

THE OTHER CITY: HARLEM IN ANN PETRY'S *THE STREET*

MANUELA MATAS LLORENTE
Universidad de Sevilla

In 1949, Ralph Ellison asserted that Harlem was nowhere.

Living in Harlem, says Ellison, is to dwell in the very bowels of the city; it is to pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter under foot with garbage and decay. Harlem is a ruin- ... Overcrowded and exploited politically and economically, Harlem is the scene and the symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth (295-96).

A few years earlier, in 1946, Afro-American woman novelist Ann Petry had already captured that same symbolic character of black Harlem and turned it into a successful piece of fiction: *The Street*.

In spite of its quality as an urban novel, insofar as it takes place in New York City and deals with several aspects of city life, many of the pages devoted to Petry's first work tend to focus on its protagonist, on the characters surrounding her, and the myths involved in her pursuit of success and her ultimate, doomed failure¹. Strange enough, little or no room has been made for one of the most significant elements in the novel: the street which gives a title to Petry's account of how Lutie Johnson, a young mulatto woman, abandoned wife and eager mother, struggles to find a place for herself and her eight-year-old son, in a world dominated by white power. However, one could argue that, as much as Lutie's destiny is marked by her being a good-looking, black woman

1. See Vernon E. Lattin «Ann Petry and the American Dream» in *Black American Literature Forum* (vol. 12, No. 2, 1978. pp. 69-72), Bernard W. Bell «Ann Petry's Demythologizing of American Culture and Afro-American Character» in *Conjuring* (Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers eds. Bloomington: Indiana U.P.,1985. pp. 105-115) and Marjorie Pryse «*Pattern Against the Sky: Deism and Motherhood in Ann Petry's The Street*» in *Conjuring* (Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers eds. Bloomington: Indiana U.P.,1985. pp. 116-131).

(the classic «tragic mulatto»), it is determined by her reading, or rather misreading, of that street in Harlem from which she desperately hopes to get away, and eventually destroys her. It seems then important to explore the black inner city in its manifold implications, to look through the mirror where one can actually see the deep annihilation of its inhabitants.

The potential of Harlem as a literary metaphor goes beyond its association with black ghetto life. An example of what Spanish architect and Art historian Fernando Chueca Goitia calls «ciudad sin alma», this area of New York shares with the slum of paleotechnic cities its being «un hacinamiento de gente en un lugar que puede ser designado con nombre propio a los efectos postales ... sin adquirir la más leve de las instituciones que caracterizan a una ciudad en un sentido sociológico» (19). But the Harlem in *The Street* eludes any apprehension as a complete whole. As Petry seems to suggest, it is a world of opposites. Depending on your position (within the black community or outside in the white world) who you are and what you need, Harlem may be a place of excitement and hope or turn into a symbol of alienation and frustration. It is its very elusiveness what makes it the ideal setting for Lutie Johnson's rise and fall.

The novel opens with a full description of the scene in which the tragedy of our heroine is going to take place. Before even knowing who she is going to be, the reader encounters a windy, November night on 116th street, in Central Harlem. One of the walkers in this hostile environment, in a clear fight against natural forces, is Lutie Johnson, desperately looking for an apartment where she and her son can start a new life. Through her thoughts and comments, we are introduced to the world of the street, we see Mrs. Hedges' eyes «still and malignant as the eyes of a snake» (6), we feel the instinctive fear she felt when she met the Superintendent of the building, who will later try to rape her and will manage to get her son in prison, we are told of «tales about things that people sensed before they actually happened» (15) but, after having the signs interpreted, we discover that, despite the bad omens and premonitions, this section closes with Lutie's optimistic assessment of her new home: «Now that she had this apartment she was just a step farther up in the ladder of success» (25). How can she be so utterly deceived?

As a place defined by difference, Harlem may be both the symbol of material prosperity and the form of a new way of colonization. On the one hand, Harlem represents for Lutie and many of its inhabitants the setting for the fulfilment of hopeless expectations, a new beginning. For some others, it is just the last painful step in their climbing down the social ladder. The site of sexual freedom and abandon in Harlem Renaissance mythology, places like the Junto- a white-owned bar where blacks linger in the hope of forgetting their reality - signify the dream of possibility and equality that cannot be found in the outside world. Working men, unemployed, old and young women, all of them find there something they lack. However, everything about it is nothing but a sheer illusion, from the mirror which creates the impression the place is bigger than it really is, to the white waiters whose «courteous friendliness ... helped rebuild egos

battered and bruised during the course of the day's work» (143). It is people like Boots Smith, who sang their way out of poverty, Mrs. Hedges and her house of prostitution the ones who contribute to feed Lutie's hope for a better life, and perpetuate the myth. A few blocks away, reality breaks into the midst of fantasy.

A city within a city, Harlem is segregated from the white world by the color line which marks the space for blackness and whiteness. Within its limits, in the Black World behind the Veil, as DuBois called the Veil of Race that separates white and black America (The Souls of Black Folk 265), Harlem has a potential for destruction hidden beneath a surface of gaiety and entertainment. In sharp opposition to the novel's opening image, we follow Lutie's thoughts into a nice street in a white, rich Connecticut neighborhood where she used to work for the Chandlers. The strange white world they represent «made her feel she was looking through a hole in a wall at some enchanted garden. The people on the other side of the wall knew less about her than she knew about them» (41). That wall, quickly built up by just adopting the right tone of voice, divides black and white culture and socio-economic values, the same way Mrs. Chandler sets Lutie apart by making clear she is her colored maid. For the white world, all blacks are neatly wrapped in a package labeled «colored»; «a package that called for certain kinds of jobs and a special kind of treatment» (72). Behind the Veil, black women read as latent prostitutes eager to steal a white man from his wife. In the Chandlers' section «the price of something called Tell and Tell and American Nickel and United States Steel had a direct effect on emotions» (43).

Segregated by color, Harlem signifies the whites' attempt to keep African-Americans in their place:

It wasn't just this city. It was any city where they can set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side, so that black folks are crammed on top of each other - jammed and packed and forced into the smallest possible space until they were completely cut off from light and air» (206). Conditioned by their lack of possibility, black men, like Lutie's father, spend their time drinking and doing nothing; others, unable to find a job, find themselves a woman, different from their working wives, who can restore in them some of their lost self-respect; black women work all day long in the house of some white family and return to dark apartments from where their husbands have long left. African-Americans, formerly subjugated by slavery are now exploited by the northern world that the city signifies: «They were North's lynch mobs ... the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place» (323). As supposedly free and independent, they have no right to claim on former masters. More an attitude than a simple place, streets like the one Lutie lives on seem to be the cause of black people's destruction:

The same combination of circumstances had evidently made Mrs. Hedges... turn to running a fairly well kept whore house...; and the superintendent of the building - well, the street had pushed him into basements away from light and air until he was being eaten up by some horrible obsession; and still other streets had turned Min, the

woman who lived with him, into drab drudge so spineless she was like a soggy dishrag. (57).

Hence, the stratified structure in which the city is divided allows no balance, its inhabitants define themselves by the place where they live and the world where they belong. No wonder, the whole novel is full of symbolic and physical traps which contribute to maintain black people safely enclosed and isolated from the white world beyond the ghetto limits. The small, dark apartments where they live, the servile jobs offered to kids for early training into thinking that mopping floors is the farthest they can get, the rent they pay every month to the white landlord, the poor level of education offered. Even the singing job Lutie is offered hides the secret intention of forcing her into becoming Junto's mistress.

Deeply conditioned by ghetto life, blacks get trapped inside a vicious circle. Unable to find a position in society, African-Americans' identity is literally nowhere, wandering along the streets of Harlem which become a symbol of their inferiority. For the white community, Harlem is the mirror image of blacks' lack of humanity, the inner city where whites can read them as savages and reassure their reading. Neither the place nor its people are real entities but reflections of their reciprocal filth and primitivism. For Bud's white teacher, unable to overcome her racial prejudices, even the way passers-by ignore her in the streets of Harlem becomes a symbol of their violent character: «she thought of every person she passed as a threat to her safety» (331). Her students terrify her, their smell is offensive «bold, strong, lusty and fighting» (328), the way they act, a complete mystery to her who is not able to distinguish their lies from their truth. White reporters would turn a skinny, young black into a «burly Negro» killed while trying to hold up a bakery. To the white man's eyes «The Negro was never an individual. He was a threat or an animal, or a curse, or a blight, or a joke» (199). Overworked women like Min are laughed at by their white madams as if they were «a deaf, dumb, blind thing completely devoid of understanding...» (127). Having no real position within the system, no work, no quality, no worth, blacks' lives become meaningless, their existence useless. Invisible to the white world, these conditions of displacement turn African-Americans into walking dead whose grave is, literally and symbolically, Harlem.

Taking up again the ambivalent character of the black city, Petry makes the dwelling of the living dead coexist with a Harlem where blacks can find their own individuality. As mentioned before, the streets of Harlem become the scene for premature deaths. Literally killed by a white baker's knife, a teenager's death gave her sister «a look of resignation, of complete acceptance. It was an expression that said the girl hoped for no more than this from life» (197), the same awful look of a sixteen-year-old girl laying hurt on a hospital stretcher. With no hope for an improvement in their condition, they continue to exist with a dispassionate lack of interest, dragging themselves into another day. The Super and Mrs. Hedges are virtually buried alive, cut off from the outside world. His life is surrounded by silence, living in «the darkest apartment, the smallest, most unrentable apartment» (7), «No pictures, no rugs, no newspapers, no

magazines, nothing to suggest anyone had ever tried to make it look homelike» (24). Horribly scarred in her face and body, Mrs. Hedges is determined «never to expose herself to the prying, curious eyes of the world» (257). The physical conditions of the Harlem apartments (small, dark rooms) may be interpreted as their dwellers' symbolic grave whose walls suffocate them, whose silence can be heard under the sound of any other noise: «the three rooms with the silence and the walls pressing in» (150), a place to bury any hope for transcendence.

However, superimposed onto that world of deadly existence, Harlem is able to give its people a sense of humanity they lack in the outside world. Because of its isolation, the black inner city protects its inhabitants from the outer hatred which deprives them from their self. Coming out of the subway, Lutie thinks that «she never felt really human till she reached Harlem and got away from the hostility in the eyes of the white women who stared at her on the downtown streets and in the subway» (57). Paradoxically, the walls of white prejudice contribute to design a shelter where African-Americans can recreate their identity once they are freed from the contempt in the eyes of the downtown world, they instantly become individuals. Up here they are no longer creatures labeled «colored» and therefore all alike... The same people who had made themselves small on the train, even on the platform, suddenly grew so large they could hardly get up the stairs to the street together (57-58).

Unfortunately, as we have already seen, this is just one of the many aspects Harlem consists of, enhancing its deceitful nature and its elusive character.

At the end, Lutie transmutes into an aggressive and enraged person. The sudden breaking of reality into her world of illusion makes her kill Boots Smith (the one who disappointed her most) whose figure is transformed into «everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her» (429). By striking him, «she was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from where there was no escape» (430). Although she manages to get away, nothing in the novel may lead to our thinking that her escape is not a temporary one in another big city, Chicago, that «would swallow her up» (434).

Harlem is then nowhere and anywhere. The city in *The Street* or any other would have placed limitations on Lutie. She lacks the power to counteract the forces of the slum. Unable or unwilling to read the signs which foretell her fall, the protagonist acquires her tragic character through her own attempts to overcome her destiny. The harder she tries to get out of the street, the more difficult it is for her to face it. Her believing in Harlem as a place of transcendence, what Petry makes true for some of her characters, precipitates her failure. Lutie's mistake reads like the big mistake in the history of African-Americans: aspiring to find in the north «the apparent peace of a distant mountain, made some fatal error of judgement and fell into a great chasm of maze like passages that promise ever to lead to the mountain but lead ever against the wall» (Ellison 298). A wall of discrimination and prejudice built up to reinforce black people's oppression in white America.

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