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# Writing the Fragmented City: Black Neighborhoods in Dawn Turner Trice's Only Twice I've Wished for Heaven

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Writing the Fragmented City:  
Black Neighborhoods in Dawn Turner Trice's  
*Only Twice I've Wished for Heaven*

*Break a vase and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape.*

—Derek Walcott, *The Antilles*

Chicago-born Dawn Turner Trice belongs to a new, emerging generation of black female writers. Her debut novel *Only Twice I've Wished for Heaven* (1997) has met with great critical acclaim and reviewers agree that it “adds a new perspective to the urban African American experience” (Bracks 456-457). Set in the “Windy City” in 1975, the novel contrasts two black neighborhoods separated by a fence: Lakeland, a planned community that shelters a new black bourgeoisie, and Thirty-fifth Street, a microcosm of the decaying ghetto. Through the central characters of eleven-year-old Temmy Saville (a new resident in Lakeland who often runs off and crosses over to Thirty-fifth Street) and Jonetta Goode (a former prostitute on Thirty-fifth and a liquor-store owner reaching sixty, but also a protector and guiding force for young Temmy), the author shows how racial and social segregation affects the lives of black city-dwellers. *Only Twice* is a coming-of-age novel about self-positioning and belonging. It ends tragically with the death of a child, Temmy's friend and Jonetta's great-niece Valerie. The author interweaves the two first-person narratives of Temmy and Jonetta, some twenty years after the events.

Trice's fictional cartography of black Chicago as a dual, fragmented cityscape is pregnant with meaning. My purpose is to examine the narrative strategies that the author uses in her figurative representation of urban and architectural space. I will expose how Dawn Turner Trice gradually deconstructs upscale Lakeland as utopia while she reconsiders the underprivileged inner-city neighborhood as the "urban village" with the formative presence of the "ancestor."

For Temmy's father, leaving South Morrison Street on the South Side to move to Lakeland is "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" (16), and Temmy's initial description of the place proves him right:

[The guard] handed him a map and showed us how to maneuver Lakeland's labyrinth of twists and turns to the Five forty-five building, our new home. Finally, he opened a massive iron gate that groaned as it parted, and we were allowed in. [...] This place was straight out of a fairy tale. One square mile of rich black soil carved out of the ghetto. One square mile of ivory towers, emerald green grass, and pruned oaks and willows so stately, they rivaled those in the suburbs [...]. The four high-rise apartment buildings were the tallest structures I'd ever seen, and already janitors were hanging from scaffolds, washing beveled-glass windows, making sure everything shined in tandem. (18-19)

With its guarded iron gate, Lakeland appears as a safe haven, a fortified enclave resisting against street crime and urban poverty. Constructed in an orderly fashion as a garden sanctuary within the city, the lavish estate radiates peacefulness and harmony. Its majestic trees, rooted in a rich soil, suggest vitality, anchorage and permanence; its winding streets, evocative of country roads, break with the monotonous rigid grid map of downtown Chicago and contribute to this pastoral scenery. The serenity of landscaping and architecture makes this residential area a soaring space. Unquestionably, Trice uses the verticality of the massive apartment buildings as a metaphor for upward mobility and retrenchment. The author's references to size, acreage, and height set the cityscape in perspective, thereby giving a sense of depth

and volume suggestive of the community's lofty ideals and ambitions: "It was an idyllic community, stripped of limitations and bounds" (19). Lakeland, a monolithically black neighborhood within a restricted area, built on the shore of Lake Michigan, brings together the seductive closeness of a cocoon and the openness of outer space. The very name of the place alludes to its spatiality. Lakeland is a borderland facing a wilderness of water; it is a new Frontier, a conquered space of freedom that bears promises.

Once allowed in, the Savilles discover a new world, an unknown territory. Yet, thanks to the map that gives them structure and a sense of direction, they can navigate through the maze of streets, through the many possibilities now offered to them. The erection of Lakeland, in place of what used to be a ghetto, and the construction of new streets "appropriately named Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, Langston Hughes Parkway, Ida B. Wells Lane" (19) mean the collective appropriation of space. Thus, within its walls, Lakeland fosters a sense of place in conjunction with both race and class. The deliberate re-mapping and re-naming of the black city as "urban utopia" (19) indicates the determination to belong to a community united by a common ideal, namely "separate but equal." With its streets that function as sites of memory, the newly founded neighborhood claims its black heritage and enhances its collective racial identity within a multi-ethnic society. At the same time, the careful planning and building of Lakeland imply the spatial staging of a legitimate, full-fledged American citizenship: the new fancy place, built to forge a positive identity, displays individual and collective achievement, i.e. access to the upper social strata and material success. Reminiscent of Gloria Naylor's Linden Hills, Lakeland is also "a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of America" (*Linden Hills* 9).

At the other end of the social spectrum, but right next door, beyond the fence, lives another black community, on Thirty-fifth Street. Through Temmy's first sight of the street, Trice creates an urban environment in stark contrast to Lakeland: "The air had changed. It was damp and smelled of stale alcohol, urine, and long-standing garbage. That's what I noticed first. Grass had dulled and in most places there wasn't any, just landscaping of

cracked asphalt and pockmarked concrete" (32). The author's construction of setting adds up realistic details that concur to give an overwhelming impression of decay. At once, Temmy's senses are aroused. The mixture of pungent, offensive odors, the crevices and rough surfaces of a bleak, sterile environment that is basically mineral, all prompt—inevitably—a negative perception of space. They contribute to a somewhat conventional literary image of the ghetto common to many African American urban novels. Neglected Thirty-fifth Street is indeed representative of the black inner city on the margins, though topographically located at the center:

For the longest, even the city had wanted to forget it was there. The mayor started by taking every city map and drawing a row of X's on the grid line between Thirty-fourth and Thirty-sixth streets. [...] Mail wasn't delivered right, just left in one big pile. People never even had the dignity of a address. Thirty-fifth Street was all. Just Thirty-fifth Street. Only ten blocks made up the colored side of that street, and at every intersection, young souls was always dropping off. Like pecans from a tree. (4-5)

While Lakeland's intricate street pattern is mapped out by the city fathers who thereby confirm its reality and give it both visibility and respectability, Thirty-fifth Street is arbitrarily wiped off the map to become an uncharted dark territory, a no-man's-land. Bereft of existence and identity by officials—the dominant (male) political voice—determined to block it out of their minds, the clearly delimited street (ten blocks) is viewed as a nebulous entity, a threatening black (w)hole. As a non-space, the street implies its inhabitants' exclusion and placelessness. Trice's fictional map of black Chicago is a metaphorical—or metonymic—text that reconfigures city space. More than an objectively accurate outline, it is the expression of collective social and cultural aspirations and antagonisms; it exemplifies Carla Cappetti's definition of a map as "a main vehicle for imposing order on what appears to the outsider as chaos" (54-55). It is a work in progress that attempts to materialize and control fluctuating boundaries. *Only Twice* actually closes on the pulling

down of Thirty-fifth Street to make way for the extension of Lakeland, thus redrawing city limits.

In Trice's dichotomous urban geography, Lakeland is set up as "a wonderful place" (16), a clean, polished bourgeois world that establishes social and moral order. As a public space, the residential area is a convivial gathering place meant for leisure occupations: "Men, women, and children were out in droves reading under the trees, sitting on hand-carved wooden benches, or walking dogs along winding cobblestone streets" (19). It is a respite from the stress of urban life and a safe playground for children.

At the opposite pole, Thirty-fifth Street, "this here wilderness" (5), that "no-good" street (7) as Jonetta says, is presented as a rough neighborhood, a breeding ground for crime and lawlessness. Through young characters such as Valerie, prostituted by her own mother and led to suicide, or Li'l Beaver, a teenage "junkie" with no future, Trice sets out to show how the street has taken a heavy toll among vulnerable, innocent inner-city children. Besides, by creating the character of Alfred Mayes, a charismatic street preacher, she also has a dig at self-proclaimed leaders who thrive on people's misery and helplessness:

"I was lost in this hell along Thirty-fifth Street," Mayes said. "And Jesus found me. I've been a pimp and a hustler." With each word, he stooped, carrying a heavy load. "I've been a gambler and jailbird. A cheat." He then stood straight, suddenly free of his burdens. "But the God I serve [...] can change that. All you need is a little faith." (37)

This secondary character—whose name rhymes with "maze"—is obviously constructed as an emblematic figure, the epitome of the impostor who endorses multiple identities so as to survive in a chaotic world. Temmy is actually "mesmerized" (143) by Mayes. "God-like in stature and form" (35) in her eyes, the slick orator is but a predator, "a massive shadow looming over the crowd" (147). In fact, streetwise Alfred Mayes bears a strong resemblance to Ellison's trickster figure Rinehart in *Invisible Man*

or to “the snakes, the wolves, the foxes, the bears” in Ann Petry’s naturalistic novel *The Street* (8).

Likewise, Mayes takes part in the sexual victimization of black women in a male-dominated urban environment. Three female characters actually fall prey to Mayes. In the thirties, he offers the naive, young Jonetta “a big pretty room to [her]self with a lock on it” (109) and becomes her pimp: “He was the only one I truly let inside me. Inside my room. My private room. Who I let run from corner to corner, unlocking all the doors, opening all the windows” (111). The author’s use of architectural imagery, her association between Jonetta’s private place and the intimacy of her body is eloquent. It signifies that, in the ghetto, the gender-based dialectic between outer and inner space, between danger and safety, is irrelevant. The door lock is an illusive barrier since men can violate women’s private spaces and commodified bodies.

Later, in the seventies, Mayes enrolls Jonetta’s niece Ruth—a single mother of two “shooting blues in her veins” (221)—as a member of his congregation, the New Saveds, and pays her for sexual favors from her daughter. Robbed of her innocence by Mayes’s depraved mind, and forced to watch him masturbate in the dark of her room, Ruth’s child Valerie “sat in a chair. She was [...] sitting as though she’d been squeezed into a tiny space and asked to sit for a portrait: still and straight” (233-234). The disturbing image of the young girl, petrified and powerless, shrinking into the smallest space possible, symbolizes how black women of all generations are or may easily be caged in and objectified, confined to the role of the silent victim under male authority, thus trapped in “both the narrow space of race and the dark enclosure of sex” (Wade-Gayles 2).

Through her use of setting and characters, Dawn Turner Trice constructs Thirty-fifth Street as a confused, fragmented neighborhood, a site of violence and oppression where the protagonists have to fight against heavy odds and face painful, traumatic events. Lakeland, then, represents what the street is not: a cohesive, law-abiding community whose dreams of democracy have come true. At least that is how Lakelandites perceive themselves. As the narrative unfolds, the author builds up a reverse

image of the two neighborhoods, thus revising the Manichaean opposition between suburblike Lakeland and the seedy inner city.

The Savilles live in a spacious apartment overlooking the lake: “a picture window made the lake look as though it were a beautiful painting with the sky and the water melding into similar hues” (23-24). The window is an extension into the landscape, integrating the indoor space with the picturesque outdoor space, thus giving the impression of boundless unity. Yet, Trice uses the expanding interior as a spatial marker of division: “Our bedrooms seemed miles apart, with [Mama’s] and Daddy’s on the north end of our apartment and mine on the south” (24). Bourgeois life means the triumph of private space, away from the street and from others. Behind closed doors, individualities are turned inward, living in isolation within their fragments of reality. Temmy’s new intimate place, her richly decorated bedroom with its “incredibly high ceiling” (23), reflects the hollowness of her new life. Feeling abandoned by her busy, hard-working father, she is deeply affected by his growing aloofness. Paradoxically, this “distant familiarity, something quite specific to Lakeland” (130), makes Temmy’s mother Felicia claustrophobic. “There’s no breathing room here” (28), she protests, feeling stifled by the social codes of a well-mannered bourgeoisie that imposes a constant distancing, a leveling: in Lakeland, “the kingdom of the drab” (13), voices are subdued, emotions repressed so as to keep up the appearance of a perfect world.

In fact, behind its façade, beneath the surface, Lakeland reveals a more troubling reality. Dawn Turner Trice uses the high-rise apartment building, divided up into codified spaces, as a metaphorical representation of social hierarchy. Beyond an individualistic atomization of space into private rooms and apartments, the Five forty-five building—as a collective structure—contains two coexisting worlds that tend to ignore each other, namely “top black professionals” (19) and their maids and janitors who have learned to keep their place. Like the Daltons’ house—to a certain extent—in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, the building is partitioned along two axes, horizontal (the front and the back) and vertical (upper and lower levels), on the basis not of race



but of class. As an element of Trice's dialectical construction of space, the main entrance, "the oak double door, which led to a lobby of glittering marble and crystal" (21), functions as an ostentatious representation of wealth and social status while "the back door [which] led to a cramped back elevator that all the servants used" (25) suggests that the latter are relegated behind the scenes to a space of subordination and marginality. Besides, "most of the views opened east, out to the lake. The windows on the other side of the building [overlooking Thirty-fifth Street] were dummies. From the inside, they were plastered over, hermetically sealed" (25). The fake windows are the tangible signs of the great social divide within the black community maintained by Lakeland's *nouveaux riches*, who are deliberately forgetful of the ghetto.

Equally significant is the basement apartment where Valerie's brother John lives: "It was hot and humid down there, and so dark, [...] the hallway [...] smelled of standing water and rotten eggs" (163). The author integrates the underground motif into her Lakeland setting as a site of invisibility and stagnation. John, the head laundryman who works "like a Hebrew slave" (164) to wash the tenants' dirty linens (in private) and smooth them out, stands for the downtrodden, the black working class that contributes to the prosperity and good reputation of the place. Though functioning within the system and ensuring its durability, John or the Savilles' maid Lily and the like remain the casualties of (social) progress. Lakeland, conceived as an alternative homogeneous space, built on republican principles of freedom and equality, proves to be a place of contrasts that perpetuates oppression, segregation and exclusion.

Like the Tower of Babel, the building is the symbolic architectural expression of arrogance, diversity and fracture. Actually, the author employs biblical images to depict Lakeland as a warped and fragile collective dream. Lily, the maid and living memory of the neighborhood, explains how "Somebody filled in a swamp. Most of this land. All of Thirty-fifth Street" (138). Then, one day:

"[...] two of the tables near the lake started sinking into the ground. Looked like the earth was just gobbling them up. [...] There was a flood once, bigger than Noah's. A pipeline in the basement of the Five twenty-five building burst and water ran for forty days and forty nights. [...] Well, okay, I added a little yeast to that one. But not much. And then there was the time when incinerator chutes in the Five fifteen building caught on fire. Look like that movie *The Towering Inferno*. God said fire would follow the Flood. Well, what really happened was they built this place too damn fast. They wanted Lakeland to shine, and in a hurry, and they didn't get stuff right." (139-140)

Lily's flamboyant story, her mythologizing of Lakeland is saturated with apocalyptic images that reveal the true nature of the place. The domesticated land is beyond control and turns into chaos. The raging of the elements and especially the collapse into the depths of the earth signify that this grand scheme was not built on solid ground. As a neighborhood, Lakelandites have failed to establish the necessary foundations that shape up a true community. Through Lily's urban tale, the reader is given to understand that Lakeland is an artificial place, an aggregate of social climbers who seek individual self-improvement and have made a clean sweep of their previous history.

Through her network of characters (an all-black cast) and their distinct responses to a dubious environment, the novelist addresses the key topic of urban community building, determined by black identity, gender, class and culture. She incorporates spatial imagery together with communal rituals into her narrative to express her critical views on a mainstreaming black middle class that disconnects itself from the "black folk" and has forgotten the "vernacular" traditions.

In this respect, the imposing Newhouse Country Club, symbolically set on "the highest piece of land," is a cardinal point, "something of a national monument" (173). More than a site for social gatherings, it is the representation of a collective ethos:

Once a year for the July Fourth extravaganza, the newspapers captured it in a blaze of glory as fireworks sent red, white, and blue sparkles around its crest. [...] Every Memorial Day, legend

had it, about ten gulls were gathered into a pen, dipped in blue and red food coloring, and released into the sky while the boy's choir belted out "America the Beautiful" followed by a fifteen-gun salute. (173)

Through triumphant and federative rituals, Lakelandites engage in the collective performance of a new urban self, in a whimsical dramatization of national pride and American identity. With much fanfare, Lakeland becomes a commemorative space that celebrates integration into the "establishment." Dawn Turner Trice also signifies, obliquely, that by adhering to the dominant cultural model, they tend to shed their African-Americanness. Paradoxically, this proud all-black community, which purposely named its streets after African American heroes and artists, is losing its color (and uniqueness) by swapping racial identity for social status. In addition, the author includes in her narrative the event of the annual ball as a visible sign of deculturation. Temmy recalls:

That night, we didn't have the benefit of the blues. [...] Our steps were delicate, measured, and at times rather polite. The music moving through us in terse, refined strokes. Everybody moving the same way. Barely moving. Everybody swaying the same way. Barely swaying. Hardly touching. It was like dancing in a box. I hated it. (177)

The dance floor is a stage where the members of the clannish community can display and control their image as a group, their exclusive, self-conscious "we-ness." All moved by the same impulse, the dancers form one body. Yet, beyond the expression of symbiotic oneness, the sophisticated choreography betrays their separateness, both emotional and cultural. Following the rules of (white, middle-class) etiquette, the starchy dancers are but "mimic men" and women playing a role that allows no room for spontaneity and authenticity. Through her concise, truncated and repetitive phrasing, the novelist skillfully manages to keep pace with the music, with the rhythmical steps of the dancers. Her

minimalist phraseology reproduces their stiff and discreet moves most effectively.

As a counterpoint to her trenchant representation of the uprooted black bourgeoisie (as an empty world of cultural pretense), Dawn Turner Trice depicts Thirty-fifth Street and its inhabitants as a lively close-knit community that has managed to preserve and perpetuate African American traditions that help endure—collectively—the harsh realities of the ghetto. Her topography of the neighborhood includes public meeting places, focal points diametrically opposed to Lakeland's Country Club, namely Jonetta's store, a hangout that makes the regulars "feel like they belong" (105), and the church. Interestingly enough, while the *Newhouse* Country Club testifies to Lakelandites' determination to forget a disturbing past, to put down roots and start afresh on "virgin land," Jonetta's storefront sign "O'Cala's Food and Drug" (33) is a visible trace of the past. Named after its original white owner, O'Cala's is a reminder of the Great Migration—a history of black urbanization, racial tensions and displacement. Besides, within those two locales on Thirty-fifth, one secular (O'Cala's), the other sacred (the church), Trice fictionalizes cultural performances as an integral part of daily life and as the genuine expression of self, the celebration of black identity. In so doing, the author inscribes her narrative in what H. Nigel Thomas calls "a long tradition of dramatic presentation of black rituals within the Afro-American novel" (123). Symbolically, Temmy watches Miss Jonetta and Mr. Chitney dance to a record playing "Stormy Monday":

And boy, could she dance. The entire floor rumbled with her moves. She did a showgirl kick over Mr. Chitney's little head. He hunched his shoulders and started rolling his stomach like a belly dancer as his cane slid right off his arm and his pants started to ease down his waist. She did a shimmy, rotating her shoulders, and Mr. Chitney started clapping his hands and stomping off-beat. Too cool. Miss Jonetta said, "Go, sweet feet, go!" And he kept moving. Pointing, bending, dipping east and west, then north and south. (195)

The contrast with the previous scene is manifest. While the formal ball is a well-patterned social event orchestrated by officials, the couple's sensuous, erotic moves are the free, impromptu expression of a festive mood.

Through her literary use of music and the blues motif, Trice also emphasizes "how pain and talent come together" (103). At Valerie's funeral, Jonetta's old friend Judd walks down the aisle up to the altar and strikes up a song:

He closed his eyes and the melody just came. He started low, way down deep, in the part of your being that cups your secrets and disappointments and cradles them like a newborn child. Then he started to climb. [...] He moved higher and higher until that big old room swole up, making way for the flood tide. His humming surrounded us. Made us feel that little girl. [...] If no one knew Valerie before, through Judd, an otherwise ordinary traveler—who himself knowed her for just a few hours—they knowed her now. (271)

Judd's cathartic humming is a heartfelt testimony and a call; it is a rich metaphor of sorrow and despair, resilience and bonding. His voice, that reaches out to the responding audience, radiates as a spiritual force. The church is then filled up with Judd's contagious energy, with music and vibrations; it is breathing *life*. The church is a sanctuary, a communal house where the characters can ritualize their day-to-day lives so as to alleviate or exorcize their pains and unite as one community paying tribute to the deceased:

Another child had died. A child that her own mother had throwed away; that in life didn't seem to belong to nobody, suddenly, in death, belonged to everybody. That's why so many people came. Thirty-fifth Street's biggest thieves, cheats, and lowest dope dealers. (268)

Valerie's death is indeed an ultimate trial for both communities that have failed the young girl and have proved to be incapable of nurturing and protecting her: "How could I've saved that baby from so much sickness?" (4) Jonetta wonders with guilt. While on Thirty-fifth Street, the tragedy generates a sense of

communal identity, solidarity and cohesion, a deepening sense of fear, mixed with disdain, prevents Lakelandites from attending the funeral—except for the Savilles. As Felicia complains bitterly, “A little girl has died, and what are people doing? They’re going around putting barbed wire on the fences. Double-locking doors” (258). Dissociating themselves further, the residents turn their backs on the street definitively and entrench themselves behind the fence so as to resist or exist as new members of the middle class.

In her review of the novel, Valerie Smith criticized Dawn Turner Trice for her dichotomous representation of the two communities, her somewhat idealized, romanticized depiction of the black underclass in parallel with her cut and dried critique of a spiritless, ossified black bourgeoisie (16). On this subject, the author, whom I interviewed, is quite aware that she “did go to some extremes” by representing Lakeland as a “monolith” (Duboin 118) so as to get her point across, to stigmatize class prejudices and cultural mainstreaming:

Within the confines of that ivy-lined wrought-iron fence lived this elite group of people who had been allowed to purge their minds of all those things that reminded them of what it meant to be poor and downtrodden. Once here, Lakelandites didn’t look back. They surely didn’t want to go back. [...] And they vowed to put their bodies and their beliefs into this great blender and leave it there until the whitewashed folk who came out no longer resembled the pageant folk who had entered. (20)

Trice’s novel clearly illustrates “the tension between race, class and cultural identity” which cultural critic Todd Boyd relates to “the assumption that Blackness is indelibly linked to a working-class ethos and singularly informed by the struggles of overcoming poverty. Thus those who do not embrace this notion of Blackness are seen as selling out or the ultimate charge—of not being Black enough” (22). Boyd’s critical comment about the confusion between class and ethnicity is actually well illustrated by Mr. Chitney’s equivocal remark: “Them people from across the street don’t know nothing about the blues” (196). Through this

ambiguous message, the character implies that black bourgeois enjoy a cozy, happy life (they never “have the blues”), and more importantly, they don’t have “soul,” they have lost their culture.

Addressing this difficult issue, Trice integrates the fence as a metaphor for the social and cultural divide between the black urban underclass at a dead end and upwardly mobile African Americans who ultimately, ironically, marginalize themselves further in their collective effort to conform and gain respectability. Thus, more than a physical borderline that separates the inside from the outside, the fence materializes binary oppositions between “we” and “they,” unity and dissolution, ascent and downfall, good and evil. A protective buffer against the ills of Thirty-fifth Street, the fence is also symbolic of the emotional barrier Lakelandites have erected—a fact Temmy’s father will eventually realize:

“Damn it, a child has died. And now the only real thing separating us is the fence we’ve constructed in our minds and around our hearts. When did we forget who we are? [...] All week long, we’ve been trying to find ways to protect ourselves from them. [...] But we are them [...]. Aren’t we? We’re as intricately woven as the ivy on the very fence that divides us. When did we forget that?” (261-262)

Commenting on recent African American writers, Henry Gates stressed “their capacity to express the desires and anxieties of this new middle class freely and from the inside” (40). A member of this new generation of black writers, Dawn Turner Trice drew inspiration from personal experience and wrote a novel that focuses on class division rather than racial tensions. The author states that her narrative is not autobiographical strictly speaking (in terms of plot and action), yet she recognizes that, in some way, it mirrors her own quest: “It had more to do with my own personal journey, and me being maybe symbolic of a whole. [...] Lakeland represented what had happened to me, and I found that to be not a pretty sight. To be honest, I think that my heart had hardened a little bit. There was that distancing [...]” (Duboin 118). Then, the act of writing partakes of personal reassessment and self-

criticism, with a focus on positionality: What do I stand up for? And, where do I belong? In her deliberate attempt to answer these fundamental, interconnected questions, the novelist insists on the necessity to remember and acknowledge one's origins so as to be able to grow and make progress.

*Only Twice* closes on the Savilles' departure to California and Jonetta's return to the South after her run-down street has been condemned to make way for an extension of Lakeland: "I'll go down there for a spell and find the land I was born on and reminisce for a while. [...] Been here too long. Too long," she confides (299). Jonetta's and her old friends' reverse migration illustrates Farah Jasmine Griffin's study on the representation of the "New South" in recent African American fiction. She observes that "the south is a haven where the failed migrant might heal from his failure" (143). *Only Twice I've Wished for Heaven* is indeed a novel about the fallacious promises of the modern American city that still segregates, alienates, and despoils disfranchised minorities. City building, like History, is a steady process of change and cyclical renewal, and beyond apparent contrasts, Lakeland and Thirty-fifth Street are much alike. At different times, both neighborhoods were initially viewed as utopias, potential Eldorados. In 1932, Jonetta's family moved up to Chicago, joining the mass of black southern migrants, because her father "thought 'up north' was a step away from heaven" (55). Similarly, in 1975, Temmy's father decided to move to Lakeland because he "wanted something better for the family" (258). The two places are actually described in identical terms. Jonetta recounts how, at sixteen, she first stepped into her street, back in 1932: "I came to Thirty-fifth Street that night the way the three wise men came following that star. The *bright city lights* called me. [...] Seemed to me most people on Thirty-fifth Street had already found heaven, one way or another. Or at least thought they had" (50, my emphasis). Reminding us of Toni Morrison's characters in *Jazz* and their fascination for "the City," Jonetta is drawn by the glittering street lights. Some forty-three years later, standing outside Lakeland's gate, she also "noticed how white the pavement was behind the fence and how the *bright lights* made it look like diamonds had been sprinkled into the concrete" (242, my emphasis). All the



metaphors and similes (lights, stars and diamonds) are so many significant details of an enticing picture. They evoke the novelty, the specialness, and the lure of the black city, the nascent urban community that has apparently so much to offer. The decline (whether material, social or moral) of both neighborhoods also leads the reader to predict that the pulling down of Thirty-fifth Street and its gentrification are somehow bound to failure.

The main characters' resulting restlessness and displacement across the city, as well as their journeys across the country, signify their permanent quest for a home. In this respect, Trice's novel can well be labeled as a "post-Ellison migrant novel," to borrow from Lawrence R. Rodgers's classification in *Canaan Bound* (181). Besides, in this coming-of-age novel, the characters' peregrinations parallel their inner journeys toward (self-)discovery.

Trice's black city, with its distinct neighborhoods, its many nooks and corners, gradually becomes the scene of an initiation. Nostalgic of her former close-knit community on the South Side, "the only home [she]'d ever wanted to know" (11), Temmy transgresses the boundaries of her safe but constricting new world where she finds herself an outsider, and runs off to Thirty-fifth Street on several occasions to take refuge in Jonetta's store.

With Temmy's fortuitous discovery of a breach in the surrounding railing, and later on, of a hidden rusty gate, the fence carries a new meaning in Trice's construction of setting. It becomes the ambivalent metaphor of (dis)continuity, enclosure and opening. The gate is a symbolic junction; its threshold, a place of passage and a narrow way that Temmy takes to navigate between two separate worlds and embark on a painful journey toward maturity: "I was determined that day to explore the rest of Thirty-fifth Street. Truth is, I didn't feel much like sitting still. I had on my traveling shoes [...]" (141).

Crossing borders—a challenge to (parental) authority—expands Temmy's urban territory and confronts her to new dangers and ordeals, as Thirty-fifth Street is the site of a relentless struggle for existence, for a decent life, against the many traps and pitfalls of the inner city. Still, Temmy's stepping into the shabby

street enables her to reconnect with her community and regain a sense of home, thanks to both Jonetta and Valerie:

That year, Child was eleven years old, going on ninety. [...] She thought nobody understood what it felt like to want to fly somewhere and be free. That's why she wandered over to Thirty-fifth Street. She was looking for a place to run to. [...] Her family had just moved to this new hanky place where she felt she didn't fit in. With Valerie over there, and me on the other side of the fence, the two of us made her feel like she belonged. (6)

Indeed, Jonetta plays the role of mediator in Temmy's search for identity and becomes a tutelary figure, as her repeated admonitions to the young girl show it: "And be careful crossing that street, hear? Look both ways and come straight to this store if you must. Don't you take your fanny nowhere else along Thirty-fifth Street. Understand?" (75). Akin to Mary Rambo in *Invisible Man* or to Miss Thompson in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Jonetta Goode (as her last name indicates) is built as a positive female character, the caring "othermother" (Collins 4) common to many black urban *Bildungsromane*. Her store serves as a sanctuary away from the insecurity of the street. It is a nurturing place for lost souls in need for guidance and moral support, such as Temmy, Li'l Beaver or Ruth: "Yelling, whether Bible verses or anything else, don't do no good lessin you give a child a safe place to hear it in. It's like scattering fresh seeds on hard concrete and expecting a miracle" (117).

Within Trice's range of characters, and in opposition to Mayes, Jonetta represents the humane dimension of the ghetto. She and her old male friends (Mr. Chitney, Judd, Hump and Fat Daddy who meet at O'Cala's) are not lonely outcasts who face adversity and deal with the quotidian. In truth, over the years, they have learned how to survive with pride and resilience: O'Cala's "may be a hole-in-the-wall, but it ain't no gutter" (42). Together, they have managed to maintain or recreate the cohesive "village values" they grew up with in the South, and now form a tradition-bound urban community whose strong ties are built on a sense of solidarity and generosity.

Not only do Jonetta and her friends contribute to making their street somewhat bearable, but at times, they turn it into a warm and friendly environment. Actually, the grim, unsavory street exerts powerful attraction on Temmy (who strays from a comfortable neighborhood) only because of their presence as both “ancestor figures” and “cultural bearers” (Page 13, 15) who keep positive values and traditions alive and pass on their heritage to younger generations. Toni Morrison once observed that “contemporary Black writers seem to view urban life as lovable only when the ancestor is there” (“City Limits” 40). Besides, she pointed out that “these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (“Rootedness” 343). Interestingly, Trice’s rendering of the black urban experience, her colorful tableau of Thirty-fifth Street, matches Morrison’s description of place and characters in contemporary African American fiction.

Temmy’s crossings and geographical explorations lead her to grey zones on both sides of the fence. Her young friend and confidante Valerie (who lives in Lakeland with her brother John while her mother Ruth dwells in a dilapidated tenement on Thirty-fifth Street) broadens Temmy’s outlook and plays a crucial role in her initiation. She indicates her the way to the hidden gate and guides her through Lakeland’s basements, through a physical and metaphorical journey backstage, into the lower depths. Valerie exposes the naive Temmy to the inner realities of Lakeland and helps her see below the surface of things. Together, they invest the subterranean world of obscurity where conventional rules of conduct are suspended. Valerie initiates her friend to the secret world of adults and their misdemeanors too shameful to mention. The basement is then the paradoxical site of darkness and vision, concealment and disclosure. In veiled terms, Valerie confides that she can “hear things” from a pipe in the cellar (165), and that she saw Mrs. Hubbard and John “doing it behind the elevator shaft” (166). But more importantly, Temmy will be led to pry into Valerie’s secret.

The novel opens on a newspaper clipping, a proleptic paragraph from the *Chicago Sentinel* about Alfred Mayes’s

“murder” of Valerie in 1976 (1). The young girl’s harrowing story is shrouded in mystery; gradually, through Jonetta’s investigations, secrets unfold. A victim of sexual abuse and child prostitution, Valerie commits suicide at her mother’s, jumping down from the twelfth floor. Temmy is a witness to the scene; so are Jonetta and Valerie’s molester Mayes. Surprisingly smitten with remorse, he claims he pushed her and is sentenced to life imprisonment—a self-inflicted punishment: Jonetta infers “that Alfred was there, but that he didn’t push her. No more than all the other nasty men had laid their hands on her. All of them” (267).

Through Valerie’s poignant story, the author denounces the abdication of responsibilities on the part of adults in today’s society. At the same time, she portrays politically and economically disempowered parents who end up yielding to environmental pressures, thereby furthering urban violence. The young girl’s tragedy exemplifies social dislocation. It recalls us to the prejudicial absence of the “ancestor” who was not there to make sure Valerie did not “fall into the wrong hands” (55), or to give “[the] little girl a chance to enjoy a good breeze—to fix herself a dream” (5).

In a more symbolic reading, Valerie’s suicide is a climactic scene, a turning-point in the initiation process Temmy undergoes. The girl’s death is a most distressing rite of passage into adulthood. On that dreadful night, Temmy lost a friend, but she also lost her illusions together with her childhood—definitively.

However, the novel’s final chapter offers a glimmer of hope since Temmy settles down in California and eventually starts a home and family. Her last name Saville (save/ville) is a hint at her search for a city, a safe place she can call home, and she has apparently found it. But it will take Temmy some twenty years to overcome the aftershock of loss, face up to the past, and write down her journey across time and space, with Jonetta’s help, so as to be able to look forward, not back, and be “finally, finally free” (304). Following the pattern of the black female coming-of-age story, the author suggests that healing is possible only through “the use of memory and voice” (LeSeur 197):

I told her one day she'd have to tell this thing. And it wouldn't matter if the miles stretched like canyons between us, because I would help her. One day she'd have to gather the events the way you would loose petals on a flower and piece them together again. Slowly. Into a whole story. [...] It's time. So listen. (7)

Through her novel's structure (with two segmented, criss-crossing narratives that juxtapose contrasted perspectives), Trice draws textual spaces and borders that recall the fragmented topography of her urban setting. Yet, Temmy and Jonetta's geographical separation and their differences will be transcended. Bridging or spiritual bonding is achieved through writing and storytelling: the author interweaves two overlapping accounts and binds their narrators together through ties of friendship, thus transmuting fragmentation into wholeness.

Dawn Turner Trice's concerns echo those of prominent black female writers such as Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor; her novel inscribes itself in the African American literary tradition. In her critique of Naylor's urban novels, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, Barbara Christian argues that "[a] single writer's juxtaposition of two Afro-American neighborhoods, different in values, separated by class distinctions, yet located in the same geographical area, is an unusual one in Afro-American literature" (107). In *Only Twice I've Wished for Heaven*, first-time novelist Dawn Turner Trice combines the two separate communities within one narrative and sheds light on their social and cultural cleavages, on the growing segmentation of (African) American life. This moving girlhood story was followed by the publication of a second novel, *An Eighth of August* (2000), which confirmed Trice's particular interest in such themes as black womanhood, friendship and community building, and showed once more her taste for, and skill in storytelling, to the great delight of her readers. She is currently at work with her third novel.

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