In his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, “Is not segregation an existential expression of man’s tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness?” Unexpected lines of connection run between T. S. Eliot and King’s revered letter. As a celebrated Christian poet, Eliot was indelibly associated with the language of estrangement and sinfulness. Drawing on Eliot’s cultural authority, King quoted from Murder in the Cathedral, addressing his audience of white clergymen in words they would recognize. Yet a connection also runs the other way: King’s remarks about segregation as an expression of “man’s tragic separation” reveal something about the sources of Eliot’s own estrangement.

Like King, the poet grew up in a segregated Southern city, albeit on the opposite side of the color line. Eliot began describing urban alienation, to become his quintessential theme as a poet, in his earliest notebook poems. Along with transnational features of urban modernity such as crowded streets and industrial pollution, St. Louis also manifested a specifically American form of estrangement, that of racial segregation. From the Compromise that admitted Missouri to the Union as a slave state and the Dred Scott decision that inflamed antislavery sentiment, to the Ferguson riots that led to Black Lives Matter demonstrations across the country in 2014, this border state has served as a flashpoint for national racial conflict, and its history “almost caricatures race relations in the United States.” When Eliot was eight, Plessy v. Ferguson affirmed the legality of segregation, and during his childhood, Jim Crow significantly changed

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1 King, Why We Can’t Wait, 83.
2 “As T. S. Eliot has said: ‘The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.’” King, 94.
St. Louis, restricting the relationships of white and black inhabitants and making the city a destination for refugees of racial violence in the South. The neighborhood of the Eliot family home was in the process of a contested transition from majority white to predominantly black in the early years of the twentieth century. The color line was an integral part of his most formative years.

The association between Eliot and alienation has long been a critical cliché, to the point that this term is often defined in a literary context by reference to his work, especially *The Waste Land*. But because of the idea—propagated in part by Eliot himself, in concert with the spread of existentialism in the middle of the twentieth century—that alienation is a pervasive human condition, we have not examined the local context of social alienation in his earliest experiences. Then, too, Eliot is thought of often as an English poet, or a citizen of the world, not a poet of Missouri. But as W. E. B. DuBois wrote when Eliot was twelve, “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line,” and it may be that his poetry spoke so urgently to his generation and those coming afterwards because he expressed, without clearly identifying the causes of, an underlying malaise of American life.

The influence of African American culture on Eliot is well known through Michael North’s analysis of Eliot’s “racial masquerade” and David Chinitz’s examination of Eliot’s canny use of ragtime and jazz to shape his poetic identity and enrich his style. Their observations of Eliot’s identification with the figure of the blackface minstrel marked an important engagement between traditional modernist studies and the critical conversation about

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6 North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 77. Chinitz explored the poet’s appreciation for popular music, specifically linking Eliot’s poetics with the hallmark syncopation of ragtime and jazz that could be heard just a block away in the city’s entertainment district (T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide, 39-40). More recently, Steven Tracy has included Eliot in his survey of the “bluing of American literature” (Tracy, *Hot Music*, 170 ff).
the contributions of African American culture to American literature. More recently, critics have noted the similarity between Eliot’s themes and those of the Harlem Renaissance, as in the introduction to African American modernism in the *Cambridge History of African American Literature.* It requires only one further step to connect Eliot’s experience of segregation with that of African American writers of the early twentieth century, such as Hubert Harrison and Fenton Johnson, who articulated the racial alienation and social fragmentation of the new Jim Crow regime. In *The African American Roots of Modernism,* James Smethurst has observed that Jim Crow and the “territorial racialization” of cities in the early twentieth century gave Americans “new ways of thinking about, making sense of, figuring, coherently experiencing, and temporarily bridging the various sorts of profound divisions or senses of alienation that famously attended U. S. society after the industrial revolution.” It is not absurd to think that Eliot’s poetry also grew out of the “territorial racialization” of St. Louis that took place beneath his youthful eyes; that his sensibility was shaped under the regime of Jim Crow might explain, for example, Eliot’s appeal for both Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, themselves prose poets of alienation. We have not connected Eliot with segregation because his published poetry does not direct us to; however, good historical and textual evidence suggests this connection. Examining Eliot’s St. Louis context more closely reveals the extent to which his characteristic preoccupation with social separation, which readers throughout the world now associate with modernity itself, was rooted in the lived experience of racial segregation, the religious contradiction it posed, and the sensory regime it imposed.

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7 Werner, “The Foundations of African American modernism,” 242
Eliot’s 1910 notebook poem “Easter: Sensations of April” opens a window to understanding what the separation of the races in St. Louis meant for the development of his poetry.¹⁰ Focused on the memory of “a little negro girl,” this draft condenses the spatial and emotional geography of segregation in two vivid sensory recollections. This poem and its literary and philosophical sources, the writings of Eliot’s grandfather and his mother, the historical record of St. Louis, and significant resonances in his other writings both poetic and philosophical provide evidence that Eliot’s existential preoccupations with sin, separation, and alienation were rooted in the conditions of racial segregation and white flight that Eliot and his family experienced in St. Louis. Written as Eliot first became interested in Henri Bergson’s arguments against conceptual oppositions such as mind and matter, “Easter: Sensations of April” explores how sensory experience bridges the artificial divisions created by social convention, especially that of segregation, symbolized by the alley between the homes of the white speaker and his black neighbor. Though this unpublished draft is just a fleeting moment in his poetic oeuvre, its concerns lead to and invisibly inform Eliot’s philosophical explorations of color and the isolated urban flaneurs of his published verse. Placing his figures and their bleak cityscapes in St. Louis’s segregated terrain fits one further puzzle-piece into Eliot’s poetry and Eliotic modernism, illuminating not only the relevance of the color line to long-established features of “high” modernism but also the psychic cost of its maintenance even to those who benefitted from its inequities.

¹⁰ The manuscript was discovered after Eliot’s death at the New York Public Library and first published in Christopher Ricks’s edition of Inventions of the March Hare, 1994. It can also now be found in the Ricks/McCue edition of The Poems, used in this article.
Segregation in St. Louis

Though Eliot said little about his childhood, late in life he acknowledged the significance of St. Louis in the development of his imagery:

In St. Louis, my grandmother…wanted to live on in the house that my grandfather had built; my father, from filial piety, did not wish to leave the house that he had built only a few steps away; and so it came to be that we lived on in a neighbourhood which had become shabby to a degree approaching slumminess, after all our friends and acquaintances had moved further west. And in my childhood, before the days of motor cars, people who lived in town stayed in town. So it was, that for nine months of the year my scenery was almost exclusively urban, and a good deal of it seedily, drably urban at that. My urban imagery was that of St. Louis, upon which that of Paris and London have been superimposed.\textsuperscript{11}

With a remarkable self-awareness, Eliot did more than acknowledge the importance of his hometown to his poetry. His account of his childhood placed his own experience of estrangement in the context of the migration patterns that have defined the post-Civil War history of St. Louis: people who could move “further west,” did so. Each new western suburb has embodied the desire of its inhabitants to get out of “town.” They fled industrial noise and pollution, to be sure, but as the central neighborhoods became a destination for African Americans migrating north after the Civil War and again during Jim Crow, they also fled racial integration. The nation’s fourth largest city in 1900, St. Louis has been so reduced by a century of white flight (to the

\textsuperscript{11} T. S. Eliot, “The Influence of Landscape Upon the Poet,” 421
surrounding St. Louis County) that it no longer ranks even in the top fifty American cities by population, while it has the distinction of being one of our most segregated.\textsuperscript{12}

The 2600 block of Locust Street, just west of Jefferson Avenue, now resembles a ghost town, with an AT&T parking lot occupying the property where the Eliot home once stood. In 1900, however, it was a residential street of handsome three-story brick homes populated by a spectrum of households including well-to-do Anglo-American professionals and businessmen, first- and second-generation German, Swiss, and Irish immigrants, and freed slaves and their descendants, many of them Southern migrants.\textsuperscript{13} A demographic snapshot provided by the 1900 census suggests an ethnically and economically diverse community, and many neighbors may have been on friendly terms, but viewed historically, the neighborhood was in the midst of a contested transition. For the Eliots, living there meant not just a decline in the appearance of the neighborhood from fashionable to “seedy”; more fundamentally, it meant social estrangement from new neighbors and physical separation from old friends. In 1905, after their son’s graduation from Smith Academy and departure for boarding school outside Boston, his parents quickly moved to the new housing development of the Central West End, where the home they built still stands on Westminster Place. Throughout his childhood and adolescence, however, the young Eliot lived on the fringes of a neighborhood to the east that was one of the poorer, more densely populated parts of St. Louis and housed a high concentration of the city’s black population. The city’s vice district was located nearby in “Chestnut Valley” (also called “Death

\textsuperscript{12} In 2019, St. Louis City (not metro area) was at 62 in the list of American cities by population (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_cities_by_population), and losing ground. The metro area, including the politically and fiscally separate St. Louis County, ranked 21\textsuperscript{st} among American metro areas in 2017. For segregation, see Joe Holleman, “Study ranks St. Louis as one of 10 worst segregated cities,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 24, 2017; another study from 2018 calls St. Louis “hypersegregated” and ranks it twenty-first in the nation for segregation (Benton 1113).

\textsuperscript{13} The 1900 federal census provides a wealth of detail about Locust Street and surrounding blocks. I am also drawing on Christensen, Black St. Louis, especially Ch. VI: Neighborhoods 1890 to World War I.
Valley”), through an intentional policy of the city’s police force. His daily trek to Smith Academy through this district made him a passive witness to the effects of racial separation and economic inequality in the form of poverty, filthy living conditions, prostitution, drunkenness, and criminal behavior, if we are to believe the newspapers of the day. It was not St. Louis’s famed architecture that Eliot referred to in 1937 when he called the city “repulsive” and “one of the most unpleasant large towns in the world.”

Here Eliot observed the flight of his parents’ friends and the imposition of segregation, and here he learned to live by its double standard. Robert Crawford and Ronald Schuchard have connected Eliot’s lifelong sense of sin to his early reading of James Thomson’s “The City of Dreadful Night,” a poem that expressed something Eliot was already attuned to. A fuller understanding of the social conditions of his St. Louis neighborhood may explain his predisposition to feelings of guilt, shame, emotional paralysis, and isolation.

From William Greenleaf Eliot, his grandfather, Eliot’s family inherited a tradition of public service and fighting for racial justice. His mother Charlotte wrote that “no citizen of Missouri…worked harder for [the emancipation of the slaves] than Dr. Eliot.” A Unitarian minister, Greenleaf Eliot used his position as a religious and community leader to oppose and mitigate slavery as best he could. By the time of the Civil War, none of his congregation members still owned slaves. He purchased the freedom of slaves, harbored and employed a runaway slave, Archer Alexander, and assisted others to gain their freedom. His *Story of Archer*

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16 Lyndall Gordon emphasizes the moral authority of the Eliot family patriarch in the opening pages of *Eliot’s Early Years*, without mentioning his work against slavery, to which Herbert Howarth gives more attention in *Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot* (4-6).
Alexander: From Slavery to Freedom describes an idyllic morning at the Eliot homestead on Locust Street:

I was living with my family at Beaumont Place, in what was then the western suburbs of St. Louis. It was a lovely spot, containing about four acres, with a grove of forest-trees, a small but choice orchard, a vegetable-garden and lawn, with an old-fashioned one-story farmhouse upon it…. [One day] as I walked towards the Locust-street gate I stopped a moment to look at Archer with his plough, and the children at his heels…. As they came towards me, and, reaching the limit of the garden lot, the horse was turned and the plough swung round with a scientific flourish, Archer bowed, and said, "Good-morning, sir," looking as happy as freedom could make him. Then they pushed on to make another furrow, the children shouting with pure enjoyment; and with the fruit-trees in full blossom, the birds singing in the branches, it was as pretty a rural picture as one can well imagine, close to a crowded and restless city.18

Noting nearby Union troops, Greenleaf Eliot felt “satisfaction and safety” as he departed to lecture at nearby Washington University. Yet moments later, bounty hunters descended, beating and dragging off Alexander. This picture of pastoral harmony interrupted by violence and injustice captured, for the elder Eliot, the spirit of slavery in Missouri: “a brutal and barbarous social system existing among a civilized, Christian people.”19 In the next thirty years, slavery was abolished and Locust Street transformed from rural to “seedily, drably urban,” but it remained the scene of unchristian separation in the midst of civilization.

At the end of the Civil War and again after the collapse of Reconstruction, St. Louis became a major destination for African American refugees. In 1890 (when Eliot was two), St.

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Louis had the third largest urban black population in the country after New York and Baltimore, although Missouri as a whole had a low ratio of blacks to whites, compared to other former slave states. The new inhabitants found places to live in the industrialized region of the city, especially in tenements and between the backs of larger brick buildings, in wooden shacks without foundations, facing the alleyways. In this respect St. Louis was a typical Southern city, where alleys, “pestilential and dangerous,” were “the nucleus of Negro population,” according to W. E. B. DuBois. By the turn of the century, much of the black population had become concentrated around the low-lying center of the city (around the railroad tracks), up to the western border of Jefferson Avenue. “Over one-half of the black population lived within 2.3 per cent of the city’s area and in slums where the population density averaged 82.5 people per acre,” compared to the city’s average of 12.4 people per acre. The housing in these slums was desperately dilapidated; a city survey in 1906 “indicated that the entire area east of Jefferson Avenue suffered from neglect.”

No wonder, then, that the first decade of the twentieth century saw a massive shift of black occupancy across Jefferson towards Grand Avenue, ten blocks west of the Eliots’ home. By 1910, five years after his parents joined the white exodus towards the Central West End, this area contained the two city wards with the largest number of African American residents in the city. “Push factors, such as crime, disease, and degraded physical surroundings” motivated the migration of blacks, as well as the pull factors of cheaper, better housing that came on the market as whites took advantage of new tram lines to commute to homes further west. Following the

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22 Christensen, Black St. Louis, 88.
23 Christensen, Black St. Louis, 131
24 Christensen, Black St. Louis, 150.
25 Christensen, Black St. Louis, 92.
26 Meyer, As Long as They Don’t Move Next Door, 28.
initial wave of white flight during Eliot’s childhood, a tightening ring of neighborhood
improvement societies and other strategies for containing black residence culminated in a block-
by-block segregation ordinance passed in 1916, though never enforced. The 1917 race riot across
the river in East St. Louis, ignited by tensions between the all-white labor unions and
ununionized black workers, resulted in the deaths of up to 250 African Americans, left an
additional six thousand homeless, and sheds some grim light on the state of race relations here in
the early twentieth century. Although the Eliots’ block of Locust Street was an ethnic melting
pot, racial tensions also simmered there.

Restricting black residence to certain neighborhoods ultimately became the most
effective form of segregation in St. Louis, but at the turn of the century, separation of public
spaces and activities by race was the preferred strategy. With its roots in the codes noirs of
French rule and restrictions on free blacks during the antebellum period, the Jim Crow color line
enforced social distance between blacks and whites who lived in proximity to each other.27

Drawn indelibly in Southern cities like Birmingham or Atlanta, however, the color line was less
definite in St. Louis. The expansive streetcar system, desegregated since 1868, afforded
continual opportunities for interracial contact.28 Public libraries were also integrated, as were
some churches. But theaters, sports facilities, and other public amusements were segregated,
with separate sections for black and white patrons or rules for alternating days of use. A color
line also divided the city’s playgrounds and lunch counters. Many St. Louis hotels and
restaurants, swimming pools, and tennis courts were “whites only”—with a few establishments
catering to an all-black clientele, though it could be difficult for a middle class black traveler to

27 On black codes, see Bourgois, “If You’re Not Black You’re White,” 110-11.
28 Christensen, Race Relations, 133.
find a suitable place to spend the night.\textsuperscript{29} Public education for black children was established as early as the Civil War in St. Louis, partly through the leadership of William Greenleaf Eliot, and the black-only Sumner High became famed for its academic excellence.\textsuperscript{30} Finally, blacks and whites could not marry or cohabitate. St. Louis’s system of segregation was both hypocritical and inconsistent, providing many opportunities for an observant child to criticize the order of society. Moreover, separation of blacks and whites, especially children, \textit{increased} at the turn of the century, around the time that Eliot was entering his teenage years and was fully capable of noticing.\textsuperscript{31}

At this time, the Eliots’ block of Locust Street was situated on the color line, so to speak, between black and white St. Louis. It is difficult to know with certainty how aware young Tom was of racial tensions in the city, but one person who certainly shaped his thinking on this matter was his mother, Charlotte. She dedicated her 1904 biography of William Greenleaf Eliot “for my children, ‘lest they forget.’” The quotation is from Deuteronomy 6:12, “Then beware lest thou forget the Lord, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”\textsuperscript{32} Written as race relations declined into the grip of Jim Crow, Charlotte’s biography of her father-in-law emphasized his opposition to America’s “house of bondage”: the word “slave” appears on a quarter of the book’s pages and three of its thirteen chapters deal with slavery and its aftermath. She seems especially concerned to inscribe Greenleaf Eliot’s legacy as an opponent of slavery and advocate of African American rights and education, albeit a moderate in politics. In her conclusion, she states that his purpose in coming to St. Louis and remaining there was “to assist

\textsuperscript{29} Christensen, \textit{Race Relations}, 134.
\textsuperscript{30} Christensen, \textit{Race Relations}, 125.
\textsuperscript{31} Christensen, \textit{Race Relations}, 134.
\textsuperscript{32} “Lest they forget” also echoes the refrain of Rudyard Kipling’s 1897 nostalgically patriotic “Recessional,” a childhood favorite of her son’s, but the Biblical reference seems more salient to the context of Greenleaf Eliot’s life.
in founding institutions of learning, in advancing all humane objects, and in making Missouri a free State.”

In portraying her subject as a defender of the rights of the weak, especially slaves and freedmen, Charlotte Eliot seems to be calling on her children and fellow St. Louisians in a time of racial tension to remember his example. Yet as well as paying homage to Greenleaf Eliot, Charlotte was bidding him farewell. She had fulfilled her husband’s “filial duty” (to use Eliot’s words) by living on Locust Street and caring for her ageing mother-in-law, but her commitment was coming to an end. In April 1905, she wrote to the headmaster of Milton Academy, where she intended her son to attend a year of prep school: “We have lived twenty-five years on the old Eliot place, while all our friends have moved out, and Tom desires companionship of which he has been thus deprived.” The same could surely be said of herself and her husband, who would move to their new house on Westminster Place after the family’s summer holiday. Her remark suggests that the family’s sense of alienation was already conscious, if not profound, at the point of the son’s departure from St. Louis. Their alienation was double: separated by geographic distance from their social peers, they were also separated from their neighbors by the color line and by distinctions of class. In leaving “the old Eliot place,” Charlotte and Henry Ware Eliot were turning their backs on a cause that William Greenleaf had defended. He had dreamed of a garden of racial equality and human flourishing at his homestead on Locust Street, but instead, his grandson had grown up “deprived of companionship” in an industrialized cityscape where European immigrants and the refugees and victims of racial oppression struggled for existence.

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34 Eliot, *Letters* 1, 4
“Easter: Sensations of April”

In April 1910, five years after Charlotte wrote this letter, her son copied a poem into his notebook that registers isolation, racial separation, and a sense of the conflict between Christianity and the color line. Not published in his lifetime, “Easter: Sensations of April” is among the few of Eliot’s poems clearly set in St. Louis. Like his mother’s biography of William Greenleaf Eliot, the poem seems inflected by a desire to make common cause with St. Louis’s African Americans and yet a sense of resignation to the injustice of segregation. It concludes with an image of withdrawal that captures the Eliot family’s physical and social retreat from Locust Street. Eliot’s poem looks back in memory on “The little negro girl who lives across the alley,” who “Brings back a red geranium from church” and places it “on a third-floor window sill.” The speaker recalls the “perfume” of the geraniums along with “the smell of heat/From the asphalt street,” although all of this is now “Withered and dry/Long laid by/In the sweepings of the memory.”

The heat of April—as opposed to summer—and the presence of the black girl mark the memory as distinctively Missourian. Moreover, the speaker recalls the perspective of a child, who spies another child bringing a flower back from church and setting it on her windowsill. This memory becomes the occasion for a reflection on separation that is built into the poem’s setting as well as its two-part structure.

The poem is oriented around two liminal spaces that had racial significance in Eliot’s St. Louis: the alley and the window. As mentioned above, African-American families were more likely to live in residences that faced an alley than the main street, especially on majority-white blocks such as the one where Eliot grew up. The alley actually and symbolically marked the color line. Windows, too, marked the separation between white and black families, but this

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dividing line was less absolute. In a society where social contacts took place largely in person
and a climate where doors and windows often stood open, these apertures had more significance
than they do now. For example, the African American newspaper *The Palladium*—published for
three years at the turn of the century—takes a strict line on the importance of keeping your head
inside the window:

> One of the surest indications of the approach of summer is the almost inestimable number
> of heads of women of our race, seen poked out of windows. It seems as if our people
delight in sunning themselves, for the least ray of sunlight calls forth heads from every
> crack and cranny…. It is a very bad habit and one which should be remedied
> immediately.³⁷

Twenty-five years before, St. Louis’s “social evil ordinance” regulating prostitution had
prohibited women from displaying themselves at windows.³⁸ Such oddities suggest that
inhabitants of this southern city were accustomed to communicating through open windows and
that legal and social authorities attempted to police such interactions in order to enforce
prevailing racial and sexual codes of behavior. Unlike the alley in Eliot’s poem, which prevents
the speaker (as a child) from playing with his black neighbor, her open window permits some
communication from one house to the other: not conversation, but sight, sound (of her prayer),
and even scent (of her geranium). The window becomes a metaphor in the poem for the
intermediary role played by sensation. Socially, the window both permits and marks the limit of
their relation—the memory of the girl seen through the window has become an image of
separated proximity, proximate separation.

Eliot’s poem combines details drawn from St. Louis with the poetic topos of a speaker, presumably male, observing a modest young lady saying her prayers. With overtones that are somehow both romantic and ironic, Eliot’s scene recalls several poems by Jules Laforgue entitled “Dimanches,” or “Sundays.”\(^{39}\) Eliot’s reference to “Sunday school” in the last line signals this connection. Geraniums are the particular giveaway; for Eliot, “Laforgue…made it impossible for anyone else to talk about geraniums.”\(^{40}\) In “Rigours à nulle autre pareilles” (Rigors like no other), Laforgue describes a geranium dying fossilized (mourait fossile) in the pages of an album, corresponding to Eliot’s geranium “Withered and dry/ Long laid by/ In the sweepings of the memory.”\(^{41}\) For both poets, the geranium suggests something of the desirability and frailty of a young woman, who is treated with longing qualified by a slight air of superiority. Much of Laforgue’s poetry comments critically on the strict courtship rules of the French bourgeoisie, by turns captivated and frustrated by the innocence and social inaccessibility of the jeune fille. In “Easter,” Eliot evokes the memory of “a little negro girl” who stood beyond the alley and the window sill, separated from him, or rather his childhood self, by the color line. Laforgue and Eliot both measure a separation imposed by social rules: in Eliot’s case, the rules are those of racial segregation. To appreciate his choice to adapt Laforgue for his memory of an African American girl as the potential object of romantic interest, compare Eliot’s poem to one by a classmate published in the Smith Academy Record during his school years: “But no black girl will do for me,/ Nor yellow one, or red,/ No brown-faced shiny Esquimau—/I’ll take a white instead.”\(^{42}\) Eliot is not following the conventions of his peer group.

\(^{39}\) Such as *Derniers vers* IV and *Des fleurs de bonne volonté* XII (Laforgue, 301, 364).
\(^{42}\) Stayer, “Eliot as a Schoolboy,” 629
“Easter: Sensations of April” has two parts, and the division between them underscores the social separations that shadow the poet’s Easter memory. While the floral emblem of part I is the brightly colored geranium, the sign of part II is the lighter daffodil:

Daffodils
Long yellow sunlight fills
The cool secluded room
Swept and set in order…

The cool and orderly room contrasts with the “smell of heat/From the asphalt street” and view of the alley in part I. Yet, the speaker’s prevailing emotion is not “the bliss of solitude,” as Wordsworth would have it in his paean to daffodils. Rather,

The insistent sweet perfume
And the impressions it preserves
Irritate the imagination
Or the nerves.43

Order and seclusion are not what his imagination desired or desires. The empty room of part II is the image of renunciation, a privileged but lonely place to which the child is forced to withdraw. The memory of this place and its scent “irritate” his nerves because, despite its relative luxury compared to the “alley” and the “street,” the place is not a happy one.

The implied rule of separation stands in disquieting contrast to the Easter holiday commemorated by the poem. The little girl has come back from Sunday school on the most solemn day of the Christian year. Easter fell on March 27 in 1910, and Eliot inscribed this poem in his notebook shortly afterwards. Laforgue is not the only literary influence here; his mother’s

43 Eliot, *Poems*, 242
self-published “Easter Songs” of the 1890’s include “At Easter Tide,” which develops a metaphor of the soul as flower and concludes:

Thou who dost guard and safely hold
The life that now begins, unfold
The conscious life within!
There beauty infinite shall bloom,
Immortal verdue there find room,
And endless joys begin.  

Eliot’s poem shares the intertwined themes of childhood, flowers, and a “room” where “conscious life” unfolds, yet his room is a place of loneliness and irritation rather than “endless joys,” and his description of the girl’s prayer—“she repeats her little formulae of God”—is far from, and indeed seems to mock, the complacent (or perhaps forced) optimism of his mother’s poem. The sound of the girl’s prayer crosses the alley, yet Christianity does not bridge the racial and social divide. (Indeed, the speaker’s withdrawal to the orderly room doubles as an emblem of the Eliot family’s departure to their newly built Central West End home in 1905.)

Estrangement permeates Eliot’s poem at many levels: between the girl and the speaker, between the joy that Easter is supposed to inspire and the jaded disappointment that the poet experiences, between the mother’s piety and the son’s skepticism, and between the innocence of childhood and the adult’s realization of his irritated isolation. Underlying these estrangements is the stark incongruity between Christianity and racial segregation.

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45 His mother’s verse might have been on his mind in April, following a letter she wrote on April 3, saying, “I hope in your literary work you will receive early the recognition I strove for and failed” (*Letters* 1, 11).
Dickey

Eliot’s first religious poem—to the extent that it commemorates Easter—is set in St. Louis for good reason. His childhood was permeated by church-going and churches; within five blocks of his house lay not only the nearby Church of the Messiah, founded by his grandfather, but also houses of worship for Catholic, Methodist, Episcopal, Congregational, Christian Scientist, and Jewish congregations, giving the name “Piety Hill” to this area (just northwest of “Death Valley,” as if the city itself were a moral allegory). Three blocks from the Eliot home stood St. Paul’s African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest AME church west of the Mississippi and the largest African-American congregation in St. Louis. While Eliot may never have set foot in that or any other black church, his neighbors’ expressions of faith were probably not confined within church walls, as this poem suggests. Moreover, Charlotte Eliot’s biography of his grandfather is clear on the point that slavery was not consistent with Christianity. Whether or not Eliot consciously criticized the inequities of segregation, he could not have been unaware of them. His family took pride in their past defense of racial justice. Even presuming some denial about the increasingly stringent Jim Crow practices, a system of unequal segregation obviously contradicts the teachings of the New Testament (love thy neighbor as thyself; the last shall be first), which Easter calls upon the Christian to follow. Eliot’s poem does not articulate this contradiction, nor clearly express disapproval of segregation; rather, it registers discomfort with the separations and isolations that persist within a society where professions of Christian faith are conventional, even obligatory. Yet in closing, the poem also gestures towards a poetic response to estrangement: the “cool, secluded room” is a place of “imagination/Or the nerves.” If social reconciliation is not within reach, poetry’s consolations may be. Alone, the poet lifts his pen.

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46 Leffingwell and Chestnut Streets (called Lawton on that block). Gordon has suggested the possible religious influence of Eliot’s Catholic nurse, Annie Dunne (Eliot’s Early Years, 3).
In his 1929 essay *Dante*, Eliot described Dante’s *Vita Nuova* as a “sound psychological treatise on something related to what is now called ‘sublimation,’” in which the poet transformed his childhood love for Beatrice into an expression of love for God. Eliot drops numerous hints that he himself experienced such a childhood attraction: “In the first place, the type of sexual experience which Dante describes as occurring to him at the age of nine years is by no means impossible or unique”; “to me it appears obvious that the *Vita Nuova* could only have been written around a personal experience”; and “I cannot find it incredible that what has happened to others, should have happened to Dante with much greater intensity.” In a letter of 1939, Eliot humorously described his childhood propensity to fall in love. What happened to this child is speculation, but as a poet, Eliot trained himself to sublimate romantic love and erotic attraction into religious devotion. As Schuchard has observed, *Ash-Wednesday* is an expression of consciously sublimated love, as in the lines “I renounce the blessed face/ And renounce the voice.” The gesture of renunciation was well established at least as a trope in his poetry long before *Ash-Wednesday*. Before his beloved can reject him, Prufrock draws back, choosing not to speak to her, and in both “Portrait of a Lady” and “La Figlia Che Piange,” the speaker self-consciously stages a separation between himself and a woman who seems to desire closer connection. The act and feeling of separation are fundamental to some of Eliot’s most powerful poems.

The titles of “Easter” and *Ash-Wednesday*, naming holy days at the end and beginning of Lent, suggest that Eliot’s 1930 conversion poem may incorporate and revise some of the same material as “Easter,” whether consciously or not. Comparing the two poems illuminates the

49 letter to John Hayward, 27 Dec 1939, TS Kings College Cambridge
gesture of withdrawal in both. In the second section of Ash-Wednesday, Eliot’s emphasis on 
*whiteness* is notable: “Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree”; “the Lady is 
withdrawn/In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown.”\(^{51}\) The divided structure of 
“Easter: Sensations of April” dramatizes the racial meaning of withdrawal, contrasting the black 
girl and her red geranium with the secluded, light-filled room pervaded by the scent of the 
yellow daffodil. Set next to “Easter,” Ash-Wednesday’s imagery of withdrawing into whiteness 
cannot be entirely disengaged from its racial overtones, even as it echoes the *Vita Nuova.*\(^{52}\) Ash-
Wednesday converts the material of “Easter” from secular to sacred, and from interracial to 
familial. The boy’s curiosity or feeling for the “little negro girl” of his memory has been 
transformed into the adult’s adoration of an inaccessible woman in white, now addressed as 
“Sister, mother.” The girl’s common geranium has been elevated to the “Rose of memory/Rose 
of forgetfulness…The single Rose/Is now the Garden/Where all loves end.”\(^{53}\) Further, in 
“Easter,” the speaker observes the girl’s piety and her prayers, while Ash-Wednesday II is spoken 
as the poet’s prayer to the lady. One could say that in sublimating his feelings for the girl, the 
poet has also adopted her, or his mother’s, piety.

*Ash-Wednesday* marks the beginning of Eliot’s journey as an openly Christian poet, but 
the completion of a process of sublimation and/or repression of the memory of the black girl, or 
girls, whom he has succeeded in forgetting. He prays, “Let the whiteness of bones atone to 
forgetfulness.”\(^{54}\) While the girl, the social system that segregated her from him, and the city 
where they lived apart have been erased, the painful feeling of separation still gives rise to

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\(^{51}\) Eliot, *Poems* 89.


\(^{54}\) Eliot, *Poems* 89.
poetry. The speaker concludes, addressing the lady, “Suffer me not to be separated/ And let my cry come unto Thee.” Without diminishing the significance of more proximate literary, religious, and personal sources of inspiration, this reading of *Ash-Wednesday* points to its link with “Easter’s” early recollections frankly situated in a cityscape of racial difference.

**Sensation and Segregation**

Eliot’s departure from St. Louis was figurative as well as biographical, for—until a brief poetic return in “The Dry Salvages”—he expunged the “negro girl” and other direct references to the community where he grew up as surely as he overcame his Missouri “drawl.” Yet the poetic motifs, philosophical ideas, and psychological impulses that he first explored in the race-inflected setting of “Easter: Sensations of April” reverberated throughout his career. This is particularly true of the concept of *sensation*, hailed in the title of the poem. While physical space and social relationships seem indelibly divided by race in Eliot’s poem, sensory perception continually offers to bridge the gap. In spring 1910, Eliot was preparing for his year abroad in Paris by reading the philosophy of Henri Bergson. The terms “sensation” in Eliot’s title and “memory” in his closing lines are central to Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* (1896), a work that Eliot also echoed in “Prufrock” and “Rhapsody on a Windy Night.” Bergson’s book explores the relationship between matter and memory through a series of dialectic pairs—materialism and idealism, pure perception and pure memory, practical and pure memory, and body and soul. His goal, Bergson writes, is to “lessen greatly, if not to overcome, the theoretical difficulties which have always beset dualism,” by dissolving our false conceptual oppositions. Although “pure

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memory…does not in any degree share the nature of sensation,”\(^5^7\) in practice our memories continually interact with sensation: “There is no perception which is not full of memories,” Bergson writes; “with the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience.”\(^5^8\)

“Easter: Sensations of April” seems to confirm the interpenetration of sensation and memory, and thus the possibility of overcoming dualism. The poem opens in the present tense—the girl “lives” and “repeats,” and the speaker evokes sight, hearing, smell, and the feeling of heat, placing him (and us) physically at the scene. Yet in line 10, the poem suddenly turns towards the past (“Withered and dry/ Long laid by/ In the sweepings of the memory”) demonstrating the mind’s oscillation between memory and present sensation. Bergson writes: “it is from the present that comes the appeal to which memory responds, and it is from the sensori-motor elements of present action that a memory borrows the warmth which gives it life.”\(^5^9\)

Describing “the smell of heat/From the asphalt street,” a synesthesia of smell and touch, Eliot literally warms his memory with the sensation of a hot St. Louis Sunday. Treating the experience of the girl and her geraniums first as the present, then as the past, then as the present again (in the closing couplet), Eliot confirms that sensory experience (i.e. of matter) and memory are in effect the same phenomenon at different times. Thus, while on a social level the poem seems resigned to separation, it offers philosophical examples of mediation and integration that counteract the racial barrier between the speaker and the girl.

The last chapter of *Matter and Memory* argues for a universal continuity between mind and matter in terms that might resonate in unintended ways with a reader raised in a segregated

\(^5^7\) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 180.


\(^5^9\) Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 197, emphasis mine.
society. In his graduate paper “Inconsistencies in Bergson’s Idealism,” Eliot described this chapter as “a very remarkable and provocative, indeed tantalizing, piece of writing….one of the most interesting and most important parts of Bergson’s work.”

Bergson states in a central proposition, quoted by Eliot: “All division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division.”

We introduce discontinuities in nature for our own purposes, Bergson writes, “expressing the duality of [our] need and of that which must serve to satisfy it.”

Bergson’s language here is not abstract: our “need” (besoin) is for nourishment (la nutrition).

This language would have specifically racial overtones for someone whose family servants included an African American, Stephen Jones, and his wife, from a city whose black population worked as cooks, janitors, laundresses, and maids.

St. Louis exemplified the divide between those who have needs and those who serve them.

Bergson argues for unity over division: “the close solidarity which binds all the objects of the material universe… is sufficient to prove that they have not the precise limits which we attribute to them.” If separation is all in our minds, surely we can dismiss it like a bad dream: “let us…banish all preconceived ideas of interpreting or measuring, let us place ourselves face to face with immediate reality: at once we find that there is no impassable barrier, no essential difference, no real distinction even, between perception and the thing perceived,” he proclaims.

In “Easter: Sensations of April,” the poet perceives, and the girl, with her innocent geraniums, is perceived, facing each other across a space that defines their separation. Bergson deplores this space: “perception and matter…approach each other in the measure that we divest ourselves of

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60 Eliot, Prose 1, 75.
61 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 259; Eliot, Prose 1, 76.
62 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 261.
63 Bergson, Matière et Memoire, 222.
64 Crawford, Young Eliot, 20-21.
65 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 278.
66 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 291.
what may be called the prejudices of action…. homogeneous space, which stood between the
two terms like an insurmountable barrier, is then seen to have no other reality than that of a
diagram or a symbol.”67 Space is the alley that stands between the poet and the girl “like an
insurmountable barrier,” but if we can divest ourselves of “the prejudices of action,” Bergson
suggests we could dismiss this barrier as a figment of our imaginations. Bergson’s language of
need and service, barriers, prejudice, and essential difference are uncannily appropriate to the
social situation evoked in Eliot’s poem. And, if he was thinking of Bergson when he wrote
“Easter,” Eliot could well have been thinking of “Easter” when he wrote about Bergson.

Reading *Matter and Memory* alongside “Easter: Sensations of April” dramatizes the
relationship between *space* and *sensation*. According to Bergson, sensation really shows us that
matter, laid out in space, is continuous, though for convenience we believe in divisions between
ourselves and others. In Eliot’s poem, sensation bridges the gap between the speaker and the girl.
First he sees her, then hears her prayer, then smells the perfume of her geraniums, along with the
heat of the street. In this sensory inventory, the senses are ordered by the distance required to
experience each one—vision being the most distant and olfaction the nearest. The simple
interaction described in the poem offers a kind of philosophical counterargument to racial
segregation: though separated by social convention, we are always connected to one another by
sensation. Touch, to be sure, is absent, and I will return to this significant omission below.

“Easter” is as much a meditation on the metaphysics of sensation as it is a reminiscence
of his St. Louis childhood. In spring 1914, when completing his graduate coursework in
philosophy, Eliot continued the conversation about sensation, now without reference to race, St.
Louis, or Bergson, along similar lines as his poem from 1910: “sensation is an intermediary

67 Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 293. In “Inconsistencies in Bergson’s Idealism,” Eliot wrote, “Bergson has thrown
space overboard entirely” (*Prose* 1, 71).
between subject and object and inseparable from both,” noted his classmate J. R. Costello on a
day when Eliot was presenting a paper in class. “Color is a relation between myself and object
but not separate, and makes up both. Can’t be separated from both.”68 Eliot reworked this paper
as he wrote his dissertation in England during 1914-15, exploring how sensation, especially of
color, mediates between subject and object.69 This exploration was fertilized by his encounter
with Bertrand Russell, whose *Problems of Philosophy* (1912) proposes that “sense-data” (such as
“colours, sounds, smells, hardnernesses, roughnesses”) are neither the subject’s experience of a
thing nor the object itself, but hover somewhere in between.70 Even granting Russell’s influence
on Eliot’s examples, it is remarkable that his dissertation contains such sentences as “My
existence is dependent upon my experience of red in the flower, and the existence of the flower
is dependent upon its unity in feeling (as red) with me.”71 The red flower persisted in his
imagination as a figure for the possibility of connection between “awareness and awared,” self
and other.72 Finally, just as with the language of prejudice, barriers, and division, the very word
“color” had a significance in the American vocabulary of the early twentieth century that readers
may be more likely to overlook now: “colored” named the racial other and appeared on signs
prohibiting or allowing entry to African Americans. It was thus impossible for a Southern-bred
American to discuss visual perception *at all* without a consciousness of racial discourse.73 Eliot’s
philosophy thus echoes with the unresolved questions posed by the arbitrary separations of his

69 In *Chromographia*, Nicholas Gaskill uncovers the fascinating history of color perception in the nineteenth and
early twentieth centuries, as theories of a separate “color sense” attempted to answer the question of whether color
inhered in objects or was found in the perceiver’s mind (29). These discussions were intimately connected with
American racial discourse.
71 Eliot, *Prose* 1, 255.
72 Ibid.
73 In *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, Mark Smith has examined the sensory construction
of American racial segregation.
St. Louis childhood, even dwelling on the floral imagery that seemed to promise reconciliation—from the flowering fruit trees of his grandfather’s farm to the Easter geranium of his poem.74

“Easter” is not Eliot’s only early poem in which the senses bridge the space from a presumably white speaker to a black figure. Another notebook poem, “The smoke that gathers blue and sinks,” describes a scene in a nightclub, perhaps in Paris, where Eliot was when he wrote it in February 1911, and where ragtime music and musicians had been popular since 1900.75 The poem consists in a sensory inventory, beginning with the more physical senses of smell (“the torpid smoke of rich cigars”) and taste (“torpid after-dinner drinks”). These drag the speaker downward towards the condition of “matter ‘going by itself,’/ Existence just about to die.”76 The sensation of becoming matter evokes Bergson, again, whose lectures Eliot had been attending in Paris. The speaker describes himself as “overoiled machinery,” like Bergson’s “conscious automaton” who dwells in the sensory present and experiences the past only as “motor memory.”77 After a stanza break, the sensory inventory moves through hearing (“The piano and the flute and two violins”) and sight (“A lady of almost any age/ But chiefly breast and rings”), concluding with a vision of an African American dancer who stirs the speaker to life: “Here’s a negro (teeth and smile) / Has a dance that’s quite worth while.”78 In admittedly cringe-worthy language, Eliot places the figure of the dancer at the top of a ladder of sensation, associated with art and life as against matter and death. The speaker figuratively stretches his arms to the dancer (“Throw your arms around me—Aint you glad you found me” quotes the

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74 In addition, see “Eliot’s Floral Magazine: A Journal of Floriculture. St. Louis, MO., Feb., 1899,” held in the Houghton Library, Harvard. Crawford has suggested that Eliot may have picked up his floral theme from the adventure novels of Captain Mayne Reid (Crawford, Young Eliot, 53). In Reid’s The Quadroon, an 1856 abolitionist novel set on the Mississippi, a Frenchman attempts to court and marry an enslaved mixed-race woman, their romance embellished with colorful descriptions of flowers and other plants.
75 Caddy, “Parisian Cake Walks,” 289; Blake, Le Tumulte noir, 15.
76 Eliot, Poems, 258.
77 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 201.
78 Eliot, Poems, 259.
poem from Harry von Tilzer’s “The Cubanola Glide”), perhaps feeling a special kinship based on memories of music in St. Louis, where the center of ragtime was located just a few blocks from Locust Street.79

As in “Easter,” the speaker of “The smoke that gathers blue” moves through an inventory of sensory perceptions towards an African American figure as if seeking connection, though meaningful interaction is indefinitely postponed beyond the frame of the poem. Written a year after “Easter,” this draft shares the earlier poem’s preoccupation with sensation as a racial bridge, but now aided by a cultural mediation: music and dance by African American performers. In contrast to the raw separation between the speaker and the girl across a city alleyway, the relationship between speaker and dancer here is defined and choreographed by their shared enjoyment of a song by a Polish composer utilizing the rhythms and harmonies of African American ragtime. Eliot’s future engagements with blackness will take place, like this one, via mediated references to African American culture, such as his allusion to the Shakespearian Rag and his adoption of race-marked dialect in his private correspondence with Pound. Meanwhile, his personal experience of segregation leads to and disappears into his philosophical examination of “color” and the epistemological question of how one consciousness or “finite centre” can encounter another.

Yet the pain of isolation and gestures of separation, renunciation, and sublimation came to define his speakers, who wander the modern city, subject to unspecified forces of alienation beyond their control. Segregation marks their state of mind and the path they take, but those from whom they are segregated have become invisible. This paradox is most evident in Eliot’s quintessential urban flaneur, J. Alfred Prufrock. The name of Prufrock originated in the name of

79 Chinitz, Cultural Divide, 39.
a local family who owned a furniture store in downtown St. Louis and whose daughters attended the Mary Institute next door to Eliot’s house. But “Prufrock” has become synonymous with a young man’s helpless alienation from society as he wanders the streets of a polluted city and fails to establish meaningful contact with women. This existential condition may well have a specific historical and racial cause, which I will just sketch here in closing.

**Prufrock in Death Valley**

In St. Louis, racial segregation coincided with a conscious policy of restricting vice to predominantly black districts. It is thus impossible to disentangle the psychic impact of racial segregation from that of living near brothels and the center of an epidemic of venereal disease that ravaged Eliot’s neighborhood and imposed its own sensory regime. As a frontier city that catered to riverboat men and settlers, nineteenth-century St. Louis had a substantial red-light district whose location also shifted west over time. In 1872, St. Louis was the first city in the United States to legalize prostitution, in an attempt to control the spread of venereal disease. Eliot’s grandfather led a successful campaign to repeal what he considered an immoral law. In 1888, the year of T. S. Eliot’s birth, a U.S. Department of Labor report based on interviews of working women in twenty-two major American cities judged that “The moral conditions [in St. Louis] are generally of a lower standard than is found in many other cities.” St. Louis newspapers at the turn of the century record an ongoing civic dispute about where to confine the

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80 See, for example, “At Germania Theater: Mary Institute Graduates Receive Their Parting Testimonials,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 14, 1895, 3. Web: Proquest Historical Newspapers.

81 I have explored this topic in greater detail in “My Madness Singing: The Specter of Syphilis in *Prufrock and Other Observations*,” with Bradford Barnhardt, *T. S. Eliot Studies Annual* 2 (2018), pp. 3-23. The following paragraphs draw on that article, by gracious permission of the *Annual*.


sex trade, with most of the proposed neighborhoods lying within ten blocks of the Eliot home.\textsuperscript{84}

By 1900, when Eliot was a highly observant twelve-year-old, Jefferson Avenue from Market Street to Washington Avenue—running directly by the bottom of his block of Locust Street—was described by one newspaper as “the pest hole of St. Louis…where there are 12 saloons within a stone’s throw.”\textsuperscript{85} This was the western edge of “Death Valley,” the most dangerous and vice-ridden neighborhood of the city, which ran from Market to Washington and extended down to 19\textsuperscript{th} Street in the east.\textsuperscript{86} As a high school student, Eliot either walked or took the streetcar through this neighborhood every day on his way to and from Smith Academy (at the corner of Washington and 19\textsuperscript{th}), presumably without a chaperone.

The co-location of the city’s red-light district and the greatest density of African-American residents was no coincidence. When arguing against the proposed segregation statute in 1913, a group of civic leaders of both races stated, “It is significant that all three of the … vice districts are surrounded by negroes. This is due, not to the negroes’ preference to live near vice districts, but to the fact, first, that the police located these vice districts in negro neighborhoods.”\textsuperscript{87} This practice was common in Jim Crow America; “the segregation of the Negro quarter is only a segregation from respectable white people,” wrote the Progressive activist Sophonisba Breckinridge about Chicago.\textsuperscript{88} Perversely, the justification for segregation often rested on the excuse of preventing the spread of behaviors that police had originally directed to predominantly black neighborhoods. The rules of racial segregation merged, no doubt imperceptibly, with moral disappprobation for the drinking and prostitution tolerated in Death

\textsuperscript{84} St. Louis Republic, January 16, 1902, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{85} St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 28, 1903, p. A1B
\textsuperscript{86} The borders of Death Valley are delineated in a 1903 St. Louis Post-Dispatch article: “bounded by Washington avenue on the north, Market street on the south, Nineteenth street on the east and Twenty-third street on the west” (May 17, 1903, p. 1).
\textsuperscript{87} The Legal Segregation of Negroes in St. Louis, 1.
Valley. And prostitutes, many black, were stigmatized both by racial prejudice and fear of the transmission of venereal disease.

Syphilis posed “a health problem of enormous dimensions” at the turn of the century. As an incurable disease that resulted in debilitating pain, loss of mobility, and ultimately madness, it was justly feared. St. Louis newspapers at the turn of the century carried many references to “blood disease” and “blood poison,” euphemisms for syphilis. Medical estimates of the rates of infection among American prostitutes were as high as fifty percent, and one medical researcher proposed in 1895 that one out of twenty American men were infected. At a time when the disease was not well understood and no cure was possible, fright-induced abstinence was considered the only effective public health campaign against syphilis. The 1890s were the “golden age of the venereal peril,” a peak of feverish public discourse about the dangers of syphilis and gonorrhea. A literature of “anti-syphilitic prophylaxis” aimed to terrify young men by representing the debilitating effects of syphilis (including such favorites of Eliot as The Picture of Dorian Gray and Bubu de Montparnasse). Even progressive medical doctors held that venereal disease was a punishment for immorality, a view shared by Eliot’s father. It is no wonder that Eliot complained to Conrad Aiken of “nervous sexual attacks” that goaded him to walk the streets but prevented him from “disposing of his virginity” “whenever opportunity approaches.” Eliot was not alone in suffering these “nervous sexual attacks.” The public health

89 Brandt, No Magic Bullet, 13.
90 See, e.g., Allan McLaughlin, A State-Wide Plan for the Prevention of Venereal Disease (United States Public Health Service, 1918; reprint no. 455): “A Few Facts About Syphilis...I. Syphilis, also known as “pox,” “blood disease,” etc., is a serious contagious disease, slowly acting, which may affect all parts of the body” (14). For “blood poison,” see Parascandola, 81. In just the St. Louis Republic, “blood disease” appears over 500 times from 1895 to 1905, and “blood poison” over 3000 times between 1900 and 1905.
91 Sanger, The History of Prostitution, 686.
92 Showalter, Sexual Anarchy, 188.
93 Showalter, “Syphilis,” 92; Eliot, Letters 1, 41.
94 Eliot, Letters 1, 82.
campaign worked all too well, and fear of syphilis became a common diagnosis at the turn of the century: “The horrors of syphilis pale into insignificance compared with those of syphilophobia, as this condition is called. It assumes every variety of hysteria and neurasthenia.”

References to venereal disease linger in the margins of Eliot’s oeuvre, and his early verse is especially syphilophobic. “Preludes” draws on a scene in *Bubu de Montparnasse* in which Berthe, a prostitute, discovers that she has contracted syphilis, and suggestions of contagion by hands, thumbs, and fingers radiate throughout the poem from her “soiled hands” “clasping yellow soles of feet” (with physical and moral infection implied in the sole/soul pun). Set in a red-light district where a streetwalker in a “torn and stained” dress “hesitates towards you in the light of the door,” “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” features a syphilitic moon (the projection of the speaker’s fears) who displays the telltale symptoms of memory loss and (in Eliot’s original text) “hideous scars from a washed-out pox.” This moon causes the speaker to recall “smells of chestnuts in the streets/And female smells in shuttered rooms…And cocktail smells in bars,” a barely concealed reference to the “gentlemen’s rooms” for hire in saloons on St. Louis’s Chestnut Street. The floral emblem of “Rhapsody” is the madman’s “dead geranium,” a memento mori casting the innocent attraction of “Easter: Sensations of April” in a darker light.

A young man torn by feelings of dread and guilt, Prufrock is perhaps Eliot’s most syphilophobic figure. He yearns for contact with women, yet a pathological fear of them paralyzes him. Imagining himself as a medical patient, sensitive about his premature hair loss

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96 Maud Ellmann, for example, refers to the “syphilitic Jew” in “Gerontion” (“The Imaginary Jew,” 85), and the Bolo poems are laced with references to venereal disease, such as the “Jersey Lilies/A bold and hardy set of blacks/Undaunted by syphilis” (*Poems*, 272) and “‘We’ll see if there’s a doctor here/ Can cure the whistling cancers’” (*Poems*, 272).
(another well-known symptom of the disease), and afraid of women, Prufrock wanders into the red-light district of his city. Almost every detail of the excised “Pervigilium” section concerns prostitutes and venereal disease, such as women “spilling out of corsets” as they stand idly in entries and Prufrock’s hysterical visions of “my Madness…A blind old drunken man…With broken boot heels stained in many gutters” (his stained heels echoing the prostitute’s “yellow soles” in “Preludes”). Leading up to this scene, a sensory inventory in the second stanza emphasizes touch, including “peeling oranges,” “reading evening newspapers,” “smoking cigarettes,” and finally “evil houses” pointing a “ribald finger” at him and chuckling in the darkness. The world falls apart when Prufrock violates social and sensory prohibitions by entering the vice district and enabling the tactile sense, either by touching, allowing himself to be touched, or simply contemplating physical contact. Touch in the red-light district is taboo, for reasons that lie too deep for his own analysis: fear of contagion, fear of sexual inadequacy, and the rule of segregation combine to shock Prufrock into a terrified solitude that pervades the entire poem. Prufrock moves through the city alone because his city is divided, like the structure of the poem.

Though Eliot may have had excellent poetic reasons to excise the “Pervigilium,” its suppression also mirrors the logic of segregation—racial and sexual—that defined a class of “respectable white people” by what they were not and where they did not go. In this

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100 Walter Pater’s Marius the Epicurean, one of the main sources for the section, concerns the death of Flavius by a syphilis-like disease, as he writes his own “Pervigilium.”
101 Eliot, Poems 2, 316.
102 ibid.
103 During segregation, associations of blacks with disease, especially tuberculosis and venereal disease, were used to justify a taboo on interracial touch—except, of course, in the home, where black domestic servants prepared food, did laundry, and cared physically for whites, especially children (Smith, How Race is Made, 64, 84).
104 It is assumed that Prufrock’s name derives from a furniture store in downtown St. Louis but it is also just as likely that Eliot recalled the name from the social acquaintance of his sisters with the young socialites Adele, Hilda and Cornelia Prufrock, who graduated from the Mary Institute next door to the Eliot house, and whose social doings were announced with fanfare in the local papers in the 1890’s. See “Wedding of Robert R. Ringen and Cornelia
segregated terrain, Prufrock’s emotional paralysis (similar to what Eliot diagnosed in himself as “aboulie”\textsuperscript{105}) bespeaks the impact of a regime of sensory and social prohibitions that deny and pervert natural human inclinations.

Though Prufrock’s neighborhood was the starting place of Eliot’s journey as a poet, and biographically speaking he left St. Louis in 1905 never to return except for a few brief visits, in another sense he carried the terrain within him for life, struggling to overcome a perpetual sense of isolation and self-division.\textsuperscript{106} More to the point, his figures, especially Prufrock, have expressed for generations of readers “man’s tragic separation, his awful estrangement,” (in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., where this article began), though without any acknowledged connection to the original conditions of this estrangement. The significance of this finding is less the biographical aspect than locating in St. Louis’s geography of racial separation—needing consideration as urgently now as it did a century ago—a historical grounding for Eliot’s symbolic cityscapes of disconnection and his observations of the grotesque dysfunction of our society. Along with the knowledge of St. Louis’s tragic history, brought to our consciousness most recently by Ferguson, perhaps this reading of Eliot can make his poems newly available to us for what they reveal about the costs of racial separation, both enforced and chosen, to an entire society.

\textsuperscript{105} In a 1921 letter to Richard Aldington he refers to “an aboulie and emotional derangement which has been a lifelong affliction.” Letters 1, 603.

\textsuperscript{106} Jewel Spears Brooker has recapitulated this view of Eliot in light of his philosophical and religious quest for unity in \textit{T. S. Eliot's Dialectical Imagination}, 2018.
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