



# American Dream, Urban Nightmare: Edwidge Danticat's Breath, Eyes, Memory and George Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin

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American Dream, Urban Nightmare:  
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George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*

**I**n *the Castle of My Skin* was published in 1953. It was written by George Lamming who was born in British administered Barbados in 1927 and who spent his teenage years in the suburbs of Bridgetown, the capital city, where he was mainly brought up by his unmarried mother. It is a semi-autobiographical account of the life of G., the protagonist, from his ninth birthday until he reaches his majority and leaves for Trinidad where he will take up a teaching position. These years are marked by the young character's endeavour to find out who he is. But the absence of a real family life—his father has gone and left him in the charge of his mother, his uncle has left for America, his grandmother has gone to Panama and his grandfather is dead—and the mediocrity of the education he receives at the village school—teachers conceal Barbados' past, its history of slavery and oppression, and only emphasize its good relations with the mother country—hinder his quest for identity. There is some sign of hope when G. obtains a grant allowing him to go to high school, but secondary education slowly alienates him from his friends and his peasant background. G.'s transition to adulthood also coincides with crucial changes that affect his village. They are essentially due to a strike organised by the workers of the nearby city. The spirit of rebellion generated by the social upheaval soon contaminates the surrounding villages and some rioters attempt to kill Mr Creighton, the local landowner. The strike paves the way for a new breed of politicians, represented by Mr Slime, the trade union leader. It also announces the end of colonial customs typified by a blind devotion to the white landlords, and the development of the capitalist system on the island, best shown

when the members of the new brown-skinned middle class buy the land of the weakened landlord and order the expulsion of the village inhabitants who do not understand why they are so suddenly dispossessed of their houses. The novel ends on the eve of G.'s departure for Trinidad. It is the occasion for him to have a last conversation with his boyhood friend Trumper who has just returned from America, and who makes him discover the notion of black unity that he still finds difficult to understand.

*Breath, Eyes, Memory* came out some forty years later, in 1994. Its author, Edwidge Danticat, is an American novelist who was born in Haiti in 1969, raised there by an aunt until she was twelve and left for the United States to rejoin her parents. It is obvious that Danticat's novel also has some autobiographical overtones. It relates the story of Sophie Caco, a Haitian girl who was entrusted to her aunt's care at the age of four when her mother Martine emigrated to America. The narrative begins when the protagonist is twelve and leaves for New York to be reunited with her mother. When she arrives in New York, Sophie discovers why she has never known her father: her mother was raped in a canefield when she was a teenager. Martine, who works as an auxiliary in a nursing home, harbours great expectations for her daughter whom she expects to become a physician and marry a well-to-do Haitian husband. When Sophie, aged eighteen, graduates from high school, the rebuilt family moves into a new neighbourhood where she falls in love with Joseph, an African-American saxophone player who is her mother's age. When Martine realizes that her daughter has become infatuated with Joseph, she forces her to undergo regular "virginity tests" to make sure she will not have sexual relations out of wedlock. The repetition of the "test" upsets Sophie who finally chooses to deflower herself by using a kitchen pestle, but who also mutilates herself in the process. Dismissed by her mother who believes she has had sexual intercourse, Sophie goes to live with Joseph, marries him and soon gives birth to a daughter. Incapable of leading a normal sexual life because of the trauma she underwent, Sophie escapes to Haiti with her young daughter, hoping to understand why Haitian women strive to perpetuate outdated traditions. Martine also makes the journey to the island where she

becomes reconciled with her daughter. Mothers and daughters finally fly back to the United States where they resume their family lives. No sooner have they returned than Martine learns she is pregnant. Unable to face a pregnancy that conjures up visions of the rape she endured as a teenager, she commits suicide by stabbing herself in the stomach. Her corpse is then transported to her remote Haitian village to be buried. The funeral means a new start for Sophie who frees herself from the guilt that has so far ruined her life.

In many respects, *In the Castle of My Skin* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* are very distinct novels. The main interest of Lamming's work lies in the denunciation of colonialism, in the condemnation of its damaging effects such as racism or poverty, and the announcement that its end is close. The apology of decolonization is obvious when the narrator states that "Boy Blue [...] had a feeling that it would be nice if some of the people in the village got a bit of the big life" (CMS 168). In Danticat's novel, it is the feminist dimension which is of paramount importance. Despite an obvious criticism of their conservatism, the young writer praises Haitian women for their courage and doggedness. This is exemplified by the character of the grandmother who epitomizes Haitian resignation and wisdom when she admits that "We come from a place [...] where in one instant, you can lose your father and all your other dreams" (BEM 165). Yet, despite marked differences in time, setting and topic, the two works are far from being completely disconnected. In fact, they hinge on similar key concepts, such as the sense of place and the inevitability of emigration.

Sandra Pouchet Paquet once pointed out that, for George Lamming, "West Indian novelists of the [fifties] remained essentially rooted in the experience of the West Indian peasant majority: 'the substance of their books, the general motives and directions are peasant'" (52). Given the background of *In the Castle of My Skin*, namely the search for identity in a small rural community bound to disappear, one may think that the Barbadian writer made this statement to defend his own cause and also worked on the assumption that what was true for him was true for

his fellow writers. Judging by the context of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, one must admit that younger Caribbean writers seem to confirm Lamming's vision. Assuredly, Edwidge Danticat can be added to the list of artists concerned: many passages from her novel praise the traditions peculiar to her island's countrymen and out of thirty-five chapters, twenty take place in the Haitian countryside. However, it would be misleading to assert that *In the Castle of My Skin* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* are, above all, country novels. The main subjects tackled in the two narratives, feminist and colonial protests, are beyond the scope of average country life. Furthermore, it would be inaccurate to assert that urban vicissitudes are peripheral to both works. Even if city life is not their focal point, even if they are not "yard novels," that is to say, novels concerned with "the yards and streets of lower class, urban West Indian neighbourhoods" (Hamner 99), it still plays an important part and cannot be excluded.

The reader readily notices, in each novel, the dependence of villages on the nearby towns. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the first village mentioned resembles a kind of parasitical excrescence which feeds on Port-au-Prince. Croix-des-Rosets has no existence of its own. As the narrator makes clear, it is only a dormitory suburb that is not part of any middle-class suburbia. Croix-des-Rosets is nothing but a shanty town, which is proved by several references to the barrack-yards that make it:

Here in Croix-des-Rosets, most of the people were city workers who labored in baseball or clothing factories and lived in small cramped houses to support their families back in the provinces. Tante Atie said that we were lucky to live in a house as big as ours, with a living room to receive our guests, *plus* a room for the two of us to sleep in. [...] The others had to live in huts, shacks, or one-room houses that, sometimes, they had to build themselves. In spite of where they might live, this potluck was open to everybody who wanted to come. There was no field to plant, but the workers used their friendships in the factories or their grouping in the common yards as a reason to get together, eat, and celebrate life. (BEM 11-12)



In fact, the reader assumes that Croix-des-Rosets is a village first because that is the way the narrator refers to it (*BEM* 5). Then it is made clear that many dwellers come from the countryside where they have their roots. It is the various allusions to country life and traditions that give a sort of rural dimension to the slum (*BEM* 20). Finally, the impression that the township is detached from the city is reinforced by the van trip the narrator and her aunt make to Port-au-Prince to go to the airport (*BEM* 32); but for all that, it is difficult to define the place as a real entity, as a self-contained country village.

The same can be said of the protagonist's village in *In the Castle of My Skin* that takes on the appearance of a working-class extension of the town. Indeed, the boundary between Belleville and Creighton's village is only marked by a street (*CMS* 200), and it is very easy, even for children, to walk from the village to the city (*CMS* 101). Moreover, the problems of salubrity alluded to in the episode of the sanitary inspector suggest that Creighton's village is a *favela* (*CMS* 6). Above all, the picture drawn by the omniscient narrator of the activities peculiar to the village matches the traditional descriptions of West Indian shanty towns that can be found in major Jamaican or Trinidadian novels such as Roger Mais's *The Hills Were Joyful Together* and Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance* which, after the fashion of Lamming's novel, begin with a precise description of the township:

The village was a marvel of small, heaped houses raised jauntily on groundsels of limestone, and arranged in rows on either side of the multiplying marl roads. Sometimes the roads disintegrated, the limestone slid back and the houses advanced across their boundaries to meet those on the opposite side in an embrace of board and shingle and cactus fence. The white marl roads made four at each crossing except where the road narrowed to a lane or alley that led into a tenant's backyard. There were shops at each crossing: one, two, sometimes three, and so positioned that the respective owners could note each other's customers. And wherever there were shops there was a street lamp ringed to a post, and always much activity, and often the stench of raw living. The lamps were fuelled with gas and lit at six every evening. When the lights went on, little boys like a bevy of flies assembled

around the lamp-post for gossip and stories. Elsewhere in a similar manner men gathered to throw dice or cut cards or simply to talk. (CMS 2)

But contrary to their Haitian counterparts in Croix-des-Rosets, the inhabitants of Creighton's village do not work in the nearby town. They are dependent on the white landlord who controls the estate where a great part of the villagers seems to be employed. The submission to the white landowner and his gang of devoted overseers can lead the reader to believe that Creighton's village is more a rural locality whose inhabitants work on the plantations. Indeed, in both novels, the difference between town and country is not always clearly delineated. The description of Croix-des-Rosets and Creighton's village reminds one of the beginning of *Guerillas*, when V. S. Naipaul gives an account of the problems of development the island's main town comes across: "It was possible to see over what the city had spread: on one side, the swamp, drying out to a great plain; on the other side, a chain of hills, rising directly from the plain. The openness didn't last for long. Villages had become suburbs" (9). It is obvious that the difference between town and country is not easily made in islands where distances are far more reduced than on the mainland, where the space available is far more limited.

The strikes which shake Barbados in *In the Castle of My Skin* (CMS 181) confirm the idea that on a small island no place, city or village, is immune from an eventual after-shock. The uproar originates in Belleville where it has apparently been triggered off by dockers, but it soon affects Creighton's village as the white landlord is a partner in the shipping company where the strike was called (CMS 191). In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, political violence is not a specific feature of the city or the country either. To the murder of the student by the local police witnessed by the main characters when they are on their way to the airport (BEM 34) corresponds the beating and the killing of the coal vendor by the *Macoutes* in La Nouvelle Dame Marie (BEM 118). Urban violence quickly spreads to the countryside which is not impervious to the events that crop up in the city.

Yet, the city—and especially the local town which in this particular case is the island's capital—very often represents a completely different environment for the characters of the two novels. Although it is very close to the suburbs, it remains a remote world, not in terms of distance, but in terms of life style. What characterizes the city is the exact opposite of what can be found in the villages. In *In the Castle of My Skin*, the adjectives used to describe the city are in stark contrast with those which could define the township. The city is affluent, still, orderly and whenever this harmony is jeopardized, it is because of undesirable intruders, agitation is not ascribed to permanent residents:

We were now in Belleville where the white people lived, and the streets bordered by palm trees were called avenues. Here the houses were all bungalows high and wide with open galleries and porticoes. Bottles of milk were grouped on the steps, and occasionally light flickered from the kitchens where the servants were preparing early coffee. (CMS 101)

It was a terrible sight. The workers moved into the main streets of the city, and when the politicians realized what might happen they came out. They warned the men not to destroy anything, above all the lives of innocent people in stores and shops. But it was too late. [...] The damage took a strange form. Cars were overturned, and the bread vans making the early deliveries were stopped, emptied and turned on one side in the gutter. Some of the men ate the loaves, and others used them as weapons to throw at the police. In the main street of the city two large stores had been entered; the shop windows were destroyed but the men refused to take the cloth. They trampled across the show window over the silk and satin and entered the store. (CMS 192)

It is relevant to note that the rioters do not seek to appropriate the consumer goods that the white or brown-skinned urban middle classes fancy, but insist on destroying them. This occasional fury can be partly explained by the feeling of rejection many colonials harbour because they are not accepted as full citizens in their own country, and more particularly in public places usually associated with the city (CMS 288). The local town is not a reflection of West



Indian life at large and does not really stand for something enviable. It was built by the colonizers and was supposed to reproduce life as it could be found in the home country. Thus, Bridgetown (or its fictional twin Belleville) and Port-au-Prince are mock towns. After all, affluence, stillness and order are not necessarily significant values in the Caribbean. This discrepancy also explains why many islanders are attracted to the local town: it bears marks of exoticism and it can therefore arouse some short-lived wonder (*BEM* 177). It is not, however, a place where one would want to settle at all costs, as the following extracts from *Breath, Eyes, Memory* suggest:

They stood outside the stores in their Sunday dresses to listen to the sounds of the toy police cars and talking dolls chattering over the festive music. They went to Mass at the Gothic cathedral, then spent the rest of the night sitting by the fountains and gazing at the Nativity scenes on the Champs-de-Mars. They bought ice cream cones and fireworks, while young tourists offered them cigarettes for the privilege of taking their pictures. They pretended to be students at one of the gentry's universities and even went so far as describing the plush homes they said they lived in. [...] Then before dawn, they took a van back home and slipped into bed before my grandmother woke up. (*BEM* 33)

In her pink dress and brown sandals, with the village dust settled on her toes, it was easy to tell that she did not belong there. She blended in neither with the smiling well-dressed groups on their way to board the planes nor with the jeans-clad tourists whom the panhandlers surrounded at the gate. (*BEM* 36)

In any case, the reader gets the feeling that the average Caribbean workers will never make it in the local town. Their presence is tolerated because there is a need for cheap manpower, but they are expected to return to their slums once they have completed their daily drudgery. This is quite obvious in Lamming's novel since the period of time taken into account is the 1950s, when the island is still in the hands of the British colonizers who must above all control the cities that are places of power (*CMS* 193). Although it is set in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it is not really

surprising in Danticat's work either: it is clearly stated that Port-au-Prince accommodates many American tourists who behave as neo-colonizers only interested in a lifeless Caribbean background which suits their needs (*BEM* 177-78). If they want to shed their semi-rural, semi-township life to become real urban dwellers, West Indians are doomed to go abroad and settle in a foreign town. But not all destinations are suitable. Going to Britain or France—the homelands of their rulers—might amount to jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Therefore, the obvious solution is the USA, the nation of the American dream (*CMS* 78), synonym of success and well-being. So West Indians centre their hopes on the American city—which seems more within their reach than the capital of their own island.

The chronic unemployment, political instability and demographic pressure that hit the West Indies after the Second World War transformed a region of longstanding immigration which had received numerous newcomers from Europe, Africa and Asia into a land of emigration which sent every year thousands of its countrymen abroad. Very early, and for various reasons, many Caribbean emigrants, whether they came from former Spanish, French or English colonies, chose the United States of America as their country of destination. This contributed to the establishment of a significant West Indian community, who constituted a bridgehead on which the subsequent waves of emigrants could rely. The presence of relatives who could send sound information and thus minimize the risks inherent to emigration encouraged a real exodus to America and its most promising urban centres. *In the Castle of My Skin* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* give a good representation of this phenomenon. In Lamming's novel, each West Indian family has at least one relative in the States to whom they can turn when the going gets tough (*CMS* 211). Danticat's novel goes further as it indicates that Haitians have an accurate idea of the income that can be earned in the States since money received from America contributes to the improvement of living conditions in the local villages. It gives them a good idea of the difference in living standards that prevails and of the way of life they could enjoy if they emigrated (*BEM* 11-13).

Yet, the reader notices that the information available for those who stay behind on the islands is often vague and unreliable, for several reasons. To start with, the distance between the American mainland and the Caribbean islands is undeniably a factor of distortion. Then, people might not be on the same wavelength in America as in the West Indies, and messages can take on different meanings. Lastly, Barbadians or Haitians living in America may wish to exaggerate their success to impress their fellow citizens who still reside in the West Indies. As a result, America, more especially the American city and its best embodiment, New York, conveys diehard fantasies:

'Where you want to go to?' Boy Blue asked. 'You always talkin' 'bout you want to go away.'

'I don't know,' said Trumper, 'p'raps to America. They say things good there.'

'Mr. Slime call it the promise land an' some who been an' come back says 'tis the bread basket o' the world.'

'What they mean by that?' Trumper asked.

'Seems it mean you can get all you want to eat,' Boy Blue said. [...]

'tis only what I hear them say,' said Boy Blue. 'You push in what they call a dime through a little hole, and the plate o' food come out at you through another hole.' (CMS 160-61)

"Do you know where she is? She was supposed to meet me here. I sent her a cassette from America."

"How is there?" Her eyes were glowing. "Is it like they say? Large? Grand? Are there really pennies on the streets and lots of maids' jobs?" (BEM 98)

Strangely enough, it is the absence of precise data that makes America a destination which can be seriously envisaged and the American city an attractive place in which to live. Not knowing exactly what happens beyond the Caribbean Sea, it is possible for West Indians to dream of a land of milk and honey, of a city equal to their ambition. The local town does not trigger off such expectations because islanders know exactly what the situation is like in their capital. So it is the unknown and the opportunities it

entails which urges West Indians to leave their country and which allows them to get away from a social and geographical confinement. Unfortunately, on reaching the American mainland, things do not work out the way they hoped. They are no more welcome in the American city than they were in their local town. If they were reminded of their colonial, working-class, inferior status in their native island, they are ostracized because of their skin colour and alien condition in the United States (*BEM* 51). Moreover, the way most Americans behave towards coloured people leads them to a worse predicament. The colonials who left their islands were accustomed, in Selvon's words, "to the old English [or European] diplomacy: 'thank you sir,' and 'how do you do' and that sort of thing. In America, you see a sign telling you to keep off" (40). Because generally speaking Americans are outspoken (*CMS* 287-288), West Indians obtain the proof that it is not their farming or working-class stock which excludes them from any form of social advancement, but their skin colour, and this adds to their initial disorientation. And yet, the very first impression they had of the city on arrival was promising, in keeping with the American dream. But it quickly transformed into an urban nightmare as the subsequent extracts show:

'But the first night I walk down Broadway,' Trumper said, 'that wus something out o' this world. I don't exactly recall what kind o' feelin' I had, but nothing seem real to me. 'Tis one thing you always feel 'bout America. Although everything goin' on round you for you to see, nothing still seem real. There wus just light an' light an' more lights. I start to get a headache when the lights go on an' off till nothin' seem but one set of light. An' the noise! When I tell you noise, boy, I mean noise. If America is anything in this world, 'tis a country o' noise. (*CMS* 276)

She leaned over and attached my seatbelt as the car finally drove off. Night had just fallen. Lights glowed everywhere. A long string of cars sped along the highway, each like a single diamond on a very long bracelet. [...] All the street lights were suddenly gone. The streets we drove down now were dim and hazy. The windows were draped with bars; black trash bags blew out into the night air. There were young men standing on street corners,

throwing empty cans at passing cars. My mother swerved the car to avoid a bottle that almost came crashing through the windshield. (*BEM* 42-43)

West Indians realize that violence is not only endemic in their region of the world and that life in America is not easier than in the Caribbean—except from a material point of view—for it is undeniable that West Indian immigrants improve their standard of living in the United States. When Trumper returns from America, the fashionable clothes he wears betray that he was rather well-off in the USA. It is relevant that Lamming lingers on the sartorial description of the character who comes back from the United States. The way he is dressed is the most obvious means to show that he has made it in the States. It is the token of success par excellence that he can bring home. When Trumper asserts in the same passage that he used to have two telephones and three electric fans (*CMS* 274-75), no one can ascertain that he tells the truth; but the fine quality of his suit speaks for itself. Trendy garments are the harbingers of a better life style. This detail does not escape Danticat's protagonist when she flies back to Haiti and buys a pair of "I LOVE NEW YORK" sweatshirts for her aunt and her grandmother (*BEM* 106). She knows that the two women will be proud to sport a sign of her prosperity and they will concomitantly become human proofs of the American dream. In the same way, the physical condition of the returning emigrants is also revealing of the West Indians' way of living in the United States. Their good health shows that they have money. When Trumper incidentally points out that he has been eating too much recently (*CMS* 273), this is nothing but a show of wealth for his fellow citizens who do not enjoy such preferential treatment. However, the abundance of food is not necessarily proof that West Indians are prosperous in the United States. Even though they have the possibility to eat to satiety in America, it is plain in Danticat's novel that they feed on junk food and that they suffer from the problems of obesity which affect the American lower classes. The confession of Sophie's mother who recognizes that she gained sixty pounds the first year she arrived in America goes along these lines (*BEM* 179).



West Indian emigrants seem better off compared to their counterparts who remained behind but as can be expected, they only swell the ranks of the American destitutes. They do not move into middle-class suburbs, but into neighbourhoods that are not without recalling their original slums back in the Caribbean:

All along the avenue were people who seemed displaced among the speeding cars and very tall buildings. They walked and talked and argued in Creole and even played dominoes on their stoops. [...] We strolled through long stretches of streets where merengue blared from car windows and children addressed one another in curses. (*BEM* 52)

Although, strictly speaking, they do not match the description of Caribbean townships, these areas evoke the Barbadian or Haitian barrack-yards and they above all correspond to the American inner cities where most immigrants are parked. It is especially noticeable in Danticat's novel that those districts lack the human warmth of the Caribbean. The children who curse each other are a good example: the language they use is far from having the colourful dimension of Haitian swearwords (*BEM* 54-55). What is also very telling is the way the narrator describes the American inner cities. The tone is very matter-of-fact. When she points to the decay of the neighbourhood, no personal feeling is expressed. It contrasts very much with the emphasis on colour that can be found even in the americanized Caribbean town (*BEM* 32). Another striking instance is the description of the American subway which clashes with that of the motley *tap tap* van (*BEM* 94) and emphasizes the dull reality of urban life in America:

A musty heat surrounded us as we stood on the platform waiting for a subway train to come. Inside the train, there were listless faces, people clutching the straps, hanging on. In Haiti, there were only sugar cane railroads that ran from the sugar mill in Port-au-Prince to plantation towns all over the countryside. (*BEM* 77)

The narrator insists that Americans are very lucky to be able to benefit from such transport facilities but regrets that they do not

take advantage of their good luck to give a human touch to their daily life. Haitians or West Indians in general feel ill-at-ease in the individualistic American society and their reflex is to reproduce in American cities the life style they used to enjoy on their home island. Indeed, the reader witnesses the creation of a Haitian ghetto in New York (*BEM* 50). People insist on eating Haitian food (*BEM* 53), listening to Haitian music (*BEM* 213) and preserving their local habits. The example of the shop where Haitians can send cassettes and money home epitomizes the situation. It is like an umbilical cord linking the still not self-reliant community to the mother country. This is very ironical insofar as the West Indians find themselves in the position of the colonizers who, two hundred years before, had tried to impose their customs in the Caribbean. But this time, one does not witness the reproduction of the (European) culture of the centre on the periphery (The Caribbean) but the duplication of the lifestyle of the periphery (West Indian culture) on the margin (the inner city) of a strategic centre (the American metropolis). One can rightly wonder to what extent West Indians will manage to make their culture coexist with the dominant way of life. The answer given by the two novels is rather pessimistic. The recurrent journeys between urban America and the Caribbean countryside indicates that Haitian or Barbadian expatriates may never achieve real autonomy. Only when they go back to their islands do they realize where they belong, where their true self is, but at the same time they acknowledge that a final return is not conceivable. For example, when Trumper comes back from America, he understands straight away the changes that have occurred in Creighton's village (*CMS* 274), but he also confirms that this new awareness will not allow him to stay in Barbados anymore (*CMS* 275). Living in America has endowed West Indian emigrants with a new personality, but this new existence brings with it more questions than answers.

When they headed for the United States, West Indians forsook the peasant world, just like G. who acknowledges, when leaving Barbados, that he "knew in a sense more deep than simple departure that [he] had said farewell, farewell to the land" (*CMS* 295), but they soon realized that the urban life they had yearned

for did not correspond to what they expected. Both Lamming's and Danticat's novels underline the disorientation that West Indian emigrants undergo, but they also suggest that salvation may come from their encounter with their African-American brothers and sisters who will understand that they form a new people with a common heritage and common aspirations. This is what Edwidge Danticat stresses when she makes Sophie's mother say: "I feel like I could have been Southern African-American. When I just came to this country, [...] I used to go to this old Southern church in Harlem where all they sang was Negro spirituals" (*BEM* 214). If they want their future to be beneficial, West Indian emigrants must accept their new life in their foster country, for only America, or rather African-America, will give them the conditions of a real development. In the words of Trumper, "'My people,' he said again, 'or better, my race. 'Twus in the States I find it, an' I'm gonner keep it till thy kingdom come'" (*CMS* 287). However, this does not mean that they have to vegetate in the decaying inner cities. The African-American middle class is a model to follow. It is not by chance that Sophie does not settle in New York City with Joseph but moves to a middle-sized town in Rhode Island where they will raise their Haitian-American daughter. As Sophie says it herself: "I was bound to be happy in a place called Providence. A place that destiny was calling me too. Fate! A town named after the Creator, the Almighty. Who would not want to live there?" (*BEM* 89).

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