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A Loss of Innocence: Shifting Imaginaries of the Twin Cities in the 1970's

Rob Granfelt

The experience of urban space in the United States has long been dichotomous along racial lines. For many white Americans, the city is a place of excitement, luxury, and opportunity, creating a powerful and romantic, yet exclusive and skewed imaginary of urban space. The Twin Cities have acted as a place of social congregation, the promotion of goods, and the exchange of ideas since the mid-1850's, boasting solid innovation, a strong economy, safe neighborhoods, and a quality life for residents. Due to these factors, a largely white imaginary was constructed in relation to Minneapolis & Saint Paul as desirable urban spaces for white individuals to set their roots and raise families. That being said, the romantic view of the Twin Cities city began to shift in the 1970's due to heightened racial tensions, crime & drug use, and shifting attitudes about industrial work & suburbanization. Through an analysis of events, policies, and texts from the decade, it becomes evident that a strong stigmatization developed around the white idea of urban space in the Twin Cities in the 1970's. Racialized prejudice, fear, and tension played a key role in the events, policies, and literature that promoted a shift towards the devaluation of urban life.

As I will show, a critical analysis of the various pathologizations of urban life in the 1970's can provide individuals with a critical understanding of the social geography of the Twin Cities. I derive my findings from archival research at the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), in the spring of 2013. Arguably the most telling aspect of this investigative research was the incredible lack of sources available from non-white perspectives. Police reports, mainstream newspaper articles, and city data were all readily available; however, first hand sources from the black community were nearly impossible to locate. This paper deals with the Black Panther Party, a black activist organization founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton. An often controversial and biased history is told of

the organization, omitting their instrumental role in the Black Power Movement and community-based initiatives such as free food, clothing and medical attention. Despite hours of searching at the MHS, I was unable to find first hand accounts from the Black Panthers.

Safety is a primary characteristic of a romanticized white imaginary of urban space. In this imaginary, cities are to offer ample opportunities and accessibility to amenities such as entertainment and commerce, while still providing a safe space to raise families. On the night of May 22 of 1970, a significant event occurred in West Saint Paul that would spark a shift from this romanticized idea of urban space. Just after midnight, a woman phoned St. Paul's police department to request transportation to the hospital for her sister, who was in labor. Two young patrolmen, Glen Kothe and James Sackett, drove to the Summit-University neighborhood to pick her up. When they reached the front door, a shot rang out, and Sackett fell, assassinated by a sniper (Swanson). The murder dominated news headlines the following morning, instilling fear in the local community. The *Star Tribune* perpetuated this fear by publishing a front page article laden with implicit messages such as "Police officials called the death of James Sackett, 27, father of four small children, including a son born three weeks ago, deliberate, cold blooded murder" (Presby). This tangential addition of the young family that Officer Sackett left behind, and the phrase "cold blooded murder" evokes fear mongering—readers reconsidered their urban location to increase the safety of their family. The Saint Paul Police were well-respected before the murder of Officer Sackett, and had not experienced a legitimate assault of an officer for upwards of 11 years until Sackett's fateful night (Corcoran). Sackett's murder was the beginning of a string of violent events in the early 1970's that would continue to restructure the white imaginary about the Twin Cities.

Officer Joseph Corcoran was promoted to Sergeant of Saint Paul Police within days of the Sackett murder and was immediately placed on the case. Despite this, the murder remained unsolved until 2006, when the Black Panther Party was connected to the death of Sackett (Corcoran). Deteriorating ideas of safety and shifting attitudes towards urban life in the 1970's were addressed in an oral interview with Corcoran from 2008. Corcoran explicitly touches upon the role of the Black Panther Party in the Twin Cities, and the role that their presence added to the stigmatization of urban space. For example, the Black Panthers attempted numerous bombings in the Twin Cities. According to Corcoran, "we had a lot of bombing incidents take place. And the department wasn't prepared for the bombs, because we had nobody trained" (Corcoran). The perception of lawlessness spurred by the murder of Sackett was furthered by the Saint Paul Police's inability to combat Black Panther bombings in the city. The white imaginary of safety in urban space is closely tied to a policing service committed to protecting individuals (in this case white) from dangers that may arise (in this case black activism). When addressing the violence and racial tension in the Twin Cities, Corcoran states,

Back in the 1970's, it was very difficult to be a police officer... What these Black Panthers would do, is they would set up a bomb in one location, have it go off, and they knew the police would send the squads there to the scene. Then they would pull a bank robbery in another part of town. (Corcoran)

The police department's protective role in the city was questioned when it was unable to stifle Black Panther agendas. The city was then seen as an increasingly dangerous space for white people, perpetuating fears that would push incentives for suburbanization and consequentially increase segregation and racial disparities. In the wake of Officer Sackett's murder and Black Panther activities that followed, the Twin Cities became characterized as a hazardous geographic space.

Another monumental instance of urban violence occurred in April of 1971, when a downtown Saint Paul corner store was robbed at gunpoint. This robbery received high-profile publicity in subsequent weeks, leading to dialogue surrounding city-wide gun regulations. In June of the following year, Saint Paul passed a policy that strictly regulated gun purchases within the city (Star Tribune). Strict gun regulations were not seen as a necessity until these occurrences of gun violence. Such policies reinforced the racialized fears of city residents, leading to concrete changes in the functions of urban space. The call for reinforced gun regulation highlighted the police force's inability to protect residents of the Twin Cities in the 1970's, threatening the white imaginary of urban space.

White flight became an increasingly common response to this threat, as is evident in the 1980 census, which documented extreme population growth of Twin Cities suburbs during the 1970's. For example, Anoka County saw a 26% population increase in the decade, while Sherburne County saw a dramatic 63% increase (1980 Census). Concurrently, the urban counties of Ramsey and Hennepin saw decreases in population percentages for the first time in decades. I believe that these statistics are non-coincidental in light of white individual fears that brewed in the 1970's.

Migration from the cities was not only due to families suburbanizing, but also through corporate movement and divestment. City construction management records of 1974 show correlations between 17 different counties in the Twin Cities and the relocations of various industrial firms. In this year, a total of 33 firms moved—16 of which were moving from either Saint Paul or Minneapolis. (State of MN) The next largest number of relocations out of a county was a miniscule three. Unsurprisingly, the largest increases in firm relocation were suburban areas surrounding the Twin Cities. Thus, following the suburbanization of families, suburbs became seen as more desirable spaces for business due to the

safety and convenience of not having to enter the Cities. This divestment in urban space furthered sentiments about the undesirability of the cities, given the migrations of white individuals and business corporations to suburban locations..

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith produced an essential text to understanding the ideas of urban space of the 1970's. His work, *The Affluent Society*, was published in 1958, and outlined his ideas of the New Class—a class of people who benefitted from intellectual work, reduced manual labor, and a sense of identity through their employment. Although published in the late 1950's, the New Class occupied a prominent place in society in the 1970's, making Galbraith's sentiments relevant to the decade's narratives on class—which is inextricably connected to race. While this text was instrumental in promoting the New Class, it produced a subtle but critical shift in perceptions around physical & industrial labor- which had previously made up a significant portion of city labor. As Galbraith states, “the industrial scene [contains] the dreariest and most burdensome tasks, require as they do a minimum of thought and skill” (Galbraith). Although Galbraith's text was not focused on shaming industrial labor within urban space, sentiments such as these inevitably resulted in stigma. Although once seen as respectable, blue-collar urban labor became seen as increasingly undesirable in the 1970's. This workforce was made up largely of minorities, especially African Americans, once again adding to the racial pathologization of urban space. The aforementioned statistics on industrial firm migrations and further suburbanization work in conjunction with the academic critique of urban work courtesy of Galbraith.

These workings depleted the city's value to all new record lows in the 1970's. Specifically, from 1972-1974, nearly every building project within the Twin Cities metropolitan area lost considerable amounts of value. The numbers themselves expose the mammoth shift in geographic value in comparing the city and the suburbs. Single family home value in the Twin Cities dropped 18.3%,

commercial space value dropped 36.7%, and multi-family home value dropped a dramatic 65.2% between 1972-1974. (Housing Finance Industry) These statistics display compelling new imaginaries surrounding the Twin Cities, reveal numerous migrations from from undesirable to more desirable to residential areas.

It is important to note that a simultaneously similar shift in the imaginary of urban space was occurring throughout the country, as is seen through Lizzie Borden's film *Born in Flames*. Released in 1983, much of the writing and filming took place in the 1970's. The film is set in a ravaged New York City that has been ridden of effective governmental influence, law-enforcement, and is consumed by inequality, racism, drugs, & violence. The film follows the work of The Women's Army, which is a sort of militia in response to the city's reality as a dangerous and uncontrolled space. At the end of the film, the Women's Army sets off a bomb in New York City—striking a considerable resemblance to much of the Black Panther activity in the Twin Cities. Although the film is fictional, similarities between *Born in Flames* and the realities of the Twin Cities in the 1970's are bound by the shared identity crisis that white America was having in relation to urban space.

Even in the wake of the 1970's, the shift in urban imaginaries that took place in the decade is remembered. For example, an online forum thread exists solely dedicated to “memories of the gritty Minneapolis/Saint Paul downtowns in the 1970's”. (City-Data) Memories such as “this hotel on 9th and Hennepin was crazy, it was turned into room for rent type of place... Everyone grew weed and it was very odd. Prostitutes walked up and down in front”. (City-Data) Another memory recalls, Being in Moby Dick's and seeing the scumbag owner saunter by, with a young blonde man on a leash, in leather S&M garb. Another time, the police raided Moby Dick's for drugs, and... dozens of bags of cocaine,

pot, pills, & needles scattered over
the floor. (City-Data)

In this quote, images of increasing drug organizing and apparently divergent sexualities remember a Minneapolis/Saint Paul that was unregulated, uncontrolled, and unruly. Sights of prostitutes walking through the downtown streets and casual S&M garb furthered the idea of the cities as unruly and immoral.

As has been shown, the shifting imaginary of urban space in the Twin Cities was initially generated through the murder of Officer Sackett, and furthered through the increasing violence in the Cities. This led to movement away from the Twin Cities through suburbanization, relocation of corporations, and a general lifestyle switch by much of the white population. All of these workings culminated in both a severe ideological shift, as well as monetary plummet in the value of the Twin Cities in the 1970's, leaving the urban population, largely black, to deal with the divestments. In 2015, we can still see remnants of the 1970's - housing segregation, maintained corporate divestment, and a fear of certain urban spaces and neighborhoods. This history becomes increasingly important to us in a time laden with issues of race along geographic lines such as extreme segregation, wealth and resource disparity, and police brutality. It can provide us with an understanding of the events that led to the shifting imaginary of the Twin Cities as it developed then, and continues to evolve and manifest today.

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