One to Write On

Communion Without Consensus in
The Women of Brewster Place and Jazz

The Black Archivists' struggles with white expectations are not about cataloging prejudice; rather, they are meditations on the prospects for democratic pluralism. Just as these meditations focus on white authority, they also explore black traditions. Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison undertake such explorations in The Women of Brewster Place and Jazz. Although the Great Migration shapes these novels' plots, both books link that southern exodus to commentary on black fiction. The commentary examines cultural communion. While some critics see a romanticized South and a retreat from cosmopolitanism in works such as Women and Jazz, their interpretations overlook the intergenerational conflict that keys these texts' action. These conflicts cast the collision between rural

1. Herman Gray captures how mainstream America constantly confuses special pleading and democratic work when it comes to its black citizens. He notes that the nation's "unwillingness, even inability, to see communities of color as more than aggrieved political subjects is evidence of the lingering effects of a post–World War II liberal discourse of national identity" (91).

2. The Great Migration names "the mass movements of Blacks to American cities in the twentieth century" (Pruitt 437). According to Bernadette Pruitt, "scholars since the 1960s have estimated that 7 million African Americans between the years 1915 and 1970 abandoned the rural and urban South for metropolitan and industrial centers across the country" (437). See Isabel Wilkerson's The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration (2010) for a narrative history of this phenomenon. Focusing on literature, Farah Jasmine Griffin's "Who Set You Flowin?": The African American Migration Narrative (1995) and Lawrence Rodgers's Canaan Bound: The African American Great Migration Novel (1997) both analyze relocation plots.

3. W. Lawrence Hogue and Madhu Dubey talk about urban crisis and black southern nostalgia in Race, Modernity, Postmodernity: A Look at the History and Literatures of Peoples of Color Since the 1960s (1996) and Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism (2003), respectively.
origins and urban change less as a fall and more as a test. If this collision signals the different responses that elders and youngsters give to the questions implicit in modernity, then it also shows how survival entails paying attention to the link between individual flair and collective discipline. That attention edifies psychologically and literally. In fact, the ethics of swagger hinges on such scrupulousness. Naylor and Morrison’s experiences with black writing reveal why.

While she was an editor at Random House, Morrison researched earlier black authors and promoted promising new ones. Naylor’s pursuit of African American literature took her to university libraries, and her efforts turned up similar treasures. Refining recovery instincts that first led them to write, Morrison and Naylor believed that engaging black authors who had been ignored was apt commemoration. Still, they did not unearth the literature merely to lionize it. In prior writings they noticed techniques, themes, and ideas that could enhance late twentieth-century representation. By studying their predecessors, Morrison and Naylor hoped to make blacks more than “leftovers in the imagination of white America” (Williams-Forson). They wanted to balance preservation and critique and advance a notion of growth through interdependence. Avoiding glib unity, they depicted belonging that did not stem from consensus. Their depictions reflected an artistic innovation where black authors used one another to write on.

Women and Jazz recalled earlier novels such as Ann Petry’s The Street (1946), Dorothy West’s The Living is Easy (1948), Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, and James Baldwin’s Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953). Although these books routinely celebrated relocation, they also revealed anxieties about such movement’s impact on African American “cultural cohe-

4. For an overview of Morrison’s editing career, see Cheryl Wall’s “Toni Morrison, editor and teacher” in The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison (2007). Jessica Harris and Dana Williams also engage her support of black writers in “I Will Always Be A Writer” (1976) and In the Light of Likeness Transformed: The Literary Art of Leon Forrest (2005).

5. Between 1975, when she started college, and 1981, when she completed her B.A. in English and her first novel, Naylor “read voraciously, discovering a rich history of black writers” (Fowler 14). Her Yale master’s thesis in Afro-American Studies (1983) extended her explorations of this “newly discovered . . . literary tradition” (Whitt 7). Because of this training, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., concluded that Naylor was arguably “more immersed in the formal history” of “the African American literary tradition” than anyone could have been “before the late seventies” (“Preface” ix).

6. The themes of black women confronting the city not only recur in literature but also in music. Songs such as The Friends of Distinction’s “Willa Faye” (1970) and The Whispers’ “Olivia (Lost and Turned Out)” (1975) stand alongside better known cuts such as Stevie Wonder’s “Living for the City” (1973), George Benson’s “On Broadway” (1978), and Gladys Knight and the Pips’ “Midnight Train to Georgia” (1973), conveying the extent to which rural/urban circuits struck black artists in the 1970s.
sion” (Tally 17). These anxieties confirmed that the move from the South to the North was a bedeviling project, one that even by the twenty-first century remained incomplete. Concerned that the Great Migration had buried crucial memories, Naylor and Morrison explored how novels could counteract cultural forgetfulness. Thus, while *Women* and *Jazz* included classic accounts of South-to-North trips, their portrayals also meditated on how urbanization impacted post-civil rights black creativity. Specifically, these books show Naylor and Morrison’s desires to not only address the Reagan era’s “political fable[s]” but also the “critical fable[s]” that divorce black art from its moorings (Fraser 90). The former was evident in the pathological narratives of black city life that America’s political leaders produced beginning in the 1960s. By the 1980s, the latter emerged in critical theories that neglected the fellowship that fed the rise of the black novel. *Women* and *Jazz* revised these fables, stressing the exchanges that made black urban community meaningful. In Naylor and Morrison’s correctives of one another, such exchanges feature unity without unanimity. This trait’s benefits extend from the pages of their fictions to the writers’ professional interactions.

Contemplating Naylor and Morrison’s takes on narration, housing, and violence, this chapter considers how *Women* and *Jazz* connect the Great Migration plot to debates about black writing. While these

7. Naylor lamented that in the 1960s, not many books contained “reflections of . . . [her] experience” (Goldstein 4). Because of that absence, she felt that the novel circa 1980 should be retooled to testify on behalf of black females who could not find “a mirror of [their] worth in society” (Naylor, “Conversation” 189). Morrison expanded this idea. Sensing that the moment where music and other “ceremonies . . . sustained [black] culture” had passed, she believed that the novel must now provide “information about how to hang onto what . . . is important and how to give up things that are not” (McCluskey 41).


9. James Berger’s “Ghosts of Liberalism” usefully summarizes how the political narratives of the 1960s registered in African American thinking in the 1980s. See also Ashraf Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives*.

10. Naylor and Morrison complete *Women* and *Jazz* during the sociological revival of the 1960s and 1970s. This moment is pejoratively associated with the Moynihan Report, but it also produced “Black Sociology,” a branch of study conducted by black scholars and for black people (Watson 109). For more on this epoch, see Arthur S. Evans’s “Role Relations of Black Sociologists With the Black Community: Perceptions of Sociologists” (1983) and Neil J. Smelser’s “Sociology: Spanning Two Centuries” (2003). The interventions offered by black sociology register with writers; however, black novelists felt that city life demanded fictional explorations.
novelists note past strategies for depicting the metropolis, they juxtapose alienation and collectivity to ponder culture and consensus. Their juxtapositions present healthy artistry as a posture that questions both the mainstream and the tribe. Recognizing the necessity of such questioning, *Women* and *Jazz* nonetheless suggest that the ground on which black artists stand will be much more stable if they are aware of who stood there before them.

**Broken Dreams**

*Women* and *Jazz* use trios of characters to explore the Great Migration. Lacking the ruthless ambition or the work issues emphasized in earlier migration novels, both books sketch black folks that have come north and discovered a puzzling space. These middle-aged individuals often possess wisdom; still, their functions are diffuse, a fact borne out by *Women* and *Jazz*’s narrative structures. In musical terms, the trio provides space for individual voice and for harmonic interplay. *Women* and *Jazz* envision pleasing blends of individuation and harmony; however, they also capture dissonance. With this tension, Naylor and Morrison suggest the gaps in even a shared black experience. Their suggestions relate to notions of community. Everyone in *Women* and *Jazz*’s trios endures the Great Migration firsthand, yet their attitudes tax black collectivity. Probing dashed dreams, escapist vices, and tempered despair, these books chronicle attempts to turn hard knocks into nurturing. A glimpse at *Women*’s major migrants shows the stakes.

Etta Mae Johnson and Mattie Michael—her Rock Vale, Tennessee, running buddy—confirm Naylor’s interest in “the redemptive possibilities of female coalescence”; however, Ben’s inclusion complicates the significance of the novel’s trio (Awkward 98). Aging residents who all descend to the novel’s eponymous apartment building, Etta Mae, Mattie, and Ben consider whether a “Southern trace” in their characters can translate into northern endurance (R. Miller, *Literary* 201). Their considerations imply shifting cultural curriculums. Etta Mae departs Dixie

---

11. Maxine L. Montgomery argues that “the descent motif,” which depicts “a protagonist’s physical or psychological journey to a place where he or she attains self-knowledge,” generally explains Naylor’s narrative strategy in *Women* and specifically accounts for the consciousness of Mattie, Ben, and Etta Mae. Though I agree that each member of the trio acquires self-knowledge, the notion that such knowledge equals “anonymity” misses a crucial lesson regarding black humiliation (42–43).
because the region was not ready for her “blooming independence” (26). Tinged with repression, her life seems a Janie-esque battle against limits; thus, her departure could be a renunciation of horizon-pinching matrons. While aspects of this scenario fit her situation, her behaviors defy simple conclusions. Etta Mae ties seduction to security. If sex for her suggests freedom, then it also promises a satisfaction marked by commitment. She finds sexual liberty, but after chasing fulfillment all over the North, she sees sensuality as a hurdle instead of help. In many ways, her sentiments match her pal Mattie’s. Mattie was propelled onto a “north-bound Greyhound” by an unplanned pregnancy and her father’s religious convictions (24). Revising Etta Mae’s hype regarding the metropolis, her plight exposes her to squalor in “an unnamed Every-city somewhere in urban America” (Goldstein 3). When Mattie’s young son Basil gets bit by a rat, he not only joins a host of black fictional characters who have endured the tenement’s perils but also propels his mother into a desperate search for other accommodations. This desperation eventually lands her amid the “expensive mahogany furniture” and the “china bric-a-brac” that filled the home of her benefactor, Miss Eva (32). Where Etta Mae came north looking for independence, Mattie was directionless until Miss Eva delivered somewhere “safe and comfortable” for her and her son (40). Her reckless belief that she could secure this treasure yields to recognition that the city makes such attainments too costly. Ben’s odyssey also bears this out.

Arriving “a year before the Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Topeka Board of Education,” Ben, an alcoholic “janitor and handyman,” was Brewster Place’s first black resident. He resided “in the basement of 312” and has access to every apartment in the building (3). Although his underground dwelling recalls the protagonist of Invisible Man and that character’s predecessor, Fred Daniels from Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942), Ben also evokes the Super who terrifies Lutie Johnson in The Street. Super inspires fear because he trades

12. Margaret Whitt links Women and Their Eyes Were Watching God through the pairs of Mattie Michael/Butch Fuller and Janie Crawford/Johnny Taylor (22). Though the former couple’s conception of a child separates them from the latter, it also shows why Etta Mae, like Janie, flees her restrictive environment.

13. Mattie’s experience in a rat-infested apartment ties her to the Thomas family in Native Son and to Maud in Gwendolyn Brooks’s Maud Martha (1953). These connections suggest Naylor’s awareness of the black literary tradition and show her engagement with several intertexts, a key strategy for her expressions of black urbanity’s dilemmas.

14. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., contends that Gloria Naylor used “Ann Petry’s The Street, the classic work of black feminist naturalism, as her silent second text” in The Women of Brewster Place (“Preface” ix).
in lascivious gazes, but Ben’s defining gesture is agonizing confession. His central agony regards why he left the South. While he was sharecropping, Ben noticed that his landlord had taken an unseemly interest in his daughter. He could not muster the courage to confront the white man, so he took to liquor and effectively pimped out his child. Like Mattie, Ben at first viewed the city as shelter from shame, but unlike her, he never experienced its deliverance.

For Women’s trio of migrants, the novel’s unnamed metropolis proves coterminous with the quandaries that sent them scrambling northward. Their Dixie distresses never recede; rather, they tax the rituals that nurtured black survival below the Mason-Dixon line. From Christianity to the blues, no coping behaviors provide a panacea within urban space. These facts threaten to turn Brewster Place, the last stop in several of its inhabitants’ free falls, into a graveyard of frustrated folk aspiration. Although the neighborhood’s fate lends credence to morbid assessment, Naylor’s novel persistently unsettles standard calculations of value. For instance, Women’s Mattie, Etta Mae, and Ben do not equal success when measured by bourgeois yardsticks, but as occasions for exploring life’s lacerations, they produce immense benefits.

Although Mattie never reconciled with her father, her religious faith signaled an attempt to square two dispossessions that framed her life. Her father impelled her toward Women’s unnamed city when he kicked her out, and her son Basil jumped a bail she secured, thus forcing her move away from the house that Miss Eva left her. If Mattie endured by refining her father’s Christianity, then her friend Etta Mae used hustling to shape her existence. From the moment that she judged Rock Vale too small for her tastes, Etta Mae wandered from one spot to another, scrambling to find lovers to sponsor her lifestyle. Her movements bespoke a determination to live pleasurably, yet just as Mattie’s agenda prompted a throwback reckoning, Etta Mae’s rambling eventually begged the question of what offers true satisfaction. Etta Mae’s life contained stops at the fork dividing settling down and loneliness that conjured The House of Mirth’s Lily Bart. Unlike Lily though, she cherished female fellowship as

---


16. Basil’s encounter with law enforcement anticipates Jefferson’s situation and the torturous realities that fuel John Edgar Wideman’s fictions. His panicky flight before his trial dramatizes the difficult questions regarding American institutions and black male liberty that surfaced in The Chaneysville Incident when John Washington’s brother Bill was faced with a draft notice.
a port amid emotional storms. The male among Women’s elders receives no such solace.

Reminiscent of Pilate and Reba in Morrison’s Song of Solomon, Ben combines fretting over parenting with alcohol. Those women sold wine in part to fulfill their charge’s appetites, but Ben drank to quiet his daughter’s incriminating calls. By the time he arrived at Brewster Place, he has not been in her presence for many years; nevertheless, her importuning, a “bell-like voice” that enters his ears and commences a “deadly journey toward his heart,” remained a spur to his binges (154). Ben then seems less “an ever-present reminder of the failure of America’s economic system” and more an example of enduring misery by “drinkin’, the rest of [his] worried days” (Bonetti, “Interview with Gloria” 43; Bogan, “Drinking Blues”). Philip Page describes Mattie as hemmed in by “the implacable harshness of reality,” and his contention applies equally to Ben and Etta Mae. Paralyzed by their lack of “transcendent or mythic powers,” this trio, for Page, symbolizes Brewster as a site where one “can only dream of better conditions and more viable selves” (Reclaiming 163). Page’s analysis casts dreams as souvenirs of impotence, but Naylor—evoking Martin Luther King, Jr.’s prophetic vision—emphasizes the rewards of imagination. Facing urban repression, blacks, in Naylor’s view, thrive not by controlling physical space but rather by diligently tending emotional obligations. This outlook also conveys the novel’s commentary on black literary tradition.

While Mattie, Etta Mae, and Ben possess an impressive collection of soul scars, the trio’s purpose is not just documenting woe. Each character’s suffering surfaces in Women, but Naylor’s uses of their suffering reveals her outlook on black cultural consensus. Mattie, Etta Mae, and

---

17. Maxine L. Montgomery persuasively argues that Mattie Michael allows Etta Mae the freedom of fellowship. When the latter returns depressed from another one-night stand, Mattie “offers the warmth and support” that Etta Mae needs by empathizing via the “common bond” of disappointing “romantic relationships” (45).

18. Ben exists in intriguing literary company. Although his wine-fueled escapades lacked the boisterousness of Song of Solomon’s Henry Porter’s, they did evoke characters like Frank in Go Tell It on the Mountain, who self-medicated to quiet demons.

19. Michael Awkward suggests that such imagination could be compensatory as opposed to revolutionary. He explains, “With respect to its negative consequences, not only does the female flight into imagination represent at times a ‘pathetic’ attempt to transform a painful experience, but also it serves to compel women to commit plainly injurious acts of self-deception” (113). For more on dreaming in Women, see Jill Matus’s “Dream, Deferral, and Closure in The Women of Brewster Place.”

20. Naylor’s focus on empathy as opposed to property may reflect her engagement with Black Nationalist debates about the land question. For an overview of those debates, see Russell Rickford’s “Claiming Earth: The Land Question and Pan Africanist Theory in the 1970s” (2012).
Ben are rarely in the same room with each other, and they never share a conversation together. Notwithstanding this separateness, their afflictions and more importantly their survivals limn a representative range of Great Migration experiences. Their representativeness is qualitative rather than quantitative, and this effect is purposeful. Just as 1950s novelists grew to mistrust the sociological accounts of black life offered in works such as Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* (1944), so too did 1970s writers view documents such as the Kerner Commission Report (1968) as informative yet flawed. Their narrative structures strive to address those flaws using a sampling technique, and Naylor’s approach in *Women* is illustrative.

Instead of making her trio of black elders comprehensive, Naylor imbues them with singular, yet resonant life stories and sends them, jazz-style through shifting chords of experience. An understanding of their situations depends in part on analyzing earlier characters in black literature. Mattie and Etta Mae recall Elizabeth and Florence in Baldwin’s *Go Tell It On Mountain*. Revising his portrait of fallen black womanhood, Naylor removes marriage from her characters’ lives and enhances their friendship’s ability to blunt urbanity’s effects. Her reactions to Baldwin exemplify the value of black literary archives. While her engagement with him refines her art, it also enriches black literature’s response to truncated accounts of African American city life. These benefits are not confined to exchanges that cover several decades. As was the case with *Middle Passage* and *The Color Purple*, the Black Archivists sometimes revise one another. Morrison’s efforts in *Jazz* are emblematic.

*Jazz* reprises *Women*’s focus on a trio of migrants by depicting the married couple Joe and Violet Trace and the widowed seamstress Alice Manfred, middle-aged characters that have navigated the city for decades. While Mattie, Etta Mae, and Ben’s navigations take place in an anonymous metropolis, Harlem, the setting of *Jazz*, produces mythic resonances.21 Morrison heightens this impact by setting her book during the 1920s, a moment when cultural excitement exploded.22 Despite allud-

---

21. In *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (2007), Sara Blair argues that *Jazz* represents Toni Morrison’s “first direct confrontation with the phenomenal precedent” and the “iconic power” of both Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance (256). Blair states that up until *Jazz*, Morrison’s portrayal of “the Renaissance” made the movement “a monitory point of departure and a place of no return” (257). These sentiments reinforce a prevailing perspective on Morrison’s novels, namely that she willfully marginalizes major historical events in favor of mining more obscure episodes in African American life.

ing to the neighborhood’s iconic status, she quite often writes around its brio. The fabled community’s coursing energy can be detected, but Jazz gives the reader a Harlem pulsing with possibility and undergirded by melancholy. The reasons Joe, Violet, and Alice inhabit the Big Apple bear out this paradoxical simultaneity.

When they met in Vesper County, Virginia, Joe fell out of a tree and almost landed in Violet’s lap. This uncanny event began the process whereby she “claimed him” (105). Describing that claiming, Joe confessed that he “had not chosen” marriage to Violet “but was grateful . . . that he didn’t have to; that Violet did it for him, helping him escape all the redwings in the county and the ripe silence that accompanied them” (30). “Redwings” and “ripe silence” are images from Joe’s fruitless search for his mother. Though he could never locate his lost parent, Violet’s laying claim replaced maternal absence and eventually propelled the newlyweds out of Dixie and onto New York City’s trains and boulevards. If orphanhood and figurative adoption define Joe’s trek, then Violet’s migration odyssey carries alternate cravings for family reunions.

Violet knows her mother and father; however, the former’s death and the latter’s sporadic presence throw her into the care of True Belle, her maternal grandmother. This grandparent child-rearing arrangement recalls black narratives from Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God to Randall Kenan’s A Visitation of Spirits (1989); however, where those texts present elders who constrain youthful ambition, Jazz presents True Belle as a promoter of adventure.

A former slave who had, like Frederick Douglass, left a plantation and lived in Baltimore, True Belle told Violet and her siblings “spellbinding tales” about the city’s wonders (102). These

23. Claiming here could be romantic or socioeconomic, but the act also carries traces of redemption and prizewinning. These are Violet’s cues regarding family. Her maternal grandmother, True Belle, and her father both enter Violet’s life using the vocabulary of rescue and reward. After her mother gets dispossessed, True Belle shows up with “ten eagle dollars” and “Baltimore tales for grandchildren she had never seen” (142). Her father, arriving “two weeks after [his wife’s] burial,” dispensed “ingots of gold for the children, two-dollar pieces for the women and snake oil for the men” (99). These episodes express affection as intermittent and as a perforator of crisis.

24. In African American literature, intense conflict defines guardian/grandchild arrangements. Janie famously charged Nanny with trying to take the horizon and pinch “it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her” (Hurston 85). Likewise, Horace Cross, the protagonist of Randall Kenan’s A Visitation of Spirits (1989), senses that his grandfather’s Christianity included “a biblical intolerance of homosexuality” that not only “alienate[d]” these two family members but also made the older “complicit” in the younger’s death (Coleman, Faithful 65). These depictions suggest that caregivers risk more than rapport when they impose their worldview on their charge. The cost of communal preservation—figured as maintaining the elder’s values—is at least hatred and at worst death.
tales touted Baltimore’s “more sophisticated way of living” and introduced Violet to “a beautiful young man” named “Golden Gray” (139). Born to True Belle’s white mistress and “a black-skinned nigger,” Golden, whom Violet never met, “tore up” her “girlhood” by starring as the love object in her youthful fantasies (143, 97). His centrality to her romantic ideas caused her to question whether Joe had merely been a “substitute” for him (97). This capacity for substitution also registered in her attraction to New York City.

Joe and Violet, as a young married couple, “bust out” of the South “just for the hell of it” (181). Each of them has intricate reasons for such capriciousness, yet at base, they seek “their stronger, riskier selves,” the selves “they always believed they were” (33, 35). True Belle’s loving portrait of Golden fuels Violet’s belief that the city can harbor inspiring affection, and Joe’s thankfulness for Violet’s soothing of his motherlessness yokes him to faith in the metropolis. Connecting hope and relief to the energy of the urban grid, the Traces then seek to substitute a space for their emotions. They depend on New York City for “somewhat which” they do “not carry,” transgressing Ralph Emerson’s axiom regarding travel (“Self-Reliance” 149). Their actions bespeak miscalculation of the city’s talents, and the final member of Jazz’s migrating trio makes a similar misjudgment.

Alice Manfred left Springfield, Massachusetts, when her husband chose life with his mistress over marriage to her. This event stoked a “fear” that had dogged her, but it was not the chief motive behind her relocation to New York City (54). Alice’s fear stemmed from stark racial realities rather than mere infidelity; nonetheless, for her, the causes of both events were the same, submission to disorder. From Illinois to Springfield, black communities were menaced by white threats. Alice’s solutions to such threats were retreats into homogenous neighborhoods and unassailable dignity. Her remedies proved dicey when her husband preferred a woman that “wore white shoes in winter” to his “elegant” spouse (86, 83). Though New York City might not undo such selections, in 1896, when Alice arrived, it boasted possibilities that suited her reverence of bourgeois respectability. Her assumptions counterpoised racial terror and cosmetic correctives. In juxtaposing these forces, she clarifies Jazz’s creative amendments.

Women replaced The Bluest Eye’s focus on the “inter racial sources” of black female pain with an exploration of such hurting’s “intra racial” dimensions (Awkward 103). In light of this replacement, Morrison’s
decision to make *Jazz* an answer to Naylor’s artistry is understandable. Her depictions address Naylor’s reactions to *The Bluest Eye*, yet *Jazz*’s engagement with Naylor’s perceptions of *Beloved* is also illuminating. During the mid-1980s, Naylor and Morrison took part in a long dialogue that *The Southern Review* published. Their conversation has been hailed as the sort of “symbiotic merger” that typifies interactions between black female writers (Awkward 7). Although that discussion prompted warm feelings, by 1987, when Naylor served on the National Book Award panel that did not select *Beloved* as a winner, the writers’ symbiosis appeared less certain. *Jazz* subtly answers such uncertainty.

Critiquing the untroubled camaraderie of Mattie and Etta Mae’s friendship, Joe and Violet’s interactions, while grounded in love, are friction-filled. Morrison complements this adjustment by replacing Ben with Alice. Where he reveals self-destructive coping with interracial affront, she suggests the limited efficacy of elevating such hurt over intraracial pains. Negotiating these competing emphases enhances *Jazz*’s accounts of the Great Migration, and at the same moment, it grants *Women* a shrewd reading from a skilled reader. Thus, the Black Archivists provide support even as they offer critique. This model of interaction becomes crucial for the cohort’s artistic advances, and in *Women* and *Jazz*, it drives their portraits of the black community. Considering these novel’s commentaries on residence shows their investment in cultural fellowship.

---

26. Michael Awkward contends that it is the “sense of bonding, of energetic explorations for and embrasure of black female precursorial figures, which distinguishes the Afro-American women’s novels . . . from competitive black male intertextual relations” (7–8). While his claims bear consideration, Naylor and Morrison suggest that black female rewriting is not devoid of competition.  

27. Gloria Naylor probably served on the selection committee because she won a National Book Award (First Novel) in 1983. Joined by Richard Eder and the panel’s chair Hilma Wolitzer, she evaluated a group of finalists that included Philip Roth, Alice McDermott, Howard Norman, Larry Heinemann, and Morrison. In what Wolitzer described as a “majority vote,” Larry Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story* (1986) was a surprise winner of the prize. Asked about the deliberations, Naylor stated, “If the award was not predictable, that’s because literature isn’t predictable” (McDowell “Book”). Some publishing officials thought the outcome’s capriciousness was healthy. Morrison’s supporters saw the decision as a gross miscarriage, and many looked at Naylor as a voice who could have prevented such upheaval. James English observes, “For her part, Naylor’s vote may be inferred from the degree to which she was ostracized afterward by the many offended partisans of Morrison. Her planned month-long residency at SUNY Stony Brook, for example, was reportedly canceled by June Jordan, a member of the faculty and a friend of Morrison’s who had led the public outcry against the NBA decision” (151).
Houses, Not Coffins

Barbara Christian argued that from 1975 to 1985, there arose in America “a more distinctly visible black middle class than had ever existed before” (121). Exploring this idea, *Women* presented Kiswana Browne, a young activist who grew up in Linden Hills, a tony suburb adjacent to Brewster Place. Kiswana moved to Brewster so that she could be “in day-to-day contact with the problems of [her] people,” and her mother who visits her occasionally wonders whether living among the “people” qualifies as a commitment to social progress (84). Kiswana’s mother strikes many critics as *Women’s* chief expositor of black bourgeois virtues. Though Mrs. Browne is an eloquent apologist, Miss Eva and Mattie enrich the novel’s portraits of middle-class aspiration. These women’s encounters with the city’s ownership/leasing dynamic discount demonization of property owning.

Miss Eva, perhaps the namesake of Eva Peace from Morrison’s *Sula*, kept a house where “lemon oil” and “cool, starched linen” held the power to assuage “the spirit” (35, 40). Unlike social climbers whose residences were museums, Miss Eva loved her home’s lived-in quality. She adorned it with warm comforts transforming her experiences into hospitality. Despite the likelihood that her house was a bequeathal of husbands whom she had “outlived,” morbidity does not reign within its walls (32). Instead, hope swells. Mattie absorbs these doctrines. Her abrupt move from a rat-infested boardinghouse to a “beautiful” dwelling contains an almost Dickensian reversal of fortune (40). While Dickens’s characters usually thrive in situations turned by chance, she gets dispos-

28. Christian believed that Naylor’s second novel *Linden Hills* most vigorously engaged the “money and power” theory of progress (121).

29. Miss Eva differs from Eva Peace in her decorating tastes, but the two share an occasionally troublesome attraction to men. As Eva Turner states about her husbands, “I like ’em all, but they don’t seem to agree with me” (34). Miss Peace, based on her experiences with Boy Boy, would probably agree with that sentiment.

30. Miss Eva’s therapeutic finery seemingly evokes the white emulation agendas of fictional characters from *Beetle Creeks*’ Mary Diggs to *Song of Solomon*’s Ruth Foster Dead, but her house frustrates such assessments. The tension between black middle-class life as a sign of comfort and as a refutation of racial inferiority is palpable in fin de siècle America. For analysis, see David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis’s *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. DuBois & African American Portraits of Progress* (2003) and Michael Bieze’s *Booker T. Washington and the Art of Self-Representation* (2008).

31. The five marriages that preceded her old age lurk as uncertain contributors to Miss Eva’s possession of her own home. Describing one of her marriages, she states that she and her husband “joined the vaudeville circuit and went on stage” (34). While she does not identify her role in the act, the mere fact of a stage career suggests freedom. This attitude partakes of Shug Avery’s bold revisions, yet Miss Eva’s nurturing instincts separate her from Walker’s character.
sessed and lands at Brewster Place. Her plight could be understood via Women’s “descent” motif. According to Maxine Montgomery, Mattie cannot attain a “sense of wholeness” until she abandons the “outward trappings that signal middle-class success” (42). Montgomery’s theory links Mattie’s situation to Mrs. Browne’s implying that just as the latter advances socioeconomically by being what her daughter terms “a white man’s nigger,” there is something in Mattie’s pursuit of home ownership that smacks of racial self-hatred (Women 85). Though Mattie descends from a sharp-tongued, proud clan, her ambitions, like those of A Raisin in the Sun’s Lena Younger, arise less from copying white folks than from a desire to have the outcomes in her life match her labor. Mattie resurrects Miss Eva’s and other black Americans’ desire to possess a secure home. Her challenges reflect the ambivalence of Women’s setting.

Mattie’s experiences straddle two myths of the city. On the one hand, her arrival as an unmarried, unskilled, expectant mother means that she must endure exorbitant rents and low-wage employment. Urban life in this scenario involves getting exploited. On the other hand, the metropolis is a promised land. In this scenario, the city delivers an individual from peril. Mattie’s movements from the boardinghouse to Miss Eva’s and finally to Brewster Place show a fluidity that critiques determinist narratives of black fate. Though her shifts imply agency, this appearance is misleading. Mattie no more chooses to be delivered by Miss Eva than she desires to lose a home that had “a lifetime of work laying in the bricks” (53). By presenting these unpredictable developments, Naylor challenges

32. Consider, for example, the fates of characters such as the eponymous protagonist of Oliver Twist (1838) and Esther Woodhouse in Bleak House (1853).

33. For discussions of black home ownership, see Andrew Wiese’s Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century (2005), Beryl Satter’s Family Properties: How the Struggle Over Race and Real Estate Transformed Chicago and Urban America (2010), and David M. P. Freund’s Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics (2010).

34. Several studies in the 1930s and the 1940s analyzed the Great Migration and its impact on black housing. Herbert Hoover’s Committee on Negro Housing (CNH) undertook the most formal efforts. Founded in 1928 and including members such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, Charles S. Johnson, Moses McKissick, and Daisy Lampkin, the CNH produced a report Negro Housing (1932) that recommended “the construction of low-income housing, the elimination of restrictive covenants, and the end to discriminatory actions on the part of real estate agents and private lenders” (Whitaker 161). See Skip G. Gates’s “Of Negros Old and New” (1974) and Gilbert Osofsky’s Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto (1966).

35. Lawrence Rodgers evokes Canaan, the Biblical Promised Land, as the marker of the southern migrant’s envisioning of his northward journey as deliverance. While this sublime metaphor offers immense hope, Rodgers suggests that many migrants such as the protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man mistakenly enter the city as seekers of Canaan only to discover that they are “nameless Adam[s]” who have been tricked into abandoning “their roots” (2). Naylor’s life and her fiction document a middle way between these two attitudes regarding migration.
quantitative analyses of city life and reveals the elided exchanges that texture black existence. Mattie’s return to renting suggests why scripts of pathology demand this rebuttal.

Brewster Place is “four double housing units” pressed into a dead end street (1). Although it seems a step up from the boardinghouse that Mattie fled decades earlier, the apartment building reveals the same “decay” that produces division in so many black communities (4). Thus, just as Petry’s *The Street* and William Fisher’s *The Waiters* (1953) portray rental properties defined by irredeemable wornness, *Women* also emphasizes the creeping disrepair of Brewster’s buildings. This physical malfunction complements an emotional one. Although thin walls and curious eyes put inhabitants close to one another, no intimacy develops. When Sophie, one of Brewster’s residents, looks through a window and sees the lesbian couple Lorraine and Theresa making out, she bewails their “nasty ways” and complains that the two “ain’t wanted here” (145). This scene illustrates how “spectatorship and surveillance” can disintegrate fellowship (Hicks 21). While Sophie’s objections purport moral authority, her sentiments reflect “failures of vision” and a commitment to “voyeuristic modes of knowing” (Hicks 21; Dubey, *Signs* 99). Mattie’s experiences challenge such knowledge, attesting other possibilities for urban sight.

Several scholars note that the inhabitants of Brewster Place form “a community of transients” (Christian 114). Emphasizing the fragility of the neighborhood, Philip Page asserts that the tenants are alienated both from “white society” and frequently from each other (Reclaiming 162). Sophie’s complaints show such alienation, and Mattie’s latter day arrival confirms the itinerancy of the buildings’ residents. Nonetheless, community hinges less upon duration of interaction and more upon shared consciousness. This idea about neighborhood emerges forcefully in the black

36. Literature’s capacity to depict black experiences often devolves into questions of narrative mode. Although naturalism, realism, modernism, and postmodernism describe some options for storytelling, the Black Archivists complicate cultural identity by exploring what literature can express about survival.

37. The debilitating effects of proximity can be seen in Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha* and Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. Sharing bathrooms and blackouts could promote solidarity, but in both of these works, city dwellers want to flee their surroundings. Frank London Brown’s *Trumbull Park* (1959) also presents this reality. When a young girl falls to her death, Louis “Buggy” Martin, Brown’s protagonist, determines that hazarding the racism of a suburb is preferable to staying in his high-rise. Though Brown’s novel focuses on a man, *The Street, Maud Martha,* and *A Raisin in the Sun* depict black women whose hopes are frustrated by leasing.

38. Heather Hicks argues that the “dynamics of spectatorship and surveillance . . . animate the racist social formation of Harlem.” Although she focuses on Ann Petry’s *The Street*, Hicks’s attention to “vision and failures of vision” clarify Naylor and Morrison’s explorations of how looking relates to community (21). For more on vision and urbanity, see Madhu Dubey’s *Signs and Cities*, especially chapter 3, “Urban Writing as Voyeurism: Literature in the Age of Spectacle.”
nationalism of Kiswana and her boyfriend Abshu, but Mattie’s Christian ethics lead to the most reliable day-to-day practice of togetherness. When Sophie questions Theresa and Lorraine’s relationship, Mattie calls her a “busybody” (140). She still wonders whether lesbianism is “quite right”; however, because of her experiences as an unmarried mother, Mattie knows that calloused judgment splits affection (141). Her actions ally her with Lorraine, an alliance that intensifies because each has been banished by her father.

Neither Lorraine nor Mattie shares her history with one another. Despite this silence, their interaction reveals the possibilities and the limits of shared consciousness for Brewster Place’s residents. When Sophie upsets her, Lorraine does not turn to Mattie; rather, she seeks solace from Ben. Her revelations of her dad’s angry reaction to her lesbianism meet with his regrets about his daughter’s plight creating a momentary surrogacy. In his “damp underground rooms,” Ben can be a consoling father, and Lorraine can be a forgiving daughter (147). The haste and the setting of their meeting hint at peremptory connection. Despite the allure of their role-playing, her murder of him implies its insufficiency. Mattie’s “ricocheting . . . screams” form the first testimony to the tragedy (173). Beyond mourning loss of life, her screams identify sincere commemoration as one option for urban community. Mattie’s pursuit of this option re-frames the importance of property.

Urbanity limits Mattie’s ability to preserve family, much less a neighborhood. Oscillating between renting and owning, she discovers that security stems from temperament as well as circumstance. This security does not preclude catastrophe nor does it promote unanimity; instead, it subjects pain to communion and produces intimacy. Mattie, like A Lesson Before Dying’s Jefferson, discovers the tutelage of suffering. Although her studies cannot transform reality, they do align with spirituals and the blues, folk traditions of organizing loss. Combining these traditions

39. In Passed On: African American Mourning Stories (2003), Karla Holloway asserts, “Black folk—whose indomitable and full presence articulates the best of this country’s spirit, intelligence, and politics—bridge [grief’s] cultural haunting with hope, grace, and resilience” (3). Mattie’s screams preamble her affirmation of Holloway’s assertion. They are a brief interregnum that sutures recognition of wasteful loss to the slow recuperation of lament.

40. Maulana Karenga, in “Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function” (1968), argues that “the blues are invalid” because they teach black folks “to submit to . . . resignation” (1976). This disdain for resignation, which gets echoed by Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka, makes martyrdom and Hollywood heroism the sole options for dignified black existence. Ernest Gaines opposes this thesis, and Morrison and Naylor suggest that the sinews that can redeem black urbanity will not arrive in a blaze, rather more likely a shadow. For Baraka and Neal’s outlooks, see “The Revolutionary Theatre” (1969) and “The Black Arts Movement” (1968), respectively.
generates an antidote to materialism and manners, faulty bases of solidarity. Mattie echoes the hopes of *The Bluest Eye*’s Geraldine, a striver who ascends by shedding black life’s “funkiness” (Morrison, *Bluest* 83). While Mattie’s plight judges Geraldine’s tactics, she retains the latter’s neighborhood model of unity. In *Jazz*, Morrison suggests that communal consciousness demands interactions beyond your block.

Unlike Miss Eva, Alice Manfred’s loss of her husband does not translate into home ownership. Although she lacks property, her bourgeois aims surface as she selects her apartments. She moved from “Eleventh Avenue” to “Third Avenue” to “Park Avenue” trying to find an enclave where taste could protect her from racial prejudice (54). In addition to threats from white folks, she also noticed an assault on her elegance by black “juke joint, barrel hooch, tonk house, music” (59). Her responsibility for raising her niece Dorcas makes policing the effects of this music crucial. *Jazz*’s aunt-niece caregiver dynamic evokes *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, in which Elizabeth Grimes is taken from her pimp father by a maternal aunt. Dorcas’s dad owns a pool hall, but he and his wife are not morally maligned. Rather, as victims of the race riots in East St. Louis, their deaths mark the stakes of Alice’s desire to cordon off a city’s influences. Her intentions recall Mattie’s failed efforts even as her approach revises the elder woman’s.

Reprising Mattie’s mistaken faith that physical space will protect her and her son, Alice believes that “on Clifton Place” where there was “a leafy sixty-foot tree every hundred feet,” menace would yield to impeccable landscaping (56). Neat hedgerows were sentinels outside her apartment, and inside, she “outlawed” “high-heeled shoes with the graceful straps,” “the vampy hats closed on the head,” “makeup of any kind,” and “especially the coats slung low in the back and not buttoned, but clutched, like a bathrobe or a towel” (55). Against these fashions, she mounted a strictness that judged Mattie’s indulgence. Basil, Mattie’s son, was spoiled; Dorcas received love as bound breasts, censured hips, and

41. Freeda French from John Edgar Wideman’s *Sent For You Yesterday* precedes Alice as a disapprover of secular music’s penetration into black urban neighborhoods, and I treat her more expansively in chapter 6. If that resonance is intriguing, then the way that Dorcas and Alice signify on *Women*’s Etta Mae suggests the resourcefulness of Morrison’s creative critiques of Naylor. While *Women* does not extensively portray music or musicians, it shows Etta Mae returning to Brewster Place carrying a stack of albums and includes snatches of lyrics from Billie Holliday to church songs in Etta’s chapter to show that she is—to some extent—mothered by music. Dorcas’s reprisal of Etta’s temperament, and Alice’s response to that attitude, show Morrison’s determination to re-inscribe aspects of the transgenerational conflict that *Women* elides. Reflecting the recuperative possibilities of a fuller exploration of tension, Morrison presents a model of communing with deep implications for black literary history.
covered legs. No matter how diligently expressed, such strictures proved inadequate to the city’s challenges. The reasons for inadequacy centered on misperceptions of the metropolis’ appeal.

Madhu Dubey asserts that Jazz presents a “rigidly gridded structure of the city” that exemplifies “easy semiotic readability as well as the socially repressive effects of urban spatial form” (Signs 109). Though Alice’s negotiation of the grid affirms Dubey’s outlook, her inability to contain Dorcas suggests some hidden meanings that defy her understanding. These concealments ostensibly originate in the city itself. Thus, the narrator, “the voice of the City,” intimates that the metropolis is “smart at . . . sending secret messages disguised as public signs” (Rodrigues 748; Jazz 64). This description seemingly alludes to the city’s chummy covering over of adulteries and other indiscretions; however, it also refers to self-deception. Alice is known as a woman whose quiet judgment chastened indecorous acts. Her rectitude succeeded as a public sign, but this dignity veiled a never-before vented appetite “for blood” (86). Learning this truth means leaving behind the carefully gridded city and entering the unmapped territories of the human spirit. Joe and Violet usher her through this terrain.

The distance between Clifton Place, where Alice lives, and Lenox Avenue, the location of Joe and Violet’s lodgings, covers nearly thirteen miles. If this physical gap seems substantial, consider also these characters’ radically different personalities. Where Alice shares tea with the Miller sisters, prim neighbors whose favorite topic is New York City’s many “signs of Imminent Demise,” Violet straightens the hair of prostitutes, and Joe beds a teenage girl (56). These stark distinctions imply separation, but these characters’ fates are closely intertwined. Alice explains her strictness toward Dorcas by alluding to her own girlhood, in which “hysteria . . . violence” and the “damnation of pregnancy without marriageability” often caused black folks to make their young women “prisoner[s] of war” (76, 77). Though this history clarifies her behavior, her breakthrough occurs when she shares the consciousness of “mean” women like Violet and lovesick adulterers like Joe (4). Her shared consciousness does not entail approval of the Traces, yet it does require moving the couple’s situation from gossip to concern. By smashing the silence that separated her from them, Alice discovers within Joe and Violet vestiges of her own tamped down anger and fear. Just as her emotions moved her about the city, generating misguided faith in exclusivity, the Traces also cut a path albeit from the South to the North that sees setting as destiny.
Before they reside in New York City, Joe and Violet farm in Virginia. This thirteen-year stretch, from 1893 to 1906, not only solidifies their marriage but also connects them in intriguing ways to Alice, Mattie, and Ben. Where renting apartments exposes Alice and Mattie to estrangement, exploitation, and despair, Joe and Violet begin their lives together by experiencing tenant farming, a rural renting with some dangers akin to its urban cousin. Tenant farming was one of the “roots of . . . black poverty,” and Ben’s dilemma verified its emotional tolls (Mandle v). Despite these perils, it emerged as a site of bonding for Joe and Violet. The couple worked some of “the worst land in the county” for two years (126). After their debt ballooned to eight hundred dollars, he cobbled together profits from milling while she tended their rental. Five years of labor cleared their ledger. Framing their relationship to property, the Traces’ accomplishment reinforces the limits of physical space’s impact on identity. This truth surfaces in Dixie but Morrison lets it travel.

While socioeconomic accounts accurately capture some realities of practices such as tenant farming, their snapshots are rarely comprehensive. Joe and Violet confound these foreshortened narratives. Even as the couple confronts hardships, their spirits register resolve rather than defeat. This resilience goads their adventurous trek to New York City and suggests their ideas about black community. Where A Lesson Before Dying presents Tante Lou’s belief that serving your people required physical presence, Jazz elevates shared consciousness to an equal footing. Joe’s infidelity and Violet’s stalking show that such sharing is no panacea; nonetheless, communion replaces bourgeois bases for collectivity. Revising property pursuits so that empathy as opposed to exclusivity reigns, Jazz portrays its elders’ journeys toward sincere devotion and their inchoate attempts to divert younger generations away from an ethics of pleasure. These wildly diverse efforts signal Jazz and Women’s engagement with twentieth-century creative quandaries.

African American novelists, especially between 1945 and 1970, struggle with artistic liberty in the context of white prescriptions. Reminiscent of Mattie and Alice facing American myths about property, these writers too often disparaged black resources. Women and Jazz use their elders’ disillusionments regarding real estate and community to suggest that ignoring cultural affinity can cause innovation to stagnate. This becomes a crucial message for prizewinning black novelists as they sort their literary traditions. Although black archives do not nullify white aesthetic expectations, they do orient artists in cosmopolitan spaces that strive to get them lost. Like Women and Jazz’s cities, such spaces could
be symbolic (i.e., an apartment building’s fragmentation) or literal (i.e., New York’s grid). The key when navigating these spaces is grounding one’s responses in empathy. The portrayals of violence in *Women* and *Jazz* clarify the merits of this approach.

**Violent Reconciliations**

In *Violence and the Black Imagination* (1993), Ronald Takaki observed that too often, analysts generalized group behaviors without sufficiently accounting for personality. He concluded that by examining “blacks . . . as individuals” who “uniquely experienced . . . often chaotic and always terrible social realities,” a researcher could glean cultural attitudes about “violence and rebellion” (12, 13). Even though Takaki focused on the nineteenth-century psyche, his insights apply to *Women* and *Jazz*. Morrison and Naylor wrote these two novels during a moment when policies such as mandatory sentencing, antigang policing, and three-strikes statutes were beginning to dominate public discussions about violence. Sensing within these conversations the totalizing tendencies that Takaki rued, the novelists responded by placing vicious acts in the center of their plots. Each woman explores black on black violence, and though *Women* and *Jazz* are set in the 1960s and 1920s respectively, these novels dialogue with post–civil rights realities. These dialogues not only address social constructions of aggression but also the representation of blackness. Naylor make her novel’s structure central to this engagement.

*Women*, for Michael Awkward, “demonstrate[s] that the narratively disconnected texts of individual protagonists can be forged into a unified whole” (98). Though his observation clarifies how the book combines varied accounts of black womanhood, it skims over why the tension between disconnection and unity exists. Naylor’s narrative structure symbolizes the hazards of collectivity, and her treatment of violence shows why such dangers matter. C.C. Baker, a young resident of Brewster Place,

42. *Violence in the Black Imagination*’s publication history interconnects interestingly with those of *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Jazz*. Takaki’s book was initially printed in 1978, three years before Naylor finished *Women*. In 1993, a year after *Jazz*’s publication, an expanded edition of *Violence in the Black Imagination* appeared. This edition included a preface where Takaki suggested that the 1992 Rodney King incident showed how America’s racial tensions mounted during the Reagan era. *Women* and *Jazz* address these realities in their probing of violence.

43. Regarding race and law enforcement, see Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010).
heads a crew that rapes Lorraine, and Ben tries to aid her after the attack. Instead of welcoming him, she responds by grasping a brick, “splitting his forehead and . . . rendering his brains just a bit more useless than hers” (173). This murder narrowly precedes her death. If Ben’s and Lorraine’s corpses delineate threats of escapism and hatred, then their senseless passing also tests Brewster Place’s posture toward a “world tumbling down around” it (141). The blended fate of an elder and a young woman invest this testing with powerful significance. Although C.C. and his pals do not endorse Alice Manfred’s elitist strategies, their sexist attempts to control the neighborhood reflect a similar investment in hierarchies of belonging. C.C.’s criteria stem from intimidation, and his violent repression threatens to become Brewster’s binding agent. While Lorraine lacks such spitefulness, her brutality carries unmistakable judgment. Life, for her, when laced with inconsolable misery demands the deliverance of death. Facing this uncertain harvest, Kiswana tries to redeem calamity with idealism.

Kiswana’s dream of a Brewster Place tenant’s association captures the enthusiasm and the sincerity of 1960s activism. Her grassroots commitment, though it vexes her mother, is inspiring. Despite her inspiration, she discovers that unity requires more than just positive energy. Lorraine expresses the challenges: “That was the problem with so many black people—they just sat back and complained . . . Grabbing an attitude.”

44. Lorraine’s gesture holds several possible meanings. It could be seen as retaliatory. Aware of his alcoholism, she perhaps views his inability to stop her rape as a byproduct of drunken disregard and thus a betrayal of the father-daughter surrogacy that emerged in their earliest meeting. Alternately, her act could be deemed a merciful release. If her meetings with Ben have introduced her to his spiritual lacerations, then she may feel that confronting her ravaging may add another octave to the tinkling “crystal bells” that already reverberate across his conscience (149). Believing that such a sound might be too burdensome, she may have opted—in a kind of mercy killing—to silence the havoc in Ben’s head.

45. Lorraine’s act in some ways recalls Eva Peace’s decision to set her son Plum on fire. While she knows that he will die, Eva also believes that because of his drug addiction, he is already succumbing to lifelessness.

46. Barbara Christian observes, “In the geographical world Naylor is creating, Brewster Place and Linden Hills coexist, and persons from each place have attitudes about the other. So touched by the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s, Melanie Browne of Linden Hills changes her name to Kiswana and goes down to live with ‘the people’” (108). In this regard, Kiswana recalls Beneatha in A Raisin in the Sun and the title character of the Friends of Distinction’s song “Willa Faye.”

47. In addition to optimism, black activism also bred disenchantment. Nelson George argues that black nationalist characterizations like the ones found in Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters (1980) tap “into the collective exhaustion of the generation that fought furiously for black advancement but” then found “itself confronting an unfinished agenda and middle age” (16). Though Naylor writes in the context of that exhaustion, she chooses in Women to focus on the cusp of such frustration. A decade later, John Edgar Wideman would offer a full-blown radical burnout in Philadelphia Fire.
tude and thinking that you were better than these people just because a lot of them were poor and uneducated wouldn’t help either” (141–42). Attempting to bridge the gaps in schooling and finances that separate her from many Brewster residents, Kiswana promotes informed, collective action. Her prescriptions—rent strikes, Shakespeare in the park, and the block party—represent one form of black unity. Joined by her boyfriend Abshu, she seeks a Marxist-inflected empowerment. Though her agenda stresses pride, it underestimates the empathy and the trust that must precede such remedies. Like the Brotherhood in Invisible Man, Kiswana’s brand of rescue neglects too much of the human equation. If romantic radicalism cannot stop the tenant’s association from foundering, then Naylor suggests that elderly perspective could aid in addressing urban disarray.

Mattie administers emotional salves throughout Women, and, like the matriarch in Bill Withers’s 1971 hit “Grandma’s Hands,” she specializes in comfort without judgment. Her experiences of exile and abandonment allow her to midwife folks through distress. In particular, she does not shrink from the transgenerational dilemmas that threaten Brewster Place’s future. When Sophie’s homophobia discomfits Lorraine, Mattie speaks up. Following Ben’s and Lorraine’s deaths, she remains committed to Kiswana’s block party, a fundraiser meant to promote harmony. Mattie’s efforts though consistent seem ineffectual. She cannot stem intolerance’s murderous consequences, and her participation in the block party is marred by confusion between dream and reality. While these results inspire pessimism, Mattie’s example replaces an activist agenda with fellowship rituals. Tragedy, in many shapes and sizes, embroiders urban existence, yet kindness and care undergird a healing concern. While that emotional investment cannot staunch pain, it fosters possibilities that might otherwise be obscured. This potential for imagination forms a connective tissue within Women’s black community. In Jazz, Morrison revises the source and the shape of such connection.

48. Abshu’s production of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream reflects a tendency to use colorblind casting to transform the consciousness of black communities. By producing western canonical works, black actors and actresses—according to this performance philosophy—proved their skill and ennobled their ostensibly black patrons. As Naylor’s depiction shows, this approach to art proved popular, controversial, and largely ineffectual. For more on colorblind casting, see Ayanna Thompson’s Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance (2006). I take up John Edgar Wideman’s treatment of this issue in chapter 6.

49. Margaret Whitt asserts that Mattie Michael functions “as matriarch, surrogate mother, and mentor” (17). Mattie anticipates such figures in the fiction of John Edgar Wideman, Toni Morrison, and Ernest Gaines. She also intriguingly inflects the anxieties about white mentorship that Alice Walker and Charles Johnson manifest.
Jazz explores disaffected lovers, a theme that Morrison has treated repeatedly. By presenting Joe and Violet’s strained marriage, the novel hints at the impulses that lead one to mistake excitement for satisfaction. Joe’s relationship with Dorcas carries that misperception. He casts her as the listener to whom he could unburden himself. In place of the “inside nothing” caused by his mother’s abandonment, he gained succor, the ear of a girl who understood him better than folks “his own age” (37). This emotional connection appears an essential part of Joe and Dorcas’s relationship, and it colors their coupling: “They try not to shout, but can’t help it. Sometimes he covers her mouth with the palm of his hand . . . and if he can, if he thinks of it in time, he bites the pillow to stop his own yell” (39). The couple’s passion seems spontaneous and convincing, but just as Alice deals with self-deception Joe struggles to decipher his lust. On the one hand, Dorcas is to him “the reason Adam ate the apple and its core” (133). Alternately, she represents capriciousness, the type of young girl who would throw him over for a womanizing young rooster. Joe and Dorcas’s affair becomes a crucial catalyst. They deliver both the Trace and the Manfred households from the tyranny of the urban grid, yet the city remains a space where “blood will have blood” (Macbeth III, iv, 123). Just as epiphany in Beloved costs a human life, enlightenment in Jazz begins with a dead body.

Dorcas thrills to the trickiness of the city. She is, like Joe and Violet, a claimed orphan, yet her temperament betrays a compensatory volatility. Holding to the memories of her lost parents, she cries in Joe’s arms and puts her loss beside his so convincingly that he announces that she is a revelation as eventful as original sin. He says that because of her, he will, like Adam, carry the “taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life” (133). Despite such devotion, she manifests hardness and begins a relationship with a man whose diffidence toward her shames Joe’s gifts of Cleopatra cosmetics and the cuticle-clipping manicures she performed for him. In Dorcas’s volatility, Morrison not only offers an allegory of New York City but also a caution regarding human character. Dorcas’s death extends these connections.

50. Morrison’s interest in cooled affection surfaces as early as The Bluest Eye where Cholly and Pauline’s most tender moments precede their move to Lorain, Ohio. Likewise in Sula, Eva and Boy-Boy begin amid tangerine dreams and end in hateful estrangement. The same could be said of Nel and Jude, a pair whose love always seems more expedient than passionate, but their severance carries electricity. Extending the line, Son and Jadine in Tar Baby join Macon Dead II and Ruth in Song of Solomon to create a passel of Morrisonian characters that have loved and lost. These returns, I believe, constitute a professional taking stock—an activity that is quite significant both in the aftermath of the controversies surrounding Beloved and in anticipation of the Nobel Prize, an honor that Morrison could not have known was coming.
Joe Trace conflates his southern upbringing and his urban disorientation when he takes his gun and goes “hunting” for his mistress.\footnote{Joe’s hunting signals Morrison’s return to a trope that she had explored in \textit{Song of Solomon}. There, Guitar Bains is another hunter who shelves his gun in the confines of the city. If Guitar’s anecdote about shooting a doe metaphorically registers the shame associated with wounding a female, then Joe’s fatal shooting of Dorcas suggests the dangers that regional baggage poses in the metropolis. Joe Trace also offers Morrison’s reaction to David Bradley’s \textit{The Chaneysville Incident} and Gloria Naylor’s \textit{Mama Day} (1988), other novels about woodcraft.} Though he claims that her gender precludes any desire to “hurt” her, his anger along with her vanity prove fatal. Joe tracks Dorcas to a house party, and to his surprise, he finds her there with a younger man whose type she had ridiculed as lazy and inattentive. This development pushes Joe, a hunter’s hunter, beyond his training and induces him to give vent to a “broken heart” (133). Though his shot wounds Dorcas, her best friend Felice tells Joe and Violet later that the reason she died was because she would not go get medical treatment. Her last words, according to Felice were, “There’s only one apple . . . Just one. Tell Joe” (213). While it is tempting to read this remark as further evidence of Dorcas’s conceit-ness, such an interpretation overlooks her legitimate communion with Joe. In a callous city, Dorcas provides an emotional space into which Joe can fit his emptiness. Her complexity joins with his hunger, and the result is an unruly comfort, one unraveling expectations and convictions across several households. Joe’s interactions with Violet and his implicit ones with Alice show how tragedy insists upon community.

The Trace and Manfred households are thirteen miles apart, but the keener separation is caused by “the impunity of the man” that slept with and shot a “defenseless girl” (73). Twenty years after a hopeful departure from the South, Joe and Violet are “barely speaking to each other” (36). Similarly, Alice Manfred had mulled the “brutalizing men” and “brutal women” who had invaded her “house,” and like Baby Suggs, she had “withdrawn in her grief and shame” (74). The divisions among these three characters metaphorically represent major rents in late twentieth-century black existence. By candidly confronting these sites of humiliation, Morrison suggests that healing requires both desperate affection and mortifying commitment. She rejects an ethics of cool and the luxury of dignity; rather, the novelist places her characters outside of propriety in a space of raw frankness. They sacrifice respectability in the service of fellowship.

Like Sethe and Paul D, infidelity separates Joe and Violet, but this betrayal recalls them to the appetites that first joined them. Running from motherlessness and fantasies of Golden Grey, they indeed wonder
whether they have substituted one another for these earlier fixations, yet through the season with Dorcas, the couple discovers the truth of what they share, a dedication to intimacy. Ironically, Alice’s reminder to Violet lubricates the discovery. When Violet arrived at Dorcas’s funeral and tried to deface the girl’s corpse, she not only aroused wonderment about her sanity but also reinforced for Alice the perversity of black powerlessness. The grieving aunt stated that she would have had both Joe and Violet locked up if “everything she knew about Negro life had made it even possible to consider” voluntarily calling the police (74). Capping Alice’s realization that “reraising” of Dorcas had been unsuccessful, Violet’s performance at the funeral formed a gulf between these two women (60). Still, when Violet sought her out, Alice—who initially insisted that she didn’t “have a thing to say to” Violet—concluded that she did want to say a few words about “loss” (75, 87). These words led the women to meditations on “real thing[s],” and in that moment of bluntness, Alice told Violet: “You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it . . . Nobody’s asking you to take it. I’m sayin make it” (113). Alice’s admonition not only anticipates the pain of forgiveness, but also shows that you will never escape the cuts to your spirit. Despite or perhaps because of such wounds, love spawns unity.

*Women* and *Jazz* present violence as a prelude to reconciliation within black communities. Although Lorraine, Ben, and Dorcas all recall *Invisible Man*’s Tod Clifton as folks whose deaths are linked to urban chaos, Naylor and Morrison eschew the underground retreat that Ellison grants his protagonist. They force their characters toward socialization. Their decisions suggest a deeper faith in black communion, but even in their portrayals, telling differences emerge. The block party that concludes *Women* culminates in the dismantling of the wall that separates Brewster Place from the rest of the city. While this action seemingly signals optimism, it masks a lingering polarization. Theresa, Lorraine’s partner, initially tries to leaves Brewster Place as the neighborhood’s women destroy the wall. When a cabby speeds off with her suitcase, she joins the female throng and lobs bricks into the avenue. Theresa’s actions burnish the community’s cohesion, but tied to her flight, her deeds bespeak catharsis rather than empathy. This eruptive release contrasts sincere consciousness sharing, and such contrasts generate sustainability concerns. When fellowship follows from shame, can it last? *Jazz* takes up this question by focusing on eccentricity.

Joe and Violet are both tied to peculiar aspects of Dorcas’s death. From shooting her to slicing her, this couple epitomizes quirky or “spooky”
interconnection (3). Their quirkiness prompts wonderment about their sanity, but by the end of Jazz, when they form a “scandalizing threesome” with Felice, their oddity marks a profound endurance (6). Joe and Violet push through calamity with quotidian rituals and shameless affection. Whether smelling fat-fried ham or whispering “under the covers,” the two together shape a sustaining generosity (228). Their union inspires the community’s hope. If Jazz’s narrator is the voice of the city, then her admiration of Joe and Violet’s intimacy conveys not only a personal outlook but also a metropolitan one. Her confession that she must have missed some things about the couple make her look unreliable, but the fact that she found their survival unexpected bespeaks a waning cynicism. Through durable triumph and gently battered doubt, Morrison expresses the protocols that can bolster black life in the city. Her portrayals also engage late twentieth-century black artistic communion.

Women and Jazz conclude in the space between imagination and memory. The block party at the end of Women barely emerges as a real experience; instead, Mattie’s imaginings dominate that section. In Jazz, Violet and Joe’s attempts to save their marriage are punctuated by a tableau of blood, a bird, a well, and laughter, markers of experiences spanning the North and the South. While neither book sanitizes black experience, both allude to elders’ efforts to make meaning. Each also includes a younger generation who witnesses these efforts. Kiswana organizes Women’s block party, and Felice—Dorcas’s best friend—forms an odd trio with Violet and Joe. This conjoining of elder striving and youthful witnessing becomes the foundation of meaningful tradition. As Women’s revision of The Bluest Eye and Naylor’s 1987 National Book Award judgeship showed, creative fellowship does not require mindless veneration. Morrison’s reply in Jazz accepted that premise even as it extolled the benefits of superlative perception. These exchanges posited a creative collaboration that reinforced interdependence and honored autonomy. Rejecting the belief that such communion depended upon consensus, Naylor and Morrison nonetheless illustrate the Black Archivists’ leveraging of black literary traditions. Their novels’ handling of the Great Migration reveals the deep significance of these efforts.

Handoffs

Just as Ernest Gaines had done in A Lesson Before Dying, Naylor and Morrison attempted to address the crisis produced by the urbanization
of African Americans. Where Gaines greeted black folks’ shifts to the city with Dixie-bound tales of segregation, Naylor and Morrison anchored their fictions using the Great Migration. Their decisions to do so reflected complex agendas. As Farah Jasmine Griffin and Lawrence Rodgers have shown, the black migration story going back to slavery powerfully evokes liberty and rupture. This dual concern with being “temporarily free” and “critical[y]” separated haunts black life from Emancipation through the civil rights era, and post–civil rights, its resonances have weighty implications for society in general and literature in particular (Rodgers 4). With roughly commensurate growth in the black middle class and the black poor and incarcerated, the late twentieth-century concerns about urban modernity and the success of rural to urban transition acquire immense significance. The literary adjunct to those charged discussions addresses the black topic text, technical skill, and professional acculturation. *Women* and *Jazz*’s intergenerational conflicts provide intriguing salvos in the debate.

If Hugh Gloster in the 1940s had suggested that black writers experiment with the white topic text, then novelists in the late twentieth century found their technical acuity and professional aptitude linked to a litmus test regarding the portrayal of white oppression.52 *Women*’s intraracial depictions and *Jazz*’s tinted racial references seem a good ways from transgressing even the most stringent standards, but through inventive uses of elder-youngerster tensions, both books take up white repression’s place in black personality. If these fictional accounts provoke thought, then the relationship between Naylor and Morrison extends the contemplation. Naylor publishes *Women*, her first novel in 1982, and she immediately wins critical approbation and the rare acclaim of a National Book Award. Between *Women* and the publication of *Jazz*, she writes two books, *Linden Hills* (1985) and *Mama Day* (1988), and Morrison completes one, *Beloved*. Naylor’s professional esteem peaks during this interval, and even though she is steadily productive, her grip on both prestige and black literary tradition slips. While Morrison says very little publicly regarding Naylor, *Jazz*, the book that backs up the success of *Beloved*, suggests a profound sensitivity to her corpus. The novel’s major

52. For mid-century black critics such as Gloster, Thomas Jarrett, and Nick Aaron Ford, black novelists’ depictions of white characters—especially white characters that were not racist oppressors—would signify a movement toward “full” artistic “maturity” and “universality” (Jarrett 315). The ironic consequences of their positions emerges in the late twentieth-century conviction that African American writers spend too much time rehearsing white perfidy and too little time taking responsibility for their own plights. While such discourses seem largely political, the careers of the Black Archivists constantly show the literary permutations of such ideological dustups.
features—short-changed bourgeois propriety, battle-scarred black hetero-
sexual romance, and a hoodwinked narrator—all dialogue with Naylor’s
work, and its closing tableau of Joe, Violet, and Felice present an inter-
generational coalescing that models principled cultural solidarity. This
tableau acknowledges Naylor’s integrity in voting against Morrison for
the 1987 National Book Award; nevertheless, it asks why in the after-
math black creative fellowship faltered. With these questions, this chapter
returns to where it started, the contemplation of cultural communion.

The migrants in Women and Jazz range from hopeful to glum. While
this range reinforces the black community’s heterogeneity, it also high-
lights shared experiences as a powerful basis for connection. The charac-
ters in these novels make that connection across barriers of gender, sexual
orientation, class, manners, religion, and age. As Naylor and Morrison
ponder whether the novel can recuperate black togetherness, they reveal
the challenges that black writers faced as they tried to connect across dis-
tinct artistic outlooks.53 Their experiences show that community is more
than unanimity, yet they also reveal how the Black Archivists’ growth
hinges on deciphering complicated inheritances. In Song of Solomon and
The Chaneysville Incident, this deciphering centers on both family and lit-
erary traditions.

53. Justine Tally argues that Jazz is simultaneously an “homage to a cultural background
whose values have been communicated for thousands of years through an oral tradition” and a re-
alization that slavery and the Great Migration have led to “the breakdown in the traditional black
community.” Since “the stories” that grounded black existence “were no longer being effectively
transmitted,” Morrison—in Tally’s view—posits the novel as a narrative technology that can “take
the place of communal storytelling” (17). Tally’s insight could be applied to The Women of Brewster
Place as well.