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**COMMUNITY AS SAFE SPACE FOR SURVIVAL:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE GREAT MIGRATION IN GLORIA  
NAYLOR'S THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE, ANN PETRY'S THE  
STREET, AND TONI MORRISON'S JAZZ**

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate School  
of Texas Southern University

By

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2022

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## ABSTRACT

This project closely examines the unique challenges African American women faced as migrants from the rural South to the urban North during the Great Migration and particularly how community and safe spaces were necessary for survival. This article will focus on the literary works of *The Street* by Ann Petry, *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor, and *Jazz* by Toni Morrison to specifically analyze the migrant stories of African American women. *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson is used as a non-fiction anchor text to compare and contrast the fictitious accounts alongside the non-fiction accounts. Through the lens of New Historicism and Gender Critical theory, I will analyze the impact of the Great Migration and the effects on African American women who have migrated North and what the works say about oppression as a result of race and gender. I argue that intra-racial misogyny, economic barriers due to both race and gender, and sexual violence towards women appear as a common thread throughout each of these novels as a unique part of the migrant African American woman's experience; however, women that are the most successful are not only strongly connected to their community but they also have a protected space outside of the surveillance of others. The promise of the North comes into direct conflict with the hopes and dreams of African American women due to the intersections of race and gender. Hopes and dreams are often deferred, but their spirits are not broken. All three texts are written by African American women and express different experiences from multiple points of view. They demonstrate both successes and defeats for Black women as a result of the Great Migration.

## EPIGRAPH

**As the Crow Flies**

–from Mississippi

*In every town Negroes were leaving by the  
hundreds to go north and enter into Northern  
industry. (1940-1941)*

Of the four went three:

Hubert, Roscoe, Sugar—not

my grandmother, Lee.



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since her arrival in 1619 to the Americas as chattel, the African woman has been both a nurturer and laborer. This combination complicates her identity from the beginning as she is placed in a world where she is forced to wear many hats. She has been the sole producer of those that would be enslaved for over 200 years to build the economic powerhouse of America. The attempt to make her invisible by the dominant white society is in vain, as her footprints and handprints are seen everywhere throughout the history, culture, and economics of America. After enslavement, The Reconstruction Period from 1865-1877 showed a glimpse of promise for the previously enslaved population; however, was met with defeat after the federal government removed its troops from the South. This removal of federal troops that were sent to ensure the laws were being followed by the states in the South ushered in an era of terror. Whatever gains that were made during this period were lost. Industrialization and modernity began to open up the North for African Americans as factories and plants needed labor to support the United States involvement in World War I. The pull for labor in the North coupled with the terror and dead end sharecropping system in the South lead to the largest movement of African American people out of the South. Mobility was a new phenomenon for African Americans and many capitalized upon their newfound liberty. The Great Migration of African Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the American

South to the North and West has become one of the most defining and pivotal moments in American History. Historians are unable to identify one key moment for the massive movement and cannot identify who was the first individual or family to flee the South, yet for roughly 6 million African Americans this became their reality.



In the above painting, *The Migration Series* panel 1, Jacob Lawrence depicts the journey of African Americans out of the South and into the North. He demonstrates through the painting the overcrowding at train stations as migrants push in one direction to northern cities such as Chicago, New York, and St. Louis. Green is a dominant color in the painting as it can be representative of migrants seeking better economic opportunities through monetary gain. The train station also has what appears as cages in between each of the entrances to the cities migrants were going to. This could be seen as the migrants breaking free from the cages in the South and into newer and freer spaces. Due to the massive movement of African Americans out of the South, the Great Migration has impacted the social, political, and economical landscape of America. It has been key to exposing blatant and systematic racism not only in the South but also across the nation. The promise of the North encompassed specific limitations to those of African descent. It

was seen as a safer place, a land of opportunity, and once migrants have arrived, the sky is the limit. Contrary to those beliefs, at times the North was complicit with and even aggravated systematic racism by keeping African Americans oppressed and without hope. Countless African American literary works integrate the migration story as either a backdrop or at the forefront of their stories, demonstrating the vast experience of those who have taken this journey and these works display its impact. African American women who took part in the Great Migration were exposed to a unique set of barriers which were both visible and invisible. This thesis will focus on the fictional works of *Jazz* by Toni Morrison, *The Street* by Ann Petry, *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor, and Isabel Wilkerson's non-fiction oral history *The Warmth of Other Suns* as an anchor text, to specifically analyze the migrant stories of African American women. Community and safe spaces are shown to be integral to the survival of African American women in the new world. Through community and created safe spaces, migrant women who shared similar experiences both in the South and in the North had a place where they were not alone, isolated, and could relate with one another without judgment. They understood the nuances of leaving the South coupled with adjusting to the conditions in the North. These safe spaces became a sustaining mechanism as the women continued to face harsh opposition and realities but continued to fight for their own hopes and dreams.

Morrison, Petry, and Naylor present several key factors that are distinctively unique to the African American woman in the Great Migration as portrayed through the female characters: economic exploitation, housing disparities, sexual violence towards women, and the loss of children. The intersectionality of race and gender become paramount in their portraits of the migrant women in these works by exposing the

limitations placed upon them. These works also reveal the complexities, challenges, defeats, and triumphs as a result of the Great Migration.

The characters in the texts serve as migratory voices both in fiction and non-fiction. Isabel Wilkerson, in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, gives firsthand accounts of those migrating out of the rural South and into the urban North and some West, while other writers of fiction use the Great Migration as a backdrop or foundation for what is happening in the lives of their characters. Some of the voices are the focus of the texts, while others are secondary characters that nonetheless push the stories forward. One thing that is evident in both the fictitious accounts and non-fiction is the desire for the characters to live and thrive in a better America. The land of promise, hope, and freedom. These characters wanted to cash the check on the American dream and were willing to make the sacrifices and deposits necessary to realize the perceived promises. Robin Lucy in her article “Fables of the Reconstruction: Black Women on the Domestic Front in Ann Petry’s World War II Fiction,” points out that “the vast majority of African Americans, specifically men, who since Emancipation had wandered the United States in search of “what was not to be found: jobs, homes, love- a chance to live as free men” (1). The search was not for anything extraordinary, but as Lucy points out, the agency to work for a livable wage to provide for themselves and their families, a decent place to live and love, which are only basic human necessities. Freedom according to the book or the law was not necessarily actualized from day to day. This became apparent even in the North. Although unclear on their direction many times, migrants exercised determination to secure something better.

The Great Migration of African Americans from the South into the North and West was fueled by increased racial hostility following reconstruction, a dead-end sharecropping system which resembled another form of enslavement, Jim Crow laws, and the rise of white terrorist groups using lynching as a means of controlling and policing black men and women. Push and pull factors had a significant impact on movement out of the South and movement into the North and West. The pull factors North gave African Americans some control over their own black bodies. Systematic racism and race riots North and West still played a role in hindering the upward mobility of African Americans; however, as the North became more industrialized, labor was needed. Although most of the laboring jobs were given to men, Black women were still necessary in establishing the family, home, and stability in the community. Most African American women took menial jobs to help support their families. Because of their status as both African American and women, employment in many cases was difficult to secure and most times it was the least desired of all work. In Robin Lucy's article she states, "Laboring in factories and participating in unions "enabled" the black man "to cross class and racial lines" (2). This was not the case for African American women, as "the vast majority of whom worked in their own homes, often as mother, or who performed domestic labor in white households" (Lucy 2). Lucy also states that because "their orbit of life is narrow-from their kitchenette to the white folk's kitchen and back home again" (2), it was increasingly difficult for African American women to progress economically as a result of being shut out of most industries. Their status as both African American and women made it difficult to navigate to a desirable space in American society. Very few black women were able to engage in work outside of the domestic sphere. Even the

use of a kitchenette instead of a kitchen in Lucy's article is symbolic of African American women being unable to fully take up space in most industries as a kitchenette is limited and does not possess all of the appliances or amenities of an actual full kitchen. The kitchens they do have access to are not their own but the ones of whom they work for. Lutie Johnson for example in *The Street* is relegated to this confinement of a kitchenette instead of full access to American society. The urban space in the North for the African American migrant woman can be seen as the opposite of the landscape and space in the South. Generally, the space in the South is more open and less confined, whereas, in the North, the urban spaces are confined, limited, and can appear cold. Proximity becomes literal and figurative. Farah Griffith in "*Who set you flowin'?*" asserts, "Whatever the case, in the city, black migrants come to the realization that their search for a freer space has led to a space where they are confined in ways they had never imagined" (102). Power, in the North just like in the South separates and categorizes individuals. Most African American migrants were enclosed within tenements and later housing projects within certain neighborhoods. Even to attempt to push beyond these boundaries was met with hostility and rage from all that believed themselves entitled to occupy the space. European immigrants in particular were hostile towards African American migrants. As they were attempting to assimilate and assert their whiteness, this caused friction in the workplace and living spaces. Although African American migrants were native to the land, confinement to place becomes a larger theme as seen in both the texts *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Street*. African American migrant women were confined to place even when there was some form of economic mobility; segregated housing forced families to stay within certain areas. Taking African American women

further and further away, from their own homes to provide or help provide for their families proved detrimental to the private lives as mothers and wives. This was also a means to control the Black woman and her movement economically and progression in the family. Griffith also asserts that “This power controls the migrant body not only by inflicting violence upon it, but also by controlling its experience of time and space, by regulating it, and by creating desire”(102). There is a desire for these women to have agency over their own bodies and lives; it creates a conflict as the law now states that they are free; however, there are unspoken and unwritten limitations and boundaries placed upon the new migrants. This in turn creates an illusion that says these rights and opportunities are available by law but the reality of these are not being realized nor coming to fruition. The safe spaces then become necessary to combat against the realization of the illusion.

Chapter 1 will explore *The Women of Brewster Place*, both Mattie and Etta Mae arrive North under two different circumstances. Both scarred by their past in the South and are left with limited options. A new environment outside of the South appears to be the best road for both women’s redemption. The two women face disappointment in the North; however, this does not cause their defeat. By building community and creating safe spaces, the women are able to survive.

In Chapter 1, the women of Brewster Place are able to survive in the face of opposition due to their building of community and creation of safe spaces, whereas, in Chapter 2, Petry’s protagonist in *The Street* is ultimately defeated because of her rejection of safe spaces. Lutie Johnson is seeking a better life for herself and her eight-year-old son Bub. She is unfortunately met with opposition that without the support of

community becomes impossible to overcome. Lutie rejects the wisdom, guidance, and protection safe spaces can provide. Petry shows the protagonist's struggle of running away from the safe spaces she believed were causing her demise to an environment that ultimately lead to her destruction.

In Chapter 3 the text *Jazz* is examined as Morrison portrays Violet Trace as both villain and heroine. The complexity of Violet's inability to build meaningful relationships and community is woven by her childhood experiences. An absent father, her mother's suicide, and her grandmother's ideals of what and who is valuable inhibits Violet's ability to make meaningful connections and form community in the North. As Violet migrates to the North, her past does not necessarily remain in the South; it follows her and shows up in numerous ways. Initially, this inhibits her ability to build safe spaces in the new world. Eventually, Violet is forced into self-reflection and it is the creation of a safe space that allows her to heal and become adopted into the community.

This thesis will be an examination of the complexities of the African American woman's experience during the Great Migration and how building community and not stripping away of all of their Southern roots built safe space and survival for these women. African American women who rejected community and their Southern roots were not as successful in these urban spaces.



## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **SAFE PLACES AGAINST A WALL**

Brewster Place is a neighborhood, a street that is somewhere but nowhere in an urbanized northern city in America. The inhabitants, mostly African American, who reach their destination, are a part of the Great Migration from the rural south that transformed America in the first half of the 20th Century.. This location is a dead end to many hopes, dreams, and American ideals. Brewster Place and other communities similar to it in America are designed to fail. Although the women are excluded from participating in the overall society in ways that are fair and just due to their race and gender, they rely on one another for community. Each woman imperfect, yet perfectly fits into a larger collective community effort that empowers, supports, and strengthens one another even amid rejection and isolation from mainstream America.

The opening prologue “Dawn,” in Gloria Naylor’s 1982 novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, describes Brewster Place as becoming “especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among the decay, trying to make it a home” (Naylor 4). The women understand the complexity of a place such as Brewster Place where it has been both a safe haven, and also a deadly trap. Judith Branzburg in her article “Seven Women and a Wall” shows the peril of Brewster Place and its inhabitants,

“disconnected from the business of the city by a wall, Brewster Place has become a dead end literally and figuratively, for the black people who finally come to inhabit it”

(Branzburg 117). Places in inner cities that are like Brewster Place represent a suction that especially ensnares Black women, enclosing them from reaching their full potential. This decay is significant because it is indicative of the rotting conditions the “colored daughters” have been forced to live within and signals the perpetual cycle of poverty causing the women to “decay.” Although the women fight and have determined spirits, systematic racism and gender biases keep them from being able to move forward. There is a glimmer of hope also seen in the opening chapter “Dawn”, “there was a sense of promise in the street and in the times” (Naylor 2). Many of the women are migrants from the South with an expectation that somehow the North will be a better place. This idea is often met with disillusionment because of poverty, isolation, alienation, and trauma. Farah Jasmine Griffin in the text “*Who set you flowin’?*” argues “whatever the case, in the city, black migrants come to the realization that their search for a freer space has led to a space where they are confined in ways they had never imagined” (102). Once the women land in these spaces, they find it to be more challenging than anticipated. The space is freer by law, but not in practice. There are no Jim Crow laws keeping them confined but there are alliances, class and color codes aiding in restrictions. Building community must be the place of solace in the harsh systems North. The women of Brewster Place create a safe space to assist other migrant women and to resist power structures built for their destruction.

The migrant women of Brewster Place, unlike the women in Isabel Wilkerson’s *Warmth of Other Suns*, live their lives semi-independent of men. The men in *The Women*

*of Brewster Place* are almost as shadows. Naylor is not attempting to demonize the African American male; however, she calls attention to the systemic racism causing his invisibility. “Not only must the women remain true to their race, they must also support racial unity by not being too hard on black men” (Branzburg 116). Naylor demonstrates that the African American male’s invisibility has often lead to black women being left unprotected and also the primary provider and caregiver of the home. She is the disciplinarian and nurturer. She does not overly criticize black men, but Naylor provides a full scope of the Black experience in America, leading to the behaviors. Males are invisible not because they want to be but because of systems put into place within America that forces this invisibility in one form or another. American laws and policies are developed to ensure this invisibility. On the contrary, the migrant accounts of women in Wilkerson’s book do not necessarily portray this invisibility of Black men. Although the women are married, they are exposed to the same common struggles of all African American migrants. The fight to build community while combatting oppression; the fight to discover oneself while being defined and confined to a lower caste in American society; the fight to thrive in a new place while maneuvering misogyny and sexism; the fight to continue to dream and be full of hope.

Naylor strategically opens the book by making reference to the Langston Hughes poem “What happens to a dream deferred”, bringing the narrative of the migrant women of *Brewster Place* dreams and how too often those dreams were deferred and sometimes resulting in tragic explosion. Jill L. Matus explains that Naylor’s reference to Hughes poem suggests “that to defer one’s dreams, desires, hopes, is life denying. Despair and destruction are the alternative to decay” (50). The migrant women in both *The Warmth of*

*Other Suns* and *The Women of Brewster Place* dream of a better America with the hope to find solace in the urbanized North and West. Although in many cases a tragic explosion was inevitable, it did not necessarily indicate finality. Hope in the lives of the women encompasses the desire to persist through and resist complete failure in their new destination. Overcrowding in Northern cities due to unjust and restrictive housing causes friction in communities of color as each individual, each family strives to live not only for survival but also their piece of the American dream. Brewster Place, therefore, is synonymous with the poor housing conditions and the urbanized North's reluctance to provide adequate, equal, and fair opportunities to its newcomers and native residents of color.

Unlike European migrants who were able to change their last name and relinquish their accents and any other form of previous cultural ties to their home country, African Americans were unable to shed their identity and assimilate into the dominant culture. Limited work opportunities for African American women also hindered their progress in the North. African American women were disproportionately placed at the bottom socioeconomically and politically. For places such as Brewster Place, landlords were not in a rush to make necessary improvements to buildings and in most cases African American tenants were charged exuberant rents for inadequate housing. This was a reality for both the fictitious women characters in *The Women of Brewster Place* and the non-fiction stories of women that migrated North in *The Warmth of Other Suns*. The Gladney family in *The Warmth of Other Suns* were able to move from the tenement housing of Chicago; however, the upkeep of the community became short lived as white flight had overtaken their neighborhood leading to the cities lack of

care and attention to the South side of Chicago. The same systems embedded within the society to marginalize African Americans on Brewster Place are the same systems in the South side of Chicago. Naylor is strategic in not identifying a particular city as it is in any city where migration from the South has occurred. In *The Warmth of Other Suns* as more African Americans moved into the Southside of Chicago, the less the city made improvements to the community causing intentional decay. As a result, places like the South side of Chicago become crime-infested, quality education is sparse and entire communities take a turn for the worse. Systemic racism keeps communities such as Brewster Place from upward mobility and therefore it loves its “colored daughters”. The only thing that is endearing about this kind of love is that it keeps its inhabitants close and restricted. It is not that the inhabitants of both Brewster Place and the South side of Chicago do not care, but dreams that are often deferred turn into apathy. This apathy in turn results in crime-ridden areas, violence, and the overall deterioration of physical and mental health.

The women in Brewster Place endeavor to make the most out of the hand they are dealt in the North; returning South for many is not an option. Matus examines the plight of the women in the North versus the South by stating “Although Brewster Place is a hair breadth away from poverty, it is still preferable to the starving South” (59). Poverty and starving serve as close relatives in the grand scheme, placing one slightly preferably over the other. The North is symbolically impoverished but not completely void of any sustenance as it was in the South. From their perspective, the North is the lesser of the two evils. Returning back to the South would also signal defeat, especially when family members who were left behind expressed any kind of distaste for those who chose to

migrate North. Therefore, building community becomes a fundamental building block for survival.

Mattie Michael, the anchor of Brewster Place represents all that is stable. Branzburg characterizes Mattie as “the emotional center of the novel, a middle-aged woman who comes to Brewster Place from the South” (117). The community is drawn to this type of stability as displacement becomes inevitable in the migrant’s quest for safety and security. Her life story is full of dead-end streets; initially, she grapples with this, but in the end, it swallows her life dreams like quicksand. She chooses to make the most of her life’s dead end and eventually resolved not to fight against what has been prescribed as her destiny as an African American woman, due largely to her perception that this cannot be changed. Many women of the Great Migration share her story. Triumph on a dead end, an uplifted spirit in heartbreak, a refuge for the broken although broken herself, “She refused to pity herself and to think that she, too, would have to die here on this crowded street because there just wasn’t enough life left for her to do it all again” (Naylor 54). Pity would signal the dominant, oppressive forces have triumphed. Mattie Michael, a sanctuary for the inhabitants of Brewster Place, becomes that refuge to those that have been pushed on the outside and have come to their end as she knows what it is like to be rejected as a result of human imperfection. Mattie loves from a place of brokenness as her heart has been broken by every man in her life that she has held in high regard.

Being displaced abruptly in the unnamed city North, everything Mattie knows has changed beginning with where her and her baby are living. Mattie Michael’s story begins as she is the product of forced migration escaping the shame an unwed pregnant daughter of a strict preacher would place on her family. There was no way for her own

mother to protect her from her father's fierce anger of having an unwed pregnant daughter and the disgrace brought upon herself and their family. She is now displaced in a new urban city, confined into a small rat-infested apartment and alone. This is opposite of her life down South, where she is living in a larger space, surrounded by the community and protected by her father. There is no protection for the ills of urban city life. Her displacement is immediate as she probably would not have chosen this path for her life but has been forced to migrate where she is far away enough from her family to save them from the ridicule and shame of being an unwed mother. Basil is born and she clings to him as if her life depended on it. Her initial place of refuge is when she moves in with Miss Eva. The nurturing Miss Eva provides to Mattie and her son Basil echoes the ways of the South, which in turn provides her solace and a form of security in the unfamiliar city. This is the first indication of community for Mattie, allowing her the opportunity to find stability to raise and provide for Basil. Miss Eva provides community for Mattie Michael and it becomes a safe space. Without Miss Eva opening her doors to Mattie, it would have been difficult for her to assimilate into the urban setting. "Miss Eva unfolded her own life and secret exploits to Mattie, and without realizing she was being questioned Mattie found herself talking about things that she had buried within her. The young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives to that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable" (Naylor 34). Naylor forms an immediate bond between the women; mother/daughter, youth/wisdom, mentor/mentee. She uses young and old, black and yellow, but any differences there would be/are completely dissolved by the need for community and survival. Griffin explains, "As a young mother, Mattie is nurtured in the home of Miss

Eva” (93). The older woman becomes a surrogate mother for her. In *Brewster Place* all visits to safe spaces are represented by a return to the mother. This serves as the best example of the way that the South in the city ensures the nurturing and survival of the migrant. Without nurturing, survival for the migrant women would be near impossible. Upon the first encounter with Mattie, Miss Eva could have potentially seen herself in the young girl and understood where she was. This allows her to be empathetic toward the confused and lost young woman, which caused her to respond by opening up her home. There is also a Southern charm and hospitality about Miss Eva that allowed Mattie to open up easily to her. This is reminiscent of her Southern past. In addition, Miss Eva may need Mattie just as much as Mattie needs Miss Eva. Miss Eva is an elderly woman raising a baby on her own after her son has abandoned the child. As Mattie comes into Miss Eva’s home she brings to her attention the untidiness of the house due to age and not being as able to manage both the home and baby. Mattie needs safe shelter for her and Basil. The relationship is not one sided, each woman needs something different but they find mutual support.

This relationship between Mattie and Miss Eva is foundational in the development of Mattie’s character. It shows up when she arrives on Brewster Place and becomes the anchor for most of the women there. Miss Eva and Mattie are anchors for one another. Naylor also foreshadows Mattie’s losing Basil as Miss Eva has lost her own son to the vices of the urban streets. Mattie clearly can see that Miss Eva has moved on in spite of the disappointment of her own child which does not hinder her from helping someone else in need. “Her parents went back to Tennessee and just left the baby. Neither of ‘em are worth the spit it takes to cuss ‘em” (Naylor 34). Miss Eva has lived



through abandonment and loss. There is no hint of hopefulness for her son's return but a learned moving on for survival. By her becoming a safe space for survival for Mattie, it is also survival for her.

Even with the support of Miss Eva, raising Basil in the North has been a challenge for Mattie. The challenge of raising children in the North is also seen in Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*. Inez Starling, a migrant from Florida to New York experienced not only the heartbreak of losing her beloved firstborn son Gerard to drugs, "The one thing she categorically loved most in this life, her firstborn, Gerard, had broken her heart with his addictions. The drugs had turned him into a stranger and stolen her son from her" (450). Inez did not possess the safe space of community to survive through the devastation she had faced in the North. Her sorrow would overtake her and manifest itself through her health. It did not appear that she had reconciled any of her relationships before passing away. Migration North for Inez proved to be more catastrophic than beneficial, which only resulted in economic stability for her and her husband George Starling. Mattie suffers the same loss of her own son but not to her detriment. After Mattie has given her son everything she possesses and reaping back nothing in return, achieving not love, companionship, or security, she resolves once settling into Brewster Place and losing everything that she has to move forward. Her nature is that of a nurturer, which is prominent throughout most of her relationships at Brewster Place. Mattie rarely speaks of Basil and does not show signs of mourning this loss. She also does not exhibit bitter resentment of another lost man in her life. Matus, in her article describes this separation and Mattie's reaction as she does not wish her son back: "Mattie's son Basil, who has also fled from Brewster Place, is contrastingly absent.

He is beyond hope, and Mattie does not dream of his return” (52). Her ability to let him go free’s her from the trauma of her past of being forcefully separated from all that she knew living in the South (Tennessee). Mattie understands releasing Basil does not give her the freedom to return back home but is a turning point to live another kind of freedom.

Mattie’s resolve is not to give up but to become a source of strength for other women on Brewster Place. It is through being a safe space for other women in the community that she survives. Mattie did not have the strength for herself, but she did have a reserve of strength for others. There is strength in the collective community. Without being strength for others and drawing strength from others, Mattie’s survival probably would not be possible. The collective community in itself is a safe space. At times, this safe space is compromised by external factors, but the resilience shown through kindness and love rehabilitates the broken places. An example of this is shown when Mattie is visiting one of the other women, Ciel, in the building and Ciel’s husband Eugene arrives. Both Mattie and Ciel are met with hostility upon his arrival and Mattie quickly gathers herself to leave. Sensing tension, Mattie offers to take Serena, Ciel’s toddler to her apartment for ice cream so the adults could talk and immediately Eugene becomes defensive and declines her offer. Eugene knows that his treatment of Ciel is under scrutiny by Mattie which is why they are both met with hostility upon his arrival. In a previous conversation, Ciel asks Mattie “You hate him, don’t you” (Naylor 95). Mattie’s response did not actually condemn Eugene but was a demonstration of love towards Ciel: “Naw, honey. Maybe I just loves you more” (Naylor 95). Naylor often emphasizes the need for sisterly love and support without judgement. This helps to build

a safe space birthed out of genuine concern, love, and empathy. In his book review of the novel, Gerald Kendrick, states “Naylor’s characters also develop close, nurturing relationships in light of their individual dilemmas and responsibilities” (390). Ciel has the responsibility of a toddler, a failing relationship, and the dilemma of recently having an abortion because her husband Eugene believed another child would only hold him back further. Mattie becomes the strength and support Ciel needs through this turbulent time in her life. Soon after Mattie leaves the apartment, Eugene breaks the news to Ciel that he is leaving for a job and she and Serena will not be accompanying him at this time.

Branzburg’s article “Seven Women and A Wall”, points out Naylor’s ability to speak to racial and sexual politics without overtly stating these issues. Branzburg also shows how Naylor “makes it clear that the socio-economic reality of black lives creates black men’s tendency to leave their lovers and children” (116). This is shown in Ciel’s story as she navigates motherhood and catering to the needs of her husband while compromising herself to secure this love. Ciel’s focus is completely off Serena, and she is left unattended leading to her tragic death. Right before the scream from Serena, Ciel is pulled by this love from Mattie, “Ciel began to feel the overpowering need to be near someone who loved her. I’ll get Serena and we’ll go visit Mattie now, she thought in a daze. Then they heard the scream from the kitchen” (Naylor 100-101). Her entire world is shattered within a matter of moments with the loss of her baby and the loss of Eugene. Almost in an immediate fight or flight response before the tragic death of her daughter, her thoughts shift to a place that is safe, Mattie. It is the community that pulls Ciel out of her destitute place. She is alive, however, dead inside after experiencing the loss of an aborted child, her toddler, and husband in such a short period of time. Mattie comes to

Ciel's rescue during her grief and rocks her back to life. "She sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her huge ebony arms. And she rocked"....Back and forth, back and forth-she had Ciel so tightly she could feel her young breasts flatten against the buttons of her dress"(Naylor 103). The community becomes the safe space that Ciel needs to bring her back to life. Without the safe space of community, Ciel may have not been able to survive such trauma. Maxine Montgomery in "The Fathomless Dream: Gloria Naylor's use of the Descent Motif in "The Women of Brewster Place" asserts "In the patently unique community of women that is Brewster Place, Ciel grieves freely" (8). She has the freedom without judgment to release all that is bottled up within her. It would be impossible for her to do this outside of this safe space, where she would be subject to societies judgment. The text also does not state whether or not Ciel was a migrant from the South; however, there is no indication of any family around to help nurture her back to strength during her most tragic moments in life. Ciel allows herself to be embraced by the community which allows her survival in this destitute moment. Mattie knew "the tears would end. And she would sleep. And morning would come"(Naylor 105) as she had also suffered similar loss.

Mattie is well acquainted with loss as she has lived and breathed it. She has lost love, lost protection of her family, and the loss of her only son. The circumstances surrounding her son from the beginning make her familiar with loss that could have been debilitating. Cultivating love with her child's father was out of the question as Mattie is raised in a strictly religious home and the conception of her son only brought shame upon her family which banished her immediately. She has lost the protection of her home and family. In Judith Branzburg's article "Seven Women and a Wall", she explores the lost

relationship between Mattie and her father: “Sam Michael, Mattie’s father, loves his daughter with all his heart. But he beats her almost to death, failing her and himself, when he feels both that he has not protected her from sex” (Branzburg 118). In addition, Mattie loses her son Basil to the vices of the city once he becomes an adult. Basil disappears after he has exhausted his mother’s means and she can no longer be of service to him. Once again, Mattie picks up the pieces and moves forward. As Ciel has lost everything, Mattie is able to stand in the gap and provide the sympathy, strength, and love she needs during her lowest moment. “They thought it some special sort of grief when she stopped eating and even drinking water unless forced to; her hair went uncombed and her body unbathed. But Ciel was not grieving for Serena. She was simply tired of hurting. And she was forced to slowly give up the life that God had refused to take from her” (Naylor 101). Life had tragically taken everything away from her except breath and Ciel no longer saw the value in living anymore. Ciel is exhausted by the fight through life and simply just empty. In her moment of despair, life has become meaningless. Mattie experienced the same loss as she knew that her son Basil had deserted her for good and left her empty. “Trembling, she sat down, put her head in her hands, and waited for the patient and crouching stillness just beyond the kitchen door” (Naylor 54). Although the two women’s responses were different, trauma caused both women to respond with flight. Mattie’s response is “trembling”, whereas Ciel’s response is the desire to leave this life. In the moment, neither woman is resolved to fight but to flight. The fight is not signaled until later when both Ciel and Mattie are revived by the community.

Unlike Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson does not yield so easily to the dead end of Brewster Place. In fact, Etta Mae and Mattie appear to be polar opposites. Their lives continue to cross as Etta Mae is searching for the fulfillment of a dream. Her dream is to be absolutely free from societal roles placed upon women and more specifically African American women. Naylor portrays Etta Mae Johnson as the owner of her own body, not restricted by the cultural norms of what defines womanhood. Etta Mae finds out through her search of freedom that “America wasn’t ready for her yet-not in 1937” (Naylor 60). She is also not interested in maintaining any remnant of the South. From her perspective, what the South has to offer is out of alignment with what she desires her life to be. This was a common attitude among some of the inhabitants North who had migrated into these urban spaces. “In each case, the protagonist feels that any retention of the South inhibits his (her) personal growth and development” (Griffin 124). Holding on to remnants of the South was synonymous with folk culture, which was in opposition to what would be considered high culture and to many was taking a step backward. To Etta Mae, respectability was the measuring stick for true womanhood which at times displaced her even in her own community. Her character also signals the shift from rural to urban, from traditional to modernity. Etta Mae never looks back South as this would be indicative of movement backwards, while modernity and feminist thought are about movement forward. Although she pushes against the community initially, it is the same community that is her safe space in her time of need. Naylor depicts Etta Mae as strong, independent, free-spirited, and in search of her American dream. Etta Mae does desire a romantic relationship; however, she also has to often fight against the oppressive forces of ingrained patriarchy of Western society. In this attempt for her portion of that dream,

Mattie and Etta Mae at a church service encounter a visiting Pastor who intrigues the congregation with his rhetoric and charm. Etta Mae envisions the potential for upward mobility by connecting herself with a man she perceives to have a form of power and financial stability. Imagining herself already as Pastor's wife, which would improve her status both socially and economically, she is persuaded by Reverend Woods for a one night stand. Mattie warns Etta Mae against the danger of connecting with Reverend Woods because she could see afar off the potential danger and disappointment her friend would face. Etta Mae pushes against Mattie and is offended, "Well, I'm finally gonna get that rest, and it's going to be with a man like Reverend Woods. And you and the rest of those slack-mouthed gossips on Brewster be damned" (Naylor 70)! It is not that Mattie does not believe Etta Mae is worthy of love and security, but she has seen her friend go down this road one too many times and knows where it will lead. Her connection with the Pastor gave her a glimpse of hope which most migrants from the South were looking to attain their piece of the American dream. Reverend Woods as a man, although oppressed in society due to race, holds the power relationship over Etta Mae and puts her away immediately after using her sexually. He understands that his gender socially yields a form of power over Etta Mae as a black woman. It is unclear as to why Etta Mae believed the story would turn out differently this time as she has been down the same road many times. Just as Mattie speculated, Etta Mae's dream is short-lived.

Many migrants moving from the South to the North would endure similar short-lived hope. There would be placed in front of migrants some form of hope but was often met with disappointment. Etta Mae's return to Brewster Place signals the defeat she fought hard against. Ironically, Brewster Place is where she is restored by the community.

Montgomery suggests that “Mattie offers the warmth and support which Etta Mae needs at this crucial moment, and they share an important common bond based on the disappointments which each has faced in romantic relationships” (7). Mattie without any judgment awaited Etta Mae’s return and both women laughed and cried through the night. Both women are connected by friendship to one another, familiarity, and location. Despite the fact that the two women may not always conduct their lives similarly, the security of their friendship allows the women to be completely free without the gaze from the outside world. Their bond may be the only security each woman knows. They do not have to pretend. Naylor also uses Mattie’s character as symbolism of the South as this was a familiar, warm, and loving place for Etta Mae. Although she would never return back to the South, Mattie served as a safe space. What could have been complete defeat turned into restoration and a glimpse of hope. If the community had not been awaiting her return, defeat would have been the inevitable and survival unlikely due to frustration and disillusionment.

Etta Mae believed if she can change her status as married and her class economically, this would solve her issues. This lesson is seen through the life of Alice Foster in *The Warmth of Other Suns* as she is never able to obtain true freedom from patriarchy and her class only helped her economically. Caught in between a tug of war between her father, Rufus E. Clement and her husband Robert Pershing Foster it becomes nearly impossible to escape the oppression of either. A migrant from Atlanta, GA where her father is the President of Atlanta University, she relocates to Los Angeles where her husband has set up a medical practice. In the text, it never reveals if Alice established a close knit community. It appears that most of her interactions were superficial as her and



her husband were established socialites in Los Angeles. At age 54, Foster became ill and died of cancer. “Alice, who had married him to the unspoken disappointment of her upper-crust parents, had followed him to Austria and Los Angeles, and Vegas, allowed herself to be his mannequin and muse, given legitimacy to his aspirations and become his ticket to high society, which he both coveted and resented” (445). In an article in the “Pittsburg Courier”, it points out that Foster was connected to numerous organizations such as Spelman alumni, and the National NAACP, the L.A. chapter of the Links; however, in her personal life she did not possess the connection to others that would allow her a safe space. She is noted as one of the “most prominent civic and social figures” (Wilkerson 445) but was confined to the expectations of the men in her life. One of the migrant women by the name of Jacqueline Joan Johnson that Wilkerson had the opportunity to interview stated “It occurred to me that no matter where I lived, geography could not save me” (Wilkerson 445). This held true for Foster as geography, improved economic status and class did not aid in her survival.

Although the women of Brewster Place have one another in the community, it was not enough to tear down the oppressive social order causing their brokenness in the first place. Migration North was not a guarantee to full rights as an American citizen, which the women recognized once their dreams were left unfulfilled. The loss was just as great; it only showed up differently, but by building safe spaces and surrounding one another with community, they were able to survive through the most difficult times in their lives. If it was not for these safe spaces, more than likely, survival would not be possible.

### CHAPTER 3

#### DEAD END STREETS

The confinement of the street is synonymous with the treatment of African Americans as they migrated North, East, and West. African American women such as the protagonist Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's *The Street* often resisted the detrimental effects of urbanization. Female protagonists most often find urban spaces harmful and dangerous, as this is apparent in all three texts: *The Women of Brewster Place*, *The Street*, and *Jazz*. These urban spaces in many cases become a threat to their dreams and physical bodies. Robin Lucy's article, "Fables of the Reconstruction: Black Women on the Domestic Front In Ann Petry's World War II Fiction" describes this hostility as "a private war" against black women and children" (9). Survival in these environments are generally attained through strong connections and bonds and some form of community which provides a safe space. Lutie is determined to keep possession of her own body and dreams in the hostile environment of the street but she also often rejects the safe spaces available to her. Farrah Griffin describes this push for possession, argues that, "The contest over space is symbolic of the larger contest over black bodies. Within these spaces, a struggle ensues in which the migrant tries to resist efforts to dominate him or her" (102). It becomes increasingly difficult to manage through the challenges of being both African American and a woman; however, Lutie fights to push herself forward in spite of the opposition, facing the same heartbreak and disappointment as Mattie in *The Women of Brewster Place*, however, she does

not depend on any safe spaces in order to secure her survival. Given the history of Black women in America, she is fully aware of her need to be the master over her own body and fate.

The economic hold in America on African Americans, particularly women, and its excessive force physically, economically, and mentally keeps African Americans in a certain place or what is commonly referred to as “their place”. Lucy points out that Petry “depicted Harlem as an urban war zone, subject to control through the threat of violence from without and wracked by violence, often between men and women, within. What drives this violence is what I will call a genocidal economics: forms of capitalist economic and social organization which present a physical threat to the community, which deny African Americans access to the resources which ensure survival” (11). In the text Lutie describes this as “the North’s lynch mobs.... The method big cities used to keep Negroes in their place” (Petry 323). Petry uses this to expose the reality through Lutie’s experience that not one place is better than the other, not North or South. Each has its own form of a lynch mob, aiming to snatch the very life away from the African American community, both through an act of violence. The North’s use of economic deprivation and confined space eventually produces violence. Although the North did not employ Jim Crow laws and lynching to maintain control over African Americans, there were silent systems put into place to make certain progress was almost nearly impossible. It is the subtle aggressions in the North that keep the majority underemployed, overworked, undereducated, and living at or below the poverty line.

A primary example of such systemic microaggressions is shown in Ida Mae Gladney’s migration story in *The Warmth of Other Suns*. Through Wilkerson’s interview with Mrs. Gladney, she exposes the harsh treatment of African Americans in cities such as Chicago as they migrated North. There were only a limited amount of neighborhoods and housing available for

African American migrants and most of those spaces suffered from neglect of the city and abject poverty. “The color line restricted them to the oldest housing in the least desirable section of town no matter what their class, but they had tried to make the best of it and had created a world within a world for themselves” (Wilkerson 287). It was the “world within a world” that created a safe space of survival for many. Unlike Lutie, Mrs. Gladney was able to move into a better neighborhood and find safe space within her children and church; however, as a result of white flight and the city no longer providing resources for the upkeep of the neighborhood, it unfortunately became a crime ridden danger zone. Creating this “world within the world” was pivotal in Ida Mae Gladney’s survival as a migrant. She reported that although there were drug dealers loitering outside of her home, they always looked out for and respected her. Mrs. Gladney, being an older woman, therefore considered a matriarch in her community, could have afforded her this respect and protection, however, this is not offered to Lutie on the street.

Lutie focuses on fighting her way to not only survive but to build a better life for herself and her son Bub. Her options for employment are limited as most opportunities for African American women are in the domestic space. Economically, it is difficult for women who are restricted to domestic employment to move into middle-class America. Low wages in the domestic space structurally prevent any movement forward. Women work, Patricia Hill Collins, argues, not to duplicate middle-class women’s cult of domesticity but....in order to return the value of their labor to their families”(Collins 54-55). Lutie is committed to escaping domesticity as a means of livelihood as she understands that domestic employment will never produce the middle-class life she desires for her and Bub. The limitations to the type of employment offered to her as an African American woman, she understands, are a trap meant to impede her progress and upward mobility. Lutie is committed to doing this by uprightness, keeping her moral

standards, and hard work outside of the domestic sphere. She is also unwilling to compromise her standards by giving someone else possession over her body which is a constant source of strife throughout the novel. Her value system is in alignment with middle-class America, specifically the white middle class, which values the domesticity and chastity of white women. It is difficult for Lutie to obtain this status due to the stereotypes and limitations imposed upon Black women. What she instead sees around her is demoralization as the result of discriminatory practices and the racism both visible and invisible prevalent in American society.

Racial and gender oppression do not keep Lutie from dreaming and seeking escape from her circumstances; however, it does hinder the realization of her dreams. It has already been prescribed to Lutie her place in white American society as an immoral, over-sexualized being to be used at the discretion of any that desire to indulge. This is seen throughout the novel specifically beginning with Lutie's interaction with the Chandlers, a white family whom she is employed by as a live-in domestic worker. Lutie is not seen by the Chandlers as an individual, but as the dominant society had already prescribed. "It was like the Chandler's and their friends in Connecticut, who looked at her and didn't see her, but saw instead a wench with no morals who would be easy to come by" (Petry 198). Three things make Lutie a target: she is attractive, African American and a woman. Traditionally, Lutie would be unseen as a domestic worker in the Chandlers home; however, she is attractive, posing a potential threat to Mrs. Chandler. Because Lutie is working in Connecticut during the week, this marks the beginning of her being taken away from any physical safe space and community she would be familiar with. For African American women the community at times serves as the support system to counter what is happening as a result of racism, class, and gender discrimination. Lutie's employment with the Chandlers not only takes her away from her husband, son, and father, but it also removes her

from anything resembling the community she has known. “Lutie’s employment with the Chandlers takes her out of the domestic environment of her own family while it isolates her from other workers, and during the four subsequent years that Lutie works in a laundry and goes to secretarial school at night, “she had lost track of all her friends” (Petry 76). This, too, conditions her to continue her life in isolation from her community.

Lutie being displaced from her own home and her community further makes her a target of America’s capitalism on the black woman’s body. She is displaced from her home and community to provide for her family. This diminishes her ability to participate in building and maintaining any recognizable safe space. There are no friends, family, or loving familiar faces to combat the hostility she encounters in the Chandler household. This displacement is common as many African American women were forced to either spend most of their time taking care of white households for long laborious hours or taken away completely during the week as a live-in to ensure these homes operated efficiently as in Lutie’s case. In turn, many times their own homes suffered. During Lutie’s employment with the Chandlers, she is warned early on by a local immigrant store owner in her community, Mrs. Pizzini that “It’s best that the man do the work when the babies are young. Not good for the woman to work when she’s young. Not good for the man” (Petry 33). The difference between Lutie and Mrs. Pizzini is that although Mrs. Pizzini is a European immigrant, her proximity to whiteness allows her to assimilate easily into white just by the change of a name or accent, whereas Lutie cannot change the color of her skin. Jim, Lutie’s husband has given up all hope of securing gainful employment and is strategically made invisible by Petry. After he walks out on Lutie for another woman, Jim never appears again in the text. His giving up can also be viewed as retaliation against black women as he

blames Lutie and her father for losing their foster children, bringing stable income into their home.

Lutie, as with many African American women, feels indebted to her family and does all that she can to make sure they are provided for, even if it means being away from her family and community. Jim's misplaced frustration and Lutie's absence while away to provide for their family, eventually leads to the family's demise. After finding out about Jim's infidelity, Lutie has been left with no choice to fend for herself and Bub. It is difficult for Lutie to trust in anyone and build any safe spaces after her separation from Jim. She understands that it is a result of racial economics and not necessarily the inhabitants in the urban spaces causing the demise of people and community. Lutie observes, "That's what wrong. We don't have time enough or money enough to live like other people because the women have to work until they become drudges and the men stand by idle" (Petry 186). The frustration Lutie is experiencing is not with African American men or the community as much as she is enraged by systematic racism causing the problem of economic disparity and marginalization. The other people she is referring to are those that can identify themselves as white. Whether it is an American born or immigrant of European descent, the opportunities available are not the same. The experiences for women of European descent like Mrs. Pizzini from Lutie's observation are on completely opposite sides of the spectrum. The Chandler's, Mrs. Chandler's friends, and Mrs. Pizzini do not come up against nearly the opposition Lutie has faced. They are afforded protections Lutie will never know. Although Chandler's home may have provided a physical safe space for Lutie, it is destructive for her family both socially and economically.

While it can be argued that Lutie's father, Pop's home is a toxic environment, it does provide some form of safe space. Seeking an escape from her father's home and his

rambunctious girlfriend whom she viewed as a bad influence on Bub, Lutie moves to the street, which further isolates her from any form of community and safe space. The building and apartment in itself is a place of limitation and confinement from which Lutie is attempting to escape. Lutie observes the space and its condition “One thing about it the rent wouldn’t be very much. It couldn’t be for a place like this. Tiny hall. Bathroom on the right, kitchen straight ahead; living room to the left of the hall and you had to go through the living room to get to the bedroom. The whole apartment would fit very neatly into just one good-sized room”(Petry 16). Affordability and being in her own controlled space lead Lutie to the decision to take the apartment without counting the cost of other factors. The apartment has the appearance of some form of progress for Lutie but from her own observation is really only a good-sized room disguised as something more. It is an allusion leading to a trap. Instead of listening to the caution in her mind through her grandmother’s ancestral voice, Lutie dismisses what could have potentially saved her and Bub. “Granny would have said, ‘Nothin’ but evil, child. Some folks so full of it, you can feel it comin’ at you oozin’ right out of their skins’. She didn’t believe things like that”(Petry 18). This is Lutie’s initial instinct when she encounters the building Super as he is showing her the apartment. Granny’s voice and wisdom is another safe space that Lutie rejected. The safe space although not a physical space would, however, have served as a guide leading her away from danger. Instead of listening to the voice of Granny, she is more concerned that the apartment is a place she can afford. Listening to the voice of Granny could have potentially provided a safe space for her and Bub’s survival.

Granny is a representation of what urban dwellers viewed as folk culture. People moving from the South to these urban centers were often viewed as backwards, superstitious and country, as opposed to the fast, modernized ways of the North. Petry shows through Lutie’s rejection of



Granny, the North's rejection of Southern culture. Farrah Griffin explains that "In *The Street*, Petry privileges the Grandmother's voice over the written words of Benjamin Franklin.

However, her protagonist, Lutie, does not" (114). Lutie does not see her grandmother's southern ways and voice as progressive but as a direct contrast to the sophisticated progression of the North she is attempting to fully assimilate into. Although Petry does not fully romanticize the South either, she does extract the value in what is viewed as folk wisdom. Similar to Petry's ideology, Ida Mae Gladney in Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* embraces the benefits of living in the North, yet also clings onto her Southern roots. "She decided to keep the things that made her feel like home deep within herself, where nobody could judge her, and inside the walls of their kitchenette apartment where she made turnip greens and peach cobbler and sweet potato pie flecked with nutmeg and sang spirituals like in Mississippi as often as she liked" (Wilkerson 292). By her holding onto her roots from the South in the North allowed Gladney to be grounded and live within that safe space. These spaces provide protection from the outside world that would otherwise engulf its rejected inhabitants.

Predators in all forms such as the Super, Junto, and Mrs. Hedges linger around the street and hone in immediately on Lutie. Not only is the apartment unsafe, but the neighborhood is unsafe for her and Bub. She is not protected from anyone or anything, making her and Bub an open target. Lutie is also put off by the urban street and has no desire to build any safe space around her. It is in deplorable condition as the inhabitants sprawled out in any open space on the street: "And because the people took to sleeping on rooftops and fire escapes and park benches, the street also became a great outdoor bedroom" (Petry 142). Her idea of safety is to live only on the street and away from what would be her community. The street only serves as a temporary place where she can launch her dreams of financial security. This is a direct contrast from Mattie

in *The Women of Brewster Place* who found solace in the community at Brewster Place and viewed it more as a permanent place. The only safe place that Lutie has developed is internally, Benjamin Franklin's autobiography being her model of success and her own dreams. She can only see success as material, which is why she chooses to follow the model of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography over her grandmother's ancestral voice. Hard working is not the antidote for success as it was for Benjamin Franklin. He is both white and male, two places of privilege that Lutie is not privy to. It is unfortunate that Lutie does not recognize until her dead end that the safest space she has ever inhabited was with Granny. In the poem "Kitchenette Building" by Gwendolyn Brooks, it describes the juxtaposition between living in these small, confined, master planned for destruction spaces, but also carrying the dream of economic and social liberation and success. The first stanza describes both living within the two: the dream and confinement. "We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan/ Grayed in and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, Not strong/ Like "rent", "feed your family", "satisfy a man."(Brooks). This shows the cross between the feeling of hope producing excitement and day to day realities caused by the pressures of life. The demands of reality can overpower the "giddy sound" of hope and dreaming for something much better. Lutie is situated between the dream and confinement as she is determined to walk out her strategy for success alienated from the safe spaces available to her.

Petry uses not only the Chandlers, specifically Mrs. Chandler and her friends but also Junto, the landlord and bar owner as a representation of the plantation model/owner who believe because of their whiteness, Lutie is simply a female black body to be consumed to solely attend to their needs. Mrs. Hedges, the brothel owner, and Junto's business partner, tells the Super of the building "There ain't no point in you gettin' het up over her. She's marked down for

someone else” (Petty 90). Specifically because of Junto’s status as a white male, he believes that he has access to her sexually and has control over her destiny. Lutie is automatically “marked” or targeted. She is by Junto’s calculation living in one of his buildings and partaking in his bar, thereby relegating her as his property to use at his own discretion. The irony about the advice Mrs. Hedges has suggested to the Super is that she is a Black woman herself attempting to secure the sexual transaction of another Black woman, and therefore participating in the cycle of oppression for African American women. Mrs. Hedges devalues Lutie by stating she is “marked down.” Her actions and words suggest that Lutie has to settle for what she can get and is not worthy as a Black woman to obtain the American dream outside of selling her body for upward financial mobility and security. Marked down also suggests being discounted from the original price and value. Lutie cannot participate in society as fully valued or at her true cost because as a black women she is only valued as “marked down.” Mrs. Hedges, herself, is unable to participate in the society fully valued, therefore she only sees the mirror of herself in Lutie causing her to devalue another Black woman. Similarly, in Wilkerson’s text *Ida Mae Gladney* experiences unwanted and unsolicited sexual advances from an employer as she fills in for another domestic worker. Gladney, like Lutie stands her ground against the sexual advances. What stands out here, as in Lutie’s case also is another black woman plays a role in placing her in a position where her body is sexually violated. The woman Gladney was filling in for did not warn her of the dangers of the assignment. This woman devalues herself for monetary gain and expects Gladney to do the same. Neither Gladney, nor Lutie succumb to being “marked down.”

Because Lutie has chosen not to bring her community, such as her father, into this space, this only adds to her being marked as a target for sexual predators and violence towards Black women. Although limited, her father could have potentially provided a form of protection, even

if only a deterrent from those who viewed her only as prey. Griffin states that “At times, the migrants themselves engage in acts of self-discipline. Often in their very attempts to resist they have so internalized the effects of the power that represses them that they become complicit in their own subjugation” (102). Lutie believes that it is her self-discipline and not any reliance on her safe spaces that will bring her into a place of success. She rejects the ways of her father and never brings him into this space, which in turn reaps a negative consequence. It is difficult for her to see that her self-discipline and safe spaces go hand in hand to help aid her in her journey. From her perspective, his flaws outweigh his contributions to her life.

Although Lutie’s father is a victim of the racial inequities causing him to a downward spiral into the vicious cycle of alcoholism and underemployment, he could still serve as a safe space for her. In addition, as a result of her rejection of her father in this space, unknown to her she has brought herself under the control of the street. There is no safe space on the street. Petry uses Junto’s subtle approach to expose the systems put into place in American society, specifically in the North that continue to oppress and impede African American progress. He never directly approaches Lutie, however, observes her every move, yet keeping his distance so that she does not necessarily notice him. Most of Lutie’s interactions with the street in one form or another are always connected to Junto. Therefore Junto becomes synonymous with the restrictive systems put into place that keep African Americans confined. Lutie observes, “In every direction, anywhere one turned, there was always the implantable figure of a white man blocking the way, so that it was impossible to escape” (Petry 315). The system is not at all designed to promote socio-economic stability, but a negative dependence that many times causes self-destructive or intra-racial strife leading to destruction. An example of this is Junto’s use of both Boots and Mrs. Hedges as overseers to do his bidding for Lutie to ensnare her into this

brutal trap. If Lutie was to succumb to his advances, she would always be dependent upon using her body sexually for financial gain, which would eventually cause her demoralization and would cause her to self-destruct. Both Boots and Mrs. Hedges are African American and should be a safe space for Lutie, Petry, however, uses both to show the need for survival being so great that others who are being oppressed in this system are being used as tools to maintain this system of marginalization and oppression. She is commodified by both Mrs. Hedges and Boots for their own financial security and advancement. Unfortunately, neither Boots nor Mrs. Hedges realize that their actions towards Lutie are actually causing their own continued oppression as they are partakers in this demoralizing cycle. Without the help of Boots and Mrs. Hedges, Junto would not be able to operate, nor would he be successful.

The social construct of gender is also evident as a repressive tool to confine African American women. Mrs. Hedges, Boots, and Junto all seek to exploit Lutie by casting her into the stereotypical representation of African American women as a “whore” or sexually promiscuous. Lutie’s father is not visible on the street to serve as a protector, nor does she listen to her grandmother’s ancestral voice of reason to warn her of the danger in all three of these characters. She is fighting against two worlds: the white world and the world of misogyny. Her distance from both of these safe spaces leave her vulnerable to the initially subtle and eventual overt attack pulling her into a cycle of self-destruction. After Boots attempts to rape Lutie and pass her along to be raped by Junto, not only does she defend herself physically but also all of her life frustration explodes in that moment. Petry strategically shows the eventual explosion of those who have been subjected to the lack of progress and running in a never ending circle of destruction:

A lifetime of pent-up resentment went into the blows. Even after he lay motionless, she kept striking him, not thinking about him, not even seeing him. First she was venting her rage against the dirty, crowded street.....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 (Petry 450).

Sadly, Lutie only is able to destroy the manifestation of structural oppression, but not the root cause. Junto, symbolically is the representation of white supremacy and misogyny in American society. The street that Lutie meant to help move her forward is the sword which causes her downfall.

Both Lutie and Mrs. Hedges are a part of the massive movement North into urbanized epicenters. Although Lutie is not from the South as Mrs. Hedges is, the environment created in the North affected both women as a result of systematic racism. This movement North changed the landscape of America and its new inhabitants. Jacqueline Bryant in her essay, "Postures of Resistance in Ann Petry's *The Street* " observes in Petry's writing that "the environment debilitates and challenges its inhabitants, Petry's characters" (444). Those dwelling in the condition of debilitated streets and economic oppression would eventually become weakened by their circumstances. Women such as Mrs. Hedges, who has migrated from the South, finds herself becoming one of those that eventually becomes a negative byproduct of the street. Mrs. Hedges methods for survival is the degradation and exploitation of women of her own race. Upon her arrival in Harlem, she does not see the open arms of opportunity that she envisions and quickly can assess what options for survival are available to African American women. Her limitations/confinement is heightened as she survives a house fire. The domestic (being a wife or working in middle/upper class whites' homes) sphere doors have been closed as she is now

unable to fulfill this role society has limited her to. As a result, Mrs. Hedges cannot secure being a wife and mother to her own family, nor can she work as domestic help. She connects with Junto early in her arrival in the North and the two things he possesses that she does not are white and male. Mrs. Hedges is African American and female. Junto, being both white and male gives him the leverage to begin with nothing and build something without any oppressive forces such as race and gender that would keep him confined to a certain space and place. Junto is able to become landlord and business owner all through the foresight and business acumen of Mrs. Hedges. It was in fact her idea for Junto to open a club to provide an escape to her oppressed race. Because Mrs. Hedges is both a woman and African American, she is confined to sharing ideas (which is a resource) with Junto, making only a fraction of the proceeds. She survives in the Northern by becoming a part of the oppression and sexual exploitation of black women. Mrs. Hedges avoids the extreme harshness of the street by participating in upholding white supremacy and oppression by subjecting black women to the sexual prowess of those in power. She, in turn, is protected by the system that is undermining and tearing apart her community. The police department came to her aid quickly when the Super threatens to expose her business. Petry uses the Super's limited understanding of the protection she has been afforded by the power structures so that the inhabitants will eventually self-destruct. The brothel is an idea birthed out of her own oppression and limitations and seeing the need of others for an escape from their current reality. Mrs. Hedges, like Boots, are only an extension of the system put in place in an attempt to destroy the African American communities in the North. This arises as migrant women such as Mrs. Hedges oftentimes found it difficult to obtain gainful employment as the intersections of race and gender worked against them. Scholars of the Great Migration found, "Throughout the North and West, black women migrants were having the hardest time finding work of all the people pouring

into the big cities, harder than Polish and Serbian immigrants to Chicago, harder than Italian and Jewish immigrants to New York, harder than Mexican and Chinese immigrants of with gender in California. They were literally at the bottom of the economic hierarchy of the urban North"(Wilkerson 333). Mrs. Hedges could have easily fallen into this category and may not have seen a better way outside of being domestic help or becoming a prostitute her self. For African American women the strain of seeking employment, as they had to compete with those who were already in the North, other migrants flooding in from the South, and European migrants posed a great challenge.

Petry's novel is an account of her own observations being from a fairly middle class home where both of her parents worked as professionals. In many instances, Petry was shielded from the toxic racism prevalent throughout most of the country. After being married and moving to Harlem, this is where she discovered the atrocities inflicted upon African American women and the need to fight for and defend themselves. What is important to note is that Petry shows how Lutie is overtaken by the street as she is a victim of sexual violence towards women, limited economic opportunities, and a system that has ensnared her only son.. The violence she has attempted to leave behind, traps her and eventually leads to her demise. It is also apparent that the safe spaces of her grandmother's ancestral voice, and remaining connected to her father could have potentially saved her from destruction.



## CHAPTER 4

### IMPROBABLE SAFE SPACES

Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is centered around a migrant couple from the South, Joe and Violet Trace, whose world disrupts an entire community. The title *Jazz*, referring to jazz music is the point of reference through which the text is written. One of the main components of jazz is the art of improvisation where there are no rules and just a creative flow of music without any restrictions. For the jazz musician, improvisation is absolute freedom. The Great Migration of African Americans from the South into the North can be viewed as an improvisation; a search for absolute freedom. In many jazz compositions, pain and despair can be felt, but hope and jubilation can be detected. In Morrison's *Jazz*, similar to jazz musicians, each character is a different instrument to produce a collective sound. The sounds played together in unison create space for freedom and community. When an instrument is out of tune, the sound is noticeable to everyone playing and listening. It is up to not only the individual to correct the sound, but the collective group to help get the sound in sync with the other instruments. A key feature in Morrison's text is that when a character is off pitch, he or she must reach back into their past to identify the source of their blues in order to receive redemption.

The voice of the narrator represents both southern culture and the oral traditions of storytelling, while also showcasing what is new, progressive, and urban. Therefore, all

of the voices of the migrants and their stories operate in a chorus bringing forth the sound of the rural South and urban North. Just as the genre of jazz has its roots derived from southern culture, it takes shape into something new as it evolves in the north. The characters in *Jazz* operate in the same way.

A blending of voices is seen throughout as multiple character's migration stories are shared. The individual stories represent the solo portions of the performance (or jam session) to showcase their unique voice, but each instrument and its sound is vital for the collective voice, community, and story. Morrison uses an unnamed narrator in the text brings all of the sounds or voices into the collective. This narrator has a deep affinity for the city and understands its impact on the migrant experience. "I'm crazy about this City.....A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things" (Morrison 7). The city represents all that is possible, but unknown to its new inhabitants, there are invisible barriers. Not the visible barriers that migrants were accustomed to in the South. The invisible barriers or restrictions are not seen; however, are felt through their lived experiences. African American women, specifically, encounter these barriers in the city because of race and gender. An example of this is shown in Chapter 2, where Petry's protagonist Luties can not visually see the root cause of her economic barriers; but she lives them. Demoralization surrounds her not because of the people she lives among, but the invisible barriers of the city. Therefore, conflict occurs between possibility and intentional restrictions. Although the narrator in *Jazz* is in love with the city, she is keenly aware of its limitations, specifically for Black women. Violet has to work through the trauma of her past in the South, while navigating through the invisible barriers of the city. This is only possible as Violet finds community and a safe space to find freedom.

An almost stolen baby, sleeping in the bed with a baby doll (as an adult), sitting down in the middle of a New York street, and the slashing of a dead girl's face at a funeral are all indicators of a character potentially being more than out of tune. *Jazz* begins as the narrator begins to tell the story of Violet Trace and what is referred to as "cracks." "I call them cracks because that is what they were"(Morrison 22). These "cracks" potentially point to a larger issue within Violet, as her behavior exposes more than simply being out of tune. Metaphorically, like a vinyl record with a crack, it can be seen as irreparable. In order for the record to effectively play and produce sound, the needle of the turntable must be able to connect and revolve. It is difficult for a needle to move past a crack to create any form of sound. Minor imperfections including scratches and knicks on the perimeter of the record will still be able to play music; however, it is unlikely to produce any sound and consistently revolve around the turntable with a crack.

Thus the text begins at the Salem Women's Club, where Violet's name is mentioned as one in the community that is in need of assistance; however, she is immediately denied assistance as the support she needs is out of their scope of aid.

Regardless of the grief Violet caused, her name was brought up at the January meeting of the Salem Women's Club as someone needing assistance, but it was voted down because only prayer-not money-could help her now, because she had a more or less able husband (who needed to stop feeling sorry for himself), and because a man and his family on 134th Street had lost everything in a fire. The Club mobilized itself to come to the burnt out family's aid and left Violet to figure out on her own what the matter was and how to fix it (Morrison 4).

In urban centers, where migrants from the South generally moved, oftentimes there was no biological family to support and provide assistance. When they were unable to provide for themselves and their families, benevolent societies, such as the Salem Women's Club would provide aid to those in need. These societies pre-date the Emancipation Proclamation and came into existence during the late 1700s in Northern cities where there were free black communities. The societies began as the small number of free blacks recognized the need to help one another, and this help would have to come in the form of mutual aid. They became one of the most widespread types of associations for African Americans in many Northern states such as Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New York, Rhode Island, and New Jersey. These benevolent associations understood that even limited success would require mutual cooperation and solidarity in an alien New World.

The migrant women in Morrison's text, as in the fictions of Naylor and Petry experience several key factors that are distinctively unique to African American migrant women, including intra-racial misogyny, economic barriers due to both race and gender, and sexual violence towards women. Because benevolent societies are communal and provide safe spaces, they served to circumvent the issues African American migrant women would face. These safe spaces provide a form of protection from the outside world; it is a place where healing can occur; and they are spaces that are non-performative. In Chapter 1, Miss Eva is a safe space for Mattie Micheal and Mattie Micheal becomes a safe space for both Ciel and Etta Mae. In Chapter 2, Lutie rejects the safe spaces of her father, grandmother's ancestral voice, and friends from her past. Due to Violet's deviant behavior, she is automatically ostracized from the community. Not

only does the Salem Women's Club allude to her often out-of-the-ordinary behavior, but also her husband is a working man most of the time and therefore there is no need for any kind of financial assistance. Many women, especially if they were unmarried, who migrated from the South were subjected to urban poverty, however, Violet did not fall into this category. There is never any indication that Violet's problem can be resolved through monetary assistance; this problem she has is beyond their scope of aid and a problem that she alone would have to work out on her own. Violet's "cracks" appeared to be beyond the Salem Women's Clubs' repair. "Regardless of the grief Violet caused" indicates that although Violet's behavior has caused even more grief, there is a slight consideration for her. It could also signal that Violet showed no regard to the dead young girl and her family, but her actions demand some kind of attention. Their main suggestion is that her husband, Joe Trace, needed to come out of his mourning and simply go back to work to continue to provide for his home as he had done in the past before one of Violet's most visible cracks in the community; the slashing of her husband's mistress dead corpse during her funeral. In addition, this mourning Joe has is self-inflicted as he is rejected by his 17-year-old mistress and decides to hunt and kill her. Violet only exacerbates an already problematic issue. The benevolent society does not offer financial assistance nor emotional support to Violet whose husband is not only involved in an extramarital affair with a minor but also a murderer of that same mistress. Unfortunately, as a result of Violet's peculiar behavior, this only isolates her more than she already has due to prior cracks. The benevolent association does not consider Violet's blues and do not extend to her a place for healing. They move on quickly, as with the pace of a city where they believe their time and funds will be better appropriated to the family on 134th Street.

Joe and Violet leave Vesper County, Virginia for many of the same reasons most other migrants fled the South. “The wave of black people running from want and violence crested in the 1870s; the ‘80s; the ‘90s but was a steady stream in 1906 when Joe and Violet joined in”(Morrison 33). In many instances, migrants were able to connect with other family or friends who had already migrated into the North, West, and Midwest. Their connections in some cases would ease their transition into the new world. It did not remove external barriers and obstacles placed before them, but these connections did create opportunities for safe spaces to be developed. Survival would be next to impossible without the support of the collective community and safe spaces being available. Instead of connecting with the familiar, Violet isolates herself from others. She is not alienated from the community because they reject her, but because she does not invite them into her own intimate space. It could be possible that Violet does not connect with anyone from the South in an attempt to forget her life back in Vesper County. She may be avoiding any remnant as she does not want to remember the painful moments from her past in the South. Her inability to build any community for Violet is linked to the past she left behind in Vesper County, Virginia. She was born only about 10 years after the enslaved had become emancipated, therefore many African Americans living in the South were still closely connected to the system of enslavement. An example of this is shown in True Belle, Violet’s grandmother. In Violet’s past in the South, True Belle serves as a savior in the text as she comes to redeem her family after her daughter Rose Dear has committed suicide, leaving behind her children. Because True Belle has raised her previous enslavers’ grandson, Golden Gray, who is of mixed heritage, both black and white, he is her standard of perfection. This standard of perfection is engrained in

Violet's mind once her grandmother rescues their family. It is also a complicated standard of perfection as Golden Gray eventually rejects True Belle once he learns that he has African blood within him. The cracks in Violet symbolize something within her is missing or needs to be filled in, therefore, she searches to fill this void. The crack exposes her lack and is attached to Violet's memory. When Violet places herself up against this standard of perceived perfection by True Belle, the standard is impossible for Violet to measure up to. Now Violet has to claim a Golden Gray, which she discovers in Joe. Because she claims Joe for herself, Violet now has a false claim to fulfill what she is lacking. Therefore, Joe is all she values, even over her own self. And due to this being only a false fulfillment, she eventually closes herself off from him in private. She has alienated herself in both the public and private space, which is what causes her to become at times dangerous, delirious, and disconnected from others. Carolyn M. Jones in "Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*" shares in an interview Gloria Naylor had with Toni Morrison that Violet is "a woman loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself" (482). Violet watched her own grandmother love something over her own self, even if what she loved did not reciprocate her love once he discovered his true identity. Violet only awakens to her cracks once Joe not just has a mistress, but deeply mourns her death. It is not until this incident that she can become self-reflective and recognizes that she is out of tune.

It is not clear if Violet loves the city as the narrator does; however, it is clear that she is displaced in the city. She does not necessarily embrace the North or its inhabitants, nor does she attempt to connect with anything familiar to the South or those who like her

have also emigrated into the North. Although Violet is not immigrating to a new country, where language and social customs would be an obstacle, her transition into the city may have been much easier if she did not disconnect from her roots in the South. Possibly, some of her cracks could have been avoided if she was in a protected space. Specifically, connecting with others from the South due to the familiarity could have been beneficial for her. For example, migrants such as Ida Mae Gladney in Wilkerson's, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, had the opportunity to connect with a family from their hometown in Mississippi, the Carter's, once they arrived in the Midwest. "Ida Mae and George would move to the Pearson plantation, and things would unfold in such a way that Ida Mae would eventually follow the Carters up north. Although she didn't see how, the Carter migration was a signal to Ida Mae that there was, in fact, a window out of the asylum"(Wilkerson 35). The Carters and other migrants from Mississippi would make the transition into the North not as foreign as those who did not know anyone. These connections also made it easier to build safe spaces as in the case of Etta Mae and Mattie Michael in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Migrants were also viewed as outsiders to both the white world and an outsider to the black world. "She soon learned that the colored people who had gotten there before her and had assimilated to the city didn't look too kindly upon her innocent country ways"(Wilkerson 287). Ida Mae Gladney learned quickly that her southern folk ways were frowned upon by both the northern-born blacks and those from the south who had already assimilated into urban life. For those who had already assimilated into the north, southern culture was perceived as backward and they too wanted to fit into the new world. Violet on the other hand has arrived at her new destination and makes no effort to connect with anything or anyone familiar to her. She



has no desire to connect with her Southern roots. Violet does not view connection to others from the South or North as a necessity for her survival. While her lack of building a safe space in community is not the sole reason for her “cracks”, the isolation from others in the new space does not help. One of the detrimental effects of her not being a part of any safe space, she is not able to perceive that she is out of tune (or off pitch). The narrator shows how Violet actually views herself and her place in the world, “She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things; customers and acquaintances are encountered, places entered. But she does not see herself doing these things”(Morrison 22). In the public and private space, she does not recognize the mental slips, which turn into bizarre actions. From her point of view, it is not her performing these acts, but “She sees them being done” (Morrison 22). For example, the narrator points to an incident where Violet has a mental slip, “Violet isn’t paying attention she stumbles onto the cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street” (Morrison 23). It is the “cracks” that reveal to all of the others around her that she is not in sync with the rest of the improvisation and because she has alienated herself, the community is not willing to create space for her to heal.

Morrison in the text points to the importance of human community and how it relates to living in tune with the self. It is clear that Violet perceives building community and connecting with other women as more detrimental to her well-being than as advantageous. Women from Violet’s point of view are those who cause disruption in her life. “Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down to nothing. It’s these little

hungry girls acting like women"(Morrison 14). One thing that is interesting about her assertion is that her own father was absent from her childhood most of the time. When her father did arrive prior to her mother Rose Dear's suicide, he would bring gifts, but inconsistently. Almost every other year. Her father disappears completely after her mother's death and never comes to claim his family, but he is never villainized by Violet. True Belle, who is a woman, is the person who makes sure that her family is taken care of. The same is true with the way that she handles Joe's infidelity; Joe is never in trouble or villainized by Violet. Instead, she attacks the dead girl, and stalks her Aunt, but makes no attempt to ever punish or speak ill of Joe. What Violet's rejection of women really reveals is her rejection of her own self. The violence that Violet exhibits both internal and external is therefore misplaced. In this case, Violet demonstrates a "complicated anger" (Morrison 57). It is evident here the necessity for space to be created to remedy and or express this complicated anger. As safe space is created, there is an opportunity for expression and release. Complicated anger without any space to express or release itself leads to self-destruction. This complicated anger is often heard in jazz compositions and although the improvisation represents freedom, the anger expressed symbolizes that freedom in the North is not void of any issues, but shows up differently from the South. "That's the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid-out roads say to. All the while letting you think you're free; that you can jump into thickets because you feel like it.....you always end up back where you started"(Morrison 120). Violet is in a freer space, but she is not free from her past in the South. Women to Violet are not a safe or protected space.

Not only does Morrison realize the power of safe space in community, but she demonstrates through the text that it is the small, everyday occurrences that build community. Just as in a jazz composition, every note builds to a larger sound, thereby creating a song. Without the note, there would be no collective sound. Violet is disconnected from the collective space even in the everyday small occurrences that build safe space. She lacks connection to the community for ordinary, trivial, and mundane day-to-day things. For example, the women often doing something ordinary such as returning a spool of thread will often turn into something more connected than simply returning thread. “A neighbor returns a spool of thread she borrowed, and not just the thread, but the extra-long needle too, and both of them stand in the door frame a moment while the borrower repeats for the lender a funny conversation she had with the woman on the floor below; it is funny and they laugh-one loudly while folding her forehead, the other hard enough to hurt her stomach” (Morrison 16). These are safe spaces created without an invitation to her, nor does she desire it. It is not as though the community is not in close proximity to her. The landscape is completely opposite of the South, where it is more rural and people are not as close to one another. Moreover, the North’s tenements and row houses, places people in much closer proximity to one another. Physical distance is not the issue. Every note such as the freedom to roam from door to door, sharing stories, small needs, and laughter helps to keep the community in tune with one another. All of which are necessary for an oppressive environment where there is not much in their control. These safe spaces allow for resilience and healing among its marginalized residents.

Possibly, if Violet had a safe space, she could be warned of her husband's infidelity, but due to her odd behavior and disconnect to all that represents community and connection, she lives oblivious to her husband Joe's indiscretions. Malvonne, the woman who rented the room to Joe for his extramarital affair is a prime example of how if Violet was connected to the community, Malvonne, potentially would have made it more difficult for him to commit these acts, she could have warned Violet on what Joe is attempting to do. In addition, Malvonne is well connected to the community. She is seen in various spaces around the community which is a safe space for her. There is very little that escapes Malvonne's observation. "She knew who had a passion for justice as well as ladies' undergarments, who loved his wife and who shared one.....Her interest lay in the neighborhood people"(Morrison 41). As a result of Violet's disconnect from the community, Malvonne does not necessarily have an interest in providing safe space for her.

There is an opportunity for Violet to build community once she arrives within the city as by profession she is an unlicensed hair stylist: "women who wake in the afternoon, pour gin in their tea and don't care what she has done" (Morrison 14) to do their hair. Only the women who are not considered respectable by society's standards would be found in her company and this is only due to her services being offered for less than the actual worth. "Violet can only charge twenty-five or fifty cents anyway, but since that business at Dorcas' funeral, many of her regular customers have found reasons to do their own hair or have a daughter heat up the irons"(Morrison 13). Although both the women she services and her own practice are illegal, this commonality does not allow for a safe space to become developed. Violet's occupation as a hair stylist should have opened up

an opportunity to build community and a safe space as a new inhabitant in the North. Traditionally, in the African American community, both hair salons for women and barbershops for men are safe spaces regardless of class or social standing. Hair salons and hair stylists are a community within themselves providing networking, gossip, advice, counseling, listening to one another's stories, building of trust, and overall socializing. She does provide the service for the women on a regular basis as these are steady clients or regulars, there is no indication of this space having any resemblance of community or a safe space.

Initially, Violet does not welcome anyone into her intimate space which causes her to be isolated from the potential of developing protected spaces. Her delirium could be potentially tied to the lack of real human connection. This disconnect is obviously a result of childhood trauma causing her to reject any connection even with those who are in close proximity to her.

Connection back to the South and confrontation with the past is what aids in her redemption and survival. Although it is the South and community she rejects, without it, she could not have been pulled out of the emotional turmoil that has been plaguing her since her youth. In the essay, "Golden Gray and the Talking Book: Identity as a Site of Artful Construction in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*", Caroline Brown explains that "as a consequence of returning to her past, she is eventually reborn through the chaos symbolized by the jazz process" (630). Violet's unpredictable behavior is a result of her past ushering her into the healing process. If her cracks would not become public and only shown in private with Joe, a safe space for healing would not be possible. Joe has acknowledged the cracks in private within himself; however, does not do anything to help

with her cracks. The confrontation with her past as self-reflective becomes pivotal to her connection with Dorcas' aunt, Alice Manfred. In this space, Violet is not only seen but heard. A jazz composition as with Violet's life is composed of chaos and randomness, but the disorder when brought into alignment produces a sound that is both beautiful and redemptive.

This same type of childhood trauma is also seen in Wilkerson's text as Inez Starling, a migrant from Eustice, Florida leaves the South physically, but carries the negative portions of her past along with her. Like many other migrants, Inez is relieved to leave the South to be united with her husband who had gone before her to ensure there was an adequate place for her to live. Unfortunately, Inez's childhood trauma coupled with the challenges of the North created an even more hostile living environment for the Starlings. "It started long before when she and her toddler sister were left orphaned right after Inez was born. They were raised by poor, put-upon, Bible-thumping Pentecostal aunts, who couldn't afford two more mouths to feed, and by a Victorian grandmother....." (Wilkerson 357). Violet and Inez Starling share a similar experience, both losing their mothers tragically in the South and being raised primarily by their grandmothers. There is no mention of Inez Starling's father; therefore, it is best to assume that he was absent like Violet's father. Unlike Violet, Inez Starling does have superficial connections to the community; however, no one becomes a safe space for her healing. "Her churlishness had managed to alienate so many people, perhaps without intending to, but people didn't tend to stay around long enough to figure out the motivation"(Wilkerson 450). She is cracked, just like Violet and it is apparent to all those who come into her space. Both women are alienated from community due to

unresolved issues stemming from their childhood. Inez Starling does not return to her past or the community for redemption and lives her life until the end under the burden of her trauma, whereas Violet is able to make peace with her past and is ultimately adopted into the community.

Part of Violet's blues is found in her inability to have any children. Her inability to not have children actually becomes a connection point for her and Alice Manfred. The trauma after her mother's suicide caused her to commit to never having any children. This is shown in the text directly after Rose Dear commits suicide, "The important thing, the biggest thing Violet got out of that was to never never have children. Whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama"(Morrison 102). Violet's promise to never have children also created a void and eventual crack within her. This crack is seen when Violet is asked by a young lady who is going into a record store to watch her baby brother while she goes inside. As Violet slips into a crack, she dreams of the baby as being her own and disappears with the baby.

Violet, triumphant and angry, snatched her bag, saying, "Last time I do anybody a favor on this block. Watch your own damn babies!" And she thought of it that way ever after, remembering the incident as an outrage to her character. The makeshift crib, the gentle soap left her mind.....she imagined a brightness that could be carried in her arms. Distributed, if need be, into places dark as the bottom of a well (Morrison 22).

The temporary moment with the baby created both a brightness and a trigger within Violet's memory. The dark hole in the well that her mother fell into produced a dark hole in Violet and this could only be mended with some sort of light. The baby in her arms is

a light, but it also exposed something within her that is dark and missing. It is apparent here to the community that Violet is a record who is cracked. Once Violet arrives at Alice Manfred's home to discover Joe's love and mourning for his dead mistress, Alice is more than likely already aware of Violet's cracks outside of her niece Dorcas' funeral.

Resistant initially to allowing Violet into her space, Alice eventually concedes as she recognizes a need within herself also. Because both Violet and Alice do not have any children, this creates a connection point.

The nurturing role of Alice Manfred plays a huge part in Violet's redemption and healing. Here a safe space is created that ushers Violet out of her past and connects her back to her own self. Although Alice does not have any children of her own, the ability to nurture may have been developed as she became the caregiver for her niece Dorcas after her parents were killed as a result of the St. Louis riots. She is all too familiar with caring for someone who is living with trauma. Alice Manfred recognizes that Violet's cracks are deeply rooted in trauma and becomes the only person in the community to aid in her renewal. Once she has to become a parent to Dorcas, she is intentional about protecting Dorcas from the vices of the city and violence towards women. Even after Dorcas' death, she never felt the need to report Joe to the authorities, as she knew much would not be done in the course of justice for a black girl. Alice is afraid of the city, but she is not fearful of Violet in spite of all of her cracks. "By this time the women had become so easy with each other talk wasn't always necessary. Alice ironed and Violet watched"(Morrison 112). Violet is now invited into the ordinary day to day. Just like the small, single notes, it is note by note that builds the composition. Alice does not deem Violet as dangerous, but hurting. There is an apparent understanding of Alice towards



Violet because she understands Violet's rage as a woman. She herself has experienced this type of rage because of her own husband's infidelity. And similar to Violet, it is not her husband that she felt this rage towards, but his mistress. This shared experience also turns into a connection point between Violet and Alice. Connection points and relatability help to create safe spaces.

And what she told Violet was true. She had never picked up a knife. What she neglected to say—what came flooding back to her now—was also true: every day and every night for seven months she, Alice Manfred, was starving for blood.

Not his (Morrison 86).

Alice's position is complicated. Although she did what she thought would be the best way to protect her niece from sexual predators, it is difficult as a woman to fully protect, nurture, and guide her within the city that she perceives as working against her. On the other hand, it is her niece that was violated and killed by Joe and Violet, she cannot help but empathize with Violet over her plight as a wife and woman who had faced the same challenges. Both women had to grapple with something that is dead. Alice, her dead husband, and Violet, her husband's dead mistress. Alice understands the dead end and becomes that person to provide support for Violet.

Alice Manfred serves in the same role to Violet as Mattie Michael in *The Women of Brewster Place* to Ciel. Both women are altruistic in their nature and fit into the role of earth mother or caregiver. This role grounds, restores, or brings back into tune women who are in need. It is not that Alice and Mattie are without their own trauma and pain, but both women push beyond themselves to create space for other women in need. Ciel, unlike Violet, does recognize her need for this source of strength and community to bring

for a renewal to keep her from further “cracking.” Alice does not recognize this as her place in Violet’s life but jumps into this role after close examination that this is only a woman who is in need no matter the circumstances. Alice’s advice in the safe space to Violet, “You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it” (Morrison 112). Alice’s words and consistent presence in Violet’s life is similar to the bathing ritual Mattie Michael performed for Ciel to help restore her back to life during her time of grief. This type of safe space is symbolic of cleansing and renewal. It is in this place where Violet is adopted into the community, and she begins to come in tune.

Music like community is transformative. For the jazz musician, improvisation is the path to absolute freedom. For individuals like Violet who have carried their painful pasts from the South and into the North, it can be difficult to experience freedom. Migrant women who have formed a community and healed from their past through safe spaces are those who not only survive, but also thrive. Stuart Hall asserts in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," that identity is not formed in the simple recovery of the past but in the way that we position ourselves in relationship to that past and rename ourselves and our realities (258). It is a necessity to be in these safe spaces for recovery from the past and to help with adjusting to a new and unfamiliar place. This is seen clearly in Wilkerson’s text as Ida Mae Gladney held close to her Southern roots and also connected with her community through church, other women in her community, and on her job, whereas, Inez Starling remained alienated by forming only superficial relationships which never evolved into safe and protected space for her. Violet is transformed by becoming in tune with the community.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

The Great Migration yielded both positive and negative results. For African American women, success was most evident in those that had community and created safe spaces for one another. The new world was not absent of challenges; however, it opened up doors for new opportunities never known or experienced in the South. Most migrants from the South understood the value of community and brought what could be perceived as folk ideas with them into the North; however, it was those who understood the necessity of community were most successful. The gains made from the Great Migration would not have been possible without community and safe spaces. The individual is not the guarantor for success; it is the collective group who acts in solidarity to make any significant change. This too, is only possible through healing being made available in safe spaces from trauma that has followed the migrants from the South and trauma from the rejection and challenges in the North.

The story that Chapters 2-4 tell is one of community and safe spaces for African American migrant women necessary for survival. The Great Migration is a history not only of African Americans, but all Americans as it changed the landscape of the entire United States. Although the women in these stories experienced trauma in the South and North, mainly rooted in systemic racism. Race and gender play a significant role on how these women are able or unable to live freely and have agency over their own destiny.

Chapter 2 focuses on Naylor's, *The Women of Brewster Place* and the women who find refuge in one another to combat social and economic inequities created to maintain their status as second-class citizens. The harshness of the North and familiarity of the South drew these women together to create a safe space not dictated by society or any other oppressive force. It was through the safe spaces created the women were able to persevere through the difficulties of being both African American and women. They found strength through the building of community. Mattie Michael, an anchor for both Ciel and Etta Mae makes her own peace through supporting these women through the difficulties faced and dreams shattered in the North. Ciel, although abandoned by her husband and grieving the loss of her baby finds strength in community. Etta Mae searching for companionship, while also combatting traditional roles given to women, does not find companionship in a husband, but she does find love in the community. And Mattie Michael has lost her son through the vices of the city, yet she still has peace. These women do not exemplify defeat; however, find and give strength to one another.

In Chapter 3, Petry shows in *The Street* how the street is designed to overtake its inhabitants in order to ensure the erasure of African American people. The intent of the street is not to provide a place that is safe and economically stable but ultimately designed for its inhabitants to fail. Every roadblock and every detour is created intentionally with the goal of ceasing any form of progress for African Americans. Lutie, sadly is overtaken by the street. The life she desired for herself and Bub did not come to fruition due to the traps of the street. It did not help that Lutie rejected all of the safe spaces available to her, nor did she attempt to build any. Although the ending is ambiguous, Petry does not offer any kind of glimpse of hope for the protagonist.

Chapter 4 explores Morrison's *Jazz*, as it connects the fragments of the South and pieces of the North to produce, similar in jazz a musical composition. Violet, the main character, receives redemption and healing as she combines both the fragments and pieces from the South and North. Like Lutie in *The Street*, Violet rejects community and does not build any safe spaces in the North; however she is eventually able to connect with Alice Manfred, which in turn created a safe space for her movement forward. This text, in particular exposes the negative and positive effects of the Great Migration. Although there is chaos and brokenness, there is also growth and love. In addition, the text points to the lack of value society places on black women; however, the safe spaces that were created and community built, black women were able to recognize and create value for one another.

The created safe spaces and community allow African American migrant women absolute freedom; free from the gaze of mainstream society, and in some cases free from the expectations of being a mother, wife, homemaker, and working out in the marketplace. The women do not always attain what they set out for in the North; however, most are transformed through their safe spaces and community in positive ways. Through Naylor, Petry, Morrison, and Wilkerson's depictions of African American women during the Great Migration; they expose the struggles of being exploited by those outside and within their race, sexual violence towards women, the loss of children, and love loss. The texts reveal that the women are the least protected in society, yet have the most demands placed upon them. They are utterly placed in the margins; therefore, by providing safe spaces for one another, the women are able to be placed at the center of their own world providing the care necessary for survival. The

safe spaces shared between the women represent a form of resistance against things strategically designed for their defeat. The women in their created safe spaces are afforded the opportunity to be completely human.

Currently, there is a reverse migration of African Americans from both the Northern and Western parts of the United States back into the South; and they, like their ancestors, face various challenges as migrants. The new migrants too will need community and safe spaces in order to thrive in “the New South.”

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