



HAL
open science

Urban Landscapes in Black Women's Fiction: Portraits of the Twentieth-Century Fiction

Maxine Sample

► **To cite this version:**

Maxine Sample. Urban Landscapes in Black Women's Fiction: Portraits of the Twentieth-Century Fiction. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2002, *Urban America in Black Women's Fiction*, 22, pp.9-21. hal-02344235

HAL Id: hal-02344235

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344235v1>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Urban Landscapes in Black Women's Fiction: Portraits of the Twentieth-Century City

Slavery, sharecropping, disenfranchisement, and a history of racial violence diminished the possibility that life in rural America would give birth to an idealized pastoral in the imagination of African Americans. Too many stories of the South told by transplanted migrants depicted landscapes of terror, exploitation, and racial oppression; too many bodies bore the physical and emotional scars of country living. Thus, an idyllic rustic life was a cultural memory of few African Americans. Even the mythic Promised Land, the locus of racial uplift and opportunity, often emerged as an oppressive, surreal dystopia, “scene and symbol of the Negro’s perpetual alienation in the land of his birth” (Ellison 243). Lawrence Rodgers writes in *Canaan Bound: The African American Great Migration Novel* that “migration to the urban north is one of the principal driving forces behind twentieth-century African American fiction” (37), offering for the writer the formidable task of transforming urban pathology into art (38). In an attempt to make sense of the African American urban experience, writers have created texts that have given us diverse portraits of the urban landscape, ranging from “surprising celebrations of city life” (Hakutani and Butler 10) and hostile, predatory cityscapes, to safe havens of transformation.

This ambivalence of the African American writer toward the city is addressed by Toni Morrison in her important essay “City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction.” Morrison notes that black writers have neither totally embraced nor rejected the city, partly because of the absence of blacks in any significant way in shaping the city or controlling its resources. She explains the apparent ambivalence:

Black people are generally viewed as patients, victims, wards, and pathologies in urban settings, not as participants. And they could not share what even the poorest white factory worker or white welfare recipient could feel: that in some way the city belonged to him. Consequently the black artist's literary view of the city and his concept of its opposite, the village or country, is more telling than the predictable and rather obvious responses of mainstream American writers to post-industrial decay, dehumanization and the curtailing of individualism which they imagined existed in the city but not in the country. (37)

Morrison concludes that when black writers do express an affection toward the city, it is for "the village within it: the neighborhoods and the population of those neighborhoods" (37). Barbara Christian suggests that because of blacks' history of displacement, African American writers, especially women writers, have shown a particular interest in the dynamics between place and character. She explains:

Because of the consistency of forced displacement in our collective experience, we know how critical our location is to the character of our social creations, of how place helps to tell us a great deal about who we are, and who we can become. Perhaps place is even more critical to African-American women writers. For women within the African-American community have functioned both inside and outside the home, have been conservers of tradition [...] while we have had to respond to the *nuances* of a changed environment. (348)

What is the nature of the spaces that African American women occupy in urban communities? In answering that question, this paper examines gendered space in two twentieth-century novels by African American women—Ann Petry's *The Street* and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*—giving particular attention to the tropes of dead-end streets and walls that represent the marginalized existence of black women. Putting a human face on the statistical portrait of America's feminine underclass, both texts chronicle black women's attempts to claim a space in the

modern metropolis and similarly initiate a dialogue about the powerlessness of women.

The classic city novel in its attempt to render a portrait of the urban landscape typically depicts a maturation process accompanied by the protagonist's movement from a rural area to an urban area. Often the work is rife with symbols of disillusionment, frustration, and despair and is characterized in general by the alienation of the individual. In recreating the city in fiction, such writers depict the fragmentation and alienation resulting when "the characters typically feel that they are strangers moving in an alien world" (Gelfant 23). Though such "skyscraper alienation" (Bremer 16) is not necessarily universal to women's portraits of the city and is frequently replaced with communal activities that emphasize relatedness (43), for the African American writer, however, family ties alone would not be sufficient to stave off the fragmentation and alienation that became synonymous with urban existence. Ralph Ellison notes that although religion, folklore and family offer support to the transplanted southerner, often in the urban environment, "his family disintegrates, his church splinters; his folk wisdom is discarded in the mistaken notion that it in no way applies to urban living; and his formal education (never really his own) provides him with neither scientific description nor rounded philosophical interpretation of the profound forces that are transforming his total being" (243). As a result, the character finds himself ill-equipped to combat the harshness of the urban landscape. Toni Morrison calls this phenomenon the absence of the ancestor, community (or village) values that determine the success of the character. She asserts:

The advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black ancestor is imagined as surviving in the village but not in the city. [...] The city is wholesome, loved when such an ancestor is on the scene, when neighborhood links are secure. [...] The wantonness described in much of urban Black literature is really the wantonness of a character out of touch with the ancestor. (39-40)

Morrison concludes that contemporary black writers “seem to view urban life as lovable only when the ancestor is there” and has not “abandoned the traditional role of advisor with a strong connection to the past” (40). Perhaps Rodgers shares a most appropriate insight when he concludes that such urban portraits constitute “a century-long attempt to reconvene the family mealtime gathering in the heart of the modern city” (37).

This task would not be an easy one for Ann Petry, whose 1940s novel *The Street* attempted to raise America’s awareness of one casualty of the racial and economic oppression of black Americans: the disintegration of the black family. Yet in lodging complaints familiar to the genre of African American protest literature, Petry inscribes an urban landscape that marginalizes women, that frustrates, suffocates and destroys. The protagonist of Ann Petry’s *The Street* comes to Harlem’s 116th street in pursuit of the American dream, and struggles to create a safe haven for her and her young son. There is no ancestor, only a grandmother who exists as a memory; neither is there a sense of community. Petry’s novel presents the reader with community residents cast as predatory, animalistic characters whose behavior might be explained by their individual estrangement from the black community and the black community’s marginalization from the larger society.¹ J. Lee Greene contends that “through the personal history she provides for each of these characters, Petry indicates how the dominant social environment (i.e., the metaphorical street) has transformed each into a “wolfish beast” (196). Though

¹ See J. Lee Greene, *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel’s First Century*. In the section titled “Configurations of Desire in *The Street*,” Greene notes that Petry uses physical and moral abnormalities to depict qualities of wolfishness in characters and imagistic patterns to reveal the protagonists’ bestial natures (188-200). Greene writes, “The abundance of animal imagery; the imagistic patterns that foreground eating, ingestion, and consumption; the human qualities assigned to animals; the bestial qualities assigned to humans—these and other patterns and motifs all become centrally focused on the ‘street,’ which in its broad metaphorical function is the most deadly beast Lutie faces in the novel. The street is literal and figurative, human and animal [...]” (198).

characterized by traditional aspects of discontinuity, fragmentation, and alienation, Petry's portrait suggests a symbolic association of space with the patriarchal society that confines women and frustrates their efforts to move beyond the limitation of their designated space in society.

Surely the story of *The Street* ends tragically for the protagonist Lutie Johnson, whose attempts to build a better life for herself and her son are frustrated at every turn. Lutie operates under the false assumption that the American dream of economic individualism can work for black females under the same conditions that it works for white males. One can readily detect in the symbolic pattern of images that Petry uses in *The Street* an interpretation of woman's fate in a "masculine" universe. The urban landscape Petry creates is a hostile one, and from the beginning of the novel, images convey male aggression directed against woman. As Lutie Johnson walks the street in search of an apartment, Petry describes the wind as a territorial guardian. "Fingering" its way up the street, it rushes, pushes, grabs, all in one violent assault. The wind's assault on the protagonist portends the abusive treatment she will experience at the hands of certain males in the community later on in the novel. An uninvited seducer, the wind "lifted [her] hair away from the back of her neck so that she felt suddenly naked and bald" (2), much in the same way that the apartment superintendent's lascivious looks undress her months before his actual attempted rape. Like the men in the novel, the wind toys with Lutie Johnson, playfully thwarting her in her missions, in her desperate dreams to escape the clutches of the street, dreams to which she tenaciously clings. Petry writes:

The wind pried at the red skullcap on her head, and as though angered because it couldn't tear it loose from its firm anchorage of bobby pins the wind blew a great cloud of dust and ashes and bits of paper into her face, her legs, her nose. It smashed against her ears as though it were giving her a final exasperated blow as proof of its displeasure in not being able to make her move on. (3)

Petry's city is definitely not a nurturing place for women. As Lutie Johnson examines the apartment, Petry refers to the

superintendent as “some dark hound of hell” who is “eating her up with his eyes” (25). The scrawled and painted-over walls suggest a transience and perhaps a foreboding that Lutie’s stay too will be temporary; she will be devoured like other women who are unattached to men. Few women develop long-term relationships in such an environment and when such relationships are able to survive, they sustain themselves on some form of perversion like the symbiotic relationships of Junto, the white proprietor, and Mrs. Hedges, the black madam, both of whom try to ensnare the protagonist. The street and everything on it is menacing. The building itself is a place that swallows up its inhabitants—the walls “bending and swaying toward her in an effort to envelop her” (12). It seems to devour its inhabitants like a carnivore. The images of confinement and entrapment are legion. Home, whether the apartment in which Lutie Johnson and her son live or any other in that community, is perceived as one cluster of narrow, dark rooms after another. Descending the dark, high, and narrow stairs Lutie envisions “a [...] perfected kind of hell [...]” (6) suggesting a designed fate.

The surroundings stifle and metaphorically squeeze the very life from her. In such a setting, Lutie Johnson has few options besides being a sexual commodity. These invisible walls impose the limits of Lutie Johnson’s self-actualization. Petry writes:

Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North’s lynch mobs [...] the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place. [...] From the time she was born, she had been lured into an ever-narrowing street until now she was nearly walled in and the wall had been built up brick by brick by eager white hands. (323)

Lutie Johnson’s gender, as much as her race, confines her to an urban underclass that functions along the periphery of the city.

Tropes of enclosure underscore the contrast between confinement and freedom. In trying to envision her future—where a single (separated) black woman could go—Lutie Johnson “can’t see anything ahead of [her] except those walls that push against [her]” (83). Getting away is perceived as leaving 116th Street and

the “dark, narrow rooms and [...] walls that pressed against her” (207). Leaving also embodies the antithesis of her present lack of space: “some place where there were trees and the streets were clean and the rooms would be full of sunlight” (151). Petry’s city contains no “experiential, communal images of urban life” (Bremer 46). There is no network of females whose collective wisdom offers support or strategies for survival in that urban community.

Ironically, when Lutie Johnson has a problem, she must turn to the very men who prey upon her. There are no sisters to turn to; there are no other experienced mothers to whom to appeal for advice; there is no extended family where her child can seek comfort when his mother is away. In *The Street* there are no aunts, mothers, grandmothers, or any female descendants (which we know to exist in *most* black communities) to whom Lutie Johnson can turn for strength. The village is absent. The influence of the grandmother appears only as remembered admonitions about men and serves only to sustain Lutie Johnson’s moral code. Her situation is unnatural and perhaps suggests Petry’s perception of the city as a perverse environment that fragments and destroys.

The city in *The Street* is a hostile place for a woman seeking to function independently of a man. It symbolizes the patriarchal forces summoned to keep women in their “proper place” by commodifying women and enclosing them in a cage of frustration and despair. The woman who attempts to live on her own terms in Petry’s city is an outsider; there are no options which she finds acceptable. The result is a certain degree of detachment; the city becomes an impersonal symbol of that which limits and controls, that which excludes, that which oppresses and destroys.

Petry’s use of the trope of the invisible wall as a defining feature of gendered space in urban America functions much in the way that Naylor’s highly visible wall in *The Women of Brewster Place* does, embodying all the “isms” that deny black women access to power and empowerment. Gloria Naylor’s 1980s novel *The Women of Brewster Place* is often cast in the naturalistic vein of Ann Petry’s *The Street* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in their depiction of urban landscapes in which impoverished African

Americans find themselves trapped by economics and race—functioning in various marginalized states of existence in the land of plenty. In seven vignettes that bespeak the emotional pain of those forced by myriad circumstances to eke out a living behind a wall of despair and hopelessness, Naylor weaves together the personal narratives of several women who have migrated to the dead-end street of Brewster Place.

The most prominent aspect of the urban landscape in Naylor's novel is that of the wall, symbolic of the dead ends that the women have reached in their lives and of the heightened alienation of the black urban poor from mainstream America. A single mother of a son raised to be needy and dependent, Mattie Michael retreats from the emptiness created by her adult son's flight from criminal prosecution. Arriving at Brewster Place on a dreary snowy day and armed with plants that would have to fight one another for the scant life-sustaining rays of sunlight that scale the wall, Mattie accepts that most will not survive their new home. The ill-fated plants and the fading memory of Tennessee cane carried on a whiff of food being prepared, portend the bleakness of Mattie's future existence on crowded Brewster Place. Similarly, as Mae Johnson approaches Brewster Place after yet another failed search for idealized love, she sees in the wall a hungry mouth waiting to devour the indomitable spirit of a younger rebellious Mae. Also at Brewster Place is Kiswana Brown, a young woman whose black nationalism has prompted her rejection of a comfortable bourgeois existence in nearby Linden Hills, the black middle-class community of Naylor's second novel. Kiswana cannot surmount the wall of mistrust and contentiousness that harbors disunity, a wall that bounces back to her the frustrations of trying to ennoble and empower the impoverished community on which Linden Hills and the rest of America have turned their backs. The lesbians Lorraine and Theresa cannot surmount the wall of homophobia that turns a hoped-for retreat into a prison, which claims the life of not only Lorraine but Ben, the broken yet compassionate alcoholic maintenance man. Nor is existence there any more promising for Cora Lee, whose life seems an endless stream of babies who grow up to be children whom she cannot control, or for Ciel Turner, traumatized by her daughter's death.

In describing Brewster Place, Naylor signifies on the stereotype of black urban woman as sexually profligate mothers of children born out of wedlock, a fixture in the urban landscapes as imagined in the American psyche. The street itself is "the bastard child" of corrupt political machinations, conceived in a damp smoke-filled room and emerging from the "consummation of their respective desires"; though "born" in the city legislature, its "true parentage [is] hidden" (1). The sexual imagery conveys the idea that both place and people are products of a self-serving, exploitative society.

In the aftermath of white flight, Brewster Place offers these women refuge. The street itself is maternal essence, fond, as Naylor tells us, of her "colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home" (4). It is a place pulsing with women's energy: "Nutmeg arms leaned over windowsills, gnarled ebony legs carried groceries up double flights of steps, and saffron hands strung out wet laundry on backyard lines" (4). The sensory imagery writes women's presence.

In "*Who Set You Flowin'?*": *The African American Migration Narrative*, Griffin explains that in the process of trying to negotiate the urban landscape and the negative effects of urbanization, residents seek safe havens or safe spaces. As they appear in the narrative, "these spaces are either the locus for producing and maintaining the negative effects of urbanization—fragmentation, dislocation, and material and spiritual impoverishment—or 'safe havens' from these negative effects [...] that help the migrant to construct an alternate urban subjectivity" (8). These spaces can also include extended families, the church, secular rituals and community organizations, and "at their most progressive they are spaces of retreat, healing, and resistance" (Griffin 9). Mattie Michael, who comes closest to embodying such space, emerges as a kind of nurturing, mothering ancestor figure of Brewster Place. We see this in the "laying on of hands ritual" (Griffin 120) that Mattie performs on Ciel, who is wasting away in grief after her toddler's death, and in the sanctuary Mattie offers Etta, once again a used and discarded sexual object still unable to detect the shine of her own star.

However, both hope and despair live on in Brewster Place. Though for some of the residents Brewster Place is a safe haven, for others it is a continuation of the victimization of women. For example, in "The Two" we witness the brutal gang rape of the lesbian Lorraine. Philip Page theorizes that

neither family nor community provides *consistent* [my emphasis] mechanisms for characters to reconstruct the past or to rediscover personal meaning through integration of self and group. No apocalyptic changes appear likely to regenerate characters or communities, and characters' journeys rarely move them significantly toward enlightenment. [...] What little individual community progress is made seems [...] momentary. (157)

We learn from the epilogue of the novel that the rallying of the community for the block party ends as yet another deferred dream.

The week of torrential rain after Lorraine's rape and Ben's death brings a kind of cleansing or ritual bathing that provides opportunities for community renewal in the midst of death and despair. Forced to remain inside their apartments, the community must retreat within itself to find the light that was missing on the streets. Restless sleep haunted by dreams of Lorraine's death brings reminders of collective victimization to the women. Mattie's dream also represents the promise of a fruitful collective endeavor to improve their community. In her dream, the women work together to disassemble the bloodstained wall, passing bricks from hand to hand, chipping away at the wall with their hands, themselves bathed ritually by the torrential rains. The bustling preparations for the block party to raise legal fees for their battle for decent housing contrast with the tensions of the previous tenant association meetings.

The duality of hope and despair emerges from the portrait of the women's lives in *The Women of Brewster Place*. The destruction of the wall in Mattie's dream at the end of the novel is an open door through which the women can emerge, taking control of their lives in a way that they either could not or would not in the past. Lynch notes,

If the wall becomes a kind of mirror in which they look in order to survive, their destruction of the wall is a symbolic eradication of their old, lesser selves. As they spontaneously remove the horrid structure brick by brick, they defy and transcend the severe limitations the city imposes on them. (189)

Brewster Place lives and ultimately dies with the dreams of the women who inhabit that urban landscape. Brewster Place is immortalized in the memories, longings, hopes, and dreams of its children. An ancestral memory of place carried with its descendants, Brewster Place lies abandoned after the area has been condemned by the city and the residents evicted. Naylor writes:

It dies when the odors of hope, despair, lust, and caring are wiped out by the seasonal winds; when dust has settled into the cracks and scars, leveling their depths and discolorations—their reasons for being; when the spirit is trapped and fading in someone's memory. [...] death [...] is a second behind the expiration of its spirit in the minds of its children. But the colored daughters of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up with their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn. [...] So Brewster Place still waits to die. (191-92)

After the housing project is condemned, the women pack their belongings to move to another street, taking with them the deferred dreams of a marginalized community of women.

Both *The Street* and *The Women of Brewster Place* effectively employ the tropes of enclosure to suggest “both the psychological dead ends into which some characters are driven and the social and psychological forces that pressure them into such conditions” (Page 157-58). In their depiction of the nightmarish conclusion to the pursuit of the American dream, both urban portraits in these texts by African American women might be summarized by an observation made by the late urban migrant Ralph Ellison in his essay “Harlem is Nowhere”:

In relation to their Southern background, the cultural history of Negroes in the North reads like the legend of some tragic people

out of mythology, a people which aspired to escape from its own unhappy homeland to the apparent peace of a distant mountain; but which, in migrating, made some fatal error of judgment and fell into a great chasm of mazelike passages that promise ever to lead to the mountain but end ever against a wall. (244)

While Lutie Johnson is caught in the web of male desire and loses part of her self to escape it, the women of Brewster Place emerge tattered though not totally defeated and rise Phoenix-like to continue in another place, in another time, the struggle to define the parameters of their existence and to live life on their own terms.

MAXINE SAMPLE
State University of West Georgia

Works Cited

- Bremer, Sidney. "Lost Continuities: Alternative Urban Visions in Chicago Novels, 1890-1915." *Soundings* 64.1 (Spring 1981): 29-51.
- Christian, Barbara. "Gloria Naylor's Geography: Community, Class, and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian Book, 1990.
- Ellison, Ralph. "Harlem is Nowhere." *Cultural Contexts for Ellison's The Invisible Man*. Ed. Eric Sundquist. New York: Bedford Books/St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Gelfant, Blanche. *The American City Novel*. 1954. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970.
- Greene, J. Lee. *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel's First Century*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "Who Set You Flowin'?: The African American Migration Narrative." New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

- Hakutani, Yoshinobu, and Robert Butler, eds. *The City in African American Literature*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995.
- Lynch, Michael F. "The Wall and the Mirror in the Promised Land: The City in the Novels of Gloria Naylor." *The City in African American Literature*. Eds. Yoshinobu and Robert Butler. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995. 181-95.
- Morrison, Toni. "City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction." *Literature and the American Urban Experience*. Eds. Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981. 35-43.
- Naylor, Gloria. *Linden Hills*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1985.
- . *The Women of Brewster Place*. 1982. New York: Viking, 1983.
- Page, Philip. *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.
- Petry, Ann. *The Street*. 1946. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.
- Rodgers, Lawrence R. *Canaan Bound: The African American Great Migration Novel*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997.