

Coming of Age and Urban Landscapes in Edward P. Jones's "Spanish in the Morning" and "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons"

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African American author Edward P. Jones's two collections, *Lost in the City* (1992) and *All Aunt Hagar's Children* (2009), portray the lives of those residents of Washington, D.C. who "don't live in the D.C. found on postcards" (Burns n. pag.). Jones admittedly set out to write about working-class black people who "move through a Washington where museums and monuments play no daily part, not even as card-board backdrops" (Mason 88), and he memorialized "the multitudes who came up out of the South for something better, something different" (Dedication to *All Aunt Hagar's Children*). Both volumes are dedicated to the memory of the author's mother, "who came as well and found far less than even the little she dared hope for" (Dedication to *All Aunt Hagar's Children*), thus foreshadowing the stories' preoccupation with the often bitter reality of urban life in Washington, D.C. Apart from offering "ethnic counter-narratives" (Kennedy and Beuka 11) through thematizing the effects of poverty and race relations, the volumes also bring childhood and memory to the forefront. The short stories "Spanish in the Morning" in *All Aunt Hagar's Children* as well as "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons" in *Lost in the City* give an account of the experiences of two young black girls who are slowly getting a glimpse into the harsh reality of mid-twentieth-century white America.

In "Spanish in the Morning," an unnamed, presumably adult, first-person narrator reminisces about some of her childhood experiences. This richly textured narrative contains a multitude of narratives, set against specific locations, to which she was only a second-hand witness during her childhood. Also, while some of the stories and events that happen directly to her are emotionally taxing, she recounts them without self-reflexivity or any attempt at contextualization. The experiences of the protagonist of "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons," Betsy Ann, are recounted by a third-person narrator. Although contextual clues are offered to aid the reader in discovering the underlying causes of the protagonist's suffering, similarly to "Spanish in the Morning," neither the narrator nor Betsy Ann address them.

Thus, instead of (self-)reflection, places of a variety of scale, from intimate to vast, appear throughout both stories, constructing an intricate system of references. While the urban landscape is the most significant one in the stories, in order to offer a preliminary (re-)interpretation of the urban imaginary in Jones's oeuvre, it is important to attend to other layers as well

since they throw the role of the city into relief. A variety of places, most importantly urban ones, interact with the protagonists' coming-of-age process. The protagonists' memories and identities gain expression in spatial terms, and the geographical landscape is posited as a hindrance to their coming-of-age process insofar as it prevents them from accepting the reality of their loss and prevents them from facing and coping with trauma.

In order to read the protagonists' emotional landscapes, I will refer to the notion of place as used by cultural geographer Jon Anderson. Even though several theoreticians of various academic backgrounds have attempted to account for the differences between locations that are rigidly structured and impersonal and those which are practiced, lived, and transformed by human activity, or have theorized the significance of (urban) areas from Georg Simmel (1903) and Walter Benjamin (1927-40) to Michel de Certeau,¹ it is Anderson's framework that allows not only for the differentiation between abstract spaces and humanized places, but also for the analysis of both material and imaginary places of any scale, ranging from the human skin to the city (38). Anderson argues that spaces are abstract and detached, while places are humanized; that is, affected by human (but not necessarily only human) activity and they are full of meaning for the individual (38). A constituent of the notion of place crucial to my analysis is the "sense of place," first theorized by John Agnew and James Duncan (2), summed up in Anderson's words, as the "traces that tie humans into particular environments" (39). These links, or allegiances (120), can be individual or collective, and they can be emotional, experiential, or affective (39). As Anderson argues, "who we are is fundamentally connected to where we are" (40) since "identity positions are to some extent geographical" (41), or, as philosopher Edward S. Casey points out, relations between self and place are not merely connected, but conflated. However, as I will demonstrate, the heavy emphasis placed on the importance of locations in the selected short stories is excessive and thus hints at a traumatic event in the characters' lives.

A preoccupation with exact locations, spatial relations, and changes of place runs through "Spanish in the Morning." The narrator-protagonist refers to her male family members as men who "came from here and there" (31). The "men in [her] life continued to come to [her]" (32) with their best wishes before her first days at pre-school. Her early education is referred to in spatial terms as well: "as if, my mother was to say, I was going away and never coming back" (31). One of her earliest memories is of sitting on laps of various family members as well as sitting in church, and not only can she remember the address of the church but also the exact location where she sat: "At three months old, I had sat . . . on my mother's lap in the second row of the drafty

church on Minnesota Avenue” (32). Similarly, pinpointing exact locations and situating people is how she remembers them: she remarks not only from which state little-known characters are from, but she often specifies which street they live on. Sadie Cross, for example, is the narrator’s “mother’s best friend from across L Street” (36). She comments on where certain episodes in the lives of these ancillary characters occurred: Sadie’s husband is “One-Eye Jack, whose left eye had been shot out across the D.C.–Maryland line” (36). After narrating Jack’s altercation with a police officer, she comments that the officer’s wife is “at home asleep in her bed in Rockville” (37). Analogously, she emphasizes that one of her uncles is from Philadelphia and identifies her classmates by where they sat in the classroom more than by any other feature (37).

Descriptions of places also feature heavily when it comes to the subject of the protagonist’s education. While her father favors a neighborhood school, her mother insists she attend a remote Catholic institution; in the debate, both schools’ locations are foregrounded. Even though the religious school is far from her home, the narrator articulates her affective attachment to it in terms of spatiality: “I felt strangely at peace . . . as if I had done no more than move from one room in my house to another” (42). When her mother fails to pick her up on time due to a minor accident, the narrator envisions her parents and then “both my grandfathers and my mother’s people and all my father’s people, all of them coming to get me,” rushing through the streets of D.C. (39). Figurative space is also referred to: for the narrator’s father “the letter ‘M,’ for example, had no life if it only existed between ‘L’ and ‘N’” as recited in the alphabet (43), which underscores the ever-present nature of material or imagined places and spaces.

Apart from a general fascination with cataloguing precise locations, the narrator of “Spanish in the Morning” moves in between places arranged in concentric circles from private to public—from the home, the family, the school, and the city—with the last being the most important one. In order to understand the significance of urban landscapes, however, it is first necessary to demonstrate how the other, smaller circles function in the short story.

The home is the primary environment for the narrator, but not because it provides her with a source of comfort. Before starting pre-school and thus venturing out of the familiarity of her home, she is not only encouraged by her family members—she is also sexualized and expected to put on a show: “my uncle bought me nine exquisite dresses and had me model each one for him and his girlfriend before they returned to Philadelphia” (31). More explicit roles of gendered behavior are also pointed out to her: “on a few of the pages [of the notebook received as a present] Sam had drawn some

of the men in my life. 'You can do school work on the rest,' he said and winked" (32), suggesting that she should prioritize something other than education. On the verge of starting kindergarten, she occupies a liminal space, and the fact that she is initiated into her gender role in this crucial period creates a subtly threatening environment.

Apart from being subtly sexualized and learning the roles of gendered behavior, the home is also the locale of absorbing the calamitous history of her family, which, as a consequence, makes the narrator take notice of wider social issues as well. She receives an "education into family reality" by witnessing humiliation (Cheuse n. pag.). The *Kirkus Review's* description of the family as one "blighted by alcoholism and lawlessness" (Review of *All Aunt Hagar's Children*) is an understatement: the stories told to the main characters are rife with both overt and covert racism as well as explicit systemic violence and abuse. The grandfather's past as an abused child and his being an alcoholic are clear to the young girl: "there were nights, too, when my father would watch my grandfather in a piss and drunken sleep on the floor just inside the open front door, the last place he had fallen once he had crawled home" (Jones, "Spanish" 34). The grandfather's alcoholism ultimately results in his family falling apart. Before his wife leaves him, she humiliates their young son—the narrator's father—in front of his sisters by flaunting her physical strength when he refuses to leave:

My grandmother took his shirt in both hands and lifted him up on his tiptoes, the way a strong man might do a lesser man. . . . She raised him up higher with one hand and slapped him. She waited while his whole body registered what she had done, then she slapped him twice more. . . . She released my father, and he crumpled to the floor. (41)

The fact that this story of broken-down resistance and humiliation lives in the imagination of the narrator in such vivid detail suggests that it has been told and re-told multiple times, revealing its firm place and importance in family lore.

Similarly, the uncle who buys the narrator the dresses is involved in an incident at Garfinckel's, a high-end department store, which "had Negroes arrested if they tried to shop there" (32). Thus, the chemist uncle poses as the driver to his light-skinned girlfriend, who is only allowed to enter the store because she passes as a rich white lady. In order to avoid a scandal and please white high-society shoppers, he has to walk "two or so paces behind her up and down Garfinckel's aisles, carrying two small boxes, wrapped and empty" (32). They put on a sophisticated performance of race and race relations; she

even scolds him after he giggles by accident: “Is there something you want to share with us all, Rufus?” (32). The incident is narrated by the protagonist in the way it was probably recounted to her: as a light story, a game, for two young people who were “enveloped in youth” (32). Nevertheless, her tone indicates that she understands this incident to be a revealing sign of ever-present racism as she wryly concludes: “My grandparents did not name him Rufus” (32).

In another story recounted by the protagonist, an ancillary character is involved in a similarly humiliating incident. After being the victim of racially motivated police brutality, he is shamed into silence by two lengthy, carefully composed letters, in which the county government and a lawyer ridicule and blame him for what happened. According to the cynical letters, Jack was shot while changing a flat tire because he “in fact threatened the policeman’s life. . . [and] the life of the policeman’s wife, at home asleep *in her bed* in Rockville. Had Mr. Jack killed the policeman, the letter said, life as the wife then knew it would cease to be. The policeman had no children but nevertheless Mr. Jack had endangered them” (36-37, emphasis added). Racism is presented as a systemic problem that reoccurs in family lore. These demonstrations of power at the expense of the racial other, in Heller McAlpin’s words, “highlight a fraying social fabric and explore the struggle for dignity in a rough world” (n. pag.), thus teaching the protagonist about covert societal norms. While educating a black child in white America about racial realities is considered a necessary step by many families, the fact that the heroine is exposed to these threatening stories at such a young age without any context or explanation makes her home a less-than-optimal environment. The fact that her mother only speaks Spanish in the morning to be “sharp for that day some woman from Mexico, lost and without a word of English, might knock on her door and ask for help” (35) suggests that a stranger might show up unexpectedly at any moment, which only furthers the sense of unease that prevails in the home environment. The atmosphere of the home is governed by a sense of shame and threat, with both being predominantly connected to narratives involving other people, not the heroine, suggesting her inability or unwillingness to remember events from her childhood that center around her.

Another significant place where the main character can continue the process of acculturation is the kindergarten and the school, the environment in which real-life conflicts also occur. Two significant experiences which she is subjected to at these places contribute to the uneasy atmosphere she grows up in. In one incident at the beginning of the school year when she has to wait in the garden of the school for her mother, arriving late to pick her up, the narrator is separated from the familiar environment of her family and is not

yet integrated into the wider circle of society. The separation from her parents causes anxiety at the start of the day: "Then they were gone, but I got the notion that they were just outside the school, standing on New Jersey Avenue or Pierce Street, waiting for me to finish or for me to tell them that I had had enough and wanted to go home" (36). During the afternoon wait, the teachers—all Catholic nuns—discover that the narrator's cognitive abilities are ahead of her age, so they decide to put her into first grade, which is where the second incident happens. When the nuns hear rumors that two students are infatuated with each other, their reaction is severe. First, the students are ordered out of the classroom, then, "after a long, long bit of time we heard a slap, then silence. There was another slap, and there quickly followed a wail from Regina. They all returned shortly, the boy quiet and Regina crying, and Sister took up where we were before Mother Superior had opened the door" (47). This forcible intervention, after which no explanation is given to the children, leaves Regina and the boy so shaken that afterwards they avoid all eye contact (47).

The narrator is thus exposed to another lesson in power relations and humiliation. She attempts to distance herself from it in describing the episode relying on spatial terms and speculating on where exactly the event took place: "we heard them go through the nearby door that led to the stairs going up. They must have stopped in the stairwell because we did not hear them ascending" (47). She considers the whole incident as taboo: "I said nothing about it to my parents" and she is afraid of something she cannot name: "a fear took hold of me through out [sic] all the school days, even though Sister Mary Frances continued to look at me with eyes that said In-You-I-Am-Well-Pleased" (47). Since "In you I am well pleased" is a Biblical reference (Mark 1.11), it is possible that the narrator's anxiety and sense of threat stems from the religious ethos of the school and its inherent rigid hierarchy. The quote itself should have a positive connotation since these words are spoken by the Holy Spirit to Christ upon his baptism (Mark 1.10-11). However, the anxiety-inducing atmosphere of the school is so strict that even the encouraging, yet always surveying gaze of the nun fails to ease the protagonist's shock. Her loss of consciousness, which leaves her injured and bedridden for days, also attests to the severity of the impact (47-48). The link between trauma and its physical consequence is clear: right before she faints, she looks "at Regina's neck and [feels] a great flood" that overwhelms her (47).

In the beginning the school is significant for the protagonist since her mother, as well as the rest of the family, places considerable value on education. Then, the classroom becomes a place in which the protagonist experiences success and praise. However, after overhearing the slaps and the

crying, she begins to have regular nightmares in which she is unable to enter the building. The fact that in her dreams she is locked out of a place where she only gets positive reinforcement signifies that she is afraid she will lose access permanently because of what someone else has done. Victimhood and precaution weigh heavily on her since they call to her mind the countless stories of innocuous actions having sudden and grave consequences. Her Uncle Jack is humiliated by the cynical letters, and, while the Philadelphia uncle's humiliation does not have serious repercussions, the performance he is compelled to put on painfully mimics reality. Having been exposed to these stories, she begins to feel unsafe when fellow pupils are punished by a white person within the earshot of their peers merely because of a rumor. A sense of shame and threat reoccur, again signaled with an emphasis on external circumstances, containing barely any (self-)reflection or any narratives centering around her.

The next circle of the narrator's life is the city itself, a significant topic for Jones. Its evaluation is ambiguous in the protagonist's family lore, inspiring a multitude of attitudes. The narrator mentions that D.C. is thought of in mythical terms, as the sophisticated yet pretentious north in contrast to the earthy south: "In my father's eighth year, my grandmother turned her back on all the life she had known and took my father and his two sisters to Washington, where, South Carolina old folks said, people threw away their dishes after every meal because it was cheaper to buy new ones" (33). The father's initial reluctance to move to the city might stem from the fact that Washington symbolizes the unknown and its associations with his family's final disruption. Later, however, he is in awe of the city: he has "the notion that the soil in D.C. was miraculous, that it would grow anything" (33). The mother, who "came from a long line of Washingtonians" (33), also sees it as a separate entity worthy of admiration.

The capital, while being a tangible and intricate system, is also a metaphorical place with a multitude of values tied to it in the short story. For the narrator, specifically, the city is the least threatening site of all. It is presented like a map, functioning as a constant backdrop of her life-narrative. The narrator organizes her memories around urban places as her emotional attachment to the city (her sense of place) was shaped in childhood, which evokes Anderson's claim according to which our "intimate, everyday interaction with the local" results in the formation of these ties (120). This interaction can be as simple and fundamental as always taking the same route from point A to point B. Anderson argues that through creating "routes" we put down "roots" in these places (120). This is exactly what happens to the narrator of "Spanish in the Morning," whose strong sense of belonging to the

city has been shaped through walking its streets and engaging in a kind of a cartography of the city. For instance, the school her father chooses for her is “less than a hundred feet diagonally across the intersection of L and 1st Streets, close enough for him to stretch and stretch and stretch an arm across the traffic of the intersection into some classroom” (35). The Catholic school she attends is “down L Street where we lived, up 1st Street, and all the way down Pierce Street to the corner of New Jersey Avenue” (35). She gives the address of the church her mother goes to (32), the name of a specific marketplace (32), and when her sister needs medical attention after an accident, the narrator gives the name and location of the hospital she is taken to (43). Specific locations have made an imprint on her mind due to the experiential attachments she has developed to them through the experience of walking these streets again and again. She remembers these locations as being part of a map of the city: always in relation to each other and to her. She sees the city both from above and from within, with a totalizing and an intimate view. That is, disrupting de Certeau’s dialectic of the voyeur and the walker (92), thus elevating the ever-present city to a mythical importance.

The urban environment, then, stands in stark contrast with the anxiety-inducing, shame-ridden, and threatening places of the home and the school. The multitude of references to places in the city seem to anchor the protagonist; they nevertheless signal an unwillingness to narrate her own story and an inability to come to terms with what has happened to her. In the short story, there is only one self-reflexive gesture that indicates the narrator’s attempts to contextualize events and integrate them into a narrative of the self. After she faints, she makes only one isolated, retrospective comment that indicates empathic access to her memory: “It was, I learned later about myself, as if my heart, on the path that was my life, had come to a puddle in the road and had faltered, hesitated, trying to decide whether to walk over the puddle or around it, or even to go back” (48). This narratorial metalepsis, however, is not followed by any explanation as to whether she later crossed the puddle or not. Crossing a body of water, awakening from a dream, or even starting one’s formal education are symbols of coming of age, which, nevertheless, does not happen in the short story. She lives in an atmosphere in which stories of racism and injustice abound and which insinuates that even though school is important, gendered predilections—like caring about clothes and boys—should be of special interest to her. Then, in the unforgiving atmosphere of a religious institution, she witnesses the ramifications of an innocent infatuation that develops between two students. The contradiction between these two kinds of knowledges increase her anxiety. The city, meanwhile, with its familiar grid, provides a means of solace. The urban landscape is in the

foreground, but instead of exposing, mirroring, or complementing the emotional one, it obscures it.

While “Spanish in the Morning” operates with places arranged in concentric circles in order to show that the first-person narrator’s obsession with them hinders her coming-of-age process, the extra-diegetic, omniscient narrator of “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons” uses a strategy that is both different and similar. A fascination with places runs through “Pigeons” as well, emphasized by the same attentiveness to exact locations as in “Spanish in the Morning.” A photo is not kept simply in a room or in a drawer, but in a box in “the dresser’s top drawer” (6), Betsy Ann’s mother is not just in a hospital bed, but in one on the third floor (6), and people sit in a park specifically on a bench under a blue umbrella (4). Similarly, Betsy Ann observes the particulars of her cousin’s electric train set in microscopic detail, down to the beads of sweat on the eyebrow of one miniature figure or the light dirt smudge on the cheek of another, along with many more “almost invisible” subtleties (17). When newborn Betsy Ann’s father takes her on a stroll, the geometric arrangement of the inside of the carriage is explained in such detail that even the positions of the diapers, the formula, the rattle, and the blanket are given (8). Likewise, precise urban locations are often enumerated. The street with Betsy Ann’s home is described in meticulous detail within the neighborhood, also discussing its racialized context:

Myrtle Street was only one long block, running east to west. To the east, preventing the street from going any farther, was a high, medieval-like wall of stone across 1st Street, Northeast, and beyond the wall were the railroad tracks. To the west, across North Capitol, preventing Myrtle Street from going any farther in that direction, was the high school Gonzaga, where white boys were taught by white priests. (11)

The exact addresses of ancillary characters are given in great detail as well; for example, “Thelma Holley, her husband, and Ralph lived in a small house on L Street, Northwest, two doors from Mt. Airy Baptist Church, just across North Capitol Street” (16).

Another similarity with “Spanish in the Morning” is that places are arranged in concentric circles containing the apartment, the neighborhood, and the wider urban area. The significance of urban locations is accentuated when read together with other places, among them microplaces. One layer of these microplaces is the body, a site of disintegration and trauma. As Betsy Ann’s pregnant mother slowly succumbs to cancer, “her once pretty face slowly began to collapse in on itself like fruit too long in the sun, eaten away

by the rot that despoiled from the inside out” (6). She dies moments before Betsy Ann is born via Caesarian section (6), which is in itself a procedure that harms the integrity of the body. When Betsy Ann loses her pigeons, modifying her skin by doodling on it becomes an outlet for her mourning (23). Similarly, the mother’s bed at home and her deathbed are sites characterized by disintegration and loss. Betsy Ann’s asthmatic cousin confines himself to a bed so as to coax more care and attention from his neurotic mother (17-18). Places of the next scale are apartments: the layout of Betsy Ann and Robert’s home is described in detail (1), and three different kitchens are mentioned, all of which are positioned as central places where important conversations take place (2, 6, 14).

Most importantly, urban places not only feature heavily in the narrative, but the plot itself hinges on events and processes that take place in the city. Miss Jenny, Betsy Ann’s parents’ landlady has an important encounter with the young couple weeks before she agrees to rent out an apartment to them (4). Not only is the location of the park where the couple sits given, but Miss Jenny’s steps are retraced: she “had come out of Hahn’s shoe store, crossed New York Avenue, and was going up 7th Street” (4). A store where Betsy Ann is caught shoplifting is across the street from this park (24); that is, the narration emphasizes the map-like nature of Betsy Ann’s surroundings. The most important locations in her life are connected just as they are connected in D.C.’s grid-like organizational pattern. This implies that she is just as familiar with and comfortable in the city as the unnamed protagonist of “Spanish.” The straightforward simplicity of the grid provides these girls with a similar sense of comfort and enables them to see the city from both above and within.

The city in “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons” becomes a source of comfort, firstly, through the people who inhabit it, and secondly, as the act of strolling becomes a coping mechanism. When Miss Jenny tries to comfort Robert, who is newly widowed and now living with his newborn, she says that “the city people can help out with this” (7). At first, Robert misconstrues this utterance and distractedly, helplessly looks “through the fluttering curtain onto the roof, at the oak tree, at the backs of houses on K Street” (7), as if to expect the urban surroundings to come to his rescue. It becomes clear, however, that Miss Jenny uses the city metonymically and means the social services offered by the local government (7). Nevertheless, when, shortly after this exchange, Robert takes Betsy Ann on a stroll in a carriage down the neighborhood streets, it becomes clear that the relationships Robert has formed with the “city people” do indeed give him strength to be able to cope with his new situation (7-8). The pleasant, seemingly meaningless interaction

with helpful adults and curious children alike help take his mind off of his predicament (8-9). Besides interactions, the familiarity of the environment has a soothing effect on Robert. His journey is mapped out in detail presumably in order to emphasize his intimate knowledge of this urban landscape and the strong sense of place with which he relates to it. As he maneuvers the carriage from facing “1st Street Northeast” to “pointing toward North Capitol Street,” then goes from “Myrtle to North Capitol, then to the corner of K Street,” and finally “crosse[s] North Capitol into Northwest” (8), Robert begins to ease into parenthood.

The city gains even more significance when Betsy Ann herself uses it as a source of comfort and it enters a complex web of signification with the pigeons she raises. The reason behind her need for solace can be traced back to her mother’s death and the lack of the mother-daughter relationship it resulted in. Betsy Ann is enthusiastic about tending to her pet pigeons. Her fascination with them starts when she hears their previous owner referring to the birds as his children (2). Despite her young age, she cleans the coop regularly (12) and visits the pigeons two or three times a night in hopes of hearing their coos or just catching a glimpse of them (1). Even though the birds stay silent and concealed from her, she always goes back to bed feeling relieved (2).

The fact that she is drawn to them compulsively and the ease she experiences after spending even a few minutes in their presence is also mirrored in the way she finds pleasure and comfort in the presence of her aunt, who reminds her of her mother Clara. Betsy Ann does not have any memories of her mother. Her being an orphan is seemingly not a part of her narrative self-understanding: there is no indication in the narrative of her father ever talking to her about Clara. It is no wonder, then, that since Thelma is “the very image of Clara,” she is the only person through whom a link is established between mother and daughter. Betsy Ann marvels at this similarity: “it fascinated her to see the face of the lady in all the pictures on a woman who moved and laughed and did mother things” (11). Thus, Thelma becomes a mirror of the deceased mother, and the comfort Betsy Ann gains from being with her is akin to the relief she experiences during the time she spends with her pigeons. The affection she displays towards the birds, then, mirrors and thus tries to substitute the motherly love she never had. This way, her obsessions with the birds is best understood as being the outlet for the pain she feels due to the lack she has in her life.

Thus, Betsy Ann is devastated when she loses this outlet for her grief. When rats attack the birds, killing or severely injuring most of them, two survivors fly away (23). Rats in this story can be read as metaphors for “urban

woe” and destabilizing social forces (Pinckney n. pag.). Indeed, Betsy Ann often walks among dilapidated houses in the decaying urban environment of the historically plagued Sursum Corda neighborhood.² However, the presence of rats has a personal significance, not just a social one. They devour the pigeons like cancer destroyed the mother’s body, thus bringing about Betsy Ann’s devastation: after witnessing the aftermath of the attack, her compulsive behavior escalates. She can no longer concentrate at school; instead, she doodles pigeons on her hands and arms (22). She is attached even to these drawings: “In the bathtub at night, she would cry to have to wash them off” (23). Her recurrent nightmares and night terrors (23) also indicate the depth of her grief. The intensity of her emotional turmoil suggests that what she goes through might be more than mourning the loss of beloved pets: the emotional connection Betsy Ann had with her pigeons, in fact, stands in for her motherlessness.

The extent to which she is devastated after losing her birds, then, is brought about by the fact that now she is left without anything to care for, that is, without a displacement activity. She finds solace in getting to know the city in intimate ways, but her roaming is another substitute, preventing her from accepting the reality of the loss. She goes to a park and spends hours sitting “on a bench, or lying on the grass, eyes to the sky” (24), trying to catch sight of her pigeons. She even takes on characteristics of the pigeons insofar as she mimics their navigational skills and homing ability: “she came to know the city so well that had she been blindfolded and taken to practically any place in Washington, even as far away as Anacostia or Georgetown, she could have taken off the blindfold and walked home without a moment’s trouble” (24). This wandering increases what Kevin Lynch theorizes as the legibility or clarity of her wider environment (2-3), which makes her bond to the city even stronger. However, instead of evincing the start of a healing process, this wish to identify with the pigeons signals her being unready and unwilling to integrate her pain into her narrative of the self.

Roaming the streets can be considered as a coping mechanism for Robert, an adult man, insofar as walking helps him accept his new role as a single parent. For the two young female protagonists, however, walking and orienting themselves in the city are but displacement activities in the sense that the solace they offer is only temporary. The girls do not use them with the intent to move on; instead, these behaviors become almost obsessive in their intensity. No healing takes place for either protagonist. The narrator of “Spanish” offers no closure, nor does she interpret the events that happened to her from hindsight. Similarly, the abrupt ending of “Pigeons” suggests that Betsy Ann is paralyzed when the last pigeon flies away: “She did nothing, aside

from following him, with her eyes, with her heart, as far as she could” (25). What connects these two short stories, then, is that although both protagonists experience major life events, neither of them reaches maturity. The reader is left without a conclusion: it is unclear whether the protagonist of “Spanish in the Morning” crosses the puddle, just as it is unclear whether Betsy Ann can recover from her loss of the last pigeon. They map their fear, shame and sense of insecurity onto the city, while what happens to them stays unprocessed and is largely left unsaid. Foregrounding the city becomes an obsession that interferes with growing up, or in other words, it is an impediment to healing in these stories.

Undoubtedly, “identity positions are to some extent geographical” (Anderson 41), or, as Casey argues, “through inhabiting places, involving a range of everyday mundane practices as well as special one-off experiences, a person–place relationship is inevitably developed” (684). However, both protagonists are affected by and use their environment(s) to a startlingly intense degree, and in both short stories there is a pervasive, almost ceaseless presence of references to places. An insistence on thinking in spatial terms and roaming the city shields the protagonists from having to reflect on the events and lacks in their lives and suggests a traumatic experience as the root cause. As Cathy Caruth argues, affected individuals cannot articulate trauma as it constitutes a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” and is consequently “not available to consciousness” (4). Yet, they suffer from its reverberations when it “imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the . . . repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). What keeps haunting the individual is his or her inability to “claim,” that is, to know and assimilate the traumatic event (4). Thus, compulsive, symbolic reenactments such as thinking and talking about places, caring for pigeons, and aimless walking “cry out” and serve to “address” the individual “in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” to the consciousness (4).

Most scholarship on the volumes suggests that Jones disrupts the “master-discourse of the majority . . . by inscribing an alternative narrative” through telling the stories of black enclaves in the capital (Kennedy and Beuka 12) and creates “sites of strong communities, family histories and personal memories” where residents can “feel rooted, empowered and connected” (Brown 13). It follows that politicized as they may be, Washington, D.C. neighborhoods feature as positive in his stories. However, I argue that in at least two stories, instead of engendering a “sense of meaning, connectedness and community” (13) or purely offering political commentary, the city has a deeply personal but not fully positive aspect. This might be caused by the age of these two characters: because they have not experienced the restorative

power of a social circle—like Robert has—they might be less attached to members of their community and more to specific places. Also, being young, they feel lost in abstract social spaces but can orient themselves well in structured urban areas to which their childhood imagination lends mythical importance. The inability of these two black girls to cope suggests a structural issue: on account of their traumas and their precarity caused by their age, gender, socio-economic status and race, these protagonists turn to geography as a means of escape, yet cannot find places and spaces that would fully provide comfort. The persistent presence of references to places is a defense mechanism for them. The innermost circle in the body of concentric circles—their own thoughts and reflections on their own experiences—is, however, missing and remains unexplained.

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Notes

¹ See: Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” and Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, as well as de Certeau’s “Walking in the City” (91-110) in *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

² On the problems of the Sursum Corda neighborhood see John C. Hirsh, *Power and Probity in a DC Community*.

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