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**Jay-Walking in the City: Violence Against Women, Urban Space, and  
Pedestrian Acts of Resistance**

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**Jay-Walking in the City: Violence Against Women, Urban Space, and  
Pedestrian Acts of Resistance**

**by**

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# **Jay-Walking in the City: Violence Against Women, Urban Space, and Pedestrian Acts of Resistance**

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From its distinction during the 1920s as the hub of black culture and commerce in America to its later reputation as the unmitigated manifestation of inner city decay, Harlem evokes an urban palimpsest, a lived geographic space onto which collective desires and fears are written and overwritten. Because of the symbolic place Harlem occupies in the national imaginary, my dissertation focuses on this central public site. *Jay-Walking in the City: Violence Against Women, Urban Space, and Pedestrian Acts of Resistance* advocates an investigation of textual histories of abusive domestic experiences in this neighborhood in order to underline the importance of public spheres in redressing trauma. As part of the larger archive of Harlem literature, the novels I investigate in this dissertation offer counter-narratives to those circulating in post-war America concerning the safety of this neighborhood's streets and the character of its residents. Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980), Audre Lorde's

*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and Sapphire's *Push* (1996) all contain episodes of domestic or sexual violence against women perpetrated in the Harlem households where the protagonists of these novels live. This dissertation focuses on the moments when Harlemites whom these women encounter in the public sphere intervene in the violent conditions of these primary characters' lives. These interpositional episodes within each novel challenge the pervasive cultural dichotomy that extols the American home as a stronghold of social and national security and lambastes the inner city as a volatile space of danger and fear.

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## Introduction: Situating Harlem

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*To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city; it is to pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay. Harlem is a ruin; many of its ordinary aspects (its crimes, casual violence, crumbling buildings with littered areas, ill-smelling halls and vermin-infested rooms) are indistinguishable from the distorted images that appear in dreams, and which, like muggers haunting a lonely hall, quiver in the waking mind with hidden and threatening significance. Yet this is no dream, but the reality of well over four hundred thousand Americans, a reality which for many defines and colors the world. Overcrowded and exploited politically and economically, Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation from his land of birth.—Ralph Ellison*

In his 1948 article “Harlem is Nowhere,” from which I excerpted the epigram above, Ralph Ellison paints a grim picture of Harlem during the 1940s. In a critique he will extend into his 1952 novel, Invisible Man, Ellison locates Harlem within “the very bowels of the city” and notes that the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic, the institution that serves as the subject of his article, occupies the basement of a building used for other purposes, just as his protagonist in Invisible Man lives in the basement of the Monopolated Power Company instead of an apartment. Ellison’s spatialization of Harlem’s dwelling places and institutions recalls for me an image of the various *bolgia* of Dante’s Divine Comedy. In this formulation, Harlem itself constitutes a circle of hell, and the clinics and domiciles, the public and private spaces utilized by its occupants, reside in the lower ditches of the *bolgia*, the “bowels of the city,” the subterranean nightmare “of distorted images” that Ellison describes above.

A year later, in 1949, Ann Petry published an article about Harlem in Holiday magazine. Like Ellison, Petry also penned a fictional account of Harlem in her novel The

Street (1946), which I will investigate in my first chapter. Petry worked as a journalist in upper Manhattan for many years before authoring The Street and wrote extensively on the everyday lives of Harlem's citizens. Whereas Ellison's piece, "Harlem is Nowhere," locates Harlem in (the absence of) place, Petry's "Harlem" situates the neighborhood in time. She calls it "an anachronism—shameful and unjustifiable—set down in the heart of the biggest, richest city in the world" (168). By Petry's calculus, Harlem as an anachronism literally exists as "backwards time," representing a throwback to an historical past non-commensurate with the modernization and mechanization of the rest of the city. She writes, "In point of time it belongs back in the Middle Ages" (168). But "ana" as a prefix also suggests renewal, or time beginning again, so concomitant with "the shadow of the past hangs [that] heavily over Harlem" (Petry 110) exists an anticipated revivification that also clouds Americans' assessments of the area.

Ellison's assertion that "Harlem is Nowhere" can be read as recuperative as well as disparaging, despite the fact that Ellison himself explains his title in the following way:

The phrase "I'm nowhere" expresses the feeling borne in upon many Negroes that they have no stable, recognized place in society. One's identity drifts in a capricious reality in which even the most commonly held assumptions are questionable. One "is" literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a "displaced person" of American democracy. (325)

As anyone who has read Thomas More can attest, "nowhere" and "utopia" mutually define one another, such that a space like Harlem, dubbed as "nowhere" by Ellison, also

carries the dual connotation affiliated with the word “utopia”: a place that is idealized and imaginary. Within both their pieces, Ellison and Petry hold these contesting (and contestable) representations of Harlem in tension. Ostensibly, as Ellison’s explanation of his title suggests, both authors set out to write about Harlem as the dark underbelly, the unwanted byproduct, the neglected remnant of a democracy that, if we continue to play the etymology game, has reneged on its promise that America will be ruled by the people. Yet hope for the future, as well as Petry’s “shadow of the past,” hangs heavily over Harlem in both of these articles.

Ultimately, Petry’s piece offers a comprehensive, multi-dimensional portrait of this neighborhood, one that seeks to counter negative, erroneous stereotypes. She notes that “Harlem is now called a trouble spot, a ‘hot’ place. Many conservative citizens believe it to be a lawless, violent community inhabited by just two kinds of people—the poor and the criminal” (110). She proceeds to qualify these types of pervasive perceptions of the area by asserting that “in this place of unhappy repute an astonishing number of boys and girls have lived long enough to grow up; and some of them have even achieved international fame” (110). Petry then catalogues a number of distinguished persons who came of age in Harlem who were able to affect the community, as well as the country as a whole, in a positive manner. In trying to vindicate Harlem in the public eye, Petry offers brief verbal portraits and short vignettes about Harlem’s residents to argue what seems to be her larger point: that there is nothing essential about Harlem nor anything endemic to Harlem that has engendered its bad reputation. Rather, racism and class-based discrimination, manifested largely as

inequities in public policy, especially surrounding what Petry dubs “those lost bitter years” of the Depression, themselves spawned the dire social and economic conditions of the area.

Ellison arrives at a similar conclusion, both in this article and in a later piece, which revises and qualifies many of the statements he makes in “Harlem is Nowhere.” At the very end of his first piece, Ellison complicates his dystopian reading of Harlem’s urban landscape by asserting, “For if Harlem is the scene of the folk-Negro’s death agony, it is also the setting of his transcendence;” (322) this is an idea that he explores further in a 1966 article he calls “Harlem’s America.” In this piece, Ellison argues that Harlem serves as a home base for its residents who, he stresses, do not want to move away from Harlem as many outsiders erroneously assume, but instead want to transform it, largely because, Ellison reminds his readers, “A slum like Harlem isn’t just a place of decay. It is also a form of historical and social memory” (26).

This dissertation takes up Ellison’s argument that Harlem functions as a repository of memory and a site of knowledge-production, an urban palimpsest onto which people’s desires and fears, as well as the historical conditions of their existence, are inscribed and re-inscribed with every successive generation. Harlem occupies a specific place in the national imagination because, if Harlem is indeed “nowhere” as Ellison claims, and if it is also “out of time” as Petry claims, then by extension Harlem also exists “everywhere” and “within all times.” In this sense, Harlem functions as a transcendental signifier—that is, Harlem is one underrepresented, under-serviced neighborhood that, within the national imagination, stands in for other areas around the

country like it. It is an actual, geographic place, informed as much by the sociality of its residents as by the materiality of its topography; it is also a symbolic space—“Harlemworld,” as John Jackson calls it in his book by the same name—that extends beyond the technical borders of the neighborhood and conjures up for many Americans a motley host of representations, both positive and negative, which inform their perceptions not only of Harlem itself, but also, in a metonymic manner, of all American inner-city environs and the people who live in them. As Petry’s article reinforces, many of the positive associations people have with Harlem consist of an idealized, sentimental nostalgia for its long-gone Renaissance because events like the Riots of 1935 and 1943 “seem to have permanently rubbed out that other hackneyed description of Harlem—the dwelling place of a dancing, laughing, happy-go-lucky, childlike people” (Perty 110). In other words, both versions of life in Harlem—the impoverished, violent community; the utopian hub of black culture—are easy reductions of the complex, nuanced relationships and interactions residents and visitors have had, and continue to have, with this deeply symbolic space.

Because this upper-Manhattan neighborhood is a material and symbolic space that has undergone a variety of disparate incarnations throughout its cultural and geographic history, all of which radiate out from the area itself and inform Americans’ attitudes and beliefs about other inner city neighborhoods like it, Harlem serves as an apposite site of inquiry into the contested arena of civic existence often called “the public sphere,” a term that has been debated voluminously since Jürgen Habermas published his foundational, but controversial text, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, in 1962. In it,

Habermas contends that the public sphere is comprised of common spaces of social contact, such as pubs or village squares, as well as the discourse generated in these spaces; this public sphere exists in direct opposition to the private sphere, which is more or less synonymous with the “modern restricted nuclear family” (Fraser, Unruly Practices, 119). More specifically, as Fraser elaborates in a later piece, the private sphere encompasses anything “pertaining to private property in a market economy [and/or] pertaining to intimate domestic and personal life, including sexual life” (“Rethinking” 131). According to Fraser and other critics, because Habermas’s formulation of the public sphere, and of the public/private dichotomy that scaffolds it, is based on observations of English, French and Germanic society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it represents a very particular geodemographic space during a very particular historical moment. Only bourgeois men had access to the space of critical-social debate that constitutes Habermas’s public sphere, and, as such, his conceptualization of it is fairly limited. In response, post-Habermasian, public sphere theorists<sup>1</sup> have both critiqued his model and extrapolated upon it so that it more

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<sup>1</sup> See Nancy Fraser, in Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory (1989) and “Rethinking the Public Sphere” (1992); Michael Warner’s Publics and Counterpublics (2002), especially his essay “Sex in Public” with Lauren Berlant. From Berlant, see also The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship (2005) and her essay “Poor Eliza” about the limits of sentimentality in No More Separate Spheres! (2002), an anthology edited by Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher that also houses Linda Kerber’s useful article “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” as well as You-me Park and Gail Wald’s “Native Daughters in the Promised Land: Gender, Race, and the Question of Separate Spheres.” See also Houston Baker’s “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere,” Paul Gilroy’s “‘After the Love Has Gone’: bio-poetics and etho-politics in the black public sphere,” Michael Dawson’s “A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics,” and Thomas C. Holt’s “Afterward: Mapping the Black Public Sphere” all in The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book (1995).

accurately accounts for the influences of race, gender, class, and sexuality on the public/private dichotomy that structures Habermas's formulation.

Most important to this dissertation are feminists' and critical race theorists' re-appropriations and re-deployments of the term and the ideas that undergird it. Nancy Fraser has written extensively on the concept of the bourgeois public sphere and the necessity for "women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians" to construct "alternative publics," which she proposes calling "subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" ("Re-thinking" 123). Others, however—specifically Michael C. Dawson—contend that "a Black counterpublic of the type described by Fraser" does not exist because "the Black counterpublic is not a bourgeois sphere in the sense that Habermas describes; Black institutions and publics have long been multi-class [...] due to the long regime of enforced segregation. [And] while the counterpublic has been multi-class, its leadership has been male and patriarchal" (201). Dawson does, however, believe the potential to construct a Black subaltern counterpublic exists, but that it would have to take into consideration both "patriarchy and economic oppression" (217). Indeed, many theorists argue for expanding our working definitions of the public sphere and of the subaltern counterpublics that arise in response to it because, as Tomas C. Holt articulates in his "Afterward" to The Black Public Sphere Anthology (1995), "If institutional and material conditions matter, then we should not speak of the black public sphere but of a plurality of spheres" (328). Ultimately, this more-inclusive, black,

subaltern counterpublic would function in such a way that “black people [could] pursue a good material and cultural existence through a strategy that is both practical and critical of the contemporary socioeconomic status quo” (Austin 248-249).

A crucial component of this critical strategy is to investigate the historical and cultural underpinnings of the public/private divide, especially in light of the way this dichotomy has played out in the gendered, racialized geographic and discursive spaces that construct the “plurality” of black public spheres. Nancy Fraser posits that the public/private binary is problematic in part because “the rhetoric of domestic privacy would exclude some issues and interests from public debate by personalizing and/or familiarizing them; it casts these as private, domestic or personal, familial matters in contradistinction to public, political matters” (“Re-thinking” 131). Consequently, all interpersonal dynamics and occurrences enacted in the theater of the private—that is, all actions and attitudes imposed upon individual bodies within intimate, interior and/or household spaces—are automatically relegated to the seemingly apolitical domain of the personal, even if these actions or attitudes have public, political origins or ramifications. Historically, these “intimate” actions and attitudes have not simply adhered to the structural bifurcations of public/private model; they have—in many respects—actually *created* the binary for certain groups of people.

For example, sexual violence has been a defining characteristic in the lives of black women since the first female slaves were brought to the new world, as rape was frequently deployed by slave traders, masters and overseers as a method of intimidation and control. Because slaves were considered private property, any offence they incurred

at the hands or under the aegis of their masters was a matter of personal, private concern. The frequency of rape, and its part in reinforcing already existing proprietary ideas about slaves, did the work of constructing a black female subjecthood in America that was, and arguably still is, irreparably linked to sexual violence. In Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (1997), Saidiya Hartman explains: “By [...]examining female subject-formation at the site of sexual violence, I am not positing that forced sex constitutes *the* meaning of gender but that the erasure or disavowal of sexual violence engendered black femaleness as a condition of unredressed injury” (101). In other words, it was not sexual violence itself that manufactured African American womanhood as a condition of “unredressed injury;” rather, because sexual violence functioned as a private entitlement of individual slaveholders, omission and denial of such violence served as the technology of unresolved, intergenerational grievance.

This condition of unredressed injury has never been fully assuaged, or even satisfactorily acknowledged, in American culture and politics throughout the century and a half following Abolition, largely, I would argue, because the sexual violence linked to black female personhood has been considered a private, intimate issue, separate not only from the state but also from a larger public sphere. Consequently, sexual violence against black women has, and continues to have, deep cultural consequences, living on, in Sharon Holland’s words, “in the peoples’ imagination and becom[ing] fodder for both romantic fictions and horrific realities” (15).

This transgenerational memory of depersonalization and violation in many ways structures notions of black personhood and, by extension, ideas and iterations of the black public sphere. Ours is what Avery Gordon describes as a “haunted society” (98)—one that is marked by pain that “might best be described as the history that hurts—the still unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders the black subject in America” (Hartman 51). And, as Anne Cheng writes, “the traumatic *effects* [of this history] can be transmitted even if (or precisely because) the traumatic *event* itself has not” (84). In other words, the legacy of slavery serves as the ghost limb of the American body politic; although the institution itself has been severed off from the American political system, enduring, repetitive reminders of its presence pain us even today. Specifically, and most important to this study, are the effects of the long history of sexual violence against black women and the way in which these individual and collective acts of violence have shaped Americans’ notions of the public and the private, the political and the personal.

In her article “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” Elsa Barkley Brown writes about the development of Reconstruction era discourse wherein “violence against men was linked to state repression and the struggle against it to freedom, and violence against women became a matter of specific interest, increasingly eliminated from the general discussion” (144). In other words, sexual violence against women has long been relegated to the arena of “the intimate,” a term that Traci C. West, who writes about violence against black women and the ethics of resistance, describes as referring to both

“the character of the relationship between the attacker and the victim” and “the nature of the act” (4). Although there are certainly exceptions wherein sexually violent acts have been committed in public, exterior spaces, rape, molestation, and physical violence against women and children very frequently take place within the intimate spaces of the private, especially within households. In contrast, violence against men during this period, and well after, often took the form of lynching or other acts of characteristically spectral violence and therefore became a matter public interest and a nodal point of political mobilization.<sup>2</sup>

In short, because lynching was such a visible, and frequently communal, act of racist violence, and rape was such an intimate, oftentimes “invisible,” act of racist violence, they respectively came not only to *symbolize* but also to *define* the public/private dichotomy for black Americans. Moreover, the spaces wherein these acts of aggression occurred themselves have become gendered as a result of these distinct types violence. That is, violence against women was perpetrated in the intimate, private spaces of the household; violence against men in the exterior, communal spaces of the street or the civic square. Thus, in what is admittedly a reductive equation, the home has historically connoted and continues to connote feminine space, while the street has had and does have a kind of spatial masculinity. Linda K. Kerber explains how “for all our vaunted modernity, for all that men’s ‘spheres’ and women’s ‘spheres’ now overlap, vast areas of our experience and our consciousness do not overlap” (55). I would argue that

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<sup>2</sup> See Elizabeth Alexander’s article, “Can You be BLACK and Look at This: Reading the Rodney King Video” in The Black Public Sphere reader (1995).

one of the primary reasons why men's and women's "experience and consciousness" have not come to overlap is because of the deeply embedded intergenerational consequences of the lynching/rape, public/private bifurcation. Kerber explains further

Our private spaces and are public spaces are still in many important senses gendered. The reconstruction of gender relations, and of the spaces that men and women may claim, is one of the most compelling contemporary social tasks. It is related to major social questions: the feminization of poverty, equal access to education and the professions, relations of power and abuses of power in the public sector and in the family. (55)

All of the "major social questions" Kerber notes above have particular resonance in black communities, especially in areas like Harlem where poverty and racism persistently shape the everyday lives of its residents, inhering especially in their relationships with state power and the public sphere. It seems to be a truism of public policy and opinion that Harlem, and by extension all urban "ghettos," are places of violence and danger, especially for women and children. Conversely, but consonant with this rhetoric of the pathological black public sphere, institutions such as the media, the church, the American school system, and the psychological establishment scripted the American, suburban home as being a space of safety from the corruptive forces of public life. This reductive, bifurcating model presents a false dichotomy wherein the feminized, American home is exalted as a stronghold of social and national security—the "building block of the nation"—and the masculinized, inner city is lambasted as a volatile space of danger and

fear. This project aims, in part, to rehabilitate pervasive negative perceptions and representations of Harlem from this period by demonstrating the ways in which a cluster of novels set in Harlem and authored by African American women complicate and challenge the pervasive American belief that safety is found in domestic space and that public spaces are spaces of danger.

The novels I turn to in this study invert, in many ways, the public/private, masculine/feminine equation. Ann Petry's The Street (1946), Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place (1980), and Sapphire's Push (1996) all present instances of sexual violence against women occurring within Harlem's private, household spaces. As I discussed above, separate spheres constructions historically posit the home as a feminized space that stands in direct opposition to the exterior, public spaces of the streets, which are considered masculine. Yet within these novels, and within a larger cluster of texts authored by African American women between the years 1946 and 1996 that contend with this theme in a similar manner, the public, exterior space of the city is scripted as far more conducive to women's well being and safety than the intimate public sphere, to which women have historically been relegated, in part, for the very purpose of shielding them from the deleterious effects of the street.

. In addition, the constellation of texts I examine in this dissertation are themselves part of a larger, literary, oppositional public that addresses sexual violence against black women. This (counter)public includes books such as Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970), Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982), and Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969), all of which contain episodes of sexual

violence against young women. These texts, although constitutive of a literary counterpublic, differ from the novels I investigate in this study because of their rural settings. Texts such as Audre Lorde's Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982) and Louise Meriwether's Daddy Was a Number Runner (1970), which I do not treat extensively, also resonate with my project. For example, twelve year-old Francie, the protagonist of Meriwether's Daddy Was a Number Runner is repeatedly molested by the white shopkeepers in her neighborhood. If she wants Mr. Morrstein to include an extra soup bone for her hungry family, Francie has to endure the butcher, "in his scroungy white smock, patt[ing her] shoulder, [slipping his hand down] and squeeze[ing her] breast" (43) She stands "there patiently while his hands fumbled all over [her] body," which she dismisses as the "nonsense" she has to "stand still" for anytime she is the only customer in the butcher shop. Francie also reports that she gets extra rolls from Max the Baker "whenever he [gets] the chance to feel [her]" (43).

As if all this inappropriate touching at the hands of neighborhood merchants is not enough, Francie is also stalked by a white man who follows her to the movies and sits next to her, getting up and moving with her when she changes seats to get away from him. Francie accepts a dime from him and lets "his hands fumble under [her] skirt" until he gets to "the elastic in [her] bloomers," at which point she gets up and moves again (15). This same man waits for her on the stairwell in her building; he exposes himself to her and again tries to pay her for sexual favors. Later, Francie and her best friend Sukie expose themselves at the bidding of an old, white man in the park, who pays them a nickel each for a brief glimpse of their bloomers.

Audre Lorde's "biomythography," Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), contains a scene strikingly similar to Francie's experiences with the baker and the butcher. In young Audre's case, it is the proprietor of the comic-book store, "a fat white man with watery eyes and a stomach that hung over his belt like badly made jello" (49). As he lifts Audre and her sisters up, ostensibly so that they can better see the comics that he houses high on his shelves, "his nasty fingers moved furtively up and down [her] body, now trapped between his pressing bulges and the rim of the bin. By the time he loosened his grip and allowed [her] to slide down to the blessed floor, [she] felt dirtied and afraid, as if [she] had just taken part in some filthy rite" (49). Later, when she is about ten, Lorde too is assaulted on the roof of her Harlem building by a "boy from school much bigger than [her]" who "threatened to break [her] glasses" if she did not let him "stick his 'thing' between [her] legs" (75).

Although both of Lorde's and Meriwether's books contain episodes of sexual violence against young, black girls that occur in the semi-private spaces of stairwells, roofs, and stores, they function somewhat differently than the novels to which I will devote entire chapters of this dissertation. The crucial difference is that, in the two texts mentioned above, the perpetrators are white men (the boy who rapes Lorde notwithstanding because his physical description is not discussed, and my assumption is that he is black based on book's setting in the highly segregated space of Harlem in the 1940s). The Street (1946), The Women of Brewster Place (1980), and Push (1996)—the three texts to which I devote entire chapters—all contend with intra-racial sexual violence.

My choice to limit the texts to which I devote entire chapters to those containing episodes of intra-racial sexual violence was an intentional one. Because, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, sexual violence against black women was often used as a tool of white, patriarchal authority during slavery, intra-racial rape carries with it a particularly vexed cultural resonance. Because the struggle for racial equality was, in many ways, historically privileged over the struggle for gender equality within the black community, women's experiences of intimate violence have been long suppressed. Traci C. West elaborates, writing, "black women's awareness of the systematic oppression of black men through lynchings, imprisonment, unemployment, and the ever prevalent 'rape' charge causes women to feel obligated to be understanding and forgiving of black men. There are cultural cues that foster the notion that because of the racist oppression suffered by black men, a sacrificial role is demanded by black women" (83). Put more simply by Gail Garfield in her book Knowing What We Know: African American Women's Experience with Violence and Violation (2005), "I know, from experience, that you are not supposed to wash your dirty laundry in public, especially in front of white people" (xv). Because of this pervasive invective of silence about the "dirty laundry" of intra-racial sexual assault, discussions about it have historically been relegated to "the private." The novels I turn to in this dissertation not only contribute to a (counter)public that intervenes in this cultural mandate by writing about intra-racial sexual violence, but they do so in novelistic form, which constructs a permanent literary archive of such discursive resistance.

The cluster of texts I investigate in this dissertation are decidedly not, however, the first books by African American writers that portray sexual violence against women. In Aisha Shahidah Simmons's 2006 documentary No!, which is about rape in the black community and which I will revisit in my Epilogue, Farah Jasmine Griffin reminds viewers that sexual violence figures prominently in the plots of the highly canonical texts by black, male authors, namely Richard Wright's Native Son (1940) and Ellison's Invisible Man, which I reference earlier in this Introduction. Griffin argues that readers remember the rape and murders that take place in Native Son differently than they actually occur in the book. Although Bigger Thomas, Wright's protagonist, *wants* to rape the white female character, Mary, he is interrupted by her blind mother and smothers her with a pillow instead. However, Bigger *does* both rape and murder his own girlfriend, Bessie, who is a black woman. Griffin suggests that the stereotype of the sexually aggressive black male who cannot quell his desire for and aggression toward white women shapes readers' memories of the plot in such a way that people remember Bigger as the murderer *and* rapist of Mary and neglect to retain his act of intra-racial sexual violence against Bessie. Farah Griffin concludes her commentary by noting that,

All this is to say that these books did have instances of intra-racial rape, but those were never the focal point of the book, those were always kind of part of the narrative. After we get the beginnings of the black power movement and the feminist movement, which provided a certain kind of space for artists to be a little more open about what they were saying—artists who see their writing as part of that movement—we get black women writers

who finally do begin to make the victim of the rape center to the texts [...] writers like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker are [...] responding to the ways in which rape had been written about in the past. (qtd. in No!)

I agree with Griffin's assertion that the black power and feminist movements helped wheedle out space for the production of alternative, pro-feminist, anti-violence counter-narratives by black women. In fact, the post-WWII proliferation of these narratives, including the three on which I focus this dissertation, construct a (counter)public of texts that opposes both violence against women itself and its depiction in the black public sphere. As their novels have penetrated both the canon and the mainstream, and are read broadly in classrooms and in coffee houses, Ann Petry, Gloria Naylor, and Sapphire, as well as other black female authors (such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Ntosake Shange) who write about sexual violence against women, are part of a larger, oppositional, literary counterpublic. My aim throughout this dissertation is to prioritize knowledge gained about Harlem through narratives like these (both fictional and semi-autographical), which circulate within both the oppositional, feminist black public sphere, over knowledge gained about Harlem through "objective" historical documents that exist as part of a more "official" public.

My hope is that the cluster of narratives I examine in this dissertation will together provide an alternative version of the history of Harlem from WWII to the present—one that posits both alternative readings of the space of the city as well as one that highlights those narratives as they are told by non-majoritarian subjects, in this case

by black women. This project also relies heavily on black, Harlem-dwelling women's interactions with their surrounding urban environment as a source of insight into the experiences of their everyday lives. My hope is that investigating these characters' perceptions of and relationships to the neighborhood they call home will also help re-imagine academic studies of urban spaces such as Harlem. To quote Katherine McKittrick (and her co-editor Clyde Woods) in Black Geographies and the Politics of Place (2007):

Many geographic investigations of black cultures bring into focus empirical evidence based on ethnographic, demographic, or quantitative research. These studies locate where black people live [...] Additionally, while scholars of black studies explore the lived experiences and materiality of racial hierarchies, they shy away from underscoring how human geographies—both real and imagined—are integral to black ways of life. In the humanities, spatial metaphors abound through analyses of black creative texts, yet they are often theorized as detached from concrete three-dimensional geographies. (6-7)

I read Woods and McKittrick's observations about geographic and textual studies as a charge, a methodological invective that informs the shape this dissertation takes. I want to avoid cleaving my analysis of literary or other representational texts from demographic, or even topographic, studies of the "concrete three-dimensional geographies" McKittrick and Woods note above. Rather, I hope to allow these fictional accounts of black women's experiences in their urban environments to say as much about the geographic terrain itself as they say about the real-life women whose experiences they

reflect. In this dissertation, I also aim to hold women's real and imagined experiences of domestic and sexual violence in tension in such a way that these literary accounts of interventions against this violence within the public space of Harlem revises the rather masculinist archive of post-war, urban American literature. In the novels I examine, the urban space of Harlem functions as a site of resistance that mollifies the impact of family and sexual violence in women's lives. Because authorship is a force that has the potential to reshape actual, geographically-based publics, I hope that this dissertation will help rescript definitions and outcomes of black women's agency on both local and national levels. Ultimately, this study aims to posit a different methodology for investigating the crucial role of public space in feminist politics, particularly in the area of violence against women.

### **A Brief History of Harlem**

Harlem is an area that has undergone myriad embodiments throughout its cultural history. These different incarnations can be attributed, in no small part, to interactions between its inhabitants and the physical, geographic space of the city. Residents' migratory practices have marked the area from its inception, making the movement of people into, out of, and within this region a key force in defining and redefining its various phases of being. As recent exhibits at the New York Historical Society illustrate, imported slave labor aided in the material and social construction of New Amsterdam, later called New York, from its inception. According to The Black New Yorkers, an illustrated chronology published by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, "In 1625, the year before the Dutch settlement was officially named New Amsterdam, the

first enslaved Africans arrived to become its labor force” (Dodson 13). By the mid-seventeenth century Dutch settlers had migrated north to Harlem (then Haarlem), an area that was at that point described as “upstate,” given that it took nearly two hours to arrive in Harlem by carriage or on horseback from the Wall Street area of lower Manhattan (A Walk). Significantly, when the Albany Post Road (now St. Nicholas Ave.) was extended upwards into northern Manhattan in order to reach these Dutch settlers in the Harlem area, slaves belonging to the wealthy Dutchmen performed the majority of the labor. From its very beginnings, New York City as a whole—and Harlem in particular—had been shaped as much by the presence of blacks as by its earliest white settlers (Dodson 30).

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a series of innovations in public transportation engendered waves of minority migration into the region. In the 1880s, for example, the first “El” or elevated train arrived in Harlem, bringing with it WASPS and wealthy German Jews, for whom Harlem’s original row houses were built (A Walk). Later, at the very end of the 1800s, the first (underground) subway line came up into Harlem through the Upper West Side, which enabled post-bellum freed slaves escaping the oppressive sharecropping system in the southern United States to settle there alongside poorer Eastern European Jews, who evidently did as much as blacks to “ruin the neighborhood” for the WASPS and wealthy German Jews who lived there, most of whom moved out of their Harlem row houses throughout the first decade of the 1900s (A Walk). Minority migration in order to escape discrimination elsewhere seems to be one of the key themes in the overall cultural history of Harlem,

which coded the neighborhood as a kind of “rejected space.” In other words, at this comparatively early point in its history, Harlem became a repository of dispossessed, disenfranchised people who were fleeing one form of oppression or another.

Conversely, for these same people, Harlem also functioned as a sanctuary, or a site of transcendence. For example, although there had been a steady stream of African Americans into Harlem since the first, post-Civil War Great Migration (1870s and 1880s), 1911 served as a pivotal year for black migration into Harlem, in that St. Phillips Episcopal Church opened on 134<sup>th</sup> Street. In an unprecedented real estate deal, this parish’s pastor negotiated with leading black architect Vertner Tandy to rent an entire city block’s worth of apartments to parishioners of St. Phillips, thus asserting Harlem’s place as a capital of black, Christian spirituality in Manhattan (Dodson 135). Here too, though, migration came out of a need to escape discrimination, in this case, that which was levied by parishioners of lower Manhattan’s popular protestant churches, who made African Americans sit apart from the rest of the congregation. In order to combat this kind of segregation, churches like the famous Abyssinian Baptist Church relocated in areas like Harlem, drawing to those areas high numbers of migrating blacks (A Walk).

As a result of these waves of migration, by the first part of the twentieth century Harlem was flourishing as a mecca for black, urban life (Dodson 122). Influenced heavily by both W.E.B. DuBois’s notion of the “talented tenth” and Marcus Garvey’s Pan-Africanism, both of which stressed the value of the arts in cultivating and sustaining black culture, Harlem had become home to the African American intelligentsia and literati of that time. Poets such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen considered

Harlem home, as well as authors such as Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston, who dubbed this cadre of writers America's "Niggerati." During the teens and twenties, newspapers read throughout the African Diaspora, like Garvey's paper The Negro World and Du Bois's The Crisis, located their publishing houses in Harlem, not far from cultural hot spots like the famous Madame CJ Walker's beauty parlor, which later housed her daughter A'lilia's "Dark Tower" salon, a haunting place of the key creative figures of the Harlem Renaissance (Lewis 167).

The history of lived, geographic spaces such as the Dark Tower salon, the Apollo Theater, St. Phillips Episcopal and Abyssinian Baptist Churches, and Strivers' Row (two blocks of rowhouses originally designed for middle and upper-middle class Harlemites), to name just a few examples, all contribute to an overall "sense of place" within the neighborhood. In other words, material vestiges of Harlem's history (e.g. historical buildings, monuments, and streets named after famous residents) construct an overall structure of feeling, to borrow Raymond Williams' term, in relation to the neighborhood, which shapes both past and present residents' (and visitors') perceptions of the place. I, for example, live on 106<sup>th</sup> Street, but its technical name is Duke Ellington Boulevard, an official moniker that is reflected and reinforced by institutional discourse, such as street signage and mail I receive from city and state governmental organizations, which is always addressed to my apartment on Duke Ellington Boulevard rather than 106<sup>th</sup> Street. Material representations of Harlem's history, such as these, help structure people's affective relationships to the area, reminding them that there was a time when, as Ntosake

Shange titles her poem as well as the children's book she adapted from it, "Ellington was not a street."

Harlem's place in history as an artistic, religious, and cultural space of transcendence for African Americans after the turn of the century and before the Depression of the late 1920s contributed, in no small part, to the structure of feeling surrounding it. Fueled by the constant migration of southern blacks to the north, as well as by the large number of immigrants from the Caribbean, Harlem became the capital of black American culture and politics—Harlem's United Negro Improvement Association chapter was the largest in the world—as well as religion. At one point, the Abyssinian Baptist Church boasted the largest protestant congregation in America; many of these parishioners became Harlem residents so as to be closer to their spiritual community (A Walk). As a result of immigration and, on a smaller level, intra-city migration, African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American people moved to and through Harlem, ultimately engendering its eponymous Renaissance.

During the years following Harlem's Renaissance, those "lost bitter years" (Petry 110) of the Depression, individual and collective locomotion continued to inform the cultural climate in the neighborhood. I will revisit this discussion in much greater detail in my chapter on The Street (1949), but suffice it to say that the Depression deeply impacted social conditions in Harlem, worsening already-existing disparities in income and cost of living as compared with the rest of the city. It was more expensive to live in Harlem than in other areas in Manhattan during this period; landlords held a premium on real estate because Harlem was one of the few places in Manhattan where black

Americans could live; food and other necessities also cost more in Harlem than they did elsewhere in the city (Greenburg 28). Regardless, certain common cultural practices such as “hotbedding,” where “night workers slept in a bed by day; day workers slept in the same bed that night” (Greenburg 30), or “rent parties”—where people would pay a neighbor a nominal sum, which would then be put toward rent, to enjoy food, drink and dancing in a neighbor’s home—provided migrants from the south, the “Islands,” or other areas in New York with a small but indispensable social cushion that enabled them to relocate to Harlem and then remain there despite the hardships they endured. In fact, “few moved back [to their places of origin] once they had settled in Harlem” (Greenburg 17). Consequently, the neighborhood’s population density skyrocketed during the Depression. Typically, an area will expand geographically to accommodate newcomers, which, to be clear, happened in Harlem, but, according to Cheryl Greenburg, “at a much slower rate than its population did” (15). In other words, although more and more people were moving to the area during this period, they were moving into already-heavily populated buildings and blocks, increasing the neighborhood’s population density at a rate much higher than the speed with which the borders of Harlem expanded. This geographic trend directly contributed to the social conditions Ellison and Petry describe in their respective articles about post-Renaissance Harlem and has continued to inform the social and cultural atmosphere in this neighborhood into the present day. All of the novels I investigate in this dissertation bear witness to these trends by providing fictional representations of the actualities of Harlemites’ everyday lives that “flesh out” and enrich historical accounts of the area such as Ellison’s and Petry’s.

## **Pedestrian Practices**

In many respects, people's quotidian, seemingly inconsequential geographic choices like the ones discussed above—to take in a lodger, for instance, or to move in with a relative on another block—construct the tenor of a neighborhood as much as larger, institutional practices like “redlining.” Scholars, such as Michel de Certeau in his aptly named text, The Practice of Everyday Life (1988), focus on the way in which mundane, workaday acts shape the social order. In particular, de Certeau examines the everyday interactions of people and their geographic surroundings. In his chapter “Walking in the City,” (to which the title of this dissertation nods) he reads the movement of people in, around, and through New York City as text and makes note of the ways in which spatial practices, such as individuals' movements through a neighborhood, “correspond to manipulations of the basic elements of a constructed order” (100). Throughout de Certeau's book, he argues for the potentiality of the individual citizen-subject to work through and against the ideology of the contemporary Western world's consumption-driven, capitalist system. He highlights what he calls “ways of operating,” which “constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociological production” (xiv). In particular, de Certeau parses strategic practices, which are ideological and institutional, from tactical ones, which are individual and extra-ideological (xix). He maintains that “many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc) are tactical in character” (xix). As a result, merely moving through the city is, for de Certeau, a tactical act of enunciation. He writes, “walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to

language” (97). Accordingly, quotidian perambulations through urban space produce a rhetoric of tactical engagement with disciplinary structures on the part of the pedestrian in such a way as to disrupt “the microphysics of power” (xiv) that exists in the urban milieu. Simply put, sometimes merely (jay)walking in the city—effecting mobility despite structural, disciplinary machinations—serves as a tactical, resistant mode of operation.

Spaces such as Harlem, marked by the migratory, pedestrian flow of citizen-subjects who have complicated, vexed relationships with state power structures, offer tactical ways of operating that can be read textually—that is, people’s everyday movements through the space of the city provide a vibrant urban palimpsest upon which a reader can discern Harlemites’ engagement with dominant power structures. This urban palimpsest, comprised largely of workaday, intra-regional migration, vitally contributes to an archive of Harlem narratives, wherein both the literal movement of people through space, as well as literary representations of this movement, work to construct an interpersonal, affective social history of the area that challenges and revises cold, historicist representations of the area’s various cultural and political incarnations. Fictional texts, such as those I turn to in this dissertation, contribute to this archive in important ways by augmenting readers’ and scholars’ understandings of the social, cultural, and, especially, affective milieu within this historic neighborhood.

Both literal and literary geographic space is inscribed by the flow of pedestrians through it and, consequently, provides a locus for struggle and transformation. Ruth Wilson Gilmore stresses that “A geographical imperative lies at the heart of every

struggle for social justice; if justice is embodied, it is then therefore always spatial, which is to say, part of the process of making a place” (16). Moreover, as Katherine McKittrick argues in her book Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle (2006), geographic space never “just is,” as outmoded, positivist models of human geography would have us believe. She asserts that space cannot exist in the absence of constellations of human interaction within it. Rather, space is constructed by a flow of actual people having actual lived experiences. McKittrick stresses the constitutive, mutable quality of space and cautions against its essentialization because “geography’s discursive attachment to stasis and physicality, the idea that space ‘just is’ not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore, who, we are” (xi). For McKittrick, the idea that geographic space might exist apart from people’s interactions with it serves not only to “calibrate and normalize [...] who we are,” but it also seems to cement identities and ideologies in space and time in such a way that they appear fixed and inalterable. Consequently,

philosophical attention [to geography] is needed because existing cartographic rules unjustly organize human hierarchies *in place* and reify uneven geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways. This attention is also needed because [...] these rules are alterable and there exists a terrain through which different geographic stories can and are told. (xi-x)

In this dissertation, I investigate some of the “different geographic stories” whose existence McKittrick champions. The alternative stories contribute to an archive of

Harlem narratives that works to revise and rescript common but inaccurate portrayals of life in this neighborhood during the second half of the twentieth century.

Throughout the past five to ten years, years in which I have been in graduate school and thinking about this project, it seems that the idea of Harlem has begun to resonate differently in the American imagination. More and more people like former President Bill Clinton, who relocated some of his offices to Harlem in 2001, migrate north to Harlem each year, bringing with them saving accounts and credit limits that are decidedly loftier than those of most long-standing Harlem residents; an August 2004 New York Times article elucidates this trend by noting the presence of a 35,000-tenant, East Harlem public housing project located down the block from a “\$6.5 million dollar seven-story condominium with 30 apartments” (Brozan 1). Although many decry the impact gentrification has and will continue to have on the historically and culturally rich flavor of the neighborhood, there also seems to be a sense that Harlem is coming full circle, back into the light of its former renaissance.

My choice of Harlem as a subject of inquiry for this dissertation is due in no small part to the many diverse incarnations of the area throughout its history, each carrying a vastly different cultural valence. The history of the geographic area known today as Harlem is as rich and storied as its inhabitants have always been. For example, the relatively recent gentrification and corporate colonization of the 125<sup>th</sup> Street thoroughfare—an stretch of pavement that was once home to local, “mom and pop” type establishments—by businesses such as Old Navy, H &M, and the Disney Store signals a representational watershed for this neighborhood, an area frequently depicted by

literature and popular culture in unflattering, but not unrealistic, terms from the time of the Depression throughout most of the 1980s. Although Harlem was so glorified in 1920s America that it engendered its own eponymous renaissance, throughout the middle portion of the twentieth century, Harlem instead came to suggest littered streets, graffiti, high crime rates—in short, urban decay.

Harlem past and present exists as both the material Harlem of brownstones and tenements, boulevards and alleyways, and the representational Harlem of novels, blues and hip-hop lyrics, modernist art and graffiti. It is a space constructed as much by its official History as it is by urban legends and folk tales—the people’s history. Largely, the stories that people tell themselves and others about Harlem have been directly at odds with Harlem’s reputation during its Renaissance as a space of cultural and social transcendence for displaced, dispossessed African Americans. In fact, most of the stories told about Harlem during the later part of the twentieth century have revolved around the neighborhood’s status as a dangerous “space of fear,” an idea very much perpetuated by popular American music and cinema. Seminal Blaxploitation titles from the early 1970s like Shaft (1971), or the geographically-deterministic Across 110<sup>th</sup> Street (1972) paint an image of Harlem as a nexus of underground crime. Later, films like New Jack City (1991) and Die Hard 3 (1995)—where the audience immediately senses the mortal danger the Bruce Willis character is in when his enemies force him to walk through Harlem wearing a sign that says “I hate niggers”—certainly did little to debunk these highly stereotypical, reductive notions. Nor did the majority of hip-hop tracks coming out of Harlem during the 1980s and 1990s. Harlem-born Cam’ron, for example, might be

best known for physically assaulting uncooperative Sony Records producers and refusing to provide police with details to aid in their investigation of his own shooting lest he be considered “a snitch” (“Cam’ron”). Big L, another Harlem-based rapper from the early 90s, penned lyrics like “I be stalking Lennox, catching more bodies than abortion clinics” (“Devil’s Son”) before he was shot and killed in the street in front of his Harlem apartment at the age of twenty-four (“Big L”).

Although at times throughout this dissertation, I turn to popular cultural texts, such as the ones mentioned above, in order to supplement my understanding of the representational life of this neighborhood, I focus the bulk of my discussion on Harlem-based fiction, in part because music and visual art have figured so prominently in Harlem’s cultural history, yet literary texts set in Harlem also provide evidence of and insight into the black public sphere. I also believe that a methodology which includes literary texts as a way of understanding people’s real lives lends insight into interpersonal and affective experiences in a way that more traditional historicism cannot.

In my first chapter, “A Dream Dispossessed?: Privacy, Safety, and the American Dream in Ann Petry’s The Street,” I argue that the American Dream becomes condensed and localized into fantasies of safe and private living spaces for African American women living in Harlem during the Depression and post-WWII eras. Throughout her novel, Petry’s protagonist, Lutie Johnson, believes so thoroughly in an ideology of isolationism and self-reliance, which she believes will help her realize the American Dream, that she detaches herself from her Harlem community. Although other women Lutie encounters in public spaces do intervene on her behalf when she is threatened with

sexual violence, Petry juxtaposes the tragedy of Lutie's narrative with the triumph of other characters' stories. These other characters fare better than Lutie because their awareness of the permeable nature of bodily, architectural, and social boundaries in their community enables them to connect with their surroundings and garner emotional, financial, and spiritual aid from the city.

My next chapter, titled “(Inter)textual (Counter)publics: Oprah and The Women of Brewster Place,” includes readings of both Gloria Naylor's 1980 novel and the 1989 miniseries based on the book, which Oprah Winfrey both produced and starred in. The characters in both texts physically alter the geography of their neighborhood by tearing down the wall that separates their small street from their larger community in response to the rape (and, in the novel, the murder) of one of the street's residents. Via this miniseries, as well as her other televisual endeavors that contend with abuse and assault, Oprah Winfrey constructs an oppositional public of resistance across divergent groups of women that aims to intercede in America's epidemic of sexual violence against women. Consequently, this project connects Oprah Winfrey and Gloria Naylor to an ongoing discourse about abuse, recovery, and the public sphere.

Chapter three, “‘Writing Could Be the Boat’: Verbal and Spatial Literacy in Sapphire's Push” chronicles sixteen-year old Precious Jones's acquisition of verbal and spatial literacy, which expedites her recovery from the sexual and family violence that define her childhood. Precious connects with the group of women in her Harlem-based adult literacy class, many of whom also have histories of abuse and assault, and together they put their experiences into words by authoring a “class book” that addresses their

individual traumatic histories. As Precious acquires the language to understand and communicate her experiences, she also reconnects with her Harlem neighborhood and learns how to navigate the broader New York cityscape.

An Epilogue contains an analysis of Aishah Shahidah Simmons's 2006 documentary No!, which is about intra-racial rape in the black community, as well as the effects of a 2003 screening of this documentary and post-film conversation at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, located on Harlem's 135<sup>th</sup> Street.

## **Chapter 1: A Dream Dispossessed?: Privacy, Safety, and the American Dream in Ann Petry's The Street**

In the opening passage of Ann Petry's 1946 novel, The Street, protagonist Lutie Johnson fights the wind as she walks along Harlem's 116<sup>th</sup> Street trying to find a place for herself and her eight-year old son to live. Petry describes the November day that serves as a backdrop to Lutie's trek by foregrounding the effects of nature on people and their constructed environments. In particular, Petry writes about the wind finding "every scrap of paper along the street" and setting "the bits of paper to dancing high in the air, so that a barrage of paper swirled into the faces of the people on the street. It even took the time to rush into doorways and areaways" (1-2). In the next paragraph, Petry extends her anthropomorphism of the wind by granting it desire and agency. She writes,

It did everything it could to discourage the people from walking along the street. It found all the dirt and dust and grime on the sidewalk and lifted it up so that the *dirt got into their noses*, making it difficult for them to breathe; the *dust got into their eyes* and blinded them; and the grit stung their skins. It

wrapped newspaper around their feet entangling them [...] then the wind grabbed their hats, pried their scarves from around their necks, *stuck its fingers inside* their coat collars, *blew their coats away* from their bodies. (2, emphasis mine)

As Lutie struggles to make her way down 116<sup>th</sup> Street, the wind assaults her as well. It lifts “her hair from the back of her neck,” which makes her feel “naked and bald,” and “it even [blows] her eyelashes away from her eyes so that her eyeballs [are] bathed in a rush of coldness” (2).

Throughout this passage, Petry writes about the wind and its effects in a distinct language of violation. Try as the pedestrians might, the wind and the elements of the city it carries assault both people and the buildings surrounding them by forcing into noses, eyes, doorways, and coats that which is supposed to be separate from or exterior to bodies and buildings. Just as the people and their dwellings inhabit urban space, so too do the elements of the natural world found in this scene penetrate and inhabit these pedestrians and the tenements that house them. This early scene in the novel anticipates Petry’s overall thematic emphasis on the (im)permeability of both corporeal and architectural boundaries. Throughout the novel, Lutie Johnson clings futilely to illusions about her own independence and insularity, despite repeated attempts by people and the elements to breach both her own bodily boundaries as well as the domestic boundaries of Lutie’s apartment that she naively believes will define and delimit physical space as inviolately hers.

In fact, through most of The Street, Lutie espouses a doctrine of self-sufficiency and thinks that if she is independent and industrious enough, she will not simply survive the difficult conditions of her life in 1940s Harlem, she will succeed. In other words, Petry's protagonist is an acolyte of the American Dream; Lutie wholeheartedly subscribes to commonly held American ideologies of self-reliance and believes strongly in the myth of autonomous, disciplined effort as facilitating material success. Yet, although the ideology of the American Dream is constructed in such a way that it appears ubiquitously attainable for all Americans regardless of their subject position, in actuality the Dream varies depending on the positionality of the Dreamer. Lutie is a poor, young, black, single mother living in a socially and politically underrepresented area within a large metropolis. Surely her Dream will differ significantly from that of an older, white, male, rural property-owner, for instance. For Lutie, as well as for many of the other characters who populate Petry's Street, the American Dream manifests primarily as a desire for a modicum of control over the public and private spaces she occupies.

Lutie's dogged fixation on her Dream, on maintaining an unrealistically secluded living space and a solipsistic social life, manufactures her inability to perceive the actual conditions of her life and, consequently, hinders her capacity to alter those conditions. Lutie's ideas about safety and privacy engineer an impossible precedent—Lutie desires an apartment that is actually, materially impermeable, and she strives to create a tightly controlled social situation wherein she can keep her son separated from what she considers the deleterious influences of the street. I tend to follow Hilary Holiday and Keith Clark, respectively, in attributing Lutie's rigid interpersonal boundaries to the myth

of the American Dream; Keith Clark, in particular, indicts the hard-line individualism Lutie garnered from the myth of the American Dream as the cause of her disconnection from her community. That is, Lutie's individualism informs the way she experiences her material surroundings (i.e. her neighborhood) and the people who occupy it. As Hilary Holiday writes, "in her encounters with people who are just as vulnerable, angry, and fearful as she is, Lutie has little reason to think that she would benefit from wholehearted participation in the community of Harlem" (62).

Both Holiday and Clark write about the secondary characters Min and Mrs. Hedges as Lutie's foils because, in Clark's words, they "embody [...] a history of black women subverting the vacuous Dream myth through an almost innate ability to secure their own space despite the twin scourges of racism and sexism" (2). Mrs. Hedges and Min secure this space primarily via networks of affiliation with other women in their community, something Lutie finds difficult to do both because of her ideas about the importance of self-reliance and because, even if she wanted to make friends, practical considerations, such as working full-time and being a single mother, limit her opportunities to do so. Min and Mrs. Hedges are also able to secure space for themselves because their perceptions of the fluid nature of domestic space function quite differently than Lutie's own solipsistic conceptualization of home.

Lutie maintains an unrealistic idealism with regard to her living space because, for her, the American Dream has been condensed into a fantasy of an ultra-secure home. Whereas Min and Mrs. Hedges acknowledge at various times throughout the novel that their apartments are not isolated, hermetically-sealed enclaves, Lutie tries to buffer hers

from both material and interpersonal intrusions. In contrast, as Trudier Harris-Lopez argues, Mrs. Hedges and Min allow for and even embrace a certain amount of flow in and out of their homes. “Such attitudes would suggest,” Harris-Lopez writes, “that an understanding of environment and architecture should precede the imposition of an alien absolute morality [like Lutie’s] upon a world where survival depends on mutability” (69). Instead, Lutie harbors an overly idealistic conceptualization of home.

In her article “Shatterings,” Amanda Davis applies bell hooks’ concept of “homeplace” to Alice Walker’s and Ann Petry’s novels. Davis defines “homeplace” as a space “where one can find reprieve from an otherwise often harsh world” (26) and argues that, although she believes in the potential for hooks’ kind of alterior—almost utopian—concept of home, novels like The Street and (Alice Walker’s) Jubilee do little to bear it out.

Readers witness that homes themselves are continually disrupted in Jubilee and The Street through violence and oppression, and as a result, so are various attempts to create and maintain the type of homeplace that hooks describes. Walker and Petry clearly illuminate the need for home to act as a safe place of affirmation and resistance, but their texts raise critical questions concerning the obstacles against which this task must sometimes be carried out. (26)

Indeed, Amanda Davis’s overall argument very much resonates with the one I make throughout my dissertation: that ostensibly safe spaces, such as homes, are frequently more dangerous for women than the public, often urban, spaces stereotypically perceived

to pose the greatest threat. My argument deviates from hers, however, because not only do I look at domestic spaces as sites of danger or fear for women, but I also extend the trajectory of my analysis by championing the liberatory potential of the public sphere in redressing sexual violence against women.

Although Trudier Harris-Lopez investigates the (im)permeability of domestic spaces in her article as well, she also does not advocate public, urban space as antidote to the toxic household spaces of The Street in the same way that I do. Harris-Lopez asserts that “[Lutie’s] womblike domestic space only serves to lock violators in, not to lock them out. If she can have no protection within her own small apartment, then she can surely expect none from the more public spaces into which she ventures” (74). I would like to suggest that the exact opposite holds true. Lutie could, and perhaps should, expect to find the solace and support lacking in her domestic situation within the public, urban space of her Harlem neighborhood. But Petry writes Lutie in such a way that her negative attitude toward her surroundings detracts from her ability to connect with her neighbors, especially the women who live in her building, which only serves to further the isolation that fuels her emotional and material deterioration throughout the novel.

Oftentimes, it seems as if Petry has a critical agenda in the way she constructs Lutie; because Lutie is unable to see how her positionality as a poor, black woman differs from that of the people she emulates—especially Benjamin Franklin, whose ability to advance through the social strata Lutie attributes to industry alone—her ambitions are continually frustrated. As a result of both her subject position and her personal history, Lutie is skeptical about forging any kind of relationship with anybody. Scholars who

have written on The Street, especially Hilary Holiday, note how Lutie seems disconnected not only from her larger community but also from her immediate family. As Holiday explains, “[Lutie] has so much experience in aborted, unhappy relationships that the prospect of a welcoming community never even occurs to her” (49).

All of Lutie’s relationships—even her maternal attachment to her son, Bub—can be characterized as cold at best and antagonistic at worst. For example, although Lutie frequently recalls bits of folk wisdom imparted by her deceased grandmother, she does so in a detached, emotionless manner that belies the warmth and affection behind her grandmother’s advice. Lutie’s mother is never mentioned except to say that she had been killed off “when she was in her prime,” which Lutie attributes to either “Streets like 116<sup>th</sup> Street or being colored” (56). Lutie’s father does little for her except to contribute to the difficulty of her situation. He is an alcoholic who sells bootlegged liquor for a living and takes up with various women, such as Lil, who lives with them when Lutie and Bub move in with her father, and who is a raucous, sexualized presence in the lives of Lutie’s family; it is Lil’s libertine behavior, specifically her predilection for skimpy housedresses and her permissiveness with Bub, that forces Lutie to move out of her father’s house with her son. Lutie and Bub live with her father during this time because, while Lutie worked as a domestic employee in the home of a wealthy Connecticut family, her unemployed husband Jim began “carrying on with another woman” (52). When Lutie finds out, she quits her job and returns to New York, but her marriage is irreparably affected. And although Lutie loves her son very much, after her marriage dissolves, the stress of trying

to keep him fed, clothed, and housed seriously hinders Lutie's ability to bond with him in any meaningful or sustained way.

In short, Lutie Johnson suffers from a kind of social isolation that reflects the race, class, and gender prejudice that has marked her comparatively short life. It is no small irony that Lutie's move from the house she shared with her family in Jamaica, Queens to Harlem—which at one time represented community and amusement even for the solipsistic Lutie, who had previously enjoyed spending weekend nights there with her husband—exacerbates her impulse toward and need for self-reliance. Although during its Renaissance Harlem had served as a place of great community solidarity, the Harlem Lutie moves to has become ruggedly survivalist. In Black Women Novelists, Barbara Christian observes that “In The Street, Harlem does not emerge as a community, for everyone is competing with everyone else for whatever they can get. Cut off from each other, the people merely pass each other, touching only when they must or when it is to their advantage” (64). And while it is true that Lutie certainly has difficulty connecting with the people around her on even the most banal level, I tend to agree with Keith Clark's counter-reading of The Street. Clark argues that, “Although it is not a flourishing one, a black female community—some sort of network that attempts to sustain its members—does exist” (500). As evidence, Clark shifts his critical focus away from Lutie and examines some of the secondary characters in the novel.

Both Clark and Hilary Holiday argue that Mrs. Hedges and Min, the woman who lives with the menacing Super of these characters' apartment building, serve as Lutie's foils because they represent the ability of women in the city to forge connections within

the community, mainly with other women, in order to carve out space for themselves—that is, both literal, geographic space as well as the space that symbolizes opportunity. In doing so, they are afforded access to resources that otherwise would have been unavailable to them. Regarding the Super’s girlfriend, Holiday writes, “Uneducated and simple though she may be, Min finds comfort and possibility in Harlem, whereas Lutie finds only hostility and a series of dead ends” (54). The difference is, that unlike Lutie, Min and Mrs. Hedges participate in that which Nancy Fraser deems “the social,” which functions as “a site of discourse about people’s needs [...] a site of discourse about problematic needs, needs that have come to exceed the apparently (but not really) self-regulating domestic and official economic institutions of male-dominated, capitalist societies” (Unruly Practices 156). The social, in the context of The Street, would serve Lutie as an immediate, localized public, so much more available to her than the broader public of bourgeois, white America: ironically the only public for whom the American Dream is even a remote possibility. Lutie’s problem is that she is unable or unwilling to see the kind of American she is; in short, she is blind to her positionality. Because she is a poor, black, urban-dwelling female, Lutie is, as Lauren Berlant writes in The Queen of America Goes to Washington City, “American enough to provide labor but not American enough to be sustained by the fullest resources of democratic national privilege” (19).

Lutie’s indoctrination into ideologies that promise to broker hard work for social and economic prosperity are in part attributable to Lutie’s devotion her hero: white, bourgeois, founding-father Benjamin Franklin. Buying dinner rolls reminds her of Franklin’s boast in his Autobiography that he could be satisfied on bread and water alone.

As Lutie snacks on a roll while she finishes her errands, she admonishes herself, “you ought to remember while you eat that you’re in Harlem and he was in Philadelphia a pretty long number of years ago” (64). It strikes me that the distinctions Lutie makes between herself and Franklin are superficial, geographic and temporal ones. Lutie seems to miss even the most obvious, and most significant, distinctions between herself and Benjamin Franklin; what she really ought to remember is that she’s black and female in Harlem and Franklin was white and male in Philadelphia. Nonetheless, Lutie “couldn’t get rid of the feeling of self-confidence and she went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and prosper, then so could she” (64). Because Lutie is blind to the machinations of social and political power, she foolishly emulates figures like Franklin, whose rise through the ranks of power and privilege had as much to do with his status as white male as it did with any kind of agency or industry on his part.

During Lutie’s stint as a domestic worker, she is employed by a wealthy Connecticut family, the Chandlers, who further indoctrinate her into the myth of the American Dream. Lutie observes how

After a year of listening to their talk, she absorbed some of the same spirit.

The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough. Apparently that’s what the Pizzinis [the Italian grocers in Lutie’s neighborhood in Queens] had done. She and Jim could do the same thing, and she thought she saw what had been wrong with them before—they hadn’t tried hard enough, worked long enough, saved enough. There hadn’t been any one thing they wanted above and beyond

everything else. These people had wanted only one thing—more and more money—and so they got it. (43)

As determined to succeed as Lutie sounds in this passage, here too, she fails to notice the differences in positionality between herself and this family. Because the Chandlers are white and wealthy, they have greater access to the Dream that is denied Lutie and other socially and politically marginalized people. Lutie also cites the Pizzinis as evidence of the efficacy of the American Dream, even though the Pizzinis are white ethnics who, by the time Lutie encounters them in the early 1940s, have well assimilated into mainstream American culture. Lutie seems to overlook this fact as well. She seems not to understand that no matter how hard she and Jim work, they will never acquire the easy wealth the Chandlers accumulate or even the comfortable standard of living achieved by the Italian grocers.

The interstices between social positionality and geography—or more accurately, geo-demographics—do much to account for Lutie’s uneven access to the social and material resources necessary for actualizing a Dream of self-sufficiency and success. Whereas the Chandlers live in a small, wealthy Connecticut town and the Pizzinis live in a nice neighborhood in Queens, The Harlem that Lutie Johnson encounters in The Street is an area marked by abject poverty and the substandard living conditions such poverty brings. At this point in its history, Harlem was a ghetto in the truest sense of the word: it was an environment of race and class-based isolation, exacerbated by political, legal, social, and economic practices that enabled its accelerated degeneration throughout the Depression. During the height of the Depression in the 1930s, New York City as a whole

suffered from an unemployment rate that far surpassed the national average. In 1935, for example, one-third of all men and women in New York City who had been employed in 1930 had lost their jobs, with conditions even more dire in under-serviced, “ghettoized” areas like Harlem (Greenberg 65).

Statistics such as the one above can sometimes seem staggering and incomprehensible when trying to get a bead on people’s real life conditions of existence in places such as Depression-era Harlem, especially for people (admittedly, people like myself) who tend not to use quantifiable or empirical means to make sense of the world. An old Jane Tompkins quotation I scrawled on a napkin early on in my graduate career hangs over my desk and helps me remember the role of fiction in understanding historical moments and milieus, like Lutie’s, that differ so dramatically from my own. The quotation reads: “An epistemology which excludes emotions from the process of attaining knowledge radically undercuts women’s epistemic authority” (170). Although facts and statistics do provide a certain purview onto which one can imagine life in Depression- and post-Depression era Harlem, fictional texts, such as The Street, flesh out some of the more quantitative ways of accessing this area’s history by providing individualized, affective “case studies,” replete with characters’ desires and fears, that lend a human face to cold, historicist epistemologies.

For example, during the Depression and World War II eras, most African Americans living in areas like Harlem had to find ways to generate or supplement their incomes, many times through illegal means, which constructed a methodology of resource acquisition directly at odds with the protocol of industrious and honest labor

dictated by the American Dream. Petry's Street bears out people's need to participate in illicit money-making ventures to augment, or even generate, their incomes, as Lutie's father bootlegs and Mrs. Hedges, the neighborhood madam who lives in her building, continuously tries to impel Lutie into prostituting herself for extra income. These characters, and many of their real-life counterparts, were frequently compelled to engage in alternative, illegal income-generating activities because economic and social conditions in Harlem were even more severe than they were throughout the rest of the city. The Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem, published in 1935, put it succinctly enough when it issued a statement saying that "the city had two types of businesses: those that hired blacks for menial labor, and those that refused to hire blacks at all" (Greenburg 71).

Throughout the long *durée* of Harlem's Depression years, many African Americans were also forced to go to great lengths to retain their living spaces, which made securing safe and private domiciles even more vital to people's conceptualizations of success. Some Harlemites, like the Super for Lutie's apartment building, exchanged labor for rent; many more took in lodgers, whether strangers to help them with the rent or family members who themselves had become dispossessed and needed somewhere to live. As a result, segregated spaces like Harlem had obscenely high population densities throughout the Depression and most of the 1940s. Cheryl Greenberg cites a Colliers article from 1944 that asserts that "300,000 blacks [were] living in housing designed for 75,000" (219). Lutie herself muses over this fact in the early pages of The Street:

She stood there thinking that it was really a pity they couldn't somehow manage to rent the halls too. Single beds. No. Old Army Cots would do. It would bring in so much more money. If she were a landlord, she'd rent the hallways. It would make it so much more entertaining for the tenants. Mr. Jones and wife could have cots number one and two; Jackson and girl friend could occupy number three. And Rinaldi, who drove a cab nights, could sublet the one occupied by Jackson and girl friend.

She would fill up all the cots—row after row of them. And when the tenants who had apartments came in late at night, they would have the added pleasure of checking up on the occupants. Jackson not home yet but girl friend lying on the cot alone—all curled up. A second look, because the lack of light wouldn't show all the details would reveal—ye gods, why, what's Rinaldi doing home at night! Doggone if he ain't tucked up cozily in Jackson's cot with Jackson's girl friend. No wonder she looks contented. (7-8)

I quote this passage at length because it lends affect, and even humor, to the statistic presented in the Colliers article. Petry's descriptions of what it might be like for everyday Harlemites, people like Rinaldi and Jackson, to "hotbed"—a euphemism for the practice of sleeping in shifts Petry describes—strengthen the impact of the Colliers statistic by enabling readers to better picture both the advantages, such as cheap rent, and the problems, such as romantic jealousies, inherent in hotbedding.

For the most part, it was the exorbitant cost of living in Harlem during this time that necessitated practices like hotbedding, which in turn engendered such high

population densities. Rent was more expensive in Harlem than it was in the rest of the city due to discriminatory housing practices; because Harlem was one of the few areas in the city in which African Americans could rent, landlords and property developers held a premium on apartments there. Consequently, as Greenberg notes, “most blacks in Central Harlem spent close to ½ their pay on rent” (179). Food also cost more in Harlem; prices were consistently 15-20% higher than for the rest of the city (208), and the quality was much poorer than in other parts of New York. The Street reinforces statistics like the ones above by offering examples of what it might have actually looked like for Harlemites to try to feed themselves and their families on over-priced, low-quality food; for example, as Lutie purchases some questionable hamburger from a butcher shop in her neighborhood, she worries about whether “during the cold winter months the butcher might round up all the lean, hungry cats that prowled through the streets; herding them into his back room to skin them and grind them up to make more and more hamburger that would be sold way over the ceiling price” (Petry 62). Passages like this one augment readers’ and scholars’ understandings of Harlemites’ struggles to find quality, affordable food by illustrating in vivid detail just how unappealing culinary choices might be for Lutie and other, non-fictional people in similar situations.

When the United States entered WWII in 1941, economic conditions around the country improved. There was an industry and manufacture “war boom” that provided jobs for many formerly unemployed people, which helped ameliorate some of the effects of the Depression. Unfortunately, this upsurge in job availability had almost no impact on the conditions of living in areas of the country like Harlem, where racism continued to

inform hiring practices such that qualified minorities were often overlooked for positions acquired by less qualified white people. Complicating matters further was New York's economy during this period, which was far more dependent on the service and consumer markets than it was on manufacture and other war-related industries, and consequently—in contrast to the rest of the country—the unemployment rate in New York City actually rose between the years 1939 and 1942, with black New Yorkers hit the hardest (Greenberg 199). Within the social and material landscape of Lutie Johnson's Harlem, the so-called war boom is nowhere to be seen; rather, Petry illustrates the neighborhood's continuing social and economic attenuation via her protagonists' daily struggle for access to basic resources like nourishing food and safe and private shelter.

New Deal policies, which assuaged much poverty in the nation as a whole, also lagged in areas like Harlem. The Roosevelt administration instituted programs to help employ out of work Americans; it also passed anti-discrimination legislation like Executive Order 8802, which prohibited government agencies from discriminating against potential employees on the basis of race. Despite these measures, racism nonetheless prevailed, causing underrepresented black Americans to become increasingly frustrated with their meager living conditions and lack of opportunity to extricate themselves from them. Riots ensued. Petry sets The Street in 1944, and just a year before, in 1943, a major uprising broke out in Harlem. Crowds smashed windows and later looted many businesses located in the broad stretch between 110<sup>th</sup> Street and 145<sup>th</sup> Street. According to witnesses, “rioters came from all classes and ages and both sexes,”

which evidences the ubiquitous level of frustration felt by Harlem's residents (Greenberg 219).

Incidents like the riots of 1943 underline the extent to which deep structural inequalities impacted Harlemites everyday lives. The simple acquisition of basic human needs, such as feeling safe at home and in one's neighborhood, became the locus of many people's ambitions. Indeed, in The Street, Lutie's sense of self, as well as her sense of duty toward her son, is intimately bound to her struggle to procure a decent place to live. Critics such as You-me Park and Gayle Wald argue that Petry's novel reflects a "perceived crisis in the discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and labor," all of which "found social expression through the reordering of public and private" (608). Petry negotiates this re-ordering of spheres within her novel via Lutie's desperate attempts to secure a safe, private living space for herself and her son. The socially and physically porous nature of her apartment, however, as well as the uneven delineations of the public space of her neighborhood along class, race, and gender lines, compound to undermine her attempts to realize her own version of the American Dream: a secure, private home.

Lutie's solipsistic philosophy of life, coupled with her oftentimes poor treatment of her neighbors and her son, make her a difficult protagonist to identify with. At times, in fact, it seems as if Petry "has it in" for Lutie—nothing good befalls this character. It seems to me that Petry has a critical-artistic agenda in the way in which she writes Lutie, one that can be elucidated by putting The Street in conversation with Petry's short story, "Like a Winding Sheet," which was published in 1945, a year before The Street, and

which lays bare the same race-/class-/gender-based disparities that contribute to Petry's disparaging characterization of Lutie.

There are two very important commonalities that link the protagonists in Petry's novel and short story. The first is that both sets of characters reside in Harlem. The Street and "Like a Winding Sheet" are two of only three fictional pieces Ann Petry sets explicitly in Harlem. She grew up in Connecticut, and her later novels, as well as some of her short stories, take place there. Many others are set in the fictional, small town of Wheeling, NY; still others take place in the Jim Crow south. I cannot think it coincidental that two such thematically-similar stories are set in the same, underprivileged, underrepresented New York City neighborhood. Fictional texts, like The Street and "Like a Winding Sheet," lend themselves to readings as companion pieces to Petry's journalistic endeavors about the neighborhood, such as her 1949 article "Harlem" in Holiday magazine that I investigate in my Introduction. Surely, Petry uses these fictional texts and the characters that inhabit them as examples, or "case studies," of the effects of a racist, classist, sexist system on Harlem's residents for a reason.

The shared surname "Johnson" constitutes the second parallel between Lutie and the main characters in "Like a Winding Sheet." Lutie herself glosses the importance of this not uncommon last name in The Street: "The Johnsons and the Jacksons were mighty prolific. Then [Lutie] grinned, thinking who am I to talk, for I, too, belong to that great tribe, that mighty mighty tribe of Johnsons" (7). The degree to which slaves were free to choose their last names after Emancipation remains a controversial topic among historians and critics, but Orlando Patterson nevertheless emphasizes that "sometimes, for

the purposes of protection, [freed slaves] kept the names of their ex-masters if they were important persons” (56). My guess is that the “mighty mighty tribe” of Johnsons and Jacksons Lutie encounters results from the practice of self-naming Orlando Patterson describes, and, like each story’s respective setting, seems far from coincidental. Through the process of self-naming (or perhaps having been named by people in positions of power), the Johnsons and the Jacksons are semantically linked to their oppressors, demonstrating the ways in which structures of domination are deeply, trans-generationally imbedded.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond those two superficial similarities in name and place, the characters in “Like a Winding Sheet” appear to have little else in common with Lutie Johnson, at least initially. At the beginning of the short story, readers are introduced to Mae and her husband, whose first name, significantly, is never given. He is simply addressed as “Johnson,” which reinforces further the degree to which his identity is defined by his genealogical relationship to racist power structures. Johnson and Mae are Harlem residents who are just waking up at 4 p.m. to go to their respective jobs working the night shift at two downtown factories. Throughout the majority of the story, the husband and wife appear to have a wonderful, incredibly congenial and loving relationship. Johnson, for example, regrets not waking up in time to make his wife breakfast in bed (198), and Mae teases him and giggles in a light and playful way when he finally does awaken.

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<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Little understood as much in becoming Malcolm X.

Mae is a little bit superstitious, and when she notices the date on the calendar and tells her husband she would rather not go to work because it is Friday the Thirteenth, he convinces her otherwise by “talk[ing] persuasively, urging her gently,” because “he couldn’t bring himself to talk to her roughly or threaten to strike her like a lot of men might have done. He wasn’t made that way” (200). But Johnson makes himself late to work convincing Mae to go to her job, and, as a result, incurs the wrath of his boss, a racist white forewoman who rants: “Excuses. You guys always got excuses [...] And the niggers is the worse [...] I’m sick of you niggers” (202). Trying to remain appropriate, Johnson retorts, “You got the right to be mad [...] You got the right to cuss me four ways to Sunday but I ain’t letting nobody call me a nigger” (202). Although he feels “a curious tingling in his fingers” and looks down to notice that his hands “were clenched tight, hard, ready,” he maintains that “he couldn’t bring himself to hit a woman,” (203) while actively fantasizing about doing so.

Later, after Johnson works his shift and stands in line to collect his paycheck, he follows some of his co-workers into a diner close to his work. There, he has another experience with a white woman that he immediately (mis)reads as racist. When Johnson finally reaches the front of a long coffee line, the coffee urn is coincidentally empty. After informing him that he might have to wait for a while for a cup, “the white girl looked past him, put her hands up to her head and gently lifted the hair away from the back of her neck, tossing her head a little,” (206) which Johnson interprets as a gesture conveying her disdain for him and his blackness. His reaction seems largely informed by his earlier experience with his boss’s racism: he wants to “hit [the white girl] so hard that

the scarlet lipstick on her mouth would smear and spread over her nose, her chin, out toward her cheeks, so hard that she would never toss her head again and refuse a man a cup of coffee because he was black” (207). But, even though he equates this incident with the white woman to his boss’s overtly racist behavior, he comments, “he couldn’t even now bring himself to hit a woman, not even this one, who had refused him a cup of coffee with a toss of her head” (207). Instead, “He had walked away without a backward look, his head down, his hands in his pockets, raging at himself and whatever it was inside him that had forced him to stand quiet and still when he wanted to strike out” (208).

Johnson tries hard to react non-violently, even dispassionately to the racist behavior he incurs and interprets. He walks away from the diner without a second glance, which, if he had taken it, would have revealed the counter girl repeating her hair toss as an habitual—and benign—gesture. On the subway, the pain in his legs caused by standing up all night “clawed up into his groin so that he seemed to be bursting with pain and he told himself that it was due to all the anger-borne energy that had piled up in him and not been used and so it had spread through him like a poison” (208). That his anger at these racist women localizes in his genital area indicates the manner in which Johnson registers his powerlessness. The experiences he has with these women revise an established (although, clearly, hugely problematic) power dynamic, wherein his masculinity provides him with a sense of perceived power over women. By the time he takes this particular subway ride home, Johnson has not only been rendered socially

impotent because of the color of his skin, but he has been stripped of his masculinity, his last perceived vestige of power, as well.

When he arrives back at the apartment he shares with his wife, Mae immediately senses his mood. She, too, plays with her hair, a gesture reminiscent of his experience with the counter girl. Mae confronts him about his bad mood, again in a light, joking kind of way, but she makes a huge mistake in telling him that he is “nothing but an old hungry nigger trying to act tough” (210). Hearing his wife call him “nigger,” even in jest, overwhelms Johnson to the extent that “that funny tingling started in his finger tips, went fast up his arms and sent his fist shooting straight for her face” (210). Ironically, Johnson realizes his fantasy of hitting the white woman so hard lipstick smears her face by punching his wife in precisely the same way as he wanted to strike the counter girl. Although Johnson seems cognizant of the violence he inflicts on his wife, the cumulative, systemic effects of the individual acts of racism he incurs throughout the day prevent him from stopping his behavior:

He kept striking her and he thought with horror that something inside him was holding him, binding him to this act, wrapping and twisting about him so that he had to continue it. He had lost all control over his hands. And he groped for a phrase, a word, something to describe what this thing was that was happening to him and he thought it was like being enmeshed in a winding sheet—that was it—like a winding sheet. And even as the thought formed in his mind, his hands reached for her face again and yet again. (210)

In this scene, institutional racism envelops Johnson like a funeral shroud, a winding sheet, which portends both his wife's death at his own hands as well as the death of his ideals and sense of self. Early on in the story, Johnson asserts that he "wasn't made that way," (200) wasn't capable of talking to or behaving violently toward women. Yet Petry's story reveals that, given the magnitude of social impotence felt by Johnson and men similar to him as a consequence of the systemic racism they encounter in their everyday lives, everyone is "made that way": susceptible to behaving out of character as the cumulative effect of a lifetime's worth of racial slights. The final scene in The Street (a scene I will turn to in much greater detail later in this chapter), in which Lutie beats blues musician Boots Smith to death with a candle stick, seems hauntingly similar to the end of "Like a Winding Sheet." In both texts, the cumulative effects of punctual, seemingly insignificant events unearth and foreground deeply embedded structural inequalities that propagate violence and aggression in the lives of Petry's characters.

### **Bad Boundaries**

Whereas throughout most of the novel Lutie seems rather blind to the actual conditions of her life as well as to the structural inequalities that produce them, there are also moments in the text where Lutie appears to have some minimal awareness of her marginalized positionality; these may be the moments when Petry's critical agenda is best revealed. For example, Petry uses the metaphor of a walled off, "enchanted garden" (41) to symbolize Lutie's remove from white, mainstream society, particularly from the elite lifestyle promulgated by people like the Chandlers: "She could see, she could hear, she spoke the language of the people in the garden, but she couldn't get past the wall. The

figures on the other side of it loomed up life-size and they could see her, but there was this wall in between which prevented them from mingling on an even footing” (41). Amanda Davis unpacks Petry’s wall imagery, explaining how “walls are often used in The Street as metaphors for oppression, forced enclosures, and confined areas informed by race, gender, and class” (40). Indeed, much later in the novel, Lutie again understands her socially circumscribed position via the parapet metaphor; in this case, she observes that Junto, the white proprietor of clubs and apartment buildings in Lutie’s neighborhood, who is interested in her on a sexual level, holds the last brick in the ever-growing wall that stymies any social or economic mobility on her part (423).

Most of the time, however, Lutie retains the notion that hard work and god-given talent (she is a wonderful singer) are enough to enable her to “make it” in a world wherein the very conditions of her existence prohibit her success. When Lutie does interrogate her surroundings for clues as to why she cannot make ends meet on her meager salary, she repeatedly concludes that it is *the street itself* that serves as the blockage. By focusing on a geographic feature as the cause of her financial and social difficulties, Lutie, in turn, fails to note the structural inequalities that oppress her neighbors as well as herself. As per the doctrine of self-reliance espoused by her hero Benjamin Franklin, Lutie never even thinks of reaching out to other women in her community for aid or advice, which consequently exacerbates the barrier of isolation that creates a wall not only between herself and her goals but also between herself and her a broader, social network Harlem women.

Rather, Lutie fixates on insularity, believing that if she can create a hermetically sealed space for herself and Bub, she can spare both of them the social, financial, and affective consequences of the dreaded street. When she first looks at the apartment she will rent on 116th Street, Lutie is distressed by the “cigarette butts, the discarded wrappings from packages of snuff, [the] pink tickets from the movie houses” as well as the “empty gin and whiskey bottles” (12). All of these items belong in the street, or in people’s individual apartments, but have instead infiltrated the hallways of the building in a way that evinces its porosity. In fact, there are an uncanny number of references (over sixty, by my count) to architectural permeability throughout the novel. Petry makes it clear that no matter how stridently Lutie works for her Dream of securing a private, safe domestic space for herself and her son, the nature of her particular apartment building—and indeed all tenements like hers—is infinitely pervious such that Lutie’s attempts to secede and isolate herself from her community within the confines of her own apartment not only prove futile but also serve as the technology of her social and moral demise. Petry offers a solution, however, in the form of informal social networks, such as those forged by Mrs. Hedges, Min, and other Harlem women (like those in the waiting room of the Prophet—a conjure man Mrs. Hedges sends Min to see). But, because Lutie is so thoroughly indoctrinated in an ideology of self-reliance, she neglects to apprehend this informal, female public as a possible source of information and aid.

All of this is even more devastating given the fact that Mrs. Hedges works hard to make this social public available and amenable to Lutie. For example, in one scene, after Lutie catches her son shining shoes on the street, she admonishes him in a way that

betrays that degree to which she has internalized the racism and classism so prevalent in her social landscape. She yells, “I’m working to look after you and you out here in the street shining shoes just like the rest of those little niggers” (67), using racist terminology to elevate herself and Bub from their neighbors. Afterwards, she becomes aware that Mrs. Hedges has observed their whole interaction. Slightly embarrassed, Lutie notes how “living here is like living in a tent with everything that goes on inside it open to the world because the flap won’t close. And the flap couldn’t close because Mrs. Hedges sat at her street-floor window firmly holding it open in order to see what went on inside” (68). Unlike Lutie, Mrs. Hedges understands the benefits of breaching boundaries and spends the majority of her time sitting in the liminal space of her windowsill, her body half-in, half-out of the building. This ambiguous positioning affords Mrs. Hedges insight and control over activity on the street as well as the comings and goings of her clients as they visit her “girls.”

In fact, Mrs. Hedges owes her very existence to her ability to transcend architectural and social boundaries. Petry provides her readers with back story about Mrs. Hedges, explaining how, shortly after she had moved from rural Georgia to New York City, she encountered Junto—who will later come to own half of Harlem—on the street while she dug through trashcans for food and pieces of metal and glass that she could sell for small amounts of money. Junto finds Mrs. Hedges “wonderful,” as well as enterprising, and they begin to work together, eventually earning enough for Junto to purchase an apartment building and to provide Mrs. Hedges with a “job of janitor and collector of rents” there (243). As a result, Mrs. Hedges gets a free place to live as well

as “a commission on the rent she collected” (243), which she channels into other Junto-endorsed money-making ventures. Because of her social and geographic proximity to Junto, a white man who is imbued with all the trappings of power that social position affords, Mrs. Hedges becomes upwardly mobile and is able to transcend the financial and social barriers that could have barred her progression from her state of homelessness to her status as property investor.

Mrs. Hedges’s ability to breach perceived boundaries becomes enormously important during the time when she lives and works within the first property acquired by Junto. When a quick-burning fire spreads to the basement where Mrs. Hedges is sleeping, her only option for survival is to try to squeeze herself through “a narrow aperture not really big enough for the bulk of her body” (244). Consequently, “[Mrs. Hedges] felt her flesh tear and actually give way as she struggled to get out, forcing and squeezing her body through the small space” (244). Regardless of this seemingly dire situation, Mrs. Hedges continues to fight to get out the window:

There was nothing but smoke and red flame all around her, and she wondered why she kept on fighting to escape. She could smell her hair burning, smell her flesh burning, and still she struggled, determined that she would force her body through the narrow window, that she would *make the very stones of the foundation give* until the window opening would in turn give way. (244, emphasis mine)

Her efforts to escape paid off, as “she was the only survivor left from that house full of people” (244). Mrs. Hedges’s will to live facilitates her escape, to be sure, but it is her

almost preternatural, understanding of the instability and perviousness of buildings that truly enables her survival.

It is no wonder, then, that Mrs. Hedges spends the bulk of her time perched in the windowsill of her home/business. A window is what saved Mrs. Hedges's life, and a window is also what facilitates her livelihood. Moreover, according to Carol Henderson, "the window becomes the phenomenological venue through which she seizes this space; it is in this window that faces the street that Mrs. Hedges becomes deified, heard, recognized" (863). To be sure, Mrs. Hedges makes more of an impact on her urban environment more than any other character in the novel. Because of her unique vantage point, Mrs. Hedges very much functions as "the eyes on the street," and is therefore able to intervene in situations that affect people in her community. For example, when Bub is chased by bullies who begin to beat him up in front of his apartment building, Mrs. Hedges not only utilizes her commanding presence to scare them away, but she also calls the boys by name, which underlines the extent to which she knows her neighborhood and its families (348). In another scene, Mrs. Hedges provides Min, the Super's girlfriend, with directions to the office of "The Prophet," a conjure man whom Min believes will keep Jones (the Super) from "put[ting] her out" (120). Although Mrs. Hedges claims not to believe in such things herself, she nonetheless has the information that Min desires because of her awareness of everything people do on the street. Significantly in this passage, Mrs. Hedges also stresses that Min can "just walk right in the door. It's always open" (118), which further illustrates her awareness of the benefits of allowing a flow of people in and out of her apartment.

Mrs. Hedges serves as an instructive character: because of her ability to forge social and professional networks in her Harlem neighborhood—in other words, to create publics—the once-homeless, terribly scarred, turban-wearing madam literally “hedges her bets,” making sure the odds of survival are in her favor. Mrs. Hedges’s name could be read in an ironic, secondary sense as well, given that she seems the least “hedged in” of all Petry’s characters. Similarly, the name “Min” evokes anything diminutive: minus, minimal, etc. And while she does have a tendency toward self-effacement, I follow Trudier Harris-Lopez in considering this trait adaptive: “Becoming one with her environment means that Min has learned the ‘art’ of molding flesh and blood to wood and stone” (83). Both Mrs. Hedges’s and Min’s names imply truisms about their personalities and situations: Mrs. Hedges could have easily been a victim of circumstance; Min is indeed diminutive. But their names presage the opposite as well. Through social networking, Mrs. Hedges realizes financial and social possibilities. Through her diminished affect, Min curries favor with people who enable her access to necessities like physical shelter and social support.

Lutie, on the other hand, has trouble breaching social boundaries, even though Mrs. Hedges intervenes on her behalf in a way that both reveals the efficacy of social contacts and evinces Mrs. Hedges’s power, both within her building and within the social structure of her Harlem neighborhood. Throughout the novel, Jones, the Super, ferociously desires Lutie sexually and fantasizes repeatedly about attacking her. From the very first time Jones encounters Lutie, while showing her the space she and Bub will come to rent, he envisions raping her on the empty apartment floor: “[...]he knew if he

followed her in there, he would force her down on the floor, down against the worn floor boards. He had tried to imagine what it would be like to feel her body under his—soft and warm and moving with him. And he made a choking, strangled noise in his throat” (99).

The Super’s frustrated desire plagues him, and he becomes obsessed with the idea of “having” Lutie. In one scene, after Lutie and Bub have occupied the apartment long enough for Jones’s fixation with Lutie to reach the boiling point, she comes home late, brimming with excitement over the success of her rehearsal with a band that plays at the Junto, the club owned by the man with the same name. Seeing her “standing in the doorway, her long skirt blowing around her [... Jones’s] hand left the door in a slow, wide gesture and he started toward her, thinking that he would have her now, tonight, and trembling with the thought” (234). After Jones blocks Lutie’s passage as she tries to get past him and up the stairs to her apartment, she anticipates her escape, thinking that “if she moved fast enough, she could get out into the street” (235). Here, for the first and perhaps the only time, Lutie understands that the public space of her Harlem neighborhood, the very street she condemns, offers her sanctuary from the sexual violence endemic to her apartment building. For a split second, Lutie understands what Min and Mrs. Hedges have known all along: that the public space of the city protects its residents better than their private, ostensibly secure, domestic spaces.

When Jones does apprehend Lutie, his goal is to drag her down into the cellar, which Jones considers his domain. In fact, other characters in the novel attribute Jones’s sociopathic tendencies to the amount of time he has spent in cellars and basements; Min,

for example, notes “maybe if he’d had more sun on him he would have been different,” (370) and Mrs. Hedges labels him as “cellar crazy” (240). Here, Min and Mrs. Hedges indict the interior spaces of run-down apartment buildings as the real cause of the Super’s corruption, which contrasts with Lutie’s notions of the street as the force that hardens and changes people. Regardless, the cumulative effect of domestic and subterranean spaces on Jones engenders his criminal consciousness such that he does not consider his attacking Lutie to be sexual assault; Jones even believes that her attempts to fight him off are because “she hadn’t understood that he wasn’t going to hurt her, that he wouldn’t hurt her for anything” (280).

As Jones attempts to abscond to the cellar with Lutie in tow, his terribly abused dog charges into the hallway and jumps on Lutie’s back. Although Jones later speculates that it is Min who releases the dog (278), Petry provides no other evidence for this conjecture. It does, however, seem curious that the dog would have escaped from Jones’s closed door without Min’s opening it for him, but perhaps this moment in the text serves as another instance wherein the building’s porosity actually serves to help Lutie in a way that runs counter to her ideas about the importance of self-reliance and insularity. No matter how the dog gets into the hallway, his presence there sends Lutie into full-blown panic, and her consequent screams alert the ever-vigilant Mrs. Hedges that something is amiss. While Lutie’s screams “rushed back down the stair well until the whole building echoed and reechoed with the frantic, desperate sound[...] a pair of powerful hands gripped her by the shoulders, wrenched her violently out of the Super’s arms, flung her back against the wall” (236). The sound of Mrs. Hedges’s voice in the hallway causes

“the dog to slink away, his tail between his legs” (237). Mrs. Hedges confronts Jones, telling him that if he “ever even look[s] at that girl again, [she’ll] have [him] locked up” (238). Mrs. Hedges is a powerful enough member of this community that her threat is a very real one; because of Mrs. Hedges’s relationship with Junto, she enjoys the privileges of protection both from and by the police. Both because of her vantage point within/without her apartment building and via her networks of affiliation with members of her Harlem community, Mrs. Hedges is able to control Jones’s sexually violent impulses in a way that no other character in the novel can.

Yet even with Mrs. Hedges’s initial intervention and continued observation of Jones, Lutie is nevertheless understandably traumatized by his attempted assault. It colors her perception in such a way that she begins to generalize her blame for all the negative occurrences in her life to the mercenary influence of her tenement building as well as to the corrupting forces of the street on which it lies. For example, Lutie aspires to sing with Boots Smith and his band at the Junto, which she believes will enable her to earn enough money to move herself and Bub away from 116th Street. Because Junto wants Lutie as a girlfriend (or as a courtesan, depending upon one’s point of view), he declines to pay her for her performances and decides instead to give her gifts as tokens of his affection, which he speculates will eventually sway her feelings positively towards him. Lutie is devastated by Junto’s choice not to financially compensate her for her talent because she realizes that, without the supplemental income from singing at his club, she will never be able to relocate. After Lutie returns from trying to negotiate a

non-existent salary with Boots Smith, the bandleader and one of Junto's minions, Petry writes:

She had to go on living on the street, in that house. And she could feel the Super pulling her steadily toward the stairway, could feel herself swaying and twisting and turning to get away from him, away from the cellar door. Once again she was aware of the steps stretching down into the darkness of the basement below [...] (305)

Here, it seems as if the figure of Jones, the Super, stands in for all the male oppressors in Lutie's life—particularly Boots Smith and Junto. All three of these male figures desire to dominate Lutie sexually, and because she does not make herself readily available to them as a sexual object, they instead try to coerce or, in the case of Jones, force her to comply. When Lutie imagines herself being pulled down the stairwell once again as a response to Junto's decision not to pay her, she equates actual, physical rape with the kind of "soul assault" perpetrated by Junto and Boots. Here again, she makes sense of her interaction with Jones and Boots via architectural analogy: "She hadn't been buried under brick and rubble, falling plaster and caved-in sidewalks. Yet that was how she had felt listening to Boots" (307).

As the above quotation suggests, it seems as if Lutie's experience with the Super exacerbates an already-existing claustrophobia on her part, which Petry describes as that "trapped feeling she got when there wasn't a lot of unfilled space around her" (160). And indeed, Petry reinforces this characteristic by stocking The Street with references to the expansion and contraction of spaces Lutie occupies. More often than not, when Lutie

feels sad or afraid, she notes that the walls are closing in on her. For example, the first time Lutie walks up the stairs to her new apartment on 116th Street, Jones follows closely behind her, making her nervous. She observes that “When they reached the fourth floor, instead of her reaching out to the walls, the walls were reaching out for her—bending and swaying in an effort to envelop her” (12). Later, after Lutie and Bub had been living in their apartment for a while, Lutie feels that “after she had been in them just a few minutes, the walls seemed to come in toward her, to push against her” (79). In contrast, as she fantasizes about an alternative living situation for her and Bub, Lutie thinks, “It would be a place where there was a lot of room and the walls didn’t continually walk at you—crowding you” (83). In another passage, when Lutie first meets Boots Smith, whom she initially perceives to be the vehicle by which she and Bub might move into a place where the walls don’t walk at her, and he tells her that she has a good enough voice to sing with his band, she admits that she had never thought of trying to be a professional singer and acknowledges to herself that “the walls had beaten her or she had beaten the walls. Whichever way she cared to look at it” (150). Here, Petry links Lutie’s spatial immobility to her social stasis: Lutie’s claustrophobia stems from her deeper fear of being trapped in her circumstances, of being denied both geographic and social mobility because of her subject position as a young, black, poor woman in 1940s Harlem.

Although she initially appears rather naïve in her adoration of Benjamin Franklin and her impossible pursuit of the American Dream, after Boots and Junto reject her as a singer, Lutie seems to garner more of an awareness that her marginalized social status is that which confines her—both on a material, geographic register and on an emotional,

psychological one. In fact, in the later scenes of the novel, she begins to understand her claustrophobia as a symptom of larger, social constraints by relating it to issues of race and geography:

Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North's lynch mobs, she thought bitterly; the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place. And she began thinking of Pop unable to get a job; of Jim slowly disintegrating because he, too, couldn't get a job, and of the subsequent wreck of their marriage; of Bub left to his own devices after school. From the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever-narrowing space, until now she was very nearly walled in and the wall had been built up brick by brick by eager white hands. (323-324)

It strikes me as significant that Lutie comes to this realization at the end of the novel, after Boots Smith and Junto refuse to hire her, after she declines Mrs. Hedges's offer to work as Junto's mistress. As the above quotation demonstrates, Lutie has begun to understand that it is her marginalized positionality within her Harlem neighborhood and within society as a whole that obstructs her progress. Trudier Harris-Lopez writes about Lutie's relationship to walls and buildings:

Projection of life into walls provides the physical manifestation of the psychological traumas these women experience [in The Street] by trying to live up to the standards of American familial and feminine ideals in the 1940s. They are caught in a set of imperatives that did not take into consideration the facts of their lives. Indeed black women must bend their

bodies to fit the American ideal as surely as Min tries to blend into the furniture. The script was never written for them, therefore any attempt to fit their lives into it was doomed to frustration if not certain failure. (89)

I strongly agree with Harris-Lopez that Petry uses wall imagery throughout The Street to suggest social and financial stoppage as well as to serve as *tabula rasa* for the female characters' desires and fears. I would also agree that structural inequalities coupled with individuals like Boots Smith and Junto, who perpetuate these inequalities, frequently worked to stymie women's social and financial mobility by not "tak[ing] into consideration the facts of their lives." However, I have some difficulty with the second part of Harris-Lopez's statement wherein she asserts that, because Min, Mrs. Hedges, and Lutie are black women in 1940s Harlem, "the script was never written for them." Instead, I would argue that Petry intentionally writes Lutie as being complicit in her social isolation because she refuses to reach out to other women within her community. In other words, it could have been possible for Lutie, like Min and Mrs. Hedges, to "flip the script," so to speak, in such a way as to forge networks of affiliation with the other residents of her Harlem neighborhood. Min, for example, never would have left Jones without Mrs. Hedges's knowledge of *The Prophet* as well as her awareness of where to find a good push-cart man when Min decides to take her furniture from Jones's apartment and secure another residence.

In doing so, in trusting the other women in her community to listen to her problems and to help her, Lutie might have better externalized the fears and desires that she had kept internalized in her effort to be a good, self-reliant Franklin devotee, which in

turn might have helped her communicate with and connect to other residents of her apartment building or other members of her community. Rather, Lutie's feelings of frustration and resentment grow until they reach a climax, and she murders Boots Smith after she goes to him to ask for a loan so that she can bail Bub out of the juvenile detention center where he is detained for mail fraud. Bub had been removing letters from mailboxes at the Super's bidding, who convinced Bub that he was a spy helping to ferret out unspecified "bad guys." In actuality, Jones aims to frame Bub with the crime so as to exact revenge on Lutie, whom he still resents for being under the protection of Mrs. Hedges. Boots initially promises Lutie the money, but when she arrives at his apartment to collect it, Junto waits for her instead and attempts, once again, to inveigle Lutie into sex work. A fight ensues, and Junto exits the apartment leaving Lutie with Boots, who also wants to have sex with her. Boots gets progressively angrier with her as she continues to refuse Junto's and his advances. Boots is a known domestic abuser, so it is no surprise that his loose, accommodating attitude toward Lutie quickly turns into one of anger and disrespect: "And he reached out and slapped her across the face. And as she stood there in front of him, trembling with anger, her face smarting, he slapped her again" (428). Boots tells Lutie in no uncertain terms that he will not tolerate her standing up to him. He says, "I don't take that kind of talk from dames [...] Not even good-looking ones like you. Maybe after I beat the hell out of you a coupla times, you'll begin to like the idea of sleeping with me and Junto" (428-429).

In an effort to defend herself, Lutie grabs a candlestick off Boots's mantle and strikes him over the head with it, not once but over and over again. Petry explains,

A lifetime of pent up resentment went into the blows. Even after he lay motionless, she kept striking him, not even seeing him. First she was venting her rage against the dirty, crowded street. She saw the rows of dilapidated old houses; the small, dark rooms; the long steep flight of stairs; the narrow dingy hallways; the little lost girls in Mrs. Hedges' apartment; the smashed homes where the women did drudgery because their men had deserted them. She saw all of these things and struck at them. (430)

The last image Lutie sees as she bludgeons Boots suggests her new-found understanding of the systemic oppression that created “the dilapidated old houses,” “the small dark rooms,” and “the little lost girls” that occupy them. Lutie has been born into an always-already existing system of racism, sexism, and classism, a hegemony that precedes her, structures the conditions of her life, and sets the horizon of possibility for Lutie and women like her. As much as she tries to alter her circumstances via her hero worship of Benjamin Franklin, her internalization of the American Dream, and her ambitions as a singer, “the street” and everything Lutie believes it stands for has always been with her. After murdering Boots, stealing money from his wallet, and fleeing his apartment, Lutie understands how “this impulse to violence had been in her for a long time, growing, feeding, until finally she had blown up in a thousand pieces” (434). Significantly, here at the end of the novel, it takes Lutie's committing the type of act she once attributed to the influence of the street for her to understand that everything she feared would permeate her domestic and corporeal boundaries, corrupting her, had always existed inside of her.

I explore a similar act of violence in my next chapter, which is on Gloria Naylor's 1980 novel, The Women of Brewster Place. Within that narrative, after the character Lorraine has been brutally gang raped by local thug C.C. Baker and his gang of adolescent friends, she mistakes Ben, the kindly janitor whom she has befriended and who has come to her rescue after hearing the scuffle in the alley, for her rapists, and she bludgeons him to death with a brick. The narrative similarities between these two novels, as well as the structural conditions of patriarchy, poverty, and powerlessness that enabled Lutie's and Lorraine's reactive acts of violence, are staggering even though The Women of Brewster Place was authored nearly thirty-five years after The Street. During those years, uneven political representation and discriminatory public policy exacerbated the poverty and violence found on the streets of Petry's Harlem.

## Chapter 2: (Inter)textual (Counter)publics: Oprah and The Women of Brewster Place

Gloria Naylor opens her first novel, The Women of Brewster Place (1980), with an epigram from what is arguably Langston Hughes's most famous poem, wherein he asks his readers, "What happens to a dream deferred?" Curiously, although Naylor prints Hughes's poem in its entirety, she excludes the poem's formal title, "Harlem." Through this omission, Naylor gestures at, but does not commit to, her novel's setting because, as she has communicated in interviews, an important goal for her in writing The Women of Brewster Place was that it be representative of a diversity of black women's experiences, not just those who live in Harlem (Ebony 123). Indeed, throughout the duration of Naylor's novel, not once does she definitively locate Brewster Place in space. The televised adaptation of The Women of Brewster Place, which aired in 1989 and which I will investigate extensively later in this chapter, makes an even stronger case than the novel for placing Brewster in an unspecified inner-city neighborhood that is not Harlem. Whereas in the novel, the character Ciel journeys to San Francisco after the death of her child, in the miniseries, Ciel goes to New York instead, underlining the adaptation's setting in an unnamed northern metropolis other than New York.

According to Gloria Naylor's descriptions of the neighborhood within her novel, however, Brewster Place could easily be a Harlem side street. Naylor provides clues throughout that help a reader approximate its setting within a neighborhood that appears to have much in common with Harlem. Her Prologue, "Dawn," describes the origins of Brewster Place and how the "badly crowded district" in the "northern section of town" came to have an additional "four double-housing units on some worthless land" (1). In this opening segment, she also writes about how Brewster Place was "conceived" via the

political machinations of striving politicians and real estate brokers, which mirrors some of the corrupt conditions—such as restrictive covenants and red lining—under which parts of Harlem were engendered as well.

Details within Naylor’s narrative also point to Brewster’s location in Harlem; in a flashback scene in Mattie Michael’s chapter, for instance, the title character accuses her friend Etta of drifting from one urban area in the north to the next. Mattie lists St. Louis, Chicago and “here,” as places Etta has lived (26), noting significantly that Etta talks about New York as her next destination. In particular, Etta fantasizes about a “place called Harlem with nothing but wall-to-wall colored doctors and business men” (26), which implies again that she is relocating to New York City. Thirty-some years later, Mattie loses her house and also moves to this “next destination” to live with Etta, which the reader is left to assume is somewhere in Harlem. Yet the detail in the text that is most suggestive of Brewster’s location concerns Naylor’s labeling of the two tenement buildings in which her characters live as having the street addresses “314” and “316.” These were the actual street numbers of apartment buildings on W. 119th Street in Harlem owned by Gloria Naylor’s grandmother (Fowler 4, 22).

Naylor’s nod toward Brewster Place’s location matters within the context of this dissertation because it is the only text I examine that is not decidedly located in Harlem; yet my overall argument about the efficacy of feminist (counter)publics that work, within each of the novels I investigate, to redress the effects of sexual violence that occurs within the intimate, private spaces of this neighborhood stands. In fact, Naylor’s refusal to definitively place the setting of her text reinforces my theory by broadening its scope.

The oppositional public of women forged at the end of Naylor's novel in response to the rape and murder of their neighbor Lorriane could emerge in many urban settings.

Although the cluster of narratives I investigate in this dissertation depict (counter)publics of women within one particular neighborhood, Harlem is not necessarily the only geographic site wherein this model of resistance could foment and prove efficacious.

Brewster Place's ambiguous setting underlines this notion.

In addition to locating her novel in/not in Harlem, Naylor's invocation of Hughes's classic poem does other, important work within her text. The Women of Brewster Place contains a number of intertextual moments in which Naylor references significant literary works by African American writers. As Michael Awkward argues in his article on Naylor's "Authorial Dreams of Wholeness," portions of The Women of Brewster Place reference Jean Toomer's Cane (40), Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (42), and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (51). As I note in greater depth later in this chapter, Naylor also alludes to Ann Petry's The Street in a number of different scenes. That The Women of Brewster Place contains so many allusions to so many important texts in black literary history suggests an intentional effort on Gloria Naylor's part to locate her first novel within a larger literary public: that is, by beginning her novel with Hughes's "Harlem," and by referencing her literary progenitors throughout, Naylor contributes to an already existing, text-based, black public sphere. Although my goal for this chapter is similar to the ones that flank it—to investigate the manner in which the women of this fictional city block create an oppositional public that utilizes the exterior, urban space of the city as a forum through which to intervene in an

episode sexual violence against one of their neighbors—in this first part, I am also interested in exploring the kinds of public(s) that are formed around Brewster Place's intertextual relationships with other works of African American fiction and, especially, with other, related cultural products, such as films and television programs.

For example, in the mid-1980s, Oprah Winfrey's production company, Harpo, set out to produce a televised, miniseries version of Naylor's novel with Winfrey starring as Mattie, the central character, and some would argue "Mat(tie)riarch" (C. Fraser 98), of the text. In a 2005 interview, Winfrey discusses her decision to produce a televised adaptation of The Women of Brewster Place, saying, "I read mostly female literature because I just find that I'm drawn to it. If I'm in a book store, I'm drawn to the women writers because that's what I know. And so I want to be able to put that on screen. I want to be able to do work that encourages, enlightens, uplifts and entertains people" ("America's Beloved Best Friend"). As this statement suggests, Oprah Winfrey intentionally reads literature that she culls from a larger, feminist (counter)public, one that not only reflects the reality and diversity of women's experiences, but, given the staggering number of literal and literary women whose history is marked by sexual violence, also aims to wage interventions against intimate violence within various publics, not just those limited to print or televisual media.

Many, if not most, of Winfrey's projects, both circa the Brewster Place adaptation and more recently, make good on this commitment. Winfrey uses the power of her media influence, coupled with her own status as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, to contend with issues of sexual violence in the public sphere. In May of 1990, for

example, four years after her televised talk show became nationally syndicated, Oprah Winfrey had a minor breakdown on the air while interviewing author and incest survivor Truddi Chase, the first ever sufferer of what was then called Multiple Personality Disorder (since reclassified as Dissociative Identity Disorder) to pen her own account of this psychological illness. The Truddi Chase interview stands out as a watershed moment for Winfrey because it was the first time her own history of childhood sexual abuse collided with her professional life in such a public way. She admits in a 2005 interview, “I had just gotten comfortable with the idea myself, my own abuse, and in interviewing Truddi Chase and describing what had happened to her, was the first time I really connected the dots on how profound the manifestation of abuse can be in people’s lives.”

After the Truddi Chase episode aired, Winfrey visibly accelerated her commitment to using the power of her media influence, coupled with her own survivor status, to wage interventions against sexual violence in the public sphere. In 1991, Winfrey testified about her own abuse in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and in 1992, she produced and hosted the primetime documentary Scared Silent: Exposing and Ending Child Abuse, which profiles the stories of a number of survivors and perpetrators of family and sexual violence. Evidently, “more than 112,000 calls were received by the Childhelp/IOF Foresters National Child Abuse Hotline” on the night the program originally aired (Rowe 11). This overwhelming number of responses to the show highlights the efficacy of Oprah Winfrey’s use of her dual status as a highly public figure and an abuse survivor in raising awareness about the prevalence and impact of sexual abuse and assault.

All of these examples—Truddi Chase, Oprah’s testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee, and Scared Silent—illustrate how Winfrey uses her media presence to make public what are conventionally considered intimate, private issues. Even her more commercially-oriented endeavors, such as the Oprah Book Club or her recent theatrical adaptation of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, all work to render public experiences that are typically relegated to the realm of the private. Oprah’s Book Club, for example, takes what is usually a solitary act—reading—and turns it into an occasion for a public, televised conversation both about the text itself and about the social issues that invariably arise within the text. More recent examples, such as her Child Predator Watch List—where, as of the beginning of August, 2007, eight of the fourteen fugitives she profiles have been captured—underline the effectiveness of her influence (“Child Predator Watch List”). In all of these projects, Oprah goes beyond what are frequently considered standard forms of intimate privacy and, instead, attempts to wage public interventions against sexual and domestic violence.

Via all of these endeavors, Winfrey creates her own public around intimate issues, one that includes novels such as The Women of Brewster Place and The Color Purple—and their respective televisual and theatrical adaptations—as well as her syndicated talk show and nationally distributed O magazine, both of which oftentimes contend with issues of intimate violence. This (counter)public extends into cyberspace, as Oprah’s Child Predator Watch List can be found on-line, and also encompasses lived, geographic spaces, such as the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy, the school for girls Winfrey built in South Africa in 2006. In interviews and promotional material for the school,

Winfrey stresses that she wanted to build “a safe place” for girls to learn. This seems especially significant given the high incidence of rape and incest in South Africa. The website for a rape crisis center located in Cape Town estimates that upwards of 50,000 rapes throughout South Africa were *reported* in 2003-2004; the site does not speculate about how many more went unreported (“Rape Crisis Cape Town”).

One of the things Oprah Winfrey’s projects do best is to call attention to the commonality of women’s experiences, despite their incommensurate backgrounds. It is important for the young women who attend Winfrey’s Leadership Academy to have a “safe space” to learn because of the ever present threat of sexual violence in their lives, a threat that is not terribly different than it is in America. Women all over the world are constantly subject to threats of sexual violence, something that psychologist Laura Brown refers to as “insidious trauma” in her somewhat dated, but nevertheless groundbreaking, article “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma.” She defines “insidious trauma” as

the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment, but which do violence to the soul and spirit [...] all women, living in a culture where there is a high base rate of sexual assault, and where such behavior is considered normal and erotic by men as it is in North American culture, is an exposure to insidious trauma. Most women in North America today are aware that they may be raped at any time, and by anyone; all of us know someone like ourselves who was raped, more often than not in her own home by a man she knew. In

consequence, many women who have never been raped have symptoms of rape trauma...” (128)

As a result of her commitment to publicly exposing the prevalence of abuse and assault in women’s lives, Oprah makes manifest the pervasiveness of Brown’s “insidious trauma.” In an article on “Survivor Discourse,” Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray cite an episode of The Oprah Winfrey Show that aired in 1988<sup>4</sup> where “nearly all of the audience of about two hundred women were themselves survivors” of family and sexual violence (279). The constituency of this particular audience, made up of survivors from diverse racial and class backgrounds, worked to call attention to the deep imbrications of sexual violence across class and race lines. Sadly, the oft-cited “one-in-three” statistic applies to all women from all walks of life.

Alcoff and Gray cite this 1988 Oprah episode for another reason, as well. They use it to point to the ways in which public, televised conversations about abuse and assault are entered into differently on The Oprah Winfrey Show than they are on other talk shows that also take these issues on as their topics. For example, Alcoff and Gray cite an episode of a program called The Home Show that ran in the early 1990s with co-hosts Gary Collins and Dana Fleming. Alcoff and Gray investigate a particular episode of this program featuring a student from Syracuse University, where the authors teach, who had been raped on the chancellor’s lawn (276). Whereas the rape survivor wanted to steer the direction of the televised conversation toward the frequency of date rape in the

lives of college-aged women, the co-hosts repeatedly asked their guest to describe the details of her rape, to confess all the gritty particulars of the crime. They were much more focused on the salacious nature of the assault than on the political statement the survivor was trying to impart (Alcoff and Gray 276).

Alcoff and Gray were writing in 1993, and the above example comes directly out of that era in daytime television history. But the confessional bent of most talk shows applies broadly across eras. As Mimi White points out in her book, *Tele-advising* (1992), confession figures centrally as “both the subject of programming and its mode of narrativization” (8). In other words, talk shows and other televised genres both/either build programming around the confessional narratives of their subjects and/or use these confessions to structure their shows on a formal level. Alcoff and Gray question the efficacy of confession, which is frequently touted as a panacea for survivors’ pain, especially in popular-therapeutic cultures and the texts that emerge from them. They interrogate this claim by referencing Foucault’s notion that confession is not always liberatory due to the power differential between confessor and arbiter that frequently works as “an effective mechanism for enhancing the power of its administering experts [and] subsuming subjectivities under an increasingly hegemonic discourse” (Alcoff and Gray 261). However because of her own survivor status and her frequent references to her own history of abuse, the binary between confessor and arbiter dissolves as Winfrey “presents herself as a survivor/expert, still working through and theorizing her own

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<sup>4</sup> Which, sadly, I was unable to screen because there was no copy of it at the Paley Center for Media (formerly the Museum of Television and Radio), where I accessed many of the older episodes of *Oprah I*

experience” (278). In many respects, this breaks with talk show conventions, and, arguably, creates a televisual “safe space” where discourse can be generated and consumed by survivors themselves in a manner that deviates from traditional forms of confession like those typically found on day time talk shows.

Oprah Winfrey’s commitment to addressing issues of intimate violence extends beyond the boundaries of her talk show and into her other endeavors. Many of the books she has included in her book club over the years contend with sexual or domestic violence. Morrison’s The Bluest Eye is among them, as is Edwidge Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory (1994), which portrays the aftereffects of the rape of a sixteen year old, and Anna Quindlen’s story of domestic violence, Black and Blue (1998). Winfrey’s Child Predator Watch List and Leadership Academy for Girls represent two different sites, cyber and geographic, of resistance to sexual violence, and Winfrey’s more overtly political actions, such as her address to the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1991, augment the oppositional public(s) that she creates around issues of intimate violence. Moreover, and more important to this chapter’s central argument, are the adaptations of African American women’s novels, such as The Color Purple and The Women of Brewster Place, that she acts in and/or produces. Winfrey’s involvement in these adaptation projects predated the creation of her book club by a number of years, but, in many respects, Oprah’s book club and her filmic/televised adaptations have done similar cultural work: each of these projects has succeeded in disseminating both the texts themselves and the

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watched while writing this chapter.

ideas contained within them to a broader audience that might not have accessed them without Winfrey's influence, which works to create a larger, viewing (counter)public.

In this chapter, I focus on one particular televisual text, The Women of Brewster Place miniseries, as well as the novel on which it is based, because both versions of this text treat public, urban space in a way that resonates with the other novels I investigate in this dissertation. Throughout both the literary and visual texts of The Women of Brewster Place, domestic space is coded as dangerous for women due to threats of family and sexual violence; conversely, the exterior space of the city is where the residents of Brewster Place front an intervention against one woman's assault in a way that aims to highlight and disrupt the larger, institutional power structures that create and perpetuate violence against women. I will examine how the under-privileged, under-represented women of this fictional urban neighborhood respond to the rape of one of its residents by dismantling the wall that serves as a symbol of their exclusion from majoritarian America. Although this action represents these characters' local response to their neighbor's assault, I argue that it also serves, materially and symbolically, to disrupt the larger, sexist, racist, classist system that enables violence of this nature. I look at the Brewster Place texts themselves and also analyze the ways in which the production and dissemination of the televised adaptation underline pervasive cultural anxieties concerning the sexuality and gendered relationships of urban-dwelling African Americans, as well as the hegemonic ideologies that propagate these notions.

I also look at Naylor's and Winfrey's respective texts themselves with an eye toward each version's treatment of its male characters in order to explore how the

Brewster Place texts contend with prominent stereotypes about black men in inner-city communities. I view each text as attempting to address cultural anxieties concerning African American families, sexuality, and the urban underclass that were so pervasive in the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, I will turn to each text's representations of public and domestic space in order to note the ways in which the space of the city provides the fictional residents of Brewster Place with a symbolic and material venue in which to intervene in both an individual instance of sexual violence and the institutional forces that enable it.

### **Ambitions and Adaptations**

Oprah Winfrey's predilection for starring in and producing filmic and televisual adaptations of classic novels written by African American women seems to have been engendered in 1985. Winfrey plays a leading role in a big-screen adaptation of Alice Walker's The Color Purple, which portrays the life story of Celie, a poor, black, incest-survivor growing up in the South. In interviews Winfrey repeatedly discusses her passion for Walker's novel, sparked well before she auditioned for the film. She explains, "I read the book. I got so many copies of that book. I passed the book around to everybody I knew. If I was on a bus, I'd pass it out to people [...] I felt it so intensely that I had to be a part of that movie [...] I wanted it more than anything in the world, and would have done anything to do it. Anything to do it" ("America's Beloved Best Friend"). Indeed for Winfrey, starring in the film enabled her to extend outward the range of the novel's reception, bringing The Color Purple's message to a broader (and possibly non-literate or sub-literate) audience.

This ability to broaden a text's range of dissemination serves as one of the chief benefits of adaptation, although translating a literary text into a visual one is not without complication. As Carolyn Anderson notes, "Spielberg's The Color Purple illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of popular visual storytelling; it displays the possibilities and the problems of adapting an alternative literary voice to the conventionality of mainstream moviemaking" (116). In short, adaptation poses both technical and ideological challenges because filmic/televisual texts employ different techniques in relaying narratives and because, in the words of critic Dudley Andrew, they rely upon "absolutely different semiotic systems" (34). Because literature and film/television utilize such different modes of signification, adaptations point to formal differences and also "call attention to the social-political-cultural milieu in which [they are] produced" (Anderson 97).

Indeed, because viewers/readers consume literary and filmic texts differently and because these respective genres are frequently geared toward different audiences, aesthetic choices made during the process of adaptation oftentimes point to larger ideological leanings. As Robert Stam notes, "Film adaptations of novels often change novelistic events for (perhaps unconscious) ideological reasons" ("Beyond Fidelity" 73). For example, Stam notes how the manner in which the story gets told via characterization and narrative sequencing can itself be ideologically motivated, as is very much the case with Winfrey's next adaptation project, The Women of Brewster Place.

The popularity of the miniseries might very well be connected to viewers' abilities to relate to both the characters in the movie and to the conditions of their lives

because of the socio-political climate in America during the time when both Naylor's and Winfrey's Brewster Place texts were produced and released. Both versions of the text engage with particular but pervasive social issues and anxieties present in the 1980s centering around black women, poverty, sexual violence, and urban life in a way that seems incisively well timed. During this decade, certain cultural myths about African American men and women—myths that in no way had their origins in the 1980s, but instead fomented throughout American history—circulated through social, political, economic, and legal channels. One of these myths centered around the dissolution of the African American family, and therefore the integrity of the nation, as a result of a decline in the number of male heads of household, in part, because, so went the myth, men were either deceased, imprisoned or addicted, in other words, absent from their families. In her article “Stealing B(l)ack Voices: The Myth of the Black Matriarchy and The Women of Brewster Place,” Celeste Fraser discusses “the racialization and feminization” (90) of poverty perpetuated by the Republican administrations of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In particular, she indicts three key players as holding primary responsibility for these decades’ pervasive cultural and political confluences of race, gender, and class: Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Bill Moyers, and Charles Murray.

According to Fraser, Moynihan’s 1964 report to the department of labor, coupled with Moyers’s 1986 documentary titled The Vanishing Black Family—Crisis in Black America, which was created in the same spirit as “The Moynihan Report,” served to “evade the issue of racism in the impoverishment of African Americans by locating the cause of poverty within the structure of the black family” (91). Fraser emphasizes that

for Moynihan, “the ‘deviant values’ distinguishing impoverished African American families from ‘traditional’ American families promote ‘disorganization’ —the ‘matriarchal structure’ —of ‘the Negro family’” (91). In other words, according to both Moynihan and Moyers, female-centered, African American households were primarily responsible for the poverty and crime associated with black, inner-city life in America, which, in turn, compromised the solidity of the nation as a whole.

Whereas Moynihan and Moyers’s assessments could possibly be interpreted as castigating black men for being absent from the household in the first place—presumably, following the logic of the argument, because they are dead or in jail or on drugs—Charles Murray locates the blame squarely on the shoulders of black women. Celeste Fraser explains that for Murray, “the menace of the black matriarchy does not primarily lie in the emasculation of the black male—who appears in the family only as an absence and in the streets only as a criminal—but in the immoral fecundity of the black female which drains federal funds” (94). Fraser sees texts like The Women of Brewster Place intervening on the cultural front by working to explode myths of the black matriarch by scripting characters who “inhabit, in order to revise from within” (95) inaccurate, monolithic images of urban-dwelling, African American women and their families.

Despite the fact that critics like Fraser, as well as Gloria Naylor herself, see the novel as an attempt to portray a diverse array of African American experience, many others decried the novel and the miniseries, largely due to these same depictions of gender relations that Fraser champions. In fact, when Oprah Winfrey first decided to

bring The Women of Brewster Place to the (television) screen, it took a good amount of campaigning on her part to find a network willing to air the piece. She approached three networks before she finally found one that agreed to run the movie. “They said it was too womanish,” Winfrey reveals in an interview (Kaufman 41). “Womanish” seems like a particularly loaded term to invoke in this instance, as it recalls Alice Walker’s concept of “womanism” that she puts forth in her book In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983). Walker defines “womanism” as: “Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one” (xi). Womanism also refers to a particular brand feminism that distances itself from culturally elitist notions of women’s progress, frequently promulgated by white, bourgeois feminism. Instead it aims to include a broad range of women’s social, racial, gender, and sexual identifications. That Winfrey’s attempts to air the televised adaptation of The Women of Brewster Place were stymied on the charge of the movie being too “womanish” seems to resonate with patriarchal, nationalist anxieties concerning black women and American families.

To be sure, many of the issues surrounding the production and distribution of Winfrey’s adaptation, as well as the textual variants that exist between it and Naylor’s novel, underline these same anxieties. Consequently, my discussion of this adaptation will center on its ideological implications rather than on reductive notions of textual fidelity because “an adaptation is [...] less a resuscitation of an originary work than a turn in an ongoing ideological process” (Stam, Literature Through Film, 4). Nothing illustrates this assertion better than the reasons for Gloria Naylor’s own objections to the

proposed adaptation of her novel for television. Not only did the Brewster Place author play no part in adapting her novel into a televised text, but she also told reporters from Ebony magazine how she “objected to the sale of the story to the Phoenix Entertainment production company” in the first place. Naylor explains, “I’ve seen what this company has done with other works and I just didn’t like them” (122).

Oddly, I can find no evidence of the existence of the Phoenix Entertainment production company. Harpo, Winfrey’s company, produced the miniseries, although it was distributed by the Xenon Entertainment Group. Xenon sounds suspiciously like Phoenix and was responsible for the distribution of many Blaxploitation films throughout the 1970s, as well as numerous Kung Fu genre flicks (“Xenon”). There is no way to tell if this is a transcription error or simply confusion on Naylor’s part; regardless, there are strong ideological underpinnings to Naylor’s objection to her story being categorized alongside those that make of their subjects racially-charged stereotypes, although at times in arguably subversive, ironic ways. In a sense, this, too, is an issue of competing publics. Naylor may not have wanted to have seen her novel associated with different kinds of mediated publics, like the one that emerged in the early part of the 1970s, concomitant with the apex of the Black Power Movement, when the Blaxploitation genre emerged. These films typically presented as their protagonists highly masculine black men in gritty urban settings who make a living through illicit ventures, oftentimes at the deliberate expense of the white male power structure. Through their ability to thrive in America’s underworld, critics like Dorothy Broaddus argue that “The new black male protagonist used the inner city as a stage for performing a hypersexualized and

street-smart masculinity that called attention to white America's racist practices" (214). Naylor's objection might lay in the denigration of women both in the fictional Blaxploitation films as well as the notoriously chauvinistic Black Power Movement that engendered them. Naylor's issue with Xenon Entertainment Group could also be one of representational control on the level of distribution. Perhaps Naylor anticipated problems that could potentially arise from relying on a major distributor (assumedly owned and operated by white people with money) instead of upon an independent, black-owned distribution company because, as Tommy L. Lott notes, there is a role that "production and distribution play in shaping the aesthetics characteristics of a film" (224).

Indeed, issues of production and distribution are key when investigating filmic/television adaptations of novels because they reveal much about the ways in which these chief components of movie-making are bound to financial and social power, two main ideological channels. Dominant forms of discourse that are sustained by money and power not only inform the material conditions of movie production and distribution but also affect the manner in which narratives get told, particularly when they are translated across genres, as with adaptations. Robert Stam asserts that, in the case of adaptations, "the narrative sequencing can also be rearranged, with clear ideological overtones" ("Beyond Fidelity" 73). Pathological ideologies concerning underprivileged, urban-dwelling, African American families are rendered legible by variants in narrative sequencing, aesthetics, and characterization between the two Brewster Place texts.

### **Gender and the Ghetto**

A reader/viewer who is familiar with both Gloria Naylor's 1980 novel and the 1989 miniseries based on it might notice significant textual variants between the pieces, including the adaptation's alteration of Naylor's unique, structuring frame. The narrative arc of the text, the manner in which the Brewster Place story gets told, changes in the adaptation in order to accommodate the mandates of the televisual medium. Although each of Naylor's six individual chapters (containing seven women's stories) coalesce at the end of the novel as well as the end of the miniseries, in the novel they are intentionally presented as individual tales, capable of being read independently of one another. In the miniseries, the narrative sequencing bends to reconcile the very valid rationale behind Naylor's structure with the demands of the miniseries genre. Gloria Naylor explains her theory behind her formal(izing) methodology and how she,

envisioned the story as being a saga of the contemporary Black American women in many—though certainly not all—of her shades. "That's why the book is structured the way it is," she says. "Because one character couldn't be the Black woman in America. So I had seven different women, all in different circumstances, encompassing the complexity of our lives, the richness of our diversity, from skin color on down to religious, political and sexual preference." (Ebony 123)

With her commitment to representing the diversity of women's experiences scaffolding her narrative, Naylor's novel compartmentalizes each woman's story into its own chapter (with the exception of "The Two," the chapter devoted to Lorraine and Theresa, who are a couple) and stresses the significance of "the different circumstances" and "the

complexity of lives” of which she speaks above. Although the personal interconnections among the women, as well as the commonalities of their respective life trials, cohere in “The Block Party”—simultaneously a chapter title and a narrative event—Naylor’s formal structure allows the reader to experience each character on her own terms by underlining both the junctures and departures in these fictional women’s lives and by stressing their individuality despite their common place of residence. Naylor’s original characterization changes in the adaptation largely because, in it, the characters’ individual narratives acquire a more collective ethos, which emphasizes the continuities, rather than the discrepancies, of these fictional women’s life histories. Perhaps this change in characterization from the novel to the miniseries elucidates the manner in which much of American society perceived (and to a degree still perceives) minority women from poor, urban areas less as individuals than stereotypes of feminized, racialized pathology.

Not only is Naylor’s story-telling methodology amended in the adaptation, but significant events within the story itself are altered or even diluted, perhaps in order to make the story more palatable for a prime-time viewing audience. Although this “sugar-coating” of violent, difficult-to-watch narrative events occurs throughout the adaptation, the major plot variant concerns the story’s ending. The events that propel the residents of Brewster Place to tear down the wall—which signifies their underprivileged, underrepresented social status and separates them from the main, commercial areas of their city—differ significantly in the two versions. In Naylor’s text, Brewster’s resident

thugs<sup>5</sup>, egged on by their leader C.C. Baker, gang rape the character Lorraine, one of “The Two” lesbians who reside on this street. By contrast, only C.C. assaults Lorraine in the miniseries, which downplays the violence inherent in the scene by excluding five out of Lorraine’s six rapists.

Moreover, the book provides a particularly brutal, graphic description of the rape, relating horrifying details, such as “The sixth boy took a dirty paper bag lying on the ground and stuffed it into her mouth” (170), “What was left of her mind was centered around the pounding motion ripping her insides apart,” (171) and “She didn’t feel her split rectum or the patches in her skull where her hair had been torn off by grating against the bricks” (171). These descriptions, as challenging as they are to take in, do provide Naylor’s reader with a sense of the level of violence inflicted upon Lorraine. Moreover, they work to grant her an interiorized subjectivity in a way that the visual adaptation cannot, due simply to the nature of the genre. Dudley Andrew explains: “Generally film is found to work from perception toward signification, from external facts to interior motivations and consequences, from the givenness of a world to the meaning of a story cut out of that world. Literary fiction works oppositely” (32). And indeed, Naylor’s telling of Lorraine’s rape focuses as much on the interiority of her experience—what she’s thinking and feeling—as it does on the factual, physical aspects of her rape, likely

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<sup>5</sup> One of whom is played by Mike Tyson in the miniseries, a figure whom I discuss in some detail in the Epilogue to this dissertation; Robin Givens plays the character Kiswana, and the movie was filmed during their courtship. Ironically, Robin Givens appeared on The Oprah Show (5 Nov. 2004) to talk about the domestic and emotional abuse she suffered at the hands of Mike Tyson, even during the months when The Women of Brewster Place was shot.

because the medium itself allows Naylor the opportunity to grant Lorraine this kind of interiorized subjectivity in a way that the adaptation cannot.

In writing about Lorraine's subjectivity within the assault scene in her article "Reading Rape," Laura Tanner posits, "To see Lorraine scraping the air in her bloody garment is to see not only the horror of what happened to her, but the horror that is her" (88). Within the written text, at the same time as Lorraine is robbed of her agency when she is raped by C.C. Baker and his boys, she is also given thoughts, emotions, and sensations that personalize her rape in such a way that a reader would have a hard time disidentifying with Lorraine and the assault she endures. Furthermore within the written text, although Lorraine is left for dead, Ben the janitor finds her the next morning (172). In her pain and disorientation, Lorraine beats Ben severely with a brick, thinking—readers conclude—that she is still being attacked and is therefore defending herself against her assailants (173). Most significantly, Naylor's text implies that both Lorraine and Ben die.

Conversely, the rape and murder that take place in the miniseries are presented as far more sanitized and exteriorized versions of the same crimes. Viewers get no subjective, first-person glimpse into Lorraine's experience; all we see is C.C. Baker, sans cronies, leading her off at knifepoint, and then the scene cuts to black. The violent details of the rape are omitted entirely, and the events leading up to and following the rape are changed in the adaptation as well. In the miniseries, C.C. Baker rapes Lorraine at a block party, just a few feet from Brewster's other residents who are all enjoying themselves, eating, drinking, and dancing. Ben finds her immediately in this version; she bludgeons

him with a brick just as she does in the novel, but here she is much more conscious and physically intact than she is in the book. She is even able to request that her partner, Theresa, join her in the ambulance that the other residents call as it takes her to the hospital. In this version, because she is conscious and even lucid in the ambulance, the implication is that Lorraine lives, and although it is not clear, it seems perhaps as if Ben does too. Presenting these brutal events in such a palliative way potentially alters a reader's/viewer's encounter with the violence inherent in the text(s).

In representing disturbing events to a mainstream audience, producers/distributors hazard overloading or alienating their viewers by portraying violence in a way that causes them to “shut down,” or to stop watching/listening in order to deny the reality of these types of violence both on the screen and in life. Significantly, this miniseries also aired during prime-time television-watching hours, which means it would have to be suitable, content-wise, for viewers of all ages. Filming Lorraine's rape in the same way as Naylor writes it would be gratuitous given the conventions of the miniseries genre. Yet it seems to me that there might be some kind of representational middle-ground wherein the brutality of Lorraine's gang rape could be communicated without being explicated in an overly graphic way. The details of the scene in the adaptation are certainly suggestive and may even allow an empathetic viewer to imagine the horror of Lorraine's experience, but they also work to downplay the enormity of rape in women's lives in a way that resonates with cultural misapprehensions about the severity and impact of this crime and in a way that relegates to the realm of apolitical privacy.

Based on these alterations that dilute the brutal nature of Lorraine's rape, it strikes me as ironic that the components of Naylor's original story that her detractors took issue with, most of which centered around the less-than-flattering depictions of men in the book, are far more pronounced in the televised version than they are in the written text. Indeed, because of the limitations of the televised genre in representing characters' interior lives, Naylor's novel arguably develops its male characters in a more sophisticated way than the miniseries and garners each male character greater complexity and range than does the televised version, where the male characters are scripted as much more two-dimensional than they are in the book.

Throughout the adaptation, Brewster's male residents appear "flattened out" when compared with their literary counterparts. Gene, the father of Luciela's baby Serena, serves as an apposite example. In both Naylor's chapter devoted to Luciela Louise Turner and in the adaptation, Serena dies from electrocution; she sticks a fork in an electric socket while her parents argue (a moment in both texts I will examine further in a later section of this chapter concerning the dangers of domestic spaces). Importantly, Ciel's chapter in the book begins with two of Brewster's only resident men, Gene and Ben, discussing the tragedy of Serena's death; it depicts how Gene feels alienated from his wife and from Brewster's community of women. He tells Ben, "Yeah, well, damn, I took it bad. It was my kid too, ya know [...] I should be there today with my woman in the limo and all, sittin' up there, doin' it right. But how you gonna be a man with them ball-busters tellin' everybody it was my fault and I should be the one dead? Damn!" (90). Ben replies by assuring him that "a man's gotta be a man," a vague statement referencing

an illusive (and imaginary) code of masculinity that dictates proper, manly behavior in situations such as these. In the miniseries, however, Gene disappears outright, prompting Mattie and Etta to have a conversation (not found in the book) about his absence and how he ought not return to Brewster. Either way, Mattie is portrayed as a “ball-breaker,” and Gene is portrayed as emotionally absent. In Naylor’s version, though, the reader sees Gene grapple with his grief in relation to his masculinity, while he tries to figure out how a man should act upon the death of his child. This contrasts with Gene’s character development in the miniseries, where he is represented in an angrier, more severe, more disparaging manner, which very much plays into stereotypes of the absent black father so prevalent during this period.

Whereas the figure of the absent father plays prominently in the miniseries’ portrayal of Butch and Gene, another associated stereotype—that of the socially impotent black man—emerges in the figure of Ben. Ben, Brewster’s handyman, appears first in Naylor’s prologue, “Dawn.” In this preliminary chapter, Ben is accredited with bringing integration to Brewster Place, which was formerly inhabited by “dark haired and mellow skinned Mediterraneans” (2). Those early residents accept Ben, along with “his drinking which became a fixture on Brewster Place, just like the wall” (4). Later, in the chapter titled “The Two,” readers learn that Ben’s drinking is prompted by guilt over not being able to protect his daughter, who is physically disabled and cannot do agricultural labor, from her white employer, for whom she does domestic work and who regularly sexually assaults her (152).

Moreover, in the novel, Ben's own wife castigates him for his impotence, telling him, "if you was half a man, you coulda given me more babies and we woulda had some help workin' this land instead of a half-grown woman we gotta carry the load for" (153). Here, Ben's wife not only condemns him for being unable to care for their daughter, but she attacks him by insulting his virility, the very seat of his manhood. In the novel, then, Ben's back story scripts him as both sexually and socially impotent. Conversely, Ben's drinking is omitted entirely from the miniseries, as well as any mention of his background or relationship with his daughter, which helps explain the friendship that Ben and Lorraine develop over the course of the novel/movie.

Throughout both texts, although more so in the novel, Ben and Lorraine function as surrogates for the missing people in their respective lives. In the novel, Lorraine confides in Ben about her lack of a relationship with her own father, telling him, "My father kicked me out of the house when I was seventeen years old. He found a letter one of my girlfriends had written me, and when I wouldn't lie about what it meant, he told me to get out and leave behind everything he'd ever bought me. He said he wanted to burn them" (148). Lorraine also discloses to Ben how she tried repeatedly throughout her life to contact her parents by sending them birthday and Christmas cards every year, all of which they returned unopened (148). Because of this rejection by her own parents, Lorraine needs a father-figure in her life, and Ben serves as an apt substitute by listening to her stories and feeding her biscuits and tea—simple things that make Lorraine feel cared for and loved.

Similarly, Ben misses his daughter, whom he lost when, “the girl disappeared one day, leaving a note behind that said she loved [her parents] very much, but she knew that she had been a burden and she understood why they had made her keep working at Mr. Clyde’s house. But she felt that if she had to earn her keep that way, she might as well go to Memphis where the money was better” (154). In short, Ben lost his daughter because she was forced into a life of sex work as a result of his own inability to both support and protect her, two fundamental functions of parenthood. Consequently, he relates to Lorraine, a woman who lost her family due to her own father’s inability to support and accept her. Ben and Lorraine’s relationship has a quality that suggests something akin to Freudian repetition-compulsion, where people repeat versions of the same events, often unconsciously, in order to attempt to “re-do” and master those events (173). Ben and Lorraine both try to compensate for their prior losses by substituting the other as a father/daughter figure and, through these substitutions, both attempt to make right what was done poorly in their pasts.

For this reason, Ben’s death is particularly poignant. It seems more than ironic that Lorraine kills Ben, a figure of love and fatherly kindness in her life, because she confuses him with her rapists. But, as Michael Awkward brilliantly points out in his article, “Authorial Dreams of Wholeness: (Dis)Unity, (Literary) Parentage, and The Women of Brewster Place,” Lorraine’s violence toward Ben is not completely without warrant. Awkward calls his readers’ attention to the passage in the book where Ben fantasizes about murdering his controlling wife: “He could simply go into the house and take his shotgun and press his palms around the trigger and handle, emptying the bullets

into her sagging breasts” (153). This passage locates Ben somewhere along a “continuum of male violence against women of which the actions of the gang are the reprehensible extreme” (Awkward 60). In this way, Ben not only functions as a father-substitute for Lorraine, but also stands in for her violators, as she fights and eventually kills him rather than her actual perpetrators.

Within The Women of Brewster Place as a whole, Lorraine’s rape stands in metonymically for every female character’s experiences with sexual violence, and Ben’s murder stands in for each woman’s retribution. Indeed, taking both the televised and novelistic versions of the story into account, nearly every single woman present in these texts has survived episodes of family and/or sexual violence. Mattie’s father beats her severely when she tells him she is pregnant with her son Basil (23); Naylor’s text implies that Etta has to leave her hometown after trying to exact revenge on a white man who assaults her: “Etta was sorry she hadn’t killed the horny white bastard when she had the chance” (60). Some of the fathers of Cora Lee’s children leave her with “bruised eyes because of a baby’s crying” (113), and Luciela’s husband Gene verbally and physically abuses her (95). Lorraine’s rape brings to light these women’s respective histories of violence in a way that scripts her as Brewster Place’s “sacrificial lamb.” Significantly, however, none of the other women in the story could serve the same substitutive role as Lorraine does because it is, in part, Lorraine’s lesbianism that provokes C.C. Baker. Lorraine does a poor job standing up to his insults prior to her rape (162), and, although Kiswana tries, none of the other women—not even Lorraine’s partner Theresa—attempts to defend Lorraine or diffuse her conflict with C.C. Baker and his gang. Furthermore, as

Virginia Fowler notes, “the structure of the story establishes beyond doubt that the women of the street, in their refusal to embrace Lorraine, are complicitous in her assault,” (54) which implicates Brewster’s homophobic residents who behaved derisively toward Lorraine and Theresa.

However, as much of a precipitating factor as Lorraine’s sexual identity appears to be in C.C. Baker’s crime, Gloria Naylor herself debunks this idea in a 1983 interview with William Goldstein:

“In the case of Lorraine [...] it was her alienation from the other women that put her in that alley” Naylor states emphatically. “The thing is Lorraine wasn’t raped because she is a lesbian, they raped her because she’s a woman. And,” she continues, raising her voice and her hand, and striking the desk with each phrase, “regardless of race, regardless of social status, regardless of sexual preference, the commonality is the female experience.” (5-6)

Barbara Christian attempts to reconcile this contradiction—that it seems like Lorraine’s rape is at least partially homophobic motivated when Naylor claims it is not—by pointing out that Lorraine’s rape symbolizes “an attack on all women, not only because lesbians *are* women, but because lesbian stereotyping exposes society’s fear of women’s independence of men” (196). And, indeed, if Celeste Fraser’s hunch is right that The Women of Brewster Place serves to explode the myth of the black matriarch, it seems appropriate that Lorraine’s lesbianism would function as yet another substitution; this time Lorraine’s female-centered sexuality reveals the extent to which all of these

women's friendships exist along a continuum<sup>6</sup>, which serves to highlight how easily each of them could be subject to similar misogynistic attacks. As Fraser underscores, "the male violence in The Women of Brewster Place occurs not in connection with sexual appetites but with attempts to subject black women to patriarchal authority" (98). That is, given that none of these women seems to "need" men, and given that Lorraine's rape functions as an attempt to punish her for her independence (sexual and otherwise) from men, the same fate could have befallen each of the female occupants of Brewster Place. Because all of the men in this text exist, again in Michael Awkward's words, along a "continuum of male violence against women," each of these male figures could substitute for one another in their attempts to exact "patriarchal authority" (C. Fraser 98) over these women.

Given then the respective climaxes of both texts, in which Brewster's residents dismantle the wall that serves as both a material and symbolic reminder of their exclusion from mainstream, bourgeois society in order to protest the act of sexual violence that occurred against it, Brewster's men never quite succeed in fully exercising this supposed "patriarchal authority" over women, a failure which seems more pronounced in the miniseries, likely because the men whom viewers encounter are characterized in a more two-dimensional manner than they are in the novel. Instead, the men in the miniseries serve to highlight pervasive social anxieties regarding "the myth of the black matriarch"

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<sup>6</sup> Mattie and Etta have a conversation about this very thing in the book. Mattie says to Etta, "I've loved some women deeper than I've ever loved any man [...] And there have been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did." Etta protests that "it's different," but Mattie replies, "Maybe it's not so different [...] maybe that's why some women get so riled up about it, 'cause they know deep down it's not so different after all" (141).

present in the decades during and surrounding the production of The Women of Brewster Place.

### **Picturing Brewster**

Differences between the literary and visual depictions of urban and domestic spaces found throughout the narrative also reflect the respective Brewster texts' engagement with racist, classist ideology. In particular, the adaptation's representation of the story's infamous wall against which two murders and a rape take place varies from its portrayal in the book. These discrepancies, in both the function of the wall to the overall narrative and in its formal depiction, point to the importance of the visual symbols present in the miniseries in helping viewers unpack the meaning of the narrative. Robert Stam notes how "[...] stories (and popular stories in particular) depend for their legibility on codes, conventions, topoi, and tropes that similarly migrate from medium to medium—in short, on an intertextuality that includes not only film and literature, but all the other media as well" ("Beyond Fidelity" 29). In other words, viewers rely on culturally-legible codes in order to understand the value of particular symbols that remain intelligible across genres.

Brewster Place's wall resonates, if only on an unconscious level, with viewers' always-already present knowledge of this symbol as signifying barrier, blockage, that which keeps people out; these same viewers may also understand the symbol of a wall to connote protection, security, a membrane between two physical or geographic spaces. Both of these conceptions of the wall's symbolic value are equally valid and can co-exist

even though they appear to contradict each other. Brewster's infamous wall thus comes to suggest both exclusion and inclusion simultaneously, an idea that becomes explicated through the characters' interactions with it, both in the novel as well as the miniseries. Consequently, the wall serves as a symbol for the sometimes-paradoxical desires and fears of this street's occupants: simultaneously a welcoming playground for children and a "pulsating mouth" (73) waiting to devour its residents. Throughout the novel, in fact, there are many, varied descriptions of the wall's function. It exists, for example, at the end of this inner-city block because the administrative forces of the city, in a capitalist grab, attempted to cut off the "small veins" of the community from its commerce-fueled "main artery"(2). Because of this, the wall serves as a symbol of "the end of the line" (135) for many of Brewster's women like Etta Mae Johnson, who contemplates the wall upon first arriving at Brewster Place and finds it challenging to comprehend why it appears so differently when she views it during the day, "with the August sun highlighting the browns and reds of the bricks and the young children bouncing their rubber balls against its side. Now it crouched there in the thin predawn light, like a pulsating mouth awaiting her arrival" (73). Here, much like interior spaces did in Ann Petry's The Street, the wall serves a double function, as it represents both a site of diversion and enjoyment for children as well as a potential subsuming force for adults.

In order to suggest these contradictory meanings of the symbol of the wall, the miniseries, more so than the novel, relies upon the specific, aforementioned, culturally legible "codes" to convey the idea of Brewster as a particular kind of space, namely, a run-down, inner city block replete with broken down cars, little girls playing double-

dutch, and other somewhat hackneyed, but infinitely legible symbols of the ghetto. Right after the credits roll, for example, the camera pans across the wall, which is spray painted with perfunctory, irrelevant graffiti; words such as “Foot Lives,” “Cat,” “Jesus,” “Be,” and “Revolution” appear on the wall in a rather orderly manner that does the work of suggesting a certain geo-demographic positioning of this imaginary neighborhood and its fictional residents. A provocative piece of graffiti reads “TEASE” in all capital letters, a derisive term describing women who arouse men, even involuntarily, but who then do not behave sexually toward these men. Its presence on the wall seems to point to the way C.C. Baker and his gang feel about Brewster’s women, and by extension, all black women. Overall, this initial pan of Brewster Place locates the street for the miniseries’ viewers by wielding a few token symbols of the ghetto as codes that a primetime viewing audience would likely be familiar with.

The aesthetic representation of the wall differs in the text and screen versions of this story and the ways in which the residents interact with it also varies in important ways. In the novel, for example, nothing is done to improve either the looks or function of the wall until the final pages when the residents tear it down in response to Lorraine’s rape, but in the miniseries, Kiswana, the youngest and most idealistic woman of Brewster Place, attempts to paint over the wall’s graffiti with a mural depicting men and women in colorful, African garb. Kiswana paints the background of the mural bright pink—or more accurately, the “hot pink” color so popular in the mid-1980s—suggesting not only femininity, but the triumph of bold, exaggerated femininity. This, coupled with the Africanist emphasis in Kiswana’s mural, hints at the triumph of black femininity (or

perhaps a womanist brand of feminism) over the limiting, detrimental conditions of urban life as exemplified by the wall.

Despite Kiswana's efforts, however, the miniseries still portrays the wall in a more polemical manner than does the novel. As Kiswana paints, Mattie chides her, saying, "You can paint this ol' wall any color of the rainbow, and it'll still be an eyesore." This statement prompts Kiswana to gloss Naylor's "Prologue," which explains the origins of Brewster Place and functions, in the novel, as a kind of originary myth for the street and its residents. Kiswana tells Mattie an abridged lifestory of the street that illustrates how Brewster's bright beginnings were supplanted by the institutional forces of capital and patriarchy that made it almost impossible for its under-represented, under-privileged residents to fight for it, so it became the walled-off, dead-end street on which the narrative is set. At the end of Kiswana's history lesson, Mattie states, "Ain't that the story. Colored folks try to do a little something, somebody goes and throws a wall up." Mattie's statement here works to reinforce for the viewing audience the idea that the wall symbolizes the obstacles and barriers African Americans encounter in attempting to break into mainstream society.

Likewise, the manner in which domestic and urban spaces are imagined and represented throughout the miniseries functions similarly to the adaptation's depiction of Brewster's wall. For example, the image of house in which Mattie raises her son, Basil—before he absconds while out of prison on bail, causing Mattie to lose the house she put up as collateral—strongly juxtaposes the way Mattie's Brewster Place apartment looks. Whereas Mattie's house is presented in the miniseries as strikingly bright and white, with

the sun streaming in through the kitchen windows and hitting Mattie's jungle of potted plants and rows of canned goods, the apartment Mattie must move to after she loses this house appears incredibly run-down. The apartment is dark and so dirty that there is actual trash lying all over the floor; the wallpaper and carpet are both torn, and from her kitchen window, Mattie can see only Brewster's wall, which blocks the sunlight from her plants. An empty birdcage hangs in the apartment, perhaps left by a tenant who was luckier than Mattie and, like the bird, found a way to leave the dead end street.

Even though the exterior space of Brewster Place is depicted throughout both the novel and the movie as an area of urban blight, the adaptation's portrayal of the interior, domestic space of Mattie's apartment is consistent with both texts' coding of household spaces as the real spaces of danger in this story. In fact, despite Brewster Place's ostensibly rough, urban setting, critics such as Virginia Fowler argue that Gloria Naylor not only personifies the street, imbuing it with human characteristics, but that these qualities are specifically feminine in nature. In her chapter "Ebony Phoenixes," Fowler references an article by Kathryn Palumbo positing that Brewster functions in a manner that I might be inclined to describe as a black, feminist (counter)public. In other words, the block exists not as a dead-end space of fear and desolation, but rather as an ultra-feminine, nurturing, womb-like area (Fowler 24). Indeed, in Naylor's Prologue, which offers a life-history of Brewster Place, the street itself is described as "mourning" (3) right along with its occupants who lost sons in WWII and "rejoicing" (4) in its third generation of residents, the majority of whom are similar to the characters presented in the novel: single, black women.

For Virginia Fowler, this is no coincidence. She explains how “Naylor’s delineation of the street’s history suggests that it has been victimized by the (white) male brokers of wealth and power in ways similar to the victimization of the black women who now reside on it” (25). The street and its residents share a common history of institutional neglect and abuse, but at the same time, both Brewster and the women who live there persist; they continue to nurture one another and cultivate dreams for their futures. In this way, “Naylor celebrates the very space that she presents as a dead end for her characters, precisely because it is and has been the locus of so much human desire, human pain, and human hope” (25). Indeed, throughout each of the seven women’s narratives that make up the novel, Gloria Naylor frequently (but not exclusively) scripts exterior, urban spaces as bastions of refuge and support in the lives of the women who live on Brewster Place. Conversely, many of the interior, household spaces within the novel are the places where negative things happen—most notably abuse and assault perpetrated by men. Throughout Mattie Michael’s story, for example, domestic spaces appear particularly vexed; she endures many the acts of violence, both physical and psychic, within homes and apartment complexes. Even the conditions that propel Mattie north from her childhood home in Tennessee transpire as a result of family violence. When Mattie tells her father about her pregnancy, for example, he beats her badly enough to break the broom with which he hits her (23).

Unable to remain living in her abusive father’s house, Mattie heads north and moves in with her friend Etta, who leaves shortly thereafter in search of better opportunities in a different northern city. Mattie remains in the shabby, “cramped

boardinghouse room with its cheap furniture and dingy walls” (27) because she is unable to save enough money to move elsewhere and still pay the babysitter’s and doctor’s bills for her son. While living in this boardinghouse, Mattie awakens one night to the sound of her son’s screams after he is bitten by a rat in his sleep. For Mattie, the danger of making a home in a place so run-down and infested with vermin overwhelms her, and she knows she must take her son and flee this household space of danger in order to create a better, safer life for him. In a scene incredibly reminiscent of Lutie Johnson’s apartment-hunting trek in The Street (1946), Mattie packs their things, picks up Basil, and walks the streets of the city all day, trying to find someplace they can afford to live (29).

Her status, like Lutie’s, as a single, young, African American woman prohibits her from easily finding something, but after a day of walking, Mattie (again, much like Lutie) encounters a woman on the street who presents her with options she did not have before. The woman, Miss Eva, invites Mattie and Basil to live with her and her granddaughter Lucielia (Ciel), and Mattie finds herself “settling like fine dust on her surroundings and accepting the unexplained kindness of the woman with a hunger of which she had been unaware” (34). Here, as throughout Mattie’s narrative, she garners the support necessary to recover from the negative occurrences in her past—all of which take place in interior, household spaces—via positive experiences in the public sphere.

Miss Eva’s happy home, however, which provides Mattie and Basil with thirty-years of safe, rat-free nights, again becomes a source of fear for Mattie long after Miss Eva has passed away and Ciel and Basil have grown up. Basil becomes a spoiled, child-like man, who cannot bear to sleep in a jail cell for even one night after he gets arrested

for killing a man in a bar brawl. Mattie, an ever-indulgent mother, borrows against the home Miss Eva lovingly left to her, so she can bail him out and pay a lawyer's retaining fee. Again, in a narrative twist evocative of Ann Petry's The Street, Mattie does not actually need to pay a lawyer to defend her son; a public defender would have sufficed. But, like Lutie, Mattie does not know this, and the lawyer neglects to disabuse her of this notion; he thinks instead, "Thank God for ignorance of the law and frantic mothers" (48). In this way, Mattie loses her house, a one-time space of hope that is transformed into a symbol of betrayal and loss. As a result, she winds up in the dingy, anemic Brewster Place apartment.

Mattie's is not the only Brewster Place domicile represented as a space of danger for its inhabitants. Luciela's and Cora Lee's chapters reinforce this idea as well. Cora Lee is the mother of seven children, who is too concerned about the events unfolding on her favorite soap operas to keep her house tidy and her children safe. The representation of Cora Lee's apartment in the miniseries reinforces Naylor's description of it as a place with "broken furniture" and "piles of litter in [the] living room" (121). In both versions, while Kiswana visits Cora Lee, trying to convince her to bring her children to an all-black production of A Midsummer Night's Dream in the park, Cora Lee's son falls from the draperies on which he is swinging and hits his head (116). Whereas Dorian's fall worries Kiswana, this type of thing is *de rigueur* in Cora Lee's household, which is a constant scene of domestic chaos. Kiswana does, however, manage to convince Cora Lee to bring her children to the Shakespeare play, and it is in the public, recreational space of the park that the lives of Cora Lee's children are transformed. On the way home from the

performance, for example, her son asks her if Shakespeare is black, to which she replies, “‘Not yet,’ remembering she had beaten him for writing rhymes on her bathroom walls” (127).

Significantly, as Jill Matus notes in her article “Dream, Deferral, and Closure in The Women of Brewster Place,” Naylor opens the chapter with a quotation from A Midsummer Night’s Dream: “True, I talk of dreams,/Which are the children of an idle brain/Begot of nothing but vain fancy” (107). Cora Lee forever dreams of infants, but when the tiny babies she adores begin to grow up, Cora Lee neglects them and shows that they were themselves “begot of nothing by vain fancy.” Regardless, I follow Jill Matus in arguing that Cora Lee’s newfound respect for and nurturance of her children evidences changes in her attitude toward life, no matter how small. After the family returns from Shakespeare in the park, for the first time ever, Cora Lee bathes her children and cleans her house before she goes to bed. Here, the experience she had in the public sphere helps transform her apartment from a site of domestic chaos into a more suitable home for her children.

Sadly, Luciela’s chapter does not present such a happy ending. While her parents argue in another room, Ciel’s daughter Serena (whose age is never disclosed, but who looks about eighteen months old in the adaptation) becomes fascinated with a cockroach crawling across the floor, and she chases it until it retreats into a crack in the wall right next to a light socket. In her attempt to wrench her new playmate from his hiding place, Serena instead electrocutes herself. Here, like the rat that bites Basil, pests associated

with tenement-living contribute to the danger of domestic spaces. Moreover, it is the apartment itself—or rather its wiring—that is responsible for Serena’s death.

Although Mattie, Cora Lee, and Luciela’s stories all highlight the danger inherent in Brewster’s household spaces, it is Lorraine’s rape that truly cements this idea. To be clear, Lorraine is raped outside, a space that I have argued functions more as a “space of hope” than a “space of fear.” But the geography of Lorraine’s assault is such that the wall against which she is raped, due to its close proximity to the building in which she lives, is scripted in both the novel and in the miniseries as more of an extension of Brewster’s building than its own, separate, outdoor entity. Moreover, Naylor codes the alley itself as oppressive and concave. It circumscribes both Lorraine’s freedom and the freedom of C.C. Baker and his gang. She writes

[Lorraine] had stepped into the thin strip of earth that they claimed as their own. Bound by the last building on Brewster and a brick wall, they reigned in that unlit alley like dwarfed warrior-kings [...] They only had that three-hundred foot alley to serve them as stateroom, armored tank, and executioner’s chamber. So Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence—human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide. (170)

In the novel, Lorraine is accosted in the alley itself, as she tries to get to Ben’s house for one of their evening chats. She is raped right where they find her, in her rapists’ “six-foot wide” world, which evokes more of a grave than a kingdom. In the adaptation, however, the idea that danger resides in domestic space is made even more clear because the events

leading up to Lorraine's rape are presented differently. Most importantly, C.C. Baker alone accosts Lorraine as she wanders from the neighborhood block party in search of Ben. Just as she is about to ascend the stairs to her apartment, C.C. grabs her at knifepoint, pushing her up against the stairwell. Notably, the Drifters' "Up on the Roof" (1963) is playing as Lorraine's assailant leads her away from the stairwell and into the alley that buttresses her apartment, just a few feet away. Here, Lorraine is literally raped up against the side of her building, flanked on the other side by Brewster's wall, which serves to reinforce the paradigm presented by both versions of this text (and indeed by all the texts I examine in this dissertation): that geographic spaces associated with domesticity are far more threatening to women in terms of family and sexual violence than public, urban space.

The last scene of the movie, which is actually the penultimate scene of the book, serves as a perfect example. In the novel, Cora Lee alerts Brewster's female residents to residual blood on the bricks of the wall against which Lorraine is raped and Lorraine and Ben are murdered (185). Together, the "women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands" (186). In this scene the women of Brewster Place use the very tools of domesticity and femininity to dismantle the wall that signifies their oppression.

In the movie, however, both women and men work to tear down the wall, and significantly, Mattie begins the process with a tire iron, a tool associated with mobility and masculinity. Before Mattie attacks the wall, she makes a speech that also does not appear in the book. She says, "That's why I don't trust tryin' no more. The harder folks

try, the more something come and smack ‘em down. It’s always something standing in the way of good, blockin’ it out, just like that wall blockin’ off this street. And I’m tired of it. I’m tired of it, and I can’t stand it no more.” Here, Mattie’s effort is joined by other residents, including Etta who tells her, “They’re gonna put every one of our butts in jail,” to which Mattie replies, “Then I guess we’ll just have to tear that down too.”

That the last line of the miniseries suggests dismantling the local jail as this community’s next act of protest seems highly significant here, as the prison industrial complex serves a key component of the same hegemonic system that created impoverished, urban spaces such as Brewster Place and helped manufacture the pathologized (and pathological) subjects and untenable living conditions that the characters in this scene rally against. The end of the adaptation, which corresponds to the penultimate scene in the novel, sees the fictional residents of this imaginary neighborhood striking out against the real life conditions of their existence, creating, in effect, a subaltern counterpublic because the actions of this neighborhood convey a pointedly critical relationship to power.

In tearing down the wall that functions in the narrative as both a material and a symbolic impasse, Brewster’s residents resist the larger, institutional forces that the wall represents. These characters form an oppositional public because their actions in response to Lorraine’s rape and to the larger forces that enabled it help “provide a sense of active belonging that masks or compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents in a capitalist society” (Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, 113). The characters in Naylor’s novel and in its televised adaptation, in particular the women, are marked by

the forces of capital, racism, nationalism, and patriarchy. Although they are fictional, their plight sadly mirrors that of many women in the United States who are also subject to these same forces but who may not be able to resist them in such a materially destructive way. Instead, women often form mediated counterpublics like that which is created by The Oprah Winfrey Show and other Winfrey-sponsored televised, filmic, or theatrical events, all of which aim to address issues of sexual violence against women, as well as the forces that engender this violence, by rendering public that which is often considered sacrosanct and private. In many respects, discussions of family and sexual violence that occur in the (counter)public sphere work to contradict nationalist rhetoric that bills the family as the bulwark of American integrity. Counterpublics of sex and gender, especially those that foment around issues of violence against women, create alternative, oftentimes affective, discourse that responds to and intervenes in both punctual, individual instances of sexual aggression and to America's larger culture of violence.

### **Chapter 3: “When you in it it look like the world”: Verbal and Spatial Literacy in Sapphire’s Push**

At the commencement of Sapphire’s novel, Precious Jones is an illiterate, HIV positive, sixteen year old, who is pregnant by her father for the second time. After having been suspended from her public school and told she must attend an alternative educational program called Each One/Teach One because of her pregnancy, Precious begins to learn to read with the help of the other students in the class and their adult literacy coach, Ms. Rain. One of Precious’s favorite exercises is to walk around her Harlem neighborhood with her journal in hand, describing the scenes she witnesses there. In one entry, Precious writes about a “vaykent lot” on 124<sup>th</sup> street, the very heart of Harlem, as being a space of abject urban decay:

i stop. Gon rite bout vaykent lot  
uuuuuuugh dog shit dog shit  
crummel up briks  
steel fence  
lifes of trash  
cancer yr eye  
multiply

ugliness  
greazee shit  
garbage cans, rottin  
cloze PAMPER filthee  
dope addicks  
pile up  
flow over  
uglee  
I HATE  
HATE  
UGLY

During the years 1987-1989, when Push is set, the poverty and disrepair represented in The Street and The Women of Brewster Place continued to mar Harlem and other inner-city areas like it. Precious keenly observes the product of such impoverishment, the filth and squalor surrounding her, and records her emotional reaction to it. She communicates in no uncertain terms that she “HATE[S] UGLY” and the “dog shit,” “crummel up bricks,” “garbage cans, rottin,” and “cloze PAMPERS filthee” that constitute it. Precious’s description of her neglected, environmentally and emotionally toxic, late-1980s neighborhood depicts Harlem at what is arguably its most destitute moment in history. Not unlike other socially and politically underrepresented areas in New York, the standard of living within this historically black neighborhood in upper Manhattan had been on the decline since the early days of the Great Depression. Whereas other areas in

the city rallied during and after WWII due to a national industry boom that, in turn, promoted growth in the service and entertainment sectors, Harlem never returned to the exalted place it occupied in the national imagination during its Renaissance in the 1910s and 1920s.

Precious was born in 1970, and although she is only seventeen years old when she writes the above poem, she seems to communicate a sense of loss for the Harlem of the past—the distant, pre-Depression era past—when residents were more invested in the upkeep and safety of this neighborhood’s public spaces, such as the vacant lot about which she writes. Although Harlem’s financial and material degeneration accelerated after World War II and through the 1960s and 1970s, the Reagan era saw a Harlem that was so “whipsawed by both a drug ‘epidemic’ and the so-called ‘war on drugs,’” that it lost its potential for what sociologist Leith Mullings labels “history-making,” referring to the place Harlem occupied—and perhaps still occupies—as the “symbolic capital of black America” (Mullings 173). In Precious’s Harlem, all of the poverty and alienation of Petry’s Street, as well as all of the racist public policy and consequent disempowerment and frustration of Naylor’s Brewster Place are magnified by the twin scourges of crack and heroin.

Mullings begins her article by noting the “widespread nostalgia” of her informants for a lost Harlem “characterized by a sense of community.” She attributes this nostalgia to “a loss of history, and hence of agency” (174) that she blames largely on the globalization of capitalism and New York City’s expanding role as a hub of worldwide enterprise during the second part of the twentieth-century. She notes that “a

global city requires world class order” (176) and explains how, during the 1960s and 1970s, “the city became an important testing ground for enforcing a global order,” largely, she argues, through institutions and ideological constructions, such as the welfare state and the prison industrial complex, that served to strip individual citizens of their potential for agency within a participatory democracy. The Harlem that Precious observes is one in which the political and social volition of its citizens has flagged in the face of hegemonic institutional forces as well as the blight of drugs and the “drug wars.”

Precious notes the effects of both heroin and crack in her neighborhood when she observes the occupants of the vacant lot: “Dese not crack addicts like on one-two-six. Dese people on 1-2-4 is HAIRRUN shuters. There eyez is like far away space ships. they don see you, only smell pepul go buy for money. They money dogs. If they sniff money they will try to take it” (105). The matter-of-fact quality of this statement suggests that, in the seventeen years she has inhabited this neighborhood, Precious has become inured to the danger of living in a space so heavily populated by addicts and marked by the sub-standard living conditions that both create and sustain them.

Indeed, over the course of Precious’s lifetime, economic changes within the country as a whole created a ripple effect in Harlem, but one inversely proportionate to the “trickle down” promise of Reaganomics. Throughout the 1980s, the economic situation in New York City as a whole markedly improved; the gap, however, between the wealthy and the impoverished simultaneously widened, which localized and magnified urban blight in places like Harlem. Mullings notes that, particularly during the later half of the 1970s, “public investment in housing collapsed, city-owned buildings and

parks were abandoned, and fires, often attributable to private landlords, broke out” (178). As a result, Harlem’s population fell dramatically: “numbering around 160,000 people in 1970, Central Harlem had barely 97,000 people in 1989” (178). Making matters even worse was an unemployment rate twice that of other areas in the City.

Because of the degree of destitution and desperation experienced by the people in her neighborhood, it is no wonder that spaces like the vacant lot Precious describes proliferate in Harlem. Ironically, despite the fear public spaces should ostensibly cull in this neighborhood during this particular moment in history, Precious instead experiences the exterior spaces of Harlem as significantly safer than her own apartment. When Precious experiences a dissociative incest flashback while standing on a bus stop, for example, solicitous strangers gather around her, extending their concern and offering their help. This moment in the novel sharply contrasts the way that Precious is treated at home, where she is sexually, physically, and emotionally abused by both her parents. Whereas home, a location commonly considered “safe,” becomes a “landscape of fear” (Pain 415) for Precious, as well as for Lutie Johnson and the “women of Brewster Place,” places that exist in the public sphere, especially those that people typically assume to be dangerous, actually provide these female protagonists with refuge and support. Throughout the duration of Push, Precious not only garners compassion and aid from people in the public sphere, but she also experiences alternative spaces in the city that allow for her to imagine other, emancipatory possibilities for herself and her life.

**“Who I be I grow up/here?”**

Early on in the novel, Precious describes a busy afternoon in her Harlem neighborhood as she walks home from school. She observes the homeless and the addicted who loiter on the street and contrasts these people's potential for violence with the danger inherent in her own apartment: "I'm walking slow slow now[...] I'm safe. Yeah, safe from dese fools on the street but am I safe from Carl Kenwood Jones?" (23). Precious malingers in the street in an attempt to avoid going home where she is always, "busy getting beat, cooking, cleaning, pussy and asshole either hurting or popping" (62). Because her parents exploit her labor and violate her body within the private space of their Harlem apartment, Precious feels far more secure in public spaces than she feels in her own terrifying, domestic world.

Nevertheless, it comes as a surprise to Precious when people she does not know worry about her wellbeing during her dissociative episode. "'You OK?' guy in a uniform for like working in a garage ax me." Precious responds, "'I'm OK, I'm OK,'" and notes that "People done started to gather 'round me" (25). In this scene, Precious garners concern from absolute strangers in a way that she never has from immediate family members, teachers, social workers, or other people who ought to be as or more invested in her wellbeing than the people on the streets with whom she has no formal ties.

On this same walk through Harlem, Precious notes the presence of "men, women and kids waiting at bus stop to go to school and downtown to work" (23). She asks herself, "Wonder where they go to work? Where I gonna go to work, how I'm gonna get out HER house?" Here, as through the duration of the narrative, Precious observes people in the public sphere whose lives she speculates rotate around an axis of normalcy

in a way that hers does not. These people, Precious notes, these “men, women and kids waiting at bus stop,” go to work or school everyday, whereas the adults in Precious’s immediate sphere, most notably her mother, live dysfunctional everyday lives.

Precious mentions how her mother “have not left home since Little Mongo was born” (32). Precious calls her daughter Little Mongo because a nurse at Harlem Hospital categorized her as a Mongoloid, a term for someone with Down’s Syndrome; she was born when Precious was twelve, and at this point in the narrative, Precious is sixteen, so her mother has effectively been house-bound for four years. Tellingly, throughout these four years of self-imposed domestic confinement, not only has Precious’s mother collected welfare, but she has also successfully exploited the welfare system. Little Mongo, in fact, lives with Precious’s maternal grandmother, but Precious’s mother declares both Precious and Little Mongo as her dependents in order to collect a greater welfare stipend. When Precious notices the people on the bus stop and ponders the details of their everyday lives, she contrasts what she imagines are their experiences with those of the socially maladapted people around her; as a result, she envisions a life for herself that includes self-sustaining tasks like work and school rather than a life of institutional dependency like her mother’s.

Children and teenagers’ exposure to diverse groups of people in the public sphere aids in their social development by allowing them to forge networks of identification, which enable them to imagine various possibilities for their futures. The livelier the city streets, the more they teem with different kinds of people who have varying pursuits, the better example the streets provide. Precious has spent the better part of her childhood

exposed to one particular version of urban life, namely, her mother's agoraphobia and state-dependency. Consequently, when Precious wonders about the everyday lives of people she sees on the streets, it empowers her to define herself against her mother, which, in turn, enables her to think differently about her own life and her own future. She admits, "I know I will choke to death I don't find myself" (59). For Precious, part of the process of finding herself is disidentifying from her mother and forging her own concept of herself as an agent in the world, a task that her growing exposure to the urban public facilitates as the novel progresses.

While the public, urban space of her Harlem neighborhood serves as an important locus of education for Precious, a second, semi-public site reinforces and expands the life lessons she learns on the street. Each One/Teach One is located on the nineteenth floor of the Hotel Theresa, which seems significant for a number of reasons—even the name of the hotel has some significance in that it was likely named after St. Theresa, a favorite saint in America after her canonization at the turn of the century because of her focus on small works and deeds as the way to salvation ("Saint Therese of Lisieux"). During the 1950s and 1960s, the Hotel became famous for renting rooms to people who were denied accommodation elsewhere. More often than not, these people were African Americans—although evidently Fidel Castro and his entire entourage were invited to stay there free of charge after their party was turned away at an upscale, downtown hotel (Wilson 204). When Malcolm X used it as a meeting place for his Organization of Afro-American Unity, the Hotel Theresa became even more widely recognized (Wilson 229). Although it closed its doors to guests in the late 1960s and was converted into office spaces a few

years later (Wilson 45), well before Precious began to attend classes there, most residents of Harlem continued (and still continue) to refer to it by its original name—the sign “Hotel Theresa” continues to hang even as I write this. The Hotel’s lasting historical significance coupled with its current, business-oriented occupation creates a space that spans the breach between Harlem past and Harlem present.

When Sapphire writes the Hotel Theresa as the site of Precious’s adult literacy classes, she geographically and metaphorically positions Precious alongside pivotal figures in (African) American history. Moreover, all hotels blur the line between public and private spaces. Patrons rent a room for an agreed-upon period of time, thus making it “theirs” for those days they occupy that space; yet hotels are also inherently transitional spaces—never really belonging to their occupants, even those who stay there long-term, first as guests and later as permanent residents. Regardless of the duration of their guests’ inhabitation, all hotels are essentially public buildings that provide people with private accommodations. Because of its second incarnation as office space, the Hotel Theresa further highlights the public potential of semi-private spaces like this one. Simply put, Each One/Teach One’s location within this particular building squares nicely with other positive experiences Precious has in the public sphere.

The people Precious encounters in her class at the Hotel Theresa also shape her perceptions of the world around her and offer her instruction not only in literacy but also in life. Precious’s teacher, Ms. Rain, proves instrumental because of her dedication to both types of education. Before she meets Ms. Rain, Precious is socially observant but not necessarily socially aware; in other words, she notices the economic and social

conditions of her neighborhood, although she does not yet understand why she sees what she sees when she walks around Harlem. Precious keeps a poster of Louis Farrakhan hanging in her bedroom. She “loves” Farrakhan because “he is against crack addicts and crackers,” and, as she learns from listening to his radical, separatist rhetoric, “Crackers is the cause of everything bad” (35). At this point in the development of Precious’s social consciousness, pithy, reductive statements like the one above resonate with her, in part perhaps, because she doesn’t have the vocabulary or experience to articulate the racism she encounters in her life and in the lives of the people she sees in her neighborhood.

When Ms. Rain “put[s] the chalk in [Precious’s] hand, make[s her] the queen of the ABCs” (81), she teaches Precious the building blocks of language, which enables her to access a larger, literate public. Ms. Rain also begins to raise Precious’s awareness of the history of black oppression in America. As her reading and critical thinking skills improve, Ms. Rain gives her books to read about the Civil Rights movement, about which Precious comments, “I ain’ know black people in this country went through shit like that” (82). Before meeting Ms. Rain, Precious understands that there is race and class oppression—she bears witness to it every time she leaves her apartment—but Ms. Rain instills in Precious both the skills and the information she requires to understand why this oppression exists in the first place.

Precious’s exposure to Ms. Rain and to the other students in the class does create for her a certain amount of pedagogically-useful cognitive dissonance that forces her to think about her world differently. Through observing Ms. Rain’s acceptance of all different kinds of people, Precious begins to stop making sense of her world through the

blunted tools of generalization and totalization and starts to think about people as individuals. She writes, “But what I confuse about is this. Itz so uglee dope addicks— dey teef, dey underwater walkin, steelin. Spred AIDS and heptietis. But Rita was one of dese pepul an she is GOOD. I luv her” (106). Through her friendship with Rita, Precious garners greater empathy for addicts. She begins to comprehend how events that occurred in Rita’s early life, which engendered her drug use in the first place, do not differ all that dramatically from Precious’s own history of abuse. Precious concludes that she could have easily made the same choices as Rita did had the circumstances in her life been even slightly different.

Precious harbors other prejudices that surface during Ms. Rain’s class. Very likely because of her fondness for Farrakhan, Precious is extremely homophobic when she begins her time at Each One/Teach One. When she meets her classmate Jermaine Hicks, a butch lesbian, on her first day in her alternative school, for example, Precious thinks, “Uh oh! Some kind of freak,” and notes that Jermaine “is a *boy’s* name” (45). Later, Precious sits next to Jermaine, who comments that she is glad there are no boys in the class. Precious thinks, “Uh oh! Freaky deaky here. I move a little way from her. I don’t want no one getting the wrong idea about *me*” (49). Ms. Rain works hard, however, to shift Precious’s perceptions about homosexuality. After the women in the class have improved their reading skills significantly, Ms. Rain assigns The Color Purple, a novel that is significant because of its treatment of sexual violence within the black community. By invoking this particular text, Sapphire positions her novel within a oppositional literary (counter)public of novels like The Color Purple, I Know Why the

Caged Bird Sings, and The Street, to name just a few. Because it is so representative of her experience, it is no wonder that Precious relates to the narrative to such a degree that she, “cry cry cry you hear me, it sound in a way so much like myself except I ain’ no butch like Celie” (81). When Precious expresses this sentiment to her class, Ms. Rain uses it as a pedagogical moment:

Ms. Rain tell me I don’t like homosexuals she guess I don’t like her ‘cause she one. I was shocked as shit. Then I jus’ shut up. Too bad about Farrakhan. I still believe allah and stuff. I guess I still believe everything. Ms. Rain say homos not who rape me, not homos who let me sit up not learn for sixteen years, not homos who sell crack fuck Harlem. It’s true. (81)

Precious loves Ms. Rain enough that her devotion to Farrakhan’s teachings—at least those about homosexuality—waned and is replaced by a greater acceptance of vagaries in gender identity and sexual orientation. The education Precious receives at Each One/Teach One, then, extends well beyond literacy coaching; it serves as an entry into a larger public that helps raise Precious’s awareness of both letters and life. Unlike Lutie Johnson in The Street, whose fixation on a self-styled American Dream bars her access to female-centered social networks, Precious is eager to connect with people she encounters in her day to day life. Each One/Teach One facilitates her own entry into a number of different publics: because her ability to travel through the city increases as she learns to read, Precious becomes better able to negotiate the material, geographic public that is the city; Precious’s deepening connection with her literacy coach and with her fellow

students foments as a kind of educational public; and the work Precious and her classmates do at Each One/Teach One enables their entry into a larger, literate public.

### **“Writing Could Be the Boat”**

Although Precious’s expanding awareness of both her internal and external landscape constitutes an early leg of her personal odyssey of self-discovery and redefinition, Precious embarks on her journey in earnest as she begins to acquire literacy. By coupling her growing literacy with her expanding self-knowledge, Sapphire situates Precious within a pervasive, abiding tradition in black, American literature. From the first publication of early slave narratives, such as those by Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, through to the relative present, the importance of reading has played a central role in many African American narratives. As Madhu Dubey notes in her book, Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism (2003), “If the slave narrative equated the ‘rights of man with the ability to write,’ much of the subsequent African American literary tradition was galvanized by the belief that print literature could effectively press the case for full black participation in public life” (4). In other words, what has held true on a macro-level for the African American community—that literacy, specifically print literacy, portends greater community potential—also holds true on a micro-level for those individual members of this community. Indeed, as the novel progresses, Precious’s increased literacy emboldens her to participate more actively in public life.

Subsequently, Dubey asserts that, “In this tradition, the political potential of print literacy has been intimately tied to the progressive possibilities of urbanity” (4).

Historically, both increased literacy and northward migration of black people from

America's rural south to its urban north worked to (slowly and imperfectly) create different possibilities for social and economic mobility. Dubey argues that the novels she investigates in her book (Push, Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower, and John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire, among others), "by forcing the question of how to read urban texts and how to grasp them as interpretive wholes, take on a much-debated problem—of the semiotic legibility of postmodern cities" (57). For Dubey, textual literacy and a subject's ability to read urban space as its own system of signification are intimately linked.

Likewise, as Push progresses and Precious learns basic reading and writing skills at Each One/Teach One, her confidence in her ability to read the text that is New York and, consequently, to travel through it—both as a pedestrian and via public transportation—increases as well. In other words, the trajectory of Precious's verbal literacy parallels the trajectory of Precious's geographic mobility. The moment in the text when Precious dissociates on the bus stop, for example, occurs the first time that she attempts to travel to her new, alternative school, Each One/Teach One. She recovers from her incest flashback thinking, "I'm leaning against glass panel of bus stop. I stare at 101 bus disappearing down 125<sup>th</sup> street. What am I doing at one-two-five at this time of morning? I look down at my feet, my eyes catch on my leggings, NEON YELLOW, of course! Alternative! I was on my way, *was* on my way, walking down Lenox when bad thoughts hit me 'n I space out" (25). Here, at this early stage in the narrative, Precious's post-traumatic stress reaction circumscribes her ability to move in and through her urban environment.

In providing her own backstory, Precious references times in the past in which “everything get swimming for me, floating for days sometimes” (35). Significantly however, the next time in the narrative during which Precious experiences a flashback in real time occurs that same, initial day of Each One/Teach One. This time, Precious endures these same invasive, traumatic memories when she is asked to read a passage out loud to her new instructor, Ms. Rain. She describes her reaction to Ms. Rain’s request, explaining, “All the air go out my body. I grab my stomach. Miz Rain look scared. ‘Precious!’ My head water. I see bad things. I see my daddy. I see TVs I hear rap music I want something to eat I want fuck feeling from Daddy I want die I want die” (53). Although it is common for people who suffer from post-traumatic stress to experience frequent intrusive memories and thoughts (Herman 37), it seems significant here that Precious has these incest flashbacks both when attempting to utilize her spatial literacy by traveling through the city and when attempting to demonstrate her (lack of) verbal literacy. For Precious, systems of enunciation—whether spatial or semantic—are intimately bound up with traumatic memory, such that in both these scenes the impact of Precious’s history of sexual violence severely limits her ability in the present to “read” the topographic and linguistic signifiers surrounding her.

As Precious begins to make sense of her past, however, both her spatial and verbal literacy expand. One month into her Each One/Teach One program, just before her second child is born, Precious writes in the dialogic notebook that she uses to correspond with her teacher:

A is fr Afrc

*(for Africa)*

B is for u bae

*(you baby)*

C is cl w bk

*(colored we black)*

D is dog

E is el l/m

*(evil like mama)*

F is fuck [...]. (65)

In this journal entry, Precious uses the alphabet, the very building blocks of literacy, to make meaning from and impose order onto her chaotic, violent past. Through a kind of semantic proximity, she links her child (“B is for u bae”) up with his ancestral heritage (“A is fr Afrc”) and racial identity (“C is cl w bk”), which enables her to situate herself and her child in time and space. For survivors of traumatic events—especially those who experience sustained, protracted abuse—“there is [...] an imperative need to tell and thus come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (Felman and Laub 78). Moreover, this truth needs to be integrated into the survivor’s personal history via narrative. In other words, the survivor must tell her story in order to situate the traumatic event(s) within the context of her overall life history. In her written dialogue with Ms. Rain, Precious references her ancestry and race as antecedents to her childhood sexual abuse (that is, she was African American prior to the onset of the

incest), but also notes that “E is e ‘l/m, ” or “E is evil like Mama” and that “F is fuck,” re-locating herself in the present where she continues to weather the consequences of her abuse.

As Precious gains mastery over language, she becomes progressively better equipped to engage with the realities of her history of sexual abuse. Throughout her time at Each One/Teach One, Precious develops friendships with the other women in the class, many of whom are survivors of family violence as well. Together, they author a “class book” that they fill with their life stories, particularly those that detail their traumatic pasts, in order to bear written testimony to the reality of their experiences. The class book, or Life Stories, as Ms. Rain’s literacy students title it, appears at the end of Sapphire’s novel and stands out both structurally and aesthetically from the rest of Push. Life Stories is presented as its own entity: the type-set is different from the body of the text, as if it had been written on a typewriter; it is not paginated like the rest of the novel (nor does it have its own page numbers); it does, however, contain a cover that very much resembles the title page of a book report, replete with Instructor’s name, class meeting time and days, and title of the course. It is as if Sapphire, instead of claiming authorship for this portion of Push, allows her characters to be the authors of their own stories, attributing the production of the class book not to herself, but instead to Ms. Rain’s literacy students as a material extension of the educational and literary public they forged in her course.

Notably, its title, Life Stories, is underlined, a privilege reserved for those works of literature that have already been published. If nothing else, that Life Stories is

underlined clearly demarcates it is a separate entity from the rest of Push, even though it is, according to the logic of the narrative, authored by the novel's protagonists. In this way, the class book strongly adheres to a pervasive literary trope in twentieth-century fiction, "the book-within-the-book." Madhu Dubey explains that "Since the 1970s—the period widely referred to as postmodern—African American fiction has teemed with tropes of the book-within-the-book, and with scenes of reading and writing, which probe the twinned inheritance of print literacy and urban modernity" (2). The context in which I investigate Push differs from Dubey's in a few significant ways: Dubey uses Sapphire's novel to discuss the connection between black literary postmodernism, literacy, and the decline of American inner-cities from the seventies until the present. Although we both focus on the importance of publics, Dubey argues that, because of the rise of technological mediation throughout this period of postmodernity, print culture teeters on the brink of annihilation, which for her relates directly to the dissolution of urban communities in postwar America. She believes that frequently, "the artifact of the book is taken to be the very emblem of the modern city, with its uniform visual blocks of print seeming to mirror the grids of rationalized urban space. More substantively, print technology supports a unique model of mediated yet knowable community befitting modern urban conditions" (2).

The 1980s, decade in which Push is set, as well as the decades that preceded (and to some extent succeeded) this period, were largely defined by the dissolution and decay of urban communities. In addition, the way that information was presented and distributed shifted away from print and toward digital media. According to Dubey's

calculus, modernity gets equated with print literacy and urbanism, whereas postmodernity is associated with technology and the destruction of America's urban centers as well as the communities they foster.

For Dubey, it is no wonder that novels highlighting this trope of the book-within-the-book have appeared frequently throughout the past thirty-five years, wherein there has lain an incredible amount of anxiety about the future of cohesive urban communities in the wake of postmodern cultural shifts. Accordingly, novels like Push, which take as their primary subjects issues of literacy and urbanity, attempt to mitigate this anxiety by representing fictional communities of writers and readers like the Each One/Teach One group. Dubey writes, "*PUSH* is able to affirm a literate community that is urban in the sense that it achieves intimacy by means of difficult acts of mediation among *strangers*" (78, emphasis mine). Significantly, Dubey also notes that "the circulation of the manuscript is restricted to the students and teacher of the literacy class" (77-78), who are not, by the time the manuscript is authored, "strangers" at all; Ms. Rain and the literacy group have spent at least two years in class together, and the mere presence of the class book evidences the students' acquisition of both verbal and interpersonal, emotional literacy over the course of their time at the Alternative School.

I take issue with Dubey's overall categorization of Life Stories as a "typed manuscript with a clearly defined readership rather than a print commodity whose distribution escapes authorial control" (77). To be sure, within the hermeneutic of Sapphire's novel itself, Life Stories is indeed a singular entity—it is written by the members of Each One/Teach One for the members of Each One/Teach One, and, as I

note above, very much stands out from the body of the text. But Life Stories lives only within the world of Push, a novel of Sapphire's creation intended to itself be a published, print commodity with a broad distribution. So although Dubey is correct that Life Stories does work to quell postmodern anxiety by creating a print text with a narrowly-defined community of readers, she neglects to account for the fact that the distribution of the class book depends wholly on the publication and distribution of Push itself.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the organization of Life Stories. The class book both begins and ends with poems by Precious, which bookend the prose-style autobiographies of the other women in the class. Because Push—the novel taken as a whole—treats Precious as its true protagonist and her teacher and classmates as significant, yet secondary, characters, it seems logical that the class book highlights Precious's literacy skills by sequencing her work both first and last in the order the women's narratives appear. Moreover, in the last poem found in the class book, "Untitled," Precious writes, "nobody can see now/but I might be a poet, a rapper." The inclusion of Precious's poetry in the class book, as opposed to a prose-style narrative about her life (which, arguably, the body of Push already constitutes), underscores Precious's achievements in literacy acquisition over her classmates' because, again, her work appears first and last, because she employs the "Über-literate" genre of poetry to relay her life story, and because writing her life narrative in free verse allows Precious to practice telling her story in her chosen medium. In other words, the very structure of Life Stories highlights Precious as its focus even though the class book is ostensibly a community-wide project written for and by all the members of Ms. Rain's literacy class.

The content of the women's autobiographies found in the class book parallels Precious's story in devastating and uncanny ways. Although the life stories of the other women included in the class book—Rita Romero, Rhonda Johnson, and Jermaine Hicks—represent these women's unique experiences, their individual histories of family and sexual violence nonetheless read remarkably like Precious's own narrative. Rita Romero's story appears after the two initial poems by Precious and details the incident in her childhood that spawned her life of "foster care, rape, drugs, prostitution, HIV, jail, [and] rehab," all of which occurred before she joined the Each One/Teach One community. Rita begins her autobiography, titled "My Life," by literally situating herself within the domestic space she occupied as a child. For Rita, the material objects found in her childhood home signify an Edenic time of wholeness and union with her mother.

Rita describes the interior space of the apartment she shared with her dark-skinned, Puerto Rican mother and her white father, noting that the "apartment was full of beautiful stuff—velvet couch, lace curtain, virgin statues, candles, chandeliers." Whereas Rita recalls these material objects with great clarity, she also notes that, "My father honestly I don't remember him so much even though I know he was there everyday. I know he is white because he tells me this, tells me I am white." Although she has few distinct memories of her father, Rita nonetheless retains the impression of him as racist and abusive. She relays how "[...]he grab me, hold out my arm next to his, see SEE. Look he says you are WHITE. You are not no nigger morena puta WHORE." Here, Rita's father's equates her mother's darkness with sexual excess and deviance.

Rita, conversely, adores her mother and associates darkness in general with comfort and safety. Rita writes,

I am six years old. The walls of the room are maroon. The velvet couch with the white, lace doilies is the same color as the wall. It's so pretty. It's my favorite. In the middle is the dark wood table with the crystal ball. Lace curtains is on the window. The shades is drawn.

Later on in the same paragraph, Rita again describes her mother, saying, "her hair is black down her back, her lips like red movie star lips, eyes black like oil." In this description, Rita's mother's darkness mirrors the darkness of the room where Rita feels secure and happy. Significantly, Rita's mother addresses her, Rita, as "Negra," the Spanish word for Black, and later "Negrita," little black one, claiming Rita as her own and aligning Rita's (supposed lack of) blackness with her own darkness, as well as with that of the room (womb) surrounding her.

At this point in Rita's narrative, it appears as if her own story of domestic happiness and comfort runs counter to Sapphire's overall scripting of Push's household spaces as spaces of danger. Indeed, the initial part of Rita's story reads like a model of early childhood, prelapsarian wholeness. Rita's father, however, intrudes upon this scene of primal household bliss between Rita and her mother one very significant afternoon, when he accuses her mother of prostitution and shoots her in the head, killing her in front of Rita. Sadly, in Rita Romero's story too, the seeming security of interior, domestic spaces shatters in the devastating presence of family violence.

This theme holds true for Rhonda Johnson as well, whose story follows Rita's. Rhonda's story differs structurally from the other women's in that she bifurcates her narrative into two distinct parts, which she titles "My Younger Years," and "My Grown Up Years," respectively. Rhonda's story also begins with her early childhood, although hers is spent in Jamaica; "things was good there," Rhonda writes, "until Pop die then we didn't have money so we move to the U.S. For me that is when the problem start. What the problem is is hard to say but it was with my brother." When Rhonda, her mother, and her brother Kimberton arrive in the United States, Rhonda is only twelve, yet she must work alongside her mother serving West Indian takeout on 7<sup>th</sup> Ave instead of going to school.

Not only does Rhonda's job isolate her from her peer group, but her brother becomes progressively more sexually abusive, alienating Rhonda from others even further. She explains, "We sleep in same room. He wait until I am asleep. I awake Kimberton standing over me naked as the day he born. Thing like a donkey's. I don't want it." Twice Rhonda tries to solicit help from her mother. The first time Rhonda tells her mother what is happening to her, she's fourteen, and her mother clearly does not understand what Rhonda is saying to her—the mother's response is to leave her brother's computers alone, and he will leave Rhonda alone. Rhonda tells her mother again, however, when she is sixteen. She explains that, "Kimberton is...is molesting with me at night." Not really understanding, her mother asks for clarification, which Rhonda provides by saying, "He come over to my side of the room at night and intercourse me,"

at which point Rhonda's mother kicks her out of the house, calling her names like "filthy haint" and "night devil walker."

Part two of Rhonda's narrative, "My Grown Up Years," tells of her life on the street, where she would "go with men to bars, drink, go home with them, hope I get to stay the night—that they don't tell me go after they come. After I do this with, oh, is it five or fifty or a hundred guys, I start dissolve." But, in truth, Rhonda does not dissolve; she attempts to figure out the welfare system, then lands a few different jobs as a home health worker until one of her clients dies, which catapults her back to a life of homelessness. Rhonda again lives on the streets, where she procures food by rummaging through garbage cans. It is while Rhonda is engaged in her search for other people's discarded dinners that she encounters her brother for the first time since their mother excommunicated her. Again, as throughout the rest of Push, Rhonda's moment of vindication occurs in public, urban space when Rhonda sees her brother for the first time since they are children and asserts, "I am not ashamed." As Kimberton pursues Rhonda, trying to get her to take money from him, she empowers herself by simply walking away. Here, as through the rest of the novel, women's mobility through urban space works to help re-script past traumas that played out in the "safe" space of the home.

Although Jermaine Hicks is not sexually or physically abused by her parents, she is subject to rampant, violent homophobia in response to her style of dress. Indeed, Jermaine titles her autobiography "Harlem Butch," wherein she details a lifetime of violently inappropriate responses to her gender and sexual identity. She notes how, when she is only 7, "A boy hold me down/under the stairwell/that smells like urine (pee I

woulda said at seven)/tries to push his dick into me.” Here, Jermaine is subject to abuse in domestic, interior spaces in the same way as many of the other women found in Push, as well as the other novels that make up the cluster of texts I investigate in this dissertation. Jermaine, however, “undoes” this abuse, at least semantically, by stating next that “I am 8:/when I put my tongue/in Mary-Mae’s mouth/for the first time/(under the same steps).” In fact, there appears to be some amount of promise at this point in Jermaine’s narrative that she will successfully navigate the pitfalls of her childhood relatively unscathed; this changes, though, by the time Jermaine is thirteen and Mary-Mae’s father catches them having sex. Mary-Mae’s father rapes Jermaine, as she explains it, “to show me what a MAN is, what a woman is/when I get up from my new knowledge/one of my front teeth is gone.” Later, Jermaine and Mary-Mae get “caught” by Jermaine’s very Christian mother, whose “words float over [their] naked bodies like clouds of poison gas.” Jermaine notes that after this incident, “I keep going until I hit the street.” Whereas sexual and verbal abuse occur in domestic spaces for Jermaine, she too is able to liberate herself from the confines of her past via public, urban space.

Because many of the women in the group share common histories of abuse and assault, as they grow closer, they begin to take responsibility for each other’s healing and help encourage one another to forge networks of support. Rita, for instance, persuades Precious to attend an incest survivors group meeting with her. In order to go to these meetings, however, Precious and Rita must take the bus from Harlem down to 14<sup>th</sup> Street, where the meetings are held. Not only does Precious assert and implement her spatial literacy by taking the bus through Manhattan, but the survivor’s group is also where

Precious first publicly names her violation as rape. In doing so, Precious employs her new-found geographic literacy to arrive at a location where she implements her burgeoning verbal proficiency in order to speak out for the first time about her history of abuse. Precious also comes to a pivotal conclusion while drinking hot chocolate in the Village with Rita and some of the other women from the survivors' meeting: "How Mama and Daddy know me sixteen years and hate me, how a stranger meet me and love me. Must be what they already had in they pocket." In connecting with an oppositional public of compassionate women, Precious is able to shift some of the blame for her abuse away from herself and onto her parents, who much more appropriate objects of her anger.

Under the guidance and encouragement of her teacher and fellow classmates, and in the service of authoring their class book, Precious begins to write poetry about her experience as both a resident of Harlem and as an incest survivor. She writes about how she loves to take her son, Abdul, (who, incidentally, is healthy at birth, not developmentally disabled or HIV positive) to daycare early so that she can "walk throo Harlem in/ mornin to school" (102). She observes that "this/a Harlem done/took/a beating/but mornin/if you/like/me/you see/ILANTHA tree rape/concrete/n birf/spiky green/trunk/life" (103). Although this is an especially redemptive image—a sidewalk "raped" by a tree that gives birth to new life and new growth—this moment is certainly not the first time in the narrative that Precious understands her history of sexual violence through her observations of her surrounding urban landscape. Indeed, Precious understands her own history of sexual violation largely through a racialized and

spatialized framework. Even before she audibly names her experience as rape to her incest survivors group, Precious admits to herself,

I think what my fahver do is what Farrakhan said the white man did to the black woman. Oh it was terrible and he dood it in front of the black man; that's really terrible. Yeah, on the video, Farrakhan say during slavery times the white man just walk out to the slavery Harlem part where the niggers live separate from the mansions where the white people live and he take any black woman he want and if he feel like it he jus' gone and do the do on top of her even if her man there. (68)

In coming to terms with her own history, Precious relies on past rape narratives.

Tellingly, in the above example, Precious references an historical moment in which black women living in the racially-marked area of Harlem were subject to assault at the hands of white men. For Precious, a black woman living in an area where the collective historical memory of sexual violence informs her understanding of her own traumatic past, merely walking through Harlem serves as an act of defiant enunciation—a pedestrian act of resistance. Newly able to negotiate the New York public transportation system, Precious notes with pride how she takes the bus and the subway from Harlem to various destinations around the city. Linking geographic mobility with increasing verbal proficiency, Precious writes in her journal about how excited she is that, “Toosday Rita take me VILLAG/Sat we go museum/sun day church/MONDY we gonna read Harriet T. book” (103). It hardly seems coincidental that reading and mobility are connected for

Precious, both of which work to construct geographic and discursive “liberated spaces” (de Certeau 105).

The reference to “Harriet T.” above proves significant as well. Early in her Each One/Teach One program, Ms. Rain gives Precious a poster of Harriet Tubman that she hangs in her room next to her poster of Louis Farrakhan (63). Later, Precious lists all the books she has read and acquired, one of which is authored by Ann Petry (who herself writes about Harlem as a space of liberation from domestic, sexual violence in The Street) and titled Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad (80). For Precious, the Underground Railroad serves as an apt metaphor for her own journey from her oppressive, domestic life to her newfound life of freedom, as she and Abdul move from her mother’s house into a half-way house. While living in the half-way house, Precious’s mother visits, leaving her own home for the first time in years, to inform Precious that her father has died of AIDS. Precious writes in her journal:

I was fine til HIV thing/she say i still fine/but prblm not jus HIV it mama  
Dady/BUT I was gon dem/I escap dem like Harriet/Ms Ran say we can nt  
escap the pass./the way free is hard/look Harriet H-A-R-R-I-E-T/i practise her  
name. (101)

In practicing writing the name “Harriet,” Precious further underscores the connection she forges for herself between writing and liberation, realizing that literacy can serve as her passage to both emotional freedom as well as freedom from dependencies on public assistance. The act of “practis[ing] her name” seems significant here as well. By rehearsing, in writing, Harriet Tubman’s name, Precious aligns herself with a long,

important tradition of African American writing and self-naming as deliberate acts of resistance. Perhaps for Precious, repeating the act of writing the letters “H-A-R-R-I-E-T” reinforces that she herself is “P-R-E-C-I-O-U-S” or, as she discovers in thinking about what to name her son, “My name mean somethin’ valuable” (67).

Learning to write her name and her life-story enable Precious to give form and structure to her experience in a way that allows her to transcend what seem like impossible dilemmas. When Precious first learns of her positive HIV status and tells the Each One/Teach One class about it, for example, Ms. Rain asks them write about it in their journals. Precious explains her reluctance to do so to Ms. Rain:

I say I drownin’ in river. She don’t look at me like I’m crazy but say,  
If you just sit there the river gonna rise up drown you! Writing could be  
the boat carry you to the other side. One time in your journal you told  
me you never really told your story. I think telling your story git you over  
that river Precious. (97)

Shortly thereafter, Precious begins her journaling in earnest, even to the point of walking around everywhere with the journal. She reports, “You know I go walk with Abdul, etc., take journal, write stuff in journal” (98). From this moment forward, Precious uses her journal both to practice writing itself—to increase her literacy skills—and also to engage with her traumatic past and further her healing. She continues to read literature and seems particularly fond of writers who are themselves from Harlem. She quotes Langston Hughes (“Harlmen Poet Laureeyet!”) to her class, saying, “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair [...] But all the time/Ise been a climbin’ on” (113). By referencing

the spatial metaphor found in the Hughes poem, Precious confirms her commitment to mobility, to her passage from a place of fear, confinement, and ignorance to another, transcendent place of verbal and spatial competence.

Moreover, by writing Hughes's words in her own journal, Precious includes herself as a member of a distinguished literary history. Throughout the novel, Sapphire also references texts by Ann Petry, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, and Lucille Clifton, all of whom are well established, well respected African American authors. All of these authors that Sapphire cites, and indeed many of the historical figures as well, serve as talismans on Precious's journey into the world of both literacy and literature. Many of the individuals whom Precious reads or learns about—such as Harriet Tubman—are associated with the struggle for Abolition. Still others are strongly affiliated with the Civil Rights movement. Precious also reads books titled, in her words, "Ain Nobodi Gon' Turn Me 'Round 'bout civil rights." After reading it, Precious explains, "I ain' know black people in this country went through shit like that" (82).

By invoking these important activist figures and pivotal historical moments, Sapphire aligns Precious's fight to overcome her personal battles with poverty, racism, incest, and the educational system alongside collective social movements aimed at transforming the role of blacks in America. Interestingly, even the white, British, nineteenth-century poet William Wordsworth, whom Precious reads and whose poem serves as an epigraph to the novel as a whole, functions as a literary and activist role-model for Precious, as Wordsworth held strong anti-slavery sentiments. Moreover, in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth called Romantic poetry the "the spontaneous

overflow of powerful feelings" (Norton Anthology 151) The Romantics were focused on the free, unselfconscious expression of emotion and personal experience, so much so that Shelley declared Romantic poets and poetry as the "liberators of mankind." It seems significant that Sapphire would invoke such talismen for Precious, and in doing so, forge such strong connections between literacy and freedom. These literary progenitors function as guides who educate and inspire her as she becomes more verbally, emotionally, and spatially literate.

In her room at the half-way house, Precious hangs a map of the New York subway system that "show all the places the subway go. Subway go Queens, Brooklyn—I look at it sometimes and wonder where I be if I get on train and go to end of the line or get off at say, ummm, let's see, how about Lefferts Blvd in Queens or Middletown Road in the Bronx. What kinda town or part of New York will it be" (126). At this point in the narrative, Precious is eighteen years old and has been participating in Each One/Teach One for two years. Over the course of her second year in the program, Precious's "TABE reading test" score increased from a 2.8 to a 7.8, meaning that, as an eighteen year old, she reads at nearly an eighth-grade level (139). Clearly, as the subway map hanging on her wall demonstrates, Precious is now much better equipped to read both spatial texts (the text that is the subway system) and their cartographic representations (the map of the subway that hangs on her wall). In doing so, Precious is also better able to author herself into her experience in these spaces, wondering what it is like on "Lefferts Blvd in Queens or Middletown Road in the Bronx," and imagining alternative, emancipatory possibilities for herself.

Within these “liberated spaces” — both discursive and geographic—Precious is able to envision imagined lives that differ dramatically from her earlier, violent domestic existence. She writes in her journal:

[...] I am homer on a voyage/but from our red bricks in piles/of usta be buildings/and windows of black/broke glass eyes./we come to buildings bad/but not *so* bad/street cleaner/then we come to a place/of/everything is fine/big glass windows/stores/white people/fur/blue jeans/it’s a different city/I’m in a different city/Who I be I grow up/here?

In moving from Harlem, an area of urban decay—particularly in the early 1980s when this novel is set—to downtown, where she observes cosmetic differences in both buildings and people, Precious, likening herself to Homer’s Odysseus, imagines an alternative life for herself infused with possibility. Later in the same journal entry, Precious again constructs a substitute version of herself through her identification with literary figures and cityscapes, in this case with the poetry of William Blake, himself an ardent abolitionist. She writes, “TYGER TYGER/BURNING BRIGHT/That’s what in Precious/Jones heart—a tiger./bookstores/café/BLoomydales!/Bus keep on rolling” (128). In this way, by attaining both geographic and semantic literacy, in learning to navigate her way through the city and positioning herself as a reader and a writer within the tradition of her literary progenitors, Precious successfully resists the pervasive sexual violence that had previously constrained her and, consequently, fashions—for herself and women like her—both spatial and discursive spaces of hope out of ostensible spaces of fear.

## **Epilogue: A Different Kind of Harlem Narrative**

On a cool night in March of 1995, a group of women held a candlelight vigil on Harlem's 125<sup>th</sup> Street. They stood across from the historic Apollo Theater, directly facing a second, equally angry, decidedly more vocal and potentially violent group of men and women who were there to protest the protesters (Garfield xvii-xviii). That the two groups came to stand along the very public space of Harlem's major thoroughfare that night evinces the degree of controversy issues of intra-racial sexual violence incite in many black Americans. Mike Tyson had been released from jail earlier in the day, where

he had served three years out of what was supposed to be a six year sentence for the rape of former Miss Black America, Desiree Washington. A Welcome Home Parade, organized and endorsed by “many well-known black male activists, politicians, and church leaders,” as well as Roberta Flack of “Killing Me Softly” fame, had been scheduled for the next day, but black feminist coalition members had successfully lobbied politicians and city council members and gotten the city to withdraw the parade permit (Garfield xviii).

Although a heavy police presence prevented the candlelight vigil from turning violent, tensions among Harlem’s residents and within the larger black community boiled just beneath the surface during the days surrounding Tyson’s release, bringing to light the extent to which issues of sexual violence against women provoke and divide people, especially when the crime in question one of intra-racial rape. Given the register Harlem has historically occupied in the national imagination, the fact that this particular drama played out in the theater of these particular streets seems noteworthy, especially given the fact that neither Tyson or Desiree Washington lived anywhere near Harlem at the time. Tyson had returned to his Southington, Ohio mansion after his release (Baker 7), and Washington had moved back in with her mother in East Providence, Rhode Island and was attending classes at Providence College (Patinkin 1E).

Mike Tyson as a figure, as well as this particular celebration/protest in his honor, calls attention to both the fissures and confluences in the African American community’s thinking about issues of gender and power, especially as they play out in the highly contested arena of sexual violence toward black women. That so many prominent,

mostly male, political and cultural figures—people like Don King, Louis Farrakhan, and members of the National Baptist Conference—spoke out in Tyson’s defense, asserting that Washington was a “gold digger,” a “bourgie debutant” who had “asked for it,” possibly because she was angling for money that night by voluntarily accompanying Tyson into his Indianapolis hotel room at 2 a.m, highlights the extent to which intra-racial sexual violence against women had been naturalized and even codified within the black community. The anti-Tyson protesters who held the candle light vigil that night were harassed and intimidated by Tyson’s cadre of supporters, even to the point of receiving death threats, yet their attempts to block the Welcome Home Parade, as well as their 125<sup>th</sup> Street protest received little to no press coverage. Rather, the conversation that played out in the public sphere focused more on Tyson’s future as a boxer, his impending marriage to 29 year old medical student Monica Turner—who met him shortly before his imprisonment and dutifully visited him in the federal penitentiary in Indiana—or on his jailhouse conversion to Islam than it did on the issue of violence against women. A different kind of conversation needed to take place.

That conversation fomented throughout the years following Tyson’s release and culminated on a cold night in January, 2003, where, three years prior to the official release of No! The Rape Documentary (2006), filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons scheduled a screening at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture on Harlem’s busy 135<sup>th</sup> Street. She had begun work on the project in 1994, angered and frustrated by events like the 1992 rape trial of Mike Tyson, where she “watched and listened to so many ‘so called’ Black male leaders—the same ones who defended Tawana

Brawley, when she alleged she had been raped and sodomized by four white men in 1989—accuse Desiree Washington of betraying the black community” (170). As a survivor of rape and incest herself, incidents like these prompted her to begin “thinking about intraracial violence in the African American community” (170).

With the help of her friend and mentor Toni Cade Bambara, an award-winning writer and activist, as well as many others, Simmons struggled through years of funding setbacks and interpersonal resistance. In an article she published in the *Incite!* Anthology, The Color of Violence (2006), Simmons includes the text from a few of the denial letters she received after requesting funding from various “major progressive and mainstream foundations and funds, as well as major cable networks” (173). Some of these letters accused her of having “an axe to grind” with making No!, “given that [she is] a lesbian” (174); others reinforced a hackneyed, centuries-old “blame the victim” mentality by noting that “the example of Mike Tyson’s case and the indifference from the [Black] community might be due, in part, to the moral point of view that one does not go into a man’s room in the early morning,” and that they were denying her funding for her project because “that opinion cannot be ignored” (174). Because Simmons encountered such patently reductive, disobliging attitudes, such as the ones expressed in these letters, she ultimately developed alternative funding sources, namely an “international grassroots Black feminist lesbian-led educational fundraising campaign that would raise awareness about intra-racial rape and sexual assault in African American communities while raising funds for the making of No!” (174).

Simmons also elicited the aid of black male activists, such as hip-hop historian and author Kevin Powell, who organized an “intragenerational coalition of Black men” to support her film. Powell wrote and distributed, via e-mail, an open letter to men in the African American community, explaining that “Given the level of violence against women in this country, we owe it to ourselves and to future generations not to turn our backs on No!. For in ignoring this documentary we would be once again ignoring the voices of [Black] women” (175). Powell’s coalition to support No!, in conjunction with HipHop Speaks, another of Powell’s activist projects, organized the Schomburg screening, which included a “seventy-four minute version of No! and a public discussion on intra-racial heterosexual rape and sexual assault in the black community” (175).

Powell’s promoting of the film paid off in spades. Simmons writes about how

On that cold and rainy/snowy evening [in January 2003], we had to turn away at least 200 women and men, many of whom were under the age of 30, who stood in line for *at least* an hour to attend the screening and public discussion. Even after being told that the auditorium was filled to capacity, many Black women *and* men still hung around the lobby to see if they could get in for part of the screening and all of the public discussion that followed. (175)

The amount of attention this screening of Simmons’s documentary culled from the general public, and the way in which hopeful viewers lined the sidewalk at 135<sup>th</sup> and Lenox, an epicenter of cultural and political life in Harlem, reinforces the argument I make throughout this dissertation: that the public, urban space of Harlem can and does serve as a site of resistance against sexual violence against African American women.

Indeed, Harlem served as an apposite site for the protests against Mike Tyson's Welcome Home Parade and for the screening of No! largely because of its reputation, cultivated for the most part during its Renaissance, as the nexus of black political consciousness and mobilization in the United States. Yet even during its later years of material and social decay—those years investigated in this dissertation, the post-War years through the relative present—Harlem has been invoked on institutional and popular levels as a barometer by which to gauge the cultural climate in America: a kind of class, race, gender index. Throughout its history, Harlem has been, to reiterate Ralph Ellison's words from my Introduction, a site of "historical and social memory" (26). The seemingly inconsequential, workaday movements and interactions of residents and visitors across Harlem's various material and symbolic incarnations can be read, in classic "De Certeauian" style, as an urban palimpsest upon which a piece of the narrative of black American life is written, inscribed with people's quotidian choices that, taken together, work to shape the social order. Individual acts of support or protest, such as those surrounding the Mike Tyson case, contribute to the overall cultural history of Harlem by inscribing a different kind of story, one in which the public, urban space of Harlem serves as a site of resistance to sexual violence against women that counters essentialist, separate-spheres conceptualization of exterior, civic spaces as decidedly masculine. This is an oppositional narrative, one that contributes to an alterior history of Harlem, in which the neighborhood's streets and alleyways are not constructed as dangerous "spaces of fear" for women due to threats of sexual violence. These moments of protest, of pedestrian acts of resistance, coupled with the fictional narratives of Harlem

that I investigate in this dissertation, create an alternative public around issues of violence against women within the context of this historically rich space.

A key feature of this alternative narrative of Harlem's concerns its inclusion of dialogue between men and women about intimate violence. Significantly, in her discussion about this particular screening in Harlem, Simmons reinforces the instrumentality of men in both promoting it and in generating the conversation that followed. Although she had originally envisioned No! as consisting primarily of black women survivors' testimonies, she "came to understand and appreciate the fact that men can stop heterosexual rape. Therefore, [she] made the decision to include the activism and cultural work of Black men who are involved in the anti-sexual violence movement in No!" (174), a vital step in the ongoing process of ending assault and abuse because, as the bumper stickers we used to distribute at the Take Back the Night marches when I was in college in Boulder asserted, "Only Men Can Stop Rape." In the particular context of the black community, however, the role of men is even more invaluable.

When Aishah Simmons chose to include male, activist voices in her film, she made strides toward inverting a decades' old rape/lynching dichotomy. As I discuss in my Introduction, both because of the particularly spectral nature of lynching and because of its role as a tool of social control during the slavery and reconstruction periods (and, arguably, later, as cases like Emmitt Till and Rodney King can be read as contemporary lynchings), it came to be known as the primary vector of racist oppression in America. Women's equally pervasive and traumatic, but "private," experiences with sexual violence were often overlooked or downplayed because of the horrifying visuality and

publicity of lynching. Simmons's film itself is a spectral event. And, as such, its very medium works to invert the rape/lynching binary. But Simmons also includes dramatic reenactments of slave women's experiences of rape at the hands of their white masters, and of black male slaves who seem to have been coerced into having nonconsensual sex with them, which accompany feminist historians' accounts of the prevalence of sexual violence against female slaves. By including these scenes, Simmons renders visible—and again, given the nature of the medium, *public*—that which has historically been relegated to the realm of the private.

Just as significantly, Simmons includes interviews with black, male, anti-rape activists. These moments involving what appear to be consciousness-raising groups of men discussing the issue of sexual violence are some of the film's most powerful, especially when viewed alongside scenes such as the one in which the late Essex Hemphill performs a portion of his poem, originally appearing in his book Ceremonies (2000), "To Some Supposed Brothers." The culmination of this piece takes black men to task for reproducing in their relationships with black women the same patterns of domination that were inflicted upon them by racist power structures. Hemphill writes, "but we so called men/we so-called brothers/wonder why it's so hard to love our women/when we're about loving them/the way America/loves us" (Ceremonies 132). Sexual violence against black women has served as a condition of "unredressed injury" (Hartman 101) throughout American history, a political wound that has been aggravated by the centrality of public acts of racist violence against African American men. To witness men engaged in structured dialogue about how to put an end to intimate violence

within the very public medium of film suggests an important cultural sea change is taking place wherein some members of the black male community, such as Kevin Powell and the many men he organized to support the screening of Simmons's documentary, have begun to remedy this "condition of unredressed injury" by addressing the prevalence and impact of intimate violence in the public sphere.

Aishah Simmons's documentary itself, as well as the activist public created around it, extend the trajectory of cultural work performed by the novels I examine in this dissertation into the visual arena. Taken as a whole, Simmons's documentary, other filmic and televisual texts such as Spielberg's The Color Purple and The Women of Brewster Place miniseries, as well as the cluster of novels I examine throughout this dissertation—including those such as Zami and Daddy Was a Number Runner, but especially The Street, The Women of Brewster Place, and Push—together form a oppositional literary public that strives to redress sexual violence against women. In all of these texts, and in real life instances—such as the screening of Aishah Simmons's documentary No!, where a line of people waited in the bitter, Harlem cold for an opportunity to talk about sexual violence, or the protest on 125<sup>th</sup> Street in response to Mike Tyson's Welcome Home Parade—public, urban space, comprised of the same streets that have historically been implicated in engendering such violence, becomes the very canvas upon which feminist modes of resistance are inscribed, forever altering the texture and the color of Harlem's urban palimpsest.

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## **Vita**

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