

URBAN RUINS AND THE MYTHS OF MODERNITY: CHALLENGE AND
RESISTANCE THROUGH THE WORK OF SARAH R. BLOOM

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DEDICATION

For Sarah R. Bloom,
whose work never ceases to amaze me.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the political potentialities of urban ruins through an investigation of ruins generally as well as through the work of artist Sarah R. Bloom. Ultimately this thesis describes urban ruins and their imagery as sites where powerful political (re)mapping of neoliberal capitalist modernity occurs. Whether through a (re)mapping of time, space, or hegemonic notions such as disposability, images of urban ruins do important work toward imagining alternative futures that are more just and sustainable for both humans and nature.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
PREFACE.....	ix
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION TO URBAN RUINS AND RUINATION.....	1
Urban Ruins as Central to Capitalist Neoliberal Modernity.....	1
The Demonic.....	6
The Demonic as Negative Space.....	10
Conclusion.....	19
CHAPTER 2. THE HERE AND NOW: DISRUPTING MYTHS OF TIME AND SPACE WITHIN MYTHS OF MODERNITY.....	21
Myths of Temporal Ordering.....	21
Myths of Spatial Ordering.....	34
Conclusion.....	48
CHAPTER 3. LIVE AND LET LIFE: DISRUPTING THE MYTH OF THE DISPOSABLE WITHIN MYTHS OF MODERNITY.....	49
Myths of the Disposable: Nature Within Conceptions of Human Progress.....	50
Myths of the Disposable: Peoples.....	63
Myths of the Disposable: Woman.....	71
Conclusion.....	83
CONCLUSION.....	84
LITERATURE CITED.....	85

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1:

Figure 1.1: Detroit's Blight Dilemma.....	11
Figure 1.2: 2010 Demographic Census Map.....	13
Figure 1.3: 2014 Garden Resource Program Participation by City Council District, Keep Growing Detroit.....	16

Chapter 2:

Figure 2.1: Biding My Time.....	23
Figure 2.2: The Impermanence of Being.....	26
Figure 2.3: Everything just circles around to where it was before.....	29
Figure 2.4: Don't let time rob you.....	30
Figure 2.5: Circadian Rhythms.....	32
Figure 2.6: Born Under Punches.....	37
Figure 2.7: Rubbish Queen.....	38
Figure 2.8: Either way I lose.....	41
Figure 2.9: Erase yourself and you'll be free.....	41
Figure 2.10: A Classic Tale.....	42
Figure 2.11: This same unending ache.....	44
Figure 2.12: As I Am.....	45
Figure 2.13: Cog in the machine.....	47

Chapter 3:

Figure 3.1: Life Is Nothing If Not Persistent.....	52
Figure 3.2: Huddles Masses.....	56

Figure 3.3: Chrysalis.....	58
Figure 3.4: No Title, Image by Marchand and Meffre.....	65
Figure 3.5: Torch Song.....	68
Figure 3.6: Out of Tune.....	70
Figure 3.7: Rejected Material.....	72
Figure 3.8: Depreciation.....	75
Figure 3.9: Echo Chamber.....	78
Figure 3.10: Overwrought.....	80
Figure 3.11: Will I know when it's finally done.....	82

PREFACE

Recent scholarly debates about modernity reflect a growing consensus that modernity is “best understood not as a hodgepodge of ideas and practices but more basically as a form of temporal ideology that valorizes newness, rupture, and linear plot lines.”¹ Implicit and complicit within this ideology are the operations of capitalism which create the sense that time is rapidly accelerating while simultaneously becoming increasingly disciplined, compressed, and segmented as the overlapping temporalities of life (work, family, nature, life cycles, religious calendars) are pressured to come under the control of capitalist “clocktime.”² Furthermore, these contradictory senses of modern time, both exceptional and routine, are paralleled by equally contradictory senses of modern space as both increasingly emancipated and dystopic. Ever more dislodged from the operation of time and human action, space becomes deemphasized and seemingly less vital to human activity. Furthermore, within modernity, time accelerated by capitalist imperatives and exacerbated by neoliberal agendas works not only to emancipate space but also render crude human hierarchies either invisible or fixed in place. Therefore within discourses of modernity, progress (both human and capital) becomes defined as rapidly accelerating and disjunctive forward temporal movement, through or even in spite of space, toward a future that is better and more important than both the present and past, despite any and all evidence to the contrary.

As such, in operational practice, as an expansive temporal and spatial colonizing force, modernity relies strongly upon the dominant hegemonic myths of dissociated

¹ Shannon L. Dawdy, “Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity,” *Current Anthropology* 51, no. 6 (December 2010): 762

² Ibid, 770

space and linear, progressive temporality. These myths act as “socially useful lie[s],”³ masked as absolute truth. The telling of these myths operates as a “form of power”⁴ that works, as previously mentioned, to structure and make invisible our world’s systems of domination. As such, to sabotage these myths is “to strike a blow at the numerous hierarchies that rely upon [their] constant repetition,”⁵ a central goal of this thesis. The myths that undergird modernity need be laid bare in order to address the inequality and violence that this process enacts upon bodies and spaces. In other words, it is imperative to questions what myths—what lies—are undergirding and rendering invisible the peoples, times, and spaces within modernity? This thesis argues and works to demonstrate that urban ruins operate as potentially politically powerful sites that possess the ability to address and reveal such myths of modernity.

Chapter one of this thesis discusses urban ruins as sites disruptive to modernity through a general discussion of urban ruins and their ability to (re)map both space and alternative temporalities. Chapters two and three continue this discussion in greater depth through analysis of the nude photographic self-portraiture of Sarah R. Bloom in spaces of urban ruination. Chapter two takes the dominant hegemonic understandings, or myths as this thesis argues, of linear, progressive time and dystopic, disassociated space as its analytic framework and organizing mechanism. Within this discussion, it is revealed how these two dominant hegemonic myths are undergirded by myths of their own. Afterwards, chapter three discusses the ways in which Sarah R. Bloom’s work disrupts specifically the myth of the disposable (nature, peoples, and women) within

³ Shannon L. Dawdy, “Clockpunk Anthropology,” 3

⁴ Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, (New York: Routledge, 2006): 16

⁵ Ibid, 15

narratives of modernity. As myth piles upon myth, this thesis hopes that the tangled unraveling of these narratives exposes modernity as a process always incomplete, always moving, and always full of hubris.⁶ Most importantly, with modernity conceived as such, this thesis hopes to demonstrate the potential for alternative (re)mappings of space, time, and notions of disposability that the myth of modernity works to obscure, obliterate and/or foreclose.

⁶ Shannon L. Dawdy, "Clockpunk Anthropology," 762

CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction to Urban Ruins and Ruination

“The problem with ruins is that their meaning cannot be controlled. They threaten to imprison us in the unguarded labyrinths of the past, and they also promise to open imaginary escape... Ruins are not only anthropomorphic but also anamorphic: in our imagination they morph into different shapes like clouds or stones; they make up the invisible cities of our dreams and nightmares, conjuring them to life; and they reveal the momento mori in every lively tableau, like the skull in Holbein’s famous picture. We frame the ruins, and they frame us.”⁷

Urban Ruins as Central to Capitalist Neoliberal Modernity

Within the contemporary modern era, Americans face a wide range of social, economic, and political challenges, most of which are exacerbated by neoliberal thought and policies within late capitalism, which include most significantly “privatization of the public sphere, deregulation of the corporate sector, and lower corporate taxation, paid for with cuts to public spending.”⁸ In the face of these challenges, the world not only seems increasingly complex, but also appears to be organized by a peculiar sense of capitalist realism in which “it is easier to imagine the end of world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.”⁹ For many Americans, this feeling of capitalism’s inevitability is reinforced by continuous growth, the seemingly endless cycles of destruction and development within the lived environment. However, for some, their lived experience appears to match the logic of capitalist realism on a more literal level—not only does capitalism seem permanent and inevitable, but their surrounding environments and cityscapes are characterized by the abandonment, decay, and desolation of space and place one attributes to the end of the world.

⁷ Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, eds. *Ruins of Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2010.

⁸ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 19

⁹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (London: Zero Books, 2009), 2

The presence and awareness of modern urban ruins has become a mainstay of everyday American experience as well as an increasing cultural and academic interest. A simple scan of the radio, a cursory check on Facebook, a brief browsing of the bookstore, or for some even a glimpse out the window—the evidence of contemporary America’s cultural fascination and engagement with ruination and urban decay is pervasive and profound.¹⁰ Essentially, over the past decade the presence of *modern* urban ruins¹¹ – “the structural fallout produced by rapid cycles of industrialization and abandonment, development and depopulation, conflict and reconciliation”¹² – has rapidly proliferated within American social and cultural imaginaries as these sites increasingly become visible within city landscapes and are featured in academic publications, popular culture books, magazines, online photography galleries, social media websites, as well as fine art installations and exhibitions both in gallery spaces and online.¹³

Many of the images of urban ruins circulating within popular culture are taken by an increasing number of people who engage in urban exploration (also known as URBEX or UE). Urban exploration “is a practice of researching, rediscovering and

¹⁰ However, it should be stated that despite my implication of an exclusively American fixation on urban ruins, this intensifying interest in urban ruins and ruination is an international (largely Western) shared phenomena.

¹¹ I make a clear distinction between the ruins of antiquity and the ruins of modernity. From this point on, any reference to ruins will imply *modern* urban ruins as defined above as opposed to those ruins built and used in antiquity. However, I use these terms with recognition of the contentiousness of selecting and using terminology such as “modern” and “ancient.” I also use the term *urban* with the understanding that some ruins are not located within cities proper as well as awareness of the debate between the “urban” and the “rural.”

¹² Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor. “Reckoning with Ruins.” *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 4 (2012), 465

¹³ For a good summary of the academic work done thus far see DeSilvey, Caitlin, and Tim Edensor. “Reckoning with Ruins.” *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 4 (2012): 465-485

For examples of popular culture books see Marchand, Yves, and Romain Meffre. *Yves Marchand & Romain Meffre: The Ruins of Detroit*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2010 and *Beauty in Decay: Urbex*. 3rd ed. United Kingdom: Carpet Bombing Culture, 2012.

physically exploring temporary, obsolete, abandoned, derelict and infrastructural areas within built environments without permission to do so.”¹⁴ The practices of urban exploration, as well as the urban explorers themselves, have also increasingly become the focus and subject of public interest and academic publications and study on an international level.

As modern urban ruins continue to work themselves into public discourse and visibility, these sites, ambiguous and affectively powerful, are often used to reinscribe and reinforce dominant systems of hegemonic power and discourse. Congruent with a dystopian conception of time and space, ruins, as the seemingly ultimate products of end-times, work to support a conception of linear time as well as emancipated, disassociated space. As the products of negative end-times, ruin evoke a linear trajectory of time by seeming to follow a particular temporal narrative in which objects and places have a beginning and an end. Additionally, as the product of negative end-times, ruins also distance space by disembedding space from place. Space is disembedded from place through the imagining of ruins as empty space simultaneously devoid of peoples and productivity or worth.

Ironically, ruins also support conceptions of positive progressive time—a view that states the future is increasingly better and better than the past or present. Ruins do so by operating as either the negatively imagined “end of history” or as evidence that neoliberal capitalist systems need stronger implementation—the absence of them resulting in ruin. Therefore, these central ideas about time (linear, progressive) and space (distanced) become accepted as the norm and a characteristic of reality.

¹⁴ Bradley L. Garrett, "Undertaking recreational trespass: urban exploration and infiltration." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39 (2014), 1

However, this seemingly fixed and unalterable state and terrain of reality, is rather an illusion undergirded, propelled and propagated by certain carefully crafted and protected myths of modernity. These myths include the dominance of capitalist clock time, dissociated space, as well as an inherent conception of nature and peoples as disposable.¹⁵

Furthermore, urban ruin images are often taken by men, in ways that draw upon conventions of masculine explorers surveying feminized terrain.¹⁶ As noted by scholars Mott and Roberts, many urban explorers “routinely describe themselves as ‘penetrating’ places often characterized as ‘virgin,’”¹⁷ highlighting the masculine gaze and subjecthood of urban ruin explorers. Additionally, the identity of these urban explorers are further evidenced and reinforced as masculine through online forums and comments in which urbexers describe their sense of virility, strength, and risk-taking as urban explorers, often through specific references to male genitalia, such as “having the balls” to engage in such activities.¹⁸ Moreover, while most images of urban ruins lack human depiction, the ones that do include a human presence often depict men typifying the soldier or mercenary look in poses that evoke a conquering or heroic mode.¹⁹ Also, in photographic representations in which women are present, they are cast in ways that are highly sexualized or as minority figures that are simply “going along with an activity that is largely led and defined by the male explorers.”²⁰ This gendered dimension of urban exploration ultimately results in masculinized images that reinforce urban

¹⁵ Chapters two and three deal exclusively with these myths.

¹⁶ Carrie Mott and Susan M. Roberts, "Not Everyone Has (the) Balls: Urban Exploration and the Persistence of Masculinist Geography." *Antipode* 00 (2013): 1-17.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 10

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 11

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 11

²⁰ *Ibid*, 12

exploration as a heteronormatively masculinized and male-dominated social practice as well as inscribes urban ruins as feminized, conquerable space.

However, upon closer examination, it is revealed that modern urban ruins and their imagery, working on one hand to reinscribe certain hegemonic myths, also demonstrate an ability to disrupt them. Urban ruin imagery can work to “transgress boundaries between art and everyday space, to explore the street and public realm through artistic practice,”²¹ providing valuable counternarratives within modernity, a main focus of this thesis. Additionally, urban ruins possess the ability to provide interruption and intervention due to their operations as “demonic grounds,” allowing different vantage points that challenge hegemonic norms and therefore serve as places through which respatialization is imagined and achieved.²²

Scholar Katherine Mckittrick’s model of these demonic grounds provides a powerful conceptual framework for illustrating modern urban ruins’ potential to disrupt and undermine prevailing myths of modernity and global capitalism operating within city landscapes. As will be discussed, these myths create cartographic rules that unjustly organize human hierarchies *in place*²³ by associating certain (poor, marginalized) bodies with certain places, such as ruins, in familiar and seemingly natural ways. However, and perhaps most importantly, as McKittrick states, “these rules are alterable and there exists a terrain through which different geographic stories can be and are told.”²⁴ Borrowing McKittrick’s metaphor of demonic grounds, this chapter works to illustrate how urban ruins operate as the (demonic) “terrain” through which the

²¹ David Pinder, "Arts of Urban Exploration." *Cultural Geographies* 12, no. 4 (2005): 387

²² Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxxi

²³ Ibid, x

²⁴ Ibid, x

alterability of the world and its prevailing hegemonic concepts are evidenced, and therefore, a means of revealing the alternative and actively marginalized geographic stories of those who reside within.

The Demonic

As outlined by McKittrick, the demonic is a non-deterministic schema describing a process or system hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity because the central organizing principle cannot predict the future.²⁵ As such, a demonic system not only does not have a determined or knowable outcome, but this system also inherently calls into question prescribed understandings and notions of sequential and classificatory linearity.²⁶ Therefore, from the alternate vantage point of demonic grounds, cognition *outside* of hegemonic norms and order is possible, revealing practices of domination, such as the myths of modernity and global capitalism, which are “sustained by a unitary vantage point.”²⁷ In this way, the *grounded* materiality of demonic grounds exposes the processes through which alternative geographies (peoples and space) are rendered invisible and marginal, actively concealed through landscapes of domination. Furthermore, the “absented presences” within these dominant landscapes reveal the demonic, illustrating how these alternative geographies, supposedly invisible and in the margins, are instead “lived and right in the middle of our historically present landscape.”²⁸

²⁵ Katherine McKittrick, “*Demonic Grounds*.”

²⁶ *Ibid*, x

²⁷ *Ibid*, xv

²⁸ *Ibid*, 7

The demonic nature of ruins reveals how neither space nor time is innocent—working to designate some bodies as either ungeographic (invisible) or kept in place (highly visible and yet marginalized) within uninhabitable spaces—nor, on the other hand, fixed and unalterable. The demonic also reveals how spaces such as ruins, while considered marginal and on the periphery in dominant imaginaries, are in fact central to the city as well as the workings of modernity. As urban ruin scholar Tim Edensor argues, ruins are quintessentially modern as cycles of ruin, destruction, and abandonment are defining, central features of cities.²⁹ While ruins may appear, disappear, and reappear at varying speeds and with varying persistence, they are central to a city's palimpsestic development.

Furthermore, modern urban ruins signify the unevenness of capitalist expansion as well as the failures and impermanency of the capitalist system by highlighting the temporal and spatial poverty it produces—the “sheer waste and inefficiency of using up places, materials and people.”³⁰ As Edensor states,

as glaring signs of instability, ruins deride the pretensions of governments and local authorities to maintain economic prosperity and hence social stability, and *give the lie to those myths of endless progress which sustain the heightened form of neo-liberal philosophy through which a globalising capitalist modernity extends*. Instead, ruins demonstrate that these processes are inexorably cyclical, whereby the new is rapidly and inevitably transformed into the archaic; what was vibrant is suddenly inert, and all subsides into rubbish in the production of vast quantities of waste.³¹

Furthermore, as central features of cities, urban ruins, especially in excess, can reveal the fallibility of the myth of progressive, rational, linear progress as well as the harm in neoliberal policies that allow policies of over speculation within late capitalism.

²⁹ Tim Edensor, *Industrial ruins: spaces, aesthetics and materiality* (New York: Berg, 2005), 44

³⁰ Ibid, 165

³¹ Ibid, 165, emphasis added

For example, in Ireland, as scholars Kitchin, O'Callaghan and Gleeson demonstrate, unfinished estates (new urban ruins) have come to not only symbolize the collapse of Ireland's "Celtic Tiger" economy but also work to disorder both Ireland's past and future conceptions of progress and neoliberal agendas.³² These urban ruins, colloquially termed "ghost estates," are defined as an estate of ten or more housing units where fifty percent or more units are either vacant or under construction without funding or plans to be completed.³³ As of 2011 there were 2,846 such estates in Ireland.³⁴ These unfinished or vacant housing units, left to ruin, are the direct result of neoliberal housing policies as well as the tendency toward over speculation within Ireland's former functioning late capitalist economic model (the so-called Celtic Tiger) during the decade and a half between 1993 and 2007. These unfinished estates, as ruins of the Celtic Tiger, work to "recast that period as one of 'chaotic' excess rather than 'rational' progress, while also signifying the ruined future promised by the Celtic Tiger."³⁵ In this way, new urban ruins reveal how neoliberal capitalist modernity has not led to linear, progressive progress, while simultaneously casting doubt on the notion of progress itself within modernity.

Therefore, these landscapes of modern urban ruins serve as powerful evidence of the hubris of the market, serving not only as examples of capitalism's *episodic* failures, but as cities such as Detroit or Chicago demonstrate, evidence that more and more of the time capitalism's "cumulative successes are not nearly as enduring on the landscape as its accumulating failures. Like the future Earth in the animated film *WALL-*

³² Kitchin, Rob, Cian O'Callaghan, and Justin Gleeson. "The New Ruins of Ireland? Unfinished Estates in the Post-Celtic Tiger Era." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 3: 1069-80.

³³ *Ibid*, 1072

³⁴ *Ibid*, 1069

³⁵ *Ibid*, 1077

E, capitalism is a machine churning out wreckage faster than monuments.”³⁶

Ultimately, these landscapes undermine the stability of modern, progressive time, while also altering existing perceptions of city space—illuminating the fact that despite the “socially useful lies” it tells, modernity is always incomplete, always moving, and always full of hubris.³⁷

Attentive to McKittrick’s reminder that space cannot be viewed as simply metaphorical, cognitive, or imaginary³⁸ one of the powerful features of modern urban ruins as demonic grounds is that they immediately evoke the “magico-real qualities of the human landscape... the places continually recreated out of a conjunction of imagination and materiality.”³⁹ Essentially, in the meeting of the imagination and the materiality of space within urban ruins, a thirdspace emerges similar to that described by Edward Soja, in which “a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness”⁴⁰ is possible. Within the ruins, “the physical gaps of missing walls cite missing people” while the ruin’s status as neither past nor present illuminates the temporal ambiguity of real time.⁴¹ In many ways, modern urban ruins “provoke the imagination, while their patina, dust, and jagged edges work on our senses.”⁴² Clearing away the debris masking social and historical processes, the built environment is demoted from its seemingly deterministic role when transformed into ruins, allowing one to see signs of human improvisation rather than human design.⁴³ Due to this creation of thirdspace, one is also able to delve deeper into this spatiality and contemplate the social realities of those who inhabit and

³⁶ Shannon L. Dawdy, “Clockpunk Anthropology,” 771

³⁷ Shannon L. Dawdy, “Clockpunk Anthropology,” 762

³⁸ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 17

³⁹ Shannon L. Dawdy, “Clockpunk Anthropology,” 773

⁴⁰ Soja, Edward. *Thirdspace*. Malden: Blackwell, 1996, 57

⁴¹ Shannon L. Dawdy, “Clockpunk Anthropology,” 773

⁴² Ibid, 773

⁴³ Ibid, 773

use these spaces. Accordingly, space becomes demonic and open to speculation and alternative geographies. As such, modern urban ruins hold the potential to reveal lived environments within the city as alterable spaces and as part of historical processes with uncertain futures.

The Demonic as Negative Space

However, in attempting to reduce this demonic nature of ruins, dominant narratives characterize and depict modern urban ruins as negative spaces, either blank spaces on maps or scenes of blight and negative value.⁴⁴ As scholar Mishuana Goeman masterfully illustrates, “maps exert political control by manipulating the representation of space into a language of normativity.”⁴⁵ Therefore, in attempting to reduce the demonic nature of ruins, urban ruins are not only viewed as natural or necessary productions of capitalist economy, these spaces are also conceived of as places that limit cities’ social and economic potential and are therefore written off as “uninhabitable,” dangerous places of deviant social practices and behaviors. This normative mapping of modern urban ruins has deleterious effects on both the humans and nonhumans who occupy these spaces. The common and pervasive contemporary depictions and discussions of Detroit provide an excellent example of the ways in which space is mapped as negative, blank, or blighted, rendering both the human and nonhuman in those places unintelligible, invisible, or disposable.

⁴⁴ Shannon L. Dawdy, “Clockpunk Anthropology,” 776

⁴⁵ Goeman, Mishuana, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 18

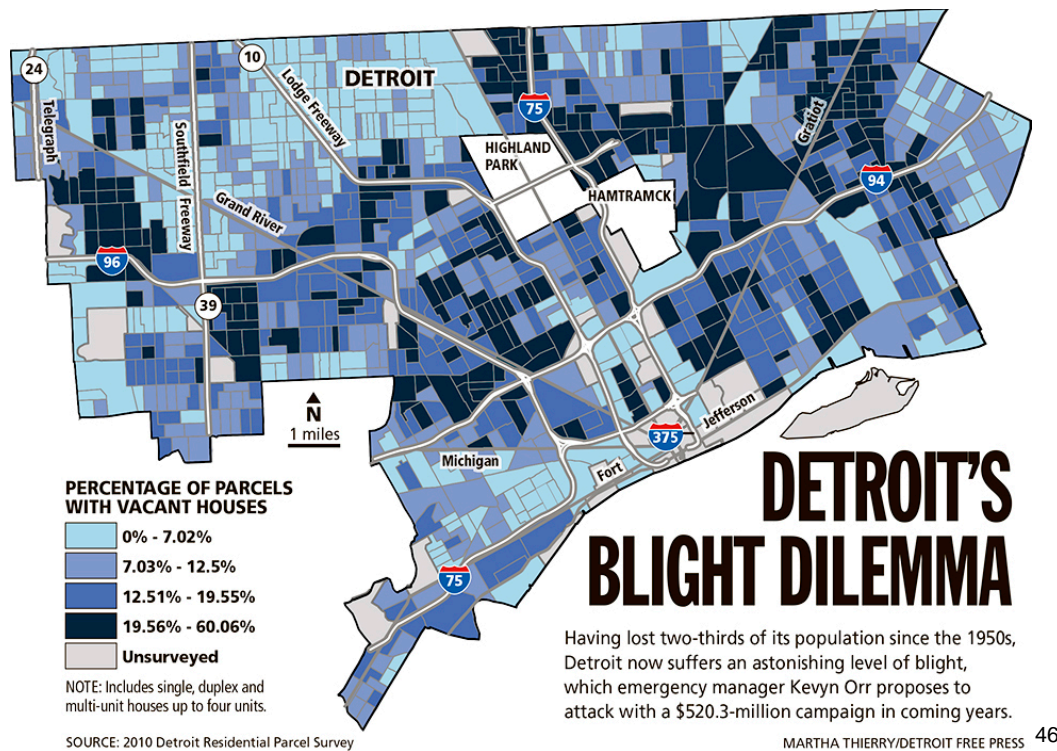


Figure 1.1: Detroit's Blight Dilemma
While seemingly normative, the equation of modern urban ruins to that of blight

or negative space, a type of *terra nullius*, works to make certain histories, communities, and relationships invisible or normalized within existing social and cultural systems—essentially “incorporated into national discourses in often unrecognizable forms.”⁴⁷ As can be seen in the map (figure 1.1), entire neighborhoods and sections of the city, still inhabited, are labeled negatively as areas of “blight” and in need of governmental reconstruction and attention in the way of a staggering \$520.3 million dollars. Even those areas with 0% of abandoned buildings or parcels are colored in a light blue, nearly indistinguishable from those areas containing up to 7.02% of abandoned properties. In essence, the entire city of Detroit is depicted here as a mass area of

⁴⁶ Figure 1.1 taken from: Gallagher, John, Patricia Montemurri, and JC Reindl. “Monumental effort to tear down blight would improve neighborhoods and Detroit's image.” *Detroit Free Press*, February 23, 2014. <http://archive.freep.com/article/20140223/NEWS01/302230057/Blight-Orr-Detroit>.

⁴⁷ Mishuana Goeman, “*Mark My Words*,” 32

negative blight. In this way, the whole city is therefore portrayed as in need of financial restructuring and redevelopment to address this “dilemma.”

Additionally, these kinds of particular mappings, within the American context of modern urban ruins, allows spaces such as these to become racialized in particular ways: poor, African Americans (and often other marginalized peoples) within urban city centers are depicted in the popular, mediatized imagination as social ruins in which “the fabric of the ghetto is imagined as isometrically continuous between the fragile buildings and the crumbling psyche.”⁴⁸ The dismissal of modern urban ruins as dystopic, negative, uninhabitable spaces renders its inhabitants “ungeographic,” mutant, deviant, and spectral. As urban ruin scholar Shannon Dawdy explains,

writing ruins and abandoned land off as negative space, even if occupied and used by inner-city residents, allows property to be imagined as *terra nullius*, ripe for imperial planning as the capitalist cycle spins back toward boom. It is an imagining that allows the urban indigenous to be relocated and hemmed into public housing reserves and have their vernacular structures torn down. The cycle that began with the imperial establishment of colonial cities such as New Orleans, New York, Cape Town, and Calcutta begins again.⁴⁹

Essentially, such normalizing designations opens these spaces up for further capitalist development and speculation, ignoring the wishes and desires of those who continue to inhabit these “uninhabited” and/or “blighted” spaces.

Going back to the example of Detroit, this process of racialization and the linking of poor black and other peoples of color to areas of blight and empty space is clear when viewing a demographic map of Detroit (figure 1.2) in comparison to the “blight map” (figure 1.1). In figure 1.2, each colored dot represents one person. On the map the red color represents the white population, blue represents the black population,

⁴⁸ Shannon L. Dawdy, “Clockpunk Anthropology,” 776

⁴⁹ Ibid, 776

green represents the Asian population, orange represents the Hispanic population, and grey represents other(s). When comparing the demographic map to the “blight map” one immediately notices that a clear racial pattern emerges. The majority of the areas characterized as blight are occupied and inhabited with clearly present and living

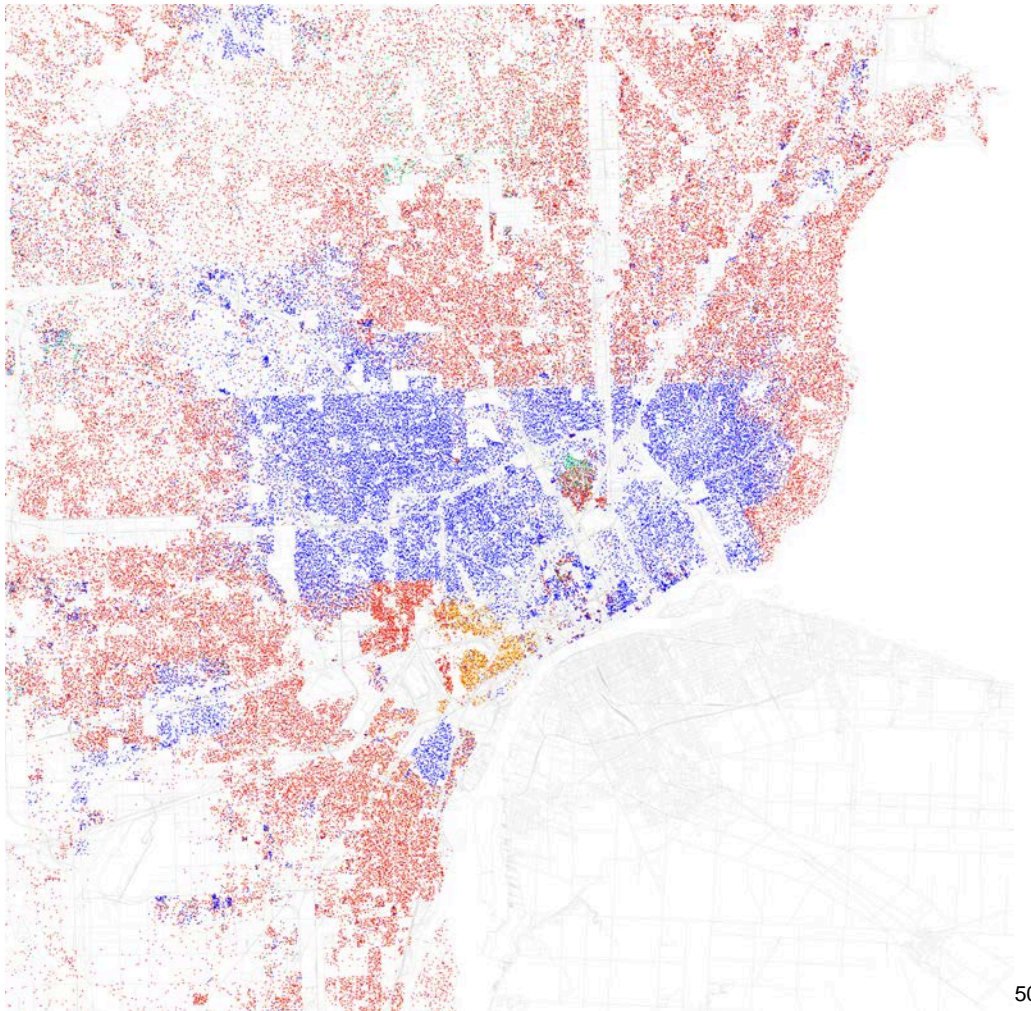


Figure 1.2: 2010 Demographic Census Map

minorities. In mapping and describing these areas as those of blight or uninhabited empty spaces, these living racialized presences are absented. However, in paying close attention to these absented presences, in exploring the vantage points and geographies offered from these “ruins,” one is able to (re)map the ways in which ruins

⁵⁰ Map of racial distribution in Metro Detroit, 2010 U.S. Census

create the conditions of possibility, especially for the emergence of alternative orders in ostensibly regulated urban spaces.⁵¹

Such attention reveals that while these spaces are considered to have little economic use-value within the capitalist market, ruins become important places of economic, social, and ecological productivity for residents.⁵² Often, they serve as resource areas for the salvaging and resale of architectural and building materials, in addition to serving as shelters for the homeless, and converted playgrounds for skateboarders, children, vandals, and urban explorers.⁵³ Ruins can also serve as places to tend gardens and livestock, create art, hold community gatherings, or utilize workspace, as well as operate as convenient sites to dump or recycle garbage in the absence of municipal services and infrastructure.⁵⁴

Many of these activities are linked to networks of an informal economy, ones of sharing and cooperation, but also ones of illegal practices such as car stripping, drug dealing and pot growing.⁵⁵ These uses of urban space reveal the “flip side of capitalism—not its opposite but its underside.”⁵⁶ Through cycles of creative destruction, urban ruins enact a sort of “temporal folding back to the times before the enclosures of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries”⁵⁷ which allows the transformation of these abandoned spaces into opportunity zones for alternative urban life. The illumination of this underside of capitalism works to disrupt the image of the neoliberal city as a space of continuous surveillance and rigid spatial ordering as well as challenges narratives

⁵¹ Caitlin DeSilvey, and Tim Edensor, "Reckoning with Ruins," 474

⁵² Shannon L. Dawdy, "Clockpunk Anthropology," 776

⁵³ *Ibid*, 776

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 776

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 776

⁵⁶ Shannon L. Dawdy, "Clockpunk Anthropology," 776

⁵⁷ Shannon L. Dawdy, "Clockpunk Anthropology," 776

that render inhabitants of ruins as invisible and thus disposable.

As Mckittrick argues, “social practices create landscapes and contribute to how we organize, build, and imagine our surroundings.”⁵⁸ Those who inhabit these spaces “are not indifferent to these practices and landscapes; rather, they are connected to them due to crude racial-sexual hierarchies *and* due to their (often unacknowledged) status as geographic beings who have a stake in the production of space.”⁵⁹ As stakeholders, within the spaces of modern urban ruins many inhabitants find ways to alter this landscape, creating their own geographies and spatial politics. Through these respatializations, one is able to see how “the processes of displacement erase histories and geographies, which are, in fact, present, legitimate, and experiential.”⁶⁰

This process of displacement is similar to the ways in which Native Americans are not, and have never been “vanished,” as scholars such as Mishuana Goeman continually illustrate.⁶¹ Like many Native Americas, those who occupy spaces deemed ruinous are present, exist (and have existed), and work to create and make space and place. Furthermore, these alternative geographies serve as powerful counters to the forces of modern capitalism that act to frame the disposability of increasing numbers of people as inevitable and justified under the normalizing rhetoric of progress and modernity. This critical (re)mapping also reveals how the dominant maps (literal and figurative) of the neoliberal hegemonic order are not *absolute* but instead present multiple perspectives and that “[w]hile narratives and maps help construct and define

⁵⁸ Katherine Mckittrick, “*Demonic Grounds*,” xiv

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, xiv

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 33

⁶¹ Goeman, Mishuana, “*Mark My Words*.”

worldviews, they are not determined and are always open for negotiation.”⁶² Returning to the example of Detroit’s public perception of total and complete blight and urban ruin and decay, the city’s recent explosion of urban gardens within modern urban ruins offers one salient and specific example of the types of (re)mapping occurring which are moving occupants and the city at large toward a more ecologically sustainable future.

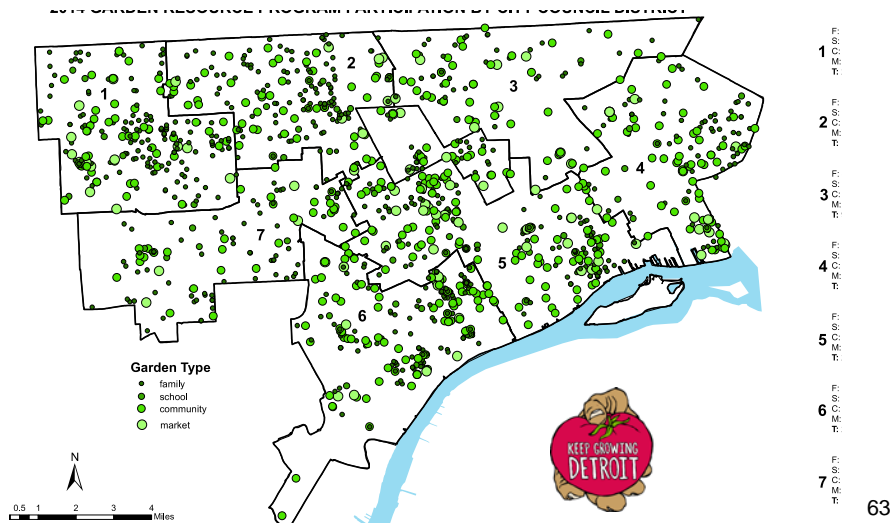


Figure 1.3: 2014 Garden Resource Program Participation by City Council District, Keep Growing Detroit
One example of the positive (re)mapping of space occurring in places deemed

ruinous is observable in the “urban garden map” figure 1.3. Urban gardens and farms are a type of “hybrid public space”⁶⁴ that provide both private and public benefits through personal and collective use of abandoned and vacant spaces. Detroit’s urban gardening spaces lie outside the purview or control of the market⁶⁵ and most often are also created outside of government sanction. Given that many residents of Detroit

⁶² Ibid, 25

⁶³ Graphic taken from:

Keep Growing Detroit. "2014 ANNUAL REPORT." http://detroitagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2014_KGD_Annual-Report_11.25.14_small.pdf.

⁶⁴ Jeffery Hou, “(Not) your everyday public space,” in *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*, ed. Jeffery Hou. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 10

⁶⁵ Teresa M. Mares and Devon G. Pena, “Urban agriculture in the making of insurgent spaces in Los Angeles and Seattle.” In *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*, edited by Jeffery Hou, (New York: Routledge, 2010): 241

struggle to find affordable and healthy food options—with approximately eighty percent of residents purchasing their food from convenience stores, party stores, liquor stores, and gas stations⁶⁶—these insurgent urban gardening spaces are not only becoming increasingly common,⁶⁷ but serve a vital and critical community need. Rebecca Salminen Witt, president of the urban gardening nonprofit Greening of Detroit, describes Detroit as the new and now center of the “urban agriculture movement,” estimating that currently there are between fifteen-hundred to two-thousand gardens within the city, ranging from the “little postage stamp gardens in someone’s backyard” to the “full scale urban farms that are growing produce for sale [and] serving as someone’s primary living.”⁶⁸ In fact, urban farming has become so central to the fabric of community life in Detroit that official government policies are being transformed around these practices. Urban farming is now considered a vital part of city planning and revitalization, highlighted in official city visions and planning documents such as the Detroit Future City Strategic Framework and the Detroit Environmental Agenda. Furthermore, the city officially made these insurgent preservation tactics legal through changes to city zoning law ordinances as of April 2013.⁶⁹

As this thesis note in the beginning, urban ruins—spaces full of the political potentiality for (re)mapping—are becoming more and more ubiquitous, no longer a characteristic of only lower class, racial, or linguistic minority-based neighborhoods and

⁶⁶ Mark Dowie, "Food Among the Ruins." *Guernica: A Magazine of Art & Politics*, August 1, 2009 http://www.guernicamag.com/features/food_among_the_ruins/.

⁶⁷ Graphic taken from:

Keep Growing Detroit. "2014 ANNUAL REPORT." http://detroitagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2014_KGD_Annual-Report_11.25.14_small.pdf.

⁶⁸ Jane C. Timm, "Urban farming takes hold in blighted Motor City." *MSNBC*, September 10, 2013. <http://www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/urban-farming-takes-hold-blighted-motor>.

⁶⁹ Sandra Turner-Handy, "Transforming Detroit involves everyone." *The Michigan Citizen*, December 26, 2013. <http://michigancitizen.com/transforming-detroit-involves-everyone/>. Specifically, changes were made to the Changes were made to Detroit Zoning Ordinance, Chapter 61 of the 1984 Detroit City Code.

realities. As Klein states

through various feats of denialism and racism, it was possible for privileged people in North America and Europe to mentally cordon off these unlucky places as hinterlands, wastelands, nowhere—or unluckiest of all... middle of nowheres... And up until quite recently, that has held up as the grand bargain of the carbon age: the people reaping the bulk of the benefits of extractivism pretend not to see the costs of that comfort so long as the sacrifice zones are kept safely out of view.⁷⁰

However, as Klein states, the extractive industries have now broken this unspoken bargain. In a very short amount time, in recent years, these sacrifice zones have gotten progressively larger, incorporating more and more spaces and peoples who previously thought they were safe from risk. Moreover, not only have these zone become larger, but “several of the largest zones targeted for sacrifice are located in some of the wealthiest and most powerful countries in the world.”⁷¹ Essentially, ruins, even if mapped as negative space or blighted areas, have become a very real aspect of many Americans’ everyday lives—even those who had the luxury of believing themselves outside the touches of the undersides of capitalist processes.

Returning one last time to the example of Detroit, when viewed side-by-side, the juxtaposed “urban garden map” (figure 1.3) and the “blight map” (figure 1.2) reveal not only an alternative view of the city and urban space, but given the locations of the community and school gardens, it also becomes clear that co-operative, community driven alternative ecological futures are being (re)mapped all over Detroit—futures imagined and (re)mapped in both the poorest and more privileged areas. Therefore, there are simultaneous process occurring in which space and place are deemed ruinous, but also being (re)mapping with more positive futures.

⁷⁰ Naomi Klein, “*This Changes Everything*,” 310

⁷¹ Naomi Klein, “*This Changes Everything*,” 311

Conclusion

In conclusion, modern urban ruins as demonic grounds, working to interrupt the telling of various myths of modernity and global capitalism—positive logics of progress, fixed spatiality and linear temporality, inevitable disposability and marginalization—offer unique potential for the radical restructuring of America’s social, political, economic and geographic imaginaries. Defying marginal rendering as the simple manifestations of modern capitalist end-times, modern urban ruins offer geographic retellings that are in fact, “*part of the story, not the end of the story.*”⁷²

Additionally, this thesis takes as its central content the nude self-portraiture of a female urban explorer Sarah R. Bloom in an effort to illustrate the gendered significance of these spaces. Working against the norm of conventional urban ruin photography, this thesis focuses on illuminating the ways in which a female-oriented approach to ruins (re)maps space, time, and narratives of modernity in critical and vital ways. By focusing on a female urban explorer who incorporates herself fully into the representation of ruin, this thesis hopes to illustrate the benefits of attending to alternative ways of viewing and understanding the practice of urban exploration.

Furthermore, while there is a recent plethora of work on urban ruin scholarship in the academy, there are few sustained examples of work done that pays close attention to the visual representation of these spaces and how they operate through the dissemination of urban ruin photography. Sustained attention to these photographs is useful as it allows a deeper investigation into what these images possibly connote and denote for its viewers.

In this way, this thesis hopes to address this literature and gender gap by paying

⁷² Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*,” 134, *emphasis added*.

close, critical attention to the nuances and potentialities that emerge through Bloom's work. This thesis operates under the assumption that while urban ruins can and do reinscribe dominant narratives, they also fundamentally disrupt them, (re)mapping both time and space and opening up more just and sustainable futures. Ultimately, this thesis argues, there is hope in ruin.

CHAPTER 2:

The Here and Now: Disrupting Myths of Time and Space within Myths of Modernity

The nude photographic self-portraits of Sarah R. Bloom within spaces of urban ruin act to disrupt modernity's narratives and definitions of time and space, serving as not only an intervening interruption but also as an alternative means of conceptualizing time and space. Specifically, this chapter argues that Bloom's nude photographic self-portraiture unsettles key myths of temporal and spatial ordering central to narratives of modernity. The work of Bloom accomplishes this task not only by exposing the spatial and temporal cracks animating myths of modernity but also by critically (re)mapping both time and space and therefore evoking alternative futurities and imaginings.

Myths of Temporal Ordering

Within narratives of modernity, the temporal ideologies of linear plot lines and positive progression reigns. Time is viewed as increasingly accelerated such that the past becomes largely irrelevant, the present fleeting, and the future a continually moving positive horizon, an obsessive target. One of the dominant realities rendered invisible is the existence of multi-temporalities as all temporalities become colonized and dominated by accelerated capitalist clock time. Clock time is perceived mathematically, as "a series of fixed states that can be sliced up, separated out and measured precisely."⁷³ It is the linear time of money and production. Alternatively, other temporalities are deemed unproductive, irrational, and/or non-existent. The impetus within modernity for *conquering* (both time and space) emerges as clearly evident.

⁷³ Robert Hassan, *Empires of Speed: Time and the Acceleration of Politics and Society*. Leiden: Brill, 2009, 43

However, despite this attempted erasure and domination, time exists within a social field. It is not, as scholar Robert Hassan cogently explains, “an overarching cosmic universe... one that we exist *within*.”⁷⁴ Instead, time is social and “being social, time is therefore also diverse,”⁷⁵ emerging from different contexts and cultures; essentially, time is both created and shaped and therefore multiplicitious in nature. However, as scholar Adam argues, the institutionalization of clock time, world time, standard time and time zones, naturalized as the norm, not only “vastly increases the difficulty of recognizing the role this created time plays in everyday life,” but “[o]ther temporal principles fade into the background. They become invisible.”⁷⁶ Despite this erasure, multiple temporalities exist, are felt in the everyday, and matter. The multi-temporalities within the lived reality of the everyday emerge clearly within Bloom’s artwork, whether through the multiple temporalities that surface within a photograph, the revelations that time operates differently than the norm, or the evocation of other temporalities such as the biological or ecological time. Each intervention actively works to subvert and disrupt hegemonic understandings of linear, progressive time within modernity.

The presence of mixed and multiple temporalities within the everyday are clearly evoked in this first image entitled *Bidding my Time* (figure 2.1), which ultimately works to disrupt notions of linear, progressive time. In one interpretation, time seems to stand still, existing in a state of suspension. The black and white of the photograph brings Bloom and the street scene into sharp focus, holding the moment in a fixed state.



⁷⁴ Robert Hassan, *Empires of Speed*, 42

⁷⁵ Ibid, 42

⁷⁶ Barbara Adam, "The Gendered Time Politics of Globalization: Of Shadowlands and Elusive Justice." *Feminist Review* 70 (2002): 17

Figure 2.1: Biding My Time

The ability of time to stand still works against normative notions of time as continually pressing forward. This is especially true given the agency that modern capitalist systems seem to give to time, where time is no longer simply passing, or pausing at moments, but always progressing forward, always demanding action. This ability of time to pause, to be held in a state of stasis, gets lost within normative conceptions of time. Therefore, Bloom's image, which brings time's ability to pause to the forefront, even if in a pregnant pausing, works to disrupt the understanding of time as forever forcefully flowing forward.

However, this image, while highlighting a moment of stasis, also evokes thoughts of the future, the moment when the string will, inevitably one assumes, continue to unravel. The visceral connection between Bloom and the string implicates for Bloom a personal unraveling and coming apart as time passes. The piece of metal attached to the string, seemingly precariously positioned over Bloom, at risk of falling on her form, gives a certain element and feel of danger to the composition as well as pointing toward the future. This linkage indicates a fear of future unraveling as part of Bloom's aging process. This connection also fixes the passage of time as negative and destructive to Bloom's figure. The passage of time has been destructive, the present moment dangerous, and the future more destructive still. This understanding of time, while linear, disrupts notions of progressive time. Time does not progress, for Bloom, toward future betterment. Time instead is conceived of as destructive, harmful, and continually moving toward greater future disregard and disrepair. In this image time does not move toward the promise of better future horizons. The horizon in this image is dark and bleak, breaking with normative understandings of linear time as positively progressive.

Furthermore, while differing temporalities of present and future are brought to mind clearly through the image's composition, the past is also evoked through the inclusion of debris surrounding Bloom within the frame. The plastic bag covering Bloom associates her not only with this rubble but also connects her temporally to the passing of time it has taken for such debris to accumulate. Time has taken its toll and the viewer is witness to the remains. However, the viewer remains in the past for only a moment as the dark background brings an electrical socket, a reminder and visual symbol of modernity, to the forefront of focus and thus into the present moment or even

the future. As such the viewer is continually shifted from past to present, present to past, as well as the future. This temporal oscillating brought to the foreground of the image for the viewer works to impress the presence and existence of multiple temporalities present in everyday reality. This temporal flipping disrupts easy notions of linear, progressive time as at any given moment the viewer is alerted to the importance of past, present and future.

As discussed previously, in modern notions of time, the importance of the past fades as the present becomes a fleeting moment and future an ever-moving target of positive expectation and focus. However, as this image illustrates, the past is significant, focusing the viewers' attention on the forces that have lead to the image's debris and discard and especially to the forces that have associated Bloom with this disposability. Furthermore, the present becomes equally important. The image highlights a moment of pause and suspension that is the present, forcing the viewer's perspective into an appreciation and awareness of this idle moment. In this moment, non-action, which acts against notions of the rapidly ever-moving forwardness of time, acts as an important disruption. Additionally, the future also becomes important in this image, but not as expected: the progressive bettering of the past and present. In this image, the future appears more dystopic and negative for Bloom and the space of ruin in which she occupies, leading to further harmful destruction and disrepair, ultimately disrupting this normative understanding of time as well. Essentially, in this image, if time moves forward into the future it does so negatively and dystopically. As such, each of these time tenses are equally significant and brought to the forefront of focus for the

viewer, complicating normative conceptions of time. The time norm within this image is a present and equally significant reality of multi-temporality.

The Impermanence of Being (figure 2.2), a series consisting of four images, also evokes multi-temporalities for the viewer. The images were displayed as indicated in the



Figure 2.2: The Impermanence of Being Exhibition Image

above photograph. Taken together, Bloom's oscillating form works to give a sense of mixed or multi-temporalities within the series. On one hand, the viewer may observe the images (in the order described) as that of mirroring the ecological time and growth

process of the trees that surrounds Bloom, simultaneously evokes a sense of past, present, and future. Each photograph is taken in the same location, with the only changing aspect being the placement of Bloom's nude form. The images take place in the burnt-out remains of a building's foundation. The charred roof and walls remain with various dark and burned remnants strewn along the ground, strong indicators of the past and present. If following a temporally linear sequence, in the first image, Bloom appears crouched down between the first two of three trees budding with green leaves. Her face is turned away from the camera, her entire face obscured by her hair, with arms slightly splayed out. This appears as the mirroring of the beginning of the tree's growth process. In the second image, Bloom is standing behind all three trees with her arms by her side, her body slightly hunched. Her face is still turned away from the camera with the majority of her face obscured by her hair. This image would be the next progression in the tree's growth, larger and more expansive, yet not quite in full bloom or growth. In the third image Bloom is also standing, this time in between the first two and last trees. Her face is turned toward the camera, her gaze down toward the ground, half of her face covered by her hair. Her arms are slightly out as if in motion. This continues to follow the progression, the tree almost fully grown. In the fourth image, Bloom stands behind the three trees her arm up and reaching out above her head. Her face is free of hair, her face upturned and her gaze seemingly on the sky. In this image it is as if she has reached, like the tree in the photograph, a certain stage of maturity along with the tree. Her face bared to the sun mirrors the tree that growth up and tall. If viewed in this order, time seems to follow a very linear order, supporting normative understandings of the passage of time.

However, given the positioning of the photographs during their display, the viewer may also view the images in another sequence in which time seems to move forward and backward, backward and forward. Furthermore, attention to each photograph by itself, especially through consideration of the evidence of tree growth, indicates a seemingly significant amount of time passing from the time the house burned and the taking of the photograph, a sort of temporal folding occurring for the viewer. The setting also evokes a visceral sense of the past through the frame of the ruined house while the youth of the tree evokes a sense of the present and future potentialities. Additionally, Bloom's presence in an environment of ruin evokes questions of the past, present and the future. What is she doing in this space? What will happen to her in this space? Should she be there or remain? How long has she been here? All questions easily evoked by the viewer that give rise to the mixed temporalities of space that these images provoke. Therefore, similar to *Biding my Time* (figure 2.1), the evocation of the simultaneous presence of past, present, and future operates within these images to disrupt contemporary notions of linear time, despite evoking question that condition a set of narrative expectations.

Additionally, the setting in particular, a place of ruin with nature springing up, also seems to disrupt notions of progressive time, for humans anyways. Nature is reclaiming this space in ways opposite to notion of progress in which nature is considered an extractable resource with humans dominant on and within the landscape. In these images, a new relationship is imagined in which the evidence of human dominance and actions upon the land lays in ruin, whereas, on the other hand, nature is thriving. In some ways Bloom too is demonstrating a non-normative way of being in time, i.e. nude,

within this space of ruin and/or regeneration. Her nudity links her more to a certain state of “nature” than to “civilization.” Furthermore, the images show her appearing to thrive as well, whether standing and observing her environment or raising her hands to the sky in a gesture of freedom of movement. The multiple stances she takes reveals a certain freedom to do so, just as the image shows the tree’s freedom to grow uninhibited, and perhaps nourished, by the charred remains of human “progress.” Time in this scenario does not benefit human desires for the conquering of land and nature nor the impetus to create enduring buildings and space of human hubris upon this land, which ultimately disrupts normative understandings of modern progressive time.



Figure 2.3: Everything just circles around to where it was before

Another image that disrupts notions of the operation of linear, progressive time is entitled *Everything just circles around to where it was before* (figure 2.3). As the title suggests, this image highlights the cyclical, rather than linear, nature of time in opposition to normative understandings of linear time. Furthermore, the decay of the image work to indicate that time circles in cycles of decay rather than moves progressively toward human betterment, disrupting notions of progressive time as well. The circular valves in the image, as well as the circular pipes, and Bloom's own curved body works to indicate and highlight this cyclicality. In some senses, the pipes resemble a rib cage, Bloom's form being the heart, drawing more deeply a human connection into the image—human time is cyclical. This conception of time works against normative understanding of time as ever moving rapidly, linearly, forward.



Figure 2.4: Don't let time rob you

Moreover, as briefly discussed, within modernity, the assumed, rapidly forward moving nature of time seems to give time a certain sense of agency in which it feels that time is pressing and demanding. Through this feeling there is a notion that emerges that time is also capable of robbing or stealing something vital from people and things. Bloom's image, *Don't let time rob you* (figure 2.4) illustrates this concept visually, working not only to evoke multi-temporalities but also to critique normative understandings of the workings of modern notions of time.

In this image, Bloom's nude form appears slightly off-centered in a huddled, fetal position amidst ruin and debris. Everything about the environment of the image, whether the cracked and peeling wallpaper, or the cracked and damaged window frames, to the debris littered ground, signifies decay, abandon, and destruction. While youthful and smooth in comparison, it is clear Bloom's body is also aged through the presence of some wrinkle-like lines on her sides as well as the shadow cast on various parts of her body. The tattoos on her body also add to the sense of time and age. The youthfulness of her body in some ways seems to resist the robbing of time the title mentions, while her age and surrounding decay indicate that time has done just that—robbed her and the environment of something life-sustaining and vital. The electricity line that leads the gaze down to Bloom's body, as well as centers the gaze in the image is implicated in this process. As a symbol of modernity, the electricity line and socket symbolically invokes modernity's time as the time doing such robbing.

Modern capitalist time not only appears to rob as *Don't let time rob you* suggests. This linear, progressive time also obscures and erases other temporalities. Therefore, the presence of other temporalities threatens and provides a much need disrupts the

dominance of modern time. As such, the image entitled *Circadian Rhythms* (figure 2.5) works to disrupt these linear, progressive narratives of time through the evocation of alternative temporalities, primarily biological and ecological time. This works against capitalist clock time's attempts to obscure or delegitimize the presence of these alternative temporalities.



Figure 2.5: Circadian Rhythms

Biological temporalities are immediately evoked through the image's title *Circadian Rhythms*. As defined by the National Institute of General Medical Sciences circadian rhythms are the “physical, mental and behavior changes that follow a roughly

24-hour cycle, responding primarily to light and darkness in an organism's environment."⁷⁷ These rhythms are found in most living things, including plants, animal, and tiny microbes.⁷⁸ These circadian rhythms are credited with influencing sleep-wake cycles, feeding schedules, body temperature, hormone release, along with other bodily functions such as brain wave activity and cell regeneration.⁷⁹ Essentially, circadian rhythms are biological ebbs and flows that determine and regulate a great deal of necessary bodily functions, not to mention energy and productivity levels, an internal biological "clock."⁸⁰ Biological time, despite being central to human (and nature) activity, is often incompatible with capitalist clock time, which expects full energy and productivity at all hours of the day. However, the reality is that circadian rhythms, which operate in conjunction with other rhythms such as the natural cycle of the sun, will never be completely colonized by capitalist clock time and images such as Bloom's *Circadian Rhythms* bring this to light.

Beyond the title of this image, this photographic self-portrait's use of natural lighting most clearly brings biological time to the forefront. In this image, not only are Bloom's circadian rhythms elicited, but also the plant growing through the window, both bathed in bright natural light within the composition of the image. Both Bloom and the tree appear splayed out and in a state of carefree ease, despite the desolation of their surrounding environment. This seems to imply a certain acceptance, acceptance perhaps of the inevitability of biological rhythms despite, or in spite of environmental

⁷⁷ National Institute of General Medical Sciences. "Circadian Rhythms Fact Sheet." 2005. http://www.nigms.nih.gov/Education/Pages/Factsheet_CircadianRhythms.aspx.

⁷⁸ While circadian rhythms are produced by natural genetic factors within the body, they are primarily influenced by light, which turns on and off certain genes that control an organism's internal clocks.

⁷⁹ Science Daily. "Circadian Rhythm." http://www.sciencedaily.com/articles/c/circadian_rhythm.htm.

⁸⁰ Abnormal circadian rhythms have been associated with depression, bipolar disorder, seasonal affective disorder, obesity, as well as diabetes.

conditions and pressures. Both the tree and Bloom's form appear as healthy and thriving in this environment of decay and abandonment, both standing out in contrast to the darkness of the floor littered with debris. Both appear as if nourished and sustained by the natural light shining in through the window. In particular, Bloom's smooth, youthful, and healthy skin stands out evocatively and provocatively in contrast to the rough texture of the peeling, cracking, and crumbling wall of the room and the debris strewn, uneven floor within the frame of the image.

The tree growing through the window evokes environmental temporalities, a temporality connected to Bloom's biological temporality through circadian rhythms. Both the tree and Bloom are influenced and nourished by, not to mention both appear as responding to, the natural sunlight streaming through the window. Their responses, highlights the importance of these temporalities (biological and ecological), in opposition to capitalist clocktime's conquering and obscuring tendencies.

Also, Bloom appears in a moment of idle restfulness. This works in opposition to the understanding of the competitive, ever moving forward neoliberal subject. In an environment where subjects are expected to always be in a state of productive action, non-action and idleness are disruptive of this expectation. Bloom's (not to mention the tree's) idleness serves little normative productive purpose. However, her idleness does work to evoke the aforementioned biological temporality erased by capitalist clocktime.

Myths of Spatial Ordering

Within narratives modernity, space is often portrayed and defined as static, immobile, and highly ordered, as well as emancipated and dissociated from human

experiences and realities. However, elements of disorder, irregularity, fluidity, and evidence of deep connection between humans and the environment often emerge even if only phantasmorically. As scholar Tim Edensor states, “[m]odernity seems to have been riven by two opposing forces, namely the quest for a seamless order and the simultaneous desire transcend a regulated life, to into a realm of surprise, contingency and misrule.”⁸¹ Despite this tension, narratives of modernity attempt to quell and make invisible the less disorderly aspects of space through regulation, aesthetic monitoring, surveillance, and a “prevalence of regimes which determine where and how things, activities and people should be placed.”⁸² This ordering also works to distance and emancipate people from space as well as supports dichotomous thinking of inside/outside, internal/external binaries of space.

Additionally, this planned spatial ordering is “informed by the requirements of industrial discipline, ‘rational’ recreation and consumption”⁸³ and works to socialize human behavior. Notions of good habits and proper behavior become institutionalized and normalized such that human behavior in public space becomes regulated through self-control that acts to suppress the body’s expressivity.⁸⁴ Furthermore, notions of order and control work to sanitize public space such that the range of sensations experienced is also highly regulated and subject to normalized perceptions of civilized, modern, cultural tastes.⁸⁵ Within the ordering of space, there is bureaucratic monitoring

⁸¹ Tim Edensor, “*Industrial ruins*,” 53

⁸² *Ibid*, 54

⁸³ *Ibid*, 56

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 56

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 56

of noise, smell, as well as enforcement of tactile sterility that works to “order the gaze”⁸⁶ as well as the interactions of peoples within space, especially space considered public.

However, there are other ways of being in space, not to mention other relationships possible between humanity and space, as Bloom’s artwork illustrates. Bloom’s work disrupts narratives and understandings of space as static, immobile, ordered, emancipated and disassociated predominantly in two ways. First, within much of her work, there is a certain element of play that reoccurs throughout Bloom’s images that (re)maps and (re)conceptualizes alternative means of being space. Whether she is playing with or within space, Bloom’s photographs demonstrate for the viewer alternatives that emerge by being physically present in spaces of ruin. Secondly, Bloom’s photographs address and complicate notions of inside/outside (internal/external) binaries about and of space. This too works to (re)map and (re)conceptualize alternatives ways of being in space.

In the image *Born Under Punches* (figure 2.6), the element of play is central, despite the negativity infusing the image’s title. Within this photo Bloom is positioned in a hunched form that resembles a dance move with her arms angled out, forcefully pushing up the plastic covering that she interacts with. This interaction adds to the element of play as it whimsically drapes over her body, transparent enough to reveal Bloom’s body and movement. Sunlight shines off of the plastic, drawing notice to Bloom’s dancing form. The remaining windowpanes also shine with reflected light, creating a bright geometric pattern, which allows the dance movement Bloom makes to stand out for the viewer. This pattern is also mirrored on the ground, highlighting Bloom, while also causing the floor to resemble a lighted dance floor or studio, upon

⁸⁶ Tim Edensor, *Industrial ruins*,” 57



Figure 2.6: Born Under Punches

which Bloom dances. This shadowed pattern also works to give the photograph a feeling a movement, a feeling and conception that highlights and supports Bloom's creative dancing movement. The color of the leaves interweaving the windows in the photograph also works to give a light, playful feeling to image as they artfully and whimsically backdrop Bloom's form. The heart graffitied on the window also adds a note of whimsy and playfulness, a marking that is also mirrored by the shape made by Bloom's body and the plastic sheet she manipulates with her movement.

Dancing, especially nude dancing, is not a socially accepted activity within public space. The ways in which people move through space, especially public space in

adulthood, are highly regulated and ordered. Tactility and experiencing of movement through space is profoundly limited by these norms and conventions. However, in this image, Bloom is able to move freely as she interacts with and within the space of ruin. The beautiful, colorful composition of the image highlights her movement in ways that render her movement artful and naturalized within the space of the photograph. As an aesthetic piece, her movements seem appropriate for the space, despite the clear challenge to dominant conceptions of bodily movement and tactility within conventional space. Given the title of the image, *Born Under Punches*, Bloom illustrates that beauty, abandon, and play are possible in public spaces, especially those conventionally considered negative and ruinous. There is a freedom of movement and interaction with her environment that Bloom's form finds within *this* space that runs counter to normative movement within highly regulated public space, ultimately working to (re)map the movement potential of bodies, especially adult bodies, within space.



Figure 2.7: Rubbish Queen

Play is also essential, albeit in a different way, in the photograph entitled *Rubbish Queen* (figure 2.7). In this image, Bloom plays not only within, but also with space. Imaginatively Bloom uses the surrounding discard and abandon, artfully arranged, to give the impression of a throne upon which she sits. The unrecognizability of individual items of much of the discard works to create solid curved lines that lead the viewer's gaze to Bloom's body centered within and seated upon the refuse. However the un-uniformity of the lines of refuse clearly indicates that it is only an imagined throne, not a physically created and recognizable one that Bloom is seated upon. Bloom's gaze, toward her reflection in the murky and greenish water evokes thoughts of internal processes, such as play and imagination on Bloom's part. Bloom's reflection in the mirror evokes an internal world the viewer is not entirely privy to. The outside world is also conjured in her internal reflections by the mirroring of the windows in the water, working alongside the rubbish to give a sense of visual symmetry to the photograph. However, in the creation of this visual symmetry, Bloom's form appears slightly off center, aligning conceptually with a queendom that is not quite as expected. This unexpectedness, this playfulness, is also present in the title of image, her imagining herself as a "rubbish queen" in a space of ruin. The ruinousness of the space is highlighted not only by the refuse, but the peeling paint of the crumbling walls as well as the inclusion of brackish water inside of a building. In this ruinous space Bloom is able to creatively imagine, or play, with the idea of being a queen in a land of trash. In this space, Bloom is free to create and visually articulate for the viewer such imaginings, an act not conventionally accepted for adults within public space. Space for Bloom, within

this image is not static, nor disassociated; it is personal, meaningful, full of connectedness and possibility of movement and play.

Additionally, Bloom further demonstrates her ability to (re)map space and ways of being in space through the photographs entitled *Either way I lose...* (figure 2.8) and *Erase yourself and you'll be free* (figure 2.9). In these images, similar to *Rubbish Queen*, Bloom plays with space in ways that serves as an interruption to dominant spatial logics of inside/outside (internal/external). In both photographs, Bloom's form is contrasted against square, geometric shapes within space. Within *Either way I lose...* and *Erase yourself and you'll be free* (as well as *Born Under Punches*) the geometric grid created by the lines within the images' composition works to juxtapose the rigid ordering of space, which ultimately throws into relief Bloom's unregulated occupation of space. Her body, working in opposition to regulated order within the spaces of ruin in these images, is called to the forefront of the viewer's attention. In *Either way I lose*, attention is drawn to Bloom's body in contrast to the shiny reflected surfaces within the image, whereas within *Erase yourself and you'll be free*, attention is called to Bloom's body because of the shiny reflective plastic she holds. However, in either case, Bloom's body appears to have more range and freedom of movement than the rigid lines of her environment allow. There is an aesthetic contrast in the image between the geometry of lines and space and the geometry of the flesh that highlight the different qualities of movement and stasis required and expected of each. Additionally, within the space of ruin, Bloom is able to play with the conventions of space in ways not normally possible within regulated space, especially bearing in mind the time and consideration it takes to compose such positioning of the body within regulated space.



Figure 2.8: Either way I lose...



Figure 2.9: Erase yourself and you'll be free



Figure 2.10: A Classic Tale

Moving to the second way in which Bloom's work disrupts normative understandings of space, the image *A Classic Tale* (figure 2.10) disrupts accepted notions of inside/outside space by complicating and weakening these boundaries through the creative (re)mapping of space that give supremacy to nature, rather than humanity or "civilization". In the photograph, Bloom's nude form is depicted lying on her side in a building filled with debris, plants, and surrounded by ruined buildings. Her body is brought into relief by the vibrant colors of the surrounding plants and moss, which contrasts sharply with Bloom's pale skin. The tree and plants (nature) seems to be enveloping Bloom; dirt is even visible on her backside as if beginning the process of

completely engulfing her. In this way it appears that nature is taking over or (re)claiming this space. Evidence of human occupation is demonstrated by the large piece of rusting metal, black tubing, and Bloom's body—all objects that stand out against the green of the plants and moss. However, the composition of the image, objects placed haphazardly and being engulfed in nature, indicates that these items are discarded, simply remains. The broken windows of the room as well as those visible outside of the building also give the impression that these are remains and debris. Given the vivid colors of the plant life, spreading out and taking over the space, objects that according to normative standards should be *outside* of the building, appear to now be dominating the interior space of the room. The "classic tale" this image seems to tell is one of ultimate human decline and the eventual (re)clamation of space by nature. This complicating of the boundaries of inside/outside works to (re)map understandings of internal and external space, flipping normative spatial logics of nature outside (humanity inside) on its head. Furthermore, in describing this nature (re)clamation as the norm, by terming it a "classic" or common tale, assumptions of what should be inside and what should be outside become complicated as normalized notions of human progress and regulated space are deeply questioned. It appears for Bloom that in the space of ruin conventional understandings of inside/outside space are challenged, instead of reinforced through this creative (re)mapping and imagining.

The normative spatial logics of inside/outside space are also questioned, in a different way, in Bloom's image entitled *This same unending ache* (figure 2.11). In this photograph, Bloom's nude form is associated with discarded and refuse located outside in nature as opposed to inside a building. While Bloom's nude body might be linked to a



Figure 2.11: This same unending ache

certain state of nature in which her bared femininity is resonate with her surrounding environment, the plastic she sits on disturbs this kind of reading of her nude form by linking her more with man-made objects and “civilization”. Therefore, instead, given the plastic, her nudity is seemingly unnatural in this space. Within “civilized” society, nudity is only acceptable in the private (internal) space of the home and not within public (external) space. Here, however, Bloom’s body transgresses this border by bringing her private, internal self into the external public, even if this public is nature. This tension is highlighted by the viewer witnessing Bloom’s public expression of private pain, as her body hunches over, arms wrapped around her body, clinging to herself, feeling “this same unending ache.” Furthermore, her body and the plastic she rests upon, visually emphasized by the contrast of light and dark colors within the composition of the

photograph, seem out of place in this setting of nature. This seems to work within normative understandings of regulated and ordered space; nature goes here (nature), human refuse goes there (civilization). The placement of her nude, refuse associated body, in this space, therefore works to also challenge conventional spatial orderings in addition to inside/outside assumptions of space.



Figure 2.12: As I Am

Normative understandings of inside/outside space are also challenged in the images *As I Am* (figure 2.12) and *Cog in the machine* (figure 2.13). However, instead of complicating spatial orderings of nature and civilization, these images operate by challenging internal/external orderings of made-made objects and the human body. In

As I Am, Bloom's curved nude form is reminiscent of a body in the womb. However, the womb in this image is mechanical and man-made, as opposed to human or even organic. The plastic covering her body, which reflects light, seems to mirror the liquid vitality of internal organs and the placenta. Furthermore, Bloom's body positioning appears fetus-like. Her closed eyes, visible in the image, give a sense of quiet rest and moment of stasis in space. The black and white of the photo, in addition to the swaths of solid black background as well as the blurriness of the background graffiti, makes this photograph resemble an ultrasound. Taken together, Bloom seems to (re)imagine and (re)map internal space externally through *As I Am*. This weakening of inside/outside binaries is also clearly visible in the aforementioned photograph *Everything just circles around to where it was before* (figure 2.3). In *Everything just circles around to where it was before* the human rib case, with Bloom as the heart, is evoked through the compositional positioning within the photograph.

Similarly, *Cog in the machine* (figure 2.13) challenges inside/outside normative assumptions of space. In this photograph, Bloom's nude body stretches out, arms and legs spoke-like, to mirror the large cog she resides within. While her body stands out, white, against the darker color of the machine, through her body's position it is clear that she is intended to be considered more a part of the machine (as the title implies as well) than apart. Furthermore, Bloom's dark hair blends in with the inner circle of the cog, her curving breast and circular nipple mirroring the center of the cog and echoing the circular shape of the shape as a whole. In this way, Bloom is conceptually linking herself to her environment, as opposed to considering herself apart from it. The internal/external, inside/outside boundaries between matter is therefore complicated in

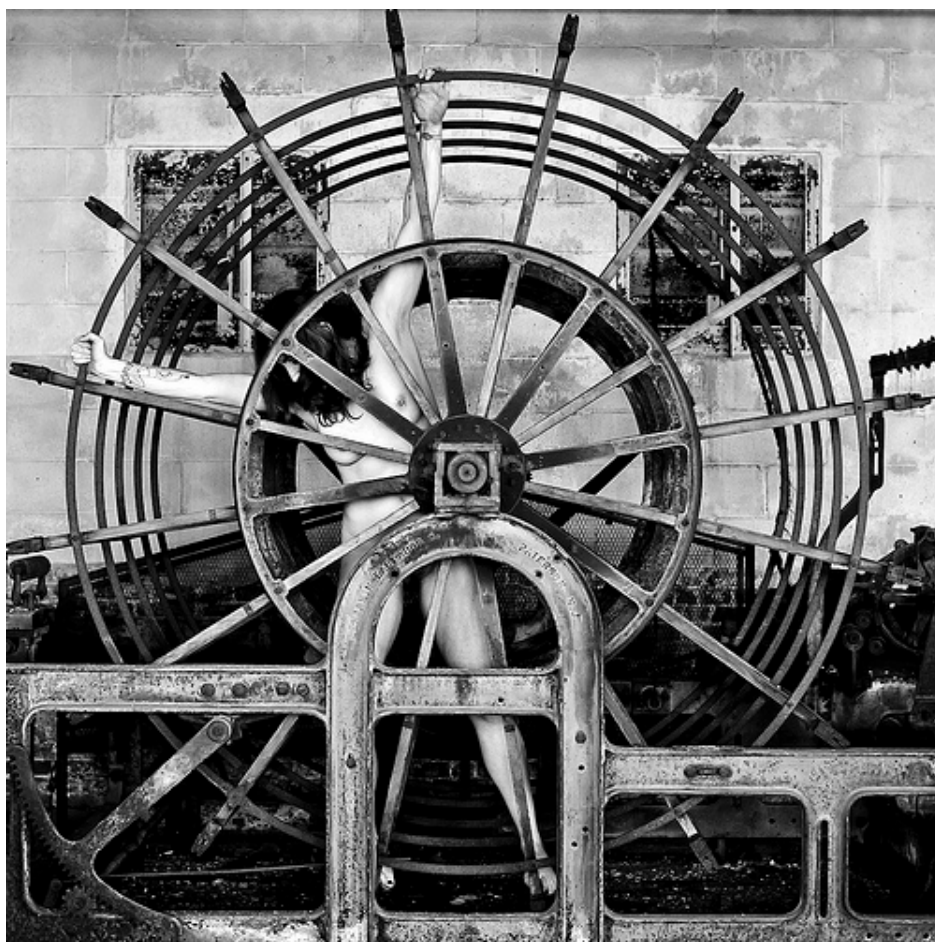


Figure 2.13: Cog in the machine

this formulation. As organic and metal material matter mesh, Bloom's photograph disrupts normative understandings of the human body as external to the material world. In this ruinous space Bloom's body becomes another form of matter amidst matter. This challenge and resistance to inside/outside space is important as it works against dominant conceptions of spatial ordering in which the body is considered entirely separate from its surrounding environment. This logic is often reinforced by general understandings of the liberal human subject, a subject bounded and discrete (i.e. creating an internal barrier) from the external world. However, this boundary is more porous than dominant thought often allows, which Bloom's images illustrate.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Bloom's images work to (re)map human relationships to both time and space in compelling ways. Whether Bloom is "playing" with or within the conventions of space or challenging its internal/external borders, Bloom's images (re)map ways of being in space that challenge hegemonic norms. Additionally, Bloom's photographs (re)map the operation of time within space both through the evocation of the existence of other and multiple-temporalities and the revelations of differing operations of time. Taken together, these images reveal how a different subjectivity is possible to explore and identify with within spaces of urban ruins, highlighting the importance of this social practice.

CHAPTER 3:

Live and Let Live: Disrupting the Myth of the Disposable within Myths of Modernity

Within discourses of modernity, time and space become distinctly and uniquely defined and elaborated. As previously discussed, time is viewed as linear and progressive and space is conceived of as increasingly emancipated and dytopic. Defined as such, narratives of time and space begin to work as co-constitutive myths that reify, prop up, and propel modernity. Within this spatially dissociative and linearly temporal ideology of modernity, other myths lurk and emerge.

Specifically, this chapter focuses on the ways in which the nude self-portraiture of Bloom in spaces of ruin disrupts the myth of the disposable. Within this myth, several narrative strains emerge as well. Specifically, Bloom disrupts the myth of disposable nature within conceptions of human progress as well as the myth of disposable peoples and the myth of the disposable woman. Each myth relies on certain temporal and spatial narratives within modernity, as space and time are co-constitutive and “co-implicated”.⁸⁷ Furthermore, each myth relies on a particular conception and understanding of peoples and nature as essentially disposable, a certain type of extractivist and separatist thinking that leads to harmful consequences. Whether it is environmental destruction, the erasures of peoples, or the stigmatization of and violence against women, the myth of the disposable (and each strain of myth within) allows and facilitates unforgivable atrocities. Modernity, by relying on these myths, naturalizes these harms. Additionally and significantly, these atrocities become tied to conceptions and definitions of modernity through crude racialized and sexualized hierarchies.

⁸⁷ Doreen Massey, *For Space*. London: Sage Publications, 2005, 55

Essentially, the sacrifice of places and peoples becomes a norm and accepted product of the workings of modernity. Within narratives of modernity, the disposable are often conceived of as the price that is paid for modernity as well as an inherent unavoidability. However, as Bloom's work illustrates, there are alternative means of (re)mapping and conceptualizing space, time, and place, and especially the role of those deemed disposable, whether they be nature or peoples, or more often, both within (or perhaps in spite of) this narrative of modernity. Ultimately, Bloom's work illustrates that narratives (myths) within modernity are neither infallible nor fixed; other conceptions and futures exist simultaneously. Furthermore, Bloom's work illustrates that these alternative narratives have the power to highlight differing potentialities and futures as well as rework and alter existing narratives.

Myths of the Disposable: Nature Within Conceptions of Human Progress

The first strain within the myth of the disposable is the myth of disposable nature within conceptions of human progress. This myth relies on a particular understanding of progress within modernity. The modern hegemonic discourse of progress can be defined (although not unproblematically) as

humanity (universalized Western rational "man"), by dominating nature (storehouse of resources, mechanistic object) through the use of reason (instrumental reason, science) and technology (autonomous and inevitable), will achieve progress (security, autonomy from nature, overcoming scarcity, ever increasing standard of living).⁸⁸

Progress, here, is inextricably linked to a liberatory, humans from nature mind-set and a nonreciprocal relationship between humanity and nature. Within this understanding of progress, the bond and linkage between human and nature is severed and rearticulated

⁸⁸ Kevin Deluca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006, 45

as dichotomous or in conflict, with nature no longer alive, but instead inert, passive, and capable of easily conquering/conquerable. Recalling the previous discussion of sacrifice zones in Chapter One, there is recurrent imperative *to conquer* and *extract* operating as a central driving force in this conceptual and physical severance of humanity from nature.

However, as Bloom's artwork demonstrates, this severance is futile as humanity is "not apart from nature but of it."⁸⁹ Instead, the photographic self-portraits of Bloom strongly deny this severance, articulating and imagining a closer and deeper, linking and binding, relationship between humans and nature. Within this particular disruption, her work also challenges the material hubris of modernity—the ever-increasing piles of rubble and discard (both human and nonhuman) that characterize modern modes of progress and production, both of which favor systems of obsolescence.

Bloom's artwork challenges this human-nature severance through her photographs by conceptually and visually linking herself with her environment. Garnering several photographic techniques, such as lighting and composition, Bloom is able to create a strong linkage between herself and her environment, often becoming a form of matter amidst matter. By becoming linked to, and operating as an element of and amongst nature, Bloom disallows and disrupts extractivist and separatist notions and thinking common to modern narratives of progress. This disruption is significant as a rejection of this nature-human severance within narrative of progress allows other notions, other futurities, to emerge. By embracing this linkage it is possible to conceive of progress (and futures) not centrally tied to the present environmentally destructive forces one observes as clearly evident today.

⁸⁹ Naomi Klein, "*This Changes Everything*," 61



Figure 3.1: Life Is Nothing If Not Persistent

This denial of human-nature severance as well as the complication of notions of progress is clearly observable in the image entitled *Life Is Nothing If Not Persistent* (figure 3.1). In this image, as with many and most all of her images, Bloom's choice to use her own nude form suggests an intense and personal investment in her project, as well as the message it conveys. The deployment of her nude form also serves to engender a connection with her environment, which is overwhelmed by the sense that it exists in a certain state of nature. Given the intimacy the nude form evokes, Bloom's use of her personal nude body also seems to work to increase the artist's degree of intimacy with her project, working to foster a sense of even greater investment and

connection with her audience, art, and overall messages.

However, while apparent, prominent and centered, Bloom's nude body is not entirely central to the composition of the frame. Instead, the tree in the image is given equal space, centered above and next to her body. The eye is drawn toward both; in some ways, the viewer is only able to recognize the human form by following the gaze along the branches toward Bloom's body. Similar to the tree, much of her body remains in shadow, drawing the viewers' notice to both in order to work out the visual presented. The tree appears to be mirroring Bloom's body, instead of vice versa, giving a certain sense of agency to the tree in the image—certainly there is an implicit connection being made between Bloom's form and the tree's form. The viewer is continually compelled to return to Bloom's nude form, forcing the viewer to make a connection between the nudity of the human form and the nudity of the tree bereft of leaves save a small few, which work to reinforce the tree's barrenness. The increasing awareness of the similarities between the two objects brought to the forefront of focus, the human and nonhuman body, work to solidify the conceptual linkage between these two forms. The absence of color also serves to strengthen the connection, both depicted in black and white, both illuminated by the natural sunlight entering through the windows in the composition. This sense of natural illumination and light also reinforces the connection between Bloom and her environment, not simply surrounded by nature, but effected and affected, a part of it entirely.

In this image, while decay is noted and often appears through stark contrast, it is not jarring for the viewer. Instead it seems to highlight alternative temporalities existent within the space of the frame. An entire tree has grown inside, and as the windows

attest, it is clearly inside, a building. The ecological lifecycle of birth and death is evoked by the surrounding decay of crumbled leaves and barren trees, this cyclical temporality disrupting the linear temporality attributed to modernity. As scholar Tim Edensor states, ruin space is “subject to ecological temporalities” as the “illusion of permanence dissolves,”⁹⁰ through the consideration of decay. The illusion of permanency has dissolved in *Life Is Nothing If Not Persistent* as decay illuminates the temporality of lifecycles, especially that of decay and death. Similarly, Bloom’s body is clearly aged beyond childhood, it too seems to have reached a certain level of maturity, or decay in another conceptualization—the link is once again made between the forms of the nonhuman and human body.

Largely and overall, Bloom’s image, *Life Is Nothing If Not Persistent* works to (re)map the relationship between the human and nature. In this image not only does Bloom establish deep connection with her environment, the image hints toward a certain respect and sense of agency for the nonhuman. This resonant with other ruin scholarship, as scholar Tim Edensor writes

[a]s spaces that have become unpoliced and are no longer regularly cleansed to minimize non-human intrusions, plants and animals show their adaptability to the opportunities which arise in the city as they quickly seek out cracks in which they may prosper, finding nesting spaces, food sources and territories. This rapid colonisation testifies to the scale of ongoing human attempts to banish from urban settings all but the most favoured companion plants and animals from their midst. And it also showcases the agency of insects, birds, mammals, fungi, shrubs, flowering plants and trees in the constitution of the urban, despite their wrongly assumed absence.⁹¹

The composition of *Life Is Nothing If Not Persistent* illustrates visually such agency within the unregulated space of ruin. Furthermore, the title of the photograph grants agency to all life, human and nonhuman, each persistent, each important, each existing

⁹⁰ Tim Edensor, *Industrial ruins*,” 44

⁹¹ Ibid, 42

and ultimately, connected.

As this image profoundly illustrates, at the site of the modern urban ruin, the human and nonhuman are able to connect and intersect in such a way that a reconceptualization of the meaning of nature is possible. Such deep connection and reassemblage of the human-nature connection disrupts the contemporary hegemonic notion of both nature and progress by undermining the foundations of which that demand separation and hierarchical renderings. Essentially in *Life Is Nothing If Not Persistent*, Bloom illuminates a conceptualized mapping that provides an alternative to normative orderings of space, time and ultimately conceptions of human progress. Bloom's mental and corporeal map, captured through a photographic lens for the viewer, is also visible in the next image entitled *Huddled Masses* (figure 3.2).

In *Huddles Masses*, the viewer is presented with a landscape-esque image that also works to complicate notions of human progress by denying a severance of human-nature through Bloom's explicit linkage between her form and that of her surrounding environment. The image is reminiscent of a landscape through the use of deep focus, the vastness of the foreground, which indicates the openness of space, along with the ceiling that signifies the sky and the presence of track lines usually located in outside space. The lighting also works to give the image a feeling of outsidersness, working to highlight the sense of deep space within the image. This landscape-esqueness of the image evokes for the viewer a sense of viewing a scene in nature, a feeling in tension with the interior space of the room and the industrial feel to the image that the track lines convey.

In the image, the gaze is drawn and focused toward Bloom's form by the linear

perspective of the track lines that seem to converge on Bloom's "huddled mass" form. While the tracks lead the gaze directly to Bloom's form, this visual rhyming highlights the other huddled mass within the frame. In other words, while Bloom is placed as central to the image, it is also clear that Bloom is intentionally mirroring the other huddled mass within the photograph. Located initially in the gaze's periphery, as the viewer follows the track lines toward Bloom, the nature mass becomes more central



Figure 3.2: Huddles Masses

to the viewer's notice. Therefore, the compositional positioning of the nature mass, to the right and slightly behind Bloom, also allows the viewer to immediately notice this

form as more central to the image. This huddled mass appears to be an indeterminable conglomeration of stone and plant-life. Together they comprise the “huddled masses” referenced in Bloom’s title. Moreover, the intentional positioning of Bloom’s body, in front of the graffiti, works to draw the viewer’s eye in such a way that places emphasis on the connection between the huddled masses. Specifically, once the viewer’s gaze is on the graffiti, both Bloom’s body mass and the nature mass appears to exist on a similar plane in the background; once again the connection is clearly made between Bloom and her surroundings. Bloom becomes a form amongst forms.

Additionally, the asymmetrical frame of the large doorway acts to frame both Bloom and the nature mass, bringing both into attention and focus for the viewer, working to link the two forms together. Furthermore, the black and white of the image allows Bloom’s splayed hair, covering most of her body, to make her nude form dark and similar in color to the natural huddled mass behind her, strengthening their connection. The lighting of the image also cast similar shadow on both masses working once again to conceptually connect the two forms. Ultimately, this dedicated linkage between Bloom and the natural mass works to disrupt the narratives of progress that dictate a severance between nature and humans by (re)mapping ways of being in time and space incongruent with contemporary conceptions of progress. In this image Bloom exists as matter amongst matter, connected and in sync with nature rather than separated and harmfully extracting.

This dedicated denial of the severance between human and nature is also strongly present in *Chrysalis* (figure 3.3), which also works to (re)map an alternative means of being in time and space. Within this image, Bloom’s form is enclosed and



Figure 3.3: Chrysalis

literally enveloped within nature. The symmetry and seamless pattern of auditorium style seats leads the eye directly to Bloom's enveloped body. The seating itself, a place in which knowledge is usually disseminated, alerts the viewer that some kind of knowledge transmission is happening within the image. Specifically for this image, the knowledge dissemination appears to center and revolve around Bloom's nude form and the vines that envelop her. Additionally, the absence of color allows Bloom's body and the vines that surround her to take on the same tone and hue, emphasizing their

connection. These vines that wrap around Bloom's nude body visually forms a type of cocoon, or "chrysalis" as the title of the image states. According to Oxford Dictionaries a chrysalis has three definitions, "a quiescent insect pupa, especially of a butterfly or moth," "the hard outer case of this [insect pupa], especially after being discarded" and/or "a preparatory or transitional state."⁹² Each definition solidifies the connection between Bloom and nature, whether she is viewed as a butterfly-like being, a natural discarded outer casing, or as existing in a transitional state literally wrapped in and nurtured by nature. For example, if viewed as butterfly-like being, nature is part and parcel of her transformative process, as she exists within this natural state. In this instance, nature is less a resource for extraction and more a life-sustaining force that plays a central, rather than peripheral role in Bloom's growth and transformation. She can only progress in sync and connected with nature, not separate from nature. Progress here is redefined as centrally reliant on a symbiotic and strongly connected relationship with nature, as opposed to extractivist and separate. Nature is no longer resource only, but instead central driving force of progress.

On the other hand, if viewed as the discard of a transformative process, Bloom is still intimately connected to nature, which essentially equates her to natural discard. In this conception of progress, Bloom and nature were both central to the transformative process, and both are discarded. This could be conceived of several ways. One may view this discard as the negative waste and harmful by-product of the contemporary conception of progress, where both human lives and nature are discarded in the search for human progress and betterment. In this conception, Bloom's linking of herself with

⁹² Oxford Dictionaries. "chrysalis."
http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/chrysalis.

nature in this discard, emphasized by the debris that surrounds her chrysalis in the image, works to reveal the violence inherent within contemporary conception of progress. While the conventional definition of human progress would indicate that only natural resources are used and discarded, Bloom denies this by showing that human lives and bodies are also discarded and as such are a central part of this process. By linking nature (through the inclusion of vines in the image) and humans (her nude body within the image) Bloom reveals the disposability of peoples and nature inherent within the processes of capitalist modernity. Alternatively, one can conceive of this discard process as a testament to the inherent links between human lives and nature. Both nature and humans going through natural cycles of rebirth and death together intertwined and temporally and spatially aligned within these transformations. In this image, the alignment of humans and nature work to reveal how each go through periods of birth, decay, and death as part of the natural lifecycle of matter at a fundamental level. In this conception of progress, humans and nature are experiencing cycles together, as opposed to one (nature) being used for the betterment of the other (humans).

Lastly, if one views this image in the sense of the third definition, as a transitional or preparatory state, Bloom (re)maps relationships between nature and humans by showing explicitly the interconnection between humans and nature in transformative processes. Bloom's body appears nude and vulnerable through her body positioning in the image, supporting this sense of transitional state. Nature, in this instance, nurturing and supporting, plays a central role to her transformation. While this may seem extractivist at first glance, following the contemporary conception of progress as using

natural resources for human betterment, Bloom's equation of herself as *part* of nature disruptions and transforms this relationship. The evocation of being birthed or transformed by nature, as inherently linked, connected, and part of this nature denies the current necessary severance of human and nature. Progress, here, relies on nature, but does not exploit or extract. Bloom, within her chrysalis, in a transformational state, is reliant on nature, but she is not separate from nature or apart from it. What harms nature in this instance, would harm herself. Extractivist thinking is disallowed in this conception, as well as the environmentally harmful processes one sees running rampant in contemporary conceptions of progress.

Ultimately, for Bloom, in the conceptual space of urban ruins, she is able to map out a different way of being with and in nature than dominant modes of being in space and time typically allow or modern definitions and discourses of progress dictate. This ultimately works to disrupt modernity's notions of progress that demand human and nature severance by offering up alternatives, especially alternative futures. Whether Bloom is viewed as a part of nature, transformed by it, or simply existing in symbiosis, separatist and extractivist thought is disallowed, altering modern, contemporary conceptions of progress. Progress, as Bloom's images illustrate, is not always forward moving, nor harmful to natural resources. What is harmful for nature is harmful to herself, therefore, progress, transformation, and futures must be reworked and reconsidered to allow an intimate and explicit connection between the human self and nature. Therefore, within this image, more just and considerate futures for humans and nature emerge, ultimately disrupting the myth of human progress.

To note, Bloom's mental maps made corporeal is resonant with the many

examples of anti-extraction struggles of groups (a movement she terms “Blockadia”) in North America, Latin America, Australia, and New Zealand as discussed by author Naomi Klein. Klein defines Blockadia, not as a specific location on a map or group of organized people, but instead as “a roving transnational conflict zone that is cropping up with increasing frequency and intensity” wherever communities and individuals are opposing extractive processes.⁹³ Each group, Klein argues, works to put forward “worldviews based on relationships of reciprocity and interconnection with the natural world that are the antithesis of extractivism.”⁹⁴ If one takes the maps Bloom provides in her photographs seriously, extractivist processes and thinking could not exist as dominant—it would be impossible to consider either life sacrificeable, or even make a distinction between human and nonhuman, sacrificeable and unsacrificable. In this light, Bloom’s work can be considered a part of the movement that Klein terms “Blockadia.”⁹⁵ Bloom’s photographs, taken in several locations (Detroit and Philadelphia for example), illustrate the multiplicity of places in which one is able to find examples of this work being carried out. Moreover, if one considers the vast dissemination potential the Internet provides for these image, the widespread consumption of these images allows for (re)mapping work to take place at an international level. This also adds to the political potentialities of urban exploration as social practice. In this way, Bloom is contributing to Blockadia, appearing to strengthen the environmental and spatial justice movement.

⁹³ Klein, Naomi. “*This Changes Everything*,” 295

⁹⁴ Ibid, 182

⁹⁵ Ibid, 294

Myths of the Disposable: Peoples

Another strain of the myth of the disposable that Bloom's work disrupts is that of the myth of disposable peoples. Within this narrative, it is revealed that often in the quest for human progress as well as in on-going capitalist processes, human lives (in addition to nature) are often rendered disposable. However, upon close inspection of this myth it is clear that through these often-insidious processes, the disposability of humans is repeatedly masked as human presences are often absented or dehumanized in order to hide the reality of the disposability of peoples. This is especially true within spaces of ruin, in which people are considered most disposable, and as such most vulnerable to this process of absenting and dehumanization. Capitalist modernity has a particular impetus to hide this disposability of peoples as it works against prevailing notions of the liberal human subject. Considered free and able to prosper, the reality that some are considered disposable threatens the foundation of such beliefs. As such, this absenting and dehumanization of humans is a way in which hegemonic processes, such as capitalism, normalize the disposability of peoples even as it attempts to hide and erase from view this very real end and by-product of capitalism, neoliberal agendas, and the hubris of human progress. Within this narrative, ruins, central to these processes, often work to render those who inhabit these spaces as disposable. This is accomplished in many ways, but one of the most prominent is through images of ruins and ruination. These images, increasingly popular in the social imaginary, play a central role in absenting human presences as well as dehumanizing those who remain in these spaces of ruin while paradoxically highlighting the very detritus of those they absent.

However, it is important to note, that while disposable humans are often rendered as invisible or dehumanized, if one looks closely, the presence of humans remain. As such, haunting and dehumanization complicatedly operate within images of urban ruins. While certain images conjure the ghost of human presence quite powerfully and clearly, others do not. Furthermore, the absence of humans or even the evocation of ghosts allows for a distancing similar to that of dehumanization on the part of the viewer. One may become so enthralled in the beauty or horror of such images one forgets to acknowledge or legitimate the human lives in which the violence and dispossession of decay and abandonment play a central role. Furthermore, while specters of humans may be evoked in certain ruin images, these specters' haunting often goes unquestioned or dignified—they are often kept at a dispassionate distance.

This obliteration and the process of dispossession of the real human presences of these sites is one of the central arguments of those who disapprove of the dissemination of images of urban ruination, likening the viewing of such photography to that of “ruin porn.” Speaking of the now iconic urban ruin imagery of Detroit specifically, one scholar argues that urban ruin photography, absent of humans (but not, I would argue, specters of humanity)

aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit or transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city.⁹⁶

This aestheticization, dramatization, and romanticization are all acts that actively work to distance the viewer from the reality of the lives most affected by processes of urban

⁹⁶ John P. Leary, “Detroitism.” *Guernica*, January 5, 2011
https://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/.

ruination. This distancing discourages viewers from feeling and/or acknowledging the humanity and human presence of those who reside within spaces of ruin. Distancing and dehumanization go hand in hand. The further one is able to distance oneself from others, the easier it is to believe in the disposability of those peoples. This is a form of dehumanization that images of ruins often support and facilitate.



97

Figure 3.4: No Title, Image by Marchand and Meffre
For example, the above image (figure 3.4), now iconic and characteristic of

images of urban ruin, works to absent human presence in ways that allow dehumanization as well as understandings of these absented peoples as disposable.

For some, the image will evoke nothing of the human presences that once occupied, or

⁹⁷ Image taken from: Marchand, and Meffre. Marchand Meffre.
<http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/26>.

continue to occupy these spaces. The sheer beauty of decay will arrest the attention, leaving human presences continually absented. On the other hand, for some viewers, the vast emptiness of the image's composition works to create "the eerie effect of evoking the absent people who once inhabited"⁹⁸ and continue to inhabit these spaces. However, with the absence of humans and the dehumanizing distancing the image evokes in the viewer, the picture does not demand that there is "something-to-be-done"⁹⁹ when the ghosts of absented presences do emerge. This something-to-be-doneness is important in the context of these images as Avery Gordon argues, one of the requirements of dealing with ghosts and hauntings is that "the ghost him or herself be treated respectfully (its desires broached) and not ghosted or abandoned or disappeared again in the act of dealing with the haunting."¹⁰⁰ A haunting is evidence of absented presences or dehumanization occurring.

While evidence of the violence emerges in the form of ghosts of human presence for some, contemporary popular images of urban ruins do not allow a humane and just engagement with these disposable peoples. As previously stated however, for some, the image above will not haunt. Complete dehumanizing distance is maintained when distracted by the majesty and eerie beauty of ruin. For others however, ghosts of the absented presences of the image will emerge. What is significant, however, is that even though ghost may emerge, the image does not allow a way in which to justly and humanely deal with such ghosts. In hauntings, the something-to-be-done-ness works to lessen the dehumanization and disposability of the people ghosted, however, it appears that the iconic and popular images of urban ruins often do not allow such dealings to

⁹⁸ Leary, John P. "Detroitism."

⁹⁹ Avery F. Gordon, "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity." *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011), 3

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 3

take place. The violence of absented presences and dehumanization are not adequately, if at all, addressed. As in the above image, it is all too easy to make the evoked ghosts abandoned or disappeared again when viewing photographs of this nature. In these images, the ghosts of absented and dehumanized presences become a fleeting thought, a brief presence, before disappearing into the background once again. Essentially, the ghosts are disappeared again, if they emerge at all for the viewer. Bloom's artwork, through the deployment of her nude figure, complicates this haunting and process of dehumanization by incorporating a human presence within images of ruin and ruination. This works to disrupt narratives of disposable people by ensuring that the human presence is acknowledged, that the something-to-be-doneness of the absented presence of humans is appropriately dealt with in ways that rehumanize these spaces in time.

For example, in the image entitled *Torch Song* (figure 3.5), the visual is quite different from that of Marchand and Meffre's. On first glance, given the architecture of the room, the striking similarity of the chairs and piano, one might easily conclude that these two images were shot in the same location. However, in comparison, the depth of field and composition of *Torch Song* allows, and in many ways demands, a more intimate engagement of the viewer with the content of the photograph. In this image, people are not made into ghosts through absence, Bloom's presence, front and central within the image, is a presence that must be dealt with; there is a feeling that there is something-to-be-done elicited within the viewer. Bloom's gaze, directed out towards the viewer, demands attention. Here, something is being



Figure 3.5: Torch Song

asked of the viewer. Bloom's nude form works in the image to further the sense of immediacy and intimacy. Her figure has laid all bare in her state of nudity, in her demand for focused attention. The black and white composition, casting half of Bloom's face in shadow, gives a melancholic feeling to the image. The use of shadow works to associate Bloom with her surroundings, decaying and abandoned. The empty chair serves as further invitation for the viewers, to take a seat, to join in or perhaps suffer being relegated to such a fate themselves. Herein lies this photograph's call to action. One can imagine the haunting tune the piano may play for this abandoned figure and thus question what must be done in order to avoid such fates and circumstances. Due to the invocation of the viewer to join in, one thinks of the future in this image, while viewing images that seem steeped in the present and past. A torch song, as this image

is named after, is a song about unhappiness in love, often-unrequited love.¹⁰¹ Out of this photograph imaginings of different futures are possible, ones less melancholic, ones less abandoned and decayed, a future where perhaps love is requited, where people are not considered disposable. Bloom's desires, as a haunting presence, must be addressed. In this image she seems to desire the viewer's direct engagement with her disposal and abandonment. Her gaze, her body, and her striking presence demands this of the viewer.

However, while in *Torch Song* Bloom's direct gaze and the strong composition of the image works to demand attention and that there is something-to-be-done, in other images, such the image *Out of Tune* (figure 3.6) this something-to-be-done-ness is evoked in more subtle ways. In *Out of Tune*, once again, the viewer finds themselves in the same room, but viewing the scene within a slightly different frame. The depth of field is greater, yet a sense of intimacy remains highlighted by the broken mirror that seems to draw the viewer into the image. The seat for the viewers also remains as an invitation to join in, in addition to the possibility of the viewer actually seeing themselves visually reflected within the frame through the mirror. In this way, Bloom's composition in this image affectively works to draw the viewers into the image, to imagine themselves as discarded, abandoned, and disposable. Once again Bloom has laid all bare in her insistence and demand that attention be paid to the something-to-be-done-ness of her presence, as is highlighted by the dress that drapes meaningfully over the piano, which works to emphasize Bloom's state of laid bareness. The positioning of Bloom's body is slightly different, also draped over the piano, as if playing the torch

¹⁰¹ *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition*. S.v. "torch song." Retrieved May 13 2015 from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/torch+song>



Figure 3.6: Out of Tune

song mentioned above. In this scenario, however, the viewer is alerted by the title, once again, that something is not quite right here. Her piano is “out of tune,” highlighting the melancholic feel of the image. Violence has occurred and is occurring here, a violence in which Bloom’s presence works to rectify. For whom does she play? One can imagine that she plays to remind the viewer of those who remain, those such as herself, her own body, rendered abandoned and disposable. And yet, as her continued playing attests, emphasized by the long shadow the piano casts, despite the defeated and hunched position of her body, she remains and she plays. She is present and not absented. Bloom continues to play; she exists, as do the others in spaces of

ruin. They too exist and remain. For the viewer, there is something-to-be-done here. There is violence occurring, emphasized by the surrounding debris, the jagged and broken remains of the mirror, implicating and accusing, a violence which must be addressed through Bloom's continued presence. Her body refuses to be absented or dehumanized and as such is a haunting that must be dealt with. This becomes an internal and personal struggle for the viewer just as Bloom struggles within the frame of the photograph. Her continued and striking presence allows the space to be re-humanized, allowing her body to *matter*, to no longer be relegated to the realm of the disposable. Whilst Bloom haunts the image, this image haunts the viewer.

Myths of the Disposable: Woman

This haunting thread works itself into the next strain of narrative myth, the myth of the disposable woman that emerges and is ultimately challenged throughout Bloom's work. This myth is similar to the myth of disposable peoples, however, within the myth of the disposable woman, the narrative takes on a particular gendered tone and focal point. Bloom's work not only challenges the absented, dehumanized presences of humans, her work also provides a gendered resistance and challenge to capitalist processes dominant within narratives of a neoliberal order. Within capitalist processes of depreciation and ruin, speculation, boom, and bust, women in particular find themselves most vulnerable to exploitation and harm. This is particularly true for women who occupy conceptual and literal spaces of ruin, especially spaces such as inner cities or third world countries.¹⁰² It is important, therefore, that Bloom's work provides a challenge to this vulnerability and disposability of women within the very

¹⁰² Wright, Melissa W. *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

spaces that women find themselves often rendered most disposable and vulnerable. Bloom accomplishes this task, similar to the above myth of disposable peoples, by illustrating the continued presence of women, presences that cannot be continually absented, presences that must be reckoned with.



Figure 3.7: Rejected Material

This is particularly true in the first image, entitled *Rejected Material* (figure 3.7) which obtains its name from the factory sign centered at the top of the image's frame. This image works to disrupt the myth of the disposable woman within neoliberal

hegemonic discourse by illuminating the continued presence of women, visceral and meaningful within spaces of ruin. Essentially, Bloom's image disrupts the myth of the disposable woman by disallowing herself to be designated as a rejected and disposable person, even while capitalists processes at work would render her so.

As can be seen above, in this image, Bloom's nude form is centered and seated in a hunched position underneath the "rejected material" sign that is hanging from the ceiling. The sign and Bloom's body, both stable and solid visual forms, work to balance the image as well as contrast against the texture and color of the blue and white rectangled background. Both of these elements of composition highlight the importance and connection between the body and the sign. Essentially, this demonstrates, Bloom's form, while given special emphasis in the frame, is associated with the rejected material of her surrounding environment. However, unlike the sign, Bloom's hunched position is rounded and circular making her form stand out against the square patterns of the background, giving the impression that whilst she is associated with this rejected material she is also set apart. The lighting and shadow within the image also work to give Bloom's form a certain feeling of standing-out-ness. This standing-out-ness works to give Bloom's huddled body a certain sense of resistance to the designation of "rejected material" even while her hunched form emphasizes her vulnerable position. These contradictions work to illustrate that while there are those who would relegate women to the status of rejected and disposable, she is still present and set apart, a presence that must be dealt with, a presence that remains despite, and in spite, of any such designations. Her gaze, slightly toward the camera, but obscured by her hair, also works to complicate her position as "rejected material." A gaze

completely away from the camera would have made her seem more vulnerable, however, she does not entirely face away. The covering of her face with her hair seems to be intended to give a more universal quality to her form, although her gender and race as white is clearly evidenced. Furthermore, the chosen depth of field, placing Bloom at a distance away from the viewer within the frame also emphasizes a certain detachment congruent with that of “rejected material.” However she is not placed at such a distance that all intimacy is removed between the viewer and Bloom’s form. Instead, the viewer is able to feel the distance but due to her nude and vulnerable form is still capable of feeling an affective pull toward the figure within the frame.

In the image, through Bloom’s clearly mature nude form, both age and gender are implicated as complicit and part of the process of designating Bloom’s form as “rejected material.” Additionally, the factory setting of the image evokes thoughts of capitalist processes as also complicit or implicit as one of the root factors in this designation. However, despite being labeled as such, through her continuing presence and standing-out-ness this status itself is rejected by Bloom. As Judith Butler argues, bodily presence is a performative message stating that I “am *still* here... [I] have not yet been disposed of... [I have] not slipped quietly into the shadows of public life... and become the glaring absence that structures your public life.”¹⁰³ Bloom’s body, that stands apart and glaringly *present* is a message that she remains, she must be dealt with justly and humanely, she is *not* disposable.

A similar, albeit more violent statement is made in the image above entitled *Depreciation* (figure 3.8). Immediately through the title one is reminded of the economic

¹⁰³ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Malden: Polity Press, 2013, 196, emphasis in original



Figure 3.8: Depreciation

system of capitalism in which depreciation is the negative and insidious force that slowly and relentlessly eats away at the value and newness of a consumer good. With this in mind, the photograph *Depreciation* is an inherently violent visual as it seems to equate Bloom's nude form with the capitalist process of depreciation. When viewing the photograph, the absence of color allows for a sharp contrast and clear focus of the viewer's gaze on both the debris littered around and Bloom's nude form wrapped in plastic. The body is wrapped in a haphazard and seemingly careless manner and as such resembles in many ways the disposal of a corpse. This carelessness brings to light that only certain corpses are handled in such a manner, which works to highlight the disposability of this particular body. There is a clear implication being made here

that her body, her female body, is disposable. The head and upper body are wrapped tight, highlighting Bloom's sex, giving little indication as to whether the form is breathing while simultaneously sexualizing the violence of this disposal. The image's depth of field works to give an intimate glimpse of the scene to the viewer, while allowing some dispassionate distance, highlighting the intended relegation of this body as disposable. The background is cast in a deep and dark shadow, only the body and the surrounding debris cast in stark white light as if highlighting a crime scene. This emphasis on contrast with little color works to give the image a certain harshness as well as an accusatory tone. Only the body remains smooth, highlighting it as different from the background and foreground, while also emphasizing the sexual nature of the violence. At the same time, the smoothness of her body, in such contrast from her surrounding environment, gives her body a certain value as the object of a sexualized gaze, an erotic object of the viewer's attention. As eluded previously, the plastic wrapped tightly around the figure's breast gives clear indication that Bloom's nude form is in fact a mature female, which ultimately works to implicate femaleness as well as age in this process of depreciation, devaluing, and disposability.

While sexual and violent, the image is haunting. There is something-to-be-done here as well. Someone (the viewer), and something (capitalist processes) are being called into light and accused, highlighted and called into question by the sharp white light cast upon the scene. It is impossible to ignore Bloom's body and make her disappear or continue to render her body as disposable. Her presence in the frame acts as an accusation, an indictment, but also as a demand for attention and action. The viewer must reconcile and recognize the sexualized violence taking place and must

work to deal with the haunting taking place. Having a body, a physical presence, while violent and disturbing is important. Otherwise, as Athena Athanasiou argues, “[a]s long as bodies are deemed disposable, found discarded, and remain uncared for, the notion of disposability will be associated with the concepts and practices of dehumanization.”¹⁰⁴ It serves hegemonic neoliberal capitalist interests within modernity as well as allows dehumanization to continue if bodies are not accounted for, not reconciled and grappled with, if hauntings are not properly honored, if the desires of the ghost are not broached. Therefore, Bloom’s violated bodily presence is a performative statement and call to action for the viewer. Affectively pulled, internally horrified by the scene of sexual violence, the viewer is compelled to act against the forces that render and relegate women’s bodies as disposable.

While the viewer is led to the condemnation of the disposability of women’s bodies indirectly through *Rejected Material* and *Depreciation*, the viewer is more directly confronted and compelled toward action and engagement in *Echo Chamber* (figure 3.9). Similar to *Depreciation*, it is a violent and uncomfortable image to view, especially due to the visceral emotions being conveyed through the composition and Bloom’s body positions within the frame of the photograph. The image depicts Bloom’s nude form, sitting in a chair, located in a space of ruin and abandonment. Sitting in the chair, her form is considered a part of the ruin and abandon taking place around her as clearly evidenced by the rubble, crumbling walls, and damaged chair and locker. Unlike both *Rejected Material* and *Depreciation*, Bloom’s face is more in view. Her expression is one of torture and pain as she is depicted crying out intensely. Bloom’s nude body is

¹⁰⁴ Butler, Judith, and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Malden: Polity Press, 2013, 147



Figure 3.9: Echo Chamber

tensed and active, highlighting the inner pain she is expressing. A smiley face graffitied to the wall, partly hidden in shadow, grins gleefully, or perhaps grimaces in a mirror of Bloom's discomfort, as Bloom's form exists in a state of clear and present pain. The frame, which includes this graffiti, a chair, and a locker in the background, provides evidence of former activities in the site, heightening the sense and feeling of abandon in the visual. There are those who have come before, but now leave Bloom to her abandon, heightening the association of Bloom to disposability. However, the visual image of the graffiti seemingly coming out of Bloom's mouth, as if captioned, also

seems to connect Bloom to these former activities and inhabitants. The mirroring curves of the graffiti's R, the smiling face, and her own screaming mouth, connects and binds to those also deemed disposable within the space of ruin. In this way Bloom is associating herself with others deemed disposable and abandoned.

Whereas Bloom's feelings toward this abandonment (of herself and others) are understood implicitly within *Rejected Material* and *Depreciation*, in *Echo Chamber* Bloom's feelings are clearly expressed through her emotionally painful physical reaction. While this photograph also has the feeling of indictment and accusation, her rejection and resistance to such treatment is visceral and intentional within the composition of the frame. However, it is interesting to note that no matter how much she is painfully reacting to such abandon and negative treatment, as the title indicates, her screams appear to only echo. Who else can hear her scream? The viewer, as witness, is emotionally pulled into the image as well as implicated in process of abandon. In this way, Bloom's resistance is more forceful, yet subtle in that she seems to be unable to escape this cycle of abandon—She is at once resistant and yet trapped. However, she has clearly not given up. Bloom's form screams. She rejects her disposability and one may assume will fight to find a way out of such a relegated state. By drawing the viewer into the image, through her expression of pain and outrage, Bloom implicates not only capitalist processes, but also all viewing and hearing her scream. Once more, there is something-to-be-done.

As much as the viewer is implicated by these images, Bloom's images also work to show how she herself is complicit and a part of these ruinous processes. Bloom demonstrates through her images, that although capitalist processes and unfeeling (or

feeling yet complacent) viewers are guilty of relegating and allowing others to be deemed disposable, she takes responsibility and accountability for her own involvement and participation in these processes. Essentially, she demonstrates how she too contributes to the disposability of peoples, especially the disposability of women.



Figure 3.10: Overwrought

By engaging in visual techniques similar to those used within images such as *Life Is Nothing If Not Persistent* or *Huddles Masses*, in the above image *Overwrought* (figure 3.10) Bloom works to mark herself as part of her environment. However, in this image she is highlighting her complicity. Specifically, in *Overwrought*, the positioning of

Bloom's body associates herself as part of her environment—once again a form of matter amongst matter. In this photograph, Bloom is positioned as part of the machine she sits upon. The lack of color in the image works to blend Bloom into the piece, while also serving as a contrast that allows her to stand out as a distinct part of the machine, a technique similarly used in images such as *Rejected Material*. Her curved form matches that of the machine she rests on—she is implicated as a part of the machine itself. In some ways, given her feminine nude form the image evokes a sense of giving birth, heightening the sense of connectedness between Bloom's form and the machine. As part of the machinery, Bloom is also a part of the processes of her own decay and abandonment. In this way she is both implicated in the process of ruination as well as a product this ruin. She is both a machine in production and as she states in another of her self-portraits, "she is [also] part of the assembly line."

However, this birthing also highlights a certain disjunction and contrast given she is birthing a machine, which serves as a sharp contrast to reality of the viewer. Given the jarring nature of the implication of birthing a machine, the viewer is forced to grapple with the meaning of this birth, which works to deepen and highlight Bloom's own complicity and involvement in this process of disposability and abandonment. One must assume that the working of the machine, as well as the eventual depreciation, decay, and death of the machine is inevitable and something Bloom will be a part of, calling upon a unique temporality of human-nature-machine lifecycles. Bloom is demonstrating her own complicity in this process by making strange the birthing ritual within the lifecycle through this depiction. She is at once a part of the process and cycle of birth, decay, abandon, and eventually death, while simultaneously apart, resisting and

rejecting her own disposability. This tension, also reflected in the referenced image *She is part of the assembly line*, works to create a complex visual, haunting the viewer in a new way. The viewer must deal with both his or her own complicity as well as Bloom's—no one is innocent in this scenario.



Figure 3.11: Will I know when it's finally done

This haunting theme plays out in the next image entitled *Will I know when it's finally done* (figure 3.11), where it appears that all have blood on their hands. In this photograph Bloom's nude form is hunched over, face looking down, with dark oil covering her hands and body. The oil on her hands implies a certain involvement in the

process of decay and abandonment that is characteristic of her surrounding environment. The color within the visual also connects Bloom to the dirty oil, a symbol of her guilt—her visible tattoo links her with the color or the label “esso” and the red highlights in her hair mirrors the red of the oil barrel. A viewer may interpret her hunched over position of that of guilt and complicity or pain over the designation of abandonment. “Will I know when it’s finally done” adds a temporal dimension to the image and the dirtiness of her form, seeming to imply that her position is more meant as a painfully complicity and yet abandoned form. Will she know when the process of decay and abandonment has been complete? Will she know when she is no longer implicated or a part of the process?

Conclusion

Overall, Bloom’s images work to (re)map relationships of disposability within modernity, mostly by denying this state for both humans and nature. While Bloom’s images illustrate awareness that she is complicit in these processes, complicating the resistance and challenge these images provide, she also powerfully demonstrates alternative conceptions of the value and inherent still here-ness of humans and nature. Despite processes, which would render Bloom or nature disposable, Bloom’s images illustrate that both she and nature are still here, still valuable, and still matter.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this thesis explored the political potentialities of urban ruins through an investigation of ruins generally as well as through the work of artist Sarah R. Bloom. This thesis describes urban ruins and their imagery as sites where powerful political (re)mapping of neoliberal capitalist modernity occurs. Whether through a (re)mapping of time, space, or hegemonic notions such as disposability, images of urban ruins do important work toward imagining alternative futures that are more just and sustainable both for humans and nature.

Specifically, Sarah R. Bloom's work illustrates the complex relationship urban ruins and their imagery have to dominant structures, processes, and ideologies. Her work demonstrates her own complicity in reinscribing and reinforcing hegemonic understandings, while simultaneously illuminating ways in which she challenges and resists hegemony. Urban ruin imagery, Bloom shows, has the radical capability to (re)map important areas of neoliberal capitalist modernity such as understandings of time, space, as well as notions of disposability. This works to demonstrate the political potential that urban exploration as a social practice holds as well as underscores the alterability of these dominant modes of reality. Urban ruin imagery and urban ruins, as contested sites, possess the ability to reimagine the world.

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