

SECTION III
RACE AND CLASS

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“MY GOD, THEY MUST HAVE RIOTS ON THOSE THINGS
ALL THE TIME”: AFRICAN AMERICAN GEOGRAPHIES
AND BODIES ON NORTHERN URBAN PUBLIC TRANS-
PORTATION, 1915-1940

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“On a bright September morning in 1921, I came up out of the subway at 135th and Lenox into the beginnings of the Negro Renaissance,” Langston Hughes wrote about his introduction to Harlem.¹ Three years after his first steps into sunny Harlem, a subway platform became the setting for Hughes’ “Subway Face,” a poem of anonymous, fleeting attraction originally published in the December 1924 issue of the NAACP’s *Crisis*:

That I have been looking
For you all my life
Does not matter to you.
You do not know.

You never knew.
Nor did I.
Now you take the Harlem train uptown;
I take a local down.²

The subway itself is secondary to Hughes’ encounter with the person across the subway platform, just as it is mere background to his recollection of the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance. But the subway was what connected Harlem to the rest of Manhattan, and without it, the “Subway Face” encounter would not have been possible. The poem hinges on the fleeting and anonymous nature of the encounter, enabled by the two trains traveling in opposite directions on a fixed schedule, precluding any deeper connection. In eight sparse lines, Hughes captures the anonymity and mobility of city life.

In the quarter-century between the World Wars—roughly from 1915 to 1940—in cities like New York and Chicago, public transportation was integral to urban culture, shaping the experience of an accelerated pace of life. Before suburbanization and the automobile dominated the American landscape, subways

and streetcars were king. In literature, they brought Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* into Harlem and were the backdrop to Bigger Thomas' Chicago in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Public transportation constituted not merely a technological innovation, but a social, economic, and aesthetic one as well, bringing together and leveling diverse riderships with a flat, affordable five-cent fare that took passengers to their destinations with modern speed and style. As Hughes subtly reminds the reader in "Subway Face," the same subway platform could take a rider uptown to black Harlem or downtown to white Manhattan; it expanded the sphere of citizens' mobility for work and recreation beyond their immediate surroundings to the entirety of Manhattan and, eventually, to the surrounding boroughs as well. Similarly, elevated trains and streetcars transported African Americans to and from Chicago's South Side black belt for work and play, making the boundaries of a segregated community more fluid than perhaps many whites would have liked them to be.

Whereas African Americans could be residentially segregated with housing costs, exclusionary covenants, city planning, and discriminatory hiring practices, anyone with the five-cent fare was able to ride the El or the subway. The result was an uneasy and contested public social space that, while it condensed space and time by making it easier and faster to travel long distances in shorter times, on a more individual level also presented a condensed space *within* the confines of the mode of transportation. It was a space that, as passengers sat or stood hanging onto a leather strap within a streetcar or a subway car, was often crowded and forced different races, classes, ethnicities, and genders into closer proximity than was experienced in even city streets or public parks. Although not published until 1951 in "Montage of a Dream Deferred," Hughes' "Subway Rush Hour" would have rung just as true in the interwar:

Mingled
breath and smell
so close
mingled
black and white
so near
no room for fear.³

While "Subway Face" implies condensed geographical space on a communal level, "Subway Rush Hour" reveals condensed bodily space on a personal level as riders are physically pressed close to one another in a subway car. Whether the poem's last line—"no room for fear"—is more a statement of what is or what ought to be remains unclear, but the nearly claustrophobic bodily contact is inescapable, just as it was for subway and streetcar riders between the World Wars. By the post-war era, perhaps Hughes' "Subway Face" hopefully looks forward toward interracial equality and understanding as part of a growing Civil Rights movement while also gesturing backward toward a history of racial fear and inequality on public transportation.⁴ However vague and diffuse the fear in "Subway Rush Hour" is

construed to be, whether psychological or physical, the fact remains that public transportation was not always a site for fleeting attraction. Subways and streetcars did, at times, represent an incipient interracial physical threat.

In Hughes' two poems, then, are contained two ways in which public transportation and race converged in the years between the World Wars. First, public transportation defined and disrupted geographical boundaries on a communal level; it could simultaneously serve as a geographical boundary for a black community while providing the means to transgress that boundary, connecting workers to their jobs, children to their schools, and families to recreation points outside of the delimited "black belt." Second, it contested bodily boundaries on an individual level; public transportation was perhaps the most frequent site of close physical contact between blacks and whites, bringing black and white bodies closer together than any other public situation, collapsing individual bodily boundaries literally at the same time as it collapsed geographical boundaries by transporting those black bodies to white areas. On both a communal and individual level, public transportation represented a space of potential physical threat; close personal contact raised fears about the transmission of tuberculosis and the instigation of interracial physical violence.⁵

While much has been written about both African American housing and labor in the urban North in this era, relatively little attention, by contrast, has been given to African Americans' time in the transitional, liminal public spaces—public transportation, city streets, public parks—between the home and the work settings.⁶ Chicago and New York serve as the loci for this study for multiple reasons: during this time, both cities had two of the most advanced and expansive urban transit systems, only to decline in importance with the automobile's ascendance and white flight to the suburbs in mid-century; both cities had (and still do have) two of the largest African American communities in Harlem and Chicago's South Side black belt; and both cities were magnets for African Americans migrating from the South to Northern metropolitan areas during this extended Great Migration era. In the wake of the 1935 Harlem riot, it was estimated that ninety-five percent of Harlemites took public transportation to and from work each day, and public transportation was just as heavily used in Chicago.⁷ Unquestionably, black (and white, for that matter) experiences in New York and Chicago during this quarter-century were not identical. Yet public transportation still functioned in much the same way in both cities, shaping citizen perceptions—migrant and lifelong northerners, middle-class and working-class men and women alike—of the urban environment around them; it helped breach communal geographical boundaries and test individual physical boundaries.⁸

Crossing Boundaries: African Americans and Public Transportation Geography

New York City's subway opened to great fanfare in October 1904; in 1916, the Chicago surface streetcar lines carried more than three and a half million passengers over the course of a normal twenty-four hour day. The elevated lines carried

more than a half million in the same period.⁹ Ridership only grew as lines expanded service; it was the heyday of urban public transportation and the crowds were enormous, regularly eliciting complaints from riders.¹⁰ Subways, elevated train lines, and streetcars were an integral part of the urban environment that, according to Stephen Kern, “created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space.”¹¹ If these changes were unsettling to established urban citizens in New York and Chicago, they were all the more disconcerting to the masses of African Americans making their way north in search of a new life.

Scarcely more than a decade after the New York City subway opened for business, the Great Migration was underway in earnest; it was all these transportation services could do to keep up with ever increasing urban density and the massive influx of African Americans from the South. Although dwarfed in sheer numbers by World War II era migration a generation later, Chicago’s black population more than doubled from 1910 to 1920, then doubled again by 1930—the South Side black belt was behind only Harlem as the world’s largest “Negro city.”¹² St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in *Black Metropolis*, their landmark study of the African American population in Chicago, noted that for migrants, “Their first task was to adjust themselves to a modern industrial city. Life in the city involved the substitution of the clock for the sun and discipline of the factory for that of the agricultural cycle.”¹³ Public transportation was part of that reorientation of time and space in the industrial city. It was a reorientation that, to varying degrees, both migrants and those already accustomed to the North were undergoing.

If not for the subway, Harlem probably would not have been the destination for black migrants fresh from the South. As Gilbert Osofsky points out, the sheer distance of Harlem from downtown made settlement in the late nineteenth-century geographically difficult. The extension of elevated train lines north and associated real estate speculation by the end of the century, however, had connected the area to downtown and made travel much quicker and more efficient, spurring growth.¹⁴ Too much building too fast in Harlem gradually led to lower property values which, in turn, lured more and more blacks to a housing situation that, while it still treated them unequally, proved a better opportunity than living elsewhere in Manhattan.¹⁵ In a very real sense, Harlem would not have existed as blacks knew it in the 1920s and ‘30s had subway planners not built a line up Lenox Avenue decades earlier.

If subway lines facilitated the growth of black communities in Harlem, rail tracks on Chicago’s South Side physically constricted the growth of the African American community. By the turn of the century, Chicago’s South Side black belt was already well-established as a geographical area bounded on all sides by train tracks.¹⁶ One South Side resident recalled that walking to school as a boy in the mid-1930s, he and his friends had to fend off snowballs and rocks from white children once they crossed the railroad tracks on their way to school.¹⁷ Yet just as railroad lines served as boundaries for whites to police, streetcar and elevated train lines simultaneously provided the means for blacks to transgress those boundaries. Transportation infrastructure, then, both contained and expanded the black social sphere.

Work was the primary reason that blacks rode public transportation in New York and Chicago.¹⁸ Industry was centered mostly around steel and meatpacking in Chicago, and the proportion of African American workers in these industries exploded during the Great Migration.¹⁹ To get to and from work at the stockyards, they generally took streetcars west from the black belt and through Packingtown, a white ethnic neighborhood adjacent to the stockyards where many meatpackers lived. Many black workers gained employment in the stockyards as strikebreakers, crossing meatpacking union lines as they crossed geographical color lines on their way to work each morning. While stockyard and manufacturing employment grew, employment in the service industry downtown began to slowly decline as black servants, waiters, and housekeepers were replaced with white workers.²⁰ Many African Americans still traveled downtown to Chicago's Loop for these jobs, however, inevitably coming into contact with whites on their daily streetcar or elevated train rides north for work—enough of them so that Chicago, whether the white citizens were comfortable with it or not, was “used to seeing Negroes all over the city.”²¹

Despite black ridership's citywide reach, in reality it was concentrated almost exclusively on twelve lines that connected the black belt to places of employment, lines that accounted for only eleven percent of total track mileage. While African Americans in Chicago accounted for only four percent of the city's population, it was not unusual for them to account for over half of the streetcar ridership in the black belt and, conversely, a miniscule proportion of the ridership in other areas of the city.²² In effect, public transportation both reflected and reinforced segregated housing patterns on a citywide scale while allowing for significant interracial contact within proscribed geographical boundaries.²³ Affluent white North side residents might rarely encounter African Americans on public transportation, but for working class whites on the South Side it would have been a daily occurrence.

A 1935 assessment of Harlem's employment situation found that, while industrial and manufacturing work was not as significant as it was in Chicago, Harlemites by and large took public transportation to work all over the city much like black Chicagoans did. While Harlem's black men most often worked as “waiters, cooks, porters, doormen, cleaners, handymen, elevator runners, house attendants, and longshoremen,” the women worked primarily “in needle-trade factories and in homes as domestic servants.”²⁴ Not only did the subway allow women to travel to these jobs all over New York, but during the Depression subway stations became employment agencies of sorts. The *Chicago Defender* noted that in 1930, hundreds of women regularly gathered at subway stations waiting to take a Seventh Avenue train from Harlem up to the Bronx to do a day's housework for a white housewife.²⁵ In *Black Metropolis*, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton noted that in Chicago the situation was much the same: “many Negro women were so desperate for employment during the Depression,” they wrote, “that they actually offered their services at the so-called ‘slave markets’—street corners where Negro women congregated to await white housewives who came daily to take their pick

and bid wages down.”²⁶ Although white housewives may have ventured into Harlem and Chicago’s South Side to procure a housekeeper or domestic servant, white traffic into black communities was much less common than black traffic into white areas. Whites did often take the subway uptown to Harlem to enjoy the nightlife, but they had little other reason to go there.²⁷

By contrast, the bulk of African American mobility in New York and Chicago was something that workers were largely compelled to do in order to make a living—it was a necessity. Given the choice, whites more often than not sought to reinforce barriers between white and black communities, not make them more porous. Once Harlem was established as Manhattan’s black belt, some citizens clearly saw subway lines as an unwanted connection between the black belt and white communities. In 1922, a proposed subway line extension that would connect the white Central Park West neighborhood directly to Harlem drew protest from the Central Park West and Columbus Avenue Association which claimed that “there is little use in trying to beautify Central Park West if the line serving it terminates in the ‘black belt’ of Harlem.”²⁸ Similarly, in Chicago there was white resistance to a proposal that would extend streetcar lines and link predominantly white Hyde Park with the black belt.²⁹ Despite these sorts of efforts, black mobility only increased as more transit lines were constructed and a growing population fueled mostly by southern migration utilized them to reach jobs all over the city.

Mobility, whether for work or not, was something that black migrants from the South appreciated; it embodied the potential for freedom and racial progress. When asked by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations (formed after the 1919 race riot) about the freedom, independence, and wages in Chicago as compared to the South, a few respondents cited public transportation as the locus for these differences. One said that a benefit of higher wages in the North was that he could go anywhere he pleased on the streetcars after paying his fare and another noted that he could sit anywhere on the cars he pleased as well.³⁰ As James Grossman points out, despite white prejudice against blacks that often manifested itself as an unwillingness to sit next to a black passenger, such white discomfort and distaste was most often borne silently—in stark contrast to the prejudice migrants were used to encountering in the South.³¹ And yet, while blacks could, in fact, go anywhere they pleased on the cars and sit next to whites, those journeys were not always without incident. The Commission saw the Great Migration as the catalyst for discord on the streetcars, stating that “The contacts of Negroes and whites on the street cars never provoked any considerable discussion until the period of Negro migration from the South.”³²

As with the general population, black traffic was heaviest during rush hour in the mornings and afternoons.³³ Black workers, many of them migrants, would return home from a day at the stockyards or factories, having to force their way onto crowded streetcars with their clothes often soiled and smelling. In the process, they often came into closer personal bodily contact with whites than any other situation would occasion. This sort of interracial contact on streetcars was such a salient issue following the 1919 race riot, in fact, that the Commission devoted an entire

section of its report to interracial contacts on public transportation, prompting the *Chicago Defender* to call friction on streetcar lines an "old problem."³⁴

Manners and Migrants: African American Bodies on Public Transportation

While streetcars brought blacks and whites closer on a geographical level, collapsing time and space barriers, they also brought blacks and whites closer on a personal physical level. Crowding was nearly inescapable in all aspects of black urban life in this era: tenement houses were overcrowded, streets overflowed with people and streetcars, and the cars themselves were crowded with people.³⁵ The Chicago Commission's 1922 report found interracial contact on public transportation important for three primary reasons: it potentially facilitated stereotyping, was "unsupervised" unlike contact at work or school, and "involve[d] a degree of physical contact between Negroes and whites which rarely occurs under other circumstances."³⁶ The African American community was certainly aware that individual behavior on streetcars and subways reflected on the race as a whole and took pains to encourage black citizens to be aware of their behavior.

Embodying what Evelyn Higginbotham calls the "politics of respectability," a 1923 *Chicago Defender* article compiled by the Chicago NAACP's Educational Committee encouraged African Americans to observe "certain individual and community duties" as part of being a good citizen, several of which pertained to behavior on public transportation.³⁷ Fraught with class tension, the article states in part:

On street cars, busses, and in public places you come in contact with others who pay the same price and have the same rights as you. You have a right there the same as they, but you also owe a duty as a citizen to the public and the individual to be neat and clean and not make yourself a nuisance and objectionable. One seat on a street car is all any individual is entitled to. To sprawl all over a car or to engage in loud talking, eating and sleeping show very bad manners.³⁸

So while public transportation's equal fares afforded black riders rights, the "respectable" black community policed attendant responsibilities as well. More than a decade later, little had seemingly changed; a 1933 column called "Everyday Courtesies" tackled the same issue, though focusing less on riders coming back from work than the everyday rider.³⁹ Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* seems to have grasped the message about good behavior on streetcars, although ironically concluding that observing proper manners in public is useful mainly because it allows him the freedom to transgress more profound social codes. Taking a ride after murdering Mary Dalton, Bigger muses to himself: "Would any of the white faces all about him think that he had killed a rich white girl? No! They might think he would steal a dime, rape a woman, get drunk, or cut somebody; but to kill a millionaire's daughter and burn her body? He smiled a little, feeling a tingling sensation enveloping all his body. He saw it all very sharply and simply: act like other people thought you ought to act, yet do what you wanted."⁴⁰

Unlike Bigger, black working class migrants in the interwar era were frequently accused of not observing the types of “everyday courtesies” the *Defender’s* pages counseled. The Chicago Commission observed that many whites objected to the migrant’s “‘loud laughing and talking,’ his ‘ill-smelling clothes,’ his ‘roughness,’ and his tendency to ‘sit all over the car.’”⁴¹ Especially for migrants coming from a strict Jim Crow culture of segregation, the public transportation experience could be disconcerting. As James Grossman has pointed out, not all migrants reacted to a culture without Jim Crow in the same way. For as many migrants that pushed the boundaries of their newfound freedom resulting in whites being put off by their behavior, others took a more cautious approach.⁴² One Chicago newcomer remembered, “When I got here and got on the street cars and saw colored people sitting by white people all over the car I just held my breath, for I thought any minute they would start something, then I saw nobody noticed it, and I just thought this was a real place for colored people.”⁴³ And yet a cautious approach and good behavior did not ameliorate all tension on streetcars and subways—some things were nearly beyond black riders’ control, whether they were migrants or not. At least one stockyard worker in the 1930s felt compelled to walk home each day rather than take the streetcar home in filthy clothes.⁴⁴

And yet “ill-smelling clothes,” although no doubt racialized in the popular imagination, were a function of occupation, not race or culture. In fact, the Chicago Commission went on to speculate that tensions on streetcar lines perhaps had as much to do with class as race, observing that middle and upper class whites had as much problem with white laborers as black laborers.⁴⁵ Indeed, some whites may have found working class public transportation riders, white and black alike, unpleasant to have to share personal space with. But there was a difference between mere unpleasantness and threat; the latter had much clearer racial connotations than the former. When forced up against a white woman on the subway, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* “wanted desperately to raise [his] hands to show her that it was against [his] will” and thinks, “my God, they must have riots on those things all the time.”⁴⁶ *Invisible Man* was not afraid simply of offending the white woman, but inciting riotous physical violence as a result; dread surrounding the escalation of such petty inconveniences and discomforts into violence was almost exclusively along racial, not class, lines. In both Chicago and New York, the sheer amount of people on the streetcars and subways often forced blacks and whites into close personal contact and no amount of proper behavior and well-laundered clothing could guard against the potential threat public transportation represented, both violent and otherwise.

TB, Robberies, and Riots: African Americans and Threat on Public Transportation

Although the possibility of physical violence was the most obvious threat accompanying close personal interracial contact, it was perhaps not the most persistent threat on public transportation. Ill-smelling clothes and the general uncleanliness of some black riders highlighted the potential threat of spreading

disease—tuberculosis (TB) in particular—through close personal contact. Although the actual threat of contracting TB from a subway or streetcar encounter was minimal, the perceived threat was much greater given racial bias and the state of medical knowledge.⁴⁷ Crowded, unsanitary living conditions in black communities such as Harlem and Chicago's South Side were a breeding ground for many diseases. TB was chief among them, reaching epidemic proportions in the late 1910s through the 1920s, seeming to subside only marginally into the 1930s. TB's contagiousness was well-known (and even over-blown) by both the black and white communities; the disease's high profile meant a general awareness that a passenger's subway and streetcar rides to and from work each day could have been spent unknowingly sitting or standing next to someone carrying this silent threat.⁴⁸

While newspaper accounts indicated that TB was primarily a black problem, racist connotations of the disease had been muted substantially by the late 1910s as the black population in northern urban centers swelled, supplanted by an interpretation that rightly identified overcrowding and unsanitary practices as the culprit.⁴⁹ Yet it did not matter if the public believed African Americans contracted TB because of some biological susceptibility or because of unsanitary, overcrowded living conditions; either way, they became a threat in the popular consciousness, a "source of contagion."⁵⁰ Tera Hunter notes that in the South, although both blacks and whites suffered from TB, "whites were likely to be seen as victims [and] blacks as perpetrators."⁵¹ The victim/perpetrator dynamic persisted in the North; Sylvia Washington Hood, in her study of environmental racism in Chicago, argues that the perception of African Americans as disease-carrying bodies was an integral part of city planning that geographically isolated and segregated black populations.⁵² Coercing blacks into living in a constricted geographical space may have succeeded in isolating the TB problem to an extent, but it was only exacerbated in those black communities—and blacks could not be confined to those areas at all times. Every day, black workers crossed the residential color line carefully drawn up and reinforced by restrictive white residential covenants, economic disparity, and scare tactics. Public transportation was a venue in which little free choice could be exercised by whites seeking to avoid blacks. In many public spaces—places of employment, parks, beaches, theaters, ballparks, and the like—it was often possible for whites to avoid close personal contact with blacks; all of these places were regularly segregated in the North, if not officially, then tacitly. Yet on public transportation, whites and blacks were forced into close personal contact with one another and the possible contagious disease threat each body represented. The anonymity of these bodies on a subway train or a streetcar only added to the threat, as no one could be sure of the health of the person next to them in the car.⁵³

While TB represented a perceived health threat to whites coming into contact with blacks on public transportation, there was also the specter of more immediate physical harm looming over those contacts. Although it does seem that violent crimes were relatively uncommon on public transportation, it was also true that "pickpockets waited on car platforms [...and] thieves occasionally com-

mitted armed robbery against the drivers.”⁵⁴ Whatever the level of violence on the subways and streetcars, one thing was certain: the white press helped shaped the perception that blacks were disproportionately responsible. But while newspaper accounts racially skewed the instigation of subway and streetcar violence, they also revealed the white lynch mob mentality often incited by interracial confrontations on public transportation. Whites may have had reason to fear violent attack from a single black assailant, but blacks in turn had to fear getting caught up in a riotous lynch mob.

In 1922 the *Chicago Defender* charged that while it was “a common occurrence to witness exhibitions of rudeness on our street cars [...] the participants are not confined to any one race, yet the readers of the *Tribune* would doubtless come to the conclusion that offenders are all of the Colored Race.”⁵⁵ Indeed, a glance at *Tribune* articles throughout the era reveals not only rudeness attributed to African Americans on streetcars, but a host of physically violent episodes as well. Some were robberies of El ticket agents, others resulted from escalations of verbal confrontations—arguments stemming from a foot stepped on, someone’s personal space crowded, and the like.⁵⁶ Whatever the cause, the message was the same: streetcars were potentially threatening places in Chicago. The situation was little different in New York City, save for the locus of violence shifting from streetcars to the subway. The *New York Times* reported the same sorts of interracial violence, mainly perpetrated by blacks.⁵⁷ Sometimes, the interracial violence on streetcars and subways in both New York and Chicago threatened to escalate beyond a somewhat contained confrontation into a full-fledged riot as angry white mobs were on the brink of lynching blacks who had committed—or were thought to have committed—a violent crime.⁵⁸

Ellison’s *Invisible Man* may have overestimated the frequency of riots on public conveyances, but New York and Chicago both did indeed “have riots on those things.” In August 1900, before the New York City subway was opened and Harlem became the center of the black population in the city, a race riot in Manhattan illustrated just how vulnerable blacks could be on public transportation. The *New York Times* noted that “every car passing up or down Eighth Avenue between the hours of 8 and 11 was stopped by the crowd and every negro on board was dragged out, hustled about, and beaten.”⁵⁹ Similarly, African Americans on streetcars, many on their way to or from work in the stockyards and the Loop, were specifically targeted by the white mobs as cars were stopped and riders dragged off and beaten during the 1919 Chicago riot.⁶⁰ Whatever the cause or scale of the violence, it was often lent a spectacular, sensationalized quality by newspapers reporting passengers that fled or looked on in terror at the violence in their midst.⁶¹

Art and Aesthetics: African American Cultural Production and Experience

Although this essay has, in the main, been concerned with the social and cultural resonance of public transportation in the African American geographi-

cal/communal and bodily/individual spheres of life (and the ways in which threat enters both), transportation impacted—as we have seen for the most part through the work of Hughes, Ellison, and Wright—the artistic and aesthetic spheres as well, precisely *because* it impacted the everyday. Cultural and artistic production is, in a sense, just another lens through which the broader social reality is filtered. Writers like Hughes, Ellison, and Wright respond to the very same realities of public transportation that, say, the average stockyard worker or domestic servant did. For artists and average urban citizens alike, public transportation between the World Wars highlighted contested geographical and bodily boundaries while compressing space and time—not to mention raising questions surrounding modernity and the relationship between man and machine.

Cultural critic Lewis Mumford drew aesthetic inspiration from subways and saw them as a synecdoche for the modern urban landscape that was increasingly mechanized and fast-paced, yet still quite human.⁶² Similarly, Joel Dinerstein argues that jazz was wildly popular during this era precisely “because its driving, syncopated rhythms reflected the speeded-up tempo of life produced by industrialization in the American workplace and the mechanization of urban life.”⁶³ But if the clatter and speed of subway cars could represent promise and progress as Duke Ellington’s “Daybreak Express” (composed in 1935) and “Take the ‘A’ Train” (composed in 1939) seem to, they could be just as alienating.

First published in 1950, Langston Hughes’ “Jukebox Love Song” captures just how conflicted the cultural significance of subways and streetcars had become over the preceding half-century. Like Mumford, Hughes (as we have seen before) takes some measure of aesthetic inspiration from the subways; while in “Subway Face” the subway platform is a visual and temporal backdrop to an urban human attraction, the rumble of the trains is part of attraction’s soundtrack in “Jukebox Love Song”:

I could take the Harlem night
and wrap around you,
Take the neon lights and make a crown,
Take the Lenox Avenue busses,
Taxis, subways,
And for your love song tone their rumble down.
Take Harlem’s heartbeat,
Make a drumbeat,
Put it on a record, let it whirl,
And while we listen to it play,
Dance with you till day—
Dance with you, my sweet brown Harlem girl.⁶⁴

A reading of “Jukebox Love Song” as Hughes’ poetic nod to jazz inspired by urban life is perhaps best informed by an essay he penned a quarter-century earlier titled “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” In that essay, Hughes wrote that “jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of

joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.”⁶⁵ In other words, Hughes in part saw jazz as not the uncritical translation of modern city life into music, but an expression of black resistance to the potentially alienating pace and confusion of the white world that the subway represented.⁶⁶ The subway’s rumble in “Jukebox Love Song,” then, needs to be transformed and toned down rather than transcribed faithfully in order to recover a usable humanity in the urban environment. Otherwise, the result is an alienation on the order of that experienced by Ellison’s shocked Invisible Man who, after his friend is shot to death, hears and sees the subway trains roaring past him, signifying the mind-boggling, unsettling chaos of the city.⁶⁷ In a sense, Hughes—by figuring jazz as a modification of the social space and time of the “world of subway trains”—undertakes the sort of cultural project suggested by David Harvey when he suggests that “dominant and hegemonic definitions of social space (and time) are perpetually under challenge and always open to modification.”⁶⁸ But as we have seen, these challenges and modifications went far beyond the artistic realm and into the everyday. As black stockyard workers or domestic servants took a streetcar or subway to work in a white community and sat next to white people on that journey, individual and communal racial boundaries were continually crossed and re-crossed—all for a nickel a ride.

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ENDNOTES

1. John Henrik Clarke, *Harlem, U.S.A.* (New York, 1971), 57.
2. Langston Hughes, Arnold Rampersad and David E. Roessel, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York, 1998), 40.
3. *Ibid.*, 423.
4. The *Plessy* case in 1896 is of course one landmark in this long history. While this is an essay concerning public transportation in the North, similar issues of interracial contact arose even in a segregated Southern context. Robin Kelley, for instance, sees WWII-era public transportation as a site for “black working-class resistance” in “Congested Terrain: Resistance on Public Transportation,” in *Race Rebels* (New York, 1994), 56. See also Michael Mizell-Nelson’s dissertation titled “Challenging and Reinforcing White Control of Public Space / Race Relations on New Orleans Streetcars, 1861-1965” (Tulane University, 2001), 2, which suggests that public transportation was one of the most bodily “intimate” venues of segregation in the South.
5. My framework is informed in part by a recognition that interracial contact really existed in “only three spheres of life: the casual, the economic and the criminal” because segregation was so complete. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1944), 650. While public transportation mainly falls in the “casual” category, as I show, it also holds implications for the economic and criminal.

6. A nineteenth century example of this sort of work is Michael Kahan, "Rights of Passage: The Integration of Philadelphia's Streetcars and Contested Definitions of Public Space, 1857-1867," in "We Shall Independent Be": *African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, eds. Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander (Boulder, 2008), 375-92.
7. Rose C. Feld, "Harlem Riot Attributed to Many Economic Ills," *New York Times* (24 March 1935). See also Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago; a Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot in 1919* (New York, 1968), 298.
8. A study of Chicago's public transportation system makes a similar argument in drawing comparisons between Chicago and three other major metropolises: New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. See Paul Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transit: The Formation of Public Policy in Chicago, 1900-1930* (Philadelphia, 1983), 4-7. See also Clifton Hood, "Changing Perceptions of Public Space on the New York Rapid Transit System," *Journal of Urban History* 22.3 (March 1996), 309.
9. Charles W. Cheape, *Moving the Masses: Urban Public Transit in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, 1880-1912* (Cambridge, 1980), 92-3; Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 297.
10. "Hang Up Traffic Record," *The Chicago Defender* (10 July 1926); Hood, "Changing Perceptions," 318; Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transit*, 115.
11. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, 1983), 1.
12. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, (Chicago, 1993), 8-9.
13. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 75. See also E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present* 38.1 (1967), 56-97. Counter to the popular misconception of migrants moving exclusively from the rural South to the urban North, several critics have noted that the majority of migrants were in fact not agricultural laborers and instead laborers hailing from Southern towns and cities. See Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 38-9; and Carole Marks, *Farewell, We're Good and Gone: the Great Black Migration* (Bloomington, 1989), 35-44. While it is important to recognize this fact, I contend that the majority of migrants still necessarily underwent a period of adjustment upon arriving to Northern metropolises. While many of these migrants may have been accustomed to city life and even some form of public transportation, the scale and character of experience in Chicago and New York—particularly on public transportation unaffected by Jim Crow laws—would have been unlike anything in a Southern town or city.
14. Clarke, *Harlem, U.S.A.*, 8. See also Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, "Or Does It Explode?": *Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York, 1991), 14-5.
15. As whites were moving out, blacks moving in were actually quite diverse. The Caribbean influence in the neighborhood was particularly strong. See Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1999).
16. Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge, 1983), 3. Railroad tracks bounded black settlements in the suburbs as well. See Andrew Wiese, *Places of their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2004), 17.
17. Timuel D. Black, Jr., *Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration* (Evanston, 2003), 470. See also Thomas Lee Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto: Immigrants, Blacks, and Reformers in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Belmont, 1991), 148.

18. See Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 298.
19. James R. Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago's Packinghouse Workers, 1894-1922* (Urbana, 1987), 48. See also Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 357-61; Estelle Hill Scott, *Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago* (Chicago, 1939), 217.
20. See *ibid.*
21. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 195. For shopping or for work, the vast majority of whites and blacks used public transportation downtown in the Loop in the 1920s. See Black, *Bridges of Memory*, 147, and "Auto Not Popular in Loop, Check-Up Reveals," *The Chicago Defender* (3 July 1926).
22. Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 298-309.
23. Barrett comes to a similar conclusion; see *The Automobile and Urban Transit*, 26, 108-10. Despite battles over *de jure* segregation on public conveyances being largely resolved by the mid-nineteenth century in the North, then, it could be argued that a type of *de facto* segregation persisted. As James Grossman argues, however, these interracial relationships "differed qualitatively" from Southern segregation. See James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, 1989), 167. For more on the nineteenth-century legal battles over segregation on public conveyances in the North, see Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961), 106-12.
24. Feld, "Harlem Riot Attributed to Many Economic Ills." See also Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York, 1940), 118; and Langston Hughes' "A Song to a Negro Wash-woman," originally published in the January 1925 *Crisis*. Hughes, Rampersad and Roessel, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 41.
25. "Harlem Women Use Subway as Employment Agency," *The Chicago Defender* (16 August 1930). Subway stops were also a gathering place for the unemployed looking for handouts, not work. See "Harlem Subways are Mecca for Beggars," *The Chicago Defender* (3 December 1921). See also Greenberg, "Or Does It Explode?," 79.
26. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 245.
27. Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 139; and James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York, 1930), 161.
28. "Oppose 'Black Belt' Line." *New York Times* (27 May 1922).
29. Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transit*, 109.
30. Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 102.
31. Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 166-7.
32. Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 299.
33. *Ibid.*, 298.
34. *Ibid.*, and A. L. Jackson, "Commission Delves into Old Problem," *The Chicago Defender* (4 November 1922). As I stated above, the Commission maintained that interracial friction and complaints were minimal prior to 1919. This disparity can perhaps be resolved if we understand the *Defender* to be taking a shorter view than the Commission, labeling heightened interracial conflict from 1917-22 "old." See Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 299.

35. See, in particular, Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto*, 437; and Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago; the Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1967), 254.

36. Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 300.

37. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, 1993).

38. Educational Committee of the Chicago branch of N.A.A.C.P., "Chicago Great City of the West," *The Chicago Defender* (29 September 1923).

39. Geraldine Marchbanks, "Everyday Courtesies," *The Chicago Defender* (13 May 1933). Given this essay's forays into the literary, it is also worth noting that Zora Neale Hurston leads off her autobiographical thoughts on black class politics with a reference to conduct on public transportation. See Hurston, "My People! My People!" In *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York, 2006), 177.

40. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York, 1998), 113.

41. Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 301, 309.

42. Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 118-9, 166-7.

43. Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 99.

44. Black, *Bridges of Memory*, 28.

45. Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 304. A complaint letter written prior to substantial black employment in the stockyards suggests that this was an issue well before manners, smell, and the like were associated more readily with race. See "Voice of the People," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (27 September 1909). Paul Barrett, however, argues that different classes had little reason or opportunity to take the same streetcar lines and that hence complaints about class mixing were rare. See Barrett, *The Automobile and Urban Transit*, 108.

46. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, 1990), 158.

47. Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997), 200.

48. See, for instance, Dr A. Wilberforce Williams, "Keep Healthy," *The Chicago Defender* (13 September 1913); and "Dr. A. Wilberforce Williams Talks on Preventive Measures, First Aid Remedies, Hygienics, and Sanitation," *The Chicago Defender* (20 March 1915), (29 May 1915), and (12 May 1917); Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto; Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York, 1971), 152; Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 187. Venereal disease and pneumonia were two other primary health concerns.

49. Hunter notes that "blackness was thought to embody tuberculosis" in the immediate postbellum period, later shifting to be more specifically associated with black servant women. See *ibid.*, 195. David McBride points to the World War I period as a pivot point in the shift from racialist to environmental explanations for black susceptibility to tuberculosis. See David McBride, *From TB to AIDS: Epidemics among Urban Blacks since 1900* (Albany, 1991), 67. Even as early as 1912, the *Defender* attributed tuberculosis to miserable living conditions for blacks. See "The White's Responsibility for the Black," *The Chicago Defender* (12 October 1912).

50. McBride, *From TB to AIDS*, 15-17.

51. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 195.
52. Sylvia Hood Washington, *Packing Them In: An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865-1954* (Lanham, 2005), 130.
53. More generally on this topic, see Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, 2008), 115-42.
54. Glen E. Holt, "The Changing Perception of Urban Pathology: An Essay on the Development of Mass Transit in the United States" in *Cities in American History*, eds. Kenneth T. Jackson and Stanley K. Schultz (New York, 1972), 329-30. See also Hood, *722 Miles*, 214-19.
55. "The Tribune on the Race Question," *The Chicago Defender* (14 October 1922).
56. See, for instance, "Robbers Beat 'L' Agent, 76, into Blindness at Station," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (11 August 1935); "Crowds in Panic as Negro Stabs Guard on 'L' Train," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (29 March 1925); "Fights Duel on Car with Thief and Wounds Him," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (3 July 1919).
57. See, for instance, "Stabbed on Subway Train," *New York Times* (29 October 1939); "Crazed Negro Alarms Subway Train Crowd," *New York Times* (17 July 1929); "Pursue Subway Stabber," *New York Times* (21 September 1922); "Disorderly Negro Gets Subway Lesson," *New York Times* (20 July 1910).
58. "Mob Threatens to Lynch Negro in New York City," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1 November 1933); "Patrolman Saves Negro from Crowd," *New York Times* (18 November 1926); "Men Attacked by Negro Save Him from Mob," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (11 July 1922).
59. "Race Riot on West Side," *New York Times* (16 August 1900). See also Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, 49.
60. Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago*, 7-18. See also William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York, 1972), 37-46. The subways did not play a major role in the 1935 Harlem riot; the violence was for the most part contained to the streets.
61. See, for instance, "Gripman and Negro Fight while Passengers Flee," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (24 December 1903); "Crowds in Panic as Negro Stabs Guard on 'L' Train."
62. Lewis Mumford, "Machinery and the Modern Style," *The New Republic* (3 August 1921), 264-5.
63. Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars* (Amherst, 2003), 64, 5.
64. Hughes, Rampersad, and Roessel, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 393.
65. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation* 122.3181 (23 June 1926), 694.
66. *Ibid.*, 692.
67. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 438.
68. David Harvey, "Between Space and Time: Reflections on the Geographical Imagination," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80.3 (September 1990), 422.