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Carol E. Henderson

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In the Shadow of Streetlights: Loss, Restoration, and the Performance of Identity in Black Women's Literature of the City

*on this bus to oblivion i bleed in the seat
numb silent rider
bent to poverty/my blackness covers me like the
american flag over the coffin of some hero killed in
action...*

—Wanda Coleman, "Today I Am a
Homicide in the North of the City"

*A boy is born in hard time Mississippi
Surrounded by four walls that ain't so pretty
His parents give him love and affection
To keep him strong moving in the right direction
Living just enough, just enough for the city...*

—Stevie Wonder, "Living for the City"

The city has become, in one critic's estimation, the most dominant environment in Western civilization in the twentieth century (Hurm 1). Indeed, many of America's most celebrated writers have expressed varying degrees of ambivalence and enmity towards the city. For African Americans writing the urban experience, the city has been both friend and foe; it has been a source of spiritual healing, and likewise a thorn in the side of many of its inhabitants. Doris Jean Austin and Martin Simmons explain that "[a]s people and as writers we were nurtured by the city. We fell in love with the city, and if we love America, we love it because of its cities" (vii). Thus the exploration of stories about the city—and urban life in particular—reveals much about the character of American society and its moral and social conflicts. "We are not blind to urban

problems,” write Austin and Simmons, adding that “[i]n fact, our daily lives are affected by the grimmer aspects of city life—but we are equally aware of the vitality and passion of America’s cities and the people who populate them” (vii).

In this essay, I explore the social writings of African American women concerned with the individual and collective experiences of African American people in the city. In particular, my analysis “unmasks” the active participation of the city in shaping not only the “urban consciousness” of African American people, but in transforming the spiritual condition of its inhabitants as well. Implicit in this line of inquiry is a critical recognition of certain social practices that have come to represent the urban milieu in the fictional world created by black authors such as Gloria Naylor and Ann Petry—practices that, when viewed in the larger social context of urban alienation, consider the dire consequences of delayed self-assertions affirmed in the symbolic acts of violence described in these narratives. In each instance, these depictions of violence are tied to a larger examination of sexual political issues that affect black women, issues that may otherwise become subsumed under the stereotypical portraits of sexual violence in the city. Although many may question my categorization of fictional literature as “social writing,” it has been well established by historians, sociologists, and humanists alike, that literature has the ability to change the cultural landscape of American society. According to James Baldwin, writing *is* a public act; it “involves, after all, disturbing the peace” (qtd. in McQuade et al. 2077). He believes that writers are revolutionaries, not simply because of those perspectives espoused in their writings, but due to the potential their work has to effect social change. Artists write “in order to change the world,” Baldwin concludes, “knowing perfectly well that [they] probably can’t, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world” (qtd. in McQuade et al. 2077).

These same sentiments belie the motivation behind this current endeavor. Of key concern here are the *figurations* of urbanism characterized in the fiction of African American women that privilege those historical and political moments of production masked in the culture of the street. As Patricia Hill Collins has

already pointed out, black women intellectuals demonstrate a sustained effort when examining the connections between race and gender oppression (44). Given this view of black women's scholarly inquiry, I would propose that contemporary visions of urban America in the literature of African American women complicate and *recast* traditional investigations of the city that seek to destabilize the relationship between the reality of the street, as presented in mainstream culture, and the "reality" of urban life depicted in the pages of their narratives. Considering the multiple perspectives on the city, and the variety of approaches to American city fiction, it is important to indicate the different qualities and properties associated with this cultural phenomenon. In this sense, "urban" may come to signify dual characteristics. On the one hand, it may function as a metonymic representative of the transhistorical attitudes many African Americans have towards the city and the promise it allegedly held. The migratory journey of many African Americans from the South to the North, and from the East to the West, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, demonstrates how important landscape is to shaping our understanding of African American quests for selfhood. On the other hand, "urban" may also symbolize the internal conflicts many individuals have about moving beyond their "normal" circles of existence to experience the "unknown" or the "forbidden" world of the city. In this respect, the physical and spiritual landscapes of the city provide insight into the mythical properties of the archetypal *image* of the modern city as a site for inner freedom and self-fulfillment. As critic Raymond Williams observes,

Myth and revolution, in their variable forms, have dominated the responses to altered conditions in the fragmented metropolis. Myth, as collective unconscious, creates a new community among the dissociated urban monads in and through intense subjectivity. The fragmented daily experiences in the modern environment are stabilized in the link to universal constants and metaphysical patterns. (qtd. in Hurm 89)

I would also argue that these same properties frame a context for understanding how movement—imaginative movement—facilitates a political refashioning of the public self that allows one to exercise his or her autonomy even in times of limited mobility.

The Semiotics of Identity

We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experiences of those with whom we have come in contact. [...] To read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the 'raceless' one with which we are, all of us, most familiar.

—Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken"

In evaluating the symbolic representations of urban America in African American fiction, and more specifically its larger connection to the notions of selfhood and identity, it would be useful to consider the sparsely populated area of study that examines the relationship between culture and environment. Eco-criticism—or urban semiotics—conceives of the city as an agglomeration of signs that, when interpreted, can be read as coded ideological extensions of American social "isms." Urban semiotics, in particular, concerns itself with the ideological uses of the image of the city both as a cognitive map of the social significance of urban layout, and as a metaphor of the systematic dissemination of cultural meanings.¹ Proponents of eco-criticism see their critical investigations as an extension of the environmental movement, a movement built on the various sociological and philosophical approaches to urban ecology. Although works in "classic" Marxist environmental theory figure

¹ See Gerd Hurm, *Fragmented Urban Images*, particularly pages 69-72, for further discussion of this concept.

prominently in the development of eco-criticism, many of these approaches “lack a thoroughgoing *cultural* analysis of urban environments,” as Bennett and Teague argue (5). Thus eco-criticism, as a trope and a theoretical paradigm, allows us to not only explore the components of urbanism, but also to conceptualize the *nature* of cities by examining the importance of the geographical and cultural aspects of place and identity in the urban setting.

These formations can be more clearly assessed in the writings of Gwendolyn Brooks and Gloria Naylor. Naylor, in particular, explores the agonizing complexities of identity formation in her portraits of urban dwellers confined to space and place in her novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. Unlike her second novel, *Linden Hills*, which examines the black suburb through the eyes of Willie Mason, a young African American poet who seeks employment in this exclusive neighborhood, *Brewster Place* finds its genesis in a housing tenement in the ghetto. This structure, walled in from the rest of the city, serves as a transitory space for the women who inhabit this place. Ever mindful of their second-class citizenship within the confines of the larger city, and also cognizant of their tenuous status as black women in this community, the women of Brewster use this site as a sanctum for the rebuilding and restructuring of their “womanist” sensibilities.²

Like Gwendolyn Brooks’s kitchenette building in *Maud Martha* and *A Street in Bronzeville*, these tenements highlight the numerous imagined identities embraced in these communities. Brooks peoples her building with individuals who are “grayed in, and gray,” who dream “through onion fumes [...] and fried potatoes. And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall” (“kitchenette building,” *Blacks* 20), but who nonetheless coexist, quite ingeniously, within this delimiting environment. Naylor presents a similar portrait, yet her emphasis rests upon the

² My use of the term “womanist” here implies all that it is meant to. That is, I signify upon Alice Walker’s theoretical development of the concept in her seminal work *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983).

“difference of difference” implicit in the often-contradictory impulses of the street. The tenement, a sign of urbanization gone awry, underscores this semiotic relationship. Notably, it points to the need to reconcile the contradictions inherent in separating one’s own internally defined image of self from those proposed in mainstream America. As Farah Griffin concludes, “the creation of a new self may be one of the most crucial aspects of resistance to the complexities of the North” (8). The *nature* of this complicated and compulsory existence may have reached its zenith, many would argue, with the publication of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Yet in Naylor’s narrative, the visibility/invisibility paradigm is recast within her interventionist politics of sexuality. Specifically, Naylor constructs a literary world that places the bodies of her two lesbian characters, Lorraine and Theresa, in direct contrast with the urban landscape of Brewster Place. This “dialogue” serves two purposes: it reveals the role the body plays not only in constructing our sense of social realities, but also in distinguishing the ambiguous but powerful connection between what is viewed as “unnatural” and “natural” in the urban environment.

When the reader is first introduced to the couple (Lorraine and Theresa), we are told that “no one could remember exactly when they had moved into Brewster [...] if it was in the winter or spring of that year that the two had come” (Naylor, “The Two” 2544). Naylor’s vague description of the pair’s initiation into the urban landscape of this unnamed city establishes the restless nature of Brewster Place, its irregular but consistent migratory ambivalence; people came and went in Brewster, “moving in and out in the dark to avoid eviction notices or neighborhood bulletins about the dilapidated condition of their furnishings” (2544). Thus, it is of great significance that Lorraine and Theresa are noticed—their pattern absorbed by the knowing eyes who “clocked” them leaving and returning in regular intervals to their apartment in this tenement building. This surveillance of their bodies (and of their activities) is once again extended to the jealous practices of the women of Brewster, who had readily accepted the “lighter, skinny one” (Lorraine) because “there wasn’t much threat in her timid mincing walk and the slightly protruding teeth she

seemed so eager to show everyone” (2544). Theresa threatened them: she was short, dark, and pretty, with “too much behind. [...] Through slitted eyes, the women watched their men watching her pass, knowing the bastards were praying for a wind” (2544). Yet finding that Theresa was oblivious to the supplications of these men made their women breathe easier, and so “the two” were deemed harmless and accepted into the fold. Naylor’s implication of not only the social color-isms that rule so many African American communities (Lorraine was accepted first, the lighter of the two), but also of the ritualized practice of “outsider/insider-ism” foreshadows the inevitable clash of the sexualized bodies of Lorraine and Theresa with that of the heterosexual entity of Brewster Place.

It is important to note that Lorraine and Theresa have arrived at Brewster Place not because they are economically disadvantaged, but because they are social outcasts. Each has felt the sting of discrimination and understands fully the ramifications of being marginalized from mainstream America. Lorraine, in particular, has felt the pressure of being disassociated from the “normal” ebb and flow in her previous neighborhoods. Upon her prompting, Theresa has given up apartment after apartment in hopes of finding a place that will make Lorraine comfortable. Their arrival at Brewster thus signals the end of the road, so to speak—they have nowhere else to go. Intuitively, I have to believe that Lorraine and Theresa had hoped to avoid “detection” in their new surroundings *because* they were women. They assumed that they could move “invisibly” among the throngs of women who inhabit this inner-city landscape. Naylor’s subtle reminder of the engendered face of poverty points up this connection. However Naylor here also challenges the notion of a homogeneous community based solely on the socially constructed categories of sex and gender. As Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, “sex is a biological category attached to the body—humans are born female or male. In contrast, gender is socially constructed” (164), marked by individual anxieties and fears exhibited in the larger systems of oppression. Therefore, biological categories of sex and gender are or can become informed by the socially constructed meanings of masculinity and femininity. In exploring the ways in which these

interlocking systems operate within the “margins” of Brewster place, Naylor exposes not only the dynamics of racial and sexual politics functioning within the borders of this self-inscribed community; she likewise unearths the *nature* of homophobia present in this “close-knit” community.

Typology of the City

As Toni Morrison reiterates in “City Limits, Village Values,” the city is viewed positively by African American writers because of its ability to provide neighborly ties and assistance against the stifling conditions of oppression experienced in the surrounding white society (35-43). But as critics like Farah Griffin and Patricia Hill Collins have noted, these same subcultures can also be detrimental to women, children, and those individuals considered “unnatural” to its environment. According to Kathleen Wallace, writers such as Audre Lorde use their work to point up “the abundant ironies in attempting to distinguish between what is and is not natural” (55) in the urban setting. Lorde’s poetry, in particular, blurs the division between nonhuman and human-made environments as “grass and weeds and flowers” in one sense, mirror the “color” implied by the nobody who called her “nigger” at the age of thirteen, as discussed in her poem “Outside.” Lorde’s awareness of her outsider status in these and other socially inscribed spaces is repeatedly evoked in her writings. As Wallace adeptly determines, “Lorde writes from a double perspective as nature writer and social critic” (59); her multiple identities as an “African American, lesbian, feminist, and writer/lover of urban landscapes” allow her to comment on those individuals who continually label her as being ‘unnatural,’ an outsider in her home environment of New York City.

Wallace’s interrogation of Lorde’s ecological poetics allows us to more clearly assess how the social practice of urban alienation functions in the lives of Lorraine and Theresa. “The Two”—as they are termed rhetorically within the body of the narrative and within the space of Brewster Place—are “found out” when Theresa grabs Lorraine around the waist to break her fall

after she tripped over a child's ball. " 'Careful, don't wanna lose you now,' " Theresa tells Lorraine. Then "the two of them laughed into each other's eyes and went into the building" (2545). This shared moment of "invisible communion reserved for two and hidden from the rest of the world behind laughter or tears or a touch" (2545) alarms the residents of Brewster Place. They began to ask themselves the meanings of "such behavior" (2545). Sure, as they determined among themselves, they had laughed and touched each other in joy or under other circumstances, "but where had they seen *that* before? [...] They had seen that—done that—with their men" (2545).

Naylor's reference here to the sinister nature of the tongue, of rumor, of naming that which cannot be named is outlined in "the image of the stumbling woman and the one who had broken her fall" (2545). Naylor goes to great length to depersonalize the description of the couple as each woman becomes an object, a symbol of disgust in the "jaundiced eye" of this community:

So it got around that the two in 312 were *that* way. And they had seemed like such nice girls. Their regular exits and entrances to the block were viewed with a jaundiced eye. The quiet that rested around their door on the weekends hinted of all sorts of secret rituals, and their friendly indifference to the men on the street was an insult to the women as a brazen flaunting of unnatural ways. (2545)

Naylor is brilliant here in her description of the residents of Brewster Place. To say that this community is "jaundiced" is to direct attention to the "illness," the "poison" that is affecting this "unified" body of urban dwellers. Critic Margaret Whitt suggests that this illness may stem from the very "unnatural" way Brewster Place was conceived: "It is a bastard child, created by the wiles of men in clandestine meetings" (13), who had hoped to achieve economic gratification with its erection. The wall, which eventually separates this community from the main artery of the city, stands as a constant reminder of its malevolent status. Subsequently, the illness that pervades the character of this environment affects the very nature of the relationships formed in

its shadows. For Lorraine and Theresa, this dis-ease proves detrimental as they become scapegoats—an antidote really—for the maladies present in this community. As critic Barbara Smith points out, “the fact of difference can be particularly volatile among people whose options are severely limited by racial, class, and sexual oppression, people who are already outsiders themselves” (228). The painful realizations of Smith’s commentary bear themselves out in the brutal gang rape and tragic decimation of Lorraine’s character at the hands of C.C. Baker who, disenfranchised himself, uses the one weapon he felt would make him a man: that tool that “lay curled behind his fly” (2564). This retaliatory act, spurred by the public “dissing” of C.C. Baker in front of his boys, reemphasizes the “darwinesque” tendencies of the street. Like the alley, Lorraine’s body becomes one more “thing” to conquer in order to “authorize” the territorial dominance of Baker and his gang. In the end, the reader is led to believe that violence underlies this process of objectification, and that even within the margins of difference, homophobia is a pervasively “natural” thing.

In *Black Feminist Criticism*, Barbara Christian argues that the emergence of the lesbian theme in African American women’s literature has contributed mightily to the breaking of stereotypes about black lesbians so that they are clearly seen as women—and thus vulnerable to the same types of violence as heterosexual women (199-200). Moreover, such explorations expose not only the presence of homophobia in the black community, but they reveal “how homophobia is related to the struggle of all women” (199-200). In relating Christian’s comments to the literary currents found in *The Women of Brewster Place*, we are able to determine the manner in which Naylor’s complex rendering of the contradictory impulses of the city underscore the various ways women’s bodies become refigured within the exigencies of domination. Their identities, shaped by who they are, who they have become, and who they hope to be, are as much a function of the environment they live in as they are a symptom of the need to disassemble the veil that has them see themselves through the distorted eyes/I’s of others. In finding a voice, these women

wrestle with, and many succumb to the perils of the street. Yet, in charting their journeys, one can better assess the relations of and struggles for power implicit in their troubled existence.

CAROL E. HENDERSON
University of Delaware

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