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Urban Culture

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Urban Culture

Because cities historically emerged as a means to organize and defend populations, and to disseminate goods and communications, they constituted a key location for establishing and challenging cultural norms. A vibrant scholarly literature has documented the making of urban cultures of middle class self-improvement and self-fashioning, calling attention to connections between city life and the culture of consumption. Other aspects of what can be identified as urban culture become visible in clashes over cultural meanings and competing forms of cultural practice resulting from patricians wielding social and economic power and plebeians contesting or eluding their authority. Historical investment in racial differentiation, policed by and inextricable from sexual regulation, generated critical points of contestation. This essay will highlight several key moments of urban cultural formation when contests over public space and cultural authority revealed a dynamic of cosmopolitan boundary crossing, even amidst continuous efforts to establish and maintain sharp divisions and terms of exclusion.

This dynamic marked the particular circumstances of urban slavery. Slave ownership was almost universal among the urban elite in the eighteenth century cities of Charleston, Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Providence. Urban slaves lived in close proximity to whites, gaining first hand knowledge of their masters' world. They had more opportunities to sell their labor and live independently, and to mingle with poor people of varying status, rubbing elbows

with white laborers in cellars where drink was sold, and at cockfights, public markets, and fairs. New York was the site of a slave insurrection in 1712, and of a threatened revolt in 1741 encompassing slaves and white compatriots, in both instances followed by brutal suppression. Eighteenth century New York was also a place, like Boston, where slaves staked a brief claim on public space for yearly African American versions of local festivals, Pinkster in New York, and Negro Election Day in Boston. Taking place over seventy years, the celebrations varied in terms from place to place, but everywhere, they involved circumstances where masters watched but slaves were in control of the proceedings. They commonly included music, dancing, extravagantly styled dress, feasting, and the assertion of some form of self-generated black leadership. When slaves dressed in their masters' clothes and mounted on their masters' horses, these festivals celebrated a momentary release from bondage and gestured toward alternative sources of leadership.

In the early nineteenth century, free urban African Americans asserted their right to the streets in order to participate in public expressions of citizenship, jostling for space with white crowds when, for example, they insisted on celebrating the abolition of the slave trade in Boston and the abolition of slavery in New York City. The parades featured orations, banners, marchers in ceremonial dress, and uniformed marshals. In Philadelphia in 1804, armed blacks organized in semi-military formations used the occasion of July 4 festivities to fight for control of the streets and assert black agency. A report in New York's black press explicitly named

their intentions: “damning the whites and saying they would show them St. Domingo” (referring to the successful slave revolt in Haiti). In addition to physical obstruction and counter-attacks, the emancipation parades generated a specific genre of print and visual caricature called “Bobolition.” Careful reading of the white-authored historical record of these festivals and parades suggests how contemptuously framed accounts constituted one kind of effort to contain the challenge to the social order.

By the 1830s and 1840s, racial representations became part of national culture when whites performing in blackface created blackface minstrelsy, the most popular form of nineteenth century entertainment. While acknowledging the extraordinary costs of this form’s widely circulating and powerful racist stereotyping, scholars have traced the origins of minstrelsy back to the urban encounters entailing white admiration of black cultural forms, suggesting more complex dynamics within cross-cultural borrowing. New York’s eighteenth century Pinkster festivities had taken place at the market at Catherine Slip, right across the East River from farming areas on Long Island. Anthropologists characterize markets as contact zones between cultures and as areas of border crossing. It was probably for this reason that Catherine Market had been designated as the locale for the public hanging of the supposed ringleader of the 1741 “Great Negro Plot,” so that the fate of the white tavern-keeper John Hughson could serve as a harsh warning against habits of interracial sociability.

Decades later, Pinkster festivities and Hughson's hanging long forgotten, Catherine Market continued to serve as a venue of cross-racial interaction. One account looking back from 1862 described how slaves from Long Island and New Jersey would be joined by New York slaves, who, after selling their produce, might dance for admiring white customers, who paid for the pleasure of watching with a coin or some leftover produce, a bunch of eels or fish. Dancers "would be hired by some joking butcher or individual to engage in a jig or breakdown...and those that could and would dance soon raised a collection." One of the favorites who danced for eels at Catherine Market was Bob Rowley, slave of a Long Island farmer; he performed frequently enough to be known by a "stage" name of "Bobolink Bob."

In the early nineteenth century, New York's free black population increased at the same time as the state's gradual manumission statutes began to have an effect. By 1820, blocks from Catherine Market, the crowded immigrant and black neighborhood known as Five Points took shape. By 1820, the ward housing Catherine Market was one of the city's poorest and most mixed areas, mingling white and free black, male and female day laborers, boarding in rooms and cellars and making do. A rare folk drawing, "Dancing for Eels, 1820, Catherine Market" shows that black dancers continued to earn recompense and admiration in the marketplace. It depicts three black performers dancing and drumming to keep the time, three thoroughly engaged white patrons, dressed both in work clothes and fancy dress, and an attentive interracial integrated crowd of onlookers. By 1848, when two brothers used the print of "Dancing For Eels" as the basis for lithographs

promoting a popular workingman's theatrical performance called "New York As it Is," white actors performing in blackface had propelled the unruly and raucous genre of minstrelsy to center stage. But its origins at Catherine Market, and its circulation in the United States along the waterways dredged by canal laborers, suggest that its appeal emerged in connection with the intermingling of rough laborers across the color line, as a form that literary critic W.T.Lhamon, Jr. noted could register "cross-racial charisma" as well as "racial separation and disdain."

A variety of forms of commercial performance flourished in the 1820s and 1830s. The crowded immigrant and black neighborhood of Five Points was the location of an expanding underground economy in which prostitution was increasingly visible. In Five Points, those seeking to pay for sex encounters could find black run-brothels and saloons catering to black customers as well as saloons and brothels accommodating a mixed clientele. Poor tenement neighborhoods more generally provided the setting for the emergence of commercialized sex districts; the sex trade guaranteed landlords more stable sources of revenue than poor tenants could ordinarily provide. The rise of popular theater featured melodrama as well as minstrelsy and variety, and after 1866, female burlesque performances. Popular theater accompanied and was fueled by the emergence of commercial sex, both because the top tier of seating at most theaters --from the exclusive to plebeian-- was reserved for prostitutes and their clients and also because brothels located themselves near theatres to further facilitate assignations. Big cities offered popular entertainments in restaurants, concert saloons, beer gardens, music halls

and dime museums to white collar employees, journeymen, working women, and laborers, and in most of these, sex was readily on display and for sale.

In these years the streets became the scene of theatrical performance. Promenading on wide public thoroughfares was a common practice everywhere, especially after gas street lighting (first introduced in Boston in 1816) expanded visibility. In cities where Spanish and French traditions of carnival were celebrated, maskers, Harlequins and Punchinellos paraded the streets with guitars, violins, and other instruments in the days before Lent. In St. Augustine, maskers on St. John's Eve marked the summer solstice with ritualized gender inversion, dressing up as highborn people of the opposite sex. By the 1830s and 1840s, New Orleans revelers were throwing flour and pieces of brick as well as candies, cake, and apples and oranges to people along the parade route, and newspapers appealing to class-based norms of civility dismissed Mardi Gras celebrations as "vulgar and tasteless."

Elsewhere the street as theater offered more of a battleground. In Philadelphia and Boston, groups of native-born workingmen battled groups of Irish-born laborers, driven by competition for turf and work, as well as by the polarization between Protestant and Catholic religious and social sensibilities. In some places "gentlemen of property and standing" led crowds to turn on abolitionist challengers to the status quo, burning their meeting places and smashing the printing presses that made use of new technology and cheaper to dramatically increase their production of broadsides and tracts. In Washington, D.C. Cincinnati,

Providence and New York, workingmen's crowds moved viciously against free black individuals, families, and institutions in neighborhoods that bordered areas they claimed as their own. In Baltimore in 1835, crowds turned on a failed bank, impatient at secrecy and legal delays obstructing settlement of the bank's affairs, and in the Kensington section of Philadelphia in 1839, residents battled in the streets to obstruct an extension of a street railroad through their neighborhood, throwing stones and destroying property for two years until the state legislature finally revoked this section of street railroad's right of way.

New ways of writing about urban heterogeneity became part of the stock in trade of the new cheap newspapers which emerged after 1834. In these papers, the city itself, rent by spectacular divisions, became the news. Benjamin Day's New York Sun featured anecdotes from police court that invited readers to imagine the interaction between a streetwise expert reporter and a caricature of an Irish newcomer. James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald's "wide-awake" coverage included dramatic details so that readers could picture destitution in Five Points and the extravagance of the new Astor House hotel on Broadway, completed in 1836. Artisans and mechanics who read the Herald might have enjoyed the new "keyhole" journalism that exposed elites; business readers found plenty of articles of interest on money and Wall Street. Horace Greeley's Tribune specialized in accounts of newcomers encountering city life, but also extensively covered extremes of poverty and wealth. The 1836 murder of Helen Jewett, a well-known New York prostitute who died in a local brothel, enabled the penny press to pioneer a new

genre of crime sensationalism pushing against norms of public reticence. A new sporting male press and the debut publication of the weekly National Police Gazette (1845-1935) created a specialty out of a kind of hybrid crime/sex storytelling.

Nineteenth century novels and popular guidebooks characterized urban culture by means of polarized oppositions, between good and evil, light and dark. Intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson scorned the materialism and artificiality of urban life, and Nathaniel Hawthorne half seriously proposed that “all towns should be made capable of purification by fire, or of decay, within each half century.” Within the boundaries of walking cities, the lives of the rich and the poor were largely visible to each other. Written narratives emphasized the revelation of urban inequality, the increasing wealth and pretensions of the very rich and the simultaneous imiseration of the very poor. The language of sunshine and shadow, repeated in many titles of the guidebooks, highlighted the class geography of access to windows and street lighting. Wealthy homes, high class streets, and the commercial amusements that beckoned were well lit; where the lights stopped marked the boundaries of poor neighborhoods, with passageways barely visible and living and sociability forced into unlit corridors, windowless rooms, and dark cellars underground.

Reading the guidebooks enabled a kind of literary tourism across the boundaries separating the respectable from the rough, crossing into unfamiliar territory. Female moral reformers traversed this terrain, engaged in home visiting

and rescue of fallen women, and reported it in their publications. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the technology of photography expanded the printed representation of the city's diversity of inhabitants and habitats. The Danish reporter Jacob Riis shocked public lecture audiences with his magic lantern shows of photographs taken inside New York's tenement walls, 'Black and Tan' saloons, and on gangs' street corners. These images were published in book form by 1890, reaching an even wider audience. In the 1880s and 1890s, efforts at regulating morality, policing public sexuality, and marking a bright line between rough and respectable sociability coincided with the rise of metropolitan city dailies, competing with each other to attract readers via the biggest headlines, most visually compelling graphics, melodramatic crime reporting, and sensational exposes. Sports sections, women's sections, comics, and advice columns also broadened daily readership. Media historian Paul Starr observed that the National Police Gazette began to lose readership in the 1890s, not because of the Comstock-inspired censorship, but because its brand of news was increasingly available through Hearst and Pulitzer's mass circulation papers.

In the 1880s and 1890s, racial boundaries unsettled by the defeat of slavery and Reconstruction-era political realignments were reinvigorated by the national turn toward Jim Crow segregation and the mass disenfranchisement of African Americans, with particular impact in cities. Especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the triumph of Jim Crow as a national system reorganized modern urban life in both the North and the South, provoking violence in mixed

working class areas where African Americans lived in Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago, increasing residential and racial separation in New South and border cities like Atlanta, Washington, D.C. and Baltimore. In both regions boundaries marking distinct black ghettos and African American commercial and entertainment zones sharpened, and longstanding patterns of discrimination in employment, housing, and education escalated. Northern blacks could vote, had access to better housing, schooling, and some public services than African Americans living in the South, but with racial confinement increasing in racially demarcated ghettos, discrimination intensified in education, public services, and employment. Vice reform efforts previously focused on segregating commercial sex were absorbed into the enforcement of racial segregation.

The new popular culture industries of music publishing, recording, and early film, were deeply implicated in remaking the urban landscape and enforcing new racial conventions. Mechanical reproduction made it possible to even more widely circulate black voices and black bodies in modes familiarized by minstrelsy, and popularized new more sexualized and criminalized versions of blackness in coon songs. The new public commercial amusements of vaudeville and moving picture theatres appealed to large and mixed audiences across lines of class, ethnicity, and gender by systematically excluding African American ticket buyers, or carefully confining them to segregated entrances and balcony seating. When talented African American artists found work as entertainers within these conventions, they were

sometimes able to expose minstrelsy's masking via multiple modes of performance which could be interpreted with different meanings by white and black audiences.

At the same years as the national system of Jim Crow was taking shape, new types of urban "slumming" excursions provided occasions in which groups of middle class men and women left their comfortable homes to observe working-class, immigrant, and non-white metropolitan enclaves. Building on respectable white urban women's social reform practices and sporting male culture's pursuit of urban sexual pleasures, slumming offered its participants a way to grasp the increasing diversity of the urban landscape, to consolidate heterosexual and modern identities defined as superior to foreign born, non-white people, but also sometimes to explore varied forms of sexual intimacy. After 1910, slumming was less directed at geographically defined neighborhoods and more focused on urban nightlife in cabarets and after prohibition was enforced in 1920, in speakeasies, places where various conventions, including the maintenance of racial and sexual dividing lines, might be temporarily breached. Literary representations of slumming had the paradoxical effects of codifying and disrupting classificatory schemes. In response, insider writers aimed to replace literary tourists as "native informants" who could more knowingly depict the possibilities and disappointments of racial and sexual bohemias and nightlife eroticism.

Night life venues in black neighborhoods in New York and Chicago, Memphis, New Orleans, and Kansas City helped to create the soundtrack of modernity, the

development of the new musics of ragtime, blues, and jazz, later rhythm and blues and country. The early recording industry drew musicians to cities, but created the recording/marketing categories of “race” and “hillbilly” music with the effect of literally “segregating sound.” Despite this practice forms of musical innovation showed traces of white and black southern cultures, sometimes in combination with local Italian, Polish, and Latin ethnic traditions. Musicians learned from each other and responded to audiences in multiple musical performance venues ranging from marching bands to funeral processions, local brothels and juke joints to after hours clubs, neighborhood bars, and cabarets. Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay and performers like Duke Ellington and Ethel Waters made use of the public intimacy of the cabaret to challenge modernist conceptions of the other as primitive and exotic by representing racial and sexual self-definition as complex and contradictory. Wide-open districts in southern and western cities were especially important centers of cross cultural musical innovation.

The competing pulls between urban boundary crossing/hybridity and boundary policing continued to characterize modern American culture throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. They animated the reorganization of the revived, more expansive KKK after 1915; shaped arguments for and against immigration restriction, and provided the ammunition for the sexual and racial censorship to be enforced by the new motion picture production code after 1934. New zoning laws and real estate covenants created new tools for segregating public space, as did the new liquor licensing laws that followed the overturning of

Prohibition. The combination of federal home mortgage and loan policies, postwar suburbanization and highway building, and downtown redevelopment created powerful new institutional structures deepening racial segregation and racial confinement. Patterns of suburban living and the rise of home entertainment technologies, from television to video games and internet streaming, discouraged practices of “going out.” Global and internal migrations continued to drive contentious and generative cross-cultural exchanges. These helped to create the new musical and spoken word forms of hip hop and rap, forms then emulated and appropriated by urban artists throughout the world. In the same time period, political divisions sharpened between those who have had to find ways to co-exist with sharing crowded urban space with strangers and those who have not..

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