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For Every Rat Killed

Etienne C. Toussaint
University of South Carolina School of Law, ectoussaint@sc.edu

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Abstract

If my grandmother had survived the sickness of old age and were alive to witness the economic injustices wrought by capitalist culture, what would she think? If my grandmother were alive to observe familiar technologies for exterminating household pests—surveillance, capture, imprisonment, disposal—being increasingly aimed toward low-income Black communities, what would she believe? If my grandmother were alive to discover, in the palm of her hands, a digital platform for spreading information (and misinformation) to the masses and painting new futures into the minds of lawmakers and politicians, what would she say? Studies have shown that low-income individuals are more likely to suffer physiological and psychological harms than middle- and high-income individuals due to the substandard conditions of their communities. Yet, such indignities are justified by market opportunities to grasp for better—to take "personal responsibility" and "pull yourself up by the bootstraps"—even when the process of grasping for upward social mobility inflicts its own trauma. This Essay explores the trauma of grasping for better in the United States where wealth inequities only seem to be getting worse. In so doing, it considers whether capitalism's competitive and individualistic culture—a spirit that thrives on the exploitation of the weak to further the capital accumulation of the strong—not only normalizes violence as a mechanism for social mobility but sews division and strife where alternative futures, perhaps even Afro-futures, might finally set us all free.

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"When will I finally get to rest through this oppression?
They punish the people that's asking questions."
Tupac, *Me Against the World*[1]

"The landlord told Raymond's mother twelve dollars
would be deducted from their rent for every rat killed."
Tara Betts, *For Those Who Need a True Story*[2]

My grandmother was the one to flush it down the toilet. We would all cower behind her, my sister, my brother, and me, each peeking out from under the flexed arms of our five-foot-one champion. She would stand before the green bowl with her shoulders arched back, calloused hands clasping the animal by the tail, pink floral nightgown inches away from its soaked hide. I wondered where she had garnered the courage. Her face would twist into a

* Assistant Professor of Law, University of South Carolina School of Law. I thank colleagues who provided feedback on drafts of this Essay, including Jean Goetz Mangan, Jennifer Murphy Romig, John Dehn, Grant Wong, Marsha Griggs, and Pilar Margarita Hernández Escontrías. I also thank Whitney A. Barnes, Aubree Manley, and Danielle Miller for research assistance. Any errors or omissions contained in this Essay are my own.

[1] Tupac, Me Against the World, on Me Against the World (Interscope & Jive 1995).

[2] Tara Betts, For Those Who Need a True Story, in Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry 124 (Camille T. Dungy ed., 2009).

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harrowing yet resolute glare that left me curious; had she learned the procedure in the villages of the Caribbean—perhaps Roseau, Dominica, where her sister still lived—or upon the musty docks of New York City, where she first inhaled the sharp scent of American opportunity as a young immigrant? Either way, such musings about the delicate process of endings demand a much longer explanation of beginnings. And ours was not unusual.

It would begin late at night. Long after the hallway light had been turned off, long after we had been tucked safely into twin beds in the small room beside the kitchenette, long after Granny had spent precious moments beside our homemade pillows to rehearse nightly prayers before making her way to the front room where Papa lay waiting, hushed squeaks began to fill the air. They did not usually rouse us from our dreams. But when they did, they confirmed what we had already discerned about the folks living in our hood. Everyone—including the rats—craved the sweet things in life. Even if it meant risking life and limb; even if it meant moving here and darting there; even if it meant scaling heights that felt more ambitious than a jazz man pouring heavy notes into the ears of ambivalent passengers on a crowded subway train, we battled shaky foundations and chased our cravings.

The rodents of my childhood were not dissimilar to the pests that swarmed other rowhouses in the South Bronx during the 1980s and 1990s.[3] I also doubt it's a stretch to claim the faithfulness of pests to the creed of urban America as a time-honored tradition observed in cities worldwide.[4] While landlords in almost every city in the United States must maintain their premises under a "warranty of habitability"—an implied promise that a property remain in livable condition for its tenants—state laws do not always clarify how many household pests are needed to infringe upon livability.[5] As a result, unless a court order deems it otherwise, it is the renter, and not the landlord, who is frequently expected to ward off and control everyday pests, such as rats or roaches, that threaten damage to the home or introduce disease.[6]

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[3] Colman McCarthy, The Poorest District, Wash. Post, Aug. 4, 1984, at A23.

[4] See generally Dario Capizzi et al., Rating the Rat: Global Patterns and Research Priorities in Impacts and Management of Rodent Pests, 44 Mammal Rev. 148 (2014).

[5] See, e.g., John R. Sauter, An Ohio Landlord's Responsibility for Pest Control, AVVO, June 19, 2013 (https://www.avvo.com/legal-guides/ugc/an-ohio-landlords-responsibility-for-pest-control) (noting that "the City of Columbus Housing Code Chapter 4551 states the landlord 'is responsible for elimination of insects, rats, or other pests in a dwelling containing two or more dwelling units . . .' However, in order for the landlord to have violated this particular section of the Ohio Revised Code, the defect or infestation must materially affect health and safety."); Can I Break My Lease Due to Mice Infestation?, Positive Pest Mgmt., Oct. 28, 2020 (https://www.positivepest.net/can-i-break-my-lease-due-to-mice-infestation/) ("Although it is the landlord's task to keep the place habitable, keeping mice away from the unit is a joint responsibility that tenants must actively participate in."); N.Y.C. Admin. Hous. Maint. Code § 27–2017.1 ("An owner of a dwelling shall take reasonable measures to keep the premises free from pests . . . and shall expeditiously take reasonable measures to remediate such conditions and any underlying defects . . . .").

[6] See, e.g., Doug Donovan & Jean Marbella, Dismissed: Tenants Lose, Landlords Win in Baltimore's Rent Court, Balt. Sun, Apr. 26, 2017 (https://data.baltimoresun.com/news/dismissed/) (discussing steps taken by Baltimore city to fine landlords who ignored rodent infestations in their apartments); Jennifer Waugh, Rodent-Plagued Residents Take Their Fight to Court, News4Jax, June 8, 2021 (https://www.news4jax.com/i-

In many low-income and racially (or ethnically) minoritized neighborhoods, the responsibility of exterminating rodents is a familiar task for both renters and homeowners alike. This is especially true in neighborhoods with a legacy of municipal disinvestment, which follows urban decay, but often precipitates rodent infestation. Further, this role is often encouraged by local government. For example, between 1900 and 1906, when the Bubonic Plague—known as "Black Death"—struck San Francisco, California, the city invested $2 million toward pest extermination when it was discovered that plague-ridden rodents were one of the disease's vectors.[7] Alongside quarantining residents living in the city's Chinatown and extending the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—both actions motivated by racism toward Chinese immigrants who were deemed carriers of the disease[8]—San Francisco offered a ten-cent bounty to the general public in exchange for every rat killed.[9] In the 1960s, in New York City, the *New York Daily News* distributed rat poison to the public and paid teenagers to learn how to exterminate rats as part of a larger effort to wage war on rodents in low-income housing.[10] To be sure, such efforts faced opposition from conservative politicians who wanted to limit governmental spending on anti-poverty programs. After Congress failed to pass President Lyndon B. Johnson's Rat Extermination and Control Bill in the summer of 1967, Johnson declared, "We are spending Federal funds to protect our livestock from rodents and predatory animals. The least we can do is give our children the same protection that we give our livestock."[11]

In some instances, landlords have even used monetary rewards to incentivize vigilante pest control by those living in densely populated apartment buildings. In her searing poem, *For Those Who Need a True Story*, Tara Betts describes the scene: after mixing bread,

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team/2021/06/07/rodent-plagued-residents-take-their-fight-to-court/) (discussing a court order for tenants in a Jacksonville, Florida apartment to move out of their unit until the landlord resolves mice infestation).

[7] Keith F. Murray, The Evolution of Plague Control in California, 2 Proc. Vertebrate Pest Conf. 143 (1964).

[8] Joan B. Trauner, The Chinese as Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco, 1870-1905, 57 Cal. Hist. 70, 70-72 (1978) ("By the 1870's, the racist argument had broadened in scope, and the Chinese were viewed as 'a social, moral and political curse to the community.' Specific arguments advanced against the Chinese included . . . the medical argument, that the Chinese, ignoring all laws of hygiene and sanitation, bred and disseminated disease, thereby endangering the welfare of the state and of the nation.").

[9] Guenter B. Risse, "A Long Pull, A Strong Pull and All Together": San Francisco and Bubonic Plague, 1907-1908, 66 Bull. Hist. Med. 260, 274 (1992).

[10] Murry H. Raphael, New York City's Rat Control Program, 33 J. Milk & Food Tech. 52-58, 56 (1970) ("During its second year the Health Department expanded its educational efforts via school programs in public and parochial schools . . . . Rodent control programs are presented for the upper grades of the elementary schools and high school (sixth through ninth year grades.)"); Mandi Isaacs Jackson, Harlem's Rent Strike and Rat War: Representation, Housing Access and Tenant Resistance in New York, 1958-1964, 47 Am. Stud. 53, 64 (2006) ("Three years before the mayor announced his million dollar anti-rat campaign in response to rent strike demands, community groups in Harlem teamed up to launch their own war on the rats that the city had consistently failed to remove . . . . Children and chaperones went door to door with information on garbage disposal, hole patching, and inspections.").

[11] See Lyndon B. Johnson, Statement by the President on the Failure of the House To Act on the Rat Extermination Act, The American Presidency Project, July 20, 1967 (https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-president-the-failure-the-house-act-the-rat-extermination-act).

meat, and rat poison in a bowl stationed near the center of the kitchen floor, Raymond and his mother await the death that must precede their counting.[12] The poem unveils the violence of survival in the slums of Chicago,[13] a narrative both tragic and stirring that lingers with the reader like the silence after a funeral elegy:

> Raymond describes the wave of rats like a tidal crash
> covering the bowl, leaping over each other's bodies,
> then the dropping, the stutter kicks.
> A chorus of rat screams ramble through Raymond's ears.
> Keening, furry bodies tense paws against churning guts
> as they hit cracked linoleum until an hour passes.[14]

When all the rats have been killed by the potion, Raymond and his mother begin to deposit the limp bodies into plastic grocery bags. One imagines the depressive symptoms visible upon the body of the woman—perhaps dark circles under the eyes from restless nights hunched over unpaid bills[15]—or the many diseases that might have danced across the linoleum during the melee, now hidden within its cracks.[16] But the reader's attention is quickly directed toward the arduous process of accumulation that tugs at the tender hands of young Raymond, hopeful even as he yearns for an escape from the toil that has become emblematic of his life in the ghetto:

> Raymond wanted to stop counting,
> but mama needed to save a dozen dollars
> wherever she could
> if they wanted to finally leave the rats behind.[17]

For Raymond and his mother, the crude ritual of exterminating rats in their kitchenette to save money on the rent—twelve dollars deducted for every rat killed—underscores the shame of living in shoddy housing riddled with pests.[18] It also demonstrates the bleakness of capitalist culture for low-income workers in America. To move up the

[12] Betts, supra note 2, at 124.

[13] See generally Earl Fredrick, III, Death, Violence, Health and Poverty in Chicago, 19 Harv. Pub. Health Rev. 1, 3 (2018) ("In Chicago, growing up in certain neighborhoods essentially guarantees a lifetime of poverty and frequent exposure to violence.").

[14] Betts, supra note 2, at 124.

[15] See Cynthia G. Cahoon, Depression in Older Adults, 112 Am. J. Nursing 22, 24 (2012) ("Physical signs and symptoms of depression may include weight loss, insomnia, slowed movement, and vague complaints of pain.").

[16] L. Dorothy Carroll, Rat-Borne Diseases, 49 Am. J. Nursing 226 (1949).

[17] Betts, supra note 2, at 124.

[18] Michael G. Walsh, Rat Sightings in New York City Are Associated with Neighborhood Sociodemographics, Housing Characteristics, and Proximity to Open Public Space, 2 Peer J. e533, Aug. 26, 2014 (https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.533); Jackson, supra note 10, at 53 ("The press had been tipped off by strike leaders that they would smuggle dead rats into the courtroom to serve as both symbol and evidence of what the media liked to call their 'sub-human' living conditions.").

social ladder, one must sacrifice the bodies of the weak (even one's own body) to the ruthless demands of the market.[19] Hands must get dirty in the sorting, eyes must turn away from the brutality, pockets must be emptied to satisfy the terms of the contract. It is a striving that not only infiltrates the home, we learn, but also seeps into the spirit and muddies commonplace notions of humanity. The indignities of everyday life in urban ghettoes are justified by market opportunities to grasp for better, even when the process of grasping inflicts its own trauma.[20]

As Nicole Brown explains, there is a psychological dimension to living with pests. More than mere nuisance, their constant scavenging not only instills "fear, distress, and disgust" within the people living with these creatures underfoot, but it also perpetuates toxic stereotypes about low-income neighborhoods that can dampen community morale.[21] When such challenges are tacked onto the many hardships of urban poverty, it is no wonder that low-income individuals are more likely to suffer from both physiological and psychological harms than middle- and high-income individuals living in so-called higher opportunity neighborhoods.[22] Some might argue that such suffering is natural, almost necessary, as humans evolve and populations swell. As Thomas Malthus argued in 1798,

> The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work themselves.[23]

Others note, as Joshua Bennett puts it in *Being Once Property Myself*, that the engagement of working class people in the violence of capitalist culture—a daily process of rooting out the weak to ensure the strong survive—is not grounded in a quest for domination or a yearning for profit accumulation.[24] Instead, such strivings in the hands of the oppressed—from rural towns to urban landscapes across America—can be acts of insurgency, an ambitious "labor toward escaping" the clutches of the market in search of liberty.[25] Either way,

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[19] Barbara Harriss-White, Poverty and Capitalism, 41 Econ. & Pol. Wkly. 1241, 1241 (2006) ("Effectively this means that capitalism is to be the major 'development partner' of the poor. But we have not yet come full intellectual circle because, in being stylized as 'business'—and commonly also as 'markets' and 'economic growth,' capitalism is robbed of its logic, its institutional framework and its dynamic.").

[20] Keylee A. Byers et al., "They're Always There": Resident Experiences of Living with Rats in a Disadvantaged Urban Neighbourhood, 19 BMC Pub. Health 853 (2019).

[21] Nicole Brown, Rat Fishing and the Disparate Treatment of Pest Animals, 1 Mid-Atl. J. on Law & Pub. Pol'y 10 (2012).

[22] Brice Lepièce et al., Poverty and Mental Health: What Should we Know as Mental Health Professionals?, 27 Psychiatria Danubina S92, S95 (2015) ("Poverty can be considered as a risk factor for mental illness. Indeed, common mental disorders are significantly more frequent in socially disadvantaged populations.").

[23] Thomas R. Malthus, An Essay on the Principles of Population 44 (London: J. Johnson, 1798).

[24] Joshua Bennett, Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man (2020).

[25] Id. at 29; see also Matthew Lambert, "That sonofabitch could cut your throat": Bigger and the Black Rat in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, 49 J. Midwest Mod. Language Ass'n 75, 76 (2016) ("In struggling against the containment practices that support the dominant ways of ordering landscapes and controlling 'others,' Bigger

as folks like Raymond and his mother kill the rats in their midst in hopes of escaping them, Betts's poetry exposes the spiritual violence endured by low-income families living "at the edge of the civil."[26] One is left wondering whether the incessant extermination of pests is a feature of humanity's ongoing pursuit of well-being, or a deformity of the human condition in individualistic and competitive societies. Perhaps the desire to exterminate is a cultural virus, a bug that invades the mind and poisons the soul from envisioning new modes of sociality and kinship.

It was this violence that I had grown accustomed to as a child. During late night trips to the restroom, I occasionally heard the flutter of footsteps near the kitchen pantry. Like a butterfly in a garden, the small and rapid sounds danced toward the place I remember now as the modest two-shelf cabinet crafted by my late father. Back then, it was our sweets pantry, a gold mine buttressed by a southern atrium stuffed with yellowed Tupperware, and a northern cavern crammed with packages of Little Debbie Fudge Rounds, Pecan Swirls, and occasionally, if we were good, a box of Chewy Chips Ahoy. Once I got old enough, I would learn to trade a dollar or two at the corner store bodega for my own secret stash of Sour Power Candy Straws, Little Debbie Oatmeal Crème Pies, and Drake's Coffee Cakes. Sheltered by protective parents, our life felt sweet, and we learned soon enough how to hoard our riches like arctic foxes in a waste land.

It would take many years for me to discover the term "food swamp."[27] I did not realize as a child that the treasure chest of corner store bodegas and fast-food restaurants lining the central artery of my hood was a dead man's curse, a cheap ticket to a lifelong voyage battling hypertension, diabetes, and other food-related storms while navigating the city's rough waters. I was not aware that there would be pests on that ship too—fast-food corporations that scavenge in the hull of low-income vessels with billboard advertisements and thirty-second commercials featuring the latest happy meal. I was not aware that restrictive covenants, redlining, and housing discrimination had pushed many supermarkets, along with many White folks, out to the suburbs.[28] I was not aware that many low- and middle-income neighborhoods around the country not only lack access to healthy and nutrient-rich food, but also lack access to adequate healthcare services.[29] All I knew was that if something

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and the rat become environmental fugitives, calling attention to the social and environmental practices that create the slums in which they are confined.").

[26] Bennett, supra note 24, at 26.

[27] See Justine J. Reel & Brittany K. Badger, From Food Deserts to Food Swamps: Health Education Strategies to Improve Food Environments in Urban Areas, J. Obes. Wt. Loss Ther. (2014) ("This high availability of fast food coupled with a disproportionately lower number of grocery stores in these same areas have led to the proliferation of these poor food landscapes which should be renamed 'food swamps.'").

[28] N.Y. Law Sch. Racial Just. Project & ACLU, Unshared Bounty: How Structural Racism Contributes to the Creation and Persistence of Food Deserts (June 2012) (https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/racial_justice_project/3).

[29] Sean C. Lucan et al., Healthful and Less-Healthful Foods and Drinks from Storefront and Non-Storefront Businesses: Implications for "Food Deserts," "Food Swamps," and Food-Source Disparities, 23 Pub. Health Nutrition 1428, 1428 (2020) ("Sources of food/drink can differ substantially between communities. In lower income communities (especially those with higher proportions of racial/ethnic minorities), fast-food outlets

or someone touched our treasure without permission, the code in the hood was extermination.

After the alarm had been raised by one of us kids the next morning, or perhaps by the shiny droppings that occasionally peppered the cream linoleum in front of the sink, Granny would purchase sticky traps at the hardware store down the block. Unlike rat poison, the technology of sticky traps immobilizes your prey while keeping them alive, a holding cell for the terror that awaits. Sticky traps also prevented our rats from escaping into holes in the plywood behind the kitchen counter. Occasionally, while doing homework or reading an R.L. Stein novel at the kitchen table, one member of the bunch would skitter past my feet and disappear under the stove. Even as I shoved the broom handle underneath, fiddling at the corners like a baseball player at the plate, they remained hidden. But, once I had the good sense to use a flashlight to scan the crawl space, I confirmed my suspicion: a hole in the wall served as entry to the rat's lair.

Looking back, I recognize now that our rats were no more than mice. I also have learned that childhood traumas can morph into inaccurate adult nightmares once recovered. We were only plagued with mice for short periods of time. Whenever they arrived, Granny purged them faster than any exterminator I've witnessed since. But the animated comedy series, *Tom and Jerry Kids*, had taught me that rats are not only stubborn crooks, they also live inside of household walls. And childhood me believed that our resident rodent shared a permanent bunk with friends behind the wall because in the South Bronx one rarely walked or lived alone. The costs were simply too great.

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The technology of exterminating pests has a complex history that reflects its underlying moral tensions. While people have been battling rodents likely as long as humans have been walking the Earth, differing views on whether and how humans should expel pests underscore what Hendrik Hartog describes as "the problematic relationship between our social pluralism—the multiplicity of our social practices and normative identities—and the values we impute to legal order."[30] The first patented lethal mousetrap in the United States is credited to James M. Keep of New York, issued in 1879.[31] As cities grew alongside an industrializing economy, the mousetrap provided a mechanism to kill hungry rodents with spring-loaded cast-iron jaws that snapped when bait was pulled from a trigger. The more familiar spring-loaded bar mousetrap on a rectangular wooden base was patented by William C. Hooker of Illinois in 1894, with other inventors building upon Hooker's design

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and convenience stores appear more often than in wealthier communities (especially those with higher proportions of white residents).").

[30] Hendrik Hartog, Pigs and Positivism, 1985 Wis. L. Rev. 899, 900.

[31] J.M. Keep, Animal-Trap, U.S. Patent No. 221,320 (issued Nov. 4, 1879) (https://patents.google.com/patent/US221320A/en).

over the years.[32] Other devices were invented to capture rodents without killing them. In 1870, W.K. Bachman of South Carolina patented a mousetrap that lured rodents inside of a box where a trigger shut the entry gate, allowing uninjured rodents trapped inside to be later released into the wild.[33] Similar designs, such as the trap invented by Dr. H.B. Sherman of Florida in the 1920s and commercialized in the 1950s, have enabled researchers to capture live rodents and other wild animals for experimentation.[34] Glue traps with synthetic adhesive material applied to cardboard or plastic trays eventually became a popular method of capturing rodents in the household. However, glue traps have been denounced by animal rights groups for inflicting traumatizing slow deaths on the captured rodents upon disposal.[35] In response, some people choose to kill the rodent before disposing of the glue trap. Others opt for the most common rodent extermination method, rat poison, even though studies have shown that rat poison poses a threat to wild animals that feast on rodents, such as owls, squirrels, and even deer.[36]

Perhaps compassion was the reason why Granny did not take the approach of Bigger Thomas, the character from *Native Son* I would meet in high school English a few years later.[37] In his novel, set in the Chicago slums of the 1930s, Richard Wright critiqued the same substandard housing conditions that Tara Betts paints with her poem. In the opening scene of *Native Son*, Bigger and his family awaken to "a huge black rat" scurrying around their one-room tenement. Determined to exterminate the pest, Bigger engages in a violent struggle to kill the rat: fending off rat bites to his trouser-leg, smashing the animal with an iron skillet, until "the flat body of the rat lay exposed, its two long yellow tusks showing distinctly," before finally crushing the rat's head with a shoe, "cursing hysterically: 'You sonofabitch!'"[38]

Whereas Bigger had been overcome by a vicious spirit of conquest, my grandmother appeared far more humane to me, always awash with silence as we killed each rat, never boastful. Although I regrettably never asked her much about the experience, I knew Granny had endured the heartache of leaving her Caribbean family behind for the sweet promises of the American Dream.[39] I knew she had entered Jim Crow America as a young Black

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[32] See Joachim L. Dagg, Exploring Mouse Trap History, 4 Evo. Edu. Outreach 397, 399 (2011).

[33] W.K. Bachman, Cage Trap, U.S. Patent No. 107,647 (issued Sept. 27, 1870) (https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/2f/33/38/a4bf4a5e414f89/US107647.pdf).

[34] Carol Lou Sherman Phillips, The Sherman Traps Tradition, H.B. Sherman Traps, Inc. (2015) (https://www.shermantraps.com/animal-traps/sherman-traps-tradition [https://perma.cc/BT3S-NS5C]).

[35] Glue Boards: Cheap, Cruel and Indiscriminate, Humane Soc'y United States (2018) (https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/glue-boards [https://perma.cc/F3FH-687D]) ("Glue boards might seem like a safe and easy solution to pest problems but in fact, they are one of the cruelest and most dangerous.").

[36] Robert McClure, "Super-Toxic" Rat Poison Kills Owls, Sci. Am., Dec. 13, 2010 (https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/super-toxic-rat-poision-kills-owls/).

[37] Richard Wright, Native Son (1940).

[38] Id. at 10.

[39] The phrase "American Dream" was popularized by James Truslow Adams in 1931. See James Truslow Adams, The Epic of America 404 (1931) ("But there has been also the American dream, that dream of a land

woman in the 1950s with nothing much in her hands besides a husband, my infant mother, and hope. Although a fast gait and firm handshake must have felt essential for survival in the ghettos of New York City, I suppose there was a part of Granny that hoped to live in a more gracious way. A part that yearned to make a home for her daughter and future grandchildren that pleased her God. A part that submitted to the routine of extermination to make room for blessings while asking for forgiveness in the same breath. A part committed to the discovery of joy in the tragedy of the American way. I imagine that she was not alone.

As I read *Native Son*'s opening pages as an eager high school student, I not only saw in the squalor of Chicago's Black slums the more dangerous areas of the South Bronx that I had been taught to avoid,[40] but also the *animality* of Bigger.[41] Before disposing of the dead pest, Bigger held it up by the tail in front of his sister, "swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister's fear" while mocking her with a smile until she fainted at the sight of the animal's hideousness.[42] One of my classmates mentioned the way Bigger's treatment of the animal suggested a kind of metamorphosis, him becoming the savage that he so desperately sought to destroy. A sour silence melted under our teacher's knowing grin like a ghost before the rising sun, and we considered at our desks—we being several White boys and one (or two) Black boys other than me—whether Bigger symbolized the savagery of an anti-Black world, the violence of a political economy where those in power derive satisfaction from disposing of unwanted Black fugitives in their midst.[43]

Was ours a world where rich and powerful White folks enjoyed eliminating poor and disgusting Black pests from city streets? After all, Amadou Diallo, a West African immigrant known for peddling bootlegged tapes on the street, was shot three blocks away from my Bronx home, only two years before my encounter with Bigger, after being mistaken for a rapist by undercover police.[44] I found myself disagreeing with the proposition,

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in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement."). It reflects the sentiments evoked by the Declaration of Independence that America is a nation where "all men are created equal" and all people have a constitutional right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This vision inspired Caribbeans to immigrate to New York in the mid-twentieth century and continues to motivate immigrants to settle in the United States today. See generally Philip Kasinitz, Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race (1992).

[40] NYC in Chaos, PBS (2019) (https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/blackout-gallery/ [https://perma.cc/SJ3Z-BE2P]) (noting that "New York City in the late 1970s was plagued by severe economic and political troubles unlike any the city's inhabitants had experienced before"); see also Lambert, supra note 25, at 85 (explaining that "rats are most abundant in places that humans tend to ignore: alleyways, dumps, and economically depressed neighborhoods").

[41] Federica Durante & Susan T. Fiske, How Social-Class Stereotypes Maintain Inequality, 18 Current Op. Psych. 43, 43 (2017) (explaining that "cross-nationally, poor people are perceived as incompetent (even more so in unequal societies) and judged as animal-like in the UK, US, and Australia").

[42] Wright, supra note 37, at 10.

[43] Lambert, supra note 25, at 82 (explaining that Bigger's reaction to the dead rat "foreshadows the hate his white pursuers and prosecutors show him after they discover that he killed Mary. On the run, Bigger, in effect, becomes the feared, hated, and empathetic rat.").

[44] See Heather Mac Donald, Diallo Truth, Diallo Falsehood, City J. (Summer 1999) (https://www.city-journal.org/html/diallo-truth-diallo-falsehood-12011.html); see also Etienne Toussaint, Blackness as Fighting

hanging onto hope by a thread, convinced even then that there must be something far more pernicious than an overly simplistic Black-White dialectic driving poverty in America. I was also unable to get past the oddity of Bigger Thomas representing both Blackness and anti-Blackness, both a propulsion toward something better and the forces of the so-called *better* White culture bearing down heavy on folks whose lives could not get much worse.

I also wondered if my grandmother—standing boldly before the toilet, preparing to flush the rat's worn body into oblivion—embodied a kind of savagery too: a savagery symbolizing America's best and worst traits. Now, years later, I see in Bigger's story, and perhaps in my grandmother's story too, a parable about the hopes and dangers of the American Dream, an allegory of the opportunities and risks of melting in the pot of American promises when driven by a hunger for more. Can one escape toil in the urban ghetto without resorting to the guiding light of violence as a north star? It seemed Granny had avoided the rage of Bigger Thomas by invoking the compassion found in the adhesion of sticky traps; compassion not because the technology avoided a traumatic and slow death, but because it granted Granny time to arrest her frustrations long enough for empathy to take root. It also granted the rodent a chance to escape. And sometimes one did. But when it did not, it was only then, guided by the rat's screeches—high-pitched and drawn-out sounds that echoed throughout our rowhouse like a communion song within the walls of an old Black church—that Granny would finally lead us into the death march.

After grabbing the device, she would walk us toward the bathroom to flush the pest down the bowl. It was almost dead by the time she peeled it off the trap. In my memories, I see her waving it by the tail above the open seat. But unlike Bigger Thomas, she did it slowly, like the priest waving the incense-filled thurible at our Catholic school's Sunday mass. Granny waved it slowly while praying inaudible last rites as we three children stood behind, silent acolytes waiting for the flush of the toilet to call the pest home to the underworld. The story might end there, and all might be forgiven, but there's one part of it that ruins the narrative arc, that calls into question our Black ghetto utopia, our Afro-future.[45] Granny had a way of striking a final blow that left me wondering if she shared some of Bigger's animality after all. I do not know where she learned it. Perhaps on that first boat ride to America from the West Indies. Maybe right there in the belly of the concrete jungle that never sleeps. Was it savage of Granny to pour a kettle full of boiling water on the

Words, 106 Va. L. Rev. Online 124, 133-35 (2020) ("I learned that Amadou was simply a West African immigrant street peddler of bootlegged tapes and cheap tube socks, perhaps hoping to avoid another run-in with the law. I learned that when the officers searched Amadou's perforated body for a gun, they found only a black wallet and a shattered beeper covered with blood. I learned that at least one of the officers wept.").

[45] Alex Zamalin, Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism 10 (2019) (explaining "black utopia was never a transhistorical idea . . . its meaning had everything to do with the existing social conditions of a given moment . . . its specific concern was always with the black diaspora"); see also Afrofuturism, Pratt Inst. Libraries (2021) (https://libguides.pratt.edu/afrofuturism [https://perma.cc/23DE-S3H6]) (defining the term "Afrofuturism" as "'speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of the twentieth century technoculture—and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.'").

trapped mouse until screams turned to whimpers before sending its burned body to the grave?

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Is it humane to kill others that we deem pests, to "exterminate all the brutes" as Sven Lindqvist described the historic genocide of the so-called "lower races" in Europe and Africa?[46] When it comes to rats, I have struggled to answer this question and the ones that follow from it. Whether one smashes a rat upon its head with a cast-iron skillet in the manner of Bigger Thomas, or subdues the pest into slow death with a sticky trap and boiling water like Granny, the animal dies all the same. Both acts seem driven by a genuine hunger for liberation, a yearning to be free of the distractions of poverty and disease long enough to enjoy the treasures of American conquest; an appetite to grasp the so-called American pie, or at least to preserve the cookies in the sweets closet long enough for the next generation to enjoy it. For the average working-class American, such violence seems practical, almost necessary. Yet, in our individual efforts to win at the game of survival, do we also lose a piece of our humanity? Is capitalist culture and its moral imperatives a "mechanism of disaggregating human personhood itself"?[47] Is the elimination of distance between people through technology—because "time is money" as Theodor Adorno reminds us—a recipe for estrangement, a kind of "sickness of contact" that stems from "an ideology" of "treating people as things"?[48] By exploiting the weaknesses of our pests, by expropriating the shared space to claim our social dominance, do we become *animalized* in the fight for power in our respective corners of the hood?

Perhaps the harms that stem from pests justify their extermination. Maybe Granny knew it was rats that spread Black Death in San Francisco in 1906. Maybe she knew that the fleas, ticks, and infectious diseases carried by rats have been responsible for killing at least ten million people in the last century alone.[49] Maybe she was already aware of the many germs that rats carry from underground sewers and of the havoc they often wreak upon precious food supplies.[50] Maybe she knew from silently watching me watch *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* on Saturday mornings that rats must remain hidden from view in the dank corners of underground sewers, even if their black bodies contained the secrets of generations of skilled warriors.

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[46] Sven Lindqvist, "Exterminate All the Brutes": One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide (1996). Sven Lindqvist borrowed the phrase "exterminate all the brutes" from Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella, *Heart of Darkness*, which critiqued European colonial rule in Africa.

[47] Bennett, supra note 24, at 32.

[48] Theodore Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life 44-45 (E.F.N. Jephcott trans., 1974) (1951).

[49] World Health Org., WHO/CDS/CSR/ISR/2000.1, WHO Report on Global Surveillance of Epidemic-Prone Infectious Diseases 25 (2000).

[50] The Impact of Rats on Food Supplies, Rat Relief (2014) (https://www.ratrelief.com/the-impact-of-rats-on-food-supplies/#How_Rats_Contaminate_Food [https://perma.cc/UGY7-QWDV]).

Then again, it doesn't take the presence of rats for crisis to flood the hood or for pandemic to spread Black Death in low-income neighborhoods. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic proved that one's weakened immune system and heightened risk of infection has far more to do with social determinants of public health—social and economic status, neighborhood and environmental distress, access to healthcare—than the presence of rodents.[51] Indeed, even the rats in cities nationwide were sent into hysteria during the pandemic's shutdown. In May 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned that the COVID-19 pandemic was provoking rat aggression.[52] According to urban rodentologist Dr. Bobby Corrigan, as restaurants and other food businesses were shutting down to contain the spread of the coronavirus, rats who traditionally relied upon restaurants' nightly trash were beginning to turn upon one another for survival.[53]

The COVID-19 pandemic drove humans to turn upon one another too. Grocery stores and supermarkets were quickly emptied of essentials as government-mandated lockdowns threatened a shortage of crucial food and home goods supplies.[54] Police officers selectively levied technologies of extermination against unarmed Black men and women around the country.[55] Citizens erupted in protest, some decrying the call for mass vaccination, others calling for the government to do more to help struggling families facing eviction,[56] and still others taking matters into their own hands by bringing assault weapons to peaceful demonstrations.[57] With demands for police abolition and cries for radical transformation of the economy hovering in the background, many political debates heading into the 2020 presidential election boiled down to whether there was need for a national reckoning with White supremacy, or whether the violent culture of marginalized communities is to blame for their social and economic hardships.[58]

These tensions—the desire to exterminate so-called pests and the cries of the exterminated for justice—point toward something lingering far deeper in American culture than everyday efforts to escape rodents. I recall stories of the violence of young men in my

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[51] See generally Etienne C. Toussaint, Of American Fragility: Public Rituals, Human Rights, and the End of *Invisible Man*, 52 Colum. Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 826, 838-63 (2020).

[52] Mariel Padilla, C.D.C. Warns of "Aggressive" Rats Searching for Food During Shutdowns, N.Y. Times, May 24, 2020.

[53] Id.

[54] Yaron Steinbuch, COVID-19 Panic Buying: Toilet Paper, Essentials Fly Off Shelves Again, N.Y. Post, Nov. 17, 2020.

[55] Lerner Ctr. for Pub. Health Promotion, Issue Brief #31, Black Lives Matter: Police Brutality in the Era of COVID-19: Tyra Jean 1, June 16, 2020 (https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1037&context=lerner&preview_mode=1&z=1611953291).

[56] See Sydney Lupkin, The U.S. Paid Billions to Get Enough COVID Vaccines Last Fall. What Went Wrong?, NPR, Aug. 25, 2021 (https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/08/25/1029715721/pfizer-vaccine-operation-warp-speed-delay).

[57] Haley Willis et al., Tracking the Suspect in the Fatal Kenosha Shootings, N.Y. Times, Nov. 22, 2021.

[58] Jenna Johnson, Amid a Year of Debate Over Inequity and Police Violence, Trump and Biden Spar Over Race, Wash. Post, Oct. 23, 2020.

childhood South Bronx who resorted to theft or intimidation to get ahead.[59] I recall stories of the violence of schoolyard bullies who would rather draw blood from balled fists and curse words than admit they were afraid of not being picked for the team.[60] I recall stories of the violence of landlords who evicted neighbors late on the rent, and the violence of employers who fired low-wage workers when profits were running low.[61] Was it partly desperation to escape inhumane conditions—the "bleakness of black social life" as Joshua Bennett describes it[62]—that accounted for such complicity with the violence of American culture? Was it partly desperation that inspired playground or workplace cultures premised on the exploitation, and sometimes the extermination, of the weak? Or is it the very metamorphosis of the urban poor into that which they seek to escape—from the dominated into the dominator, much like Bigger's transformation in the kitchenette—that obscures their subjugation?

After all, American culture boasts a long history of employing violence, theft, and intimidation as tools of conquest.[63] For Native populations, such violence and theft has left behind a trail of tears and a long shadow of broken promises.[64] Like the scrambling rats on

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[59] See Jackie Snow, Growing Up to Be Stickup Kids, Juv. Just. Info. Exchange, Feb. 1, 2013 (https://jjie.org/2013/02/01/growing-up-be-stickup-kids/) ("The crack trade peaked in New York between 1987 and 1989, so Contreras and his peers, who he calls 'tail enders,' teenagers in the late 1980s, were a little too young and too late to the game to be successful drug dealers. Soon robbing major drug dealers, despite the increased risk, became the lucrative move."); see also generally Randol Contreras, The Stickup Kids: Race, Drugs, Violence, and the American Dream (2012) (describing how some kids living in the South Bronx in the 1980s turned to robbery).

[60] See Martin Tolchin, Gangs Spread Terror in the South Bronx, N.Y. Times, Jan. 16, 1973; George James, Shooting Prompts More Police Around School, N.Y. Times, Oct. 21, 1992.

[61] See Michael Goodwin, Empty Bronx Buildings, Angered Former Tenants; 'Inhumane,' Official Says a Wave of New Violations Rumors of Eviction, N.Y. Times, May 28, 1980; Kevin Baker, "Welcome to Fear City"—The Inside Story of New York's Civil War, 40 Years On, Guardian, May 18, 2015 (https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/may/18/welcome-to-fear-city-the-inside-story-of-new-yorks-civil-war-40-years-on) ("New York's budget cuts fell heaviest on the city's public workforce. In May 1975, Mayor Beame had announced severe reductions in salaries, pensions and working conditions, plus the layoff of 51,768 city workers—more than one-sixth of its employees—with the proviso that these cuts might be averted if all the city's workers agreed to work four days a week, for a commensurate salary.").

[62] Bennett, supra note 24, at 41; see also Dawn Day Biehler, Pests in the City: Flies, Bedbugs, Cockroaches, and Rats 153 (2013) ("Rats filled the niche created by the forces of racism and disinvestment. Where disrepair was widespread throughout a building, block, or neighborhood, rats became entrenched residents, with many alternative harborages should any one family patch up holes with steel wool or cement.").

[63] See generally Edward E. Baptist, The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism (2016) (describing how the expansion of slavery in the first eight decades after American independence drove the evolution of United States capitalism); Douglas A. Blackmon, Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II (2009) (exposing how Black Americans following the Emancipation Proclamation were "leased" as convicts through forced labor camps operated by state and federal governments); Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness—10th Anniversary Edition (2020) (arguing that "we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it" via the mass incarceration of Black Americans); Cedric Robinson, Black Marxism 2 (2000) (1983) (advancing the concept of "racial capitalism" to explain how "the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions").

[64] See generally John Ehle, Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation (1988) (describing the fate of the Cherokee Nation in 1875 when they signed a treaty relinquishing their land east of the Mississippi

the linoleum floors of Chicago kitchenettes, as Tara Betts describes in her poem, European colonizers intent on conquering foreign lands similarly left behind disease. For the immigrant in America, such violence has sometimes meant getting burned in the melting pot of xenophobia. And for the Black citizen who traces their ancestry to the enslaved Africans who endured racial terrorism on Southern plantations, perhaps becoming violent has always been part of becoming American.

Even more, do these questions simply overwhelm us with further questions about the psychological dimensions of capitalism as a political economic global system? Is it the individualism of capitalist culture that justifies the technology of extermination as a mechanism to resolve the threat of pests? Is it the competitiveness of capitalist culture that justifies the perception of unwanted community members as "insurgents," as interrupters of daily life who refuse to submit to the status quo?[65] History has shown that racially and ethnically minoritized people—the Native, the Black, the Brown, the Asian, the Jew, etc.—can breed the same hatred, the same discomfort, the same yearning for expulsion from the body politic that arises from the sight of rodents.

Was Japanese American incarceration during World War II any different than the sticky trap?[66] Is the neglect of Native populations in under-resourced reservations any different than the box trap?[67] Is the "slow death" wrought by gentrification in low-income Black neighborhoods any different than the steady pounding of the cast iron skillet?[68] Is swift death from COVID-19 infection within low-income Black neighborhoods any worse than the spring-loaded cast iron jaw?[69] Is the brutal treatment of starving Hispanic and

in return for promises of better opportunities); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States (2015) (offering a history of the centuries-long genocidal expansion of the settler-colonial state that would become the United States as told through the perspective of Indigenous nations).

[65] Bennett, supra note 24, at 41.

[66] See generally Stephanie D. Hinnershitz, Japanese American Incarceration: The Camps and Coerced Labor During World War II (2021) (describing the forced removal and incarceration of approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II); Mary Matsuda Gruenewald, Looking Like the Enemy: My Story of Imprisonment in Japanese American Internment Camps (2005) (describing the author's first-hand experience living in an internment camp for Japanese Americans during World War II).

[67] See generally Ezra Rosser, A Nation Within: Navajo Land and Economic Development (2021) (describing economic development challenges of communities living on the Navajo reservation); Andrea Smith, Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide (2015) (describing the violence endured by Native American communities, particularly women).

[68] See Lauren Berlant, Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency), 33 Critical Inquiry 754, 754 (2007) ("The phrase *slow death* refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence. The general emphasis of the phrase is on the phenomenon of mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality."); John Betancur, Gentrification and Community Fabric in Chicago, 48 Urb. Stud. 383 (2011); Peter Marcuse, Gentrification, Social Justice and Personal Ethics, 39 Int'l J. Urb. & Reg'l Res. 1263 (2015).

[69] See generally Shamsher Samra et al., Interpersonal and Structural Violence in the Wake of COVID-19, 110 Am. J. Pub. Health 1659 (2020); see also Leonard E. Egede & Rebekah J. Walker, Structural Racism, Social Risk Factors, and Covid-19: A Dangerous Convergence for Black Americans, 383 New Eng. J. Med. e77 (2020).

Haitian immigrants at the southern border any different than rat poison?[70] Does the so-called culture of "civic disorder" witnessed in crumbling low-income neighborhoods characterize the threat?[71] Or, as Orlando Patterson questioned about human chattel slavery, do such acts of "social death" say something deeper about the civility of the people who engage in them, or of those who stand by innocently as passive observers?[72] Perhaps most troubling to me as I reflect on my grandmother's efforts to keep my childhood home pest-free, what becomes of the folks who strive to purchase new freedoms, as Tara Betts tells us, "for every rat killed"?[73]

While my grandmother embraced the violence of extermination with silence, Bigger Thomas's mother was overtaken with an anxious indignation. When Bigger's mother witnesses how the rodent inflames her son with anger, she is arrested by fear and overcome with prophecy. Her fear at the sight of the black rat appears to be less about its status as vermin and more about the way its presence illuminates the injustice of the family's social condition; the invasion of economic disparity upon the serenity of home life; the assault of social unrest upon the psychic terrain of Black humanity.[74] In this way, the kitchen becomes a battleground for social striving and a courtroom for moral reckoning, "the funnel," as Richard Wright argued in *12 Million Black Voices*, "through which our pulverized lives flow to ruin and death on city pavements, at a profit."[75]

Yet, while both women appear different—Bigger's mother and my grandmother—maybe both women are more similar than I care to admit. My grandmother used boiling water and the work of calloused hands to craft a burial ground for the pests who craved our sweets. She flushed the body down the toilet, placed a fresh trap in the corner of the kitchenette, and prayed for no more to return. Without knowing it, she taught us how to survive in capitalist America, how to rid ourselves of unwanted vermin in the path of sweet

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[70] See generally Julie Turkewitz et al., Perilous, Roadless Jungle Becomes a Path of Desperate Hope, N.Y. Times, Oct. 2, 2021; Camilo Pérez-Bustillo, US Brutality Against Haitian Migrants Highlights US-Mexico Collusion and Repositioning in Latin America, Just Security, Oct. 7, 2021 (https://www.justsecurity.org/78510/us-brutality-against-haitian-migrants-highlights-us-mexico-collusion-and-repositioning-in-latin-america/).

[71] Some critics blame the squalor of poor neighborhoods on civic disorder. See Biehler, supra note 62, at 151 (noting that "some critics opposed any government support for rat control in cities, blaming infestation on civic disorder and residents themselves rather than any systematic oppression or injustice").

[72] Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death (2018); Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, 212 Atlantic 78, 78-88, Aug. 1963 (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/letter-from-a-birmingham-jail/552461/) ("I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action.'").

[73] Betts, supra note 2.

[74] Bennett, supra note 24, at 21 (noting that "the wages of pestiferous life are the toll that pests take on the psychic economy of a given space, the cost to an inhabitant of letting live what does not belong, what invades or remains though it is unwanted").

[75] Richard Wright, 12 Million Black Voices 111 (1941).

American dreams, and how to do so with grace. She also taught us about the art of escape, how some captured Africans embraced a watery death in the Atlantic in their quest for freedom from the brutality of America. Bigger's mother took the similar moment in *Native Son* for premonition. After her son kills the rat in the kitchenette with the cast iron skillet, she announces to Bigger in prophetic words, "You'll regret how you living some day . . . If you don't stop running with that gang of yours and do right you'll end up where you never thought you would. . . . And the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling, boy."[76] In both instances—the works of my grandmother's hands to breed empathy, the faith of Bigger's mother to demonstrate protest with impassioned speech—Black striving in capitalist America has often meant facing the inevitability of death with one's head held high.

Maybe this is what it means to chase the American Dream. To grow accustomed to the persistence of pests, to hold fast to extermination as a technology for human striving, to remain committed to execution as a means to clear the pathway toward human flourishing. Maybe such contradictions are part of what it means to be an American. For if there will always be more rats, as James Smethurst declares,[77] then "the interminable flow of rats . . . [emerge as] figures of resistance rather than solely of abjection or despair."[78] In other words, the persistence of the marginalized—the so-called pests of our modern age that breed discomfort by exposing the hypocrisies of liberal democracy and capitalist economies—not only suggests the inadequacy of modern capitalism as a solution to economic injustice, but also reveals the unwillingness of the poor to be reduced to disposable people. Maybe this too is America.

We too easily forget that hardships fade from memory when replaced by hopeful visions of the future—"freedom dreams," Robin D. G. Kelly calls them[79]—that inject utopian possibilities into "the apocalypse of the everyday."[80] If "utopia" is a state of being "temporally estranged," as Jayna Brown argues,[81] then while my grandmother's perhaps vain attempt to forge a ghetto utopia with the limited tools she had at her disposal appear futile in hindsight, we might discover a radical imagination of Black futurity by walking "through the ruins, toward the terror and fear," and choosing to "lay bare the trauma that we all carry with us," as Eddie Glaude Jr. encourages.[82] Put another way, might we engineer new modes of sociality and human subjectivity by designing a new world through the imaginations of our grandmothers?

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[76] Wright, supra note 37, at 9.

[77] James Smethurst, Invented by Horror: The Gothic and African American Literary Ideology in *Native Son*, 35 Afr. Am. Rev. 29, 36 (2001).

[78] Bennett, supra note 24, at 42.

[79] Robin D. G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (2003).

[80] Jayna Brown, Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds 4 (2021).

[81] Id. at 8; see generally Zamalin, supra note 45.

[82] Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own 211 (2021).

If my grandmother had survived the sickness of old age and were alive to witness the futility of modern capitalism as a pathway toward economic justice,[83] what would she think? If my grandmother were alive to observe familiar methods for exterminating household pests—surveillance, capture, imprisonment, disposal—being increasingly aimed toward low-income Black communities,[84] what would she believe? If my grandmother were alive to discover in the palm of her hands a digital platform for spreading information (and misinformation) to the masses and painting new futures into the minds of lawmakers and politicians, what would she say? There is one part of me, the Afropessimist side, who agrees with Frank B. Wilderson III: slavery is permanent, and emancipation is a myth.[85] That part imagines Granny would simply retort, *I told you so*.

But there is another part of me—the Afrofuturist side, who remains inspired by the novels of Octavia Butler and the artwork of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the music of Janelle Monáe, works that envision a techno-future free of the structures of racial oppression that predominate modern life—that imagines Granny would shout, *Where do we go from here?* After looking around, Granny would bristle at the usage of facial recognition technology by police departments, too often leading to bias being folded into algorithms that perpetuate cultural stereotypes.[86] I imagine Granny would craft a Tweet or publish a Facebook post calling for technology not to be used as a mechanism for surveillance, but instead as a tool for building empathy.[87] I imagine she would draft an opinion editorial or two denouncing technologies

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[83] See generally Yanis Varoufakis, Yanis Varoufakis: Capitalism Isn't Working. Here's an Alternative, The Guardian, Sept. 4, 2020 (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/04/yanis-varoufakis-capitalism-isnt-working-heres-an-alternative) (arguing that "once labour time has a rental price, the market mechanism inexorably pushes it down while commodifying every aspect of work (and, in the age of Facebook, our leisure too)"); David Leonhardt, Opinion, American Capitalism Isn't Working., N.Y. Times, Dec. 2, 2018 ("Median weekly earnings have grown a miserly 0.1 percent a year since 1979. The typical American family today has a lower net worth than the typical family did 20 years ago. Life expectancy, shockingly, has fallen this decade."); Gar Alperovitz, America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy (2004) (calling for the development of a more community-centered, democratic market system to overcome growing inequality and debt).

[84] See Ruha Benjamin, Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code, 98 Soc. Forces 1 (2020).

[85] Vinson Cunningham, The Argument of "Afropessimism," New Yorker, July 13, 2020 (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism); see generally Frank B. Wilderson III, Afropessimism (2020).

[86] See, e.g., Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, Facial Recognition and the Fourth Amendment, 105 Minn. L. Rev. 1105 (2021); Mark MacCarthy, Mandating Fairness and Accuracy Assessments for Law Enforcement Facial Recognition Systems, Brookings Techtank Blog, May 26, 2020 (https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2021/05/26/mandating-fairness-and-accuracy-assessments-for-law-enforcement-facial-recognition-systems/); Katelyn Ringrose, Note, Law Enforcement's Pairing of Facial Recognition Technology with Body-Worn Cameras Escalates Privacy Concerns, 105 Va. L. Rev. Online 57 (2019).

[87] See, e.g., Elizabeth E. Joh, The Undue Influence of Surveillance Technology Companies on Policing, 92 N.Y.U. L. Rev. Online 19 (Sept. 2017); Tom R. Tyler, From Harm Reduction to Community Engagement: Redefining the Goals of American Policing in the Twenty-First Century, 111 Nw. U. L. Rev. 1537 (2017); Andy Myhill, Nat'l Policing Improvement Agency, Community Engagement in Policing: Lessons from the Literature (2012) (https://whatworks.college.police.uk/Research/Documents/Community_engagement_lessons.pdf).

of extermination employed by police officers that deliver instantaneous death.[88] I imagine she would demand crime-control strategies that make room for protest, for insurgency, for community engagement, for escape by fair trial, and in the worst case scenario, a noble death march.[89] I imagine Granny would write a book asking us to transcend the model of possessive individualism that buttresses our conception of private property, that urges us to hide our sweets in tightly sealed jars confined in offshore cabinets at the expense of starving pests in our midst.[90] I imagine Granny would deliver a TED talk urging us to redefine the American Dream altogether. To consider a new world where alternative visions of community might transform space and time, such that everyone—even our dear pests—might live together in harmony without fighting over scraps. I imagine Granny would ask us repeatedly to dream. Would we be brave enough to listen?

With new vision, the vision of our grandmothers, we might discern the transgressive potential of our pests, "figure[s] full of contradiction" that urge us to resist reading the lifecycles of pests, and by extension the lifecycles of the poor, as defined by social death.[91] Instead, we might view such strivings as a hardship that is exhausting, yet also restorative.[92] We might even see this same striving within ourselves: men, women, and children motivated by an inner fight to thrive when societal temptations threaten to lure us down the beaten path. It is perhaps this striving that animates Bigger's flight from the police at the end of *Native Son* when it is discovered that Bigger, deemed a pest in the anti-Black culture of 1930s Chicago, has killed a White woman. In cliché fashion, Bigger is accused of rape. Leaping from building to building, Bigger becomes the metaphorical rat of the Black urban ghetto:

> On all fours, he scrambled to the next ledge and then turned and looked back . . . From somewhere in him, out of the depths of flesh and blood and bone, he called up the energy to run and dodge with but one impulse; he had to elude these men. . . . Would it not be

[88] See, e.g., Jeremy Hobson, Do Police Need Guns?, WBUR Here & Now, June 23, 2020 (https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/23/do-police-need-guns); Scott A. Harman-Heath, The Quasi-Army Law Enforcement, Value Judgments, & the Posse Comitatus Act, 11 Cal. L. Rev. Online 367 (2020); Anta Plowden, Note, Bringing Balance to the Force: The Militarization of America's Police Force and its Consequences, 71 U. Miami L. Rev. 281 (2016).

[89] See, e.g., Jocelyn Simonson, Police Reform Through a Power Lens, 130 Yale L.J. 778 (2021); Megan Quattlebaum & Tom Tyler, Beyond the Law: An Agenda for Policing Reform, 100 B.U. L. Rev. 1017 (2020); Monica C. Bell, Police Reform and the Dismantling of Legal Estrangement, 126 Yale L.J. 2054 (2017).

[90] See, e.g., Nir Mualam & Debora Sotto, From Progressive Property to Progressive Cities: Can Socially Sustainable Interpretations of Property Contribute Toward Just and Inclusive City-Planning? Global Lessons, 12 Sustainability 4472 (2020); Gregory S. Alexander et al., A Statement of Progressive Property, 94 Cornell L. Rev. 743 (2009); Johan Colding et al., Urban Green Commons: Insights on Urban Common Property Systems, 23 Global Envtl. Change 1039 (2013).

[91] Bennett, supra note 24, at 49.

[92] Id. at 49-50; see also Lambert, supra note 25, at 76 (explaining, "the rat, another prominent animal in the novel, is also of central importance, acting as a symbol for both the impoverished conditions and potential transgressive abilities (moving across boundaries) of African Americans living in cities").

> better to stop, stand up, and lift his hands high above his head in surrender? Hell, naw! He continued to crawl.[93]

In these final pages of *Native Son*, we see a frantic "striving toward nowhere" that is, at once, a bold striving for "an elsewhere," a world away from the unjust rule of law that deems Bigger a pest to be ridden from the urban terrain, a striving toward freedom.[94] At the end of the novel, Bigger finds himself behind bars awaiting execution with a "faint, wry, bitter smile," and an unsettling realization: "What I killed for must've been good!"[95] Of course, the reader knows by this point how Bigger killed the White woman. It was not rape. Rather, as the Dalton family's hired driver, Bigger had driven their daughter Mary throughout Washington Park while she drank rum in the back seat with her Communist boyfriend Jan. Mary, we learn, is a rebel. And Bigger fears that she will be the cause of his unemployment if he is not careful. Yet, at the end of the night, when Bigger carries Mary's drunken body into her bedroom, he cannot resist the temptation to kiss her, a forbidden act for a Black man during that era. When Mary's blind mother emerges at the bedroom door, Bigger is overcome with fear at being discovered in a White woman's bedroom and presses a pillow against Mary's face to silence her, hoping to escape undetected. Once Mrs. Dalton has left the room, convinced her daughter is fast asleep, Bigger realizes that he has suffocated Mary and, in desperation, decides to burn her body in the house's basement furnace to hide the evidence of his transgression.

I wonder now if my grandmother came to a similar conclusion while killing the rats in our kitchen. I wonder if during those silent moments above the toilet, with a faint, wry, and bitter smile—while bidding our pests farewell; while paying tribute to their determination, their relentlessness, their insurgency, their contradictions—Granny decided that burning the body was the only way to escape the futility of her predicament, to forge a new vision of Black futurity with old technologies of extermination. I wonder if the final screams of the rat as she burned the body gave her hope, knowing that she too—even as New York City presented her with obstacle after obstacle as a Black immigrant woman—would fight until the very end, would run toward an "elsewhere" until the American Dream made sense for a woman like her. I wonder if in burning the body she concluded, *What I killed for must've been good.*

In *Notes of a Native Son,* James Baldwin famously criticized the resolution of Richard Wright's novel for what he perceived to be its stereotypical portrayal of African Americans and its failure to imagine new solutions to the problems that persist in Black urban ghettos.[96]

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[93] Wright, supra note 37, at 264-65.

[94] Bennett, supra note 24, at 54.

[95] Wright, supra note 37, at 429.

[96] Ayana Mathis & Pankaj Mishra, James Baldwin Denounced Richard Wright's "Native Son" As a "Protest Novel." Was He Right?, N.Y. Times, Feb. 24, 2015 ("Its failure, he wrote, lay in 'its insistence that it is . . . categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.'"); but see Lambert, supra note 25, at 88 (arguing that the text "force[s] us to examine often unquestioned beliefs and assumptions regarding what constitutes race, equality, humanness, and, animality").

But, perhaps that was the point. Perhaps by setting the stage, Wright sought to introduce us to the apocalypse of the everyday in urban America, a bending of time and space where we might discover how to write new futures by closely reading our past. I hope that one day we write a new ending to the ongoing quest of the urban poor to survive America. An ending that might celebrate new visions of thriving, a world where satisfying our cravings for sweet American opportunities does not require so much violence along the way. I hope we also come to see the parallels between urban and rural poverty; the commonalities between urban dwellers and the coal miners of West Virginia, the spirit that binds the iron workers in the rust belt and others across America whom capitalism has left behind.

Until then, as grim as it sounds, I am glad for memories of burning mice in the bathroom, for the haunting sound of pests crying in their final moments, for the struggle to preserve goodies in the sweets closet while honoring the dignity of rodents with sticky traps before flushing them into the darkness below, for every rat killed. These scars remain on my hands. But keloids are also beautiful reminders. Hope can emerge from immense pain and inevitable loss. Hope that one day, we might all become free, and "let America be America again."[97]

[97] Langston Hughes, The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes 189 (Arnold Rampersad & David Roessel eds., 1995).