Narrating Washington, D.C. from the Margins:

Urban Space and Cultural Identity in Lost in the City and the Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears

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Washington, D.C. is a city of paradoxes. At once the site of a tremendous amount of power, wealth and representations of democracy, the city also contains impoverished sectors where residents are disenfranchised. In the following paper, I explore the ways in which two recent works of literature, Edward P. Jones's *Lost in the City* and Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* depict Washington, D.C. from these marginal places. Grounding my discussion in theoretical conceptualizations of symbolic and lived space, and applying these theories to urban space in Washington, D.C., I argue that these works evoke images of Washington, D.C. that differ from dominant discursive constructions of the city. I explore the ways in which these re-configurations of urban space in the capital city, articulated from the margins, present narratives that contest the dominant American Dream myth of striving and success. To conclude, I argue that literary works like Jones's and Mengestu's, which articulate experiences often occluded from the dominant urban narrative, provide us with "local knowledge" that highlights cultural difference and inequality in the city. I propose that these local forms of knowledge be incorporated into urban plans for democratic space in Washington, D.C. to make American discourses of "liberty and justice for all" a reality for more residents and users.

Subject categories: Literature, Urban Studies

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INTRODUCTION

> *"Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories....*
> *The appropriation and use of space are political acts."*
> (Hooks, 1990)

Washington, D.C. is a city of paradoxes. At once the site of a tremendous amount of power, wealth and representations of democracy, the city also contains impoverished sectors where residents are disenfranchised and have been institutionally marginalized. These sectors — the inner city streets, the gentrifying neighborhoods and the ethnic enclaves -- contain communities whose collective experiences contrast sharply with the ideals of inclusion and opportunity that are commemorated in the monuments and memorials of the capital city's iconography.

Two recent works of literature, Edward P. Jones's short story sequence *Lost in the City* and Dinaw Mengestu's novel *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears,* depict the

experiences of members of minority communities living in the nation's capital. Both of these books depict the lives of city residents that seem far from the power brokers, historic monuments and politicians in the National Mall or on Capitol Hill. Narrating from the margins of the city and nation, characters from these works articulate experiences that oppose dominant constructions of American identity and success. Unable to share in the ideals of citizenship and "American-ness" built into the monuments and memorials that characterize Washington D.C.'s better known landscape, what I refer to in this essay as the capital's "monumental space", these voices evoke a representation of the city that is informed by exclusion, subjugation and an ambiguous (yet detectable) sense of community. The urban landscapes that they depict constitute a radical break from mainstream cultural imaginations of the capital city.

In the discussion that follows, I explore the ways in which Jones and Mengestu illustrate the urban space of Washington, D.C. in their respective works. How do the characters in each piece, excluded from the American promises of "liberty and justice for all" enshrined in the monumental space of their urban surroundings, evoke representations of the city that challenge hegemonic ways of seeing and knowing Washington, D.C. as a "city worthy of the nation" (Gillette, 2006: xxii)? How do these re-conceptualizations of a space that has been made culturally visible as a signifier of national identity beget narrative forms that challenge the American cultural mythologies projected through Washington, D.C.'s monumental spaces?

In addressing these questions in this essay, I explore the ways in which characters from *Lost in the City* and *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* negotiate the polarities and frustrations of their urban surroundings, and argue that the various ways that each makes sense of place in Washington, D.C. is reflected through the relationship that their narrative bears to mainstream national discourses of universal inclusion into the American "promised land". By articulating experiences that deviate from dominant narratives of striving, success and "liberty and justice for all", Jones and Mengestu illustrate an image of Washington, D.C not as symbolic space of national unity, but as a real and complex city in which new forms of knowledge, identity and memory are produced.

In order to elucidate the ways in which the varying lived spaces depicted in these texts reflect their narratives' relation to hegemonic American ideals, I have divided this paper into six sections. In the first section, I provide a brief overview of the construction of symbolic space, and theorize the link between place, narrative and identity. I then go on to more specifically explore how the monumental space of Washington, D.C.has come to dominate the ways in which both planners and the general public see and know the city, and I will more closely examine the particular narratives that have been built into these spaces and communicated through their cultural representations. In the third section, I discuss the ways in which lived experiences within the margins of bounded symbolic spaces can produce new readings of a given landscape. I argue that in Washington, D.C. these spatial re-configurations make way for the articulation narratives that deconstruct the nationalist ideologies projected through privileged constructions. In the fourth and fifth sections, I examine the textual manifestations of these theorized minority places and narratives in *Lost in the City* and *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (respectively), and demonstrate the ways in which each work illustrates the contested nature of both spatial representations and the American ideals of equality, opportunity and inclusion. To conclude, I use the final section of the paper to explore the ways in which these multiple and oppositional epistemologies of space in Washington, D.C and the minority narratives that they evoke, can open up a dialogue for more democratic readings and uses of urban space in the capital city.

PLACE, MEANING AND SYMBOLIC KNOWLEDGE

> *"A 'people' is formed by physical propinquity, a native soil and a shared history that has formed common beliefs and values (i.e. its culture or civilization) and conferred on it an identity. The link between a people and a land is a profound one.*
> (Coles ,1985:186)

Crucial to a critical reading of the capital city is a conceptualization of place, and an understanding of the ways in which place can be tied to identity, narrative and normative ideals. Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defines place as a "center of meaning constructed by experience" (Tuan, 1975:1). These meanings can be grounded

in experiences that are lived and concrete,or derived symbolic experiences that are constructed of images, symbols and representations of a given place . It is this ladder symbolic element of place that allows for normative constructs of identity, belonging and exclusion to be communicated to its inhabitants. For example, Tuan argues that the senses of community and identity projected from large, *symbolic* places like the city or nation depend on "indirect and abstract knowledge for their experiential construction". In contrast to smaller, *lived* places like the home and neighborhood, where community and cohesion are sustained through personal memory and social interaction, the existence of these symboli*c* places as unified wholes is contingent upon "maintaining the potency of shared symbols and concepts, and less on direct experience with objects and people" (Tuan, 1975:153-156). Meaning is invested into these discursive spaces through symbols that communicate shared experiences to all inhabitants, visitors and spectators. These meanings are then reproduced through dominant representations of the city or nation-state, circulated through media imager, tourist literature, planning ideologies, political agendas, newspapers and the like, which often represents the interests and experiences of the dominant culture and economic interests. By building abstract knowledge of imagined communities into the epistemologies of a symbolic place like the city or nation, these places come to "embody a culture" and produce a unifying, essentialist identity by "dramatizing the aspirations, needs and functional rhythms of group life" (Tuan, 1977:178).

These symbolic elements of space manifest themselves distinctly within the urban space of Washington, D.C. Like any city, Washington, D.C. constitutes a municipal space from which images of shared metropolitan realities and civic identities can be projected as part of a totalized urban whole. However, as a capital city, Washington, D.C. takes on a specific role that distinguishes it from other cities as a center of symbolic meanings produced for the nation-state. As a result, the narratives tied to dominant cultural representations of Washington, D.C. do not only communicate a symbolic knowledge of the city, but also embody the dominant discourses that define constructs of national identity in the United States. In the section that follows, I explain how these meanings are put on display in the monumental spaces of the capital, and

explore in more depth the specific narratives embodied in these selective constructions of American identity.

MONUMENTAL SPACE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

"Washington exists only for the country at large; its local interests not dependent upon its national functions are in effect nothing.
--Frederick Law Olmstead Jr. (1902)

"'Kathy, I'm lost,' I said, though I knew she was sleeping
I'm empty and aching and don't know why
Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike
They've all gone to look for America
They've all gone to look for America
(Simon and Garfunkel, "America")

In the opening pages of *Berlin, Washington: 1800-2000: Capital Cities, Cultural Memories and National Identities,* Andreas Daum poses the question: "what makes a capital city?" In addressing this question, he explains that capital cities are "expected to perform certain functions of their nation states" by creating national ideologies, enhancing political values, representing a shared national history, defining national identity and putting this identity on display (Daum, 2005: 1-30) . When laying out his economic plan for the city, Bill Clinton echoed a belief in these nationalist functions for Washington, D.C. and claimed that "Washington, D.C. is every American's home, and it

should be every American's pride. Our capital city must reflect the best of who we are, what we hope to become and where we are going," (Garrison, 2008).

These representations of the capital city characterize it not as a real, lived-in metropolis but as a city that exists for the nation state. The Washington, D.C. that Daum and Clinton imagine is meant to serve specific symbolic functions by projecting the ideological constructs of the national community to its citizens, and by establishing a geographic space to which Americans can look to understand their values, identity and history. In doing so, these conceptualizations reproduce an image of Washington, D.C. as an iconic city of monumental space and federal institutions rather than as a site of multiple histories, diverse neighborhoods and differential social relations.

Cultural theorist Margaret Farrar explores how these dominant ways of seeing and knowing Washington, D.C. as a "city worthy of the nation" have informed urban renewal initiatives in the capital. She argues that by making Washington D.C's memorial landscape particularly visible in cultural representations of the city, and concentrating planning efforts on "purifying" Washington, D.C. of spaces that posed a threat to these aesthetics, planners and politicians have used urban space in Washington, D.C. as an instrument with which they have attempted to "(re)create Americanness"…to cultivate a singular national identity and to project that identity to the rest of the world," (Farrar, 2008:51). Elaborating upon Henry Lefebvre's contention that monumental space constitutes a collective mirror in which each member of society can envision their membership (Lefebvre, 1991:220), Farrar argues that the monumental spaces of Washington, D.C. have played a pivotal role in the production of a symbolic national community in which all citizens are "one people, with common purposes and aims, common ideals and a common destiny". By " emphasizing national unity and…making visible the values and virtues required by its citizens," the monumental spaces in Washington, D.C., and their dominant place in cultural imaginations of the city, have served as "crucial conduits of symbolic power…meant to *make* citizens out of an otherwise heterogeneous, unmanageable population," (Farrar, 2008: 51). The concentration of these commemorative spaces within the city serves to construct

Washington, D.C. as a symbolic urban place in which privileged histories are displayed as universally embedded in the identities of each member of the American community.

John Stratton and Ien Ang argue that the Enlightenment principles of "liberty and justice for all" (Stratton and Ang, 1998), articulated in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence and written into the walls of the Jefferson Memorial, express the dominant ideological concepts that have been scripted into monumental space in Washington, D.C. By emphasizing a universally accessible "American way of life" and an "orientation towards an idealized social destiny" these unifying discourses evoke the "American Dream" narrative, a myth of striving and success that sits at the heart of dominant constructions of national identity. Born out of the nationalist vision of America as the "promised land for all", and embodied in Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches tales in which "alone, unaided, the ragged boy is plunged into the maelstrom of city life, but by his own pluck and luck he capitalizes on one of the myriad opportunities available to him and rises to the top of the economic heap," (Lynn, 1955:7), the American Dream narrative manifests itself in cultural representations as "the belief in the potential greatness of the common man, the glorification of individual effort and accomplishment, the equation of the pursuit of money with the pursuit of happiness and of business success with spiritual grace,"(Lynn, 1955:7). This "success myth" values individual prosperity (measured in terms of material accumulation) over all else, and disguises itself as universally accessible through merit and hard work. Kenneth Lynn explains that this "scheme of values" constitutes the ideological tenets of what it means to be an "American", regardless of race, color or creed. By making primary the relationship between individual effort and upward mobility, the American Dream narrative erases the boundaries of race, class and gender as they exist as both real barriers to opportunity and as alternate social categories with which marginalized Americans can identify and seek empowerment.

Central to the American success myth is the "unifying and informing symbol" of the American frontier (Atwood, 1972: 31). Phillip Page writes that "physical mobility in American culture is the key to social mobility, economic success and political expression. The frontier is the creative edge of the ideal "democratic social space" by

which the United States invented its National Identity," (Page, 1999:1). The frontier symbol projects ideologies of freedom of movement from dissatisfactory places and positions to a better and more fulfilling life. However, by emphasizing individual spatial movement as the primary means by which success is realized, this myth undercuts efforts of meaning-making and community building in smaller places within the nation. Instead, it idealizes the larger and more abstract nation-place of America as an imagined community in which all citizens can find a sense of belonging (while remaining mobile within it), and demands that individuals look to these ideals, rather than to community values or personal memory, to discover a national identity that overwrites all other forms of allegiance.

Stratton and Ang argue "the universalist myth of opportunity for all into which the American Creed was translated for the individual failed to materialize, leading to a sense of disillusion with official providential Americanism," (Stratton and Ang, 1998). Integration through the construction of a universal set of particularly American ideals that stress a shared history and destiny has only been partially successful. Similarly, Lynn concludes that "the great success myth was a grand and impossible dream," (Lynn, 1955: 14), and that disillusionment in the modern city has converted the American dream it into the modern "American nightmare".

If the ideals of universal inclusion and prosperity are unobtainable myths for many, then the national monuments and federal institutions that signify this narrative are peculiar mirrors, that do not "so much reflect as they imagine, mythologize, distort…and (re)construct identity, history and citizenship by reinforcing the nation's symbolic unity," (Farrar, 2008:53). The "abstract knowledge" of nationhood produced in these visible spaces of the capital perform the "fantasy work of national identity" by making visible a "hegemonic landscape where the dominant culture is legitimated, transmitted and preserved," (Farrar, 2008: 57). Turning her attention away from the public city center and towards the histories, communities and identities that are excluded from these monumental spaces, Farrar explains that the "citizen body expressed in the symbolic space of the Washington Mall found its antithesis in the bodies of the urban poor" (Farrar, 2008:73). In other words, the public space of the

capital, embodied in dominant representations of the city, fails to reflect the lived experiences of many of the citizens who live within its geographic bounds. The geographical proximity of these two opposing spatial narratives poses a threat to the symbolic unity of the capital city and nation-state.

LIVED SPACE AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

> *"Urban spaces are often spaces of paradox and contestation where various forms of identity, morality and knowledge are produced, challenged, reinforced and disputed."*
>
> (Farrar, 2008)

If dominant representations of urban space in Washington, D.C. serve to reproduce a national narrative, then how can different representations of this urban space, narrated from the margins rather than from the public center**,** evoke new narratives that challenge essentializing nationalist discourses? In addressing this question we must return to a discussion of theoretical considerations of place. Just as epistemologies of space can be constructed through symbolic representations, they can also be received through lived experiences and everyday social interactions within a given locale (Lefebvre, 1991: 362; Soja, 1999). Cities exist not only as they are depicted on postcards and theorized through planning initiatives, but they are also defined by the multitude of meanings that users of the city invest into its urban space, both public and private. From lived experience, inhabitants invest into places meanings that often differ from their symbolic constructions. The recognition of these *lived* spaces often problematizes the knowledge and narratives tied to the *symbolic* places to which they are bounded.

Crucial to an understanding of how individual relations to lived places are produced is political geographer John Agnew's concept of "sense of place". Agnew defines a "sense of place" as "identification with a place as a unique community, landscape or social order" (Agnew, 2009:37). He highlights the subjective nature of these identifications with lived place, each evoking a variable feeling of belonging and emotional association between an individual's consciousness and a defined, physical locale. Similarly, anthropologist Margaret Rothman argues that place is multi-local and

unstable, and that "for each inhabitant, a place has a unique reality, one in which meaning is shared with other people and places" (Rothman, 1992: 643).

If place is experienced subjectively, then efforts to script universal discourses onto certain locations as symbolic spaces (such the urban space of the capital city) will always be contested through lived experience. Highlighting the polysemic and subjective nature of lived space, Rothman argues that "places are not intern containers. They are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions" (Rothman, 1992: 641). By investing personal meanings into to a specific location, regardless of the organizing principles around which that location has been planned or represented, inhabitants transform it into a lived place of local knowledge and subjective meanings.

From these lived spaces, new ways of "seeing, knowing and understanding the world" are produced and articulated (Creswell, 2004:8). While these grounded, experiential relations to space are constructed on both the margins and center of a social landscape, it is most often the epistemologies communicated from the less visible portions of the city and nation that most significantly destabilize the discursive constructions of their imagined communities. From these alternative ways of seeing and understanding the world from the margins come new voices, often dissident voices that articulate "oppositional world views" (hooks, 1990:149) that have been excluded from dominant cultural reproductions. By making visible lived spaces and recognizing their polysemic nature, the privileged symbolic mappings that mask these multiple and marginalized readings are thrown into question, and their instability revealed.

Because urban space in Washington, D.C. acts as a physical symbol of the discourses that constitute American national identity, a subversion of dominant spatial representations of the city serves to disrupt the hegemony of the nationalist discourses of "liberty and justice for all" that are embodied in the capital's patriotic iconography. From new conceptualizations of space in Washington, D.C. (as lived rather than symbolic), emerge what Homi Bhabha describes as "dissident and dissonant histories…counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries…and disturb those ideological maneuvers through which

'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities," (Bhabha, 1994: 313). It is only by recognizing the contestability of established spatial meanings and enabling these alternative narratives to be voiced that selective and totalizing national narratives are pried open, and voices normally excluded from the history of monumental spaces are allowed room for resistance.

Excluded from the cultural memory and promises of the nation, and geographically relegated to the abject fringes of the city, the African Americans in Jones' stories and the African immigrants of Mengestu's novel constitute what Bhabha describes as "people of the pagus… peoples who will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation" (Bhabha, 1994: 315)". As they narrate from the margins of Washington, D.C., these characters evoke representations of the city as a complex social entity rather than as an idealized national capital. As a result, these works challenge the totalizing depictions of American identity that Stratton, Ang, Lynn and others critique, and reveal new narratives that contest the master discourse of the "American Dream". Jones' short story collection and Mengestu's novel rearticulate knowledge from marginalized perspectives to create oppositional discourses that are based in lived experiences along the frontiers of the very city and nation whose mythologies they defy.

In the discussion that follows, I explore the meanings that characters from *Lost in the City* and *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* invest into their surroundings in Washington, D.C. to transform it into a lived space of contested subjectivities. As I examine the ways in which these lived places simultaneously differ from and are informed by the symbolic spatial constructions of the surrounding city, I identify the counter-narratives articulated from these places, and the supplementary yet oppositional relationship that they bear to master national narrative of the American Dream. By depicting Washington, D.C. as a collection of lived places rather than as a totalized symbolic place, these pieces of literature allow us access into ways of knowing the city that challenge the master-narratives embodied in its hegemonic landscape.

SAFE SPACES AND COMMUNITY NARRATIVES IN EDWARD P. JONES'S *LOST IN THE CITY*

"The affection of Black writers (whenever displayed) for the city seems to be for the village within in: the neighborhoods and the populations of those neighborhoods"
(Morrison, 1981)

The fourteen short stories that make-up *Lost in the City* capture chapters in the lives of what literary critic Gerald Kennedy characterizes as a "settled, post-diasporic community that includes many folk with Southern roots, presumably descendents of African Americans, who flooded into the District from the South during the 1930s"(Kennedy, 2001, 12). These stories take place in all quadrants of the city (Northwest, Northeast, Southwest and Southeast) throughout the 1950's and 60's. There is no recurrent protagonist in the text but the city itself. The urban landscape of Washington, D.C. weaves each of these narratives together to illustrate an intimate portrait of the capital city, experienced by men and women, old and young.

The Washington, D.C. portrayed in Jones's collection is not the "Washington they put on postcards" or "what the white people call the federal enclave" (66). Instead, it is a city of neighborhoods and communities. Steeped in the geography of Washington, D.C., these stories depict particular city blocks, intersections, markets and community centers, and communicate a sense of intimate, local knowledge of particular sites within the city. Each account is located within a specific urban locale. Diane from "Gospel" lives on "9th Street Southeast, not far from Lincoln Park". The protagonist in "Marie" lives in Claridge Towers at 12th and M (as does Joyce's mother from "His Mother's House"), and she catches the bus at 14th and K. "A Butterfly on F Street" takes place on an F Street median, just after the protagonist, Mildred, has left one neighborhood market) to go to another.

Jones' consistent use of street names and neighborhood references, coupled with his infrequent insertion of physical descriptions of these locations, establishes a sense of inclusion into the narrative and the community that he depicts. No introduction or contextualization of these places are needed. Instead, these streets exist in an intimate world in which everyone understands them, knows their location, has met their

inhabitants and is part of their history. As readers, we are pulled into this world, and we see the small places that Jones narrates through the eyes of his characters.

By investing fragments of the city with personal meanings and histories, Jones illustrates neighborhoods that are the sites of strong communities, family histories and personal memories. He transforms the otherwise totalizing space of Washington, D.C. into a city of lived places. The title story of the collection, "Lost in the City", illustrates this subjective place-making process most clearly. Unable to face the death of her mother, Lydia Walsh pays a cab driver to take her away from the hospital and to get her "lost in the city". However, Lydia's efforts to lose herself in the spaces of Washington, D.C. ironically bring her back into contact with meaningful places that evoke personal memories of her past. As she passes the National Mall she is reminded of her father's janitorial job at the museum, a rendering that marks the space not only as a site of personal memory but also as a place whose meaning for Lydia stands in stark contrast to the symbolic function that the Smithsonian museums play as leisure spaces that reinforce civic identity. A drive along 5th St. brings her back to the apartment where her father died, and her return to the place renders the scene vividly in her memory. On Ridge Street she sees the apartment where she later lived with her mother, and on Rhode Island, she remembers "living on the same floor as a woman who was terrified that her husband would leave her", (150). Each of these places within the city is tied to a specific memory. These locations are not simply names, numbers or coordinates, nor are they sites from which Lydia can "envision her membership" within the national community. Instead, they communicate subjective associations that frame the way in which Lydia sees and understands her place in her urban environment.

The sense of meaning, connectedness and community that characters like Lydia derive from small, confined places within Washington, D.C. can be read, in part, as a reaction to segregation and exclusion from other spaces and institutions in the city. In her account of African-American history in Washington, D.C., Constance McLaughlin Green notes that in the 1950s and 60s, the District's black community lived in segregated neighborhoods, worked in less esteemed and lower paying positions, had higher rates of unemployment, poorer health and more crowded schools than most

whites in the city, (McLaughlin, 1967). These lines of race, class and power are mapped extensively through Jones's stories. In "The Sunday Following Mother's Day", Sam evokes the unmistakable racial zones of the city when he accuses Maddie of living "up there among all them white people" (134). In "The Store", the narrator takes "the bus all the way down to P St., crossing 16th St. into the land of the white people". Myrtle Street, the setting of "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons, is to the east "prevented from going any further" by a medieval like stone wall across 1st Street, Northeast. "The high school Gonzaga, where white boys were taught by white priests," (11) is its western boundary.

When characters cross these racial boundaries, into the "land of the white people", they face racism and discrimination. In "Marie", the elderly protagonist is ignored and patronized at the Social Security offices at 21st Street Northwest and M Street Northwest. In "The Store", the African-American narrator describes his first job, where he was paid less than his white co-workers and was later fired so that the company could hire a white employee to take his place. He also recounts his experience with a white cop on New York Avenue and 5th as he walks home from this job one day. The cop bullies and embarrasses the narrator by making him cross and re-cross the same street several times in the freezing cold. "Just get me back to one-fifteen New York Avenue safely and I'll never come back to their world again" (110) the narrator repeats to himself once he is finally free to make his way home.

In response to experiences of discrimination, Jones's characters internalize the effects of a divisive urban power so that they accept, sustain and even strengthen the racial boundaries of their urban environment. They construct what literary theorist Farah Jasmine Griffin has described as a "safe spaces" (Griffin, 1995: 103). Griffin explains that these safe spaces are sites within the "harsh cold and indifferent" space of the Northern city that are out of reach of the dominant society and that can empower and protect African-American characters. The sense of place with which inhabitants relate to these safe spaces is characterized by feelings of belonging and security, while the world outside of them is perceived as foreign and "other".

Throughout the collection, the white spaces of the city are constructed as distant and unwelcoming territories that stand in stark contrast to neighborhood "safe spaces"

with which Jones's characters identify. The general tone of the references to these white spaces communicates a sense of distrust for the "land of white people", and an overall resistance towards assimilation and integration. In "Lost in the City", Lydia's efforts to buy her mother a townhouse near her home on G Street and 7th Street Northwest are unsuccessful. Georgia, her mother reasons that "she did not know if she could live among so many white people" because she was not used to their "ways" (147). When Sam confronts Maddie about her choice to live in a white neighborhood, he calls her neighbors "ghost people". Sam tells Maddie that she should "move out to Anacostia with the real people, the people who know what day and night are like and who never get the two confused," (134). Similarly, Maddie's father tells her that the "first law of the land" is to "never get lost in a white folks neighborhood," (135). In "His Mother's House", Joyce finds herself feeling less secure than ever in a white neighborhood on 10th St., living in a house about which she used to have "poor-women dreams" of inhabiting. Even after putting to locks on her door and ensuring that they are secure, she "cannot sleep because she keeps on thinking that she had not locked all the windows and doors" (157).

This sense of urban distrust extends beyond just the white parts of the city, and into any area outside the bounds of the territory that these characters deem as a safe space. Jones's characters perceive nearby neighborhoods as "foreign lands", and they experience a sense of disorientation each time they step outside of the geographical limits of their community. The metaphor of getting "lost in the city" recurs in almost every story in Jones's work: In "The Night Rhonda Furguson Was Killed" when Cassandra Lewis (who lives in Northwest) has car trouble in Southeast, she feels as if "she was in a different country" where "the laws might not be the same for her"(45). In "The Store", the narrator, who exhibits one of the most rooted senses of place out of all of the characters in Jones's stories, sees "neighborhoods in far, far Northeast or Anacostia" as existing in completely different worlds, (95). In "A New Man", as Rita Cunningham stares at a giant map of Washington after her daughter's disappearance, she is struck by the city's vastness. "'I never knew the city was this big,' she said the day that she put it up, her fingers touching neighborhoods that she had heard of only in

passing—foreign lands that she would never set eyes on. Petworth, Anacostia, Lincoln Park," (211). In "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons", as Robert first wanders down Myrtle Street with the young Betsy Ann, two boys stop him and tell him to "turn back" to avoid getting "lost in the city" (9). Robert understands and obeys their suggestions.

Excluded and estranged from powerful parts of the city, Jones's characters look inward to their communities, investing meanings and memories into their surroundings to construct lived spaces in which they feel rooted, empowered and connected. These place-making activities sit at the heart of their narratives. Within these safe spaces, they define success according to their ability build relationships and maintain a sense of connectedness and familiarity with their surroundings. In "The Store" the narrator constructs a safe space for himself within the confines of the poor black neighborhood in which he works. Outside of the 5th and O neighborhood and in other parts of the city, the narrator feels unsafe and unsure of himself. He communicates a strong distrust for white people (who he imagines live in a faraway, distant land), and recounts memories of discrimination and disorientation when he steps outside of "his world". He explains two notable events that allow him to "make room in his soul for more than one neighborhood": the first occurs when receives the combination to a small safe in the store, in which he finds old pictures of "people in the 5th and O St. Neighborhood". As he looks at these pictures of people from the community, he reflects, "I wanted good things for them, the way I wanted good things for my nieces and nephews" (93). The second time that the narrator realizes that his "allegiances are expanding" is when he is asked to be the godfather of newborns in the neighborhood twice in one month. By defining moments of inclusion and into the community as indications of his success and personal development, the narrator subtly constructs a community narrative that contests the individualized "success myth" of American discourses.

In "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons", the neighborhood of Myrtle Street is constructed as a "safe space" where the two central characters, Robert and his daughter Betsy Ann, locate an extended family, community and sense of security and stability. "Prevented from going any further" by physical barriers that signify the segregation of the African-American community in Washington, D.C. (the railroad tracks and a white

boys high school), the Myrtle Street residents construct an intimate community in which each resident seems to know every other by face, name, family history and residency. In the absence of a mother, Betsy Ann is effectively raised by the Myrtle Street inhabitants. She is provided for by the teacher who lives next door, the doctor who lives down the street and a land lady who serves as a surrogate grandmother. The story centers on Robert's efforts to maintain a sense of place and home for him and his daughter as the "community is obliterated" and long-time residents are evicted to make way for the expansion of the railroad tracks. What emerges from Robert's struggle is an "alternative narrative of metropolitan survival" in which mobility constitutes displacement, and the individual's role within the city is not to "pull himself up by his bootstraps", but to maintain his community in the face of "progress" and "development".

The general aversion towards integration and geographic mobility articulated in "The Store" and "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons" and reproduced in many of the stories throughout Jonses' collection contrasts the normative emphasis that the American Dream narratives places movement and advancement. If the symbol of the frontier and the valuation of physical mobility sit at the heart of nationalist constructions of success, (Page, 1: 1999), then these characters' collective adherence to their own neighborhoods evoke a counter-narrative in which such mobility is perceived as undesirable, and is even understood as a betrayal of their community. In fact, Lydia Walsh, one of the few characters in these stories that achieve the American Dream of material wealth and socio-demographic mobility is portrayed as one of the most troubled characters in the collection. In "Lost in the City", Lydia is an affluent graduate of Yale Law School who lives in an expensive townhouse "among the white people" in Southwest (147). Her material success has alienated her from her family, community and heritage. In their place, she has substituted a coke addiction and one night stands with strangers to whom she lies about her name and identity. It is only when she leaves her townhouse in Southwest and passes by parts of the city that render memories of her childhood that Lydia is put back in touch with her past. Jones's portrayal of Lydia's material success and emotional disorientation stands in stark contrast to his characters that remain spatially and socially stagnant, yet spiritually attached to their communities.

Contextualized among narratives that render strong visions of communal interiority, Lydia's pathologies can be read as a response to displacement from the communities of her past, up and into a world where she feels she must deny her identity and heritage.

The devaluation of social and geographic mobility articulated throughout Jones's collection evokes a dissonant discourse to the master-narrative of American advancement. It allows African-Americans in Jones's story to negotiate their disenfranchised positions and exclusion from opportunities for advancement, and to re-define conceptualizations of "success" and "identity" to create meaning within their urban confines. However, it is important not to glorify these acts of resistance too greatly. While Jones's characters' aversion towards mobility serves to empower and protect them within their segregated communities, it also serves to limit them, and can be read as an indication of their internalization of subjugation. In theorizing the construction of "safe spaces" , Griffin writes that "migrants often engage in acts of self-discipline" and normalize the "effects of power so that they become complicit in their own subjugation" (Griffin, 1995: 103). In "The Store, the narrator takes the bus into the "land of white people" because his father has told him that "white people did not like to see Negroes driving cars, even a dying one," (164). The narrator, who has worked hard to earn the money to buy his Ford, preemptively denies himself the agency to drive it into certain parts of the city, outside of his safe space, in which he is seen as subordinate. He has internalized years of discriminatory experiences and parental words of caution so that the confidence that he feels within the safe space of his community disintegrates outside of its bounds.

By illustrating the city as a collection of "safe spaces", Jones depicts an image of Washington, D.C. that contests the dominant place it holds in the national imagination. In fact, the much photographed public space of monuments and government buildings is barely featured in any of Jones's stories. Excluded from the histories that these spaces commemorate, and cheated by the promises of inclusion that these democratic institutions project, the African-Americans in Jones's story create lived spaces for themselves within a capital city in which these patriotic symbols are absent. In doing so,

they evade the sense of loss and disillusionment that could emerge from the failure of lived experience to realize these ideals.

Kennedy argues that relative absence of national symbols and monumental space from Jones's stories "subtly disrupts the 'master-discourse' of the majority, not by confronting its ideology of 'liberty and justice for all' and its sanitized version of history, but by inscribing an alternate narrative of metropolitan survival" (Kennedy, 2001:12). In their small worlds of meaning and experience, characters evoke "alternate narratives of metropolitan survival" by constructing their identities outside of myths of ideological unity that Stratton and Ang critique, and envisioning futures that depart from Kenneth Lynn's "success myth" of the American Dream. A character's success in the city is not defined by his ability to accumulate and ascend a social hierarchy, but rather by his capacity to participate in his urban confines by sustaining communal meanings. Identities are understood through roles and relationships in a given neighborhood rather than in relation to abstract patriotic symbols and monuments. These "safe spaces" replace the nation and its monumental space as sites from which characters resist national narratives of upward mobility and ideological unity to build communities apart from the national body politic and identify homes distinct from the mythologized, universal home of the national Capitol.

TERRITORIES OF NOT-BELONGING AND AMERICAN NIGHTMARES IN DINAW MENGESTU'S *THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS THAT HEAVEN BEARS*

> *Do you mean is this like my village? No 1 am a stranger here.*
> (Greek-Cypriot refugee in Zetter, 1994: 311.)

The sense of rootedness communicated through Jones's stories sharply constrasts with the tone of displacement that pervades Mengestu's novel. In the following discussion, I examine the ways in which the African immigrants in *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* relate to their surroundings in Washington, D.C. and discuss how their alienated sense of place within the city and nation informs their reactions to experiences of discrimination. I argue that Mengestu's characters, less rooted to smaller

communities within the city, are unable to find safe places from which they realize conceptualizations of success or identity that diverge from dominant constructions. As a result, they respond to their frustrations with disillusionment and denial. They seem perpetually alienated in their urban surroundings and remain in constant dialogue with the promises and failures of the "American Dream".

Mengestu's novel captures eight months in the life of Sepha Stephanos, an Ethiopian refugee who comes to Washington, D.C. in 1974 to escape the military coup that ousted Haile Salassi I and put the Derg into power. Sepha runs a failing grocery store in a poor black neighborhood near Logan Circle, where higher income, white families are slowly moving in and gentrifying the area. Sepha lives a quiet and isolated life. He spends the majority of his day at the store reading, and his only two friends are two other African refugees: Kenneth from Kenya and Joseph from the Congo. The three men cope with the trauma of their past by drinking together and creating a trivia game in which they quiz one another on African coups and dictators. Sepha's uneventful life is disrupted when Judith and Naomi, a white woman and her biracial daughter, move next door to him and Sepha begins to see his friendship with the two as way to escape his isolated and unsettled life.

In his essay "Reflections on Exile", Edward Said writes about the "territory of not-belonging" (Said, 2000:173-176), inhabited by refugees, exiles and immigrants, "just beyond the frontier between 'us' and 'outsiders'" (Said, 2000:177). Elaborating upon Simone Weil's argument that "rootedness" constitutes "perhaps the most important and least recognized needs of the human soul" (Weil, 1952: 41), Said explains that the uprooted exile distances himself from "commitments, connections and community". Severed from his roots, the exile feels "an urgent need to reconstitute [his] broken life, usually by seeing himself as part of a triumphant ideology or restored people", (Said, 2000:177). In other words, the exile does not look to smaller places of the neighborhood to find meaning, but instead to larger, more abstract and symbolic places, such as the imagined community of the nation, in order to understand his new life in his new environment.

By reading the lived space that Mengestu's African refugees construct for themselves through Said's theoretical "territory of not belonging" we can better understand the ironic mix of nostalgia and bitterness with which they relate to their home countries and the contrasting senses of desire and disillusionment through which they view American ideals and their physical embodiments in monumental spaces of the Capitol. In *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears,* Sepha, Kenneth and Joseph dangle in between two worlds: the "home" of their past whose commemoration renders painful memories of loss and the America of the present and future, where their skin color and foreign origin sets them apart. Exiled from the former yet unable to let go of their attachment to it, these characters resist new attachments to communities within their host lands. Like Said's theoretical exile, they attempt to recreate their identities and reclaim a sense of inclusion by internalizing America's "triumphant ideologies". They long to construct their "new lives" in America in accordance with totalizing national narratives of universal success and opportunity. When they are unsuccessful, they are left with a residual feeling of emptiness, and are unable to re-conceptualize new lives in America apart from these received versions of national experience. Disconnected from smaller communities in the city and excluded from the imagined national community embodied in the Capitol's public space, these characters understand Washington, D.C. as a space that serves as a constant reminder of their otherness within the nation.

Sepha's struggle to identify with the inhabitants of his neighborhood illustrates the sense of disconnectedness that the immigrants in Mengestu's novel feel from smaller locales within the city. As the Logan Circle community rallies against the evictions that have been imposed upon longtime residents, Sepha is hesitant to express solidarity with their cause. He understands more than anyone the feeling of displacement, but he has never settled quite comfortably enough into his current neighborhood to see this threat to his community as a threat to himself, his history and his identity As the community meets to discuss their cause, Sepha feels uncomfortable and out of place. He sneaks quietly into the meeting in hopes of entering unnoticed, and he hesitates to choose sides (198). His attempts at a relationship with Judith, the first of

the "urban pioneers" to enter the neighborhood, is taken by his neighbors as the ultimate betrayal of their communal solidarity. Even in a neighborhood where Sepha has lived for seventeen years, he still feels like an outsider

This theme of alienation and isolation manifests itself consistently through Mengestu's novel. From the illustration of Kenneth sitting in his unfurnished apartment "frozen and lifeless in a plastic lawn chair by the patio windows, drinking beer after beer, wiggling his toes in his expensive wools socks,…hysterically laughing to himself," (145), to Sepha's portrayal of his apartment and store as his "own private world" from which he is able to watch, rather than truly participate in the world outside. The Washington, D.C. that these characters inhabit is one in which they have never fully invested themselves, one in which they still feel like isolated outsiders after nearly two decades in the city. This depiction is radically different from Clinton's illustration of the capital city as a universal "home" and physical allegory of national potential, and poses a challenge to the cultural mythologies that imagine America as a promised land of inclusion and opportunity for all.

Sepha describes his life America in "fragments and pieces" rather than as a unified whole (45). He likens the experience of a refugee, who "who lives in the shadows of every neighborhood, owns corner stores, lives in run-down apartments…and walks the same streets every day" to that of a somnambulist: half present and half-awake so that the world around him remains devoid of emotional attachments and stable relationships. (35). In this dreamlike state, Sepha sees images of his family everywhere in the city. Rather than identifying with the sanitized history inscribed into the public places of his surroundings, Sepha locates memories of his African past within the alley ways, busses and hidden corners of poor neighborhoods. "At times," he narrates, "it felt as if I had never really left. I searched for familiarity wherever I went…I let my imagination get the best of me. My hallucinations became standard… How was I supposed to live in America when I had never really left Ethiopia?" (175-176).

One night, as Sepha heads back to his apartment on Logan Circle, he reflects on the phrase "going back home". Throughout his meditation, his thoughts bounce back

and forth between Logan Circle and Addis Adaba, and remain ambiguously un-rooted to a specific time or place. This depiction illustrates the ambiguity that Sepha feels about locating any specific location, either in Washington, D.C. or in Addis Adaba as "home":

> *There is a simple and startling power to that phrase: going back home. There is an implied contradiction, a sense of moving forward and backward at the same time, but there's no tension in the phrase. Instead the contradiction gives in to something else: an understanding, perhaps, that what you're returning to can never be the same was what you left. I understand that distant, faraway look I've seen in other immigrants when they talk about returning to wherever it was they first came from. I can see the store exactly as I left it this morning…I can see it just as clearly as I can still see the look on my mother's face as she handed me all of her jewelry in a red cloth sack and begged me to leave…*
>
> *It would be so much easier to never return, wouldn't it? To just keep walking down this road until I hit the city's edge. And from there I could hop on a bus or train and make my way farther south or north or start all over again. How long did it take for me to understand that I was never going to return to Ethiopia again?...I couldn't remember at which point I understood that I had left home for good…I never understood…until right now: that everything went with [my father]. (174-177).*

Sepha knows that the Ethiopia of his childhood no longer exists, and without his father, he cannot call it home. However, he has been unable to form new attachments in America from which he can locate a rooted sense of belonging. As a result, Sepha wanders the street of Washington, D.C., engaging in conversation with the memories of his dead father, rendering "conjured, fictitious dreams" of Addis from the trains and beggars around him. (176). He remains suspended in a homesick and hollow life between Ethiopia and America, somewhere in between dreams and reality, memories and loss.

Kenneth and Joseph experience similar feelings of dislocation and alienation. Exiled from their homelands, the three immigrants live in a constant state of arrival and

departure, caught indeterminately in an intangible time and place. In order cope with their anger and longings for connectedness they create a trivia game of African dictators and coups. Each time that a conversation drifts too closely towards their new frustrations in the United States, one of the three begins to test the others' memories of the continent that they have left behind. This game poignantly symbolizes the troubled way in which these displaced characters relate to "home". They wish to stay connected to their home countries in Africa, and they fear that too much time in America will lead them to forget their pasts. Yet, as a way of negotiating their longings for return, they collectively render images of their country as a place of war and instability, a hell that stands in contrast to the mythologized American "heaven" that they now inhabit. The game serves to distract them from the frustrations of their own life while allowing them to maintain contact with Africa. Through it, they aim to ease the identity crises and homesickness that their exile has rendered part of their everyday experiences

The Washington, D.C., depicted through these illustrations of solitude and displacement differs from the Washington, D.C. of both Jones's novels and from the "hegemonic landscape" that Farrar critiques. Sepha, Kenneth and Joseph do not invest localized attachments into their surroundings the way that Jones's characters do. The city of Washington D.C. exists for them not as a collection of safe spaces but rather as an alien space devoid of secure or empowering havens. In the absence of these personal connections to parts of city, the characters look to the commemorative landscape of the capital to situate themselves in their new environment.

For this reason, the symbolic space of Washington, D.C. is featured much more prominently in Mengestu's novel than it is Jones's story collection. While very few of Jones's characters experience any of the monuments, government buildings or historic spaces in Washington, D.C. as meaningful places (let alone safe spaces), Sepha, Kenneth and Joseph frequently interact with these monumental spaces in lieu of the private ones in which they feel alienated. However, they do not locate these monumental spaces as "mirrors" in which they can "envision their own membership", nor do they identify with the selected history communicated through their structure. Instead, Sepha, Kenneth, and Joseph look to these spaces with a sense of awe and longing for the

promises that they project. As their lives in America fail to match up with these promises, they begin to relate to these monuments and ideals with resentment, and come to perceive the city as a physical reminder of their marginality. As the three men view, from a distance, the landscape of the National Mall, Sepha narrates:

> *The Capitol's white dome seems to hover in front of us, and if I turn just a little to the right, I can see the red eye sitting at the peak of the Washington Monument. There is no mystery left in any of those buildings for us, and at times I wonder how there ever could have been.*
>
> *I stop in the middle of the road as we cross the street toward the car and look up and hard while Kenneth and Joseph walk on. I am waiting to see if I can recall that emotion now—a silent, almost fearful awe that came when I first saw each building from a passing van, and that continued to come involuntarily for years afterward. My mother and father claimed to have felt something similar every time they saw the emperor in Ethiopia—power embodied, as it were, in a single man.*
>
> *…"Look at those buildings," Joseph said. "I would have…" He stopped there, stuck in midsentence. It was one of the few times in all the years I have known him that he has ever been speechless. We rarely talked about those buildings explicitly, but I know that Joseph and Kenneth both spent hours standing in front of Lincoln's massive, imposing figure, seated on his throne with an indifferent gaze cast toward the city. During his first few months in America, Joseph had memorized the Gettysburg Address off the memorial's walls, and spent several nights watching the sun rise from its steps. It's been years since either of them has gone near those buildings, and how could you blame them? Reality has settled in, and they're both still waiting to recover. (46-47).*

The sense of disillusionment and disappointment with which these characters relate to the symbolic space of Washington, D.C. reflects their disenchantment with the promises and ideals of the nation as a whole. When they first arrive in Washington, D.C., the three men see the country through ideological images that communicate promise,

wealth and opportunity. Exiled from a past of meaningful places and memories, they first look to the monuments of the national mall to construct visions for their new lives in America, and exhibit an almost obsessive fascination with the buildings. The three men constantly speculate on the opportunities that America has in store for them, and look to pre-fashioned images American success to envision their futures. When Sepha first opens his store in Logan Circle, he and his friends see it as "a departure from frustrating, underpaying jobs and unrealized ambitions." Sepha recollects their conversations that first night in his new store, growing "increasingly grand, our ambitions for the world limited only by imagination," (144-145).

However, Joseph, Kenneth and Sepha's lived experiences in America put them into direct contact with racism and exclusion. As "reality sets in", the characters begin to relate to the nation and its promises with resentment, cursing it as a "little bastard child" where the promises of "wealth and power were not immutable". As a result, they view to the symbolic space of the Mall and Capitol with a sense of loss. However, in the absence of strong communities through which they can understand alternate futures or identities, these characters negotiate their marginalized experiences with a mix of denial and disillusionment. They know that their "hyper-inflated optimism and irrational hope" for America is unrealistic, but the pain of fully acknowledging their disenchantment is too great to bear.

The title of the novel captures the ironic sense of striving and optimism with which Joseph, Kenneth and Sepha first relate to America. "The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears" comes from the last lines of "The Inferno", just as Dante's character leaves hell and sets route to purgatory. Joseph takes these lines to be "best lines of poetry ever written" and declares that "no one can understand that line like an African because that is what [Africans] lived through. Hell everyday with glimpses of heaven in between," (100).

In Joseph's poetic conception of the world, America is imagined as heaven, and its promises of opportunity constitute "some of the beautiful things that heaven bears". However, like Dante, Joseph and his friends see these "beautiful things" as part of an idealized, abstract construction of "heaven" that they have yet to enter. They have made

it out of Africa, a hell of coups and genocide, but they remain outside the American "promised land" of justice and prosperity. Instead, these characters inhabit an uprooted place between the hell of their pasts and the mythologized heaven of America's symbolic nation-space. Their visions of "life in America" are never fully experienced, but rather always a promise of an unrealized future.

Throughout the novel, the "beautiful things that heaven bears" are predominantly equated with material wealth, elevated social stature and pre-established images of American success. Kenneth, an engineer, constantly tries to mimic that actions and appearances of the powerful, white, American men for whom he works. Joseph, "plays the role of an aspiring academic" and dreams of attending Michigan to earn his Ph.D. because he's heard it's a "top notch school" (101). Even Sepha, the protagonist who, out of the three, expresses the greatest degree of suspicion towards American ideals of wealth and mobility, only begins to see the first semblance of a life for himself in America when he momentarily enters the world of his white, upper middle class neighbors, and imagines himself as part of their family. The most lively and exciting scene in the novel occurs as Sepha rushes through the city, up into Georgetown to purchase Christmas presents for Judith and Naomi. He perceives the opportunity to participate in this ritual of American consumerism as the ultimate indication of his inclusion into the nation and as hints of a start of "real life" in America.

Reality fails to live up to these men's dreams: Kenneth drives a rusting car and lives in a decaying apartment, and Joseph, never makes it beyond community extension classes and an exploitive, demeaning waiting job at the Colonial Grill. When Sepha first begins to envision a new life for himself through his relationship to Judith and Naomi, he becomes disillusioned by the class differences that exist between them. He describes his attempts at a relationship as "a case of mistaken identity: "I had forgotten who I was with my shabby apartment and run down store, and like any great fool, I had tried to recast myself as the type of man who dined casually on porcelain plates and chatted easily about Emerson and Tocqueville while sitting on a plush leather couch in a grand house," (180). Sepha feels like an intruder; inadequate and ashamed of his attempts to

transgress the lines of nationality, race, class and "distances too great to be crossed by a couple of dinners and over the counter banter," (137).

To cope with these frustrations, Kenneth, Sepha and Joseph fashion their friendships with one another around denial and evasion. Just as three men rarely talk about the monuments, they never explicitly acknowledge their pain to one another, and instead spend their time drinking and joking, always rooting one another on to "keep fighting the good fight". These positive public interactions contrast with the internal emptiness that pervades Sepha's private narrative, and the lack of openness between Sepha and his friends contributes to the sense of unsettledness that he feels in his new environment.

Sepha and Joseph are confronted by the harsh realities that they publicly deny when Sepha visits his friend at his waiting job at the Colonial Grill. Joseph has told Sepha and Kenneth that his job at the restaurant signals "step up in the world, a sign of progress, advancement and promotion" (169), because it put him in close physical proximity to power through the wealthy restaurant patrons. However, when Sepha visits him, he and Joseph are paralyzed by the realities of their stagnant lives in America. "We can't make sense of the image staring back from only a few yards away," Sepha narrates as the two men stare at one another through the window of the downtown restaurant. "Joseph barely looks anything like the man I know. It's not just the tuxedo that changes him, it's the context and the expression on his face. Despite what he may have said in the past, I've always known that he has never wanted Kenneth or me to set foot inside that restaurant while he was working there….There is no denying anymore who we are and what we've become," (173).

Joseph and Sepha are "unable to make sense" of the images they see at the Colonial Grill because it does not fit in with the visions that they have had for their lives in America. It is during these moments that the gap between their idealized visions of America and their lived experiences within its margins becomes undeniably clear. However, unlike the characters in Jones's story, who react to this reality by refashioning minority group identities and counter-narratives based on community values, the African immigrants of Mengestu's novel are unable to conceive of prosperity and

fulfillment outside of definitions that they have received through national discourses. Without senses of rootedness to smaller communities from which they could form alternate identities or future visions in America, Mengestu's characters find themselves in relentless dialogue with the national success myth of the American Dream, defining their successes and failures according to its prescriptions and envisioning their futures along its narrative structure. They look to the national monuments and public spaces of the Capitol to inform their "abstract knowledge" of the nation, and, despite lived experiences that contest these symbolic representations, they continue to strive, wavering between Africa and America, amongst a sense of futility and an irrepressible longing for inclusion. Through these lived experiences in the city, Mengestu's characters construct lived spaces invested with ambiguous meanings of dislocation, and depict the city at large as a physical reminder of their otherness. Their narratives evoke what Kenneth Lynn has describes as an "American Nightmare", in which characters', unable to access to the opportunity promised through national discourses, become disillusioned with the nation, the city and their place within it.

CONCLUSION: MARGINALIZED VOICES AND DEMOCRATIC SPACE

Going beyond nationalisms…our artistic product presents hybrid realities and colliding visions within coalition. We practice the epistemology of multiplicity and border semiotics.
(Gomez-Pena, 1993)

Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified or excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is VITAL that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space.
(Anzaldua 1990)

As Jones and Mengestu represent Washington, D.C. not as a unifying symbolic space in which each citizen can "envision their membership" but as a complex metropolis where characters feel rooted to neighborhood locales or de-territorialized throughout, they evoke narratives that pry open the dominant discourses of success and inclusion that are embodied into the symbolic national spaces of their urban surroundings. Jones evokes a Washington, D.C. that is the site of communities and "safe

spaces" that provide characters with a sense of belonging in the face of an unwelcoming and unmanageable urban environment. It is from these smaller locales within the city that his characters understand their identities and vocalize community narratives that oppose totalizing nationalist constructions. In contrast, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* depicts Washington through the eyes of outsiders. Displaced from their home countries in Africa and unable to establish a sense of rootedness in their new environments, the exiles in Mengestu's novel find less meaning in the smaller locales within Washington, D.C. Disconnected from any tangible sense of community, they look to the symbolic spaces of the city and the imagined community of the nation in order to recreate their identities and understand their place in their new homes. However, as "reality sets in" and their experiences fail to live up to the promises of national ideologies, the city, and particularly its monumental space, begins to serve as a reminder of their otherness and alienation. What emerges from their stories, like those of Jones's collection, are narratives that contest the mainstream "American Dream" myth of universal opportunity and inclusion. However, unlike Jones's story sequence, Mengestu's novel does not present an alternative community narrative. Instead, what is evoked is an "American nightmare", in which these characters, uprooted from their pasts and disenchanted by the unrealized ideals of their new home, articulate their experiences from a strained and striving place between "American" and "outsider".

Read together, these two pieces of literature illustrate two very different ways of knowing the city. They expose instances in which the promises of the American Dream fail to manifest themselves in the lives of disenfranchised members of the imagined national community, and depict distinct means of constructing everyday life in the face of social exclusion. While a further comparative analysis of these works could explore what they can tell us about the importance of rootedness, the extent to which each narrative communicates hope in the face of loss, or the historical and social context of the experiences of these two minority groups in Washington, D.C., I instead choose to conclude by stepping back, away from a close textual analysis of these works. Instead, I pose the question: why read these pieces of literature at all? Why are local epistemologies of the city and the counter-narratives they articulate important? How

can re-conceptualizations of urban spaces and stories be used to imagine a space that distributes democracy more inclusively?

In his assessment of planning agendas in Washington, D.C. Josep Subiros laments that "Congress and the federal government have always seen and continue to see Washington, D.C., not as a real and complex city but essentially as the malleable seat of federal institutions and as a symbolic and monumental display of national unity," (Subiros, 1997:15). Farrar and Gillette have forwarded similar critiques, and have demonstrated that, since its inception, Washington's planning initiatives have focused more on aesthetics than justice, and have been organized around improving the city's capacity to perform federal functions, both practical and symbolic (Farrar, 2008; Gillette, 2006). In other words, symbolic constructions of Washington, D.C. as a capital city and "showplace for the world" rather than a complex and heterogeneous metropolis have figured largely into planners' visions for Washington, serving dominant economic interests that benefit from increased tourism and capital investment. "From the point of view of this plan", argues Subiros "the basic users of the city are the hundreds of thousands of suburban residents who work in the District every day and the millions of tourists who flock to the National Mall every year, (Subiros, 1997: 17)" By configuring planning initiatives that ignore the lived experiences of marginalized residents in the city, Washington, D.C. planners have designed an urban space that displays democracy as spectacle but fails to distribute it spatially.

Farrar argues that "plans for democratic spaces do not shy away from argument, antagonism, or contestation; they allow for multiple readings and uses of that space, cultivate an appreciation for the contestability of established meanings, and offer support for entering public life and public conversation" (Farrar, 2008:135-136). Similarly, urban theorist Leonie Sandercock advocates that planning for justice must make the "invisible visible" by supplementing "expert", abstracted planning knowledge with a recognition of the "epistemic multiplicity" of urban space (Sandercock, 1998). Writings of women/people of color, inhabiting the margins–psychologically, epistemologically, ontologically, and methodologically–challenge us," she explains, by "showing us a new way, a new space, a space that is not comfortable

but risky, not rigid but flexible, but above all, a space of radical possibility-a way forward," (Sandercock, 1995: 79). Sandercock argues that a participatory planning practice that utilizes marginalized experiences of space to imagine a new way forward would incorporate into its methodology "alternative ways of knowing, learning, discovering….from talk to storytelling, blues, to rap, poetry and song; and visual representations from cartoons to murals, paintings to quilts" (Sandercock, 1998: 121).

By articulating literary counter-narratives from the margin and making clear the connection between lived space and dissident local knowledge, Jones's story collection and Mengestu's novel constitute these "alternate ways of knowing" and reveal the contestability of symbolic constructions of space in Washington, D.C. These works demonstrate that Washington, D.C. is a city of "paradox and contestation, where various forms of identity, morality and knowledge are produced, challenged, reinforced and disputed' (Farrar, 2008: 29). They articulate marginalized perspectives of the city, and demonstrate that the users of Washington, D.C. are not, as planners have conceived them to be, simply suburban residents and tourists, but also a diverse set of residents, some of whom not have access to the national ideals incarnated at the city center and reproduced through the hegemonic landscape. The recognition and inclusion of these voices, and the voices of other marginalized city residents, destabilizes the "expert" knowledge and priorities of civic planners. By making clear that the organization of the city, as it is and as it has been, has failed to distribute liberty and justice for all to many of its residents, these oppositional worldviews make clear that future visions for a Washington, D.C. that truly aspires to embody the democratic ideals of liberty and justice for all must incorporate excluded epistemologies into plans for democratic urban space.

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