throughout the project, I have erred on the side of including too many examples from this data rather than too few. My goal is to communicate the repetitive nature of reports on slum conditions and riot activities. These reports take on a banal quality as you read through countless examples, as if the human misery on display was a just and accepted aspect of Philadelphia’s urbanization.

On one front, politicians and constituents carried out a textual campaign to enshrine inequality by stripping African Americans of all voting rights. Disfranchisement was an efficient and comprehensive solution, allowing a few to exert control over an entire city, county, and its residents. On another front, mobs and a quiescent public enforced spatial segregation through physical violence. Physical violence was a very targeted approach, requiring the segregators to potentially harm their own bodies while extirpating African Americans from the body politic.

Each chapter fulfills the methodological task of assemblage theory of demonstrating interconnectedness by examining the practices required to maintain place. Practice is central to the construction of place, and involves the people, ideas,

and things that make it up.<sup>7</sup> The common formulation of “place” as static in contrast to dynamic “space” is wrong. Places are never stable or complete, but always recursively created and recreated through practice. Places shape bodies, cultural behaviors, and identity in myriad ways. Interpreting the ways in which places contribute to these processes provides insights into the formation and maintenance of personal and group identity such as that of “public citizen.” Understanding the role played by place and space in historical conflicts over access to the identity of public citizen, specifically as seen in the case of antebellum Philadelphia, is the goal of this dissertation.

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<sup>7</sup> Cresswell, 2002.

“Let not him who is houseless, pull down the house of another; but let him labor diligently and build one for himself, thus by example assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built.”<sup>8</sup>

– *Abraham*

*Lincoln*

“There is a deadly hostility in this city to the colored people. It now bursts out.”<sup>9</sup>

– *The Liberator*

“As men sow they will reap. There is a prolific crop to be yet gathered of rapine and violence in Philadelphia.”<sup>10</sup>

– *The New York Herald*

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<sup>8</sup> Lincoln quoted in Eric Foner. (1970). *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*. New York. P.20.

<sup>9</sup> H.C.W. “The King of Mobocrats.” *The Liberator*, May 25, 1838.

<sup>10</sup> “Law and Order in Philadelphia.” *The New York Herald*. August, 5, 1845. XI, 193. P.2.

## Chapter 1: The Ideal City

### Penn & Holme's Philadelphia

From its founding, Philadelphians invested great effort in reconciling the experience of the city with the idea of Philadelphia. William Penn arrived in North America to settle a Quaker colony where a new Christian way of life could take root.<sup>11</sup> Penn believed God had ordained the colony and that it would therefore play an important role in achieving Christian salvation.<sup>12</sup> Settlement and salvation required Christian, industrious, and virtuous colonists to aid Penn in carrying out God's will, which also included the civilization and conversion of the native peoples living there. If settlers achieved prosperity in Philadelphia, it would be evidence that God favored their work.<sup>13</sup>

On March 4, 1681 Charles II, King of England, issued *The Charter of Pennsylvania* granting Penn his land. Shares of Penn's colony began to be sold in July, 1681, with most sold in five thousand acre lots. Working with the Society of Friends in England, Penn created an outreach program to entice settlers to his colony, and employed sales representatives in Ireland,

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<sup>11</sup>Soderlund, J. R., & Dunn, R. S. (Eds.). (1983). *William Penn and the Founding of Pennsylvania: A Documentary History*. Univ of Pennsylvania Press. In his 1680 Petition to Charles II, Penn convinced the King of England to grant him a charter by offering to make the colony profitable to the crown. Charles II praised Penn for his efforts "to enlarge our English empire, and promote such useful commodities as may be of benefit to us and our dominions, as also to reduce the savage natives, by gentle and just manners, to the love of civil society and Christian religion." Quoted in Soderlund, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Frost, J. W. (1983). William Penn's Experiment in the Wilderness: Promise and Legend. *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 107(4), 577-605.

<sup>13</sup> Nash, G. B. (1968). City planning and political tension in the seventeenth century: the case of Philadelphia. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 112(1), 54-73..



Scotland, North England, and Holland. Penn's earliest investors sailed on the *Bristol Factor* from Bristol, UK to the shores of the Delaware River in Pennsylvania in late 1681. Four ships arrived in the late summer of 1682, and brought word that Penn would soon join them. Thomas Holme, Penn's surveyor, arrived on the *Amity* in fall of 1682. Penn set sail on the *Welcome*, arriving October 27, 1682. New settlers arrived in the fall of 1683 on five ships, two from Bristol, two from Liverpool, and one from London. In total, twenty-three ships arrived in Philadelphia in 1682, along with twenty more in 1683, each carrying about eighty people, according to Penn's estimates. Goods were imported from as near as New England, New York, Maryland, and Virginia, and as far as Barbados and Jamaica via coastal trade and shipping boats.<sup>14</sup>

Profits and providence were united in Penn's vision for Philadelphia. Penn set up a joint-stock company known as the "Free Society of Traders" to aid in the development of a colonial economy. First Purchasers bought five thousand acres that included lots along the Delaware riverfront. Property rights functioned as the basis for both government and social structure in the colony.<sup>15</sup> Penn gave detailed instructions to his commissioners, the owners of the five thousand acre tracts, who would accompany the new settlers.<sup>16</sup>

Penn commissioned Thomas Holme as his Surveyor General to design a master plan of the city to be used as a promotional piece in London. "A

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<sup>14</sup> Nash, 1968.

<sup>15</sup> Nash, 1968.

<sup>16</sup> Reps, J. W. (1965). *The making of urban America: A history of city planning in the United States*. Princeton University Press..

Portrait of the City of Philadelphia in the Province of Pennsylvania in America,” included a brief description of the territory that was published in 1683, and Penn’s pamphlet, “Letter from William Penn to the Committee of the Free Society of Traders.” If any settlers were to already occupy this land, Penn asked his commissioners to persuade (buy) them off it, so that “so necessary and good a design be not spoiled.”<sup>17</sup> Penn and Holme’s design featured open space for each property owner and prominent sites for public buildings. It also featured Holme’s highly ordered grid plan, making it a pioneer in urban design as the largest and most important city to adopt such geometric regularity in the Americas.

Holme’s design depicted a city that stretched from the Delaware River in the east to the Schuylkill River in the west, with twenty-three blocks in between. Eight blocks separated Vine Street in the north from Cedar in the south. (Cedar became South with consolidation in 1854.) Running north to south, Broad Street bisected the rectangular city. All north-south streets were numbered, and ran sequentially from each riverbank from Front (instead of First), to Second, on through Eleventh until Broad, when the numbers repeated, in descending order. To the west of Broad numbered streets were labeled Schuylkill, such as Third Schuylkill, while those to the east were labeled Delaware, such as Third Delaware. East-west streets were named for local plants and trees. In addition to city lots in Philadelphia, each of Penn’s first purchasers was granted acres in the surrounding areas north of Vine Street and south of Cedar Street (today South Street), which Penn called

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<sup>17</sup> Hazard, Annals, p.527-30.

“liberties,” where purchasers were free to develop country estates, as they desired. The liberties came to be known as districts and included Passyunk, Moyamensing, and Southwark in the south, and Spring Garden, and Northern Liberties immediately north of the city.

The actual settlement of the colony contravened Penn’s plans in important ways. First, the topography of Penn’s territory forced surveyors to depart from allocating property within the original city plan as intended. The area within Holme’s grid proved too small to apportion city plots to First Purchasers as promised, given the watershed, and many creeks, streams and rivers running through it.<sup>18</sup> Instead of five thousand acres within the city plan, First Purchasers got acres of the liberties in addition to their city plots. By 1701, after a prolonged dispute with his landholders, Penn decreed any property within the city not allocated on Holme’s “Portraiture” belonged to him to dispose of as he wished.<sup>19</sup> Penn and Holme’s plan for public parks and a gridiron of streets survived mostly intact.

Planning and designing a city on paper was one thing; enforcing a particular mode of settlement and social relations amongst a group of settlers creating a new society was another entirely. Early colonists chose not to spread across the territory’s width as Penn intended. Instead, they clustered nearest the Delaware River, around Second and High (Market) streets, in small villages of Swedes, English, and later German and Irish. Penn’s vision for a controlled environment of city-dwelling gentlemen within a day’s ride of

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<sup>18</sup> Nash, 1968.

<sup>19</sup> Nash, 1968.

their country estates remained unfulfilled well into the eighteenth century. His plan had situated each city house in the middle of a square lot, surrounded by grass and a fence. Instead residents packed in together in an urban density. The liberties north and south of the city and across the Schuylkill remained a relative wilderness in contrast to the city, providing either estate homes for wealthy gentlemen, farmland, or undeveloped open space. Theorizing Space in Antebellum White Philadelphia

The Philadelphia imagined in Charles II's *Charter*, Penn's advertisements, the stock company, and Holme's grid was what Henri Lefebvre calls conceived space, a representation of space intended for instructional, didactic, and instrumental uses tied to relations of production.<sup>20</sup> In these documents, "Philadelphia" was a scheme for ordering the material environment according to the surveyor's knowledge and the codes of conduct stipulated by property relations. The city in its earliest days was contained in such abstractions and speculations.

The period of Philadelphia's settlement and development transformed the city into a perceived space, where material symbols reinforced the city's meaning within the context of the urban environment. The right angles of intersecting streets imparted a uniform regularity on the city that made it navigable for outsiders unfamiliar with its layout. Grand civic buildings, offset within sprawling lawns neatly bordered by waist-high fences, framed perspectives and encounters around the civic and moral ideals of

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<sup>20</sup> Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (Vol. 30). Oxford: Blackwell, 38-40.

Philadelphia's founding. Samuel Otter describes how mid-nineteenth century writers employed Penn and Holme's grid plan as a rhetorical trope, an ironic setting for the riotous destruction of the era, "a measured surface that masks a fundamental disarray."<sup>21</sup> As we have seen and will explore further, by 1830 the grid plan was more ideal than reality. Nevertheless, the grid-ideal animated city life and fomented numerous contests over the direction of the city's future.

As the population grew, inhabitants transformed the city into a lived space, where comings and goings enlivened the meaning of the city through the rituals of daily routine. The lived space of settlement was not easily reconciled with the conceived space of Penn and Holme's plan nor did it try to be. Lived space defied geometric regularity and evenly spaced divisions, instead opting for tightly packed settlements that prioritized social practices and individual needs. Michel de Certeau has called social practices that contravene ordering schemes "enunciations." He uses the act of walking to explain how daily practices can undermine imposed orders. Certeau calls the abstraction of the mapped, designed city, the "concept-city.... a totalizing and almost mythical landmark for socioeconomic and political strategies."<sup>22</sup> The city as an object of thought is the fantasy city, an object of knowledge that is wholly governable, striving to achieve "a society of non-corporeal communion

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<sup>21</sup> Otter, 2010, p.158.

<sup>22</sup> Certeau, M. d. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p.95. De Certeau, M. (1998). *The Practice of Everyday Life: Living and cooking. Volume 2* (Vol. 2). U of Minnesota Press.

(the ideal, purified, administered city).”<sup>23</sup> The true city, according to de Certeau, exists in the daily routes traversed by the inhabitants, which produce their own “text” that remains illegible to the autocratic eyes of planners, governors, and engineers, who see the city as the product of their own interests and ideas.

De Certeau and other practice theorists overstate the importance of such enunciations at the expense of the idea of the city. All cities have been imagined prior to their founding, and it is safe to say all cities continue to be imagined and re-imagined as inhabitants trace their paths within the city’s spaces. It is a false choice between the concept of the city and its practice. The relationship between conceived and lived cities was and continues to be a daily negotiation between idea, material environment, and social practice. In Philadelphia, colonial settlement patterns revealed Penn and Holme’s planned city to be fiction, but it was a fiction that nonetheless continued to animate daily life and shape Philadelphia’s development.

The wide gulf between the conceived city and the lived city calls into question the object of study here – Philadelphia. The question of what a city is has been central to much of urban research and theory. Early research interrogated the physical city apart from its social life, while nonetheless implying a closer connection between the two. The American sociologist Robert Park argued the city was first and foremost immaterial, “a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this

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<sup>23</sup> Donald, 1999, p.24.

tradition.” Park did not wholly abandon the material environment in favor of the subjective city, he just subordinated one. “The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature.”<sup>24</sup> The human subjective experience is elevated above the “merely physical” and “artificial.”

A contemporary and collaborator of Park’s, Ernest Burgess’s organic metaphors focused on the spatial boundaries of social and economic relationships in the context of urban transformation. Urban growth was “a resultant of organization and disorganization analogous to the anabolic and katabolic processes of metabolism in the body.”<sup>25</sup> One “natural” urban process was segregation into different class and ethnic groups, which facilitated the categorization of people in the organization of urban life, intensified the distinctions between groups, and thus reinforced the identity differences among them. This project builds on Burgess’ insight into the relationship between spatial organization and social identity.

Lewis Mumford and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. each attempted to bridge the gap between the material and social realms through dramaturgical metaphors. Mumford described the city as, “a related collection of primary groups and purposive associations.”<sup>26</sup> In Mumford’s view, “purposive

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<sup>24</sup> Park, R. E., Burgess, E. W., & McKenzie, R. D. (1967). *The City* (1925). Chicago: Chicago UP. P.1

<sup>25</sup> Ernest Burgess. (1925). “The Growth of the City.” In *The City* (pp 47 – 62). Chicago: University of Chicago.

<sup>26</sup> Mumford, L. (1937). What is a city. *Architectural record*, 82, 59-62.

associations” distinguished a city from other forms of settlement, as actors coordinated to form “more significant culminations.” The drama of city life makes the city “a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity,” in Mumford’s words. Similar to Mumford’s dramaturgical metaphors, Schlesinger called the city “a place where men found a variety of outlets for their special talents, an opportunity to cultivate the art as well as the business of living.”<sup>27</sup> Given the subject matter considered herein, we should be warned against too sanguine an interpretation of special talents and the social drama. Direct conflict is absent from either theory. However, Mumford and Schlesinger move us closer to uniting the social and material.

### **Immigration, Urbanization and Transformation**

Penn had wanted a buffer between each household. He provided land that could be improved and made profitable through small-scale agriculture, that would also prevent against the ills of overcrowding, principal among them the threat of contagious fire. But most Philadelphia homes better resembled those in working class London neighborhoods: small, packed together on narrow, winding streets, pocked by interior courtyards and irregularly bisected by alleys. Poor, working class, and wealthy Philadelphians all sought the advantages of density and proximity to central market places like the one at Second and Market streets, the docks of the Delaware River, and the institutions along Chestnut.

Growth happened so quickly as to defy any attempt at order or planning. Philadelphia’s population statistics are as follows: 44,096 (1790),

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<sup>27</sup> Schlesinger, A. M. (1940). The City in American History. *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 27(1), 43-66.



61,559 (1800), 87,303 (1810), 98,193 (1820), 147,877 (1830), 198,009 (1840), 286,087 (1850), 565,529 (1860). Some of this growth is attributable to an influx of population and natural growth; some of it to annexation of contiguous areas. For example, Southwark and Northern Liberties were included in the 1820 count; Spring Garden and Moyamensing in 1830-40; Kensington in 1850. The 1860 count included the entire city consolidated now as Philadelphia County.<sup>28</sup> By 1830, the urbanized population was more than three times that of 1800. And by 1860, it was more than x times that of 1830.

Throughout the eighteenth century Philadelphia County's population remained mostly clustered east of Broad Street as people chose to stay in the central city rather than spread out into Northern Liberties, Southwark, Moyamensing, or any other ward. By the nineteenth century Philadelphia city had reached a density that has not been equaled in its history, with the wards bordering the Delaware River bursting at 93,000 people per square mile, with the average household containing about eight people, in a city without a public sewer or water system, with buildings generally only one, two, or three stories tall.<sup>29</sup> During this time, 52,000 new homes were added to the stock, averaging 6.6 residents per new home built.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Gibson, C. (1998). *Population of the 100 largest cities and other urban places in the United States: 1790-1990*. Washington, DC: US Bureau of the Census.

<sup>29</sup> Murtagh, W. J. (1957). The Philadelphia row house. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 16(4), 8-13. Schweitzer, M. M. (1993). The spatial organization of federalist Philadelphia, 1790. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 24(1), 31-57.

<sup>30</sup> Shammas, C. (2000). The Space Problem in Early United States Cities. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 57(3), 505-542.

Philadelphia was a great mix of diverse peoples with a range of backgrounds who lived in close proximity as they plied their trades, engaged in commerce and politics, and became “Americans.” The influx of new people between 1815 and 1860 included rural white men and women who flowed in from the farmlands of New Jersey to the east, and from north and west of Philadelphia. From Europe came the English, Scots, Germans and most of all after 1840 the Irish. By 1850, almost 60 percent of new immigrants came from Ireland, almost 20 percent from Germany, and roughly the same from England and Scotland combined.<sup>31</sup> The majority of Europeans came from small farming and fishing villages. Their introduction to a rapidly industrializing city was abrupt, especially in terms of living in compact neighborhoods that pulled together groups with different language, religious, and social customs.

Although the Irish had been in Philadelphia prior to the American Revolution, Irish immigration did not peak until 1846-47 as a result of the Irish potato famine. The Irish were the first great wave of immigrants to come to Philadelphia, and led off a number of decades of immigration and urban expansion. They left behind famines and hunger and arrived in Philadelphia at the apex of its growth. By 1850, the Irish accounted for 27 percent of Philadelphia County.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Nash, G. B. (2006). *First city: Philadelphia and the forging of historical memory*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 144..

<sup>32</sup> Laurie, B. (1974). “Nothing on compulsion”: Life styles of Philadelphia artisans, 1820–1850\*. *Labor History*, 15(3), 337-366., P.338. Adopted from *Census of the United States Population Schedule, County of Philadelphia, 1850*.

By and large, Irish immigrants to Philadelphia were unskilled laborers who performed menial tasks. Their employment was the most tenuous in a tumultuous labor market. Most were day laborers, carters, and teamsters. By 1850, some worked in skilled trades, but these were viewed by contemporary Philadelphians as the most dishonorable of the category, according to labor historian Bruce Laurie.<sup>33</sup> As a working population, they were very much like African Americans, who had long ago been shut out from apprenticeships and were mostly unskilled workers. The Irish and African Americans competed directly for work, though the Irish would win many more of these contests than not. Many Irish had worked the handlooms in Ireland or England, and became loomers, tailors, or shoemakers in Philadelphia. These roles were undergoing transformation in the industrializing economy, and work was often uncertain. German immigrants, by contrast, were mostly skilled workers in Europe and readily became craftsmen in Philadelphia, a distinction that offered greater pay, control over one's work, stability and advancement.

Alongside their African American neighbors, the Irish were residents of one of America's first ethnic ghettos. By 1850, the Irish owned roughly one half of all property in Moyamensing.<sup>34</sup> There were some exceptions – a few wealthy Irishmen with prominent homes in fancy neighborhoods. Many Irish lived in close proximity to middle class neighborhoods just north of Cedar or south of Northern Liberties.

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<sup>33</sup> Laurie, 1974.

<sup>34</sup> Clark, D. J. (1790). The Philadelphia Irish: Persistent Presence. *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1940*, 135-154.

For those Irishmen, there was an avenue out of poverty into those better neighborhoods, and it was to become a building contractor. Everyone from average laborers to skilled architects called themselves contractors. For the Irish, who suffered from discrimination, finding a commercial niche in serving other Irishmen as contractors was a way to get ahead. In fact, discrimination compelled the Irish to construct a “parallel-network” of churches, schools, and benevolent societies to serve their community. By contrast with African Americans in Philadelphia, they were able to accomplish this goal with little interference. This parallel network provided ongoing employment opportunities, allowed for creation of Irish neighborhoods in certain parts of the city, and helped individuals accumulate wealth. Territory plus capital also led to political influence, which in turn funneled resources and employment opportunities back into the Irish community, largely via these contractors. This was the Irish path out of poverty.

Decent housing was about more than home ownership. It was about having an ownership stake in Philadelphia, and, thereby, in American society. Dennis Clark describes a trend of increasing economic opportunity for the Irish from around 1850 onward, as Philadelphia continued to expand economically. This led to increased wealth and ownership in most aspects of Philadelphia life. Unskilled and uneducated Irish were able to escape poverty and the slums, and could look forward to graduating to semi-skilled and skilled work with decent wages. They were able to join in the benefits of an upwardly-mobile metropolis.

The Irish were able to dominate neighborhoods and wards but never city politics. At that level, they remained a minority constituency throughout the antebellum era. In this period, the Irish engaged in grassroots politics centered around the saloon and fire company headquarters. Irish allegiances primarily belonged to the Democratic Party. Irish citizens managed their affairs by working through local political bosses, which became the prototype for ethnic and machine-based politics in the later nineteenth century. Irish political behavior can be summarized as ethnically defined territorial control, centered around parishes, fire companies, and local bosses.

The ability to accumulate wealth in institutions, and to connect parishes, schools, and societies together to create a habitus network of places that shape an ethnic community was crucial for advancement in antebellum Philadelphia. African Americans were at a disadvantage in creating this infrastructure in Philadelphia relative to Irish Americans. Theodore Hershberg has argued that black families born into slavery more successfully transcended poverty than those free-born on account of strong church affiliations, which most free-born African Americans lacked. While Gary Nash has contested some of Hershberg's findings, it is clear that church networks in antebellum Philadelphia offered more than spiritual guidance for both African Americans and European immigrants.<sup>35</sup> They were centers of material gain and spaces of control and identification within the city.

Philadelphia was an important hub for African Americans, who concentrated in the county at far higher rates than anywhere else in the

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<sup>35</sup> See Nash, 1988.

surrounding region. By the 1850s, Philadelphia was home to over 22,000 African Americans, the largest concentration of black people outside the South. Black men and women came from the South, either free or fleeing slavery. Philadelphia was a main stop on the Underground Railroad, largely thanks to William Still, who worked at the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery and led emancipation efforts in the region.

The first significant wave of African American migration to Philadelphia occurred from 1790 – 1815, when slavery was being dismantled in the North and mid-Atlantic. Many farmers could not find agricultural work so they sought employment in cities. Unfortunately, detailed records of black migration are difficult to come by for several reasons. Some migrants were escaping slavery. Others had lived in Philadelphia for a few generations, but in white homes. Some were property holders and enumerated in censuses. Others were poor, and not counted until the surveys of 1837-38. In any case, we can sketch the population in broad strokes, and additional information will be presented in Chapter 3.

### **Ordering The Antebellum White Upper Class Built Environment**

These diverse immigrants crowded into a city bursting at the seams. City builders constructed uniform three-to-four story brick row homes within geometrically regular lots framed by streets that extended the grid into previously rural spaces. This type of formal development only partially filled out the urban grid.

A significant amount of development was informal and ad-hoc. Wood shanty houses were constructed in hidden places, filled in behind the larger row homes sharing the lot as renters, and clustered along the back alleyways that cut between major streets. Informal development had only the most tenuous relationship to prescribed modes of middle-class living and Penn's grand design for the city. It subverted the grid plan by filling in green space and lining alleyways not meant for housing. While these houses were typically geometrically regular squares, they were constructed with only one room per floor. The space was undefined, and usually crowded with inhabitants who often came from different families. Life in the informal city was irregular, even chaotic, responsive only to meeting the most basic and immediate material needs.

Property owners subdivided houses and lots to accommodate and profit from rapid population growth. Many landowners added rental units. Houses were built on lots facing both directions, outward toward the main street, and rearward, toward interior courts and alleys. In working class and poor districts, newly constructed alleys, courts, and small streets disrupted the grid plan's regularity, and were built up with small, idiosyncratic shelters, randomly assorted on lots and attached like barnacles to main buildings. Small alleys cut parallel and perpendicular paths across main streets and between houses to provide access to rear-facing houses and apartments. The typical lot in the city was only twenty feet wide, and seventy feet long. Most houses occupied the entire width, save for the possible alley carved out, and

only about half of the length, leaving additional room for out buildings behind the main structure.<sup>36</sup>

Neighborhoods turned over huge portions of their populations every year. Foreign and rural migration to the city increasingly undermined many Americans' sense of the known community of the colonial village. Almost 500,000 immigrants arrive in the U.S. in the 1830s, more than 1.4 million in the 1840s, and over 2.6 million by the 1860s. Most were Irish, English, and German. Immigrants and the poor crowded into apartments fashioned from attics, cellars, and wooden shacks, moving constantly to find better accommodations. The city was increasingly becoming a place to encounter strangers who looked, spoke, and often smelled quite different.<sup>37</sup> Between 1830 and 1860, according to Sam Bass Warner, Philadelphia had matured from a provincial town to a "modern big city."<sup>38</sup>

Philadelphia was renowned for its civic and religious spaces, economic institutions, and comfortable domestic living. High Street was nicknamed "Market Street" by residents on account of its merchants, auctioneers, hardware stores, grocers, and many more businesses all clustered between Front and Eighth on High.<sup>39</sup> Chestnut Street west of Fourth was one of the premier stretches in the entire country, with more prominent buildings in close

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<sup>36</sup> Shammas, 2000, p.520.

<sup>37</sup> Mohl, R. A. (Ed.). (1997). *The making of urban America*. Rowman & Littlefield..

<sup>38</sup> Warner, S. B. (1987). *The private city: Philadelphia in three periods of its growth*. Univ of Pennsylvania Press..

<sup>39</sup> This description is largely compiled from: Hastings, W. S. (1967). Philadelphia Microcosm. *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 91(2), 164-180..



proximity than almost any other. Carpenter's Hall, the Independence Square group, the United States Hotel, the Mint, Chestnut Street Theatre, the Bank of North America, the Arcade and Museum, the Masonic Hall, and at Ninth Street the University of Pennsylvania all stood together.<sup>40</sup>

Prominent African American buildings could be found throughout the city east of Broad, included Bethel Church, founded by Richard Allen at Sixth and Lombard Streets. Some churches such as the Episcopal Church of the Crucifixion, on Eighth north of Shippen, had racially mixed congregations, with white parishioners downstairs and African Americans above in the balcony. From Sixth to Broad, the finest homes in the city filled out the streetscape. Commerce still animated the older portions of the city, bound by Race and Walnut, Fourth and the Delaware River. Popular hotels, inns, and taverns dotted each street in this neighborhood. The *Franklin Gazette*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *American Daily Advertiser* were all published in the square formed by Market and Chestnut, between Third and Fourth.<sup>41</sup>

Rapid growth and development in the decades preceding the Civil War inspired schemes designed to bring order to American cities. The development of the American city in the nineteenth century is often told as a story of spatial differentiation and metropolitan integration spurred by the technological advances of industrialization, particularly those in transportation

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<sup>40</sup> According to the Independence Hall Association in Philadelphia, the square took on its current name of Independence Square in the 1820s. It was earlier referred to as either "State House Yard" or "State House Garden." From, <http://www.ushistory.org/independencehall/history/indhall6.htm>. Accessed July 16, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Hastings, 1967, p.170.

and communication.<sup>42</sup> As cities grew in population and geographic scale they required city builders to become urban managers of increasingly complex systems. Land uses became more specialized. No longer did the artisan mechanic live in a bedroom above his ground floor workshop. Increasingly mechanized production took place in factories, which were entirely different from the new stores that sold their goods, which were again often separate from the residential buildings in which both producers and consumers alike lived. The specialization of the real estate economy paralleled the increasing social stratification of groups along class, race, and ethnicity lines. American cities had become unstable, with so many diverse people crowding into unhealthy urban environments competing for increasingly demanding jobs, and municipal authorities had little power to shunt the entropic forces.

Historians frequently employ order, and the lack of order, as a framework to interpret urbanization in the decades between 1820 and 1860. Gunther Barth argues that from the 1830s until the 1910s residents of the “modern city” built new environments in which they crafted identities and forged community ties. Urban dwellers invented and redesigned the apartment house, city press, department store, ballpark, and vaudeville house as sites that fostered mutual identification and representation through large-scale shared experiences that provided a buffer against the increasingly strange character of rapidly developing cities.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Scobey, D. M. (2003). *Empire city: The making and meaning of the New York City landscape*. Temple University Press..

<sup>43</sup> Barth, G. (1980). *City people: The rise of modern city culture in nineteenth-century America* (p. 65). New York: Oxford University Press.

Christian morality along with Enlightenment rationality were driving forces behind many of the new buildings that rose to meet the social challenges of urban disorder, including penitentiaries, asylums, and public schools. These were institutions designed to shape personal development. As Howard Chudacoff and Judith Smith write, “housed together, away from their families and the temptations of city life, the poor could be rehabilitated in a controlled environment that would teach them values of orderliness and industry.”<sup>44</sup> Almshouses and workhouses became popular urban “solutions” for the problems of the poor and homeless in the 1820s, ‘30s, and ‘40s, largely due to their efforts to get the destitute off of city streets into more permanent shelters. Reformers blamed the urban environment for the vices of the poor, arguing that the controlled and orderly environments of philanthropically designed institutions could reform them into productive members of society.

On a larger scale, urban planning was an attempt to bring the civic ideal of rationality and orderliness into creation of the built environment. Sensory order was paramount in this regard. City builders worked to minimize the sounds and smells of the city to privilege lines of sight and enhance the visual landscape in which they constructed new buildings and plazas to foster virtuous interactions. Opinion leaders sought out quieter materials and methods for street paving, attempted to outlaw forms of noise making in the markets, banished cemeteries to the periphery, and built new sewers to

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<sup>44</sup> Chudacoff, H. P., Smith, J. E., & Baldwin, P. C. (1975). *The evolution of American urban society*. Prentice-Hall..

transfer waste to unoccupied (or under-occupied) areas of the city.<sup>45</sup> These efforts were designed to encourage and enforce a civilized way of life conforming to republican ideals and, later, to capitalist priorities. Political and economic elites devoted huge amounts of energy and resources to “inventing” built environments deemed appropriate and necessary for new ways of life. Visual regularity and spatial uniformity were the aesthetic, material, and ideological manifestations of these attempts. Streets and buildings were both made more uniform.

Carpenters, not architects, built most homes of wood and brick, and became the “master builders” of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The construction industry employed about a fifth of the “craft” population in early nineteenth century Philadelphia and one tenth of the entire male work force, according to Donna Rilling’s research.<sup>46</sup> Master builders solicited work, drafted designs and building plans, managed finances, and oversaw construction. Carpentry was even a path to literacy and numeracy. Many attended school for reading and arithmetic after a day at the mechanic’s shop. Carpenters contracted directly with clients to design and build homes, which allowed them to pursue speculative building, buying up land and building on credit. By the 1830s, builders operated at such scale that some constructed as many as fifty homes simultaneously. The occupation provided a path toward improving one’s economic and political situation too.

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<sup>45</sup> Upton, D. (2008). *Another city: Urban life and urban spaces in the new American republic*. Yale University Press, 3. .

<sup>46</sup> Rilling, D. J. (2001). *Making Houses, Crafting Capitalism: Master Builders in Early Philadelphia, 1790-1850*. Univ of Pennsylvania Press.viii.

Tradesmen took advantage of every opportunity to become their own bosses through innovative uses of subcontracting and specialized skills.<sup>47</sup>

By mid-century, architecture claimed greater prominence from carpentry by promoting aesthetic arguments for their profession, arguing that social and political ideals were attached to architectural forms. Federalists promoted the idea that beauty, symmetry, and spatial arrangement were the first tools of civilizing new urban migrants. Philadelphia featured prominently in the development of national architectural styles, as Dell Upton has written: “many of the new urban and architectural forms and practices of the early nineteenth century first appeared in the United States in Philadelphia, and Philadelphians often articulated their purposes most clearly.”<sup>48</sup> Building a better city would mold character and shape an American identity for every city dweller.<sup>49</sup>

At the heart of this effort was the creation and profusion of architectural books “intended to codify and extend the craftsman’s knowledge” in a competitive building market where anyone could claim design credentials and erect buildings.<sup>50</sup> The professional difference between architect and builder was still barely distinguished by 1830 when Asher Benjamin published *The Practical House Carpenter*. After 1830 or so, the books defined the architect’s

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<sup>47</sup> Rilling, 2001, p.x-xi. In their work to build Philadelphia, Rilling argues, these craftsmen built a modern form of American capitalism too.

<sup>48</sup> Upton, 2008, p.9

<sup>49</sup> Clark, 1976. P.42-3.

<sup>50</sup> Upton, D. (1984). Pattern books and professionalism: Aspects of the transformation of domestic architecture in America, 1800-1860. *Winterthur Portfolio*, 19(2/3), 107-150..

professional credentials, effectively separating his position from all other house builders. Upton divides these publications into builders' handbooks, focused on carpentry, stylebooks, which presented exemplary designs to laymen as well as builders, post-Civil War mail-order catalogs, which advertised pre-fabricated elements, and technical manuals for architectural drafting and structural engineering.<sup>51</sup> Pattern books disseminated architects' arguments in favor of certain forms so as to codify architectural tastes. In so doing, these works created a new national architectural aesthetic.

The professionalization of architecture prompted a shift from craft-based building employing regional styles to architect-led building incorporating national and international styles. The implications of the shift meant that more than ever before, the aesthetics of the built environment had a didactic purpose in the cultivation of civic virtues and identity. The Franklin Institute and Carpenters' Company began programs in architecture and drafting education in 1824 and 1833 respectively. Architectural education cultivated a common visual vocabulary in the city through lectures for the privileged and trade manuals and pattern books for the majority of builders. Builders employed increasingly sophisticated sketches to communicate among themselves, solicit new work, and advertise their trade.<sup>52</sup>

Builders turned to classicism, the dominant style in Philadelphia after the Revolution, to reshape the built environment according to principles of symmetry, monumentality, and geometric order signifying the highest ideals of

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<sup>51</sup> Upton, 1984, p.108.

<sup>52</sup> Rilling, 2001, p.79.

western civilization. Benjamin Henry Latrobe built the Bank of Pennsylvania in 1798, one of the finest and earliest examples of the Greek Revival style, as well as the Fairmount Water Works. William Strickland built the Naval Hospital, while Thomas Carstairs designed a uniform row of houses for Sansom Street. By the 1820s, Philadelphia had achieved a leadership position among cities in the Greek Revival movement, with William Strickland, Thomas Walter, and John Haviland contributed buildings such as the Second Bank of the United States (1819-1824), Franklin Institute (1826), Naval Hospital (1828-1832), the Merchant's Exchange (1832-1834), and Girard College (1833-1848). These were "temple structures," as one architectural historian has called them, that reshaped Philadelphia's built environment according to principles of symmetry, monumentality, and "Grecian orders."<sup>53</sup>

The Greek revivalists of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were most concerned with how public order was reflected in the facades and arrangement of buildings. Formal beauty was a good in and of itself. The mid-century romantics who followed them refuted these ideas, arguing the Greek revival period was dishonest artifice. Romantics felt building facades should accurately reflect the nature of activity inside them, whether a bank, factory, or private residence. Form was only beautiful if it evoked the proper thoughts in the eyes of the beholder, if it inspired moral and spiritual uplift.

As the environment was reordered to prioritize a certain vision of the city and citizen, people and behaviors deemed out of place stood out by

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<sup>53</sup> Cohen, J. A. (2000). Evidence of Place: Resources Documenting the Philadelphia Area's Architectural Past. *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 124(1/2), 145-201..

contrast. One effect of the reordered environment was to publicly expose those who were out of place. Philadelphians achieved social status by taking a public life and making it private. By mid-century, Philadelphians believed that civic virtue could be on display in the street, but personal cultivation took place in private. The rapidly changed city had grown too chaotic. Mobs took private lives and make them irreversibly public. They denied privacy by destroying homes and burning out neighborhoods. They ensured that many would live with only the barest means of subsistence. While the aesthetics of wealthy Philadelphian homes do not directly influence the attempts to control urban space by disfranchisement and violence, they highlight the spatial antithesis to those processes. The wealthy and empowered created forms of habitus according to their own ideals. These ideals directly contradicted the living conditions of the poor, and fed the distinction between moral and immoral ways of living.

The popularity of Gothic architecture at mid-century marked an increasing interest in shaping lives and moral character through the design of interior domestic space.<sup>54</sup> Density had cluttered and confused the meaning of public space, so thought leaders advocated an inward focus. The Gothic revival style found its greatest expression in Haviland's 1829 Eastern Penitentiary in the Fairmount section, north of the city. The Moyamensing County Prison, located on 10<sup>th</sup> and Reed streets in Moyamensing, the prison was rendered in English Gothic style, a castle complete with battlemented bastions, corner turrets, and parapets, as well as lancet arches and hood

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<sup>54</sup> Clark, 1976. P.41-2.



molds above the front windows.<sup>55</sup> John Dorsey, an amateur architect and merchant, designed and built one of the first Gothic revival buildings on Chestnut between Eleventh and Twelfth streets in 1810. Philadelphia in the 1820s, 30s, and 40s was home to multiple architectural revivals, from Greek, to Egyptian. The romantics, however, never completely left the revivalists behind. One early historian described the spirit of these years as being a “commingling of the classic urge with the romantic,” a red city with brick-built homes punctuated by marble and stucco temples.<sup>56</sup>

Owing to the desire for density and mandate for brick construction, contiguous row homes became the most common form of domestic architecture early in Philadelphia’s history. Internal improvements such as leveled and paved streets were relatively rare in Philadelphia through much of the eighteenth century, making travel and communication across distance difficult. Vibrant social, economic, and religious life required spatial density, which row homes provided.<sup>57</sup> The sidewalk in front of the row homes, common throughout the city, added a social dimension to the street and lively spaces of interaction.

Insurance guidelines served as an unofficial building code in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Contributionship refused to insure wood

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<sup>55</sup> McCown S. (1984). *Philadelphia County Prison (Moyamensing Prison)*. *Historic American Building Survey*. National Parks Service., PA1097.

<sup>56</sup> Harbeson, W. (1943). Mediaeval Philadelphia. *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 67(3), 228.

<sup>57</sup> Ames, K. (1968). Robert Mills and the Philadelphia row house. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 27(2), 140-146..

structures after 1769 and demanded thicker walls, and the separation of less-valuable properties from the main structure. Made from brick, the row home was often identical to the house on either side of it, making for a whole block of visually repetitive facades. The earliest row of contiguous homes in Philadelphia was Budd's Row, built around 1691. The earliest known planned row is that designed by Thomas Carstairs and Benjamin Henry Latrobe in 1800-1803, built back-to-back on Walnut and Sansom streets. One of Latrobe's assistants, Robert Mills (1781-1855), built Franklin Row in 1810-1811 on Ninth Street between Locust and Walnut. Lots were twenty three feet wide and ninety feet deep, and houses filled the entire width and extended forty feet deep. The houses were three and a half stories high, with two rooms on each floor, and the kitchen and dining room in the basement. The aesthetics of Latrobe, Haviland, and Mills' row homes were adopted from English and French architectural traditions.<sup>58</sup>

The mass-market luxury, understated aesthetics, and highly regular, geometric angles of row home architecture all helped it gain prominence in Philadelphia during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Facades were mostly symmetrical and without elaborate adornments. Tripartite windows, recessed arches, and wooden shutters were the principle aesthetic embellishments that differentiated the various row home architectural styles.<sup>59</sup> Street-facing facades were rectangular, flat, and uniform. They might have distinguished themselves from those on other streets, but when planned, they

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<sup>58</sup> Ames, 1968, p.140-141.

<sup>59</sup> Ames, 1968, p.144

rarely deviated from the form of their contiguous neighbors. As architectural expression goes, it was the block of row homes that was meant to be interpreted, not the individual home. American born and trained architects of early nineteenth century Philadelphia set about to construct the city block by block, rather than home by home, promoting a uniformity that suppressed individual difference.

William John Murtagh, an early historian of Philadelphia's row house architecture, describes four predominant styles from the late seventeenth through nineteenth centuries: the bandbox, the London, the city, and the town house.<sup>60</sup> The bandbox was modest, small and affordable to most Philadelphians, measuring about sixteen feet square with only one room per floor, and either two or three stories tall. Bandbox houses filled the courtyards, alleys, and lesser streets of the city, were built for shelter not presentation, and comprised much of the infill around the more stately homes and streets. London houses, as the historian Murtagh describes them, were built on larger lots with rear yards accessed by a small alleyway between houses. The bandbox and London house types were often enlarged into what Murtagh calls the "city" and "town" houses respectively, achieved by adding additional rooms to the rear of the structure. This back-building resulted in a tapering of the buildings from the street-facing facades to the rear of the lot. Rooms for hosting guests, entertaining, and family functions were therefore placed toward the front of city and town houses, while rooms with the functional purposes of food preparation, horse and carriage maintenance, or bathrooms

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<sup>60</sup> Murtagh, 1957, p.9.

were placed toward the rear. Town house expansion came at the cost of bandbox housing, meaning that as a building was extended to the rear, the bandbox houses in courts and alleyways were either demolished or precluded from ever being constructed.

The disruptions to family life and the increasingly hectic nature of urban living in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century prompted a shift in attitudes about domestic architecture. The uniformity evidenced in row houses and the push for a single national architectural style paralleled attempts to create a uniform population of Americans, alike in race, culture, and creed.

Middle class and wealthy homes were increasingly viewed as sanctuaries in which families could escape the chaos and clamor of industrial urban life, where families could cultivate virtue and protect members from the city outside.<sup>61</sup> Starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and accelerating in the nineteenth, wealthier homes grew in size as the interior division of space changed to accommodate rooms set aside for both private and public functions.<sup>62</sup> Individuals had their own private rooms for sleeping and dressing. Guests were welcomed into antechambers and sitting rooms specifically designed to offer a vision of domestic life for public consumption. Women were protected

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<sup>61</sup> Clark, C. E. (1976). Domestic architecture as an index to social history: the romantic revival and the cult of domesticity in America, 1840-1870. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 7(1), 33-56.. Gillis, J. R. (1997). *A world of their own making: Myth, ritual and the quest for family values*. Harvard University Press..

<sup>62</sup> Sharon Salinger maps exterior and interior living spaces in 18th century Philadelphia using evidence from the Philadelphia Contributionship for the Insuring of Houses From Loss by Fire, the first successful fire insurance company in the northern American colonies founded in 1752. Salinger, S. V. (1995). Spaces, inside and outside, in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 26(1), 1-31..

from prying eyes when kitchens were shifted to the back of the home or basement. Back staircases were added in wealthy homes so that servants could prepare the food out of sight of any guests. Front rooms were no longer hearths that hosted most of a family's activities.

Wealthier homes became stage settings for scripted encounters designed to present a strategic portrait of a family. The distinction between what was made private and public became increasingly important to the lives of wealthy Philadelphians, as did the individuation of family members, each with his or her own space. No longer was the family a cohesive unit. Now members were each distinct, with their own rule-governed roles to play. The industrialization of the city that prompted the segregation of land according to use was mirrored in the social division of space inside the home. This was an era where confusion and collision was met with schemes of sorting and classification.

### **Strangers' Guides and the Idealized City**

The city of Philadelphia was presented in idealized form in Strangers' Guides. These pocket-sized books were popular in the mid-nineteenth century as travel guides for prominent cities. They included descriptions of popular sites, facts about population, economy, and religion, scenes from around the city, and suggested routes for site-seeing. They were helpful for visitors, but also for residents who could use them as directories. Strangers' Guides made the case against Moyamensing more subtly through the implied contrast between their vision of an idealized city and the realities of the slums. These guides offered readers a rationally/critical representation of the city that

systematically denied inconvenient people, practices and places. Although published by multiple shops and written by different authors, these guides all relied upon the same partial geography of Philadelphia to frame the city. Public and commercial buildings, markets, parks, trade statistics, and descriptions of religious and philanthropic institutions were given as evidence for the importance and meaning of Philadelphia. Whatever did not conform to this idealized version of the city was omitted.

Each guide stated its purpose as the presentation of facts interesting to visitors. James Mease described his 1811 guide as “the multiplication of facts,”<sup>63</sup> while *Philadelphia in 1824* offered “strangers and citizens a considerable mass of accurate information in a very portable form.”<sup>64</sup> *Philadelphia As It Is* in 1834 was intended as “a book of reference, and guide to the numerous business concerns,”<sup>65</sup> while *A Hand-Book for the Stranger in Philadelphia* from 1849 was meant to provide “a short description of all the Public Institutions and Buildings of Philadelphia, as well as to direct the attention of the traveller to such objects as are most likely to interest him.”<sup>66</sup> *Philadelphia as it is in 1852* acknowledged its explicit commercial purpose, offering the guide for “its intrinsic value as a complete guide for strangers and others to all places of interest and attraction in the city, as well as an advertising medium of rare advantage.” This guide’s “Philosophy of

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<sup>63</sup> Mease, 1811, p.xi.

<sup>64</sup> *Philadelphia in 1824*, (1824), p.iv.

<sup>65</sup> *Philadelphia As It Is*. (1834). Philadelphia: P.H. Gray. P.v.

<sup>66</sup> *A Hand-Book for the Stranger in Philadelphia*, 1849, p.3.

Advertising” highlighted “the attractive qualities” of Philadelphia businesses “in so peculiar and inviting a form.”<sup>67</sup>

Guides were compiled to offer a perspective on the city, arranging many elements into a single resource that could capture the meaning of Philadelphia. They mentioned the Moyamensing district in passing, typically featuring little more than the Moyamensing Prison. Guides commonly included lists of and descriptions of the following: Philadelphia’s settlement history, government, manufactures, commercial institutions, religious institutions, moral reform societies, banks, insurance companies, cultural societies, the justice system, public squares and gardens, educational institutions, federal government institutions, municipal buildings, engine and hose companies, hotels and bath houses, and miscellaneous other buildings and sites. It was nearly impossible for visitors to experience all these venues. The 1849 *Stranger’s Guide* reads, “Unless acquainted with some resident, he finds it among the most difficult matters; first, to ascertain what objects ought first to claim his attention, from their interest or importance, provided he cannot see all; and next, to know how to obtain access to them.” The guide mapped an experience of the city that, it argued, best captured Philadelphia. “In all cities there is a class of objects, which almost always engage the attention of travellers, and not to have seen which, would, upon his return home, derogate from his character as an intelligent and accurate observer.”<sup>68</sup> The city was a

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<sup>67</sup> Smith, 1852, p.iii.

<sup>68</sup> *A Hand-Book for the Stranger in Philadelphia*, (1849), p.3-4.

vanguard, the guide argued, and understanding its modern and cosmopolitan character was a mark of the fashionable visitor.

Readers of these guides needed to know how Philadelphia had become what it was. James Mease's *The Picture of Philadelphia* (1811) begins with a brief historical account of the city, which furthers the mythic conception of Penn as the beloved founding father. "Whatever impressions the inhabitants may have received of their future governor from his friends who had preceded him, his conduct on his arrival was sufficient to ensure their attachment."<sup>69</sup> Mease portrays Penn as galvanizing native and colonist support through his magnanimity and vision, prompting Swedish settlers who predated Penn's arrival to declare his landing, "*the best day they had ever seen.*" Penn was revered, the story goes, for his vision for the colony, beginning with "the law *concerning* LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE." And although Penn took possession of his land with a title "deemed valid by all nations," he nonetheless "thought it necessary to obtain an additional right from the aborigines of the soil by fair and open purchase," thereby signaling his commitment to equality between all peoples.<sup>70</sup>

The 1824 Stranger's Guide comments:

Stained with no blood, darkened by few of the excesses of faction, unpolluted by tyrants or bigots, its foundations laid deep in religion and morality, and public liberty and political wisdom, the history of this city may be cited as a striking proof of the justness of the observation, "That there exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness, between duty and advantage,

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<sup>69</sup> James Mease. (1811). *The Picture of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: B. & T .Kite. p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> Mease, 1811, p.9-10.



between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy, and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity.<sup>71</sup>

This type of hagiographic account of Penn's arrival reappears numerous times in a wide variety of nineteenth century Philadelphia publications. The narrative served multiple purposes. First, it established Penn and his vision for the city, along with his views on tolerance and equality, as Philadelphia's defining features. The rendering supports Penn's claims that Philadelphia was God's chosen place, and his colonists, chosen people. In other words, venerating Penn and his vision reinforces a hierarchy in which white European men were entrusted with leading the city as the heirs to Penn's legacy. Second, this account obscures the messy aspects of the city's commercial development as the engine of growth, the legacy of slavery and slave-trading among Penn's First Purchasers and early colonists, and the social and economic strife beginning to boil over in nineteenth century Philadelphia. By promoting the mythic vision of Penn's colony, the promotional literature argues that noble ideas are more truthful than material realities.

This historical narrative also conveys the unmistakable message that Penn's colony was an improvement on the natural state he and his First Purchasers encountered when they arrived in the region. Mease calls the colonization process Penn led, "progress from the stages of rude society to comfort, riches, refinement..." which he follows with, "for the hand of a particular Providence was more than once interposed in their behalf." Penn's

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<sup>71</sup> *Philadelphia in 1824*. (1824). Philadelphia: H.C. Carey & I. Lea. P.2.

colony grew wealthy because it was God's will that it be so, according to Mease's mythic history. Carey & Lea's *Philadelphia in 1824* describes the site of Penn's colony as "covered with forests; and wild men and savage beasts had a pretty equal title to it."<sup>72</sup> The *Stranger's Guide* from 1849 echoes: "the tract of ground upon which Philadelphia now stands was covered with forests, and people only by savages.... From this time [Penn's founding] forward until the present, the city has steadily increased in size and wealth."<sup>73</sup> *Philadelphia As It Is* in 1852 put it this way: "Our beautiful streets, now alive with the ceaseless hum of industry and the turmoil of commerce, was the hunting-ground of the Indian. Behold the change!"<sup>74</sup>

As the guides moved from founding mythologies to guided tours through the contemporary city, they highlighted Philadelphia's proud public buildings, comfortable homes, and egalitarian ethos: "Probably in no other city in the Union, can visitors' time be more profitably and pleasantly spent in viewing the public edifices than in our city," according to the 1849 *Stranger's Guide*.<sup>75</sup> Independence Hall and Carpenters' Hall, High Street Market, Washington Square, The Athanaeum, American Philosophical Society, Academy of Natural Sciences, Bank of the United States, Blockley Alms House, Fairmount Water Works, Girard College, Laurel Hill Cemetery,

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<sup>73</sup> *A Hand-Book for the Stranger in Philadelphia*. (1849). Philadelphia: George S. Appleton. P.16.

<sup>74</sup> R.A. Smith. (1852). *Philadelphia as it is in 1852*. Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston. P.14.

<sup>75</sup> *A Hand-Book for the Stranger in Philadelphia*, (1849), p.19.

Eastern Penitentiary, Christ Church, and the Cathedral of St. Peter and St.

Paul filled out the itineraries of most guidebooks:

The mere enumeration of the public institutions of this city, established and supported for the diffusion of education, the relief of distress, the improvement of the human condition, the advancement of philosophy and literature, and similar purposes, will probably surprise even most of those in whose vicinity philanthropy has been so actively at work.<sup>76</sup>

Philadelphia was a city built to advance civilization and promote the civic virtues that served as its engine of improvement.

The implicit argument that city building was a to enhance life and livelihood was evident in the description of prominent institutions as well. The Eastern Penitentiary and House of Refuge were both environments designed explicitly to reform behavior and human character. The House of Refuge was built for young people under 18 years of age, “who have either committed crime, or, from natural disposition, are unmanageable by parents or guardians.” By removing youth from the company of adult offenders, the House of Refuge is better able “to render them, by a course of training and education, and the inculcation of virtuous principles, useful members of society.”<sup>77</sup> The Eastern State Penitentiary rehabilitated its inmates through a novel system of solitary confinement and employment, which prevented the interaction of inmates and the spreading of criminal behaviors, and promoted the virtues of hard work and productive labor. The 1852 guide calls it the most “*perfect, humane, and reformatory system*” in the United States.<sup>78</sup> The

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<sup>76</sup> *Philadelphia in 1824*, p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> *A Hand-Book for the Stranger in Philadelphia*, (1849), p.55-56.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, 1852, p. 383.

inclusion of the House of Refuge and Eastern Penitentiary, along with Moyamensing and Debtor's Prison on Passyunk Road, and the Blockley Alms House along the western bank of the Schuylkill, among others, as frequent sites of tourist attraction highlight the importance of environments designed to shape human behavior and character. Along with benevolent institutions such as Pennsylvania Hospital and The Naval Asylum, these structures were important components anchoring its inhabitants to a sense of shared civic purpose instantiated through public architecture.

To the degree that guidebooks reflected on private spaces, they offered the gracious homes of Philadelphia as evidence that domestic life in the city was of relative comfort for all residents, regardless of class or color. While public buildings galvanized collective pursuits, private homes offered serene places to which Philadelphians could repair and rejuvenate their spirit, free from the antagonisms that arose in more crowded cities:

Few can rival [Philadelphia] in the health, comfort, pleasure, and happiness of its inhabitants. Our city is not so thickly populated, for its extent, as some others. The streets are wide, and the inhabitants of every class enjoy more room than usual in large cities. Not only the merchant, wealthy manufacturer, and persons well to do in the world, occupy each an entire dwelling, but traesmen of the most humble class can have a house to themselves.<sup>79</sup>

Philadelphia buildings were distinguished for the "neatness and comfort" they extended to all inhabitants, according to the typical claims made in these publications. The 1852 Stranger's Guide contrasts Philadelphia to European cities: "Let foreigners talk of their splendid palaces, mansions, and

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<sup>79</sup> Smith, 1852, p.18.

rich dwellings; theirs is but the parade of pomp and vanity, ours is social comfort.”<sup>80</sup> Philadelphians, evoking the Quaker ethos of “plain people,” are “indifferent about notoriety and distinction. Display is certainly not the characteristic of Philadelphia whatever it may be of other cities.”<sup>81</sup> Domestic buildings enabled the Philadelphian “to live within his own family free from interruption, contest, or intrusion, to have his house clean and comfortable, his apartments adapted to their several purposes, and in every respect convenient, is our citizen’s delight; to effect all these, the builder exerts his utmost skill.”<sup>82</sup> Guidebooks portrayed a city in which living had been elevated to an art and science. Its place and associated “civilized” practices were essential to its meaning. The city was a technological marvel, designed to enhance prosperity and equipped with builders capable of executing plans for perfection of its spaces.

Likewise, “the streets are wide and airy, crossing at right angles; they surpass all others in the world, in their convenience for trade and accommodation for passengers, and are well paved and kept remarkably clean. At night they are well lighted with gas.” The 1852 guide names Philadelphia “the most healthy city in the United States.... There is—and we say it without fear of contradiction—no other city, the inhabitants of which

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<sup>80</sup> Smith, 1852, p.17.

<sup>81</sup> *Philadelphia in 1824*, p. 10.

<sup>82</sup> Smith, 1852, p.17.

enjoy so many of the accommodations art can afford, as those of Philadelphia.”<sup>83</sup>

In short, Philadelphia had all the hallmarks of an orderly, civilized, and advanced society as manifested both in its ways of living and its built environment. Its regular street grid, distinguished public buildings, vibrant markets, and uniform domestic architecture were so frequently commented upon by travelers and critics in the late eighteenth century that by the early nineteenth they had become tropes by which to measure progress in the city. Unfortunately, concerns arose that the direction of change was more devolution than evolution. The order of the grid was juxtaposed to the disorder of the Jacksonian era. The distinguished public buildings were contrasted to the working class docks and mechanics’ shops. The consistently refined homes of the better streets were seen as the antithesis to the festering, disease pockets found near the ramshackle slums. By the mid-nineteenth century, the halcyon ideal of an ordered and upright Philadelphia was juxtaposed against the material realities observed by strangers and others as they walked through the streets of the city and its environs. Exception to the Upper Class: James Forten’s Philadelphia

The ordered environment as described by Penn and Holme and the Strangers’ Guides was an upper class and almost exclusively white vision of urban living, but not exclusively so. A few African American found great wealth in Philadelphia and shaped the city according to their own desires.

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<sup>83</sup> Smith, 1852, p.18.

Foremost among them was James Forten, black sailor and sail-maker, businessman, and one of the wealthiest Philadelphians who lived on the eastern edge of the Cedar neighborhood. Forten was also a civil rights leader, and the best example of how an African American family could own and control large portions of Philadelphia. Forten had spent his early years as a sailor. He was already a wealthy business owner of a sail manufacturing facility on the Delaware when he began to invest in Philadelphia real estate. Forten owned his first house at 50 Shippen Street in Southwark. He also purchased a lot and built a house at 67 George Street, also in Southwark. In 1806, Forten purchased a grand red brick house at Third and Lombard, just four blocks from his sail loft. This place would be his family's home for generations to come.

Forten rented out the Shippen and George houses, purchased another Southwark home on Lombard between Tenth and Eleventh to rent in 1809, and another substantial rental property on Ninth Street just off Walnut in 1812. In 1813, Forten purchased a house and lot on Lombard between Ninth and Tenth, and another on Little Pine Street, only five months later.<sup>84</sup> By this time, Forten had become a prominent landlord and property owner within the middle and working class Pine and Lombard neighborhoods. In 1816 Forten purchased the ground rent, which is the right to build on, improve, or rent out a building on a plot of land, for a lot on George Street in Southwark. Later that year he bought a home on Lombard and Sixth. Forten also owned a host of assets outside the city, in Oxford Township and Blockley Township. For the

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<sup>84</sup> Winch, J. (2002). *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (p. 86). New York: Oxford University Press.

next two decades until his death, Forten continued to make real estate investments.

Forten rented to black and white tenants from both the working and middle classes. He maintained a few properties in the Cedar Neighborhood, which he rented to African American tenants. Because Forten was rich, white Philadelphia society, particularly businessmen, accepted him. Forten also invested in the railroad and banking industries, thus establishing himself as a leader of the new economy emerging in the city in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

One reason for Forten's acceptance by white society rested on the fact that he had few white peers or superiors. He was also civic minded, which no doubt contributed to his high social standing, even though there is little evidence that any of his properties took on philanthropic functions. He was out to make a profit and knew what made business sense. He developed his pieces of the city according to economic principles and conducted social relations with his tenants accordingly. Throughout his life he was involved in numerous lawsuits regarding property, loans, and credits. After Forten's death in 1842, his son-in-law the abolitionist Robert Purvis sued for control over a portion of the estate. Forten's example was to show that business savvy, ambition, and an industrious work ethic allowed one to control assets, which in turn provided for a rich life.

The proportion of Philadelphians who were counted as African American remained around ten percent of the total population in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Few achieved Forten's wealth or prominence, instead living in poor, crowded, and unhealthy conditions in



Philadelphia. Despite the growth in African American numbers, the rest of Philadelphia's population increased even more rapidly. Yet Forten's example illustrates the possibilities for social class change, even for African Americans, thus contributing to the social tensions felt as a result of ethnic rivalry throughout the city.

As the White population swelled, Philadelphia's African Americans began to lose ground as a percentage of the total Philadelphia population.<sup>85</sup> By 1830, 14,600 African American men and women made up just about one tenth of the population. By 1840, black Philadelphia had added another four thousand people to its ranks. But white Philadelphia had grown even faster, largely thanks to swelling Irish immigrations as a result of the potato famine, shrinking the percentage of African Americans to under eight percent by 1840. Given these demographic changes, African Americans were forced to cluster more and more tightly in Moyamensing and the Cedar neighborhood during the 1830s and 1840s.

## **Conclusion**

Much of contemporary urban theory, particularly in geography and anthropology, aims to unite material, discursive, psychological, affective, environmental and spatial experiences under a single conceptual framework. The built environment is not a static concept. It is constantly renewed through its encounter with people and other objects. To John Law, the built environment is a material dimension of forms of social organization, an

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<sup>85</sup> Nash, G. B. (1988). *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*. Harvard University Press..

excellent but understudied resource for investigating social relations. Law, a sociologist by training and father of actor-network-theory along with Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, calls the hardening of social relations into environmental forms “material durability.” He argues that “social arrangements delegated into non-bodily physical form tend to hold their shape better than those that simply depend on face-to-face interaction.”<sup>86</sup> Setha Low and Denise Lawrence have shown how the built environment is an index of human ideas, forms of organization, and distribution of power, as much as it is a living artifact of climate and geology.<sup>87</sup> Low and Lawrence remind readers that urban planning has at different times been used as a mode of social reproduction, a tool used to ensure the dominant classes’ political, economic and social interests.

For these scholars, the built environment is an archive of actions and intentions, a material representation of cultural codes and modes of social organization. James Donald argues that the modern city is compiled from the many texts that produce how it is imagined and experienced.<sup>88</sup> The state of mind that derives from the archive of the imagined city has material consequences. The space of the city is a material embodiment of social relations as they are and as they are imagined to be. We live in an “imagined city,” Lefevbre’s representational space, in which our imagination imbues

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<sup>86</sup> Law, J. (2009). Actor network theory and material semiotics. *The new Blackwell companion to social theory*, 141-158.

<sup>87</sup> Lawrence and Low, 1990.

<sup>88</sup> Donald, J. (1999). *Imagining the modern city*. U of Minnesota Press..7.

meaning in material objects for symbolic use. We remain caught in the overlapping space of the material, social, and physical realms.

Conflict enters in the power struggles to align the concept city with the fact of the city, the actually existing material environment. Decentralized forms of resistance confront organized power. The key to understanding the dynamics between the concept and the fact is the translation, to borrow a phrase from John Law, from one to the other.<sup>89</sup> It is in the translation of a concept to a fact that the mechanisms of power are revealed. Language figures prominently in this translation, but does not explain it in its entirety.

The built environment has been studied infrequently as an index and instrument for social formations. A few works do stand out, however. Carl Schorske's *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna* demonstrated the political and philosophical importance of the built environment to the development of the public sphere and the cultivation of the citizen.<sup>90</sup> Michel Foucault has shown how architecture can maintain power relations by disciplining the bodies of its inhabitants, in addition to standing as a testament to that same power.<sup>91</sup> Further, the built environment requires cultural codes to navigate the

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<sup>89</sup> Law states: Translation: "the most interesting places lie on the boundaries between order and disorder.... To translate is to make two words equivalent. But since no two words are equivalent, translation also implies betrayal." Law, J. (2009). Actor network theory and material semiotics. *The new Blackwell companion to social theory*, 141-158. In Bryan Turner, (Ed.), *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. London: Blackwell. Also see: Callon, M. (1986). Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. In Law, J. (Ed.). *Power, action and belief: a new sociology of knowledge?*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. 196-223.

<sup>90</sup> Schorske, 1981.

<sup>91</sup> Foucault, 1995.

interaction between people and things, codes that reshape bodies through dispositions, forming the habits of thinking and feeling that Pierre Bourdieu's calls the "habitus."<sup>92</sup> Vanessa Schwartz linked the experiences of newspapers and Parisian boulevards, demonstrating the deep interconnection between media, visual culture, and the built environment in the spectacle of everyday life in a nineteenth century city.<sup>93</sup> Lindsay Jones argues that architectural meaning is "situational and transient," from the perspective of the observer, meaning resides neither in the building or the imagination, but in the "negotiation or the interactive relation that subsumes both building and beholder."<sup>94</sup> These scholars all underscore the fact that the meaning and experience of the built environment are constantly under construction.

A focus on city-building, including the construction of the material environment, the spatial practices therein, and the meaning attributed to each, offers an approach that better accounts for the range of human experience and meaning making capacities. Nigel Thrift, a geographer, argues any examination of city building is fundamentally a way to practice "material thinking," wherein we explore the hybrid forms of life produced by the continual circulation of people and objects within and between spaces.<sup>95</sup> As they move, things leave traces in the form of "effluent, memories, messages"

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<sup>92</sup> Bourdieu, 1990.

<sup>93</sup> Schwartz, V. R. (1999). *Spectacular realities: Early mass culture in fin-de-siècle Paris*. University of California Pr..

<sup>94</sup> Jones, L. (2000). *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Hermeneutical calisthenics: a morphology of ritual-architectural priorities* (Vol. 2). Harvard Univ. 41, 49.

<sup>95</sup> Thrift, N. (2006). Space. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2-3), 139-155.

that are constantly produced through encounter. These movements can form relatively stable spatial discourses. Following Foucault's concept of discursive stability, in which discourses define conditions of possibility, a material discourse elaborated in the built environment constrains ways of thinking and making sense of the world.<sup>96</sup>

City building is the process by which actors employ both immaterial and material methods to continuously recreate the landscape and experience. City building relies upon but is not limited to "architecture," a word the antebellum American architecture scholar Dell Upton uses to refer to,

... the entirety of what is sometimes called the built environment or the cultural landscape, whether or not it is made by people professionally trained in design or the building crafts. I do so because the practice of building—of imagining, shaping, and interpreting a material world—is integrated at all levels.<sup>97</sup>

Building is part of a continual process of communication, imagination, and creation that loops back and forth as the conditions under which these processes take place is ever-changing.

However, Upton's argument that city-building was worked out metaphorically according to discourses about the human body actually downplays the role of the physical body in space. Upton subordinates the material and spatial to the discursive and metaphorical when we introduces communication theory to architectural history. Upton argues the architecture of antebellum cities poses linguistic questions "because architecture was most often imagined metaphorically and analogically rather than worked out

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<sup>96</sup> Law, John. (2009).

<sup>97</sup> Upton, 2008, p.10.

according to formal rules of logic or rhetoric.” Architectural history is “experiential because metaphors and analogies acquire their force through our corporeal participation in our surroundings.”<sup>98</sup> Upton continues by arguing bodily metaphors were regularly employed in antebellum urban America “to discuss many aspects of social life and the experience of the built environment.” Bodily metaphors made the links between language and the environment commonplace. “Language acquires specificity and changes meaning in its encounter with the specificity of material existence,” Upton notes.<sup>99</sup>

Too often, Upton enables language and metaphor as the central actors in uniting body, discourse, and environment. This was the work of people – particularly elite Philadelphians – who worked to constantly refer the text back to the environment, and the environment to the text. Both black and white elites in Philadelphia engaged texts of all sorts to confront and frame experience of the city. Additionally, empowered Philadelphians relied upon their embodied experiences of the city to inform the production of new texts, whether laws, designs, or newspapers. These actors were intermediaries who linked text to place. Words were not vessels freely floating in the air until they were affixed to places and experiences. This perspective, which Upton employs, privileges language with an a priori existence. Instead, as material semiotics indicates, real human work united discourse, material conditions and the human body.

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<sup>98</sup> Upton, 2008, p.12.

<sup>99</sup> Upton, 2008, p.14.

If antebellum Philadelphians employed metaphors of systems, classification, and segregation to conjure their urban environment in language, they did so in order to use textual concepts to exert formal control over urban space. Group identity in particular was actively compiled from bits of language and environment. Upton's statement that "through living the city--through everyday experience in and of the material world of buildings, spaces, and people--American urbanites developed active senses of themselves as individuals and as members of a new republican society" captures the daily creation and recreation of identity by actors working to make connections between the immaterial and material.<sup>100</sup>

Interventions in the city were not metaphorical acts useful only for their symbolic significance, but were critiques of everyday that attempted to redraw the connections. Antebellum urbanites "created new kinds of urban spaces that were meant to propagate and accommodate" the new roles they defined for themselves in American society.<sup>101</sup> Nineteenth century urbanites built new buildings in new city plans "to channel their fellow citizens into the proper kinds of interaction, at once civilized and urbane," Upton shows. Language and metaphor were constantly tied back to spatial practice and material existence. Nineteenth century city folk believed that by building the city they were building the nation. Citizenship was a colloquially understood as a

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<sup>100</sup> Laura Rigal's *The American Manufactory* argues that the importance of city building trades to the process of nation building was one of the "founding principles" of the union. Rigal, L. (2001). *American Manufactory: Art, Labor, and the World of Things in the Early Republic*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>101</sup> Dell Upton. (2008). p.1.

material and spatial practice of ownership and improvement of Philadelphia, a point that will be elaborated and explored throughout this dissertation.

This dissertation contributes an application of spatial and assemblage theories to histories of media, technology, and society. Heretofore, these theories have primarily been adopted for technology studies, but rarely communication and media studies, which tend to rely on the brand of social constructionism that is critiqued here. As John Law puts it in a discussion of material semiotics, the theoretical foundations for assemblage and actor network: “we are no longer dealing with construction, social or otherwise: there is no stable prime mover, social or individual, to construct anything, no builder, no puppeteer.... Rather, we are dealing with enactment or performance. In this heterogeneous world everything plays its part, relationally.... The metaphor of construction – and social construction – will no longer serve.”<sup>102</sup> Assemblage theory concerns itself with substantively heterogeneous relations. Words are given the same weight as things. There is an abiding attention to what Law calls “the productivity of practice; and interest in circulation.” In assemblage theory, the social works through material practices. My focus here is on the city as rendered in space and language. Communication does not favor one over the other, so we need not forget about either.

In different ways, the following chapters show how attempts to refine the city were driven by desires to improve inhabitants and control social relations. Material projects had biological ends more often than not. The

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<sup>102</sup> Law, John, 2009.



environment was as much a technology for human advancement as any railroad, telegraph, or electric circuit. Debates over citizenship, public responses to the living conditions of the poor, and the provocation and response to riots describe varied scenarios in which, as architectural historian David Scobey argues, the origin of American city planning “was not simply a technical response to environmental disorder, but a self-consciously *cultural* project of social and moral improvement.”<sup>103</sup> Philadelphians “conceived city building as a culture-building project, an effort to embed virtue, taste, and civility in urban space,” what Scobey calls “moral environmentalism,” in which the environment was treated as “index and instrument of moral progress.”<sup>104</sup> The built environment was both a product of and medium for communication, and the common ground upon which Philadelphians constructed identities of city and city-zen. We shall now begin to examine the tools and techniques used to construct the antebellum city.

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<sup>103</sup> Scobey, 2002, p.8-9.

<sup>104</sup> Scobey, 2002, p.9, 10.

## **Chapter 2: The Degraded Places: Philadelphia's Cedar and Moyamensing**

### **Material Geography of Otherness**

One afternoon in the fall of 1847, two Quaker men walked south from the Philadelphia into Moyamensing, intent on understanding poverty there.<sup>105</sup> They did not have to journey far from the bustling commercial life of Market Street and the mansions on Chestnut before they reached Cedar, the southern boundary between Philadelphia proper and Moyamensing district, in Philadelphia County. What they saw in Moyamensing defied their expectations. The lowliest places in Philadelphia County constituted a world apart, antithetical to all that the city and the young American republic were supposed to represent.

To Quakers, as well as white supremacists, African colonizationists, and anti-suffrage advocates, no civilized man or woman, certainly no voting citizen could possibly come from the lowly places. Environment was destiny in their minds, and the debased living conditions in Moyamensing could only ever produce a degraded people. Such ways of thinking led to debates over inclusion in the status of citizenship and consideration of which groups were fit for representing and upholding the republic. In a sense, as debates over citizenship were adjudicated rhetorically in the state house, they were also considered in material and spatial terms across the neighborhoods of Philadelphia County..

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<sup>105</sup> Oct. 2, 1847. "An Afternoon Walk: The Retreat." *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*. 21:2. P.12.

“How little the inhabitants of great cities know of the real condition of the destitute poor amongst them,” the Friends lamented. The pair’s journey led to discovery of an exotic, even alien, way of life “in Moyamensing, particularly the courts, alleys, and yards, to be entered from Baker, Small, and Bedford streets.” To guide their expedition into such an unfamiliar territory, the Friends recruited a guide, “well acquainted with every alley and building in those parts.”<sup>106</sup>

The journey drew near its mark when the men observed “a large number of coloured people congregated on the neighbouring pavements.” The guide led the men into apartments that were nothing more than wooden stables. “Commencing at the back of each house are small wooden buildings roughly put together, about six feet square, without windows or fire-places, a hole about a foot square being left in the front alongside of the door, to let in fresh air and light, and to let out foul air and smoke.” The “pens” are typically dug out of the ground, causing water to pool on their dirt floors, frequently caused by leaky roofs. “Although as dismal as dirt, damp, and insufficient ventilation can make them, they are nearly all inhabited.”<sup>107</sup> The group’s tour became eventful early on when they find the body of a dead black man in his pen.

The director of the home, Hetty Reckless, whose guidance the two Quakers had sought, identified “the misery and depravity of the colored

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<sup>106</sup> Oct. 16, 1847. “A First-Day Afternoon in Moyamensing.” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*. 21:4. P.28.

<sup>107</sup> Oct. 16, 1847. “A First-Day Afternoon in Moyamensing.” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*. 21:4. P.28.

population” on Baker Street as without parallel. Baker Street, “where the poor and miserable victims of ignorance and vice, who have no homes, are, when they can beg, steal or earn enough to pay for it, furnished with lodgings.” Reckless described wooden shacks, with rooms subdivided into stalls, the kind used to house horses, with straw thrown down on mud floors for bedding. For many of the poorest, this was the best the city had to offer.

An alley ran down the middle of Baker Street, “a dirty passage, so narrow, a stout man would have found it tight work to have threaded it,” leading into a backyard, crammed full of wooden huts stacked high enough to block out the sun. This was Astor House, the most famously squalid residence in Philadelphia County.

We looked in every one of these dismal abodes of human wretchedness. Here were dark, damp holes, six feet square, without a bed in any of them, and generally without furniture, occupied by one or two families: apartments where privacy of any kind was unknown—where comfort never appeared.<sup>108</sup>

The smell within this space nearly overtook the tour guides. “We could scarcely think it possible that life could be supported.... It is not in the power of language to convey an adequate impression of the scene on this property. The filth, the odours, the bodily discomfort, the moral degradation everywhere apparent.”<sup>109</sup> The forty-eight square foot huts housed two to four people; some held as many as eight. Residents paid about eight to twelve cents a night to inhabit this space, about three quarters of their average daily

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<sup>108</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 37-8.

<sup>109</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 37-8.

earnings. Given such miserable conditions, it is not entirely surprising that Reckless told the Quaker visitors to Moyamensing that alcoholism was a problem in the district, aided and abetted by the number of grog shops within its borders.

The conditions of the Moyamensing slum astonished the Friends in part because they posed such a contrast to life in the prosperous city, so close to its border. "Here, close by our own comfortable homes, is one of the most deplorable conditions of life, in which humanity can possibly exist." Poverty was marked on the inhabitants "in the dress, the dirt, the whole appearance of those who may be found gathering rags, paper, bones, and old leather, out of our streets," a line of work "monopolized to a great extent by the black people." The Friends' report of their journey appealed to the reader's sense of common humanity: "To lovers of the coloured man it peculiarly addressed itself; for more than nine-tenths of the inhabitants of these pens are coloured people.... Here are people, too many of whom live in heathenish immorality, in worse than heathenish discomfort!"<sup>110</sup>

Environmental conditions and bodily cleanliness have long been allegorically connected to the concept of civilization in America. Through her study of popular ideas of disease, disgust, and moral corruption in the eighteenth century imagination, Kathleen Brown demonstrates how the human body is seen as both cultural and material entity. She traces ideas about body care to ones about social order, the attributes of subject and

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<sup>110</sup> Oct. 16, 1847. "A First-Day Afternoon in Moyamensing." *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*. 21:4. P.28.

citizen, and approaches to “civilizing” the uncivilized. She demonstrates how bodily care routines linked private domestic life to public culture.

This chapter extends Brown’s ideas, arguing that the environment may be understood as an extension of the corporeal body. The purity of the environment is closely linked to ideas about public culture, social order, and citizenship. As the human body was seen as both material and spiritual entity in the nineteenth century, so, too, was the environment viewed as an outward extension of both material and moral condition.

The environment is used as synonymous with place, a concept that has been presented here as encompassing the notion of practice. Places are recursively created and recreated through practice. Antebellum Philadelphians commonly believed that bodies were shaped materially and spiritually by place. As they grew old in appearance, they also became degraded in character.

Nevertheless, Philadelphians were not determinists. They did not argue that degraded character automatically produced degraded environments. Nor did they argue that degraded environments defiled otherwise good character. Their opinions on this topic were often muddled and inconsistent, yet they clearly saw a relationship between environment and character.

Some Whites such as the two Quaker visitors to Moyamensing believed that character was malleable and that strong institutions could improve the lot of those who existed in dire poverty. Quakers did not read degraded environments as incontrovertible proof of the degraded character of

its inhabitants. However, there were many who believed the living conditions of poor African Americans were the manifestation of their racial inferiority. This position was most frequently advocated by white supremacists in arguments against racial equality. But this was not only a racial argument. It had obvious class overtones as well. Irish living environments were considered by some well-off Whites to be testament to their degraded nature. They slept in many of the same stalls, on the same hay, under the same leaky roofs without ventilation or sunlight. Archival sources indicate that for most of the speakers, character and environment were inextricably bound. One's class, race, or ethnic identity was the most important moderating variable that tied environment to character.

Reformers' wrote about ghetto conditions as if environment served as a litmus test of civilized life and citizenship. Place was the stuff out of which identities were constructed. The constructions and reconstructions of the material environment were central social practices in the formation and maintenance of individual and collective identity. Ultimately, Philadelphians were judged for their ability to control their surrounding environment, to order it in ways that supported shared ideas of progress and prosperity. To shape one's environment was a sign of civility; to be shaped by it was a mark of primitive dependence.

Chroniclers of the Moyamensing ghetto wrote about space and spatial practices as if they summed up the total existence of residents. Largely poor, residents of this district/town/area did not have the opportunity to speak for themselves. Most readers of the reports about the ghetto would never

encounter the men and women who resided there. Their lives would only be recorded as filtered through the perspectives of those doing the reporting and publishing their accounts.

Just across Cedar Street, Moyamensing rebuked the idealized vision of the city of Philadelphia with conditions that threatened the meaning of the city itself. The narrow streets, cramped courts, and hidden alleys that characterized most of Moyamensing were the spatial antithesis to “the bourgeois visual environment” of the grand spaces of Philadelphia, “in which sight can prevail, civil conduct be exposed to view, and those eminently Victorian qualities of reserve and distance maintained.”<sup>111</sup> Vision was obscured, social order had broken down, and the “vile, loathsome, iniquitous, and abandoned” people of Moyamensing wasted away in the district, as the *Philadelphia Constitution* wrote in 1843.

Irish also inhabited the Moyamensing and Cedar slums, sharing rooms in crowded shanties with African Americans. Just like their African American neighbors, the Irish were a varied lot. Some competed for jobs with black Philadelphians and hated them as inferior creatures. Others work, drank, and slept beside them. Urban poverty was sometimes a stronger bond than ethnic identity.

Both Irish and African Americans received a share of scorn from their social “betters.” However, the threats to social, political and economic security for black residents were singular, and the places they inhabited were taken to

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<sup>111</sup> Chris Otter. (2002). Making Liberalism Durable: vision and civility in the late Victorian city. *Social History*. 27:1. p.3.



be the most out-of-order. The ultimate form of degradation for an Irishman was to live with or next to a black man or woman. These ghettos were more densely packed with people and houses than any neighborhoods in the city. Between 1840 and 1850, while the white population was gaining rapidly, the black population actually declined.

Although many Irish resided in Moyamensing, this chapter focuses on the area's African American residents, who were the target of the majority of riots and violence in the antebellum period. By mid-century, the Irish had succeeded in building paths out of poverty, although many were still poor. The Irish network of parishes and growing political influence gave their growing numbers an increasingly large stake in the city. A few prominent judges and politicians in Philadelphia were Irishmen who hailed from the Cedar neighborhood, Moyamensing, and neighboring Southwark. Politicians of all backgrounds fell over themselves to praise the Irish at the Constitutional Convention. Despite the fact that they, too, were often the victims of prejudice and discrimination, the Irish by mid-century had developed several means of defining themselves and asserting their interests within the power structure of Philadelphia. This was not the case for African Americans.

In a sense, the geographic confusion of Moyamensing symbolized the constriction of political, economic, and social options faced by African Americans. Narrow streets, cramped courts, and hidden alleys hardly allowed for carrying out the practices associated with public life in a civilized city.

## Theorizing Race in Philadelphia's Slums

The three decades before the Civil War were nothing less than a social crisis for most black Philadelphians. The leading historian of nineteenth century Philadelphia, Theodore Hershberg notes, "all social indicators—race riots, population decrease, disfranchisement, residential segregation, per capita wealth, ownership of real property, family structure and occupational opportunities—pointed toward socioeconomic deteriorations within Philadelphia's antebellum black community."<sup>112</sup> Between 1838 and 1847 black personal property and total wealth both declined as inequality gaps widened amongst black Philadelphians.<sup>113</sup> Hershberg calls it "a remarkable deterioration in the socioeconomic condition of blacks."<sup>114</sup> In the 1830s, 40s, and 50s, the Irish almost totally replaced the black workers in even modest paying jobs, and young black men were denied apprenticeships that would build the skills required in the new industrial economy.

Within this context of racial prejudice and systematic inequality, the tri-fold pressures of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization best explain the problems facing African American Philadelphians at mid-century. According to Hershberg's research, the lack of stable opportunities resulted in a more transient population in the Cedar neighborhood, where resident-turnover was far higher than the rest of the city. Seventy percent of Cedar's

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<sup>112</sup> Hershberg, 1971-72. P.192.

<sup>113</sup> Hershberg, 1971-72. P.187.

<sup>114</sup> Hershberg, T. (1971). Free Blacks in Antebellum Philadelphia: A Study of Ex-Slaves, Freeborn, and Socioeconomic Decline. *Journal of Social History*, 5(2), 183-209.

population turned over between 1839 and 1855, compared to just 25 or 35 percent for the rest of the city.<sup>115</sup> From 1838 until 1847 black men were increasingly missing from society, often incarcerated. They made up almost a third of the prison population although they were not a tenth of the general population. Many lived in white-owned households as domestics or simply eked out an existence living on the street.<sup>116</sup> Some were kidnapped and sold as slaves in the South.

Freeborn black households in Philadelphia faced more social and economic hardship than did ex-slave households by nearly every measure.<sup>117</sup>

Hershberg concludes:

We find the ex-slaves with larger families, greater likelihood of two-parent households, higher affiliation rates in church and beneficial societies, sending more of their children to school, living more frequently in the least dense areas of the county, generally wealthier, owning considerably more real property and being slightly more fortunate in occupational differentiation.<sup>118</sup>

Church affiliation is a useful way to measure prosperity because black Philadelphians were cut off from white society, and the black church was the central institution through which one could forge a tolerable existence.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Lapsansky, 1975, p.139.

<sup>116</sup> From 1838 until 1860, the number of black women per one thousand black men grew from 1,326 to 1,417. Overall, 78 percent of black households were led by two parents in the nineteenth century. Among the poorest fifth of the population in 1838, 70 percent were headed by two parents. However, only ten years later the number fell to 63 percent. Hershberg, 1971-72. P.193.

<sup>117</sup> In 1838 an ex-slave lived in about a quarter of all black Philadelphia households, making up 9 percent of the whole black population.

<sup>118</sup> Hershberg, 1971-72. P.199-200.

<sup>119</sup> Hershberg, 1971-72. P.194.

Union Methodist and Union Baptist churches were home to the black elite, and in these churches ex-slave membership was highest. Ex-slaves were also more likely to be members of all-black beneficial societies, which provided aid to the sick and poor, and helped cover burial costs. Ex-slaves sent their children to school at higher rates (67 percent compared to 55 percent of freeborn). Ex-slave households, most of which were in Kensington, Northern Liberties, and Spring Garden, typically located in less dense and less segregated neighborhoods, compared to freeborn blacks. Freeborn black Philadelphians were twice as likely to live in a house with no churchgoing members than households headed by ex-slaves.

The 1830s and 40s were a period of economic and political dislocation and spatial reorganization. The anxieties that resulted from this tumult were assuaged to some degree among some White Americans by a belief in the superiority of Anglo Saxon racial heritage and the increasingly prominent concept of “racial nationalism.” This idea defined the nation as a cultural community pursuing a shared religious destiny rather than as a political body. Ideas of manifest destiny and empire paralleled a growing body of scientific literature that purported to prove the existence and superiority of the Caucasian race.<sup>120</sup>

Many white Americans had begun to view their expansion across the continent as evidence of the innate superiority of Anglo-Saxons, who were believed to be skilled in government and commerce and sat at the pinnacle of the racial hierarchy. Americans attributed progress and development to a

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<sup>120</sup> Horsman, 1981. p.26-7, 33.

national “racial destiny” to spread Christianity across the continent and throughout the world. As the stewards of civilization, this master race would subdue and dominate subordinate races, such as the natives they cleared from their lands, or the African Americans they bought and sold to labor under their watch. According to this ideology of racial destiny, God’s intentions were made clear by the survival and eventual flourishing of American colonies, the successful revolution against Great Britain, and the rapid growth thereafter.<sup>121</sup>

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and particularly as epitomized by the ethnological work of Samuel George Morton, the concept of ‘race’ became biological, innate and inherited. This shift had important implications for the degraded conditions that so often surrounded free persons of color in the North. No longer was the environment a constriction on human potential, but instead it was viewed as an expression of flawed and subordinate human ability. Race and racializations were concepts that became tools used to categorize and stigmatize differences of all kinds, including material and spatial ones, as natural and permanent.<sup>122</sup> This also pertained to larger spatial environments, which could also be interpreted as signifying racially different spatial orders and practices.

One pillar of American political thought in the nineteenth century was the white supremacist idea that the purity of the body politic rested on the purity of those who inhabited the nation. Roger Smith calls attempts to

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<sup>121</sup> Horsman, R. (1981). *Race and manifest destiny: The origins of American racial Anglo-Saxonism*. Harvard University Press, 1.

<sup>122</sup> Joan Pope Melish.

redefine citizen and nation as exclusively white “ascriptive Americanism.”<sup>123</sup> Smith argues that “ascribed characteristics,” such as race, gender and the nationality or religion into which people were born, define eligibility for citizenship, voting rights and political office. This “inegalitarian ascriptive tradition,” or ascriptive Americanism, forms a third, equally important political philosophy alongside liberalism and republicanism. Smith recognizes first that political actors require a population that imagines itself as constituting a “people,” and second that the political aspirant is able to tailor his platform to that image. The ascriptive tradition recognizes that imagining America as a white political body was immeasurably easier if only white bodies were visible.

By the 1840s, race had also become the foundation for concepts of nationhood. No longer were all groups understood to be descendents from Adam and Eve, united as members of the human race. Nations were seen as differentiated by the same personal characteristics that distinguished one man from another. By mid-century, white descendents of European ancestry promoted theories of distinct racial lineages; each group endowed with its own attributes and talents, unequally distributed across races. For “successful”

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<sup>123</sup> Smith, R. M. (1997). *Civic ideals: Conflicting visions of citizenship in US history*. Yale University Press. p.1,3,6. Working from an archival record of federal statutes, federal district, circuit, and Supreme Court decisions between 1798 and 1912 that dealt with citizenship laws, Smith argues that American political history and theory has misrecognized or misremembered its past. The common popular and scholarly conception has been of a country oscillating between a liberal tradition, where the sovereign individual realizes his full potential in the marketplace, to a more republican, with its emphasis on local control and intensive civic participation. However, Smith argues the dominant political ideology throughout much of American history is the belief that America is “by rights a white nation, a Protestant nation, a nation in which true Americans were native-born men with Anglo-Saxon ancestors.” (p.3)

racess such as the Caucasians, this could result in world domination. For "unsuccessful" races (on account of their current and alleged historical domination by others) such as the African Americans, extinction could be the price of inferiority.<sup>124</sup> The number of racial theorists defending immutable, irreconcilable differences across races multiplied exponentially in mid-century.

In order to build a racialized state, its architects had to assemble the spatial and material experiences of local contexts so that Americans could experience for themselves the superiority of the White over the Black race . Representations of White superiority in rhetoric and text had to be elaborated in space, making race more than a discourse, but a material condition or affective experience.<sup>125</sup>

From the 1830s until the Civil War, antagonisms turned much more violent than they had been in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when cross-racial coalitions and debates over respectability were the norm. The doctrine of racial uplift among African Americans, including their attempts at building institutions, owning property, and marching for political gain, provoked violence. Landmarks that testified to African American progress such as James Forten became obvious targets. According to historians Michael Morrison and James Brewer Stewart, these changes

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<sup>124</sup> Horsman, 1981, p.43.

<sup>125</sup> David Roediger has argued that the concept of whiteness was developed in the mid-nineteenth century through racializations of property and property holding. Roediger, D. R. (1999). The pursuit of Whiteness: Property, terror, and expansion, 1790-1860. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 19(4), 579-600.. Roediger builds on Cheryl Harris' argument that whiteness is itself the ability to own property, and Sadiya Hartman's that the pursuit of property, also called the pursuit of happiness, both relied on the terrorizing of African American subjects. Harris, C. I. (1992). Whiteness as property. *Harv. L. Rev.*, 106, 1707-1791.

amounted to a “process of racialized state building.”<sup>126</sup> As a result, racial distinctions came to define political culture in new and increasingly intolerant ways in the free states before the Civil War.<sup>127</sup>

Foreshadowing what E. Franklin Frazier would later call *The City of Destruction*, the urban experience for African Americans was made and remade as the single most consequential factor in health, achievement, and social structure.<sup>128</sup> The social hierarchies and the spatial distributions of power were not legacy effects of slavery. Instead, they were the outcomes of deliberate attempts to construct urban environments according to certain social, economic, and political commitments. Place was not static or merely the manifestation of an established archaeology of power embedded within a particular geographic space. Place and power were dynamic processes in need of maintenance through regulation of space.

### **Environmental Disorder**

At the same time that white middle and upper class houses were growing and becoming more spatially differentiated within, the domestic space of poor and working class Philadelphians shrunk and was simplified to the most basic forms of shelter. Craftsmen’s houses declined in size in the

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<sup>126</sup> Morrison, M. A., & Stewart, J. B. (Eds.). (2002). *Race and the Early Republic: Racial Consciousness and Nation-Building in the Early Republic*. Rowman & Littlefield. 577-578.

<sup>127</sup> Stewart, J. B. (1999). Modernizing "Difference": The Political Meanings of Color in the Free States, 1776-1840. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 19(4), 691-712..

<sup>128</sup> Frazier, E. F., & Glazer, N. (1966). *The negro family in the United States* (Vol. 205). Chicago: University of Chicago Press..



decades following the Revolution, as their economic standing slipped. More than 20 percent occupied the smallest houses in the city. Many German and Scots-Irish immigrants were craftsmen and laborers who built their own homes rather than purchase them. The home remained divided between workplace and residence for the middling to lower class Philadelphians throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, leaving little room to spare for a family in a shrinking home in a courtyard or alley. Penn's "greene country town," with its evenly distributed homes arranged in the middle of ample green space had transformed into dense clusters of ad-hoc buildings, poorly ventilated with little direct sunlight.

Wood frame and stone houses existed too, typically built with flat roofs. On the wide thoroughfares, street-facing buildings often had a two or three story building tucked behind them.<sup>129</sup> Frame houses were made from wood, smaller than the typical brick row home, sometimes only one story tall. They provided imperfect shelter: they often leaked when it rained and could not block out the cold winter winds. They degraded quickly but were typically patched as needed by their poorer inhabitants. Wooden houses were principally located in the hidden spaces, behind the boulevard row homes, in back allies and courtyards, or on the edges of irregular lots to fill space and maximize profit. Despite successive bans on frame house construction beginning in 1798, by 1810 around 65% of the total housing stock in Philadelphia County was wood construction.<sup>130</sup> Construction bans in the city

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<sup>129</sup> Hastings, 1967, p.173.

<sup>130</sup> Rilling, 2001, p.10.

addressed the fire hazard problem with wood frame houses. In the liberties like Moyamensing and Southwark, however, no such regulations existed, and frame houses predominated.

The landscape of quickly built wooden huts, crammed into every available space, defined the “degraded” condition within Philadelphia. Three groups comprised most of Philadelphia’s poor: young white men, age 16-25, free blacks, and female heads of household, often widows. One in five Philadelphians belonged to one of these three groups in 1790. By 1830 it was one in three. All were straddled with lower incomes than their older white male-headed households. The historian Carole Shammas argues that Philadelphia, like other big cities, attracted vulnerable residents because it gave them a modicum of independence, regardless of the conditions, and situated them around people from similar backgrounds facing similar circumstances.<sup>131</sup> It compared favorably to the countryside, where agriculture or domestic service were the only options. The concentration of resources near the center of the city, as well as the high prevalence of poor residents, pushed up rents as landlords retrofit buildings to house as many people as possible. By 1798, the average value of a dwelling in Middle Ward was \$2,950, compared to only \$463 only a few blocks south in Moyamensing.<sup>132</sup>

No Philadelphia neighborhood featured the same density of degraded environments as did the Cedar neighborhood, site of the greatest concentration of poverty in Philadelphia County, as well as the most notorious

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<sup>131</sup> Shammas, 2000, p.533.

<sup>132</sup> Shammas, 2000, p.533.

multi-racial social mixtures, and most of the riotous violence in the mid nineteenth century.<sup>133</sup> The neighborhood was named for Cedar street, the southern boundary separating Philadelphia city from Moyamensing, called South Street today. The Cedar neighborhood overlapped both districts, stretching from Lombard in the north to Bainbridge in the south, from the Delaware to Broad Street.<sup>134</sup> It was a neighborhood defined by its inhabitants, most of whom were African American, Irish, and some German. Cedar residents drew from every class position, from the most poor to the wealthiest men such as James Forten.

While coherent socially and economically, this neighborhood stretched across the jurisdictional boundaries of Philadelphia, Moyamensing, and Southwark districts. The neighborhood, the most racially diverse of Philadelphia neighborhoods, had earned its reputation as a place in which many pleasures outlawed in the Quaker City could be had. Play houses, puppet shows and promenading gave Cedar a reputation for theatricality, risqué behavior, and social mixing.

Stacked in next to these delights were black churches that served as houses of worship, political agitation, and social cohesion. The wealthiest black families in Philadelphia were members of these churches, and the churches formed the backbone of the black community. Residents connected

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<sup>133</sup> The most prominent exception being the Catholic – Protestant riots of 1844, which took place in the northern neighborhoods of Spring Garden.

<sup>134</sup> Emma Lapsansky's *Neighborhoods in Transition: William Penn's Dream and Urban Reality* provides an historical account of 19th century Philadelphia from the perspective of Cedar, and is a very useful resource. Lapsansky, E. J. (1994). *Neighborhoods in transition: William Penn's dream and urban reality*. Garland.. See also here dissertation, Lapsansky, E. J. (1975). "SOUTH STREET PHILADELPHIA, 1762-1854: A HAVEN FOR THOSE LOW IN THE WORLD."..

locally, nationally and internationally to the plight of black peoples in the circum-Atlantic world. Bethel Church, founded by Richard Allen in 1794, stood at Sixth and Lombard Streets. The Episcopal Church of the Crucifixion, on Eighth Street north of Shippen, had a racially mixed congregation, a rarity at that time. The Bethel, First African Presbyterian and First Universalist churches were all engaged in activities and discussions about slavery and race that transcended city limits. Though global in focus, the majority of the community leaders' efforts focused on the local conditions and the struggle for equality and opportunity in and around Philadelphia. Worsening economic and social conditions in the 1830s and 1840s kept them more than busy fighting for a respectable livelihood within the county.

In these decades inequality grew rapidly, and Philadelphians were increasingly divided into the prosperous, industrious, and lowly, each living in their own geography. The onset of industrialism in Philadelphia and the population growth accompanying it meant that while some areas continued to improve through technological advancement and increased capital expenditures, these improvements often came at the expense of other areas of the county. In Philadelphia County, some measure of environmental degradation was the norm, as seen in the proliferation of stagnant pockets, where water gathered into malarial pools; traffic got stuck in thick muck; human, animal, and food waste festered in fly-swarmed piles; and the poorest Philadelphians seemed to rot in place.

Sanitation reform was an elusive goal in mid-nineteenth century Philadelphia. Programs to spur industrial development and promote business

growth were not complemented by any programs to ensure the health of either the population or the environment. Nineteenth century urban development prioritized circulation, so that people might move and breathe as freely as blood flows through arteries and veins. Contemporary ideas of progress held that the modern individual should be above all else a mobile human being, which required spaces and technologies of circulation, according to Richard Sennett.<sup>135</sup> City planners envisioned urban environments fine-tuned for economic and state expansion through circulatory networks.<sup>136</sup>

While cities were reimagined to prioritize motion as an end in itself, improvements in some areas highlighted the contrasting degradation of others. In these decades Philadelphia was known as “Filthy Dirty,” a reputation that stuck with it for over a century with only a slight modification to “Filthydelphia.”<sup>137</sup> Politics of that era focused exclusively on the pursuit of profit and realizing the city’s industrial economic potential. As a result, economic expansion came at the cost of healthy living and working environments, and ultimately, healthy Philadelphians.

Moyamensing suffered continuous outbreaks from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century. As Charles Rosenberg has shown, diseases such as cholera were commonly perceived to be a consequence of sin and evidence of God’s displeasure, thought to afflict “the filthy, the hungry, the ignorant.”<sup>138</sup> To avoid sin was to live free of disease. Poor Irish and

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<sup>135</sup> Sennet, R. (1994). *Flesh and stone. Flesh and Stone.*, 256.

<sup>136</sup> Sennett, 1994, p.262-3.

<sup>137</sup> Alewitz, S. (1989). *Filthy Dirty: A Social History of Unsanitary Philadelphia in the Late Nineteenth Century.* Garland Pub..

<sup>138</sup> Rosenberg, 7.

Negroes crowded into the worst housing conditions and were the least able to escape when cholera visited, and were judged to be the most deprived Americans.

A few reformers believed that cholera was a call to improve the social situation of the poor rather than chastise their immorality. Modern science increasingly turned away from moral explanations and towards analyses based on rigorous, systematic, and statistical data. By 1866, Rosenberg writes, “disease had become a consequence of man’s interaction with his environment; it was no longer an incident in a drama of moral choice and spiritual salvation.”<sup>139</sup> Moral reform efforts turned into sanitary reform efforts. According to Rosenberg, “there could be no public virtue without public health” .<sup>140</sup> The focus turned from the internal world of the soul, to the external environments of sewers systems and street cleaning.

The sections of the city that housed the most degraded environments inhabited by the poorest Philadelphians also housed some of its most prominent black residents. According to one contemporary Philadelphian, between Pine and Fitzwater, and Fifth Street and Tenth in Cedar, “the extreme poverty and distress so often alluded to are found, yet a large number of the most respectable and prosperous persons of colour are inhabitants of the principal streets in this district.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Rosenberg, 228.

<sup>140</sup> Rosenberg, C. E. (2009). *The cholera years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866*. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>141</sup> Needles, Edward. (1849). “Ten Years’ Progress.” Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson. 8.

The environmental and social conditions of the Cedar neighborhood and Moyamensing district were partly explained by the erosion of job stability and economic order in the early and middle decades of 19th century. Stuart Blumin has illustrated growing antagonisms through an investigation of vertical class mobility in Philadelphia from 1820 to 1860.<sup>142</sup> Blumin speculates that a prominent economic shift after 1830 changed patterns of occupational mobility. By the 1850s, downward residential mobility was at least twice as high as upward. Blumin describes a Philadelphia in which the ranks of the bottom classes increased dramatically as a proportion of the population, as did the geographic space covered by poor and working class neighborhoods.

Economic opportunity became more closely correlated with urban geography. As economic stability became more difficult to attain, competition at the lower rungs of the social order became increasingly intense, and poor neighborhoods began to show the effects. From 1830 to 1850, growing economic hardship, shifting and troubled social identities, increasingly violent contests over the question of slavery, and the deteriorating material condition of many city neighborhoods combined to produce an almost constant cycle of violence and retribution.

Numerous commentators remarked on the wretched conditions of Moyamensing living and its implications for the character of individuals residing there. Philadelphia's coroner from 1845-1848, Dr. Napoleon Leidy singled out a small black ghetto in "the smaller streets, courts and alleys" between Fifth and Eighth streets, between South and Fitzwater in

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<sup>142</sup> Stuart Blumin in Thernstrom and Sennett 1969.

Moyamensing, as the most miserable in Philadelphia.<sup>143</sup> The reformer Edward Needles identified “those crowded streets and alleys where the destitution and wretchedness is most intense and infectious.”<sup>144</sup> To live in such a neighborhood was the ultimate sign of depravity, “where the evil effects of herding together in crowded courts and miserable buildings, and the indifference to the ordinary comforts and decencies of life, are most apparent.”<sup>145</sup> Philanthropists and public health experts wrote vivid, thick descriptions of ghettos that marked residents as beyond the pale of civilization.

Philanthropists’ reports added their perspectives to a growing number of news stories that painted an increasingly vivid picture of Philadelphia’s slums. The penny press offered glimpses into the lifestyles of the city’s poor for the largest readership audiences. One newspaper noted that “Moyamensing constitutes the *lower* portion of Philadelphia, geographically as well as morally speaking. It embraces all that is vile, loathsome, iniquitous, and abandoned in that vast city. A more God forsaken spot of ground and class of people, cannot be found on this or any other continent.”<sup>146</sup> Even Frederick Douglass’ *North Star* called Moyamensing, “the place where no

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<sup>143</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 36.

<sup>144</sup> Needles, 1849, 7.

<sup>145</sup> Needles, Edward. (1849). “Ten Years’ Progress.” Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson. 7.

<sup>146</sup> The Constitution, 10/18/1843



decent person can walk after nightfall, without being robbed or insulted.”<sup>147</sup>

According to both Black and White commentators, place was defined by social practice, and people were defined by place.

The *North American* newspaper of Philadelphia described black Moyamensing residents in a typically florid manner:

This degraded and demoralized portion of the population of Philadelphia, from the scenes witnessed almost hourly every day at the offices of the police magistrates of the district, would seem to be growing worse and worse. The beastly use of poisoned rum, brutality, cutting and maiming with knives, stealing, robbery, burglary, the disregard of the marriage tie, vagrancy, beggary, disease, starvation and death, go to form but a faint picture of the reality.<sup>148</sup>

Later that year, the *North American* commented that:

a bad condition of things in that district among the blacks. Riot and brutality prevail to a great extent. The Hospital is daily and nightly troubled with cases requiring surgical treatment, caused by brickbats and other missiles, and sometimes stabbing instruments, that have been used by these miserable wretches upon each other's heads and bodies, in their constant fights.<sup>149</sup>

Police and coroner's reports contributed to the view that Moyamensing was a symbol of all the ills of a rapidly urbanizing, mixed race, county.

A pedestrian walking south towards Cedar Street, on Sixth, would encounter a landscape lacking order. Blocks were broken by alleys at irregular intervals. Passyunk Street hooked sharply up toward the Delaware

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<sup>147</sup> J.D. "Colorphobia in Philadelphia." *The North Star*. October 13, 1848. Rochester, NY.

<sup>148</sup> *The North American*, 2/06/1846

<sup>149</sup> *North American*, 7/14/1846

River's banks in a shape resembling a rhino's horn. Christian, Carpenter, and Washington Streets all bent in the other direction. Stone and brick buildings sat beside cheap, wood-framed houses. Beyond the city limits were found more idiosyncratic spaces. Just before Cedar, well into Moyamensing, and including parts of Southwark, Holme's orderly grid was sliced up into small alleys and courtyards that produced new levels of crowded and disorderly living arrangements.

Easy-to-miss byways appeared and then vanished with such regularity as to constantly transform neighborhoods and confound mapmakers, whose information became out of date almost as soon as their maps were printed.<sup>150</sup> While most Philadelphia streets were fifty feet wide, alleys were much more narrow, sometimes as slim as ten or twelve feet.<sup>151</sup> In the 1830s, twenty-five different alleys cut through the most densely populated area of Moyamensing between Cedar, Passyunk, and Eighth Streets.

Buildings in these alleys typically clustered around courtyards and were accessed through narrow passages between street-fronting buildings. Houses were usually two or three and a half stories tall, and many contained only one room per floor. Privies were built either at the end of the court or in the middle.

White philanthropists warned against black concentration in Moyamensing, arguing it only exacerbated the challenges facing African Americans in proving their suitability for citizenship and a claim on proper public space. Nevertheless, African Americans had few residential options,

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<sup>150</sup> William Hastings. (1967). "Philadelphia Microcosm." *PMHB*, v.91, 2. P164-180.

<sup>151</sup> Hastings, 1967, p.166.

having been driven from neighborhoods elsewhere in Philadelphia County by violence and intimidation. Indeed, by 1830, black residents had been shut out from spreading north and east throughout the city. Facing such restrictions, they concentrated in pockets in Moyamensing and just over the city boundary near Sixth and Lombard.<sup>152</sup>

The Society of Friends singled out these Moyamensing poor for charitable assistance and a more generous appraisal of the reasons for their conditions than was found in most news accounts: “The degradation and wretchedness which mark the infected district in Moyamensing are foreign to the real character of our coloured population, to whom it would be doing a gross injustice, not to point out clearly the broad line of separation.”<sup>153</sup> These philanthropists argued that Moyamensing was not to be taken as an example of inherent black debasement, but simply demonstrated the destructive nature of poverty among white and black alike.

Those inhabitants of that district among whom all this degradation prevails are a mixt assemblage of the lowest and most abandoned of both colours, as much below the general condition of the great portion of the people of colour, as it is below that of the respectable labouring white population of our city.<sup>154</sup>

These commentators also acknowledged that degradation was not solely a black phenomenon, but struck this population more uniformly than it did other groups. They also attributed the conditions in which African Americans lived in

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<sup>152</sup> DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*.

<sup>153</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 39.

<sup>154</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 39.

this region to the horrors of slavery, which was intended, in part, as a rebuke of the South. As the least urbanized of all the districts, Moyamensing was portrayed as the dirty neighbor to the civilized city.<sup>155</sup> Only the streets nearest Cedar were built out and densely inhabited. Beyond them lay undeveloped hillsides, creeks, and streams, some of which provided fruits and vegetables to city residents.

Between 1820 and 1840, Moyamensing's population grew from 4,000 to 14,500, almost all of whom settled near Cedar. As the population swelled, the rural-cum-urban settlement quickly outgrew the infrastructure that could support modern living. Homes were poorly serviced by roads, canals, and sewage systems. Disorder characterized the neighborhoods, and, many Whites argued, its residents' lives.

Sickness constantly threatened residents, and epidemics hit hardest in and around Cedar. In 1806, yellow fever so devastated the neighborhood that city authorities considered closing South Street between the Delaware River and Fifth.<sup>156</sup> The American Journal of the Medical Sciences reported in 1827 and 1831 that cases of malaria were confined "almost entirely to the

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<sup>155</sup> Ecology: Moyamensing was originally a farm tract deeded to Stille, Clensmith, and Andries, all Swedes, in 1664, and "confirmed" to Stille, Andries, Bankson, and Mattson in 1684. (Scharf & Westcott, 15) Incorporated in 1812 as 2,560 acres.

Moyamensing settlers described in "Minutes of the Board of Property," *Pennsylvania Archives*, Second Series, XIX, 353-354.

See Andrew Heath. (2008). "The Manifest Destiny of Philadelphia." Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>156</sup> Scharf & Westcott, 521.

comparatively small proportion of population inhabiting the unpaved or ill-paved environs” around the undeveloped portions Moyamensing, as well as Southwark, Kensington, and Spring Garden.<sup>157</sup> The undeveloped state of the district was a serious impediment to health, and poor health prevented social and economic progress.

By the 1840s, Philadelphia had eleven miles of sewers snaking throughout the city, but these did not extend to Moyamensing. The supply of water from the city to Moyamensing was sometimes cut off without warning.<sup>158</sup> In the undeveloped districts, gutters fed into open sinks, where liquids either evaporated or were absorbed into the ground beneath. In 1828 *The Berks and Schuylkill Journal* reported that a worker excavating a well in Moyamensing “was overcome by the foul air, and fell senseless; a second in attempting to relieve him, shared the same fate.”<sup>159</sup> Unpaved roads provided innumerable gathering pools for liquids of all kinds, miring human and vehicular traffic. In

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<sup>157</sup> PAS, 1838, p.36. This finding led the doctors to conclude that pavement was responsible for improved health, “...by effecting a perfect draining, [pavement] prevents exhalation, at the same time that it admits the total removal of vegetable and animal matters, the sources of foul and unhealthy emanations. The chief motive for paving the streets and sidewalks, is usually convenience, but it has always appeared to us, that by far the most important object achieved by it was the preservation of health.”

<sup>158</sup> The North American, 7/26/1839

<sup>159</sup> Berks and Schuylkill Journal, 10/04/1828

1841 *The North American* editorialized about the effects of the weather on conditions in the district:

The Roads just out of the City are in a wretched state. The frequent and long continued rains have deeply penetrated the soil and in some places, teams are compelled to pass through almost unfathomable quagmires. Near Moyamensing Prison, on the Passyunk road, and out on Broad street towards Gray's Ferry, it is almost impossible for vehicles to pass.<sup>160</sup>

The *Public Ledger* contrasted Moyamensing to the city in that same year:

Our city remains healthy, although the atmosphere is intensely hot. The streets are kept clean and the hydrants are almost daily opened and the gutters washed. This remark is true respecting the city proper, but it has less application to Southwark, Moyamensing or the Northern Liberties. Some of their streets are disgustingly dirty.<sup>161</sup>

By 1850, the Philadelphia-based *North American* lamented about the district, "as it is, property is depreciated and is depreciating; people are moving away, and everything shows signs of decay."<sup>162</sup>

### **Stench, Filth, and Contagious Living Conditions**

Cleanliness was an impossible goal for the urban poor, who crowded into single, unventilated rooms in unfinished cellars matted with slime, mold, and sewage made worse by each rainfall. Their apartments abutted the least desirable work environments – abattoirs, soap factories, tanneries, distilleries, and fat-rendering plants that filled the air with stenches and the alleys with

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<sup>160</sup> The North American, 5/14/1841

<sup>161</sup> PL 7/24/1841

<sup>162</sup> North American, 11/09/1850

waste. The front steps of poor houses were the common refuge of dogs, pigs, chicken and horses, volumes of their excrement, and the day's rubbish. As Dell Upton has described, the most common scents in antebellum cities were those of animal and human waste, disposed of in the streets and alleys.<sup>163</sup> Food spoiled in the markets, especially in warm weather, and grain decayed in warehouses and docks. In 1821 Philadelphia banned free-ranging goats from all streets, alleys and public squares. Though technically illegal, pigs roamed freely without consequence.

The better-off urban poor lived in densely packed neighborhoods, in houses that shared collective privies located over large pits to collect waste. These pits were fixed in place behind their homes, occasionally coated with lime to suppress stench, and emptied only every ten to twenty years. However, living conditions for the poorest typically did not include any outhouse at all. Instead, they relieved themselves in containers, which were either dumped onto the streets or left for pickup by the "tubmen," who collected waste at night throughout the city.<sup>164</sup> An 1835 report from the Upper Delaware detailed the situation of fifty- five families living in thirty tenements, all without access to a privy. "[Tenants] are compelled to make use of vessels of various descriptions; the contents of which are daily thrown into the neighbouring docks, or into the streets! It will be observed that the buildings in this block, (with one or two exceptions,) *occupy the whole ground belonging to the premises*. The privies are situated either in the cellars, or in the vaults

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<sup>163</sup> Dell Upton. (2008). Another City. New Haven: Yale University Press.

<sup>164</sup> Upton, 42.

under the streets.”<sup>165</sup> Typically, transporters evacuated their containers in nearby vacant lots and on the edge of the city, both of which were located in Moyamensing. Waste removal, sanitation, and their relationships to contagion were all concepts in their infancy in much of Moyamensing at this time.

In the three decades prior to the Civil War, discrepancies in living conditions between the city and surrounding neighborhoods became a source of tension. Beginning in the 1830s and accelerating in the ‘40s and ‘50s, urbanization, immigration, and industrialization widened gaps in living conditions in the city. Earlier in the century, poor Irish immigrants and black migrants crowded into rental homes around wealthier Philadelphians near Cedar Street. Although residential segregation by race and income rose from the 1830s until the 1860s, lowly black residents sometimes shared space with Irish immigrants, who were often not only their neighbors but greatest antagonists and competitors for city space and job opportunity.<sup>166</sup> Given these conflicts and scarce economic resources, black residents came to cluster further in all-black streets and neighborhoods.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Union Benevolent, 1835, p.17.

<sup>166</sup> The density of black residents living on predominantly black streets increased 13 percent while black neighborhoods grew 10 percent denser with households. Hershberg, 1971-72. P.189. However, Needles reported “In this region of poverty and wretchedness, the blacks live in the same houses, and often the same rooms, with the lowest class of foreign emigrants principally Irish, and it is hard to tell which has sunk the lowest in filth and misery.” Needles, 1849. P.7.

<sup>167</sup> Measured in 1838 and again in 1847, three out of every five black households had an entire net worth (both real and personal) of sixty dollars or less. Nine percent of black families owned real estate in 1838, while only six percent did by 1847 – all while the total number of black households increased in the city and the purchasing power of the dollar declined. By 1850, there were more black residents who were poorer and further removed from any opportunities to advance.



The living conditions for many black residents were decrepit, cramped, and often deadly. Most crowded into tenements, cellars, wood shanties, and back alleys largely hidden from public view. Reports chronicled how much harder life was for poor black residents, particularly in the notorious slums around Baker, Bedford and Small streets in Moyamensing, where the infamous Astor House drew reporters from as far as Boston. *The Boston Daily Atlas* gave a vivid account of Moyamensing's "wretched hovels" and "destitute inmates" in March 1846. In Astor House they found:

four persons, two white men and two women, huddled around a small portable furnace, containing stone coal but half kindled, in the midst of a wretched cellar.... The door was shut down to keep out the cold, leaving, of course, the inmates in the dark, and the stifling fumes from the coal had no means of escape.... The bare floor was the only sleeping accommodations.... They were all scantily provided with clothing....<sup>168</sup>

The editors recounted a philanthropist's experience finding "a colored child actually in a dying state from the want of sustenance, and huddling close to its almost inanimate body, for the purpose of obtaining some warmth, was another boy, who being older was not so far gone."<sup>169</sup>

Philadelphia's coroner, Dr. Napoleon Leidy, had taken up his own informal study of the black ghetto. Leidy described the consequences of a swelling population crowded into such conditions:

Many were found dead in cold and exposed rooms and garrets, board shanties five and six feet high, and as many feet square, erected and rented for lodging purposes, mostly without any comforts, save the

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<sup>168</sup> Boston Daily Atlas, 3/09/1846

<sup>169</sup> Boston Daily Atlas, 3/09/1846

bare floor, with the cold penetrating between the boards, and through the holes and crevices on all sides; some in cold, wet and damp cellars, with naked walls, and in many instances without floors; and others found dead lying in backyards, alleys, and exposed situations.<sup>170</sup>

Most of the poorest Negroes were without homes entirely and relied on whatever provisions they gathered or earned throughout the day as collateral for shelter. Leidy had found a recently dead black man in the first room he entered, who lay on top of the bare ground with no bedding. Next to the corpse were two Negroes, one of them his wife, "either drunk or fast asleep." Two days prior a young black woman had died in the adjoining hut.

As a result of these living conditions, poor neighborhoods least touched by sanitary reforms were most susceptible to disease. "In almost every epidemic visitation, it is the colored and poorest portion of the white population, which bear the chief brunt of suffering and mortality."<sup>171</sup> Seven out of every nine alms house patients came from Moyamensing, where "the people of colour crowded together in the narrow courts and alleys of this neighborhood."<sup>172</sup> The Quaker *Society of Friends* calculated a 1 in 33 mortality rate for black Philadelphians living in Philadelphia, in contrast to 1 in 54 for whites. In the poorest districts, the mortality rate for Negroes staying in an almshouse was 44 in 100, three times the rate for white almshouse residents.

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<sup>170</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 34.

<sup>171</sup> PAS, 1838, p.35.

<sup>172</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 25-6.

While disorder characterized the spatial existence of the poor as manifest by their greater susceptibility to disease, middle class domestic life moved gradually towards greater order and control over residential arrangements, with a growing emphasis on privacy. Throughout first decades of the nineteenth century, domestic space was designed to remove residents from bustling street noise and action through creation of buffering zones within houses—from other members of the family and from the street. Interiority, rather than openness to the exterior, was emphasized. Clear demarcation lines were established through domestic architecture between the public arena and the familial refuge of the home.

Innovations in domestic architecture signaled a desire to distinguish private from public and to allow scope for personalization and individuation of the interior space. Rooms were divided, antechambers added, bathrooms separated, and kitchens hidden in back, all in attempts to make distinctions between types of behavior and ensure that boundaries were spatially enforced. Acts that involved bodily maintenance, such as eating, sleeping, bathing, grooming, and sex, all became private matters to be attended to only in specific domestic places. If the body were to present itself to such prying eyes in public, or the small public that was the family, it must first prepare in private. For the legions of poor living in slum conditions, no such separation of functional spaces could even be imagine. Without access to privacy, the poor could not establish order in their lives. As concepts of privacy became more fully attached to notions of being human, as opposed to animal-like, the poor moved further and further beyond contemporary notions of the requirements of civilized society.

Philanthropists like the Irish-born Matthew Carey railed against the growing inequities on display in Philadelphia. In 1835, Carey published the “Letters on the Condition of the Poor” to call attention to the plight of suffering Philadelphians:

The sufferings of the respectable portion of the poor of our city are occasionally extreme and harrowing, and exceed credibility.... These scenes are owing chiefly to the wealthy being utterly unable to realize them, as they rarely ever see poverty but under its most revolting form, beggary; and to the misguided zealots, who preach against the relief of the poor as injurious to society.<sup>173</sup>

Carey fully understood that as disparities in wealth grew among Philadelphia’s citizens, the poor would soon be unrecognizable as human beings and, thus, unworthy of sympathy for the middle class and rich of the city. When class disparities were compounded by racial differences and economic competition within the lowest rungs of Philadelphia society, the consequences would be negative for the groups seen as an affront to the idealized vision of the city. Despite Carey’s efforts to stimulate a sympathetic response to the poor among his readers, the psychic, material, and social distances between classes and races in Philadelphia made this an enormous challenge.

## **Conclusion**

On their afternoon walk, the pair of Friends stopped first at the Moral Retreat for Coloured Persons, on Lombard above Seventh Street. The Retreat was an old two-story wood frame building, “indicating, we thought, very strongly a limited income in the occupants.” The pair of Friends inquired

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<sup>173</sup> Carey, 1835, p.2.

after the director of the home, Hetty Reckless, “a short fleshy woman,” who explained that the institution’s funding had run out. Though “there is no deficiency of wretchedness, misery and vice in the coloured population,” there was scarcely any money to clothe and feed new admissions to the home. The retreat provided lodging, food, and honest work to “coloured girls and women of the lowest and most destitute class... [most of whom] were bone-pickers and rag-gatherers, who, clothed in tatters, earned a bare subsistence, by groping in the gutters, and amid the offal of the streets.”<sup>174</sup>

The retreat provided a place where girls and women could cleanse themselves of the impurities of urban living. Hetty Reckless herself visited “some of the lowest haunts of the miserable and destitute,” to invite the girls to the retreat so that they might improve their lot in life. The institution first focused on helping them clean themselves and their clothes, to leave behind the dirt and filth of the streets. “The rags they bring with them can readily be purified by nothing less life-destroying than fire.”<sup>175</sup> Once cleansed, they are treated to the comfort of a real bed with fresh sheets, offered three meals a day, and employed in some form of industrious work such as sewing to aid the retreat.

The transformation was meant to prepare the women for a life in the country, far from the ills of urban squalor. “After keeping them a few weeks... places are obtained for them in the country.” The women were sent to many

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<sup>174</sup> Oct. 9, 1847. “An Afternoon Walk: Moyamensing.” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*. 21:3. P.20.

<sup>175</sup> Oct. 9, 1847. “An Afternoon Walk: Moyamensing.” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*. 21:3. P.20.

farms familiar to the visiting Friends, suggesting these were mainly Quakers associated with the retreat. The two perused a book of testimonies collected from these farmers, “as to the good character maintained by some of these poor women in their new situations.” The women too generally expressed satisfaction with their new country homes, a matter that greatly impressed the visiting Friends, “considering the depth of degradation from which they had been rescued.”<sup>176</sup>

Moyamensing was not only a problem for its black residents although they were the ones who provoked the most violent responses for simply being there. Nearly all who lived in the district succumbed to the pressures of vice and moral depravity, according to the Friends. The pair next visited the “Union School” on Christian Street above Tenth, which housed “outcast children, white or coloured, indiscriminately.” The mission here was the same as that of retreat. It included attempts to “reform” the children, and find them places to live and work in the countryside. A school benefactor reported to the Friends, “in no spot of similar extent, in any city in the world, was there as much vice and degradation [*sic*] as in that part of Moyamensing.” According to the Friends, “the most abandoned outcasts of both sexes,” were not those who fell from comfortable positions in life, but those “who have *grown up* amid these sinks of pollution and degradation.” The Friends’ language demonstrates how the environmental conditions that prompted infrastructure improvements –

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<sup>176</sup> Oct. 9, 1847. “An Afternoon Walk: Moyamensing.” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*. 21:3. P.20.

sinkholes and waste pollution – were also believed to lead to “a life of shame and wretchedness.”<sup>177</sup>

According to the Friends, the black poor were more conducive to improvement than their white immigrant counterparts, despite their impoverished conditions. The Union School benefactor acknowledged the common argument that their living condition precluded black claims to civic and social rights. “The blacks were many of them very degraded, wretched, and vicious, and their condition furnished those willing to receive it, with an occasion to say, they were not fit to be free.” The benefactor used this claim as part of an argument to invest in the improvement of the poor rather than punishment of their inevitable vices. To the taxpayers, he asks: “would they rather pay \$250 per head for punishing, or \$36.5 for reclaiming the vicious?”

<sup>178</sup>

To sympathetic readers, census reports demonstrated the effects of environment on behavior and life chances. To detractors, these reports merely quantified and illustrated what they already knew – blacks were by and large a degraded and inferior race. The choice was stark. Either invest in the improvement of the black and poor so that they might achieve success on par with whites, as the Quakers desired, or banish them, as the Colonization Society openly advocated.

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<sup>177</sup> Oct. 9, 1847. “An Afternoon Walk: Moyamensing.” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*. 21:3. P.20.

<sup>178</sup> Oct. 9, 1847. “An Afternoon Walk: Moyamensing.” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*. 21:3. P.20.

Nineteenth century Philadelphians worked at social order incrementally. A loosely coherent spatial ideology of exposure and improvement emerged from the unaligned contributions of journalists, philanthropists, the coroner and police. Each embarked on campaigns to publicize Philadelphia's spaces and people in order to pursue one course of action or another. Print representations provided a second-hand form of encounter with the slums that could be layered on top of first-hand experience. Their narrative and moralistic constructs also provided a framework for interpreting these experiences and making sense of a city that had become increasingly strange to residents.



## Chapter 3: Mob Violence Enforces Spatial Order

### Purification Schemes

Edward Abdy, an English abolitionist visiting Philadelphia in 1833-34, was certain that many Philadelphians could not possibly envision the city as a home to dark skinned people. In the notes he kept of his journey, Abdy wrote that violence against African Americans was “the result of a preconcerted organized plan—the end aimed at, being the expulsion of the blacks.”<sup>179</sup> Abdy interviewed Black families affected by the violence and white Quaker abolitionists. He described a campaign of terror. In one scene from his journal, a mob beat a man to death outside his own house, while his wife hid his children in the yard, safe from pursuers “hunting for her.” In the other, a father crossed a river with his child, just handing the child to the mother on the bank before succumbing to exhaustion and drowning.<sup>180</sup> In one riot, Black residents were “driven from their dwellings into the fields and lanes, where many passed the night in a state of destitution and apprehension.” Municipal authorities refused them entrance to the almshouse, out of fear that it would be “torn down” by the mob. When Abdy remarked to the Philadelphia mayor of his shock at the horrors visited upon the Black population, he replied, “You have not seen one-tenth of the horrors that are constantly practiced here.”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Edward Abdy. (1835). *Journal of a Residence and Tour in The United States of North America, from April, 1833, to October, 1834*. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street. V.3, p.316.

<sup>180</sup> Abdy, 1835, v.3, p.323-4.

<sup>181</sup> Abdy, 1835, v.3, p.327

By Abdy's description, economic competition was a motivating factor behind racialized violence and the expulsionist impulse. He describes rioters, mostly young tradesmen, who broke into a well-off White house, "searching for plunder," because the owner was known to employ African American men. Abdy concluded, "the Irish laborers were actively employed in this vile conspiracy against a people of whom they were jealous, because they were more industrious, orderly, and obliging than themselves."<sup>182</sup> Abdy notes the irony of an Irish population that immigrated to the United States to escape persecution in their own country only to become "more bitter and severe against the blacks than the native whites themselves."<sup>183</sup>

Economic competition alone would not describe the concerted efforts at eradication in Philadelphia. The pursuit of American racial purity underlay much of the violence. Abdy recounted how a collection was taken to help affected African American families. Many whites replied they would have no trouble contributing something if it were to ensure the removal of all Black Philadelphians to Africa. Abdy reported one African American man "of wealth and great respectability, was told afterwards by a white, that he would not have been molested, if he had not, by refusing to go to Liberia, prevented others from leaving the country."<sup>184</sup> It was clear to Abdy the people of Moyamensing simply wanted Black residents out. "The proprietors of the houses in that quarter seemed anxious to get rid of a population, the presence

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<sup>182</sup> Abdy, 1835, v.3, p.325.

<sup>183</sup> Abdy, 1835, v.3, p.159.

<sup>184</sup> Abdy, 1835, v.3, p.324.

of which they considered prejudicial to their interests, by preventing the introduction of a more wealthy class of people.”<sup>185</sup>

Five years later in 1839, Thomas Brothers, also an English abolitionist, reached the same conclusion as Abdy: mobs intended to permanently expel the Black population from the city. “It is not possible to conceive the horrid barbarities that are at times inflicted upon” African Americans, Brothers reflected. He reported that in Philadelphia, “if a man is only suspected of sympathizing with the blacks... such a man finds it necessary to plead, in the most earnest manner, for his life and property.”<sup>186</sup> The provocation for the mobs was the popular belief that “the negroes ought not to be suffered to live in a *free country*.” The violence reached its peak in the Cedar neighborhood and Moyamensing district, “that part of the city of Philadelphia, which is principally inhabited by coloured people,” where the mob “deliberately set about to murder them, destroy their houses, break up their furniture, steal their money, or other valuable things.”<sup>187</sup> Black residents were portrayed as reduced to the barest state of existence:

Affrighted and screaming women and children, in whatever condition they happened to be in at the time, have flown from their homes to the woods, where they have, for weeks together, slept upon leaves, and lived upon berries, or what else by chance they could get; and whither their savage pursuers, not having glutted their vengeance in the city, have followed them, till fairly tired out with what they term “hunting the Nigs.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Abdy, 1835, v.3, p.329.

<sup>186</sup> Brothers, Thomas. (1840). *The United States of North America as They Are*. Publisher? P.197.

<sup>187</sup> Brothers, 1840, p.198.

<sup>188</sup> Brothers, 1840, p.198.

Brothers witnessed rioters “tear down forty houses at one time,” over the course of three nights, in full view of the mayor and police. The ringleaders were well known to all, although no one was ever prosecuted for such crimes, so as to keep the city “in the good graces of the southern slave-holders, too many of whose hearts are elated at the death-screach of the negro.”<sup>189</sup>

### **National Culture of Public Violence**

Violence permeated American life in the 1830's.<sup>190</sup> Abraham Lincoln feared what it portended for the young republic, threatened by “the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country.” Lincoln warned the Young Men’s Lyceum in Springfield Illinois against “the growing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgment of Courts; and the worse than savage mobs, for the executive ministers of justice.”<sup>191</sup> Mobs were “savage” slaves to “wild and furious passions” in opposition to “sober judgement” and the rule of law. Hezekiah Niles, editor of the nationwide *Niles Register* newspaper, was shaken enough by riots in Philadelphia, Moyamensing, and New York, to lament, “the state of society is

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<sup>189</sup> Brothers, 1840, p.198.

<sup>190</sup> Chudacoff & Smith, 1988, p.62-63. “The extraordinary press of diverse populations, new experience with heightened social and economic inequality, and fierce competition between groups contending for political power left antebellum cities deeply scarred and divided. Nearly a thousand people died in antebellum riots, revealing the inadequacies of constables, sheriffs, and night watchmen in keeping the peace. A sense that crime as well as disorder was on the increase prompted cities to establish permanent professional uniformed police forces, whom they could pay with revenues raised through taxing and borrowing provisions in new city charters.... By midcentury, fear of disorder had overcome fear of professional police in many cities.”

<sup>191</sup> R. Basler. Ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. New Brunswick: 1953. I, 109.

awful. Brute force has superseded the law, at many places, and violence has become the “order of the day.” The time predicted seems rapidly approaching when the mob shall rule.”<sup>192</sup> Institutions entrusted with uniting men and women in common cause were nearly toppled by the “spirit of riot,” the “disposition to “take the law in their own hands,” [that] prevail[ed] in every quarter.”<sup>193</sup> In the minds of many Americans, law and order democracy was threatened by “that most intolerable and irresponsible of all despotisms, the sovereign *mob!*”<sup>194</sup>

Of all the sovereign mobs in the United States, those in Philadelphia were often singled out for their frequency, ferocity and impunity. Abolitionists viewed the threat with alarm. Frederick Douglass called Philadelphia the premier “mobocratic city.... one of the most disorderly and insecure” in America. “No man is safe, his life – his property – and all that he holds dear, are in the hands of a mob, which may come upon him at any moment – at midnight or mid-day, and deprive him of his all.”<sup>195</sup> For Douglass and his audience, mob rule defined Philadelphia. The abolitionist *National Era* newspaper in Washington, DC agreed: “There is not a city in the Union more shamefully mob-ridden than Philadelphia.”<sup>196</sup> Writers contrasted the image of Penn’s sober and orderly city with an antebellum Philadelphia in which neither

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<sup>192</sup> *Niles Weekly Register*, XLVIII (August 8, 1835), 393.

<sup>193</sup> *Niles’ Weekly Register*, August 22, 1835, pg. 439.

<sup>194</sup> *Boston Times* reprinted in *The Liberator*, June 1, 1838.

<sup>195</sup> Douglass, F. “Philadelphia.” *The North Star*. October 19, 1849. Rochester, NY.

<sup>196</sup> “A Bloody Riot in Philadelphia.” *The National Era*. October 18, 1849. Washington, DC.

person or property were protected. The mob had become judge, jury, and executioner. No municipal authority, not the mayor's office, police, or fire departments, had the strength or will to oppose it.

The mob is best understood as a form of embodied communication that shaped both the debate over political communities and the material environments in which they operated. The mob was a form of social critique that remade the city and its daily life in its own image. The bodies crowded on the street, the blood spilt on cobble stones, the splintered wood, scorching flames and black smoke were the enunciations that articulated the mob's worldview. These elements defined the boundaries of "the public" as clearly as any debates in Harrisburg, PA., or Washington DC. The mob was a form of material and symbolic communication, transforming the built environment at the same time it attempted to regulate how people and things could signify themselves therein. Mobs succeeded in redefining the nature of being in public for both Black and white Philadelphians through the clamors, tumults, excitements, spirits and atmospheres that so captured the contemporary imagination concerning the mob's energy as it was released upon the city.

Mobbing in Philadelphia destroyed lives and livelihoods in Philadelphia's African American neighborhoods with regularity. Residents were attacked in the streets. Homes and businesses were torn apart and burnt to the ground as nowhere else. Throughout the 1830s and 40s, mobs carried out nearly continuous campaigns of expulsion against Black residents. The *Genius of Universal Emancipation's* influential African American editor Benjamin Lundy speculated that riots were "profitable enterprises to the

abandoned slaves of misrule,” an organized “system of robbery” against abolitionists and negroes aided by complicit magistrates “disposed to wink at their depredations.”<sup>197</sup> The *Emancipator and Free American* newspaper cried out that anything but obeisance to the mob was met “by the murder of children, the outrage of women, the maiming and wounding of men, the plunder and destruction of dwellings and the burning of the sanctuaries of the despised race.... In Philadelphia... the horrible prejudice against color is stronger than in any other part of the United States.”<sup>198</sup>

From the 1820s and 30s onward, white Philadelphians took greater interest in policing representations of Blacks, as debates over enfranchisement and citizenship continued to gain force.<sup>199</sup> As a result of these strictures, Black Philadelphians were active in public space only in limited ways such as spiritual worship, street parades, and peaceful protests. They largely avoided public social gatherings. Furthermore, the Black elite scorned any public consumption of alcohol. Nevertheless, even such “righteous” activities increasingly elicited white scorn and violent response. The Haitian revolution and the abolition of British slavery in the West Indies compounded white anxieties about Black Americans, and within the context of

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<sup>197</sup> Lundy, B. (July, 1834). “To Our Patrons in Philadelphia.” *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. 1,7. Pg.111. Lundy, B. (1833). *Genius of universal emancipation* (Vol. 13). B. Lundy.

<sup>198</sup> “The Philadelphia Mob.” *Emancipator and Free American*. August 11, 1842. Vol.VII, No.15. p.58. Boston, MA.

<sup>199</sup> Runcie, J. (1972). " Hunting the Nigs" in Philadelphia: the Race Riot of August 1834. *Pennsylvania History*, 39(2), 187-218.

an outspoken abolitionist movement, any African American collective use of public space was interpreted as an affront to racial order.

The mob enforced an ideology of white male supremacy in the public spaces of the city through use of violence that threatened Blacks while establishing the power of the gang. Riots erupted in 1829, 1834, 1835, 1842, and 1849. Overwhelmingly, Blacks and abolitionists of both races were the target. Incrementally, riots and arson reshaped the city by demonstrating the boundaries of tolerance for the physical presence of Blacks within the city, according to an image of its future defined by white supremacy.

By the 1830s and 1840s, mob violence had become an epidemic, a social catastrophe that exceeded the control of any public or private agent.<sup>200</sup> The epidemic was partly based on what took place in Philadelphia.<sup>201</sup> Mob attacks, particularly “race wars,” were frequent, and the misrule of the crowd was such a common part of public life that it served as a trope in political, social and religious discourses.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> For mob violence, see Feldberg, M. (1980). *The turbulent era: riot & disorder in Jacksonian America* (p. 95). New York: Oxford University Press.; Gilje, P. A. (1987). *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834*. UNC Press Books.; Gilje, P. A. (1996). *Rioting in America*. Indiana University Press.; Grimsted, D. (2003). *American mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward civil war*. Oxford University Press.; Lane, R. (1979). *Violent death in the city: Suicide, accident, and murder in nineteenth-century Philadelphia*. Harvard University Press.; **Brown, *Strain of Violence*, 1975**; Richards, ***Gentlement of Property and Standing*, 1971**.

<sup>201</sup> **E. Geffen. “Violence in Philadelphia.” (1969)**. Geffen, E. M. (1969). Violence in Pennsylvania in the 1840's and 1850's. *Pennsylvania History*, 36(4), 381-410.

<sup>202</sup> Feldberg, M. (1974). The crowd in Philadelphia history: A comparative perspective\*. *Labor History*, 15(3), 323-336.



Across America, mobs injured and destroyed people and property with such unchecked abandon that many believed society was at its end. Hezekiah Niles, editor and publisher of one of the leading newspapers in the nation, worried, "We fear that the moral sense of right and wrong has been rendered less sensitive than it was—that a spirit of *force*, in certain cases, has begotten it in others."<sup>203</sup> Andrew Jackson feared what the mob spirit portended: "This spirit of mob-law is becoming too common and must be checked or, ere long, it will become as great an evil as servile war, and the innocent will be much exposed."<sup>204</sup> A wave of mob violence swept from New Orleans to Boston. Its victims were varied: abolitionists, opposing political parties, Irish Catholics, Protestant Nativists, and African Americans.<sup>205</sup>

Mob violence did as much to shape social relations in antebellum Philadelphia as almost any other phenomenon. Charles Godfrey Leland: "Whoever shall write a history of Philadelphia from the Thirties to the era of the Fifties will record a popular period of turbulence and outrages so extensive as to now appear almost incredible."<sup>206</sup> According to the abolitionist *National Era* newspaper in Washington, DC, "There is not a city in the Union

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<sup>203</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*. Aug. 23, 1834. P.426. Niles, H., Niles, W. O., Hughes, J., & Beatty, G. (1842). *Niles' Weekly Register* (Vol. 61).

<sup>204</sup> **Andrew Jackson to Amos Kendall, Aug. 9, 1835, Andrew Jackson Papers, Library of Congress. Quoted in Grimsted, 1972, p.367.**

<sup>205</sup> Prince, C. E. (1985). The Great "Riot Year": Jacksonian Democracy and Patterns of Violence in 1834. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 5(1), 1-19.

<sup>206</sup> Leland, C.G. *Memoirs*. New York: 1893. P.216. Quoted in Runcie, 1972.

more shamefully mob-ridden than Philadelphia.”<sup>207</sup> Frederick Douglass called Philadelphia the premier “mobocratic city,”<sup>208</sup> “one of the most disorderly and insecure” in America. “No man is safe – his life – his property – and all that he holds dear, are in the hands of a mob, which may come upon him at any moment – at midnight or mid-day, and deprive him of his all.”<sup>209</sup>

Contemporaries came to view riots as common—and largely legitimate-- forms of expression. The frequency of riots had a palpable effect on the social and political values and distribution of power within the city. At election polling stations, groceries, or Abolitionist halls, mobs were important spectacles in public life. Mob violence was coordinated rather than spontaneous. The whimsy with which rioters destroyed their city makes “street theater” an apt description. Even the most devious forms of collective action were carried out with performative flair in ritual displays of political power with deadly purpose.

Competition and the insecure economic, social and political existence of Irish immigrants in Philadelphia help explain the tensions that led to violent outbreaks. Many rioters were young, low-skilled workers, often Irish, who lived close to the scene of the riots in Southwark and Moyamensing and had a criminal history. White gangs intent on enforcing racial hierarchies turned to mob violence and arson as favored instruments for constructing political and economic power. Gangs chalked their names on the walls of Philadelphia

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<sup>207</sup> “A Bloody Riot in Philadelphia.” *The National Era*. October 18, 1849. Washington, DC.

<sup>208</sup> Douglass, F. “Philadelphia.” *The North Star*. October 19, 1849. Rochester, NY.

<sup>209</sup> Douglass, October 19, 1849.

streets -- Killers, Blood Tubs, Rats, and Rangers -- asserting their group identity, attempting to control access through physical and psychological intimidation, and challenging institutions of authority.

Meanwhile, the Colonization Society openly advocated for the removal of all of Philadelphia's Black residents to West Africa. By 1833 Black leaders had begun to challenge the notion that rational argument could overcome white prejudice. Many believed a fire of worsening prejudice, fanned by the denunciations and proclamations of the ACS, was spreading across the North. Many African American leaders feared that the expulsionist program, with the ACS as its most prominent advocate, had become the white majority opinion in the North. The 1833 convention yielded the strongest critiques of the ACS:

The conduct of this institution is the most unprincipled that has been realized in almost any civilized country.... This society has most grossly vilified our character as a people; it has taken much pains to make us abhorrent to the public, and then pleads the necessity of sending us into banishment.<sup>210</sup>

The fight, it seemed, increasingly arrived at the doorsteps of Negro residents. "Ours is a defensive warfare; on our domicil (*sic*) we meet the aggressor."<sup>211</sup> By 1837, delegates to the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention introduced amendments to disfranchise African American men and reconsider closing borders to new Negro migrants into the state.

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<sup>210</sup> Unsigned. (1833). "To the free Coloured inhabitants of the United States." In Aptheker, 1951, p.142-3, 146.

<sup>211</sup> Unsigned. (1833). "To the free Coloured inhabitants of the United States." In Aptheker, 1951, p.142-3, 146.

American slave traders ensconced in crowds prowled the streets for Blacks to kidnap and sell as fugitive slaves in the South. Philadelphia's public realm was marked by constant threats to the freedom and health of Black men and women, limited and imperfect as those were.

Two decades of riots in Philadelphia reveal a contest over space that amounted to the purification of a district by enforced segregation and planned eradication of African Americans. Moyamensing and Philadelphia were understood by many white Philadelphians to be opposites. One was the exalted seat of American democracy and hub of industrial progress. The other was a primitive backwater filled with the undesirable races. Actors in the conflagration of violence that began in the early 1830s sought to reconcile this discrepancy. One form of spatial practice would have to defeat the other.

Each riot had its own lesson for how the presence of African Americans in Philadelphia would be governed by the white majority. The 1834 riots announced that the city was not to be shared. A strict segregation of space between white and Black would be enforced. In 1835, riots effectively isolated poor African Americans in the "infected district" of Moyamensing and wholly destroyed their homes and community, leaving them with no place to call their own. The destruction of Pennsylvania Hall in 1838 meant that the mob, as embodied public opinion, interpreted uplift as amalgamation, was offensive to the public interest, and therefore required a violent response. The riots of 1842 sent the message that any public demonstrations of political ambition or group solidarity on the part of Philadelphia's African Americans would not be tolerated and would be suppressed with violence. Finally, the California

House riots of 1849 announced the practical end of integrated spaces in Philadelphia, even in private establishments in the poorest communities. Lines of segregation would be stringently maintained in order to ensure the purity of racialized distinctions.

## **Major Antebellum Riots in Philadelphia**

1834

The riots of 1834 began at the Flying Horse carousel, a popular amusement for Black and white audiences. Hundreds of Whites rioted over the next few nights, burning a Black orphanage, church and the Black Masonic Lodge on 7th near Lombard. In the streets and alleys of Southwark and Moyamensing, witnesses described a mob “breaking into houses, destroying furniture, and greatly abusing and beating the inmates, all colored people.”<sup>212</sup> Newspapers reported over thirty houses owned by Black Philadelphians were either partly or completely destroyed. “As rioters broke into the houses, their inhabitants fled, many of them nearly naked, to save their lives.”<sup>213</sup> Newspapers chose spectacular examples to emphasize that under mob rule not even dead Black Americans could be laid to rest in the city. “*In one house there was a corpse which was thrown out of the coffin; and in another a dead infant was taken out of bed and cast on the floor, the mother being at the same time barbarously treated* (italics original).”<sup>214</sup> The

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<sup>212</sup> “Town Meeting – Riots.” *Hazard’s*. Sept. 27, 1834. 14,13.

<sup>213</sup> “Town Meeting – Riots.” 1834.

<sup>214</sup> “Disgraceful Riots”, *Hazard’s Register*, Aug 23, 1834; 14, 8; pg. 126.

mob acted with such coordination and ferocity as to suggest it attempted eradication of the Blacks in the Moyamensing neighborhood around 7<sup>th</sup> Street, south of Cedar.

The riots were generally coordinated and planned in advance. White gangs navigated the landscape of Cedar and Moyamensing with the help of residents who placed lit candles in their windows, leaving the darkened homes (presumed to house Black Philadelphians) susceptible to attack. “Some arrangement, it appears, existed between the mob and the white inhabitants, as the dwelling houses of the latter, contiguous to the residences of Blacks, were illuminated, and left undisturbed, while the huts of the negroes were signaled out with unerring certainty.”<sup>215</sup> This signaling tactic, derived from the Revolutionary era, demonstrates that the attacks were planned and communicated in advance and racially motivated. It also indicated that it was not only rioters who were complicit in mob violence but also many members of the white community who lived in the targeted area.

The phenomenon of mob violence was neither spontaneous nor limited to a group of radicals. The mob that attacked the African Presbyterian Church in first assembled in prearranged meeting places before carrying out the attacks.<sup>216</sup> The sheriff’s posse arrived late, unable to protect the church, and only to survey the destruction.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> “Disgraceful Riots.” *Hazard’s*. August 23, 1834. 14,8. P.126; “Riots.” *Hazard’s*. July 18, 1835. 16, 3. P.36.

<sup>216</sup> “Disgraceful Riots.” 1834.

<sup>217</sup> “Riots on Thursday Night.” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*. Aug. 23, 1834. 14,8. P. 127.

The committee investigating the 1834 riots identified competition over jobs as a primary motivating factor behind white anger and the destruction of so much Black property.

An opinion prevails, especially among white laborers, that certain portions of our community, prefer to employ colored people, whenever they can be had, to the employing of white people; and that, in consequence of this preference, many whites, who are able and willing to work, are left without employment, while colored people are provided with work, and enabled comfortably to maintain their families; and thus many white laborers, anxious for employment, are kept idle and indigent.<sup>218</sup>

Economic competition was a theme echoed in contemporary accounts and modern historical summaries of the period. According to the original report, competition had increased in the city over access to the resources and opportunities provided there. Many whites, including rioters, mayor, police and fire companies who did nothing, did not believe Blacks had a legitimate claim to those resources.

The committee also singled out the manner in which Black Philadelphians occupied public space as an important provocation for the riots. The committee's report made clear that the mob acted to suppress African American public visibility. Attacks on small frame churches in

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<sup>218</sup> "Town Meeting. --- Riots." Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania. Sep 27, 1834; 14, 13; American Periodicals Series Online, pg. 200. Samuel Hazard (Ed.). *The Register of Pennsylvania*. Vol. V. No. 8. February 20, 1830. Philadelphia: Wm. F. Geddes, No 59, Locust Street. "A petition was presented to the General Assembly on behalf of day labourers, stating that the practice of blacks being employed, was a great disadvantage to them who had emigrated from Europe for the purpose of obtaining a livelihood; that they were poor and honest, they therefore hoped a law would be prepared for the prevention of employment to the blacks. The Assembly resolved, "That the principle was dangerous and injurious to the republic, and ought not to be sanctioned by the House."

Southwark and Moyamensing were “believed to have been caused by the disorderly and noisy manner in which some of the colored congregations indulge, to the annoyance and disturbance of the neighborhood, in which such meeting houses are located.”<sup>219</sup> Conspicuous religious worship among Black Philadelphians was deemed an offense. In response to these provocations, the committee offered a tutorial on how Black Philadelphians could avoid future harassment.

Nothing will tend to win the good opinion, and secure the good offices of the community, more than a respectful and orderly deportment. It would do much good if those of the coloured population, whose age and character entitle them to have influence, would take the trouble to exercise it, and impress upon their younger brethren, the necessity as well as the propriety, of behaving themselves inoffensively, and with civility at all times, and upon all occasions; taking care, even as they pass along the streets, or assemble together, not to be obtrusive, thus giving birth to angry feelings, and fostering prejudices and evil dispositions.<sup>220</sup>

The “respectful and orderly deportment” referenced a code of Black public behavior predicated on a surveillant white gaze, with Black behavior subject to white standards of civility, despite the evidence that white standards included violence, murder, and property destruction.

Regardless of the justifications for violence, the committee was clear about the rioters’ intentions. Publicly visible or conspicuous African Americans were out of place, offensively contrary to white visions of public life in Philadelphia society, the committee argued. The “object of the most active

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<sup>219</sup> “Riotings.” *Hazard’s*. Aug. 30, 1834. 14,9. P.143.

<sup>220</sup> “Riotings.” *Hazard’s*. Aug. 30, 1834. 14,9. P.143.



among the rioters, was a destruction of the property, and injury to the persons, of the colored people, with intent, as it would seem, to induce, or compel them to remove from this district.”<sup>221</sup>

## 1835

The next year, rioting broke out on 7th Street between Lombard and Shippen in Moyamensing. An entire block of Black owned homes on 8th Street called “Red Row” was burned down. The energy of the mob transformed city spaces with “the shout of rage and the cry of suffering.”<sup>222</sup>

The Philadelphia Gazette reported the violence:

A little after nine o’clock, the mob having increased to about fifteen hundred men, the cry was raised, “To Small Street;” and the mass rushed in that direction... The Cry of the mob when a coloured man was caught was—“Kill him—beat him—place him under the pump” with many low vociferous and blasphemous execrations.<sup>223</sup>

Pennsylvania’s Governor Wolf characterized the Red Row and St. Mary Street conflagrations of 1835 this way: “The domestic sanctuary was entered by violence, the obnoxious individual sought for, and if found, fell victim to an infuriated mob; if not, his property became a sacrifice to a phrensied [sic] populace.”<sup>224</sup> The residents living near St. Mary Street Moyamensing, “the

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<sup>221</sup> “Town Meeting. --- Riots.” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*. Sep 27, 1834; 14, 13; American Periodicals Series Online, pg. 200.

<sup>222</sup> “Riots—Monday Night.” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*. July 18, 1835; 16,3; pg. 36.

<sup>223</sup> “Riots—Monday Night.” *Philadelphia Gazette in Hazard’s*. July 18, 1835. 16,3. P.36.

<sup>224</sup> Wolf, Dec. 2, 1835.

people of color had generally left their homes, and fled to the parts adjacent—sleeping, or attempting to sleep, in the open air.”<sup>225</sup> All the trappings of civilization and comfort were stripped from the targets of attack as they fled to ensure their physical safety. “They consisted, for the most part, of poor wretches, who, driven from their homes, knew not where to fly for refuge, and hence had huddled together in the house... content to remain there in peace... but at the same time determined to strike in retaliation, should the mob attempt any act of violence towards them.”<sup>226</sup>

Mob actions marked a liminal state in which civilized conventions were suspended.<sup>227</sup> The duration of this state marked a period of contest over who would control the city and according to what governing ideology. The “Red Row” mobs attacked Black homes “with the fury of savages.”<sup>228</sup> Black Philadelphians were “inhumanly” beaten, their treatment “barbarous in the extreme,” according to the *Pennsylvania Freeman*. A Philadelphia judge went further in describing anti-abolitionist mobs as so inhumane as to “disgrace barbarians.”<sup>229</sup> Rioters were frequently referred to as barbarians and savages, cast out from the ranks of civilized society.

In the minds of many Philadelphians, the union of Black and white people in the city would ensure the destruction of the political union of the

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<sup>225</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*. July 18, 1835.

<sup>226</sup> “Scenes of Tuesday Night.” *Hazard's Register*. July 18, 1835. 16, 3. P.37.

<sup>227</sup> Turner, V. W. (1995). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Transaction Publishers.

<sup>228</sup> *Niles' Weekly Register*, July 18, 1835.

<sup>229</sup> “Riots—Monday Night.” 1835, and “Riots.” July 18, 1835. *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, June 14, 1838.

United States. The threat of the union's dissolution on account of the slavery question was a theme that carried through the 1835 riots to confrontations in subsequent decades. According to some commentators such as Governor Wolf, abolitionists were culpable since their efforts provoked a violent response:

The present crusade against slavery is the offspring of fanaticism of the most dangerous and alarming character; which if not speedily checked may kindle a fire which it may require the best blood of the country to quench; and engender feelings which may prove fatal to the integrity of the union itself.<sup>230</sup>

Wolf, the man charged with preserving law and order in the state, was not the only one who understood the national significance of the conflicts in Philadelphia, the major northern city closest to the slave holding states. A year later in 1836, James Forten Jr. urged the Ladies Slavery Society of Philadelphia:

Flinch not from your duty; continue to warn the South of the awful volcano they are recklessly sleeping over; and bid them remember, too, that the drops of blood which trickle down the lacerated back of the slave, will not sink into the barren soil.<sup>231</sup>

In the years that followed, the national significance of local Philadelphia violence would only spur more murder and destruction, as residents fought over the boundaries of who and what constituted the city.

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<sup>230</sup> Geo Wolf, "Governor's Message." *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania*. December 12, 1835; 15, 24; pg. 369. And Papers of Governors, George Wolf, Fourth Series, Volume 6. Harrisburg, Dec. 2, 1835.

<sup>231</sup> Forten Jr., James. (1836). "An Address Delivered Before the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia, On the Evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 1836." Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn. P.12

Descriptions characterized mob violence by its energy and excitement.<sup>232</sup> Henry Horn, lawyer and Philadelphia Congressman, attributed riotous violence to “an extraordinary degree of political excitement” in the city.<sup>233</sup> Political crowds produced “tumult, riot and disorder.”<sup>234</sup> In 1834, Wolf contrasted the “tumultuous risings” and “fury of an incensed populace” with the “peace-loving, orderly character” of the “proverbially staid and sober metropolis” Philadelphia had been known to be.<sup>235</sup>

1838

No building represented the national debate over slavery, the question of citizenship for African Americans, and the related issue of whether white and Black men and women could peacefully coexist on equal terms as did Pennsylvania Hall, built in 1838 as a headquarters for publishing abolitionist newspapers and pamphlets, a hall for speech making, temperance, and lyceum meetings. The site for the building was chosen nearest to the heaviest concentration of abolitionist supporters, on Sixth Street near Franklin Square.

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<sup>232</sup> Blumer, Herbert. (1965). “The Justice of the Crowd.” *Trans-Action*, 2:43. Sociologist Herbert Blumer characterized most crowd literature as needlessly dry and lacking in any analysis of the basic collective excitement common to crowds. Blumer is correct to point out that crowd analysis either focuses on the social conditions of crowd emergence, the forms of crowd behavior, and the consequences of that behavior. Most analyses fail to include any sustained examination of the experience of crowds.

<sup>233</sup> Horn, 1834.

<sup>234</sup> Horn, Henry. “Inquest of the Grand Jury.” *Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania*. Oct. 18, 1834. 14, 16. P. 253.

<sup>235</sup> Wolf, G. (Dec. 3, 1834). “Governor’s Message.” *Pennsylvania Archives*, Papers of Governors – George Wolf. Fourth Series, Vol. 6. Harrisburg.

It was the newest and largest hall in the city. Blacks were freely admitted and not assigned any particular space in which to sit.

Multiple pieces of evidence assured contemporaries that the destruction of Pennsylvania Hall had been planned in advance. The riot was preceded by weeks of whispered threats against the abolitionists. When the mob did act, it demonstrated startling efficiency. Witnesses described “twenty to fifty persons prowling about the doors, examining the gas-pipes, and talking in an “incendiary” manner to groups which they collected around them in the street.”<sup>236</sup> In front of a crowd estimated at fifteen thousand, the incendiaries forced open the Hall’s doors, made a heap of paper, books and small wood on top of the speaker’s platform, and set fire to the kindling. The crowd witnessed “the flash of the lighted torch along the deserted aisles,” the “wrenching” of the gas pipes, pointing them in the direction of the platform, the “shout which greeted the outbursting conflagration,” which “roared and crackled in the fresh night breeze.”

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* described the scene: “Soon after nine o’clock, the whole building was wrapped in flames, which diffused a lurid light around, and throwing their red reflections upon the multitude below, imparted a remarkable and fearful effect to the scene.”<sup>237</sup> Leaving nothing to chance, “the standing posts were partially cut through with axes; ropes were then fastened to the upper part of the building, and the united force of the mob, soon prostrated it to the ground.”<sup>238</sup> Anti-abolitionists issued a “fiend-like cry”

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<sup>236</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 137.

<sup>237</sup> *The Liberator*, May 25, 1838, p.82.

<sup>238</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, p.147.

as the “blazing ruin” came tumbling down. By the middle of the night, “smouldering and blackened walls alone remained, in place of the costly and splendid edifice.”<sup>239</sup> Governor Ritner cast the incendiaries as “unmasked violators of law, in the darkness of night,” whose only purpose was to oppose “the constitutional and invaluable right of “the free communication of thoughts and opinions.”<sup>240</sup> The police committee’s official report characterized Pennsylvania Hall as “doomed to destruction” and opposed by majority opinion in Philadelphia. Its ruination carried out “in the presence of thousands of our citizens, without a single arm being raised in its defence.”<sup>241</sup> The night after anti-abolitionists burnt down Pennsylvania Hall, fire was set to the Shelter for Colored Orphans. On the evening following that, the Bethel Church was attacked.

Each side saw the spectacle of the burning hall as a beacon for its cause. Abolitionists referred to the scene as “Pandemonium,” the place of demons in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.<sup>242</sup> Reports that the fire could be seen from twenty-four miles away only added to the symbolic significance. Witnesses to the spectacle were varied in their outlook. One gentleman reportedly called the fire, “a beacon-light in which the south will glory. It will warn any and every set of men, be they whome they may, against meddling with the institutions of their neighbours or broaching doctrines, which have a tendency to endanger

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<sup>239</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 150.

<sup>240</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 141.

<sup>241</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 188.

<sup>242</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 140.

the integrity of the union.” The same newsman reported a conversation with a Quaker bystander, who strengthened his resolve:

I tell thee, neighbour, that thou seest a burning and a shining light. It will aid the cause of freedom and humanity—it will proclaim from Maine to Georgia that the arguments of the abolitionists are only answered by the violence of their opponents—it will be seen all over the union, perhaps all over the world; and thou knowest that the persecution of any good cause only increases its strength.<sup>243</sup>

The destruction of the Hall symbolized the growing conflagration of violence about to erupt across the country on account of the slavery question.

*The Pennsylvania Freeman* wrote:

The flames which consumed that beautiful building, will kindle up an intellectual fire in the nation, which will seize upon the old combustible fabric of slavery and burn till not a vestige of it is left; and all the tar and pitch with which the worshippers in it have been endeavoring to cement it together, will but increase its burning and accelerate its destruction.<sup>244</sup>

The *New England Farmer* added: “The glare of this conflagration flashes before our disturbed vision, as though the flames of Hell itself had burst up through the earth—for where else indeed could such fires have been kindled?”<sup>245</sup> *The Colored American* recounted a meeting of the Colonization Society in Philadelphia, a few days after the attacks, during which members agreed, “if the fanatics were not stopped, we should see greater flames than

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<sup>243</sup> The British Emancipator, June 27, 1838, p.123

<sup>244</sup> The Pennsylvania Freeman, June 14, 1838. P2.

<sup>245</sup> The Liberator, June 1, 1838.

these, among the property of slaveholders. The slaves would be incited to kindle them, and the country would be deluged in blood.”<sup>246</sup>

The contagious, unifying effect of the riots for its participants in antebellum Philadelphia was measured in newspaper reports that portrayed a city under the control of a spirit that had suffused bodies and neighborhoods. Pennsylvania Hall was sacked by “a disorderly spirit.... [a] spirit of misrule.... this lawless and evil spirit.”<sup>247</sup> The spirit of lawlessness multiplied with the number of participants, either as rioters or as audiences.<sup>248</sup> Abolitionists frequently explained the excessive energy and influence of the mob as a divine atmosphere. “The storm that raged around us” was the act of a god who alone commanded “the tumultuous waves of human passion.” The destruction of Pennsylvania Hall was a “storm of riot and outrage burst upon us as suddenly as a thunder-peal from the bright mid summer heavens.” Abolitionists believed they had the moral right and pledged to meet their adversaries with a “mightier energy” which “girds itself anew for warfare.”<sup>249</sup> “Agents of mischief” were busy “inflaming passions;” no pacifying force existed “to avert the coming storm.”<sup>250</sup> Abolitionists yearned for when “reason shall assert its prerogative over prejudice and passion.” The *Public Ledger*

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<sup>246</sup> The Colored American, June 16, 1838.

<sup>247</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 143.

<sup>248</sup> “Riots.” July 18, 1835. The *Philadelphia Gazette* complained, “it would be well if respectable citizens, instead of swelling the crowd as spectators, would remain at their homes, or, if they desire to aid in the suppression of riots, volunteer and be sworn in as members of the police.”

<sup>249</sup> Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. (1839). “Fifth Annual Report.” *The Pennsylvania Freeman*. February 14, v.23, p.4.

<sup>250</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 148, 149, 151.



described the city filled “with the shouts of mobs... streets [were] illuminated by conflagrations, kindled by the same lawless assemblages.”<sup>251</sup> Abolitionists contrasted the “appalling sounds” and “tumultuous rush” of the mob with the “steady calmness and cool composure” of the *Pennsylvania Hall* speakers who “tranquilized [the congregation’s] brief agitation.”

Each side characterized the other as excessive and thoroughly consumed by an irreducible energy. The *Colonization Herald* charged abolitionists with aiming “to work up into uncontrollable fury...” among the “ignorant and the passionate...” in order to “drive them to excesses against which no repressing influence can be brought to bear.”<sup>252</sup> The dynamics of the crowd as represented in the *Herald* was a reciprocal transfer of energy, with one cathartic moment saturating the city with an excess of passion that must be returned in kind. The uncontrolled nature of crowd behavior ensured sympathizers and opponents would both be affected. The spirits and atmospheres of violence found spatial definition in the transformed neighborhoods crowds left behind.

The crowd’s energetic behavior extended to material relations as well. The *Public Ledger* portrayed anti-abolition mobs as growing in size and fury as they consumed people and property.<sup>253</sup> The mob was a primeval force; it

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<sup>251</sup> *Public Ledger*, May 21, 1838.

<sup>252</sup> *Colonization Herald* reprinted in *The Liberator*, June 1, 1838.

<sup>253</sup> “The Rule of Law and the Rule of the Mob.” *Public Ledger*. May 21, 1838. The *Public Ledger* echoed this theory of the excessive force of the mob and its uncontrollable momentum. “When a mob is permitted to accomplish a single unlawful purpose, it gathers strength from successes, and requires ten times more force to quell it, than would have been sufficient at first. It is a body which never stops to

radiated power beyond the sum of its participants. The mob drew life from the destruction of its targets; it consumed them as energy that it would expend in the next act of ruination.<sup>254</sup> Crowd behavior was both productive and destructive.<sup>255</sup> Riots and arson transformed the city's landscape, suffered grievous and deadly harm upon its people, and destroyed considerable wealth. For whites, however, this violence also offered the prospects of a new world, one in which Black Philadelphians were few in number, knew their place, held no positions of prominence in social, economic or political life. In this recreated city, whites were always without question Blacks' superiors.

Many pro-slavery and pro-colonization men and women argued the destruction of Pennsylvania Hall was a reasoned and necessary response to the provocation of white and Black men and women comingling. The editors of the *Missouri Saturday News* viewed as reasonable the mob's actions at Pennsylvania Hall: "A more direct and unqualified case of insolence and

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reason, but always pursues the blind, headlong impulse of passion, and when once roused, it never fails to attack any thing against which it feels any animosity, recent or ancient. It is therefore a body with which no negotiation or parley should ever be tolerated."

<sup>254</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 141. The Pennsylvania Hall abolitionists argued "the history of mobs warns against the belief that the rioters will be easily checked, or will be satisfied with a single object of attack."

<sup>255</sup> Canetti, 1960, 22. Canetti uses the term "eruption" to describe a crowd's sudden transition from policing its own boundaries to incorporating as many people and materials as it can.

"A crowd quite often seems to overflow from some well-guarded space into the squares and streets of a town where it can move about freely, exposed to everything and attracting everyone. But more important than this external event is the corresponding inner movement: the dissatisfaction with the limitation of the number of participants, the sudden will to attract, the passionate determination to reach all men.... The crowd never feels saturated. It remains hungry as long as there is one human being it has not reached."

effrontery, could not have been contrived, than the parade of Black and white amalgamation in the fashionable promenades of the city.”<sup>256</sup> Philadelphia’s committee on police reported that the abolitionists and their friends were to blame. It was they who advocated “doctrines repulsive to the moral sense” of the majority – reckless behavior they had been warned against. The activities within Pennsylvania Hall, they argued, were “subversive of the established orders of society.” The commingling of white and Black, male and female participants in the abolitionist meetings, these commentators argued, “produced in the public mind a high state of excitement, as prejudicial to the peace of the city.”<sup>257</sup>

The *Ledger* describes the incitement of the rioting as “a promiscuous association of Blacks and whites in the Hall,” which they conclude, “is an affair of taste” and should not be the concern of others. Though violence is never warranted, the paper does state its opposition “to any mingling of the two races, and shall never choose our own associates among the worthless or disagreeable of *any* color.” The *Ledger* goes so far as to favor “as companions, moral, peaceful and orderly blacks, to profligate and disorderly whites” (*Public Ledger*, May 18, 1838). This continues the theme of the report that, while maintaining the firm separation of the races, the paper favors a vision of Philadelphia society as equally hospitable to both Blacks and whites.

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<sup>256</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, *Missouri Saturday News*, undated: 170.

<sup>257</sup> “Report of the Committee on Police.” July 5, 1838. Reprinted in *Pennsylvania Hall*, 1801.

Reporting on the destruction of Pennsylvania Hall on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1838, the *Public Ledger* was chiefly concerned with the attack as an abridgement of the right of free expression. The Ledger called the riots a “scandalous outrage against law and decency.” Numbering the mob around three thousand, the paper was unequivocal in the threat these rioters posed to the community.

If the citizens of Philadelphia are resolved upon maintaining a regular government of laws, and saving their fair city from anarchy which disgraces some other portions of our common country, they have but one course in this emergency. This course is, to strain every nerve for discovering and apprehending the perpetrators, and for inflicting upon them, after conviction, the utmost penalties of the law; and also to adopt the most vigorous measures for preventing a renewal of such outrages.<sup>258</sup>

The Ledger continued by arguing that the fundamental attack was on the freedom of expression; if this right, upheld by state and federal law, was threatened, then “all freedom among us is abolished, and we are the slaves of the very worst of all tyrants, the mob.”<sup>259</sup> The notion that slavery was a condition that threatened peoples of any skin color was a popular one. According to the Ledger, slavery was a debased, degraded condition marked by a commonly enforced silence. It was through the rule of mutually deliberated and willingly observed law that citizens could fight such debasement.

The Ledger blamed the failure of civil authorizes, arguing the rule of law had been rendered meaningless in the absence of any authority to enforce it. “The Rule of Law and the Rule of the Mob” was the Ledger’s page

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<sup>258</sup> Public Ledger, May 18, 1838. 2.

<sup>259</sup> Public Ledger, May 18, 1838. 2.

two headline on May 21<sup>st</sup>. Again, the paper focused on “outrages against the constitutional rights of person and property.”<sup>260</sup> According to the Ledger, a general disorderliness had prevailed, with vocal groups denouncing the attacks on persons and property, while other mobs roamed the streets igniting further conflagrations. The paper queries, “why does anarchy thus reign? Why is the dominion of law suspended, and why are all constitutional rights trampled down by bodies organized for mischief?”<sup>261</sup> Citizens are left to mobilize in their own defense, and only vigorous preventative measures militate against the mob.

Commentators in Philadelphia and throughout America debated whether mobs were legitimate expressions of public opinion and embodied voices of the majority or whether they were criminal circumventions of law and order that suppressed constitutionally guaranteed freedoms. Each side believed the Union itself was at stake. The crux of the argument was how physical force could be applied to settle disputes. Could citizens who believed they held a majority opinion suppress minority offensive minority opinion? Or was the only legitimate use of force carried out by the mayor and police? Both the minority and majority positions required the threat of violence. Abolitionists relied on the force of police and fire companies to protect their rights of property and free expression. These agencies largely failed. Majority opinion relied on the force of mobs to suppress Black and abolitionist expression, and was largely successful thanks to quiescent authorities. The extended debate

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<sup>260</sup> Public Ledger, May 21, 1838.

<sup>261</sup> Public Ledger, May 21, 1838.

was not about the supremacy of words over action and the strength of reason applied in law as some maintained. It was over the right to apply force to support expression.

In the words of pro-slavery commentators and their sympathizers, collective violence was a form of political expression. Mob violence was necessary to preserve the Union, the *New Orleans True American* argued.

So universal was the feeling that dictated it, and so well considered were all the measures taken to effect the purpose, that neither fights, drunkenness, or disorder, stained the act, which the citizens undertook from a heart-felt conviction that their act, though contrary to the spirit of the law, was called for by a firm conviction that the efforts and purposes of the vile abolition faction tended to destroy the Union!<sup>262</sup>

It was a widely shared opinion that radical abolitionists threatened the dissolution of the union and would lead America into war. Therefore, for the *True American*, violating the law was inconsequential if it upheld the Union. This lent the mob a noble purpose that framed it as a legitimate political actor. Anti-abolition newspapers worked to legitimize the mob by offering a portrait of its rational, enlightened nature. One Southerner who claimed to be an eyewitness wrote in a widely circulated letter, “you may call it a mob if you please; but I can say one thing—I never saw a more orderly, and more generally well informed class of people brought together on any other occasion where the meeting was called a mob.”<sup>263</sup> This letter framed the mob

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<sup>262</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 167. From the Editor, *New Orleans True American*, May 26<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>263</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 168. “A Southerner and an Eye Witness” reported to the *New Orleans True American*, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1838.

in the best tradition of local democratic politics – it was an “orderly... well informed... meeting.”

Those white Philadelphians who hoped to see an end to slavery but would preserve the Union at all costs agreed with this sentiment. The preservationist argument was articulated by Samuel Breck, who had served both in the Pennsylvania Senate and US Congress as an advocate for the abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania and free education for the poor:

Altho' the means taken by the mob is to be regretted, the end accomplished is certainly very popular. The Abolitionist must be put down, or the union of these states will be dissolved, and the emancipation of three millions of slaves be postponed, if not forever prevented.<sup>264</sup>

Breck interpreted the abolitionists' techniques as too provocative to accomplish their goal of immediate emancipation. Public opinion was too important to disregard with such hasty and forceful objectives as the declaration and practice of equality.

Anti-abolitionists and Union preservationists sought to frame collective action as a form of public opinion. One prominent Philadelphia politician called the destruction of Pennsylvania Hall a signal of “the force of public opinion when provoked!!”<sup>265</sup> Philadelphia's Mayor suggested, “public opinion makes

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<sup>264</sup> Wainwright, Nicholas & Samuel Breck. (Oct. 1978) “Diary of Samuel Breck: 1814-1822.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. (PMHB). 103: 3; 356-382.

<sup>265</sup> Wainwright, Nicholas & Samuel Breck. (Oct. 1978) “Diary of Samuel Breck: 1814-1822.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. (PMHB). 103: 3; 356-382.

mobs!”<sup>266</sup> They used the term ‘public opinion’ to represent a form of mob action necessary to mitigate the effectiveness of the abolitionists’ message.

Pro-slavery and Colonization supporters viewed the mob as a legitimate expression of popular will and an appropriately conservative addendum to democratic practices. “*A mob is a necessary form of government; it is a natural and indispensable portion of the machinery of a Republic.... It prevents the moving power from going beyond the limits of moderation. [italics original]*”<sup>267</sup> While necessary, laws are often imperfect and inadequate, they argued. The mob served as a corrective force. The *Philadelphia Daily Focus* called public opinion “the magic talisman,” which could improve flawed laws and protect the communal good through action.<sup>268</sup> As the physical manifestation of popular opinion, the mob created its own law. The people “at once and on the emergency, legislated, judged, condemned and enacted.... *Mobocracy is better than Abolitionism.* The former may disturb the tranquility of a city, but the latter will sooner or later demolish the grand structure now known to the world as the United States of America.”<sup>269</sup>

The mob offered a regulatory regime that preserved the union at all costs. In this way, it was a conservative social and political technology designed to maintain the hierarchy of power and material relations between Black and white Americans in particular. The social and material world would

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<sup>266</sup> *Pennsylvania Hall*, 138.

<sup>267</sup> X. “Mobs Indispensible.” *Philadelphia Daily Focus*, reprinted in *The Liberator*. June 08, 1838. P.1.

<sup>268</sup> X. “Mobs Indispensible.” June 08, 1838.

<sup>269</sup> X. “Mobs Indispensible.” June 08, 1838.



be made to conform to majority public opinion and not to reflect the minority principles of equal rights and citizenship for Black Americans. Laws protected free expression and were therefore deemed a threat to the preservation of majority rule.

Many law-and-order newspapers, as well as abolitionist papers, satirized the perspective that destructive mobs were necessary to preserve the Union. Central to this debate is the relationship of discourse to action and reason to force. *The Pennsylvanian* wrote:

Enlightened public opinion... has been busy in Philadelphia.... We are in the midst of that which some men tell us is a purifying operation—a wholesome outbreak in the body politic.... We find ‘public opinion’ demolishing the windows of a church, with the intent of likewise committing it to the flames, and on the same night clustering in thousands around a newspaper office, muttering dire threats and horrid imprecations against those who ventured to say that they entertained different notions of liberty from those cherished by the votaries of Judge Lynch.<sup>270</sup>

The *Pennsylvanian* critique is useful for the way in which it ties the concept of public opinion to the material effects of mob violence. The abolitionist paper *The Liberator* also underscored the physical experience of such opinions:

The soundest, the hardest of all arguments, is the club of the assassin! And the brightest and most beautiful, as well as equally conclusive and irresistible, is the torch of the incendiary! These are the arguments, these are the lights, worthy of a free people!... These are the purifying, civilizing, refined, redeeming and sublime remedies for intellectual, moral, and religious errors and misconceptions.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Reprinted in *The Liberator*, June 1, 1838.

<sup>271</sup> “Lynch Law! Club Law! Conflagration Law!” *Albany Family Newspaper* reprinted in *The Liberator*, June 8, 1838. P.1

Both newspapers called attention to how majority opinion works through material destruction to silence opposition. In the newspaper's satirical rendering, intangible opinion takes on a tangible existence.

Abolitionists and law-and-order critics argued that embodied demonstrations of public opinion had no preeminence over the law, no matter how large the constituency. The *Public Ledger* spoke out against the "abominable" idea that "public opinion is the supreme law of the land.... The law is public opinion, expressed in the only mode which the public have prescribed for such expression."<sup>272</sup> The *Boston Times* agreed and added, "that kind of public opinion which denies to the minority those rights solemnly guaranteed by the Constitution, is nothing more nor less than a despotism."<sup>273</sup> Police forces superior in power to the mob were necessary to protect minority opinion. The *Public Ledger* argued citizens must demand rioters be punished and the law enforced: "The sacrifice of a hundred thousand ruffians is a cheap price" for the defense of freedom of speech.<sup>274</sup> The test of the time for these writers was whether free expression, particularly of minority opinion, would be supported by law enforcement, or whether mobs would reign through force.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> *Public Ledger*, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1838.

<sup>273</sup> *Boston Times*, reprinted in *The Liberator*, June 1, 1838.

<sup>274</sup> "Scandalous Outrage Against Law and Decency." *Public Ledger*. May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1838, p.2.

<sup>275</sup> *Public Ledger*, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1838. Pennsylvania Governor Joseph Ritner called mob rule "inimical to individual rights, and the most ruinous to social harmony and public order," explicitly because of its purpose in preventing "the exercise of the Constitutional and invaluable right of "the free communication of thoughts and opinions."

These same commentators agreed that embodied forms of ‘public opinion’ such as mobs threatened the viability of American democracy. They spoke of anarchy and despotism to make their point. The Ledger argued that if free expression was allowed to be “invaded with impunity, all freedom among us is abolished, and we are the slaves of the very worst of all tyrants, the mob.”<sup>276</sup> The *Pennsylvania Freeman* agreed, “If a mob be permitted to censure my conduct today, tomorrow they may punish yours, and without trial, without examination, the multitude shall at once act as your accuser, judge, jury, witness and executioner.”<sup>277</sup> Written in 1838, the *Freeman’s* caution highlights the sense that mobs presented an ever-growing threat to public life and free expression.

Eye witness correspondents and editors depicted rioters as “wolves and tigers in human shape” under the sway of a “demonic prejudice.”<sup>278</sup> Many newspapers argued rioters presented a direct threat to civilization, and one not easily controlled. “The substitution of self-constituted tribunals for the regular course of justice, and the infliction of immediate punishment in the moment of popular frenzy, are symptoms of a people half reclaimed from

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<sup>276</sup> “Scandalous Outrage Against Law and Decency.” *Public Ledger*. May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1838, p.2. The *Pennsylvania Freeman*, June 14, 1838. P1. The Philadelphia Judge who led the investigating into the destruction of Pennsylvania Hall argued that the alternative to law and order proposed by the mob was tyranny, which can only lead to “chains for himself and his posterity.”

<sup>277</sup> *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, June 14, 1838.

<sup>278</sup> *Public Ledger*, May 18, 1838. P.2 and “More of the Philadelphia Riots.” *Emancipator and Free American*. August 25, 1842. Vol.VII, 17. P.66. Boston, MA.

barbarism.”<sup>279</sup> To *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, the body politic had dissolved into “its original elements, with the worst passions of the worst men holding unrestrained power over the defenseless.”<sup>280</sup> The violence was “committed... not by the people, but by a mob.”<sup>281</sup> The axis of un/civilized behavior determined who could make a legitimate claim on power and the authority to govern city space. Those sympathetic to abolitionists, African Americans, or upholding the rule of law consistently argued that mobs had no legitimate claim because they represented actors and ideologues who had succumbed to their animal natures, governed by passion not reason.

For law-and-order men in Philadelphia, the repeated triumphs of mobs had transformed the city. No longer could Philadelphia be called a society – it had lost its claim to civilization. Judge Fox spoke to the grand jury in Montgomery County on the subject of the destruction of Pennsylvania Hall. Fox warned that the disease of mob rule “has reached the vitals of society.... Society for the time is dissolved, and the law of the strongest prevails.”<sup>282</sup> Judge Conrade echoed this theme to the Court of Criminal Sessions Grand Jury in June, 1838: “When the *might* of a drunken mob makes *right*, government is abrogated, and we are in a state of nature.”<sup>283</sup> Judge Conrade admonished the young men who spent much of their time on the street and in

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<sup>279</sup> Dr. Channing to Henry Clay, Letter, August 1, 1837. Reprinted in Brothers, 1839. P.216.

<sup>280</sup> “The Philadelphia Mob.” *The Pennsylvania Freeman*. June 21, 1838.

<sup>281</sup> *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, June 14, 1838.

<sup>282</sup> Brothers, 1839, 236.

<sup>283</sup> Brothers, 1839, 237.

grog shops.<sup>284</sup> Their education was in the art of the riot, they were learning that laws yielded to the might of a majority, or the most violent. These early lessons could only lead to a life of crime, Conrade warned.

Either the authorities were generally benign but inept, or they were corrupt and complicit, according to critics. Following the attack on Pennsylvania Hall, the *Public Ledger* posed the question: “Why does anarchy thus reign?” To which it answered, “because our civil authorities did not perform their duty in the commencement of this insubordination.”<sup>285</sup> One dispatch represented the common theme:

Philadelphia is unquestionably this moment at the mercy of a mob of ruthless ruffians... emboldened by their impunity, by the dastardly conduct of the authorities, by the facilities afforded for escape by the peculiar nature of the municipal government.... [Philadelphia was] cursed with a bad population, and cursed equally by a bad government, if there can be said to be any but that of the mob.<sup>286</sup>

Thorough police reform and a bolstering of its ranks were the only acceptable responses to protect life, liberty and property. If the city could not muster paltry numbers of citizens to stand for order, then it would be given over to mob rule. Trust among Philadelphians was lost and a stronger government was needed to maintain order.<sup>287</sup> The *Public Ledger* called for reform. A new system of policing was required in order to more effectively

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<sup>284</sup> Brothers, 1839, 238.

<sup>285</sup> “The Rule of Law and the Rule of the Mob.” *Public Ledger*. May 21, 1838.

<sup>286</sup> H.C.W. “Philadelphia Under the Dominion of a Colonization and Pro-Slavery Mob.” *The Liberator*, May 25, 1838. P.83.

<sup>287</sup> Dr. Channing to Henry Clay, Letter, August 1, 1837. Reprinted in Brothers, 1839. P.216.

regulate city space, it argued. A proclamation must be posted on every street corner, a thousand citizen volunteers organized, the police must be called out in force, aided by military volunteers, marines from the Navy Yard, and an artillery company. The Sheriff and his deputies would command an additional thousand men equipped with maces, stout clubs, and identification badges. This was the show of force necessary to beat back the anarchy of mob rule.

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1842

The 1842 riots that began near 7th and Cedar streets signaled a new phase in the enforcement of rules regarding how African Americans could appear in public. Displays of group solidarity or political ambitions were no longer tolerated. On Philadelphia's southern border with Moyamensing, a Black Temperance society, made up of men and boys, paraded through the morning to celebrate the emancipation of slaves in Jamaica. The incitement to riot was thought to be banners that depicted Black slaves breaking shackles that bound their feet and hands. A white mob, numbering in the thousands, chased the Black Temperance society men through the streets up to the neighborhood of St. Mary Street, between sixth and seventh, where the rioting commenced in full. A ringleader "set up a screeching howl, with waving of his hands to follow.... One half the large crowd were imitating him, and off they started, running and howling like mad Indians."<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Public Ledger, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1838.

<sup>289</sup> "Great Riot in Philadelphia." *Philadelphia Daily Chronicle*. August 2, 1842.

Black homes were destroyed. The black abolitionist building, “Beneficial Hall” on Lombard between 7th and 8th, intended as a replacement for Pennsylvania Hall, was burned down in less than an hour as thousands looked on, including the fire companies who refused to send water onto the building. Nearly simultaneously, the Second African Presbyterian Church, a Black meeting place, and the Negro Presbyterian Church on St. Mary’s Street was burned down. The central police station was overcrowded with Black residents seeking peaceful shelter. Shots were alleged to have been fired from Black residences near Bradford’s Alley at white assailants, which further enraged the mob as the day went on.

By afternoon the police turned their focus on protecting Black residents, a move in marked contrast to the efforts of the firefighters to aid the rioters. James Mason, the alleged shooter in Bradford’s Alley, was wrested away from police custody by the mob, beaten nearly to death and dragged through the streets by the hollering and cheering mob. The Ledger reported around six o’clock in the evening that the mob had taken control of the streets, while Black residents were largely out of sight. Any stragglers found by the mob were apprehended and beaten.

In one incident, a man was chased over a wall into what was presumed to be an empty house. Seeking escape from those on his trail, the man ascended to the roof, where he was left without options, under fire from clubs and rocks projected up at him.<sup>290</sup> Eventually, the man was lassoed, dragged down through the door in the roof, where the mob once again set to beating

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<sup>290</sup> Public Ledger, August 2, 1842.

him, until he was ultimately able to flee, on foot, to the safety of another occupied home.

Coordinated planning and action before and during the riot exacerbated the cost to Black citizens and property. On the day Smith's Beneficial Hall was destroyed in 1842, carpenters working on its construction were observed leaving work early in the morning, carrying off all their tools. They had received word their work was no longer needed – the building would not last through the night. At eight o'clock that evening, spectators gathered around the hall in anticipation of its destruction.<sup>291</sup> For the next few days, groups of Irish gangs roamed the streets setting upon and beating Black men reporting to work.

Word of incipient mob action was often spread efficiently throughout the city by a network of agents and their sympathizers. The *Emancipator and Free American* reported in the months preceding the 1842 Temperance riots, "groups of white republicans were assembling all over the city throughout the day, throwing out various threatenings, among which is the destruction of every church, hall and public edifice belonging to the blacks."<sup>292</sup> The newspaper concluded, "the determination to check the advancement of the colored people and humble their pretensions by a popular outbreak, was publicly and fearlessly avowed."<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> "Fire—Burning of the Hall." *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*. August XX, 1842. P.152.

<sup>292</sup> "More of the Philadelphia Riots." *Emancipator and Free American*. August 25, 1842. VII, 17. P.66.

<sup>293</sup> "Riots in Philadelphia." *Emancipator and Free American*. September 1, 1842. Vol.VII, no.18. p.72. Boston, MA.



These whisperings were part of efforts to spread fear of an imminent attack throughout the Black community and to recruit whites to the cause. Prior to the Temperance parade attacks of 1842, many Irish from inside and outside the city were spied shaping hickory clubs into bats and spears decorated for display.<sup>294</sup> This campaign of intimidation is important because it extends the temporal duration of mob action well beyond the incident itself. The threat of violence was circulated via word of mouth well before the violence began. Rioters brandished the symbols of violence in advance to demonstrate what was to come. Given the frequency of the major riots and the nearly constant threat of minor altercations, the sense of trepidation and dread must have been omnipresent.

Recurring acts of violence were only the most publicly sensational examples of a social order enforced by the mob. *The Pennsylvanian* argued that riot and arson were “looked upon as legitimate amusements—a right which may be exercised at will.” The paper continued:

Turbulent men, having once been told that they did a very clever and proper thing in setting fire to houses and in killing negroes, believed what they were told, and naturally enough believe that it is praiseworthy in them to repeat again and again that cleverness and propriety of action which were once so loudly applauded; and, as practice makes perfect, they exhibit progression in their skill. They no longer remain quiescent in the face of authority, or fly before the police force. No, they have gone a step beyond that, and trample magistrates and constables beneath their feet as fearlessly as they once sacked remote and defenceless [sic] shanties.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Signature Unreadable. “Account of the Riots. Philadelphia, August 22d, 1842.” *The Liberator*. XIL, No?. Last of August, 1842.

<sup>295</sup> “Supremacy of the Mob.” *The Pennsylvanian*. Reprinted in *The Liberator*. Last week of August, 1842. Vol. XIL.

With the support of their audiences, the mobs gained supremacy in their use of force over the police and mayor. What had begun as a campaign to suppress a minority, had turned into an effort to eradicate it and claim complete authority over the city.

1849

The California House was a Moyamensing tavern that attracted Black, white, and mixed race Philadelphians owned by a mulatto man married to a white woman. It was burnt to the ground by a mob in 1849. The fire, encouraged by mob incendiaries, was so great it destroyed more than thirty buildings before it was extinguished. “As usual, the excuse for this bloody outbreak is represented to be the fact that white and colored persons were living in the same families together, and associating on equal terms.”<sup>296</sup> The 1849 mob ruled that no spaces of social intermixture between Blacks and whites would be tolerated. Philadelphia was to be purified.

Passions in the district had been recently aroused in October of 1848 by the proposed construction of a House of Industry for Colored Persons on Catherine Street near Seventh. The Moyamensing Commissioners vetoed the building’s construction, arguing that the “poor and degraded negroes” had no place “in a thrifty and improving neighborhood, which is densely settled by white people.” The building was offensive to the Commissioners because it would “create a disturbance, or will drive away the white population, and thereby depreciate the value of property.” The decision to locate the House of

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<sup>296</sup> Frederick Douglass. “Philadelphia.” *The North Star*. October 19, 1849. Rochester, New York.

Industry in the neighborhood was labeled “a wanton disregard of public sentiment, and a contempt of the feelings of the neighboring inhabitants.” The Commissioners resolved that all such buildings, “to which public sentiment is opposed,” should be constructed within the boundaries of the City of Philadelphia, where the Commissioners’ dubiously argued, the police force was more capable of dealing with the disturbance.<sup>297</sup>

Almost a year later to the day, *The Killers* gang elaborated the Commissioner’s threats with their own violence. Gang members waited until the Moyamensing police were engaged with another matter before descending upon the California House, a pub and inn kept by a mixed race man with a white wife, that had long been seen as a site of amalgamation. Reports numbered gang members and supporters in the hundreds, clustered around St. Mary’s street, which was home mostly to Black residents. A few dozen Black men defended the California House, but the mob was too big and the Killers broke through the defenses to ransack and set fire to the structure.

*The National Era* recounted:

The inmates fled in all directions, being assaulted with stones and firearms. The struggle was continued out of doors; several adjoining houses caught fire; some policemen, who attempted to restore order, were driven off the ground; the fire companies that had rushed to the scene to put out the fire, were fallen upon by the mob, many of the members were shot down, the hose was cut, and the engines were

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<sup>297</sup> The Moyamensing Commissioner’s report was reprinted in “Colorphobia in Philadelphia,” *The North Star*. October 13, 1848. Rochester, New York.

carried off. Two men were killed on the spot – many others were severely wounded.<sup>298</sup>

Residents in nearby homes were “driven out and fired upon, with many other colored persons, who were seen flying from their houses in extreme terror, chased by gangs, who pelted them with brickbats, and fired after them with guns and pistols.”<sup>299</sup> The military was called out at midnight, but only temporarily succeeded to quell the riot, as the gangs dispersed into a game of cat-and-mouse. The next night, rioting continued and more Black houses were fired upon by the mob.

The debate over mob excess took shape in ways that parallel debates over publics and the public sphere. Supporters portrayed Philadelphia’s antebellum mobs as embodied forms of public opinion – legitimate expressions of popular will and a necessary adjunct to the rule of law. Detractors argued that legal principles/strictures/sanctions must be paramount if minority rights of free expression were to be protected. The debate centered on whether “mobocrats” represented the dissolution of social bonds with the downfall of rule-of-law politics, or the maintenance of society through majority-enforced social conformity. At stake was whether the excesses of the mob could be pruned by law enforcement, or whether mob action would

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<sup>298</sup> “A Bloody Riot in Philadelphia.” *The National Era*. October 18, 1849. Washington DC.

<sup>299</sup> “Dreadful Riot in Philadelphia.” *The North Star*. October 19, 1849. Rochester, New York.

reverberate with the strength to reassemble power and social relations in the city.

### **Academic Theories of Mobs and Riots**

For better and worse, collective behavior had an important place in early American society. Parades were often boisterous and sometimes riotous affairs that served as a powerful medium for collective expression of ideas about social relations and power. Scholar/Historian Susan Davis describes these forms of embodied collective expression as “street theater,” to elicit the coordinated and yet just slightly beyond control nature of the events.<sup>300</sup> Parades celebrated religious and ethnic identities, expressed distinctiveness and helped to develop internal cohesion while publicly expressing this solidarity to outsiders in what one historian has call a “well-understood vocabulary of public assertion.”<sup>301</sup>

Militias, fire companies and fraternal organizations were some of the many groups that sought ethnic and religious camaraderie within volunteer organizations. Historians argue that volunteer groups formed around ethnic and religious identities with roots in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century communal mindset.<sup>302</sup> In the decades that followed, public expressions of group identity turned violent as the mob riot became a

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<sup>300</sup> Davis, *Parades and Power*, 1986; Also see Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, 1999; Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 1997.

<sup>301</sup> Hoeber, *Drama in the Courtroom*, 2001.

<sup>302</sup> Reinders, *Militia and Public Order*, 1977.

common tactic in political and social relations. Riots were expressive, instrumental, and recreational all at once.

The analogy of mobs to street theater was born out in newspapers across the political spectrum that offered evidence of the coordinated, planned nature of Philadelphia mobs. Election day violence was common around polling places, where mobs made public spectacles of political opposition. In October, 1834, Jacksonians broke into a Whig tavern and houses along the block near Whig headquarters, ransacking furniture, piling it on the street around the Whig liberty pole, and setting it on fire. This symbolic and literal eviction became a recurring event throughout the decades before the Civil War.

Philadelphia mobs most commonly attacked boundaries between private and public life to communicate, symbolically and practically, that no shelter from the mob existed within the city.<sup>303</sup> Mobs destroyed doors and windows to announce that the homes provide no barrier to entry, and burned furniture and window dressings to proclaim that any comforts they afforded were illusory. On that particular day, the flaming liberty pole collapsed into nearby houses; fire spread from one building to the next until the whole block had burnt to the ground. The fire companies who arrived at the scene were

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<sup>303</sup> Canetti, 1960. Elias Canetti argues that when a crowd destroys the barriers to a house so that anyone may enter to signal that “no-one is protected any more.”

beaten back by the crowds, unable to throw any water on the flames.<sup>304</sup> Many saw mob violence as a necessary tactic for enforcing majority opinion.<sup>305</sup>

The enjoyment mobs derived from their work reminded many contemporaries of public festivals and stood in stark contrast to the terror and anger of many abolitionist and Black Philadelphians.<sup>306</sup> The mob that demolished the Flying Horses amusement was said to have “paraded” through the surrounding streets where Black Philadelphians were concentrated, wreaking havoc. In 1838, Governor Joseph Ritner proclaimed his outrage that Philadelphia had become “the theatre of scenes” so disgraceful to its reputation.<sup>307</sup> In a letter to the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, one Thomas McClintock was shocked at how Philadelphia “could have become the theatre of events subversive of all social order, and characteristic of all that is mean and illiberal, inhuman and barbarous.”<sup>308</sup> The performative dimension of political mobs was not lost on Philadelphia Congressman Henry Horn, who described polling places, frequent sites of mob violence, as either “the theatre for peaceable discussion” or “the arena for political and

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<sup>304</sup> “Dreadful Riot.” *Philadelphia Gazette* in *Hazard’s*. Oct. 25, 1834; 14,17. 264.

<sup>305</sup> Grimsted, “Rioting in Its Jacksonian Setting.” 1972. According to Grimsted, the authority of the mob can be traced back to a Jacksonian belief in moral authority and social control. The participation of every man was democracy’s bequest; men of the era valorized the inner moral compass as a code higher than the law.

<sup>306</sup> “Riots.” July 18, 1835. When one man’s house came under attack, he escaped to his roof, jumped off and managed to land on the ground unharmed. Witnessing this impressive feat, the mob applauded his maneuver and allowed him to escape. However, a similar *Hazard’s* report ended not with an impressive athletic feat, but with terrified occupants dropping out of third story windows.

<sup>307</sup> Ritner, Joseph. “A Proclamation.” *Public Ledger*. May 30, 1838.

<sup>308</sup> *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, June 14, 1838. P2.

mercenary Gladiators.”<sup>309</sup> The tensions between discourse and action, reason and violence ran throughout commentary on political and social life.

Early academic theories of the crowd date to the late nineteenth century and are characterized by their interest in preserving the institutions, orders and social practices of people and places against the crowd. Gustav Le Bon, perhaps the most famous crowd theorist, regarded crowds as the antithesis of civilization, a phenomenon that would destroy man’s greatest creations if left unopposed.<sup>310</sup> Le Bon argued individual psychology was radically altered within the crowd, that people became slaves to base instincts and trapped in a “hypnotic order.” The crowd robbed individuals of free will; they became “automaton[s]” absent “all sense of responsibility.”<sup>311</sup>

Tarde adds an attention to space and environment to his theory of crowds and mental states. Tarde argued crowds are spatially defined, but are also ephemeral.<sup>312</sup> “Physical agents,” built environments in particular, define and give shape to crowds. Gabriel Tarde’s used the concept of imitation to explain how ideas nurtured within individual minds transformed into collective, coordinated action.<sup>313</sup> Tarde called the process by which an invention spreads

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<sup>309</sup> Horn, 1834.

<sup>310</sup> Le Bon, G. (1995). *The crowd*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Pub. P.xiii. Le Bon famously argued that a gathering of individuals in a crowd threatens to “utterly destroy society as it now exists.”

<sup>311</sup> Le Bon, 1995, p.9-10, 25.

<sup>312</sup> Tarde, 1969, 280-7.

<sup>313</sup> Tarde, Gabriel. (1888). *Logical Laws of Imitation*. P.178. The theories of social imitation and contagion first offered by Gabriel Tarde and picked up by Georg Simmel offer a frame with which to analyze the transfer of energy from crowd to



by imitation “social evolution.” Tarde argues society is carved into publics along “differences in states of mind” superimposed onto divisions along religious, ethnic, or political lines.<sup>314</sup> Crowds operate “with their own particular excesses” that can result in a “blood fury” transferred among participants through “contagious influence.” Crowds are material, proximate, embodied and affective; publics are abstract, textual, and psychological.

Tarde’s ideas greatly influence Georg Simmel, whose theory of the cognitive effects of the metropolis also focused on the spatial envelope in which crowds formed. Simmel believed that metropolitan life, with its compact spatial proximity of residents, constant stranger interaction, and cacophany of mechanized activity, was an assault on the mind that could only be resisted through intellectual armor.<sup>315</sup> Simmel referred to this armor as the blasé attitude of urbanites, a prophylactic for the subjective self that mediated all encounters with the urban environment. According to Simmel, it was more

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environment to city at large so frequently described in riot accounts. Tarde had argued that “invention and imitation” are “elementary social acts.” Simmel, G. 1971. “The Problem of Sociology.” In D. Levine, Ed. *Georg Ideas and volitions are invented and imitated, from one individual to another. Through a competitive process of invention and imitation, social movements form from the most successful ideas. Simmel borrow the Tarde’s trajectory from inner subjectivity outward to the constitution of society. “A collection of human beings,” Simmel writes, “becomes a society only when the vitality of [one’s life content] attains the form of reciprocal influence; only when one individual has an effect, immediate or mediate, upon another, is mere spatial aggregation or temporal succession transformed into society.” Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. P. 25.*

<sup>314</sup> Tarde, 1901, p. 28.

<sup>315</sup> Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” 1971. P.327, 329. In “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel argued that crowds and technologies of the modern city directly challenged the independence and individuality of the average person constantly threatened with being consumed by the city. Simmel called his armor of rational intellectual thought an “organ.”

than a measure of self-protection. It was the only precaution that kept strangers from killing each other on city streets. Society for Simmel does not exist as a generalized precondition for social action but is constantly enacted through particular interactions.<sup>316</sup> The energy of the crowd is reciprocated through social interactions. These associations swell to connect more people. They may come to share a common perspective and align their behavior toward common goals.

Le Bon, Tarde and Simmel's fear of crowds reflects the pervasive anxiety about urban life in the rapidly changing nineteenth century as communication and transportation technologies brought more strangers into contact, all packed tightly into cacophonous industrializing cities. Simmel and Le Bon would both agree with Tarde's assertion that the collective action of crowds is almost always destructive. Tarde mused, "for the few trees of liberty that they planted, how many forests have been burned, homes pillaged, chateaux demolished by them."<sup>317</sup>

Despite their fears, Le Bon and Simmel point us in two important directions. First, both argue that a crowd transforms individual subjectivity into a collective consciousness. In essence, both are saying that crowds shape identity and subjectivity socially rather than individually. Second, Simmel and Le Bon offer the insight that crowds engender a social consciousness and mobilize it toward collective action. Therefore, the crowd did not simply gather

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<sup>316</sup> Simmel, 1971, p.27.

<sup>317</sup> Tarde, Gabriel. (1969). *On Communication and Social Influence*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press. P.293.

for its own sake, but gathered as a potential force that could be directed at a target.

Largely in reaction to characterizations of crowds as irrationally destructive, social historians of the twentieth century set out to prove that crowds in fact could be rational political actors. Scholars since George Rudé and E.P. Thompson have rejected the idea of the crowd as an unthinking mob. They have argued that even rioting crowds are almost always goal-oriented.<sup>318</sup> Riots were designed to overturn the social order and loosen, if not broke, social bonds. These critics have drawn a portrait of the crowd as an aggregate of politically motivated individuals. Over a number of centuries, they have shown crowds to be controlled, democratic and even noble in their aims by rejecting the notion of the homogenous crowd and focusing study on individual participants' motives and goals. In the hands of these historians, crowd action becomes a primary method of interclass political communication.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Thompson, E.P. (1971). "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd In the Eighteenth Century." *Past and Present*. 50(1): 76-136. The moral economy of the eighteenth century crowd was based on notions of the common good; riots were political, designed to shape government, commerce and social thought. Thompson argues the label "riot" poorly describes the coordinated efforts to set price controls in the English marketplace. Thompson's concept of the "legitimizing notion" points to the tendency of crowds to defend the valued traditions and customs of the majority, work that was often aided or excused by governing authorities. When economic roles were assigned according to these social norms and obligations, Thompson called this a "moral economy."

<sup>319</sup> Some of their techniques – studying collective action "from below," calculating motives, reading behavior as political communication – influence this study. But absence of the race factor, and the urge to valorize the working classes limit the transportability of European crowd theory across the nineteenth century Atlantic Ocean.

The problem with polarized crowd theories is the moral valence attributed to each. Competing stereotypes define crowds as either "the people" or the demos, that is, a symbol of revolutionary possibility, or the irrational, barbaric mob, a symbol of destruction.<sup>320</sup> These contrasting images conceal more than they reveal by describing and defining crowd behavior based on a match between the crowd's political ideology and that of the commentator. If the writer agrees with the crowd's aims, it is democratic; if not, it is despotic. It depends on who the writer believes should justly control the institutions and mechanisms of power.

The aim here is not to offer a judgment of crowd motives, goals, or tactics. It would be too simple to demonize the white mob and lament for the Black and abolitionist victims. Instead, we analyze the experience of the crowd for antebellum Philadelphians to understand its influence on public life, especially the ways in which mob action influenced spatial arrangements in the city by circumscribing Black activity and delegitimizing their status and claims as citizens.

Robert Park distinguishes crowds from publics by the capacity for reflection and self-critique in each. The crowd suppresses internal differences and fixates on an external object or goal. The public recognizes its internal differences and engages in rational debate to arrive at a consensus that does

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<sup>320</sup> Rudé, G. (1964). *The Crowd in History*. New York: Wiley. Rudé, George. (1988). *The Face of the Crowd*. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International) Rudé, George. (1995). *Ideology & Popular Protest*. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press)

not require unanimity.<sup>321</sup> The crowd expresses feeling while the public communicates information. Crowds are based on a “dynamic reciprocity” that is both emotional and intellectual, one that “gives rise to a general excitement exerting control over the group as a unit.”<sup>322</sup> The crowd achieves a “common mind” which directs their unified actions, whereas members of the public retain their individualistic faculties and engage with each other as debating sides.<sup>323</sup>

Elias Canetti adds sensuous and excessive elements to Park’s study of a crowd’s transformation. According to Canetti, a crowd is the most prominent exception to the human fear of being touched. We shut ourselves behind closed doors, conceal our bodies in cloth, and dance around each other in crowded places. In the crowd we lose our fear, pack our bodies closely together, and surrender ourselves to the group. The effect is almost magical: “Suddenly it is as though everything were happening in one and the same body.” This is the virtue of the crowd – it relieves us of our greatest fear by uniting individuals as one mind and one body.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Park, Robert. (1972). *The Crowd and the Public and Other Essays*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press) Park privileges “meaningful” communication for its supposedly unique ability to coordinate goal-oriented collective action, which he calls the foundation of modern society.

<sup>322</sup> Park, 1972. P.19. The general excitement sweeps through individuals in “currents” that unify them as a crowd, which is no simple aggregate but a collective entity in itself.

<sup>323</sup> Park, 1972. P.22, 50. The public is not unified in its goal-orientation; there is discord that needs reconciliation.

<sup>324</sup> Canetti, Elias. (1960). *Crowds and Power*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. 15-16.

The excessive nature of the crowd is developed through its twin pursuits, one productive, one destructive. Oriented toward destruction, crowds draw energy and enthusiasm from collective actions, capacities the sociologist Christian Borch describes as “destructiveness and vitalism.”<sup>325</sup> Energy, density and excess characterize the crowd.<sup>326</sup> Borch argues crowd formation is primarily sociable for its own sake, and is secondarily goal-oriented. The goal of sociability is antecedent to the identification of a goal and underlines the possibility that crowds affirm group identity through their gathering. Sociability is the life-affirming experience of forming a crowd and developing a collective subjectivity. In other words, it is not only fun but psychologically and emotionally rewarding to join a crowd. Between what is within the crowd and what is outside it, negative identification enhances positive. The crowd affirms its identity and celebrates its existence in opposition to the targets of its destruction. Vitalism therefore refers to both the life-affirming and life-destroying tendencies of the crowd.

The nineteenth century Philadelphia mob was both generative and reductive as Borch describes. The mob attempted to promote and define an idea and experience of Philadelphia – to build a white, free metropolis, only by eliminating the elements it opposed. The mob was the sovereign power in the

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<sup>325</sup> Borch, Christian. (2010). “Between Destructiveness and Vitalism: Simmel’s Sociology of Crowds.” *Conserveries Mémoires*. 8.

<sup>326</sup> Canetti, 1960, 29, 32. For Canetti, the crowd is characterized by its will toward growth, the equality of its members (who become unified as one being: the crowd), the love of density, and the need for goal-oriented direction. Together these characteristics make the crowd “a single creature dancing, a creature with fifty heads and a hundred legs and arms, all performing in exactly the same way and with the same purpose.”

city, working on the body, mind and material goods of an inhabitant. It seeded fear of constant attack in vulnerable people, most especially Black Philadelphians. It made good on these threats in random beatings, organized sieges, and public displays of violence. It also had a decidedly materialist agenda, in which homes were ransacked, furniture piled in the street and burned. Houses were torn down, and whole blocks were burnt to ashes. Fire became the primary mechanism by which the mob purified the material environment.

For Frederick Douglass, the ritual of violence marked the triumph of historically bred passions bound up in customs and traditions that would not be easily broken.<sup>327</sup> Laws were the product of rational thought and therefore doomed to suffer under mob rule.

[Mobs] marked out the people of color for destruction whenever the brutal propensities of base white men should prompt them to the work of murderous outrage.... They took authority from the hands of the Mayor, he virtually telling them that they were to have full liberty to endanger the lives, and to destroy the property of any and all persons who should be found acting in disregard for public taste and prejudice, by associating, in any way, with colored persons.<sup>328</sup>

Written in 1849, this passage defines “public taste” in Philadelphia as “the brutal propensities of base white men.” Douglass argues that readers must no

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<sup>327</sup> Douglass, F. “Philadelphia.” *The North Star*. October 19 1849. Rochester, NY. “When, in any community, a violation of a mere custom, or a disregard of a particular taste, is esteemed an available excuse for setting side all law, and for resorting to violence and bloodshed, it shows such custom and taste to be profoundly wedded to the affections of the people; and proves them to be most difficult of eradication.”

<sup>328</sup> Douglass, Oct. 19, 1849.

longer view these incidents as random or spontaneous outbreaks. Instead, they represented a systematic campaign of eradication.

Over the course of two decades, with each passing riot, evidence mounted that authorities had become accomplices to mob destruction. Abolitionist newspapers attributed the continuing violence to the complicity of the police forces and mayor.

Philadelphia and the adjoining districts have been notorious for several years, on account of the character of the public officers.... With such men for officers, who can wonder that riots have prevailed for some years past, and that vice and immorality, poverty and misery, have abounded, especially in the section where these officers reside.<sup>329</sup>

*The National Era* newspaper concluded the same after the California House riots.

The whole city is threatened by a gang of ruffians, who, had there been an efficient organization of the police, with vigilant, energetic, faithful officers, might have been seized in the first attempt at violence.... For want of this, arson and wholesale murder are committed, and the law is tramped under foot.<sup>330</sup>

What had once seemed anarchic now had the look of despotism. The “dregs of the rabble” and “gangs of wretches” had brought Philadelphia to a “disgraceful subserviency to a brute mob.” According to one Boston businessman, Irish immigrants were allowed to run wild because Philadelphia politicians and judges relied on their votes. Firemen rioted so routinely that the

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<sup>329</sup> Gold Pen. “Things in Philadelphia.” *The National Era*. December 16, 1847. Washington, DC.

<sup>330</sup> “A Bloody Riot in Philadelphia.” *The National Era*. October 18, 1849. Washington, DC.



phrase “as great a rowdy as a Philadelphia fireman” had become “a byword in other communities.”<sup>331</sup>

The riots made clear the limits of law enforcement, fire, rescue and civil services. Widespread destruction in the context of authorities unwilling to use their power in defense of Black citizens prompted the administrative consolidation of the city in 1854. Before the professionalization of the police and fire departments in the second half of the nineteenth century, volunteers intentionally blurred the lines between gang and municipal services, exercising control over their territories through each. Both were exclusively all-white and all-male. Fire companies were volunteer organizations new to the 19th century. Rival hose and engine companies frequently comported themselves as gangs, raising false alarms and attempting to seize control over each others’ equipment, fighting at the scene of a blaze for prime position, and generally trying to outdo competitors as the most masculine, the most muscular company. In their history of the city, Scharf & Westcott recalled Moyamensing in 1848:

The spirit of misrule and disorder which had been growing annually for fifteen or sixteen years was now at the height. The miserable system of a city with adjacent districts each independent of each other was a protection to the disorderly and encouragement to them to unite together for the purpose of showing their disregard of law.... The district of Moyamensing was particularly afflicted with these gangs. The district police arrangements were ineffective. The firemen of the district were also in deadly enmity. A fire was as likely to be an incendiary attempt to lure a hostile company into a district where it could be taken in ambush as to have been accidental.<sup>332</sup> (691)

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<sup>331</sup> “The Fruits of Bad Character.” *The North American*. August 30, 1843. 5,1378. P.2.

<sup>332</sup> Scharf & Westcott. P. 691.

The geographic implications of the city/district boundary were reflected in the two environments: the city was home to public, virtuous and civilized places; the district was pock-marked by hidden, primitive, and vice ridden places.

The close relationship between fire companies and gangs meant that powers of destruction and protection were concentrated among these men. Irish men were frequent and prominent members of both. There were no Black fire companies, leaving residents susceptible to arson when most companies sympathized with and sometimes participated in anti-Black and anti-Abolitionist mayhem. Fire companies would often stand down and watch a building burn, if their members and allies disfavored it. A majority of the mob violence took place in the Cedar Neighborhood, at the intersection of Philadelphia City, Moyamensing, and Southwark, where the concentration of free Black residents was highest and white and Black residents lived side-by-side and front-to-back, crowded into the two- and three-story apartments that lined the neighborhood's streets and alley ways.

In addition to the buildings that housed Black Philadelphians, mobs most frequently attacked institutions of racial uplift and empowerment.<sup>333</sup>

Prominent buildings representing Black advancement were intolerable to

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<sup>333</sup> Although disproportionately so, Blacks were not the only target of rioters' violence. Growing antipathy to the Catholic Irish boiled over in 1844, when the Protestant "Native Americans" movement gained strength in Philadelphia. "Natives" attacked the Irish, who were dispersed throughout the city, lacking the critical population mass to sustain such attacks. Protestant crowds enveloped the Church of St. Philip de Neri, on Queen Street between Second and Third, when the church was believed to be gathering weapons to form a Catholic militia, and demanded that the police apprehend the weapons. When rioting began later that night, Protestants hung American flags from their windows, symbols much like the lighted candles that signified solidarity with nativist mobs. The ensuing violence lasted for days between May and July.

certain white interests. These buildings not only housed progressive racial coalitions or Black organizations, but also represented significant capital investments and a viable claim to ownership of portions of Philadelphia. Riots robbed Black Philadelphians of spaces for gathering and exchange that might consolidate or expand their political power. Symbolically, a building's absence was a site of memorialized violence, testaments to white supremacy as demonstrated through crimes left unpunished.

The systematic erasure of signs of Black ownership and empowerment signaled to all onlookers the white supremacist position that Black and integrated communities could make no claims to ownership in Philadelphia without provoking a harsh disciplinary response. As a spectacle, these acts of arson offered a wealth of imagery for Philadelphians to draw on in conversation, exultation and condemnation, over the future direction of the city and the country. The images of city blocks in flames also became the source for important fictional and historical accounts, in the works of 19th century authors George Lippard and Frank Webb, as well as historian John Fanning Watson. As acts of erasure, arson eliminated institutions critical to the development of abolition and amalgamated society in Philadelphia. During these decades, popular bars and restaurants, temperance halls, churches, and private residences, all owned by or operating in support of the free Black community, were burnt to the ground.

The results of this social upheaval, the consolidated city of 1854 and beyond, the expanded and professionalized police force, and the turn to ethnic and race based politics, all became constitutive features of the late

19th and twentieth century metropolis. The root and branch of ethnic tensions flowered into machine politics, with local bosses representing ethnic groups and neighborhoods. The Catholic Irish, the Protestants, the African Americans, and Abolitionists all had their own territories and politicians. The “ethnic politics” of the second half of the 19th century often split along “native” Protestant and Catholic Irish lines. The lines of segregation once contested in the streets ossified in political chambers. The often-attacked and disfranchised Black population gained little from this reconfiguration of political loyalties.

### **Spatial Publics**

Looking back across more than two decades of riots, it is clear that a mob had become a common, if not altogether accepted, social technology for transforming urban space, reallocating material goods, and redefining social categories. Contemporaries most frequently described the mobs of Philadelphia as excessive. Mob energy vibrated with a swelling intensity irreducible to individual rioters. Contemporary accounts relied on ephemeral concepts such as spirits and atmospheres to communicate how mobs transformed social relations in ways that exceeded calculations of properties damaged and lives lost. For almost all of those who spoke out against it, the mob had become a unified actor in its own right, a supra-human phenomenon. Amid shifting and uncertain political, economic and social conditions, Philadelphians fought and died to control public space and access to the city.

The mob violence that flared to its greatest extent in the 1830s and 40s coincided with the period political theorist Jurgen Habermas calls the expansion of the public sphere, when increased news readership and urbanization exploded close-knit deliberative communities. Habermas' public sphere is the realm "in which the public organizes itself as the bearer [of] public opinion" to mediate relations between society and state.<sup>334</sup> Public opinion, as Habermas uses it, is brought into existence by a reasoning collective body that operates according to a set of norms that negate social differences to equilibrate power between participants who collaborate to discover points of intersecting interest.<sup>335</sup> Often this group takes form as a bourgeois public sphere – private individuals assembled together to represent a public voice using influential media outlets. Public opinion is only achieved in contexts governed by a "model of norms and modes of behavior," which include: "a) general accessibility, b) elimination of all privileges and c) discovery of general norms and rational legitimations." The news media was an early instance of such a forum.

During the "expansion," Habermas argues, the practice of reaching consensus through rational debate was eclipsed in favor of an "arena of competing interests fought out in the coarser forms of violent conflict."<sup>336</sup> Laws were no longer the product of reasoned if impassioned debate. They had

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<sup>334</sup> Habermas, J. (1964). "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article." *New German Critique*, No.3. pp.49-55.

<sup>335</sup> Habermas, J. (1964). "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article." *New German Critique*, No.3. pp.49-55.

<sup>336</sup> J. Habermas. (1991). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press. p.132.

become reactive measures to the “pressure of the street,” the violent mobs rather than the “reasonable consensus of publicly debating private persons.” Notions of public good were scuttled in favor of a race to fulfill private interests. Habermas’ narrative is compelling, as is Schudson’s, but the two remain opposed.

Any story that characterizes the 1830s and 40s by a flight from reasoned debate to a conflagration of mobs and barbarism does so with ample evidence of a society spinning out of control. This dissertation tells some of that story. However, I do not follow Habermas in drawing either a historical or theoretical line differentiating the halcyon days of debate from the descent into bodily violence and fiendish crowds. It is an oversimplification to set the two on opposite poles of socio-political formation.

In his work on the subject, Habermas notes that a public sphere is a product of either discourse or practice, that in Greek city-states the public sphere could be constituted either in discussion (*lexis*) or in common action (*praxis*).<sup>337</sup> However, he analyzes discourse only, giving no further thought to action, a decision that impacted most of the public-sphere theory that followed. This is too narrow a definition of a public sphere and the formation of publics. Discourse and print media are not the only, or even the principal mechanisms by which individuals recognize themselves as a collective entity apart from the state.

Habermas’ separation of text from embodied practices had its corollary in antebellum thought, though the distinction was untenable then just as now.

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<sup>337</sup> Habermas, 1991. P.3

Consider the letters of Dr. William Ellery Channing, the foremost Unitarian preacher of the antebellum period, in his letter to Henry Clay regarding the annexation of Texas: “I have prepared this letter, not amidst the goadings, irritations, and feverish tumults of a crowded city, but in the stillness of retirement, amid scenes of peace and beauty.” These controlled conditions would meet Habermas’ requirements for the public sphere. Channing continues:

The man who lives in a crowd, and receives perpetual impose from its prejudices and passions – who connects himself with a party and looks to it for reward—cannot easily keep his mind open to truth, or sacrifice the interests of the moment to everlasting principles, and the enduring welfare of his country.<sup>338</sup>

In contrast to the Habermasian ideal, the texts did not diffuse the prejudices of the crowd. More commonly, they emboldened them. “Even in the old states,” Channing writes, “mobs are taking the government into their own hands, and a profligate newspaper finds little difficulty in stirring up multitudes to violence.”<sup>339</sup> His statements point to the strong relationship between the street, the coffee shop, the pub, and the news printer’s shop. The solemnity of peaceful repose was unavailable to all but the most privileged. Defining publics and the public sphere according to their practices would be much too rigid and practically unsubstantiated in the antebellum period.

Embodied modes of public expression are interconnected with mediated debates and should be considered in tandem. Rioters in antebellum Philadelphia responded to their experiences with physical action, but that

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<sup>338</sup> Channing in Brothers, 1837. P.218-19.

<sup>339</sup> Dr. Channing to Henry Clay, Letter, August 1, 1837. Reprinted in Brothers, 1839. P.216.

action was captured in newsprint, pamphlets, and diaries, and discussed in the salons and coffee shops of the bourgeois. Each animated the other in an iterative process of continuously negotiating and defining the boundaries of the public.

Studying the links between discursive and material practices, between the text and the street as sites of articulation, offers the possibility of a more rounded approach to publics. We might begin to understand how groups “not privileged enough to inhabit the disembodied voice of public reason” deploy embodied publicity as a strategy in the formation of publics.<sup>340</sup> Abstract, discursive contributions to a public do not need to remain opposed to manual or embodied contributions. In their attempts to break the rigid parameters Habermas sets for the public sphere, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge argue the public “denotes specific institutions and practices,” but is also “a general horizon of social experience.”<sup>341</sup> The public sphere organizes collective experience; it is a part of consciousness but is not reducible to an epiphenomenon. Negt and Kluge’s distinction means that the formation of a public sphere is tied to embodied consciousness, which includes discourse but is not limited to it, and opens a space for environmental context.

Theorists like Benedict Anderson, Charles Taylor, and Michael Warner have overstated the importance of imagination to the formation of publics. Anderson argues that what distinguishes one community from another is the way in which it is imagined. Charles Taylor’s “social imaginary,” how people

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<sup>340</sup> F. Cody. (2011). “Publics and Politics.” *Annu. Rev. Anthropol.* 40:37-52.

<sup>341</sup> O. Negt, A. Kluge, P. Labanyi. (1988). “The Public Sphere and Experience”: Selections. *October*, 46. P.60-82.



imagine their shared existence, is “carried in images, stories, and legends.”<sup>342</sup> One of the most influential definitions of ‘public’ to follow Habermas is Michael Warner’s theory of publics and counterpublics.<sup>343</sup> Warner considers a public to be “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself.” Warner makes clear that a public is not based on “categorical classification, objectively determined position in social structure, or material existence.” A public is a form of discursive world-making, accomplished through the circulation of its discourse, that becomes mistaken for an actually existing “normal” or “natural” world. But the idea that discourse can circulate all on its own is the first problem. Technological infrastructures and human bodies enable the circulation of discourse, and both are irredeemably material. In contrast to the discursive public, Warner identifies the existence of “counterpublics” not wholly defined by literacy practices. Counterpublics embody material space, whereas publics do not. The discursive, anti-material publics of Habermas, Anderson, Taylor and Warner lead us down a path that is not only theoretically problematic, but is historically unsubstantiated in the American context.

The concern with finding alternative ways of categorizing publics is not particularly new. Nancy Fraser first called attention to the exclusionary parameters of the public sphere, arguing that bracketing out and neutralizing status distinctions between participants in theory, negates the possibility of

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<sup>342</sup> Charles Taylor. (2004). *Modern social imaginaries*. Duke University Press. P.23.

<sup>343</sup> Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and counterpublics*. *Public culture*, 14(1), 49-90.

the public sphere in practice.<sup>344</sup> Just as Warner did a decade later, Fraser urged scholars to turn attention to multiple publics rather than a single dominant public. Mary Ryan questioned the viability of a concept that fails to account for the many ways groups have acted in and upon public life, and the variety of arenas in which they have acted.<sup>345</sup> Geoff Eley added that any notion of publics must make room for the contests and conflicts that have been constitutive of social formations throughout history.<sup>346</sup>

Eley suggested we consider the public sphere to be the “structured setting” for competing publics that in a stratified society inevitably advantages some groups over others. Looking through the historical archive led Michael Schudson to declare, “the idea that a public sphere of rational-critical discourse flourished in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, at least in the American instance, is an inadequate, if not incoherent, notion.”<sup>347</sup> So why should we continue to use the concept of publics if it is both theoretically imperfect and historically unsubstantiated in the American case? The case of mob violence and the urbanization of mid-nineteenth century Philadelphia will help us to formulate a more historically grounded theory of publics.

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<sup>344</sup> Nancy Fraser. (1990). “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy.” *Social Text*. 25/26. Pp.56-80.

<sup>345</sup> Mary Ryan. (1992). “Gender and Public Access: Women’s Politics in Nineteenth-Century America.” In Craig Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press. pp.259-288.

<sup>346</sup> Geoff Eley. (1992). “Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century.” In Craig Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press. pp.289-339.

<sup>347</sup> Michael Schudson. (1992). “Was There Ever A Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections On The American Case.” In Craig Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press. pp.143-163.

Privileging abstract spaces of discourse (the geometrically vague “sphere”) over the material space and bodies of the “street” reveals a bias toward the ideal over the real, the dream of perfectly controlled communication circumstances against the messy reality of potentially incommunicable difference. In antebellum Philadelphia, dispositions toward the street fell along class lines. When streets were linked to working and lower classes, the elite described them in pejorative terms. Base passions, grimy bodies, and inarticulate actions dominated them. Streets linked to elite culture, like Chestnut for example, were matters of great civic pride. They followed Penn and Holme’s grid, which was itself the pinnacle of rational urban design. They were broad and well lit, and their buildings were designed in noble styles out of the best materials. The difference between what a street represents is a matter of the network of associations in which it is situated. Within the elite network, print media was an available platform for communicating about the street. It was not for the working and lower classes.

This is why Habermas calls it the bourgeois public sphere. It should not be taken as a normative definition of public. Warren Montag calls this separation of the ideal forms of communication from the corrupted actions of the street the “territorial imperative” of the public sphere. “To translate words of criticism into deeds is to remove reason from its adjudicating role and thus contaminate the public sphere.”<sup>348</sup> These firm territorial boundaries exclude too much. Saying there are other viable modes of political and social critique aside from dispassionate discourse does not affirm the work of mobs. The

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<sup>348</sup> W. Montag. (2001). “The Pressure of the Street: Habermas’s Fear of the Masses.” In *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere*. Eds. M. Hill & W. Montag. London: Verso. P.141.

evidence of communicative action in the arena and streets of antebellum Philadelphia abounds, whereas evidence of rational critical debate does not. From its inception, Philadelphians acted out against the rationality of the grid. The historical public sphere as both a discursive and spatial construct does not fit Habermas' theoretical ideal.

Public space must be taken seriously as a material space and not simply a discursive field. A focus on speech over space turns the concept of a public sphere into an abstraction that denies the reality of everyday life, as the political theorist Margaret Kohn has demonstrated. Taking the homeless as an example, Kohn argues that strangers do not often make their arguments through speech but through presence. For Kohn, this means contemporary democracies must protect public space as well as free speech. For this study, it prompts the recognition that attending to bodily presence as a form of political communication is inextricably linked to the spaces the body inhabits.

Even rational discourse requires force to ensure that social order is maintained regardless of the outcome of debate. Protecting the lives and property of those who have it to lose is critical in any society that hopes to engage its enfranchised citizens in debate. In the public sphere individuals associate and communicate freely, "unaffected by the determinations of the social, material world," a world they transcend. Rational communication exists in the public sphere so long as violent action does not: "as long as its participants are content to let reason decide and persuade and never resort to the use of force or even the threat of force." But to ensure that reason triumphs and discord is stifled, an external force is still necessary to serve as

a “guarantee that what cannot be improved upon will be left “intact.”<sup>349</sup> This mandate to preserve and protect social order favors the dominant when it asks all vehement opposition to power (and the lives that hang in the balance) to retreat peacefully from debate. Force is required whether the public sphere is located in discursive or material spaces. As Montag argues, “the force of reason exerts no pressure or has no effect at all, except insofar as it rests on real, physical force.”<sup>350</sup> Concepts of publics are bound up in force, concealed or apparent.

Force is required to preserve social order in a society whose public sphere is rational and discursive as much as it is required to overthrow the order of a society that has erupted in mob action. The binaries of discourse/action reason/passion erect false barriers. The choice is not simply between a psychologized inner world of ephemeral discourse and the spatialized outer world of material practice. The two are intertwined in ways that the early theoretical discussion of publics does not satisfactorily address.

Attending to multiple publics, frequently in conflict, engaging in a variety of public practices includes material conditions and spatial practices, both downplayed in the original formulations. Building on Foucault and Bourdieu in particular, geographers urge a shift in our understanding of the material environment as a world of stuff “out there” to one centered on the human body as the mediating connection. The body interacts with its environment to form a sense of the external environment, as well as a sense

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<sup>349</sup> M. Hill & W. Montag. (2001). “Introduction.” In *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere*. Eds. M. Hill & W. Montag. London: Verso. P.6-7.

<sup>350</sup> Montag, 2001, 144.

of the interior condition of the person and his or her own subjectivity.<sup>351</sup> The body mediates experience of the material environment through language and sensory perception, creating what Low calls an embodied space, “the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form.”<sup>352</sup> The materialist approach seeks to “re-animate” the landscape focus on the interaction of body and the world, understand the human as an on-going co-fabricated and redistribute subjectivity to the world outside the human mind.<sup>353</sup>

The city of Philadelphia in the 1830s and 40s is a useful test case for this material/social/imaginary theory of publics. Philadelphia was at once an idea, a territory, and a set of social relations. It did not exist apart from how it was continually enacted and reenacted as such. Habermas identifies the 1830s and 40s as the moment of the public sphere’s expansion. In America, this era is partly characterized by an intensive migration of peoples to cities and densification of the urban environment, one of the most profound periods of urbanization in American history. Urbanization occurred alongside the proliferation of newspapers and their wide circulation among all classes of city dwellers. The development of the news media was part-and-parcel of the material and spatial development of American society during the antebellum period.

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<sup>351</sup> Whatmore, S. (2006). “Materialist Returns.” *Cultural Geographies*, 13, 4. Pp.600-609.

<sup>352</sup> Low, 2003, p.10.

<sup>353</sup> Whatmore, 2006.

City building was not merely a backdrop for news making and the news consuming public; it was the productive engine behind circulation growth and the fodder for much of the discussion on news pages. The two are inextricably linked. If urbanization produced a news-based public sphere, then the development of discursive publics occurs within the context of a range of material and spatial practices, which must be considered as part of the process of creating a new urban public. Stated differently, we can use what people were talking about to investigate material and spatial practices that were influential in forming publics.

## Chapter 4: The Spatial Order of Citizenship

### Black Disfranchisement in Pennsylvania

In January 1838, midway through the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1837-38, Charles Brown, the outspoken delegate from the Northern Liberties, located in the county of Philadelphia just above the city boundary, agitated in the chamber. The convention thus far had been highly contentious, falling, as it did, in the midst of difficult economic times. Many agreed that banks were to blame. Thaddeus Stevens from Adams County warned colleagues that misguided economic "reform" could "incite mobs to lay violent hands on the institutions of the country; turning the populace loose with inflamed mind to bring ruin and destruction upon the country."<sup>354</sup> Joshua Cox of Somerset feared reforms would only exacerbate inequality and "grind the laboring classes to the dust."<sup>355</sup> Fears of economic collapse mingled with the fear of violence and the vigilante justice of Lynch Law hangings that seemed to be gaining favor throughout the United States.

By January 1838, nine months of sporadic debates had already dragged on as delegates to the Convention traveled back and forth between their homes where they listened to constituents and Harrisburg. During those long months, a new source emerged to displace the banking system as the target of their fear and enmity. Charles Brown, back from the Northern Liberties, addressed the delegates to voice the new, shared concern:

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<sup>354</sup> Stevens, *Proceedings*, V.1, 1837, p. 369.

<sup>355</sup> Cox, *Proceedings*, V.1, 1837, p.372.



Would any man place the poorest White man, who goes to the polls with the highest, and deposits his vote as fearlessly, on the same footing with the negro? Would the poor and degraded negro look as much to the interests of the commonwealth? Did any one entertain the belief that the negro should be raised to the level of the poorest man who was fit to enjoy and exercise the rights of sovereignty?<sup>356</sup>

Benjamin Martin, Brown's fellow Democrat from Philadelphia County,  
continued:

Sir, the divisionary line between the races, is so strongly marked by the Creator, that it is unwise and cruelly unjust, in any way, to amalgamate them, for it must be apparent to every well judging person, that the elevation of the Black, is the degradation of the White man; and by endeavoring to alter the order of nature,<sup>357</sup> we would, in all probability, bring about a war between the races.

Although the question before delegates was whether to restrict voting rights to White men only, those who argued for Black disfranchisement repeated the same argument again and again: Blacks were not fit to share space with Whites and thus should be removed.

Advocates of disfranchisement used a spatial as well as social argument to support their efforts. They feared that the well-ordered spaces of Philadelphia County, particularly the ballot box and the state house floor, would be polluted if Black political rights were enforced. The language used to express fears emphasized the spatial and relational aspects of what was perceived as an unacceptable accommodation of mixed races in the public sphere, especially in public spaces where democracy was enacted.

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<sup>356</sup> Brown, *Proceedings*, v.9, 389.

<sup>357</sup> Martin, *Proceedings*, v.9, p.321.

The vocabulary used to support disfranchisement evinces fear over proximity, interaction, and “mingling” between the races in the sacred spaces of democracy. For example, William Meredith, a delegate from Philadelphia City, “shuddered at the consequences of throwing open our polls.... He thought it wiser not to incur the risk of having our institutions controlled, by a race to which we do not belong.”<sup>358</sup> John Sterigere, Democrat of Norristown, maintained, “respectable citizens.... will not go to the polls and jostle with negroes.”<sup>359</sup> Martin added, “he could never give his consent that a Black man should sit in this body. Was there a man in the Convention who would like to see a county represented by a Black man on this floor? Was there one who would take his seat beside a negro?”<sup>360</sup> Martin continued, asking, “is there anything to justify the opinion, that these individuals can bring into the ranks of our citizens that weight of intelligence which should induce us to admit them to take part in our contests, shoulder by shoulder, and side by side?”<sup>361</sup>

Philadelphia Democrat John McCahen added:

If they should be entitled to vote, place them in your jury box, elect them as members of the Legislature, and to any and all of the offices established by your laws.... There would be true republicans in witnessing upon the bench of your *Supreme Court* the *presiding Judge*; the offspring of *Africa's shores*, sitting in *brotherly* and *religious companionship* with his *White brethren*, deciding upon your *rights*, your *properties*, and your *lives*.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Meredith, *Proceedings*, v.9, 349.

<sup>359</sup> Sterigere, *Proceedings*, v.9, 368

<sup>360</sup> Martin, *Proceedings*, V.2, 478.

<sup>361</sup> Martin, *Proceedings*, v.3, p.83.

<sup>362</sup> McCahen, *Proceedings*, v.3, 88.

As drafted in 1776, the Pennsylvania state constitution enfranchised freemen twenty-one years of age who had resided for more than one or two years (there was disagreement over how long) and who paid taxes, with no distinction made on account of skin color. The Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1789, however, featured an attempt to add the word “White” before “freeman” to restrict voting rights, but it was defeated.

Pennsylvania also passed a gradual abolition law in 1780, the first of its kind in the United States. This legislation promised emancipation by age twenty-eight to African Americans born into slavery after 1780, at which time they would revert to the status of indentured servant for four years before gaining freedom. The law had effectively diminished the presence of slavery in Pennsylvania. Between 1790 and 1800 the total number of slaves in the state dwindled from 3,737 to 1,706; by 1810 there were 795, and by 1840 only 64 African Americans were enslaved in Pennsylvania.

Over the course of the 1837-38 convention’s first nine months, numerous delegates had proposed constitutional amendments to offer the right to vote and hold public office to “White” freemen only. Throughout Pennsylvania, Democratic leaders believed African Americans represented a critical constituency for the Whig party, even if intimidation kept them from voting in large numbers. Months earlier, judges in Luzerne County in northern Pennsylvania and Bucks County in eastern Pennsylvania had ruled that Black Pennsylvanians had never been considered part of the political compact of the state constitution. As recourse, Pennsylvania’s disfranchisement

supporters, many but not all of whom were Democrats, sought permanent advantage over the Whigs by denying Black voting rights.<sup>363</sup>

The right to vote was viewed by both sides as an invitation to share the city and state as equals. Disfranchisement supporters viewed this as potentially ruinous for Philadelphia and America, which would no longer be governed according to the spatial order of the master White race. Democrat Charles Brown delivered a clear message to Black Philadelphians:

We do not wish you to come here; it is not to our interest, nor to yours, that you should inhabit the same soil, mingle in the same social circles, and we will not invite you here. We will place a few barriers between you and us. We will offer you a premium to go elsewhere for this is not your home.<sup>364</sup>

Brown proposed that the body “offer the Blacks some inducements to leave us, and go to a climate and country, in which they would be comfortable and happy, and not be degraded as they are now, for degraded they certainly are.”<sup>365</sup> Brown sought disfranchisement as the first step in a legal campaign of Black removal, as did many disfranchisement delegates. Earlier in June 1837 a defeated measure had proposed barring African Americans from entering the state altogether.

Colonization had threatened African Americans with expulsion from Philadelphia from the early days of the nineteenth century. The American

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<sup>363</sup> Malone, Christopher. (2005). “Rethinking the End of Black Voting Rights in Antebellum Pennsylvania.” *Pennsylvania History*. 72:4.

<sup>364</sup> Brown, *Proceedings*, v.9, 390.

<sup>365</sup> Russell, *Proceedings*, v.2, 200.

Colonization Society (ACS) was founded in 1816 with the mission to send all free African Americans back to Africa in order to ensure America's future as a White political community. Some of the leading social, political, and business leaders of the era supported it. Many saw White prejudice as irreconcilable with the free Black presence in the north. Furthermore, some argued, slavery had inflicted psychic and social wounds on African Americans too deep to rehabilitate through existing White institutions and society.

Men such as Pennsylvania constitutional convention delegates Woodward, Martin, and Brown believed that African Americans threatened American order and decorum. The most practical strategy, and most Christian, in their view was to send free African Americans back to Africa where they could benefit from their own all-Black institutions and the safety and security of their own society. Southern slaveholders applauded this idea, as they supported the removal of free northern Black "incendiaries" who might foment revolt amongst their slaves.

As Nash summarizes the problem, the oft-referenced degraded African American position contradicted the entire spirit of republicanism that had spurred the American Revolution. Rather than focus efforts on uplifting African Americans and combating White racial prejudice, the ACS and its supporters chose instead to remove the objects of prejudice from America altogether.<sup>366</sup> African American leaders in Philadelphia vocalized their nearly unanimous opposition to the Colonization scheme as early as January 1817, denouncing

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<sup>366</sup> Gary Nash. (1988). *Forging Freedom*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p.233-4.

what they saw as disingenuous efforts at “improving” the Black condition and thinly disguised schemes to protect Southern slavery.<sup>367</sup>

Disfranchisement delegates presented the expulsion of African Americans from Pennsylvania as the best way to respect majority opinion and prevent conflict. Woodward noted that legislators should respect “mobism.... It becomes us not to trifle with it. We must legislate with a view to human nature.”<sup>368</sup> He continued, “there is a remedy.... It is colonization. The negroes belong to Africa.... Colonization is the antidote both for slavery and that wild fanaticism [abolitionism].” Woodward believed the South would eventually emancipate its slaves for African colonization so that they might live to see the day when slavery became extinct and America, “her whole population White people... still enduring the glory of the world, and the fountain of infinite happiness.”<sup>369</sup>

Opponents of Black suffrage argued that the Black neighborhoods of Philadelphia were irrefutable evidence of their residents’ inferiority. E.T. McDowell from Bucks County characterized “nine-tenths” of Black Pennsylvanians as “debased and degraded:”

Vagabonds... who prowl and depredate by night, when honest men sleep; who lodge in beds of ashes and charcoal, and shake themselves like other lazy dogs when they get up.... A class of beings that they have in large numbers in the city and county of Philadelphia.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Nash, 1988, p.238.

<sup>368</sup> Woodward, *Proceedings*, v.10, 23.

<sup>369</sup> Woodward, *Proceedings*, v.10, 24.

<sup>370</sup> McDowell, *Proceedings*, V.2, 541, 543.

Martin portrayed Whites as “the masters of the civilized world, an immeasurable distance in advance of all the other population of the earth.” He contrasted Black Philadelphia with this image:

Let gentlemen walk through Philadelphia, and see for themselves, and be convinced. [Black people] came together there from all the southern States, and have so corrupted each other, that they are now in a situation far worse than the bondage from which they have escaped. It is impossible to walk through Cedar ward, in a clear warm evening, [because of] the Black population.<sup>371</sup>

Brown believed that Black residents corrupted his city:

let them visit the lanes and alleys of this city, and there they would find negroes...who were equally as much slaves in mind, as their brethren of the south.... Consider what is the condition of the negroes even in this free state. For himself, he would say that he would rather be a slave at the south than a free negro in Philadelphia, for he would be much better off.<sup>372</sup>

To Martin and Brown, Black enslavement was preferable because it maintained White control over space and practice. Sterigere echoed Brown’s sentiments:

The evidence of their inferiority is seen everywhere. All our observation confirms this opinion, and we look around us in vain for a contradiction. We see them engaged in no business that requires even ordinary capacity; in no enterprises requiring talents to conduct them. The mass are improvident, and seek the lowest avocations, and most menial stations.... They are also a debased and degraded portion of our population.... All attempts to elevate them have proved abortive. They seem to have no desire to be elevated.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Martin, *Proceedings*, v.3, p.84.

<sup>372</sup> Brown, *Proceedings*, v.9, 392-93.

<sup>373</sup> Sterigere, *Proceedings*, v.9, 364.

Black spatial practices were at the heart of delegates' statements concerning Black inferiority. These delegates had witnessed Black residents in public spaces across Philadelphia County and rendered a judgment that they were "debased and degraded." Some argued that slavery was a better condition than freedom for African Americans because of the guiding influence of the White master who imposed order on Black practices. Left to themselves as "free" people, disfranchisement delegates argued, African Americans either failed or refused to adhere to civilized White codes of conduct.

As the debate over voting riots continued, disfranchisement delegates returned again and again to the spatial implications of enfranchisement. Delegates argued that Black enfranchisement protected and encouraged the shared use of all kinds of spaces. If Black and White bodies met at the voting booth, they would do so in the courtroom, at the workplace, in the pub, and in the bedchamber. Numerous delegates presented memorials "effectually to prevent all amalgamation between the White and coloured population, in regard to the government of the state."<sup>374</sup> Martin argued: "to hold out to [Black men] social rights, or to incorporate them with ourselves in the exercise of the right of franchise, is a violation of the law of nature, and would lead to an amalgamation in the exercise therefore, that must bring down upon them, the resentment of the White population."<sup>375</sup> Political rights were seen as natural rights that involved body and soul. As we shall see, delegates used the term

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<sup>374</sup> *Proceedings*, v.8, 113.

<sup>375</sup> Martin, *Proceedings*, v.9, 321.



“amalgamation” to refer to political, social, and spatial, communion between Black and White.

Disfranchisement delegates used the most intimate bodily relations, most particularly, the specter of interracial sex, to warn delegates against African American male enfranchisement. Intermarriage and sexual union were posed as the logical outcome of political equality. George Shellito of Crawford County in Pennsylvania’s far northwest corner near Lake Erie argued, “Once open the flood gates to this innovation, and where, he should be glad to know, was it going to stop? Why, it was amalgamation to the fullest extent.”<sup>376</sup>

Meredith echoed the same thought: “While we resist all association with them in private life, and repel the idea of intermarriage with the race, and amalgamation with them—to induce me to give them the right of suffrage, and to run the risk, however remote it may be, of having the government of this state in the hands of the African race—that they should exercise control over its administration.”<sup>377</sup> To which Sterigere added: “[negroes] could not be placed on an equality in political and social rights, with white citizens. No white citizen would permit a negro to educate his children, or marry into his family.”<sup>378</sup> Woodward argued that voting would be accompanied by social equality, “which involves all the horrors of amalgamation... [to] marry and intermarry with them, and establish between us and them the close and tender relations which bind society together.”<sup>379</sup> Sterigere later added: “The

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<sup>376</sup> Shellito, *Proceedings*, v.5, 418.

<sup>377</sup> Meredith, *Proceedings*, v.9, 349.

<sup>378</sup> Sterigere, *Proceedings*, v.5, 414.

people of this state are for continuing this commonwealth, what it always has been, a political community of white persons.”<sup>380</sup>

In discussing amalgamation, disfranchisement delegates pivoted quickly from the abstract idea of political rights to the embodied spatial practices they entailed. Theirs were not so much arguments based on logical application of rights and principles. They started with a forbidden outcome – the dissolution of hard racial classifications based on social and political boundaries – and crafted arguments around that problem. The same parameters governed both political and biological relations. Politics for these men was less about abstract principles and more about defining the standards by which all could coexist as physical bodies in space.

From the disfranchisement perspective, redefining the political community would threaten the presumptive purity of the biological distinction between White and Black. Violence would then be necessary to preserve the spatial separation of racialized bodies. Ebenezer Sturdevant from Luzerne County north of Philadelphia warned, “injury, annihilation to the Black, sir, would be the result of making him the equal at the ballot box.... We can never force our constituents to go peaceably to the polls, side by side with the negro.”<sup>381</sup> Martin concluded that any provision in favor of Black enfranchisement “would be a curse, and would bring upon them misery and

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<sup>379</sup> Woodward, *Proceedings*, v.10, 23.

<sup>380</sup> Sterigere, *Proceedings*, v.9, 357.

<sup>381</sup> Sturdevant, *Proceedings*, v.9, 328.

ruin.”<sup>382</sup> Brown rejoined, “in Philadelphia, it would be fatal to [Blacks’] peace, and destructive to their lives. We must look at the structure of society, and contemplate man with his prejudices and passions, and move with a becoming caution.”<sup>383</sup> In Brown’s Philadelphia district, he explained, “the coloured population amounted to between three and four thousand,” a substantial voting block should it be enfranchised, and he “entertained not the slightest doubt that the signal for them to attend and give their votes would be the signal for their destruction.”

Citing the commonplace nature of riots and arson by 1838, Brown concluded, “Yes! In twenty-four hours from the time that an attempt should be made by the Blacks to vote, not a negro house in the city or county would be left standing.”<sup>384</sup> For Meredith, any migration of Black voters to the polls en masse, “would be attended with actual physical resistance.... Scenes of riot and bloodshed would most assuredly follow.”<sup>385</sup> Disfranchisement delegates believed the White majority favored disfranchisement, and that their views should be enforced, even by extra-legal measures. On January 20, 1838, Black Pennsylvanians officially lost the vote. Benjamin Martin’s amendment to insert the word “White” before “freemen” passed by a vote of 77-45, with all but three Democrats voting for it, along with 19 Whigs and Anti-Masons. African American voting rights would not be restored until 1870 with

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<sup>382</sup> Martin, *Proceedings*, V.2, 477.

<sup>383</sup> Brown, *Proceedings*, v.3, 697, 698.

<sup>384</sup> Brown, *Proceedings*, v.9, 393.

<sup>385</sup> Meredith, *Proceedings*, v.9, 350.

## ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. Census Reports and Surveys of Black Philadelphia

Abolitionist leaders, most of whom were Quakers, created the first comprehensive census of Black Philadelphia in 1837 to refute the spatial and material arguments for disfranchisement presented by delegates to the state constitutional convention. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) sent surveyors to every African American home in Philadelphia to document their existence in statistics and narrative descriptions. Through their census, the PAS attempted to use the material conditions of Black society in Philadelphia as evidence and argument for the suitability of African Americans to full inclusion in citizenship in American society. Like the surveys carried out by antebellum reformers, they document the ways in which African Americans were improving their lot, adopting social and spatial practices associated with middle class White society, and thus proving themselves part of the orderly existence so critical to the self-definition of Philadelphians.

In 1838, the PAS published a census of the Black community carried out the year before, the first ever in America, to rebut disenfranchisement efforts being made at the constitutional convention. The study surveyed the state of the “Colored People” by sending “agents to visit every colored family in the city and suburbs.” Its goals were as follows:

To “collect, as far as practicable, and preserve such statistical and other information as will show the present condition of the colored population of this city and districts,” in reference to “Population, value of Real and Personal Estate, amount of Taxes paid by them, state of Education, amount of Pauperism and Crime as compared with the

White population, &c.;" as well as "any other information which the Committee shall acquire and deem useful to the Society."<sup>386</sup>

The study construct aimed explicitly at a White audience and used White Philadelphia as a baseline against which it could measure Black "progress." If Black society were portrayed as more aligned with White society, then it would be recognized as civilized.

The survey was designed to make a heretofore somewhat invisible—and thus misunderstood--population visible to its supporters in the Pennsylvania Assembly who could protect Black voting rights and provide evidence of Black progress to rebut the arguments of their debased quality being used against them. The first half of the report (completed in 1837) was circulated among attendees of the Constitutional Convention. The report found 18,768 colored people living in Philadelphia County. The survey highlighted the Black economic contributions to the city – nearly \$1.5 million of real and personal property, over \$3,000 annually in taxes, and \$166,963.50 paid in estimated annual rents.

As for employment, investigators found that "almost all the branches of business pursued by the Whites, are, to a small extent, carried on" by Black workers. Despite this broad participation in the labor force, however, the report notes that "the colored people are almost altogether deprived of the opportunity of bringing up their children to mechanical employments, to

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<sup>386</sup> Pennsylvania Abolition Society. "The Present State and Condition of the Free People of Color, of the City of Philadelphia and Adjoining Districts, as Exhibited by the Report of a Committee of the Pennsylvania Society For Promoting the Abolition of Slavery." January 5, 1838. Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn. p.3.

commercial business, or other more lucrative occupations.”<sup>387</sup> The report attributes much of Black pauperism to this lack of opportunity.

The Quaker reformers offered wide labor-force participation, general sobriety, tax contributions, rental payments, and acquired wealth as evidence of the stability and orderliness of the Black community. Black men and women had the means and will to take a greater ownership stake in Philadelphia, but every path was blocked by prejudice. The spatial practice of republican civic duty – owning and improving one’s environment – was not an option for Black advancement.

Likewise, the social practices engaged in by Africans indicated that they adhered to the conventions of middle class behavior in public places. For example, in order to rebut stereotypes of disorderly Black behavior in Philadelphia, the reformers emphasized that despite suffering unequal hardships, it was still uncommon to see a drunk Black person on the streets, whereas “to see a drunken White, is an every day occurrence.”<sup>388</sup> African Americans had not succumbed to the temptation to use alcohol as a means of dealing with their suffering. Instead, their social practice was one of sobriety and upright behavior in public places.

Published in 1838, the full PAS report argued that the urban environment was responsible for whatever symptoms existed of a degenerated character within the Black Philadelphia population. The environment promoted spatial and social practices outside the boundaries of

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<sup>387</sup> Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), 1838, p.10, 12.

<sup>388</sup> PAS, 1838, 14.

civilized behavior. In an introduction to the second half of the 1838 report, the authors warn, “In estimating the moral condition of a mass of individuals, it will not be denied that the state of education amongst them, the character of their employments, and the condition from which they have sprung, should be taken into the account.” Considering all the prejudices aligned against them, the report excused the “vicious propensities” of some Black Philadelphians as the inevitable outcome of “the condition in which they have been placed,” rather than “any inherent defect in themselves.”<sup>389</sup>

Although not quite fully deterministic in their orientation, the Quakers were strong believers in the importance of a well-ordered environment to the production of useful citizens. “As ignorance is a prominent cause [of malfeasance and imprisonment], the *education and instruction* of the rising generation should be faithfully attended to.”<sup>390</sup> Black Philadelphians were as they were because no institutions shaped their development, according to the Quakers. Black leaders in Philadelphia such as James Forten, William Whipper, and Robert Purvis agreed.

Black claims to full citizenship remained unfulfilled over a decade after the first PAS census. In 1849, the Society of Friends in Philadelphia published their own “Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Colour,” alongside Edward Needles’ “Ten Years’ Progress: Or A Comparison of the State and Condition of the Colored People in the City and County of Philadelphia from 1837 to 1847.” Both sought to demonstrate that colored

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<sup>389</sup> PAS, 1838, p.21

<sup>390</sup> PAS, 1838, 19.

Philadelphians were vital contributors and not a drain on city resources. The study was designed to attain “an accurate account of the number and condition of the coloured population of the city and districts of Philadelphia.... and to make inquiry into the occupations, means of livelihood, estates, and general condition of the people of colour.” The report detailed poor Black life in Philadelphia through an examination of the occupations, property, family structure, rents and taxes paid, schooling and charity received, incarceration and religious practices. Like the other reports, this one addressed a White audience:

...in the conviction that it presents, so far as it goes, a faithful picture of the condition of our people of colour—a picture which should inspire them with hope and confidence in the future, and encourage their friends to persevere in their efforts to remove the distress and degradation which prevail among a portion of them.<sup>391</sup>

The census counted 20,240 people of color in Philadelphia but estimates that the population was closer to 23,000. In the previous decade, the rate of growth in the colored population had slowed. The census cites the mobs of 1842, “which drove away many of the people of colour,” as the primary cause, followed by the “great increase in poor emigrants from Europe, who have supplanted them in employments, which a few years ago were altogether in their hands.”<sup>392</sup> The census also counts “at least 1200 children between the

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<sup>391</sup> Society of Friends. 1849. “A Statistical Inquiry into the Condition of the People of Colour, Of the City and Districts of Philadelphia.” Philadelphia: Kite & Walton, 4.

<sup>392</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 7.



ages of 5 and 20, of whom no account is received, the greater part of whom are probably growing up in idle and vicious habits.”<sup>393</sup>

Abolition society member Needles 1849 report of “Ten Years’ Progress” echoed the findings of the Friends’ report.<sup>394</sup> Needles argued that the “enemies of emancipation” denounced the colored population as “nuisances in the community, fit only to fill almshouses and jails.” A decade’s worth of inquiries by reformers had firmly established that Black Philadelphians were not “a worthless part of the community, as had been represented,” but were important contributors to Philadelphia’s progress.

These statistical arguments based in the material conditions of Black life in Philadelphia offered readers a more nuanced portrait of Black society and served as a rejoinder to the stereotypical claims made as part of the disfranchisement debate. Through census reports such as these, it was hoped that African Americans would become visible to White society as an orderly and prospering community. Claiming knowledge of Black Philadelphia was an early step toward ordering it, especially the uniquely Black district of Moyamensing, which at the time was home to the majority of Philadelphia’s African American residents. As a spatial practice, census taking brought writers into the homes and haunts of the poorest and richest Black Philadelphians, making their social and spatial arrangements available in numeric and descriptive form. These records were then circulated throughout

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<sup>393</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 22.

<sup>394</sup> “Ten Years’ Progress: or a comparison of the state and condition of the colored people in the city and county of Philadelphia from 1837 to 1847. Prepared by Edward Needles.” (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Thompson, 1849).

the city and beyond. By claiming knowledge of Black Philadelphia and systematically summarizing their findings, these writers argued for an implicit orderliness in these people and places.

Arguing for their aggregate material contributions to the republic, the censuses served as a rebuttal to disfranchisement and an argument for incorporation of Black Philadelphians into the body politic.<sup>395</sup> The numbers provided a more nuanced picture of Black life, demonstrating, for example, that, like Whites, African Americans occupied a wide range of social positions and generally were the products of their environment, upbringing, and opportunities. That so many remained mired in poverty presented an obstacle to be sure, but a surmountable one if public opinion could be swayed in support of institutions and practices designed to lift the destitute. To that end, writers were quick to humanize their statistical reports with thick description.

Reformers' tactic of contrasting the environmental conditions in the slums with statistical descriptions of the wealth of Black Philadelphians such as James Forten presented a contradictory picture. Mere numbers lacked the emotional resonance and shock value of thick descriptions of ghetto conditions like those in Astor House. By contrast, the wealth and success of African Americans like Forten were often hidden away in domestic privacy since claiming too much public space and visibility could be dangerous for

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<sup>395</sup> While the PAS and Friends report focused on broad depictions of the Black community, other studies took more focused perspectives to intervene in particular debates. By 1856, Benjamin Bacon was conducting his own survey of Black Philadelphia, a "personal canvas" of education and schools to demonstrate Black intelligence and capacity for schooling. Benjamin Bacon. (1856). "Statistics of the Colored People of Philadelphia." Philadelphia: T. Ellwood Chapman.

wealthy African Americans. To be sure, poverty was more and more on display as the poorest African Americans had few means of hiding themselves and their miserable conditions. Trumpeting news about their distressed living conditions by newspapers, surveys, and reports only offered fresh evidence for White supremacist views about the degraded nature of Black peoples.

### **African American Elite's Response**

Philadelphia had been a comparatively accommodating place to free Black people during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Pennsylvania Society for promoting the Abolition of Slavery was founded in 1775 as the first antislavery society in the United States. In 1780 Pennsylvania led all other states in declaring the gradual emancipation of its slaves. The national abolition movement was strongly rooted in Philadelphia. Of the twenty-four antislavery conventions held in the U.S. between 1794 and 1828, twenty were held in Philadelphia.<sup>396</sup> As the major northern city closest to the South, Philadelphia was a home to Blacks fleeing the South, whether they were emancipated or not. Many like Joseph Forten, Robert Purvis, and William Still achieved prominence and wealth in Philadelphia.

The Black elite of 19th century Philadelphia well understood the consequences of operating as freemen in public. The city and its proximity to the South threatened Black residents with the prospect of being kidnapped and sold into slavery, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in

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<sup>396</sup> Geffen, 1969.

1820.<sup>397</sup> The American Colonization Society actively sought their removal from Philadelphia. New immigrants resented the prominence and wealth of men like James Forten and would not tolerate competition with African Americans for jobs.

Black leaders fixated on the importance of scripted codes of public appearance for African American men and women. The Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in the United States took up the issue in their Philadelphia meetings in 1830, 1831, 1833 and 1835. The convention minutes record debates over “condition” and “complexion,” which Samuel Otter argues shaped how the Black intelligentsia organized itself against repression.<sup>398</sup> These debates focused on two ideas of the origins of prejudice. “Condition” referred to the material living conditions of Black Philadelphians. For the vast majority, these were dilapidated, cramped and unsanitary. Many Black leaders regarded “complexion” or skin pigmentation as the root source of prejudice that explained problems with both inter-racial personal relations and Black living conditions. White Philadelphians read condition and complexion together, both the material environment and the appearance of its inhabitants, as markers of character.

A growing Black elite argued for and led a campaign of public visibility intended to demonstrate the moral and civic rectitude of Black Philadelphia.<sup>399</sup>

In the early Conventions for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in

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<sup>397</sup> Scharf & Westcott, 1884, p.617.

<sup>398</sup> Otter, S. (2010). *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom*. Oxford University Press, USA.

<sup>399</sup> E. Lapsansky. “Since They Got Those Separate Churches.” (1980).

the United States, some Black Philadelphians led by William Whipper, founder of American Moral Reform Society, advocated an enlightened cosmopolitanism so that Blacks might prove their moral superiority and be fully incorporated into society.<sup>400</sup> Others, such as Samuel Cornish, argued in favor of Black-only institutions and organizations that would independently demonstrate the fitness of Black Philadelphians as citizens content to live and operate in their own segregated spaces. As Cornish noted about being Black in Philadelphia, “the position we hold in community is a prominent one--all eyes are upon us.”<sup>401</sup> Both Whipper and Cornish agreed that public appearance must be used as a political tactic in any strategy to shape popular opinion on race and class.

In the 1830s, African American leaders argued that public space practices were critical to gaining the respect of Whites. By adopting sober and judicious public behaviors that appealed to White sensibilities, Black Philadelphians could avoid confrontation and craft an image of upstanding African American men and women. Forten and Whipper argued the most effective way of “refuting and rendering harmless, false and exaggerated accounts of our degraded condition, is by our conduct; by living consistent, orderly and moral lives.”<sup>402</sup>

These leaders understood that behavior in public space was highly performative and involved both actors and audiences. Black men and women

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<sup>400</sup> Otter, 2010. P.110.

<sup>401</sup> Cornish in Otter, 2010, p.113

<sup>402</sup> Forten, James. Whipper, William. (1832). “The memorial of the people of color of the city of Philadelphia.” In Aptheker, 1951, p.132.

could turn this reality to their advantage by performing in ways that accorded with White standards of behavior in front of White observers. The traditions of exultant, boisterous religious worship that so often aggravated White worshipers should be checked in favor of more sober prayer methods. Flamboyant clothing should be swapped for modest attire. Late night parties must cease, and intemperance ought to be flushed from the Black community. These strategies gained prominent support in the Negro Conventions of the 1830s, mostly held in Philadelphia, when African American leaders debated various methods of shifting public opinion in their favor.

Black leaders envisioned public space as a forum where the virtues and vices cultivated in private were displayed for all to see. Education pursued in private would reshape Black Philadelphians' self-presentation in public space, leaders argued.<sup>403</sup> Delegates to the First Annual Negro Convention in 1831 agreed that the condition of Negroes in the United States was the result of a lack of opportunity, particularly in education. "Degradation of the mind and character" was due to the distance White society kept Negroes from the "sources of knowledge which abound in civilized and enlightened communities."<sup>404</sup> A committee to establish a manual labor school for Negroes posited a choice between enlightenment and barbarity, education and vulgarity, to drive home the importance of vocational training in industrial, mechanical and agricultural fields as well as in classical studies.

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<sup>403</sup> Allen, Richard. (1830). "Address To the Free People of Colour of these United States." From *The Pioneer National Negro Convention*. In Aptheker, 1951, p. 106.

<sup>404</sup> Burton, Belfast, Morel, Junius, and Whipper, William. (1831). "Address." In Aptheker, 1951, p.116-17, 119.

A consensus emerged early in the convention era that public space was a forum for the display of character; therefore, the presence of African Americans in public was a political issue. The Second Annual Negro Convention of 1832 echoed Forten and Whipper's call to promote sobriety of character to repel prejudice. An anonymous author associated with the conference wrote that the Black community must hasten efforts toward moral and intellectual improvement, so that more African Americans will "present to the world a general character, that they will feel bound to respect and admire."<sup>405</sup> To do so, African Americans must build more high schools and colleges to teach the manual labor system, "where our youth may be instructed in all the arts of civilized life." Above all else, they must avoid "that bewitching evil... that fell destroyer of the best prospects and last hope of civilized man – Intemperance."<sup>406</sup> Civilized men were the product of churches, schools and philanthropic associations, the necessary institutions to elevate African Americans in Philadelphia and the United States.

Black Pennsylvanians lost voting rights due to a number of factors, but above all else disfranchisement passed in order to insure that Pennsylvania would remain a White republic controlled by its White citizens. Generally speaking, Whites favored disfranchisement because it institutionalized inequality between the races. Economic competition with the Irish, who worked many of the same low-skilled jobs as Blacks, also influenced

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<sup>405</sup> Unsigned. (1832). "To the Free Colored Inhabitants of These United States." In Aptheker, 1951, p.135.

<sup>406</sup> Unsigned. (1832). "To the Free Colored Inhabitants of These United States." In Aptheker, 1951, p.135-6.

delegates and public opinion. Politicians did not want to spurn an Irish population whose political influence was growing daily, and who could claim to be White. As the southern-most northern city, many southern sympathizers resided in Pennsylvania. But southern sympathy is too abstract a concept to justify the intensity of Pennsylvania's disfranchisement process, especially in a city founded by the Society of Friends with its tradition of benevolence toward African Americans. A will to preserve the White republic in identity, space, and practice best explains disfranchisement in Pennsylvania.

Spatial practices in the antebellum city supported the ideological commitment to White supremacy and enforcement of separation of the races. As Philadelphia became more crowded and chaotic toward mid-century, the debate over what to do with Black Philadelphians grew louder. Abolitionists became more public and militant, agitating for Black empowerment and equal rights. Colonizationists argued that the only workable solution was to deport African Americans back to Africa. White supremacists regarded Black Pennsylvanians as little more than chattel, as they were categorized in the South. Law-and-order men and women seemed satisfied with a slow, incremental path towards change, fearing most an abrupt upheaval in social relations.

Black leaders themselves viewed the constitutional convention of 1837-38 in Pennsylvania as a major step toward colonization. On March 14, 1838, Robert Purvis, James Forten, Sr. and Jr., and a half dozen other Black men met in the Presbyterian Church, on Seventh Street below Shippen in the heart of Cedar and Moyamensing, to discuss a response to their recent



disfranchisement. The “Reform Convention,” as it was then known, had “stripped us of a right peaceably enjoyed during forty-seven years under the Constitution of this commonwealth,” and had turned the Pennsylvania government into “a mere despotism” for Black families.<sup>407</sup>

For Purvis and the committee of Black leaders, most of whom lived in or near the Cedar neighborhood, disfranchisement was part of the larger Black-removal strategy. Referring to colonizationists, Purvis wrote, “our expatriation has come to be a darling project with many of our fellow citizens.... We are CITIZENS. This, we believe, would never have been denied, had it not been for the scheme of expatriation to which we have already referred.”<sup>408</sup> African Americans were first and foremost Pennsylvanians, the *Appeal* argued, bound to their homes “with chains of gratitude” to Penn, Franklin, and other luminaries of the colony. “Our abhorrence of a scheme which comes to us in the guise of Christian benevolence, and asks us to suffer ourselves to be transplanted to a distant and barbarous land, *because we are a “nuisance” in this*, is not more deep and thorough than it is reasonable.”<sup>409</sup> In the mind of Purvis and other Black leaders, disfranchisement was a first step in ridding a White republic of free African Americans in the North.

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<sup>407</sup> Robert Purvis. (1838). *Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens, Threatened With Disfranchisement, to the People of Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn. 9.

<sup>408</sup> Purvis, 1838, 4-5.

<sup>409</sup> Purvis, 1838, 4.

Purvis and his coauthors believed that racial purification of the state was the ultimate goal of the constitutional convention's adoption of disfranchisement. Purvis viewed White society as obsessed with questions of racial purity and fearful that citizenship was a first step toward interracial sex and amalgamation. *The Appeal* mocked these fears, assuring, "the territories of the commonwealth are sufficiently ample to afford us a home without doing violence to the delicate nerves of our White brethren, for centuries to come."<sup>410</sup> Purvis continued, "Give us that fair and honorable ground which self-respect requires to stand on, and the dreaded amalgamation, if it take place at all, shall be by your own fault, as indeed it always has been." Purvis hints at the forbidden sexual relations, traditionally acted upon by White men abusing their power, always just below the surface of nineteenth century conversation.

Purvis, African American leaders, and abolitionists fought back against the racialized redefinition of the state by citing the *Pennsylvania Abolition Society's* census of 1837-38 to argue that African American people have materially improved Philadelphia, its tax rolls, institutions, and defense.<sup>411</sup> The *Appeal* documented "facts and testimonies which go to show that, considering the circumstances in which we have been placed, our country has no reason to be ashamed of us." It outlines the wealth contributed to Philadelphia through taxes and rent, and argues these contributions have never been

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<sup>410</sup> Purvis, 1838, p.15.

<sup>411</sup> Pennsylvania Abolition Society. "The Present State and Condition of the Free People of Color, of the City of Philadelphia and Adjoining Districts, as Exhibited by the Report of a Committee of the Pennsylvania Society For Promoting the Abolition of Slavery." January 5, 1838. Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn.

countered by demands put on the city by paupers, vagrants, or criminals. It highlights the religious and educational institutions built by Black Philadelphians as a demonstration of their commitment to intellectual and spiritual improvement. Finally, it claims an ancestral lineage within the state: “Our fathers shared with yours the trials and perils of the wilderness.... Our fathers fought by the side of yours in the struggle which made us an independent republic.”<sup>412</sup> The *Appeal* includes testimonial statements that document African American heroism in the American Revolution, War of 1812, and Philadelphia’s yellow fever epidemic of 1793. Purvis closes this section with a reminder that leaders only ask for the right of suffrage for “*industrious, peaceable, and useful*” [italics original] African American men. “We are in too feeble a minority to cherish a mischievous ambition. Fair protection is all that we aspire to.”<sup>413</sup>

### **Public Disorderly Practices and the Affront to Philadelphia’s Sense of Self**

Whatever positive effect the philanthropic reports may have had in demonstrating some measure of Black uplift, their message was drowned out by news stories in the 1830s and 1840s chronicling life in Moyamensing’s slums. Census reports and surveys, when read together with the constant stream of daily news, police and coroner reports, contributed to a kind of race knowledge for navigating Philadelphia. In short and long form, official and unofficial reports, in cold statistics or purple prose, the degraded condition of

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<sup>412</sup> Purvis, 1838, 11.

<sup>413</sup> Purvis, 1838, 10, 14.

Black Moyamensing was made visible to a White, literate Philadelphia. Tales of sordid crimes frequently appeared in police reports; news of shocking deaths were captured in coroner's inquests; and intrepid journalists filled columns with trips into the city's most "wretched" places. Despite reformers' attempts to paint a more variegated picture, the collective effect of this avalanche of news about Philadelphia's Black community was negative.

The concentration of Black poverty was seen as self-reinforcing. No public and few private resources were invested in improvement of this district and its inhabitants. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society advocated that it would be best to disperse the population of Moyamensing since the concentrated poverty found there could only exacerbate negative patterns. Only by integrating the poor into neighborhoods where better patterns of living and working existed could the poor hope to improve their lot:

We all know the powerful influence of association, whether for good or for evil. Does it not tend to strengthen the influence of bad example, especially upon the young—embolden vice, and continue prejudices against them which might be removed, by scattering themselves more among the neighborhoods of the Whites, from whom they would gradually derive important hints on the science of living; and even place themselves in the way of being employed by them, in various modes which do not at present occur? We are aware that many difficulties may at first present themselves; but may they not be gradually removed?<sup>414</sup>

Opportunity and uplift had geographic associations, according to the 1838 PAS report. Both were found in White neighborhoods and were dependent on affiliation with White institutions. Although the 1838 report posited a redemptive quality to White environments, the 1849 report was more

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<sup>414</sup> PAS, 1838, 20.

circumspect. It advised Black Philadelphians “to avoid congregating in large numbers in the narrow and crowded streets of a great city.”<sup>415</sup> The report highlights a logic that held that the presence of large numbers of Black Philadelphians in the prominent streets of the city was too strong a claim to its public space, and would not be suffered peacefully.

By contrast with the comparatively sympathetic portrayals of Black life made by the reformers, Philadelphia’s news dailies promulgated a viewpoint that the illicit practices of Black life in and around the city represented the truest portrait of the community. News reports constructed Moyamensing as a place out of order and advocated that the district be brought to heel. As the city of Philadelphia developed and expanded, the slums threatened the creation story of their city and burgeoning sense of self-identity they claimed as Philadelphians.

The newspapers harped upon a variety of social practices that they found particularly offensive in Black communal life even though these practices could be found among virtually all social and ethnic groups within and beyond the city.

### **Drunkenness**

Few problems vexed Moyamensing residents as did alcohol abuse. Hundreds of grog shops and pubs throughout Moyamensing, men and women drunk in the streets, and inebriated bodies passed out in public places made the use of alcohol an especially visible practice. This visibility was enhanced

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<sup>415</sup> Society of Friends, 1849, 40-41.

by police reports that regularly featured drunken behavior in public and private spaces. Drinking was a preindustrial pastime of the commercial classes and Philadelphia artisans that owed a great deal to the unreliability of a clean water supply as well as the inherent attractions of alcoholic beverages. Alcohol was ubiquitous, used for recreational and medicinal purposes. Artisans drank in their workshops, in their homes, and on street corners. Men arrived at work with a flask and drank throughout the day, periodically sending their apprentices out to the local pub for refills. Work that required only moderate skill, and not the operation of machinery, was frequently performed under alcohol's influence.

Working class male culture centered around the pub. This was seen most prominently in Moyamensing and Kensington, both districts with high concentrations of Irish immigrants. Pubs were social as well as political centers, where workmen dallied at the end of the day before heading home. Camaraderie and group identity were formed within the regular drinking culture. Pubs provided settings for negotiating informal networks of men who exerted control within their neighborhoods. Fire companies, for example, aligned themselves with the gangs of young men who dominated street corners, employing their love of violence to interfering with rival fire companies, blocking their paths to fires, destroying equipment, and physically attacking members. Working men also engaged in competitive sports and these activities, too, focused on the pub and the consumption of alcohol there.

The Philadelphia elite deplored working-class drinking culture. In response, they founded temperance societies, benevolent institutions

demanding sobriety, and schools to educate poor and working class children. Many of the moral lessons promulgated in these schools involved alcohol. Temperance movements grew rapidly during the 1820s and 1830s, often led by Presbyterians, Methodists, and others distrustful of the largely Catholic working classes.

Philadelphia temperance movements had for decades recognized alcoholism as a problem with a prominent spatial dimension. Drunkards stumbling through the streets, gangs drinking on street corners, grog shops that stayed loud and rowdy late into the night, all meant that alcoholism was not only a personal problem but a communal one. Drunkenness affected not only individuals and their families but also public space in the city. As such the problem required a spatial response. The early temperance parades of the 1820s and 1830s sought to publicize what had, up to that point, been a marginal movement of mostly Presbyterian abstainers. In the 1830s and 40s the movement spread, as did members' attempts to take back public space. Skilled craftsmen who believed a virtuous life was one dedicated to hard work formed temperance-beneficial societies. They gained acceptance with many working classes individuals through an intensive program of outreach, social pressure, and the appearance of vigilance.<sup>416</sup>

Temperance-beneficial societies also occupied public space in ways not previously seen before. Members marched in parades, as did older societies, but they also congregated almost nightly in public streets and squares to

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<sup>416</sup> Laurie, B. (1974). "Nothing on compulsion": Life styles of Philadelphia artisans, 1820–1850. *Labor History*, 15(3), 337-366.

proselytize and win converts. The societies flourished among skilled craftsmen, many of whom were Presbyterians. They openly clashed with working class and poor Catholics, mostly Irish, who viewed the movement as an insult and threat to their culture. The domination of public space by temperance societies was met with resistance among Irish laborers, fire company members, and gangs, all of whom viewed temperance as an assault on their independence and manhood. The clashes between Protestant temperance societies and Catholic drinkers partly led to the hugely destructive Nativist versus Catholic riots of 1844 in Philadelphia.<sup>417</sup>

Black temperance groups signed on to the notion that persons under the influence of alcohol were out of order in public spaces. Provoking public wrath as a result of drunkenness, it was understood, had both individual and communal consequences when the drunken body lying on a street belonged to a Black person. These groups often aligned with other Black reformers and abolitionists. Delegates to the early National Negro Conventions in Philadelphia argued that, above all else, Negroes must avoid “that bewitching evil... that fell destroyer of the best prospects and last hope of civilized man – Intemperance.”<sup>418</sup>

The Black temperance movement of the 1830s was founded upon the principle that moral suasion and regulatory actions in support of temperance as well as public display of sober, industrious Black bodies would eventually

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<sup>417</sup> Laurie, 1974.

<sup>418</sup> Unsigned. (1832). “To the Free Colored Inhabitants of These United States.” In Aptheker, 1951, 135-6.



dismantle prejudice and inequality. Whipper, a strong temperance advocate, joined Forten and others to declare intemperance a threat as dangerous to African Americans as slavery.<sup>419</sup> They believed the problem of alcohol was in some ways more insidious than slavery and would ultimately perpetuate both real and figurative bondage.

Black leaders soon discarded the faith that their temperance efforts might dissuade White Americans from their racial prejudice. Nevertheless, by the late 1830s and 40s, temperance became an end in itself, necessary if not sufficient for survival in such a hostile country. Moreover, Black leaders came to understand that they needed to control their own efforts at moral reform, temperance, and abolition so as not to perpetuate the sense that only Whites could speak for them. Black men and women would themselves determine the most virtuous path through life in America. Temperance became an important tool for establishing personal independence and empowerment within the Black community.

Black leaders advocated sober and industrious ways of being-in-public. They chastised Black Philadelphians who found little or no work and indulged in alcohol. However, disagreements existed among Black leaders about how best to promote temperance. Samuel Cornish, Brooklyn-based publisher of the abolitionist newspaper *Freedom's Journal*<sup>420</sup> viewed Black Philadelphians such as Forten and his son-in-law Robert Purvis as out of touch with the

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<sup>419</sup> Yacovone, D. (1988). The Transformation of the Black Temperance Movement, 1827-1854: An Interpretation. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 8(3), 281-297.

<sup>420</sup> Yacovone, 1988.

realities of Black working class life. While the elites chided poor Blacks, utilizing their bully pulpits to emulate their own form of bootstrapping accomplishments, these exhortations did little to address, much less improve, the impoverished environmental context and lack of economic opportunity in antebellum Philadelphia. To the most distressed Black residents of Philadelphia, elite leaders and their conventions remained distant and irrelevant, their connections existing only in the form of exhortation and blame with a one-way direction. Otherwise poor Blacks were ignored, only slightly less by wealthier Blacks than by Whites.

The relative futility of temperance advocates' efforts could be seen in the rising number of alcohol-oriented establishments in Black Philadelphia communities during the ante-bellum era. Between 1811 and 1839, taverns quadrupled their numbers in the Cedar neighborhood until one tavern existed to serve every twenty-five households.<sup>421</sup> The rising tide of alcoholism was scarcely an unanticipated result, and was seen as symptomatic of an enfeebled and suffering population:

The truly melancholy picture is found in the statement that the District of Moyamensing, with a population of 14,000 persons, has 10 licensed taverns, 212 grogeries, 1,775 human beings that cannot read or write, over 45 years of age, and during the past year there has been sold in small quantities over 10,000 barrels of liquor! Over 100 sober men have been made drunkards, over 260 families ruined, over 900 children left destitute, 100 Coroner's Inquests, and over 4000 persons sent to prison by the Committing Magistrates for various offences! This beats New York "all to pieces."<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> Lapsansky, 1975, 150.

<sup>422</sup> *The Boston Daily Atlas*, 2/20/1846; *The Boston Daily Atlas*, 11/08/44.

This 1846 news report actually noted a decrease from 1843, when 420 unlicensed grog shops were counted in Moyamensing. Whatever the official number, the report represented Moyamensing as a home to people who contributed little or nothing to the wealth and fame of Philadelphia. Moreover, through their problems related to alcohol, they served as a drag on the overall prospects of the city.

Alcohol abuse by the 1830s and '40s marked a prominent dividing line between a virtuous and wicked life. The *Public Ledger* reported:

Ann Miller and Mary Douglass, two colored women, were taken up for violating the sanctity of the Sabbath, by fighting in one of those small rum shops which abound in the district, and which create so intolerable a nuisance to the community in general. The former had her clothes literally torn off her body in the affray.<sup>423</sup>

Drunken, naked street fights were pictures not typically associated with civilized life. News reports in *The North American* offered a glimpse inside what was purported to be emblematic of Black city life:

A negro woman named Elizabeth Johnson, was stabbed last evening in Small street, Moyamensing, in a shocking manner, by another negro woman named Lydia Ann Jones.... Rum the cause.<sup>424</sup>

Small Street was notorious for its violence and decrepit living conditions. A coroner's inquest in 1844 found in Small Street:

the body of a woman 50 years of age, named Jane Ross. The deceased was found dead upon the floor of her room, lying between a

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<sup>423</sup> *Public Ledger*, 12/22/1840

<sup>424</sup> *North American*, 7/28/1846

stove and the wall, with her face pressed against the latter. She is supposed to have fallen down and expired in a fit.<sup>425</sup>

Police and coroners' reports were valuable to the news-reading public for the type of information they circulated: the place of the incident, the race or ethnicity of those involved, the action, and possible causes, such as alcohol. These were the cluster of components used to define places and people.

Deadly living conditions contributed to and were a result of a high level of alcoholism, a fact of life that newspapers rarely failed to broadcast. Stories of intoxicated Moyamensing residents delivered a clear impression of a district filled with drunkards who regularly debased the public spaces of the district with their raucous and often violent behavior. Brief clues arrived unelaborated. The *Public Ledger* reported in December 1840 that "A person calling herself a "decent girl".... Had been found by [the watchman] laying in the street in a most beastly state of intoxication."<sup>426</sup> The contrast between decency, which is mocked by the quotation marks, and the woman's beastly state defines her—and by extension her community.

Women were generally perceived by nineteenth century society members as exemplars of the moral virtue of their communities. Women who imbibed were taken as indicators of debauchery within the district. *The Ledger* reported in 1837 that "Ann Bishop, a colored woman, was brought up, charged with sipping too much of what a Frenchman calls, "water of life," a German, "Burnt Wine," and an American "Brandy," which caused her to be

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<sup>425</sup> *North American*, 11/18/1844

<sup>426</sup> *Public Ledger*, 12/23/1840

very unruly last night.”<sup>427</sup> Black and White women alike were targets of derision when they were perceived as drunkards. Even foreign nationals followed their vices to Moyamensing: “Mary Mesmer, a buxom wench, left Germany to be committed to Moyamensing prison for getting drunk and disturbing the quiet of Quaker-delphia,” the *Ledger* reported in 1837.<sup>428</sup> Unruliness, immorality, and open sexuality set these women outside the boundaries of polite Philadelphia society.

Interracial sex was often alluded to but rarely acknowledged. In 1837, the *Public Ledger* reported that Moyamensing was a place where men and women fulfilled illicit desires of interracial relations. “Hannah Jackson, a colored wench, was brought into the office this morning, charged with having abstracted a five dollar bill from the pocket of a white man, named Jesse Nichols, during a frolic between the parties.”<sup>429</sup> Also in 1837, “Arthur Erwin and Sarah Burns, a white gentleman and a colored lady, were also pushed up to the Alderman’s desk, charged with intoxication, and a breach of the peace.”<sup>430</sup> And the last from 1837, read: “Mary Williams, a colored, and Ann Foster, and John L. Master, two white persons,” were taken before the Alderman on account of a fight they had in Small street, “in a cellar among a mixture of Whites and Blacks, or what a Frenchman would most properly call “Potpourrie.”<sup>431</sup> Months later, in 1838, “Rachael Williams and Rachael

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<sup>427</sup> *Public Ledger*, 11/20/1837

<sup>428</sup> *Public Ledger*, 11/04/1837

<sup>429</sup> *Public Ledger*, 11/14/1837

<sup>430</sup> *Public Ledger*, 10/16/1837

<sup>431</sup> *Public Ledger*, 11/07/1837

Valentine, two colored women, and James Sharp, a white man, were arrested for disturbing the public peace at unlawful and unusual hours.”<sup>432</sup> Drunken frolics at unusual hours signaled that normal social boundaries were routinely transgressed.

While most illicit desires were barely concealed behind ramshackle wooden facades or in subterranean basements, some passions exploded out into the open. Alcohol was a gateway to a life of crime, dishonesty, and interracial sex. Under the influence of alcohol, Philadelphians disregarded social boundaries, minimized stigmatized behaviors, and threatened to overturn the rules and conventions of the city’s social order.

## **Violence**

Unlike the violence discussed in the previous chapter, the stories of beatings, stabbings, riots, and arson in news reports relayed information about violence by African Americans acted upon African Americans. These stories appeared weekly in the papers, and formed the basis upon which Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention delegates who favored disfranchisement could argue that left to themselves, African Americans destroyed themselves and the places they inhabited. Disfranchisement proponents argued that such accounts of Black disorder and violence proved African Americans were incapable of civil living.

Violent and disruptive behavior was a further sign of the disorderly conditions found in Moyamensing. In 1839, Ann Delany, was brought before

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<sup>432</sup> *Public Ledger*, 3/31/1838

the magistrate on charges of “keeping a disorderly house in Seventh Street, below Shippen,” while “two colored persons, a male and a female, were committed to prison for 3 months for fighting and creating a disturbance in the street.”<sup>433</sup> Small Street, along with Shippen, was one of the sites most frequently disturbed by violence.<sup>434</sup> News reports offered brief lessons in cultural geography for urban residents, with some descriptions providing more detail:

Quite a riot occurred yesterday forenoon, in Shippen street, Moyamensing among the Blacks, originating in a report that a negro man had inveigled his wife and child into prison with the intention of selling them into slavery. This man, whose name is Nelson Barrington, was attacked in the street by a large party of Blacks, most of whom were women, and chased and pelted with stones.... Barrington was innocent. His wife having been committed to prison for theft, took her child with her.<sup>435</sup>

Police accounts portrayed Black residents through a lens of constant suspicion of criminal activity, regardless of guilt, by introducing the notion that Barrington was suspected of selling off his children.

The *Public Ledger* reported in 1840:

A man and a woman were brought up for having fought in the street. The man had struck the woman a hearty blow with his clenched fist, and she in return picked up a billet of wood and struck him with it over the face, cutting his eye badly and bruising him in this vicinity. At the office she declared, with great gravity, that she “loved him to distraction.” The man said she was insane. As they were both sober and appeared to be on very good terms, they were discharged.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> *Public Ledger*, 9/28/1839

<sup>434</sup> *Public Ledger*, 10/28/1837

<sup>435</sup> *North American*, 4/25/1846

<sup>436</sup> *Public Ledger*, 12/22/1840

Details such as the declaration of love, the charge of insanity, and the ironic twist that the two were on “very good terms” evidence a melodramatic storytelling style meant to entertain and inform, titillate and satisfy the White public’s desire for a sense of moral superiority. The *Public Ledger* reported that a riotous group:

...consisted of a number of colored people, of alleged bad character, who are in the habit of assembling in what are termed “practicing parties” at the house of a notorious fellow, known by the name of Rube Moore, in Shippen street.... What is “practiced” there we are not aware of, but it is probable from every outward demonstration that it is viciousness of a nature calculated to counteract much of the efforts that are making to improve the social condition of this caste of people.<sup>437</sup>

The *North American* reported an 1845 coroner’s inquest “upon the body of Peter Fontaine, colored, who was found on the steps of the door of a house in Smith’s Court, Moyamensing, expiring from loss of blood. The deceased had been stabbed by some unknown hand about half-past nine o’clock that night, at the corner of Seventh and Shippen streets, and walking down Seventh street to the Court, had staggered, and fallen on the steps near its entrance.”<sup>438</sup> The same report continued to describe the coroner’s inquest “upon the body of a man named Robert Suter, who was found dead at 4 o’clock at the south west corner of Rose and Shippen, Moyamensing. There were marks of violence on the body indicating foul play.” Both dead men were

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<sup>437</sup> *Public Ledger*, 12/19/1840

<sup>438</sup> *North American*, 11/03/1845



found around Shippen, a section of the district made notorious for violence and debauchery by news reports.<sup>439</sup>

Death was typically a violent public affair in Moyamensing. In the summer of 1846 the *Newport Mercury* reported that a:

young colored woman named Amelia Edwards committed suicide in Moyamensing on Tuesday night, by swallowing an ounce and a half of laudanum. –She was a female of bad character, and took the drug in the street in the presence of a number of abandoned colored females, among whom she continued to dance round in a reckless manner, until she fell down under the potency of the poison.<sup>440</sup>

Edwards is represented here as a demon spirit dancing among the living, and her story is presented as a lesson in character along with providing a prurient glimpse into debauched Black life for White readers.

Offering a similar morality tale, in summer 1841 the *North American* noted a coroner's inquest "in Nugent's Court, Moyamensing, on the body of a colored woman 22 years of age, named Mary Ann Black," who was poisoned by indigo water obtained as medication.<sup>441</sup> Baker Street provided another notoriously squalid place for episodes of African American moral failures. The *North American* reported in August 1841 that the body of Kitty Tapsaco, a 35-year-old colored woman, "a cripple, [who] walked upon her knees", was found there, dead in her bed from "intemperance."<sup>442</sup> In December 1841, the *Public Ledger* announced yet another coroner's inquest, also in Baker Street, "on the

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<sup>439</sup> *North American*, 11/03/1845

<sup>440</sup> *Newport Mercury*, 8/22/1846

<sup>441</sup> *North American*, 6/01/1841

<sup>442</sup> *North American*, 8/26/1841

body of Leah Denny, colored, 45 years of age, whose death was ascertained to have been from dropsy,<sup>443</sup> known today as edema and often caused by malnutrition.

A few years later, the body of another colored woman was found on Baker Street: “The deceased, who lived in the most squalid poverty, was seized with fits on Sunday night, and died yesterday morning.”<sup>444</sup> The association of these deaths with place and space was not accidental. Anyone who read these reports would surmise that the kinds of deaths described in the paper were representative of more than just the bad luck of the victim but of the general moral debasement of Black society as manifest in the disordered conditions of this neighborhood.

Coroner and police reports portrayed Moyamensing as particularly inhospitable to babies and children, and thus thoroughly unfit for sustaining and nurturing human life. In 1837, “the body of an unknown newly born male child was found on Saturday morning in Moyamensing, in the neighborhood of Twelfth and Christian streets, which bore the appearance of being a sound and healthy infant at the time of its death.” The child was left “exposed entirely naked.”<sup>445</sup>

Anonymity offered no comfort to the dead who could not be mourned. Even healthy children were unwanted and forsaken. On Bedford Street in 1843, the coroner examined “the body of Mary Jane Dempsey, a colored

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<sup>443</sup> *Public Ledger*, 12/29/1841

<sup>444</sup> *North American*, 5/14/1844

<sup>445</sup> *Public Ledger*, 8/07/1837

child two years old, who was burned to death, during the absence of the mother. The child was left in charge of an aunt and fell into the fire.”<sup>446</sup> In 1845, the coroner examined “the body of a new born female infant, found on a lot back of the Methodist Church, between Pine and Lombard and Juniper and Broad streets. The child had been strangled by a cord that was around its neck.”<sup>447</sup> Near the corner of Schuylkill Seventh and Christian Street in 1846, the coroner examined “the body of a colored infant a few hours old, that had been strangled with a cord, and thrown upon a lot.”<sup>448</sup> These gruesome accounts shocked the reader with their callousness and hopelessness. Moyamensing was represented as hell on earth, a god-forsaken place, where the most depraved individuals congregated and took out their own aggressions on infants and children with impunity.

Newspapers made it clear that police and constables exerted little or no control over the district. In 1850 the *Daily Atlas* reported: “Patrick Slaven, Moyamensing Police Officer, who was shot on Monday last, died this afternoon.”<sup>449</sup> Stories depicted bold and shameless residents assaulting police officers. In 1837, “John Burns, Alice McGee, Elizabeth Dunbar, Margaret McGlenn and Joshua McGee were all brought before the Alderman, charged

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<sup>446</sup> *North American*, 11/23/1843

<sup>447</sup> *North American*, 4/24/1845

<sup>448</sup> *North American*, 7/14/1846

<sup>449</sup> *Daily Atlas*, 11/04/1850

with having committed a most outrageous assault and battery on... John McGlaughlin, a constable of Moyamensing.”<sup>450</sup> In 1838:

Lucy McDonald, Ann Robinson and Sarah Ann Moore were committed, this morning for giving Mr. David McLane, a police officer, a most unmerciful thumping. It appeared that Mr. McLane went to their house on last Sunday evening, about 10 o'clock, to exhort them to keep quiet and not make such a noise, when he was assailed and beaten until the arrival of some watchmen, who put a speedy termination to the fun by taking these Amazons to the watchhouse.<sup>451</sup>

The playful phrasing, “a most unmerciful thumping” offers a glimpse at how common violence had become. It was not a cause for outrage but mockery in the papers. Violence was “fun” and the assailants were “Amazons,” exotic and uncivilized. But violence was not always amusing.<sup>452</sup>

Newspapers identified the district with its most prominent institution, Moyamensing prison. In 1838 a brawl erupted between two women and a man in the “excitable” district. “Unfortunately, during the height of this “excitement,” [police] came up and spoiled the fun, by taking the whole batch off. This morning, all hands were sent to the place “appointed for the wicked”—Moyamensing.”<sup>453</sup> Not only was the prison analogized to the district, but its populations were also equated. The prison was widely viewed as a kind of habitus for violence and criminality, further compounding the district’s problems. A Grand Inquest for the County of Philadelphia objected to how

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<sup>450</sup> *Public Ledger*, 10/28/1837

<sup>451</sup> *Public Ledger*, 3/13/1838

<sup>452</sup> *Public Ledger*, 3/12/1844

<sup>453</sup> *Public Ledger*, 6/29/1838

prisoners were grouped in cells together in a way that quickly turns minor offenders into hardened criminals. Institutions were the great disseminators of virtuous or vicious behaviors. The report praises the House of Refuge, but laments that there is no similar institution for the colored population.<sup>454</sup>

Moyamensing held its reputation for disorder for well over two decades. This reputation was evident in editorials, letters to the editor, and news reports. One such letter to the editor appeared in 1850. “Any movement whose object is to arrest the disorders and check the riotous spirit which have so long prevailed in this district, must be hailed with sincere pleasure by all good, law abiding citizens.” A public meeting at the Commissioners’ Hall was held “to wipe away the stains which rioters and rowdies have fastened upon that community.” Those responsible are “young men and boys, who have no other home, and are rioters and rowdies because they have been left to the influence of ignorance and vice,” according to the letter. “These youth that band together under names which indicate a spirit of riot and ruffianism, were never taught, and counseled, and restrained as they should have been under the parental roof.... They have partaken of the ‘cup of liquid fire and damnation,’ and never been warned and restrained as they should have been by their parents.”<sup>455</sup>

Editorials warned that the district was out of control. Hose companies were a major source of mayhem, fighting each other on route to and from fires, on the streets and at grog shops:

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<sup>454</sup> *Public Ledger*, 12/12/1840

<sup>455</sup> *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 2/21/1850

The Sheriff, in consequence of the riotous disposition manifested by the Weccacoe and Moyamensing Hose Companies, has been compelled to adopt the most decisive measures to stop their acts of violence and outrage. This officer has notified the Commissioners of Southwark and Moyamensing, that from information received, he believes is it the intention of the two rioting companies above named to renew hostilities, and calling upon them to take such action in the matter as the occasion demands.<sup>456</sup>

More violent than the hose companies were gangs such as the Killers.

Comprised of boys and young men, these gangs stalked city streets and public places, destroyed property and assaulted pedestrians, particularly around the Cedar Neighborhood at the intersection of Philadelphia City, Moyamensing, and Southwark. The *North American* reported in 1844:

two half grown boys named Roger Daugherty and James McCartney, a part of a gang of young rowdies who have been in the habit of perambulating the streets of Moyamensing lately, at night, assaulting colored people with clubs and throwing flour over them, were taken by the watch on Saturday night and committed by Alderman Hoffner.<sup>457</sup>

Gangs practiced violence in random assaults across the city to mark territory for gang, and for race. A letter to the editors of the *Pennsylvania Freeman* described how the Killers assaulted an African American in Moyamensing, “where law, in a great measure, is disregarded, and where the unruly triumph in the most daring and insulting outrages.” When a shop owner intervened in his defense, the Killers departed the scene, only to return hours later to set the owner’s store on fire. The editors write, “what a farce is the government of

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<sup>456</sup> *North American*, 4/24/1845

<sup>457</sup> *North American*, 11/18/1844

the Southern Districts of Philadelphia, while such shameful outrages on persons and property can there be perpetrated with impunity!”<sup>458</sup>

Despite what some sober-minded editorials proclaimed, the young men and boys perpetrating most of the violence in Philadelphia acted in concert with the abiding political message of the time: African Americans were not welcome in Philadelphia. Their position within the city was constantly threatened. A crowd could quickly wipe out material gains accumulated over a lifetime. Wealth and social prominence did not buffer African American men and women from the caprice of the mob. These themes were all addressed in the most widely read African American novel of its time, written by Philadelphia Frank Webb.

### **Frank Webb’s *The Garies***

The visibility of Black men and women in city life is a central theme in Frank Webb’s 1857 *The Garies and Their Friends*, one of only four novels published by African Americans before the Civil War. George Rutledge & Co. in London published the work when Webb and his wife Mary were in England on an extended visit. *The Garies* met with some critical acclaim in Europe but was virtually ignored in the United States by White and Black presses, despite the recommendations of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 2/21/1850

<sup>459</sup> Werner Sollors. (2004). “Introduction.” In *Frank J. Webb, Fiction, Essays, Poetry*. New Milford, CT: The Toby Press. Stowe and Longfellow were admirers of Mary Webb’s poetry and drama readings and Frank Webb’s writing. Webb lived in Jamaica

Despite the lack of popular attention paid to *The Garies*, it is invaluable for its attempt to view life in antebellum Philadelphia and its riots from the perspective of the African American working class. Webb's characters are well off compared to residents of Moyamensing's slums, but their relative comfort provides them little shelter from the mob. They are turned out and burned out of their homes just the same. In fact, their middle class aspirations make them prime targets for the mob's fury. From today's vantage point, *The Garies* is invaluable as an insider's perspective on what it was like to be a Black man living in Philadelphia in the antebellum years.

With uncommon skill Webb crafted a narrative that paints a vivid description of life in the city that is at least as informative and certainly more compelling than any non-fiction document. *The Garies and Their Friends* follows an interracial couple, the Garies, from Savannah, Georgia, on their move north to Philadelphia. Clarence Garie is a White slave owner who frees his slaves and marries his slave mistress, Emily Winston. Garie and Winston's children, Clarence and Emily, are born free. The Garie family seeks the help of the Ellises of Philadelphia, a free Black family with ties to Georgia. The Ellises and Garies, are educated, employed, and relatively wealthy. One of the Garies' closest friends, Mr. Walters, likely based on James Forten Jr., was a Black real estate tycoon with a strong social commitment to the Black community who rounds out the central group of characters.

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for most of the 1860s, before returning to the United States in 1869. He took classes at Howard University's Law School, worked for the Freedman's Bureau, and continued to publish. Webb spent his later years in Galveston Texas, working as a principal and teacher at a public school for Black children, and in politics for the Republican Party.



Following its colored protagonists, the novel portrays the conflicted nature of life in “free” Philadelphia. On the one hand, the Garies, Ellises, and Walters are cosmopolitan people, a tribute to their “race” and living refutations of inherent explanations of racial inferiority. At the same time, this grants them no social standing and life in Philadelphia is fraught with difficulties. For African Americans, the threat of losing property, social standing, life and livelihood is constant. The appearance of African American comfort and safety is misleading.

Webb relied upon two themes to characterize life the growing city. First, he focused on property ownership and competition over territory. Racialized boundaries carve up *The Garies’ Philadelphia*. Any acquisitive efforts, particularly from colored residents, are bitterly contested. Second, Webb meditated on the opacity of social interactions. As in the works of George Lippard, *John the Outcast*, and George Thompson, Webb’s White and Black characters constantly misread their interlocutors. The multiple surfaces of the city are made to conceal more than they reveal. Characters are regularly at a loss for tools to accurately read one another.

Webb’s characters are obsessed with the racialized boundaries governing public behavior. Walters, the Black real estate magnate, owns the mortgage on the White Stevens’ house, a fact Stevens is loathe to accept: “How I hate that nigger Walters, with his grand airs.... Contempt from a nigger is almost unendurable.”<sup>460</sup> Stevens recounts a story in which his landlord Walters was denied service at a restaurant. In response, Walters bought the

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<sup>460</sup> Webb, 155.

whole building and forced the restaurant owner to negotiate a new lease so unfavorable the business folded. “There’s not a better man of business in the whole of Philadelphia than that same Walters, nigger as he is; and no one offends him without paying dear for it in some way or other.” Economic power, particularly in the form of property ownership as this story indicates, is the axis along which social order tilts. With property ownership comes the right to determine what practices shall be afforded and how. When Stevens claims, “if I was Black.... I’d sacrifice conscience and everything else to the acquisition of wealth,” he not only sings the capitalist hymn of the era but also acknowledges that “free” Philadelphians in that era could not rely on any institutional support in the city and must earn everything they had themselves, despite the obstacles.<sup>461</sup>

Much of the action in *The Garies* centers on the contest over where Black people are located and what they are doing, which makes property ownership and visibility important animating tropes. Webb uses the phrase “know their place” as more than just a colloquial metaphor. In *The Garies*, it becomes a spatial rendering of social relations both material and metaphorical. Different characters voice the importance of marking the place of African Americans in order to achieve social order. Some find the Black people and their idea of America impossible to reconcile. The villain Stevens’ wife offers the perspective of the American Colonization Society and its sympathizers: “I think all those that are not slaves ought to be sent out of the country back to Africa, where they belong: they are, without exception, the

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<sup>461</sup> Webb, 156.

most ignorant, idle, miserable set I ever saw.”<sup>462</sup> Others detail the creation of two separate Americas. “I have a friend,” the Black Walters recounts, “who purchased a pew for himself and family in a White church, and the deacons actually removed the floor from under it, to prevent his sitting there.”<sup>463</sup> Geographies of race are preserved even into the afterlife. The Garies are barred from being interred in a distinguished cemetery on account of Mrs. Garies’ mulatto status.<sup>464</sup>

The same racial codes of being and behavior govern public appearance in *The Garies’ Philadelphia*. The Garies’ son Charlie created “quite a sensation... in the streets of the usually quiet and obscure little town” on account of “his dress and manners [which] differed so greatly from what they were accustomed to associate with persons of his complexion.”<sup>465</sup> Through the narrator, Webb explained why anti-Black riots find such willing participants. Philadelphia’s colored population did not know its “place:”

Leading articles daily appeared in the public journals (particularly those that circulated amongst the lowest classes), in which the negroes were denounced, in the strongest terms. It was averred that their insolence, since the commencement of the abolition agitation, had become unbearable, and from many quarters was suggested the absolute necessity for inflicting some general chastisement to convince them that they were still negroes, and to teach them to remain in their proper place in the body politic.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Webb, 158.

<sup>463</sup> Webb, 264.

<sup>464</sup> Webb, 263-4.

<sup>465</sup> Webb, 112.

<sup>466</sup> Webb, 204.

“Proper place” here refers both to knowledge of social codes and accepted practices, as well as geographic spaces.

Webb constructed his geography of the city based on visibility, practice, and spatial boundaries. He wrote about a campaign of riots to remove colored residents from the city, clearly referencing the two decades of riots in Philadelphia that achieved that very result. The White Stevens explains a plan to an Irish thug named Morton to muster an anti-Abolitionist crowd that will cleanse the Cedar neighborhood of its colored residents. “You are probably aware that a large amount of the property in the lower part of the city is owned by niggers; and if we can create a mob and direct it against them, they will be glad to leave that quarter, and remove further up into the city for security and protection.”<sup>467</sup> Webb wrote about anti-abolitionist and anti-Black sentiment as a vibrating potential energy within the city that could be guided to devastating effect. This constantly available tool could be put to multiple particular purposes but all aimed in the same direction, that is, enforcement of hard spatial boundaries:

Once we get the mob thoroughly aroused, and have the leaders under our control, and we may direct its energies against any parties we desire; and we can render the district so unsafe, that property will be greatly lessened in value—the houses will rent poorly, and many proprietors will be happy to sell at very reduced prices.<sup>468</sup>

Stevens describes block-busting one hundred years before it became a common practice of racial re-segregation in post-WWII America. Webb describes how prior to the attacks, word spreads throughout Cedar that a mob was being raised. Black residents were forced to choose to either flee their

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<sup>467</sup> Webb, p.196.

<sup>468</sup> Webb, p.196.

homes or erect defenses. Most chose to flee, forced to seek the benevolence of sympathetic Whites who would provide asylum.

Despite their prominent place and their status as property owners, Webb made it clear Black men and women were strangers in their own city. Webb again uses the narrator's voice to make the point: "Although the authorities of the district had received the most positive information of the nefarious schemes of the rioters, they had not made the slightest efforts to protect the poor creatures threatened in their persons and property, but let the tide of lawlessness flow on unchecked."<sup>469</sup> In preparation for the attacks the whole city seems to anticipate, Webb describes the process of converting homes to fortresses, with shuttered windows, barred doors, and furniture removed (because it was frequently turned to kindling by mobs). Men formed neighborhood watch and guard groups. These attempts at self-defense, however brave, amount to little in *The Garies*. The Black Mr. Ellis ends up chased through the streets into an empty house where he is beaten and thrown off the roof, nearly dead.

The frequency with which Black houses are destroyed in *The Garies* makes the point that Philadelphia offered no safe home to African Americans. With his vivid depictions of the violence and terror, Webb argued that White supremacists in Philadelphia intended to cleanse the city of its Black residents. When rioters breached the security of the Garies' home, the family fled out back to hide in the woodshed. For hours the pregnant Mrs. Garie and her children huddled and crouched in the shed as rioters ransacked her house, stole everything valuable, and broke up the furniture. Help arrives in

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<sup>469</sup> Webb, p.233.

the morning, only to find Mrs. Garie and her newborn baby dead, hidden in the shed. Property ownership, wealth, and virtue brought no safety to the Garies. Webb's narrative act of kindness was to allow the infant to perish with its mother, never having to experience the infernal society of the antebellum city.

For Webb, the irony of Philadelphia was that so many Blacks residents lived in "freedom" while the majority White population viewed them with such contempt. Violence characterizes Webb's depiction of life in Philadelphia, not surprisingly given that Webb was writing about Philadelphia in 1857, looking back on decades of violent reprisals against any attempts to achieve racial equality. Webb described an unceasing game of racial detection in city life that aimed to ensure violence was properly directed. Racial attitudes are so hostile in Philadelphia that Clarence Garie hears the word "nigger" used against his family, an epithet he never encountered in Georgia.

Webb rarely misses an opportunity for new characters to speculate on the "mixed" Garie children's exotic, mysterious appearance. Even Mrs. Garie is revealed as African American only when a candle passes before her face. In the room's darkness, the indelible marks of race can be obscured. From the public promenades to the private bedrooms, *The Garies* demonstrated the high stakes of racial detection, fears of misapprehension, and importance of vision to urban life.

In *The Garies*, appearance has real physical and material consequences that make the visual code of the Philadelphia streets more than an aesthetic concern. The character Stevens is tarred, jeered, and called

a “nigger” due to his new Black face and shabby clothes.<sup>470</sup> Not long afterwards, a group of working class drunkards passes, mistaking Stevens for a “darkey” and taunting him. One of the gang streaks Stevens’ face with lime (a material symbolic for its use in building construction), adding, “I’m making a White man of him, I’m going to make him a glorious fellow-citizen, and have him run for Congress.”<sup>471</sup> Here Webb references the belief that citizenship and political representation were impossible for African Americans. Only through transformation could it be possible. Lime whitens Stevens’ face as it alludes to construction and the ability to build and own property in the city. Whiteness, property, and citizenship are all inextricably linked in the social relations of Webb’s Philadelphia. The same men who attack Stevens, believing he is Black, later riot and destroy Black property.

By connecting skin color, citizenship, building trades, alcohol, and riots, Webb makes a subtle point about all the toxic elements that determine who gets to join in the development and ownership of the city and who does not. Building the city by hand is analogized with building the nation here, as the White skin and allusion to property ownership is tied to political citizenship, representation in the social and political order, and Congress. The body is never neatly separated from the built environment in the city, and both are analogized to the body politic and the nation. Stevens’ mishaps, which Morton

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<sup>470</sup> Webb, p.215-17.

<sup>471</sup> Webb, 219.

calls his performance “masquerading,” point up how quickly fortunes can turn in a city where public space is ordered by violence.<sup>472</sup>

## **Conclusion**

By the mid-nineteenth century, the politics of public visibility had become the principal means of ordering space in Philadelphia. Newspapers publicized manifold forms of spatial practices but their reports of Moyamensing, in general, and its African American population, in particular, stood out as depictions of a singularly disordered place and its people. Those responsible for creating a portrait of Black public visibility presented their reports to readers as evidence of Black depravity. Those portrayed had no say about whether or how they appeared in these accounts, the accuracy of these depictions, or the judgments rendered along with the descriptions. Disfranchisement delegates to the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention employed these stories and images of the Black poor to make their case for complete and enduring separation of the races.

The production of the news highlights the politics of public visibility implicit in these text-based practices, particularly what is made visible and what is concealed. Disfranchisement delegates sought to render African Americans invisible to the obligations of the government by promoting an image of them as uniformly degraded. Carolyn Marvin’s observation that bourgeois text functions as a “device to manage and control bodies,” where the author works to conceal his own body while exposing that of another,

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<sup>472</sup> Webb, 219.



applies here.<sup>473</sup> Disfranchisement delegates used rhetoric and the law to segregate African Americans bodies in space. Abolitionist reformers used statistics and reports to argue that African Americans should be institutionalized in schools and hospitals, rather than prisons, to shape their development into proper citizens. African American leaders in Philadelphia used their platform at the Negro Conventions and in essays and pamphlets to voice support for the same institutions. These leaders added that public space was a stage for the performance of civility, and every Black man and woman should present him or herself in public as a righteous individual. African Americans who failed to do so would also become invisible to Black leaders, who, so as not to further the stereotype, avoided the topic of Black disorderly places and practices such as seen in Moyamensing.

The struggle to define Black identity in Philadelphia focused on the spatial practices of poor African Americans in Moyamensing. Academic scholarship has demonstrated that practice and the construction of place are interconnected and central to processes of identification. Place must be constantly maintained through practice, as Tim Cresswell has argued.<sup>474</sup> The news from Moyamensing advocated a way of understanding the slums as a kind of habitus, in which the conditions of one's existence shaped lifestyle choices that defined the set of options from which residents constructed their personal identity.<sup>475</sup> Place informs identity through mythologies of roots and

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<sup>473</sup> Marvin, C. (1994). "The Body of the Text: Literacy's Corporeal Constant." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80(2): 129-149, p. 129.

<sup>474</sup> Cresswell, 2002, 20.

<sup>475</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

origins of group identity. It is “the raw material” out of which identities are constructed rather than a preexisting, genealogical origin.

The constructions and reconstructions of Philadelphia’s environment were critical social practices in the formation and maintenance of both individual and collective identity. Drawing boundaries to distinguish geographies and resource allocation implies both exclusion and relational definition, where Moyamensing was defined as not-Philadelphia, and visa versa. This was a material and a social process that defined Blackness as not-Whiteness, according to the conditions of existence in Philadelphia. Philadelphia and Moyamensing support James Scott’s contention that geographic distinctions produce tribal identities “because each asserts a boundary, it is exclusionary and implicitly expresses a position, or a location, vis-à-vis one or more other groups falling outside the stipulated ethnic boundary.” A separate ecology “marks off different subsistence routines, rituals, and material culture,” contributing to ethnic differentiation.<sup>476</sup>

Within the popular Philadelphian frame of reference, impure environments were inhabited by impure people who were unfit for civilized life and the demands of democratic citizenship. Dell Upton has described the “dizzying sensory ambience” of antebellum Philadelphia that residents and visitors commonly remarked upon. The evidence herein supports Upton’s argument that the sensory experience of offensive spaces was influential in shaping how antebellum urbanites viewed themselves and others.

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<sup>476</sup> Scott, 2009, p.261.

Citizenship for the African American poor was impossible because within classification systems, stigmatized elements become unthinkable within the framework of what is civilized.<sup>477</sup> Mary Douglas argues that human behavior seeks organization, which relies on classification. Some places must be identified as primitive and backward so that others can stand out as virtuous and modern. Philadelphia represented civilized order, with its right-angled streets, clear lines of sight, and civilized public spatial practices. Moyamensing and the Cedar neighborhood were the opposite, its dirt was disorder, “matter out of place,” as Douglas defines it. Polluted and corrupted environments were seen as obstacles to self-governance. Whoever lived in filthy, diseased, and under-developed slums was equipped neither with the technologies nor moral aptitude to serve as empowered citizen within a democratic system. The result was a White majority that debated incorporation or eradication. Should the landscape be cleansed of the poor? Of Black men and women? Or should they be rehabilitated as proper Philadelphians?

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<sup>477</sup> Douglas, M. (2002). *Purity and Danger*. New York: Routledge. Taboo: “a spontaneous device for protecting the distinctive categories of the universe. Taboo protects the local consensus on how the world is organised. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder.”

## **Conclusion**

### **The Spatial Republic**

The principal objective of this dissertation is to push communication studies away from a purely discursive notion of social construction, one that I believe artificially flattens the breadth of human experience and the creation of meaning. I have proposed spatial theory as a corrective lens, with a focus on embodied spatial practice that includes discourse as one of a number of human and non-human elements that are thrown together to form social experience. I have chosen for a methodological toolkit the concept of the urban assemblage. In short, I am continually inspired by the idea that our world and our reality is constructed; I simply believe it is fashioned out of more than words. Using the spatial lens of the urban assemblage framework, I attempted to prove the thrown-together nature of experience in chapters that demonstrate how material things, human bodies, words, images, and ideas all shape the formation of collective social identities. I primarily focused on identities that trifurcated along lines of race, class, and citizenship.

In Chapter 1 we reviewed historical and theoretical literature to argue that the concept of “place” is not an archaeology of relations embedded within a particularly geography, as some accounts have it. Place is an embodied process constantly in need of maintenance. From its earliest days, “Philadelphia” was simultaneously a scheme for ordering the material environment as well as a governing code used to shape the practices that took place therein.

White upper class Philadelphians ordered their built environment according to cultural codes of cleanliness, openness, and regularity. Philadelphia was organized according to principles of tolerance and commerce, where men could thrive as merchants and worship as they saw fit. However, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, white supremacist arguments about the importance of racial purity within a political body cast these assumptions into doubt.

Chapter 2 lays out how, if the city of Philadelphia was idealized and mythologized, the district of Moyamensing to its immediate south, and the Cedar neighborhood that overlapped the two, were its opposite. Cedar and Moyamensing together represented the slums of Philadelphia County. If Philadelphia was characterized by its virtue, the slums were represented as the source of all vice. Environment was tied directly to identity as White Philadelphia was opposed to Black Moyamensing, and a well-ordered environment was juxtaposed to a disordered landscape of slums. The White ruling classes used the contradistinction between Philadelphia and its slums to argue for the innate differences between Blacks and Whites. This chapter examined the ordering schemes of the White ruling class, the mob, and the Black elite. The ordering schemes of the poor, particularly the Black poor, are not captured within the archive. That poor African Americans and Whites ordered space to prioritize survival and some small degree of community must be inferred from the records of other groups.

Chapter 3 explored the fruits of anti-Black vitriol that built throughout the antebellum decades, sentiments that erupted into riots in the 1830s and

1840s. In these riots, mobs attempted to recreate the city as a racially purified space where Whites could realize their ambitions without interference from African Americans. Through riots and arson, Black residents were forced to concentrate in a single neighborhood that was squeezed tighter and tighter. With one attack after another, rioters made clear the terms of the conflict: African Americans were to leave the city or suffer constant abuse. Mobs and their adversaries considered themselves to be embodied public opinion imposing the majority's consensus on the abolitionist and Black minorities. Political contest was waged in the streets, and being and doing in public had become the foremost acts of political communication. It was both symbolic and practical, drawing the boundaries of public life in space as part of the ongoing transformation of the city.

Chapter 4 elaborated on these themes by showing how literate white Philadelphians defined the city of Philadelphia against the black poor in Moyamensing and Cedar, and in so doing drew spatial boundaries around what and who constituted civilized life. Disfranchisement delegates used the spatial practices of poor Black residents of Cedar and Moyamensing as evidence to revoke the voting rights of African Americans during the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention of 1837-38. Disfranchisement proponents successfully argued that poor Black neighborhoods marked Black Philadelphians as disordered and unfit for the privileges of citizenship.

Quaker abolitionists attempted to rebut these charges with a detailed census of the Black population. However, their reports did little to sway opinions that poor Black neighborhoods indexed the degradation of the entire

Black race. Black leaders recognized the limits of rhetorical arguments, and urged their constituents to present themselves in public space according to the strictest codes of civilized conducts. The problem, which these leaders correctly diagnosed, was that African Americans were perceived as performing their character poorly in public space. But when African American leaders set out to reform Black performances in public space, their engagement with the most affected poor neighborhoods was limited.

Intrepid correspondents, the police and the coroner did reach into these neighborhoods. Their reports printed in the daily newspaper offered little encouragement to those advocating civility towards African Americans. These correspondents represented Moyamensing as a place where African American residents shaped their surroundings through drunken and disorderly behavior. The environment was understood as an extension of the corporeal human body, its purity reflected the material and moral state of its inhabitants. The public disorderly practices on display in Cedar and Moyamensing were an affront and explicit contrast to the supposedly orderly and civilized city of Philadelphia.

In antebellum Philadelphia, there was no singular social order. The contest to define urban space was ongoing as were attempts to define its residents. The idea of a singular social is misleading. As John Law has argued, it has never existed, despite rhetorical attempts to bring it into

being.<sup>478</sup> Instead, as Law notes, there are many different ways of achieving social order.

In place of exclusively discursive concepts of social construction and publics, this dissertation offers spatial and material construction and publics, rooted in embodied practice. It advances a definition of politics that corresponds to two different philosophers, separated by centuries. In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour defines politics as “the progressive composition of the common world,” which holds what is given in common alongside the common good.<sup>479</sup> This definition jibes nicely with the work of a fourteenth century North African philosopher Ibn Khaldun, who studied “political conditions... in terms of the rise and decline of the built environment. Political life is examined as the building and decay of cities.”<sup>480</sup>

Both philosophers define politics as acts of collective creation in which resources are allocated according to ordering schemes that are constantly revised and contested. The built environment, specifically the metropolis, is an index of political activity. The environment and the material stuff arranged within it shape how people think about concepts such as citizen, race and nation. Every actor is a local actor, drawing from experiences with the surrounding environment to construct an understanding of any concept. Antebellum Philadelphians relied on personal experience with different

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<sup>478</sup> Law, J. (1994). *Organizing Modernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell. p. 2.

<sup>479</sup> Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social-an introduction to actor-network-theory*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press. p. 254-255.

<sup>480</sup> Mitchell, T. (1991). *Colonising Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p.55.



neighborhoods in Philadelphia County to inform their understanding of concepts that by every right transcended local geography.

In the eyes of many antebellum Philadelphians, a walk down Seventh Street from Chestnut to Shippen provided sufficient evidence to explain the division between the races, claims to citizenship, and how America was to be defined. Attempts by the White majority to expel permanently every African American in Philadelphia were efforts at reconciling their understanding of race and class hierarchies with their experience of Philadelphia. The contest over the city's future played out in public space and was registered in its built environment as well as resident bodies. The constitution of the public in antebellum Philadelphia depended entirely on where and how bodies were allowed to be, and what measures were tolerated to enforce these strictures. There was a spatial republic.

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