



Constructing a 'Black-on-Black' Violence: The Conservative Discourse¹

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Abstract This study examines the ascendant conservative “black-on-black violence” discourse in the United States post-1980. It focuses on the discourse’s construction of two prominent themes, black youth as culturally decimated and the crime-causative role of inner city black families. The results suggest that space was at the core of these constructions. Space was a widely used geographic fabric incorporated into the discourse as many kinds of mental spaces and maps. These maps served up realms of perception, imagination, fiction, and fantasy that helped authenticate these themes. Space was constituted as value-transmittal zones, geometric landscapes of proximities and potential interactions, past and present places of normalcy, texts of lurking villains and forces, and territories of movement and transgression. Imbued with this space, these themes were at the heart of racializing this violence, implicating black agency, black underclass culture, and black families for this.

Introduction

On January 8, 1981, a black youth killed a young African American in Chicago’s Cabrini Green Housing Project. The man, Larry Potts, 21, an aspiring musician, was by chance struck in the back by two random shots. He was one of more than eight victims in the area in two months. Reporting of these incidences, dubbed Chicago’s “winter wave of violence,” quickly captured national attention. Stories in the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and other

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newspapers helped center this issue in the public consciousness. A new urban ill had supposedly emerged: “black-on-black violence.” Suddenly, statistics about blacks killing blacks were everywhere. For example, data from researchers Norvel Morris and Michael Tonry (1984) were discovered and underscored in op-ed pieces across the nation. Their findings:

- Homicide was the leading cause of death for black men and women between the ages of 25 and 34.
- Black men from 25 through 44 years old were 11 times more likely to die as homicide victims than were white men in that same age bracket.
- Although one of every nine Americans was black, one of every two male murder victims was black — as was one of every two people arrested for murder.
- Blacks were two-and-a-half times more likely than whites to be victims of rape or robbery.

What had solidified in the public consciousness as “black-on-black violence” had sporadically surfaced to this point.² But now the issue exploded on the national scene (Table 1) and diverse narrativists (Republicans, Democrats, liberals) stepped forward to provide accounts (Anderson, 1984; Wilson, 2001). As casual observation reveals, the bulk of mainstream reporting and discussion reflected conservative belief. Its effect was to shape a dominant vision of this issue that persists today. Its most prominent voices -- Thomas Sowell, Mortimer Zuckerman, Cal Thomas, Rush Limbaugh, Mona Charen, Jack Beatty, Walter Williams, Charles Murray, Midge Dector, Ken Hamblin -- racialized this violence in bold strokes, proclaiming this was at its core black assailants assaulting black victims. These accounts indicted purposeful pathological kids in devastated cultural settings. *Chicago Tribune* writer Paul Weingarten (1982) and *U.S. News and World Report* Editor-in-Chief Mortimer B. Zuckerman (1986) for example, write:

When the sun sets on Chicago’s West Side, the armies of the night come out to play. People in the neighborhoods retreat into their homes-or if they’re brave, to their porches-and wait. Out in the night, a new order takes shape. It is an alien world, strange and incomprehensible. A world where junior-high kids carry shotguns, and no one ventures out unarmed.

Street gangs control the night. The gangs have a mission here, a sense of purpose and honor ... and vengeance. The code of this West is shoot to kill. They don’t care who’s in the way” (Weingarten).

The dilemma is this: Why is it that two decades of visible black progress, with billions spent in welfare and training, have also seen the explosive rise of an alienated black underclass whose rootlessness,

² But as Mike Males (1995) notes, there is no such thing as “black violence” any more than there is such thing as “youth violence” or “Italian violence.” To Males, violence is founded on class and social-status conditions (poverty and racial-ethnic stigma with respect to the mainstream) rather than age, demographics, or skin color. Commentators and officials have strained to downplay this. I thus put quotes around the term black-on-black violence throughout the paper to denote its socially constructed nature.

violence and debased values dominate the ghetto? Many statistics of social anarchy apply to the poor regardless of race. But crime and the fear of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, arson, vandalism, a dilapidated bombed-out physical environment and a way of life utterly separate from the American mainstream have become associated with poor city blacks more than any other group. One stunning statistic illuminates the catastrophe—approximately 80 percent of all black children in the ghettos are born out of wedlock.

The truth is we are up against the limits of public policy. At the heart of the disaster there is a vacuum of values. In the ghettos across America, too many young black men roam the streets and too many young black mothers struggle alone to raise another generation of fatherless black youth for reform to come about via a traditional politics and programs” (Zuckerman).

Table 1. Proportion of articles on local violence using phrase 'black-on-black violence' in text ³

	1978	1980	1982	1984	1986
<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	0	0	2(4%)	12(24%)	14(28%)
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	0	0	3(6%)	14(28%)	18(36%)
<i>Cleveland Call & Post</i>	0	3 (6%)	30(60%)	41(82%)	-
<i>St. Louis Post Dispatch</i>	0	1(2%)	9(18%)	16(32%)	-

This discourse has recently become an object of academic scrutiny. To James Nadell (1995), this multi-textured, discursive offering takes the public to devastated kids in culturally afflicted neighborhoods. Inner city black kids are indicted as horrific, irresponsible, and unwilling to commit to things (education, sound values) to improve their plight. The recent work of Lorenzo Ervin (2001) concurs and provides specificity: He chronicles two key themes repetitiously narrated in this “black-on-black violence” discourse: black youth as culturally afflicted and black families as nurturing of this

³ Based on a random sample of 50 articles selected for each year. Articles selected for review had to have the words “violence” or “crime” in their titles on local affairs. My analysis of this national discourse involved a four-pronged interrogation. I conducted a content analysis of prominent national magazines, city newspapers, and local interviews with political leaders between 1980 and 1998. A supplementary data source was an assessment of the Rush Limbaugh radio show between 1991 and 1993. Information gleaned from each source of data was integrated into an evolving understanding of the “black-on-black violence” discourse.

affliction. Ervin, like Nadell, points to a complex discourse whose nuances are concealed under a veneer of simplicity and bluntness.

This paper more deeply examines this conservative "black-on-black violence" discourse.⁴ It investigates how 1980s and 1990s conservative voices constructed these two central themes in the discourse: black youth as culturally decimated and the causative role of inner city black families. We know the importance of these themes in the discourse but know little about their specifics. In this regard how these themes have been constructed is unclear, i.e., how conservative voices have used tropes and resources to assemble and present these. This is an important issue: progressive action to rebuke conservative contention on this issue requires comprehending how they build their discourse and the resources they use. As this perspective continues to dominate discussion on this issue and aggressively attributes this violence to kids, culture, and families, this mode of operation must be known.

My agenda in this context is ambitious: to reveal the constructing of these themes as complex and spatially rooted. My central assertion, inspired by spatiality studies in human geography (c.f. Soja, 1989, 1996; Creswell, 1997), is that humanly crafted space has been a key ingredient in this constructing. Consequently, I delineate an activist space that profoundly insinuates itself into this theme's constructing. I highlight the influence of one kind of space: Henri Lefebvre's (1981) representations of space. These assembled and choreographed spaces illuminate realities of people, places, and processes in discourse. They are the imagined spaces manufactured by interest groups (academics, policy analysts, politicians, the media) to be known and acted on by technical specialists. This space, as a series of narrated maps that infuses presentation of people and processes with meaning, gives form and character to narrated themes. To paraphrase Lefebvre, not only does every society produce its own space, so does every kind of narrativist.

⁴ My analysis of this national discourse involved a four-pronged interrogation. I conducted a content analysis of prominent national magazines, city newspapers, and local interviews with political leaders between 1980 and 1998. A supplementary data source was an assessment of the Rush Limbaugh radio show between 1991 and 1993. Information gleaned from each source of data was integrated into an evolving understanding of the "black-on-black violence" discourse. For the newspaper reviews, I focused on major dailies or weeklies in 6 cities: New York, Cleveland, Indianapolis, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Chicago. These cities were selected to ensure an expansive areal coverage: the East Coast, Midwest, Northern Rust Belt, and Far West. In each city, both prominent dailies (e.g., *New York Times*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*) and community weeklies (e.g., *Cleveland Call & Post*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Indianapolis Recorder*) were assessed. This selection of newspapers ensured the encompassing of different readership and different styles of journalism. Magazine assessments focused on *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *New York Times Magazine*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Harpers*. These six prominent mainstream magazines in the U.S. were believed to be accurate sources to gauge the pulse of mainstream magazine reporting. *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature* guided me to relevant articles in these magazines. The interviews, with local political leaders in Indianapolis and Chicago, involved open-ended discussions on race and crime in their cities. Leaders were selected for assessment on the basis of their willingness to represent themselves as conservative politicians. All discussions began with the query of whether they identified themselves as leaders grounded in conservative ideas; conducting further discussion was premised on an affirmative response.

Offering the Villains

In the 1980s conservative narrativists boldly immersed themselves in “black-on-black violence.” They authoritatively cast themselves as savvy pragmatists that could gaze onto this issue and quickly diagnose its meaning: the dilemma of declining inner city and societal morals. All was enabled by the conservative decision to engage in a game of changing acuties. First, conservative chroniclers placed themselves at the “ground level” of the inner city. This roving “grass-roots” eye captured violence, disorder, and dysfunction in streets, corners, shops, parks, and schools. Looks, strolls, acts, and imaginings became deftly read and understood: deformed people and spaces were revealed in the finest gesticulations and gestures. Racialized people were made to reveal true essences -- primitivism, impulsiveness, moral deficiency -- that they could scarcely control. A different world became known that only privileged interpreters could decipher.

But positioning shifted to the “top of the territory” to indict a societal cultural fragmentation. This expansive glimpse panned across cities, metropolitan areas, and regions to allow narration of numerous cultural configurations and types. Conservatives situated themselves like De Certeau’s gaze atop the Empire State Building to see in and across vast landscapes. Cities and regions from this vantage point were reduced to specks of easily visualized dots that could be confidently read and chronicled. Like magicians, these conservatives glided in and out of these two vistas to narrate the reality of two central villains (black youth, black families) and salvationists (themselves) on this violence issue. Shifts in vista were seamless: characters were “run through” both as passive fodder to be multi-represented.

Constructing the two villains gained meaning in a melodrama filled with caricatured people, extreme social and emotive states, incessant action, and constant confrontations between virtue and vice. These kids and families were made to carry the dilemma of an unshakable race and space: The influence of Blackness, inner city space, ghetto realities, and downtrodden economic circumstance. “Black-on-black violence,” in conservative hands, would not be known by nuanced inspection but by elaborate codification. This violence would be widely discussed but stay a one-dimensional racialized performance of black people. In this discursive setup, people could easily grasp the issue’s real story by knowing the codes.

Inner City Black Youth As Culturally Afflicted

The central theme the discourse scripted was a culturally contaminated “black inner city youth.” The discourse continuously narrated this youth this way as they “spoke” about “black-on-black violence.” Conservative chroniclers realized these kids were central to common understandings of “black-on-black violence;” they had to be decisively treated. Their importance in the discourse, conservatives realized, necessitated a fixation on them. Conservatives as well documented have historically narrated inner city black kids in diverse discourses (see Castleman, 1982; Males, 1995); this would be nothing new. Their historical success in this narration, I suggest, paved the way to embellish this villain in the “black-on-black violence” discourse. This indictment, as this section reveals, was of both youth participants in violence and inner city black youth in general.

All discourse sources narrated columnist Glen Loury’s (1985) generic combustible kid that was prone to or actually involved in violence (Table 2). This kid was made the most puzzling being in the contemporary exploding black ghetto that society had to

recognize. Conservatives assembled and used their standard journalistic motifs to narrate this: the “no-holds barred” portrait of a changing urban youth, the fantastic differences of inner city space and its people, and the powerful influence of local culture on inner city neighborhoods (see Reed, 1992; Lott, 1999). These kids, in this discursive placing, were in amazingly different places, the products of “underclass culture,” and dramatically declining. These were general kids, to writer Lawrence Mead (1986), who routinely “combine relatively low income with functioning problems such as difficulties in getting through schools, obeying the law, working, and keeping their families together.”

Table 2. Degree of involvement in constituting parts or aspects of inner city black youth objects ⁵

	The black body	Spatial cartographics	Thin veneer of civility
Local city reporters and columnists	34 (68%)	37 (74%)	21 (42%)
National newspaper columnists	6 (12%)	34 (72%)	37 (74%)
National magazine & radio commentators	11 (22%)	23 (46%)	38 (76%)
Local politician discussions	2 (4%)	18 (36%)	44 (88%)

The supposed problem was that these kids were prone to seamlessly assimilate underclass culture. These kids, like others, were “blank-slate” beings, but unlike others, were intuitively drawn to the openness and roughness of the street. The lures of play and immediate gratification (street-corner bantering, malling, walking the streets) intoxicated them. Shunning the disciplinary strictures of school, work, and home, the street became their emotive home. As products of the streets, they acquired meaning in a daily round of “meeting up with other kids,” “walk[ing] up and down the avenue at night,” “losing themselves in a cultural world of hedonism and ritualized confrontation” (*San Francisco Chronicle* writer T.C. Miller, 1992; Indianapolis politician C. Moldthan, 1987). These ghetto kids commonly succumbed to a culturally destroyed place and became overtly primitive, impulsive beings. This pull of the streets, in conservative narration, seemed beyond resistance. For example, *Chicago Sun-Times* writer Rick Soll (1981) narrates the ensnarement of one youth:

⁵ Narrativists had to address an object in text a minimum of two lines to be considered discussants of that part or aspect of the object. Based on a random sample of 50 textual pieces (except local politicians that used 20 pieces) for each kind of source who discussed the object in general. Drawn from the database of newspaper articles, magazine articles, personal interviews, and notes from content analysis of radio program

"I need some peace," he said, "to figure out all this craziness. So I can figure out a way around it. Could be, you know, I'm already trapped, still stuck, you know, on the damn South Side. Lookin' back, maybe I been trapped since the very damn day I started messin' round with this s____ .." "Damn South Side, he said, Got me when I was 13." But it got him before that. The South Side and the circumstances of despair it breeds were at him before he was born. It was then as it still is, a landscape of old death and fresh troubles, and it got him the day his old man got drunk and ditched a pregnant wife.

But this was a complex (and deeply spatialized) constructing. At its core, the perspective reduced "black-on-black" assailants and black youth to common beings. Both were presented as drawn from the same cultural-spatial pool ("black inner cities") and infected by the same problematic values. Narratives distinguished between "young thugs" and non-criminal black youth: Only one offered violence (*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 1989). But both were purportedly culturally ravaged who in different ways (overt criminal activity, beliefs and attitudes about authority and society) opposed society. In the haze of promulgated stereotype, one was made to act out anti-societal impulses, the other harbored them. This generic kid in violent or nonviolent states ritually transgressed in deed or thought. Presentations of youth routine and ritual captured this. In routine, to *Chicago Tribune* writer R. Keegan (1981), kids across the community pace the street and ... "start thinking that the whole street is theirs ... smoke a joint without being hassled and maybe start selling some dope ... [have] shallow emotional attachments to people and society."

This identity-reductionist technique, to Kobeena Mercer (1994), is a common way to narrate minority youth and is profoundly spatial. It, to Mercer, makes spaces like "the black inner city" a storehouse and transmittive agent for vile youth values. This space is made to infect all; it becomes the source that renders a unifying sameness through all black kids. Its power to corrupt renders kids cognitively and attitudinally similar; personalities go out the window under the sculpting prowess of a lethal space. This constructing made this space the terrain that criminalized whole neighborhoods of kids. Entire territories within the city ("the black inner city") became Mike Davis' (1990) "terrain of pseudo knowledge and fantasy projection." African American kids, in the process, were offered through color-coded stereotyped images.

This space (in conservative hands) was important because it operationalized a process of youth cultural contamination. This space provided this process with concreteness and realness (as a physical site), making an ambiguous notion of destructive culture a tangible reality. In clear images a process that destroyed kids could be "seen." Sight became the irrefutable proof of the process, its actual reality. To image the black inner city -- its buildings, streets, parks, blocks -- was to see the force that was ensnaring youth. In this way, space was fundamental to manufacturing a social process through which all inner city black kids could be easily understood.

But space was used in other ways to make the black youth identity. Deepening this constructing of youth, their bodies were deftly marked to communicate spatially devastated kids (particularly by local reporters and columnists, Table 2). Supposed ills of inner cities were powerfully written onto bodies. This common discourse maneuver, to bell hooks (1993), makes bodies a text that communicates identities. Bodies, to Hooks, are ideal narrative instruments because the act of inscribing them is infrequently politicized.

This marking, to hooks, places bodies in the position of “speaking” against themselves. This was the case in this conservative treatment of black youth: it seamlessly asked people to read these black bodies as an accurate index of their identity. Through a reading of bodies, the realities of inner city black youth could be revealed.

Thus, these conservatives widely coded looks of inner city kids dulled and primitive. Given the power to look, these kids peered but barely comprehended: syndicated writer M. Norman (1993) described them as “face[s] [that are] sour .. eyes full of rage.” These kids, to *Los Angeles Sentinel* writer James Cleaver (1992), were trapped in “the structural character of [an] inner city culture” and were shown to be lost. These kids had defective visions and needed to be taught to see: underclass culture blinded them. Their eyes were, borrowing from Lefebvre (1984), sites of illumination in a matrix of meaning and power. This point of capture in a “political anatomy” seamlessly condensed the conservative will.

This marking of bodies also featured kids made to scowl at external intruders. Renditions of inner city daily life in Indianapolis from Councilperson Ben West (1987) exemplified this. This inner city, to West, had “hardened street corner posses .. “glaring confrontationally at anyone in their path ... “clusters of youth on street corners .. eyeing all that moved.” Kids, to West, “looked menacingly at outsiders with disdain, anger, and loathing.” In communication, these kids resented being read: facial expressions signaled a tense face-to-face encounter with enemies. Visual aggression showed a disdain for being objectively assessed: the light of truth had to be deflected. These kids rejected the most elementary act of human civility (simple observation) that positioned them outside normative society. They were unable to stand simple contact with “outsiders” that communicated a central conservative theme: an immersion in a cultural wilderness.

Mouths of kids were also scripted to indicate culturally-spatially infected youth. A confused and primitive speaking youth was frequently illuminated. The ploy was time-tested: as Eric Cheyfitz (1981) notes, conservative racial ideology commonly communicates the unattainability of full humanity without eloquence and acceptable thought. The offering of ignorance with conspicuously bad language displays part beast, a kind of monster. Thus, In *Commentary Magazine*, writer M. Dector (1992) discusses an interview with the 8-Trey Gangster Crips (the group that supposedly sparked the 1992 Los Angeles riots). Dector “captures” the horrifying reality of ghetto culture and its off-the-map carrier: “When Koppel asked the boys about the white truck driver who had in full view of the nation been pulled from his truck and beaten, one of them replied, “He knew better. He saw what was happening.” Said a second, “It was a CIA.” “ third pointed out, “They saying that, well, we burning down our own community. I mean, we don’t own none of these liquor stores.” As Dector recounts, “one named Time bomb was surprised that Koppel had never heard of him, “Because of my background and my .. years in prison for shooting, breaking and entering, and attempted murder” (p. 21).

Bodies this way were made texts. They displayed identities collapsed into revealing exclamations, looks, strolls, and movements. Yet this textual maneuver, to Steve Pile (1996), commonly relies on space to communicate. Marked bodies take readers to imagined spaces (e.g., black inner cities, ghettos, working-class neighborhoods) with profound repercussions. For example, “ghetto moves” inscribed on youth bodies takes readers to stereotypes of socialization in ghettos. Such invoking, to Pile, elicits notions of kinds of upbringing, character of community, and character of parenting. Set in a sense of

place, identities of people can be and tend to be quickly constructed. These black youth bodies in the conservative discourse, made to resonate with such “ghetto” identifiers, communicated identity and character. Bodies, in this sense, burst with a spatialness that paved the trail to understand them.

The 1980s conservative seizure and scripting of African American youth bodies is anything but surprising. Such renderings of “black bodies,” to Tommy Lott (1999), have a long history in the U.S. The era of slavery focused on generic physique (huge brutish people), early twentieth century on nimble, lithe bodies (minstrelsy), the middle twentieth century on fluid body parts (mobile urban people). Black bodies, in the words of Cameron McCarthy (1997), have continuously been used as potent semiotic cargo. Conservatives in the 1980s continued this middle twentieth century fixation but more profoundly tied bodies to ghetto space. Ghettos were the established incendiary places of dramatic cultural transformation; its usage was adroit. In this scripting these kids could say anything about this violence and participate in charade; the influence of space and culture on them were “revealed” in their talk, movement, and appearance.

But other representations of space were used to construct a generic ghetto youth. Conservative voices also widely unveiled in the discourse an intricate spatial cartographics that was a potent textual maneuver (Table 2). This space was a text assembled to display a prominent indicator of the new youth: burgeoning black gangs. This “deadly gang space,” using Lefebvre’s (1981) terminology, was a social product forged via a detailed crafting. It displayed horrific and territorial gangs encroaching upon all and everything in their way. Against a narrated backdrop of a crumbling social and physical setting, there was nothing else. This imploding, outrageous space reflected the aggressive conservative will to illuminate a new inner city black youth. To read this easily deciphered space as intended was to know the actions and values of a new, dominant black kids. This spatial text reduced diverse youth to a hideous ideal type, silencing diversity in compelling (stereotyped) strokes.

This space featured roving gangs everywhere and taking over inner cities. The conservative *Chicago Sun-Times*, for example, widely chronicled a supposed new youth infesting alleys, abandoned buildings, vacant properties, schoolyards, parks, and housing projects. These gangs were mobile, violence-prone, and seemed to affect every inch of the inner city. Black gangs struck suddenly, impulsively, and at unpredictable moments. While syndicated columnist Nicholas von Hoffman (1981) called black inner cities “a wasteland wherein children are trained to be muggers and hookers as thoroughly and effectively as white collar children are trained to be accountants,” Carl Sorrels (1986) of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* depicts these places as “crime [infested that has] become a savage intruder .. on the toughest streets.” In their wake, kids, families, and the elderly shuttered and struggled to stay safe.

This space was political in being human made and constructed to advance a politics. It was the outcome of a sequence and set of discursive operations (imposing silences, spotlighting presences, staging a coherence and clarity) made to carry political content. This constructing in the discourse was relentless. An offered content was the product of the human mind, not a passive procedure of human reporting. A “black inner city” was constructed that was inseparable from the values and beliefs of its makers. Its molding did the rhetorical bidding of conservatives. This space, following Lefebvre, exuded content in a creative and embellishing making.

The mapping was animated, moreover, by conservatives (especially national columnists and commentators) “playing” with the finer aspects of space. In particular, they often underscored gang ghastliness by muting “turfs.” Instead of providing precise coordinates, these narrativists often referenced general markers: “abandoned houses in neighborhoods,” “inner city alleys,” “community streets,” and “street corners.” The threat this way was established but precise locations were made unknown. This clear and ambiguous space ultimately communicated youth identity in glaring demonstration of realities (existence of gangs, their mobile character) and unknown possibilities (where these gangs were, where they were spreading). This mix of clarity and ambiguity was the right formula to perpetuate stereotype of culturally-spatially infected kids: They could be right around the corner. As conservatives demonstrated, making traditional Euclidean space could be potent politics.

Conservative voices in these ways imposed a massive silence on a diverse youth. This kid’s place of habitation (the inner city), vulnerable age (youth), and immersion in a dubious culture and lifestyle made “him” counter-societal and ominous. Kids in Watts (Los Angeles), Hough (Cleveland), South Central Los Angeles, Harlem (New York), Central Ward (Newark), and Jeff-Vander-Lu (St. Louis) were identical. Wherever conservatives looked, these kids were the same. Diversity had no place in the discourse; introducing richness and heterogeneity contradicted the offered coarse monolith. This reductionism, strategic and adroit, reinforced the sense of easily categorizable black youth.

But because this scripting could be interpreted as raw conservative hatred (rather than the core unblinking truth), Sidney Schanberg’s unconscionably virulent conservatives, these kids were provided a thin veneer of civility for people to see through. National columnists and commentators and local politicians were most conscious of this (Table 2). They frequently made these kids superficially civilized, providing them with a vague comprehension of existing, in the words of conservative voice Rush Limbaugh (1992), “in worlds and lives of difference.” But as true disabled creatures, to Limbaugh, they were scripted “to know little about what this difference was and lacked any sincere thought of changing.” These kids were thus projected to circulate across inner cities bearing a vague semblance of civility, but, in what really mattered, had their minds, souls, and aspirations buried in cultural deprivation. These conservatives thus chronicled a generic inner city kid that to *San Francisco Chronicle* writers S. Fernandez and S. Matier (1988) barely felt, reflected, thought as they pursued the likes of “a narrow quest for clothes, cars, and whatever pleasures the streets offer at the moment.”

The public was thus implored to view this kid objectively but to never lose sight of their ominous differences. Inner city black youth were to be simultaneously taken for granted and an object of unending concern. The public was to take for granted what they were; this was beyond doubt and further interpretation. Conservative depictions faithfully captured their essence. But the public had to be concerned about these “mobile, intimidat[ing] kids” who were counter-societal and could not be ignored. These brutish bodies and brutish minds were predisposed to being violent that escalating rates of “black-on-black violence” all too clearly showed. At a time when national culture was purportedly under attack (“the culture wars”), this youth was one aggressive belligerent (Starr, 1985). Society’s norms were under massive assault with these kids unapologetically participating.

This was the troublesome group the public had to know to understand “black-on-black violence.” This kid was situated as the free and unfettered centerpiece of a now dramatically deformed black community. They were creating problems in cities — violence, vandalism, school decline — with no end in sight. In this process, a choreographed reality of kids in a space offered the public a concise cause for “black-on-black violence.” Like bait, they were cast out as a trap (as deformed, angry, and prone to impulsive violence) to lure the public into a feeding frenzy of anger and repugnance. As conservatives had represented urban issues before (see Males, 1995), the core of the violence issue was a supposed unstable black youth freely and unapologetically choosing violence.

Inner City Black Family

The second prominent discourse theme narrated a fundamental destructive source for violence-prone black youth: inner city black families. The discourse continuously discussed this family as it spoke about “black-on-black violence.” This key construct provided a base to understand a general, violence-prone black youth. It connected a youth with perceptions of its timeless shaper, the family, that lodged this construction in a mode of rationality. So “sited,” this category of kid was placed in Norman Fairclough’s (1989) framing and grounding “well of support.” This family, as a core support construction, was mobilized to make “real” a rendition of inner city black kids.

This post 1980 family was made a site for sordid characters that perversely socialized youth. It was the simple and blunt end product of a complex setting up and constructing. It featured dysfunctional members — “welfare mothers,” “absent fathers,” “hardened teens,” “on-the-dole parents” -B that perpetuated prominent understandings of this family. But this 1980s family was distinctive in the sheer intensity of its othering. To Robin Kelley (1997), conservative voices once had these parents basically aware of societal norms but struggling (often unsuccessfully) to keep families intact. But post 1980, their awareness had disintegrated. To Los Angeles radio voice Ken Hamblin (1999), an avid commentator on “black-on-black violence,” underclass families “must now be recognized for what they [are] - the socially accepted shiftless.” This was the central ghetto element “decimated by three decades of destitution programs, welfare bailouts and affirmative action.”

Conservatives used their time-tested impugning motif to portray this family: a nostalgia for their once good old days. This way, this family was made an abandoning agent of traditional black values. These afflicted families were now supposedly performing an unconscionable sin: the betrayal of their people. They were accorded a respectable history (a once stable, patriotic black people) that was now crumbling in a sea of family chaos and ineptitude. “Once,” to syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell (1984), a frequent analyst of “black-on-black violence,” “the black family was a source of community stability, now it had gone away.” “Once a sturdy presence,” to Sowell, “this had fundamentally changed.” And with this supposed implosion, conservatives rehearsed a symbolic destruction of black community. A discursive connection between family and community had been established in common thought for a long time (see Blount and Cunningham, 1996). In conservative communication, as the black family unravelled so did the black community.

This offering intermixed an aged cultural form -- the aimless, urban black wanderer -- with a more recent form -- the black urban contagion -- to produce a hybrid product (see Hooks (1993) on these cultural forms). As wanderers, its central characters (fathers and mothers) were coded in distinctive ways: fathers as unremorseful migrants from responsibility, mothers the dreamers of a potentiality to wander. To radio voice John Foreman (1998): "Fathers were prone to be unhappy with familial responsibilities and could take off with little remorse." They were "prone to being scared by the world of the permanent [the family] and looked for release." "Mothers, unhappy with their plight and their children, often stayed." But their misery in staying put was made undeniable. The insinuation was cutting: Fathers looked for the next high or thrill outside the family, mothers lost themselves in a life of escapism (drugs, welfare dependency, T.V. and Sci Fi addiction). Their penchant for aimlessness and wandering was destructive to kids.

But again space buttressed this constructing in a nuanced and sophisticated process. Space, most fundamentally, anchored a historical rendition of "the black ghetto" (going back decades) that steeped this family in ghetto images. But this was nothing new: Decades of ethnographic exposes, stark policy pronouncements, and commentaries had contagious, wandering families infected by a spatial fabric. In the 1960s, portrayals of inner city black families typically had them as disoriented and confused ghetto subjects. For example, this family structure, to prominent researcher M. Abrahams (1964), was "a strange world where morals and rules, like in many inner city neighborhoods seemed flexible and relative." To Abrahams, "the continuous failure of aimless and disoriented mothers to perform their child-rearing duty and keep kids on the right track" were problems in America's ghettos.

This constructing through use of space and caricature continued in the 1970s. This family now became increasingly known via horrific tales of a space's latest dilemma: public housing. These families were now offered as "project families," "inner city welfare households," and "ghetto families" (c.f. Merridew, 1975; Murray, 1984). This update of the black family sustained it as the problem within the problem of inner cities. Morally loose families were crowding and populating downtown; The problem was supposedly most acute in failing public housing that was producing dysfunctional families: Pruitt-Igoe, Henry Horner Homes, Robert Taylor Homes, Cabrini Green, Lockefield Gardens. Paraphrasing *U.S News and World Report* (1972), dysfunctional black families in the projects continued to lead youth down paths of destruction. This constructing, again, had this family a dominant ghetto object but now struggling with fresh dysfunctional meanings.

Conservative voices built on this post 1980. National columnists and commentators, on the one hand, flagrantly served up lost and infectious families in rancid ghettos as they detailed (as mentioned) shiftless wanderers betraying their people (Table 3). Space constructed and drawn on helped denigrate this family's common consciousness and thought as much as their actions. Witness conservative radio voice John Foreman (1998), who spoke frequently about "black-on-black violence" and said: these families "in destructive communities refused to or were unable to objectively assess." Unable to shake this space from their system, he noted, "they were a disturbing societal problem and were growing in numbers." This "ghetto family," to writer Charles Murray (1984), was "only dimly aware of their own shortcomings and prone to blame everyone else for their predicament." These families, to Chicago's conservative University Village Association

(1991), “were too often confused and simply out of it .. which on [Chicago’s] South Side was getting worse.”

City reporters, columnists, and politicians across America often had a more subtle tack (Table 3). They used space to stage a struggling family in ghettos whose routine familial tasks were problematic: how to nurture youth, stabilize families, and ensure positive role models. This family was provided a difficult reality but acted and thought dysfunctionally that created destructive patterns of parenting. Two conservative *Cleveland Call & Post* and *Chicago Defender* writers, Mioko Anderson (1990) and Hiram Henderson (1985), summed up this offering: families in these spaces “were confused about how to keep kids out of trouble,” had to “take a more active role in controlling their children,” and “were largely irrelevant in guiding young minds.” Other families were grounded and stable, these were too often misguided and fumbling. *Michigan Chronicle* writer Danton Wilson (1991) had these families “sleepwalking right into punishing traps.” This family, to Wilson, “[had to] walk into the future .. awaken[ed] and coherent.”

Mothers were spotlighted as the leading edge of this imploding family. The drama of the spatially infected mother was riveting. They were embittered and discordant but retained a shred of maternal decency and hope. Commentator Rush Limbaugh frequently chastised this mother: While “looking to find a better way,” they “unsuccessfully played multiple parenting roles,” [gave] inconsistent discipline,” “teach delinquency,” and “were apologists for how their kids turned out.” Usually, the staging offered a caricatured intimacy, like subject Dona Williams who was interviewed in Harlem by *New York Times* writer Felicia Lee (1996) on “a streetcorner” and found “trying to keep things together” (Lee, 1996).” Such women, to Lee, “never attended high school .. [have] no marketable skills ... [stay] home knitting and watching bootleg horror films as family members stop by ... have eyes [that] are ancient.” The cognition of mothers was deformed and they were unable to keep kids on decent paths. The dilemma in the discourse was that kids turned elsewhere to meet their basic moral, social, and spiritual needs: peer groups, gangs, buddies.

This spatialized reporting also had families being intruded by *Los Angeles Sentinel* columnist Carl Sorrel’s (1986) street presences. The black home — rickety and teetering — was being destructively penetrated. The street effortlessly pushed drugs, relaxed sexual mores, and casual acquaintances into homes. Single mothers struggled with this but were losing the battle. Chicago politician Devira Beverly (1991) narrated this process of black-family plummet. To Beverly, this family was being affected by people who typically “came and went,” “brought in drug paraphernalia from the street,” “strangers who came in at a moment’s notice.” “The black family,” to Beverly, “now wrestled with the problems of the street that was knocking at their door.” “Increasingly,” to Beverly, “the street was swallowing up everything in sight.” The message was clear: black family chaos was widespread and increasingly unopposed. Underclass culture had infiltrated families and mothers were abandoning the fight to preserve family integrity.

This reporting made black inner city space stick to these families like glue. Whatever they did or thought, this space was always there. Here, again, was the suggestion of black primordial essences embedded in black inner city spaces. Like black youth, black families absorbed this space and carried a black essentialist content. But this constructing and use of space to make a pejorative identity (“inner city black families”) was nothing new. This trope was also used in the 1980s to render the identities of

“Hispanics,” “Latinos,” “Haitians,” “immigrants,” and others (c.f. Wilson, 1996; Schneider, 1997). Common thought profoundly makes identities by situating people in coded spaces: A failed space has been widely seen to yield a failed people. Conservatives, recognized the common connection of identities and space (see Creswell, 1997) and again assembled and used ghetto turf to convey this.

Representations of space helped constitute this rendition of inner city black families one more fundamental way: it formalized a produced history to know them. An assembled historical-spatial text (“serene ghetto space”) placed in discussions of this family’s history helped construct them. This space was used as the mythic remembrance of a family and its community against which the current plight of these families could be seen. As a potent disciplining space, this black inner city history “spoke for” the plight of current black families (Table 3). In the discourse, once good inner cities bred stable families, recently emergent bad inner cities bred troubled and dysfunctional families. These past spaces were the nostalgic terrains of the good old days, present spaces the “reality-check” environments of family and youth that had unravelled. As went space, so did its families.

National commentators notably waxed philosophic on these imagined serene ghettos. Once, to commentator Rush Limbaugh (1991), “the black community was filled with pleasant parks, safe streets, and well-maintained homes.” “Poverty and economic hardship characterized black families and the ghetto,” to Limbaugh, “but were handled in moral and dignified ways.” People were poor, but “these communities were rooted in maintenance and common morality.” People affected by this space “always struggled, but “obstacles were negotiated through community support, spirit, and constructive values.” “Hard work,” “personal sacrifice,” and “sense of community” marked these communities. This was the black inner city’s “glistening past.” This nostalgic invoking, of course, placed African American stability in passivity and acceptance of circumstance rather than sense-of-self or material standing. African American normality was to be a construct rooted in acceptance of inequitable material realities and docility.

Part and parcel of these once healthy spaces were what *Los Angeles Sentinel* columnist Elizabeth Wright (1988) called “clear parenting roles that “[offered] stable home lives and moral codes.” Black families were effective regulative bodies that “practiced nourishment of the mind and body.” Fathers and mothers surveyed as concerned citizens. Fathers committed to family often disciplined and punished. Mothers concentrated on the intricacies of child rearing -- nurturing egos, building moral character, monitoring friends and influences, and supporting the careers of husbands. These parents, culturally assimilated, knew society’s expectations and performing dutifully. The world was simpler then, black inner cities and society were culturally aligned. Standards of social conduct were universal, responsibilities broadly shouldered by all, and excessive diversity and relativism did not exist.

The serene ghetto was one more spatial construct in the discourse that advanced a conservative politics. Conservatives imposed their own mix of presences and absences to yield a coherent product. To be admitted into this space, people and objects had to carry potent thematic content. Signifiers of conservative normativeness -- safe streets, moral families, community-minded citizens, upstanding kids -- inundated this space (they were of course barred from this space and replaced by the indicators of pathologies in the 1980s discursive constructing of this space). Conservatives, borrowing from Henri Lefebvre

(1981), become “doctors of space.” Like architects and planners who explicitly work and re-work space, these narrativists coded and re-coded this space to their specifications.

Table 3. Degree of involvement in constituting parts or aspects of inner city black family objects ⁶

	Dominance of blatant presentations	Dominance of subtle presentations	Crafted Black histories to know plight of Black families
Local city reporters and columnists	16 (32%)	34 (72%)	32 (64%)
National newspaper columnists	37 (74%)	13 (26%)	33 (66%)
National magazine & radio commentators	38 (76%)	12 (24%)	29 (58%)
Local politician discussions	66 (30%)	14 (70%)	11 (55%)

But it was a distinctive kind of space, a landscape of the past, whose content grew more ambiguous and debatable over time. Yet conservatives continued to declare a thorough knowledge of this space. To use this past as a weapon against the present (“the current destroyed black inner city”), this past space had to be made transparent. This ploy to politicize space rendered the past ghetto transparent and readable. Conservative voices in narrative ran roughshod over any sense of a contradictory reality: a difficult-to-decipher ghetto, a place with complex and contradictory meanings, a space whose content defied easy communication. Any possibility that these issues even existed were obliterated. The history of the ghetto was aggressively forwarded as always readable and easily communicated. The goal was to offer an incisive historical text that could be used to reflect exactly what conservatives wanted.

With this making of black families, anger and rage flowed out of numerous conservative expositions. Some implored black families to do better, others went further and suggested society find a way to penalize pitiful parenting skills. To the often conservative *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1989), “Perhaps we have been trying to jail the wrong people. We have been spinning our wheels, trying to find a way to send the juveniles to jail. But we should have been looking at the parents.” The *Sentinel* goes on: “We have listened to the parents as they have given all manner of excuses, but if the parents were made to pay, then they would see their children in a different way.” In this plea, parents

⁶ Narrativists had to address an object in text a minimum of two lines to be considered discussants of that part or aspect of the object. Based on a random sample of 50 textual pieces (except local politicians that used 20 pieces) for each kind of source who discussed the object in general. Drawn from the database of newspaper articles, magazine articles, personal interviews, and notes from content analysis of radio program.

could do much better as role models and helpers of youth. They, as much as anyone and anything, were responsible for escalating “black-on-black violence.”

Conclusion

Beneath seemingly simple and straightforward conservative renditions of “black-on-black violence” was an elaborate contextual setting-up. These brute articulations incorporated construction of two key themes: black youth as culturally afflicted and black family as nurturing of this affliction. These themes helped authenticate these articulations as bolstering constructions of reality. As in all discourses on social issues, articulated themes relied upon a supporting construction of reality. These themes grounded articulations of violence in a supporting cast of “truths” about “a youth” set in a specific social configuration (“imploding families”). This “black-on-black” rendition, like other constructions of issues, drew strength from locking people into an inability to think beyond it rather than possessing an absolute validity.

Space was at the core of this constructing. It was a widely used geographical fabric incorporated into the discourse as many kinds of “spaces of representation.” Its use as mental spaces and maps served up realms of perception, imagination, fiction, and fantasy. Space was constituted as value-transmittal zones, geometric landscapes of proximities and potential interactions, past and present places of normalcy, texts of lurking villains and forces, and territories of movement and transgression. Other innovative tropes of course helped build these themes but space was made in creative ways to serve conservative politics (see Soja, 1989; 1996). It was not the exclusive domain of conservatives (e.g., radical discourse on this issue also use space, c.f. Reed, 1992), but they aggressively used space to construct their “knowledge.”

Yet this use of space in discourse was anything but surprising. In the late 1970s, Americans had become increasingly sensitive to space in their everyday lives and it was more widely used to communicate (see Benko and Strohmayer, 1997). From many discourses, the public came to know the world as spatial unfoldings. Most crucial were discourses on globalization, deindustrialization, American international policy, and urban crime (c.f. Thrift, 1995; Popke, 1995). Each was understood in spatial terms (what these issues were, meant to America, meant to people personally). For example, globalization exploded across the popular consciousness in the late 1970s as explicitly spatial process. The media offered this through images of global wheeler-dealers hooked on speedy transactions, an international financial system governed from far-away places, new global telecommunications technologies (see Thrift, 1995). In this context, active use of space to make this conservative discourse was not exceptional.

These two chronicled themes embedded in the discourse meshed with general presentation to forge an unmistakable message: this violence was a dilemma in the realm of values. There were fissures in the discourse (caricatured constructions, simple assertions, silencing of emergent realities) but potent meanings and images effectively staked this violence to popular images of pathological culture, kids and families (predatory black youth, culturally and morally deformed black life, and socially disorganized inner cities). These values were placed everywhere in inner cities: in kids, politicians, inner city spaces, minds, and sensibilities. Its pervasiveness supposedly deformed everything in its wake: bodies, dress, gestures, physical spaces, cognitive processes, and common imaginings.

This constructing devalued Black lives in bold strokes. Loss of black life by “black-on-black violence” was made grizzly but a logical outgrowth of sinister culture. The implications are haunting: loss of life was coded as expected, inexorable, and the outcome of people not trying hard enough to extricate themselves from destructive circumstances. For those that tried to escape, black suburbanization was the result. For those that didn’t, there were consequences. Inner city black lives in this presenting seemed expendable, a people who agreed through choice to dwell in dangerous, self-made cultures and terrains. That they would die in record numbers had to be expected. This violence was made to appear as a brutal symptom of a process on the verge of becoming horrifying in its potential to ravage mainstream life. In society, from this gaze, it was in an important way momentarily controlled but could spread and become the ghastly societal menace that conservatives told the public to fear.

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