Spatial Structures in Constructing Progressive Black Masculinities in The Men of Brewster Place

Jiamin Qi
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China

I. Introduction

Gloria Naylor (1950－ ) is one of the most renowned contemporary African American female novelists, whose works have been widely acclaimed for its authentic representations of African Americans’ lives. Her Brewster duo—The Women of Brewster Place (1983) and The Men of Brewster Place (1998) [1] construct an imaginary place named Brewster Place, a segregated neighborhood for poor people in an unnamed American northeastern city. Naylor focuses on the lives and struggles of black women and men of that street respectively in the duo, creating a fictional multifacet black community that becomes an inseparable element in African American literary heritage.

Since its birth, Brewster Place has long been the ghetto of the city. Due to the erection of a wall by the city council to control traffic for the main boulevard, the ghetto is separated from the booming commercial area. Because of its spatial segregation, a unique local culture of “their own language and music and codes” [2] is gradually formed. In Brewster Place’s younger days, some other white ethic groups live there, but eventually it is the blacks who stick in Brewster Place till the end. Within Brewster Place, there are some interesting spatial techniques that Naylor...
applies to develop characters and narrations.

Feminist geography has long established a claim that “hierarchical gender relations are both affected by and reflected in the spatial structure of societies” [3]. Recently, there has been a rapid growth of masculinities studies in various disciplines of social science. Naturally, cultural geographers have started to pay attention to the relationship between masculinities and space. According to *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, “masculinity is both temporally and geographically contingent” [4]. Hoven and Horschelmann also argue that “masculinities are constructed in and through space” [5]. Therefore, combining cultural geography and black masculinities studies, a fundamental theoretical base of this paper is that black masculinities are constructed through space and different spatial structures incubate different black masculinities.

There are many unique spatial structures in *The Men of Brewster Place*, such as the gay bar, the barbershop, and the streets. Bringing in the concept of “progressive black masculinities” [6], this paper chooses to focus on Brewster Place as a whole and the community center, because they reveal a developmental order for black progressive masculinities—from partial progressive to true progressive. This paper sets out to analyze spatial structures that are formative to the construction of black masculinities in *The Man of Brewster Place*, Brewster Place and the community center, which also reveals Naylor’s progressive agenda for black men.

II. **Emasculated or Partial Progressive?**

Naylor resurrects Ben, the drunken superintendant of Brewster Place, to narrate most of the black men stories in *The Men of Brewster Place*. He dies in his attempt to save Lorraine in the first Brewster duo. Compared with other characters, Ben is a constructive member for the community. However, Naylor’s critics have long regarded Ben as an embodiment of emasculated black man, with his silence and personal trauma. Ben’s grandparents’ sister is raped by a white plantation manager, and Ben’s own crippled daughter is also raped by their white plantation owner. His wife Elvira attacks him for his impotence in not giving her more children and their miserable plantation lives, berating him as not even “half a man” [7]. After his daughter and wife leave him, Ben arrives at Brewster Place and becomes the quiet and nice maintenance man. Based on this brief recount of his life, it is easy for any reader to come up with an impression that Ben’s masculinity is challenged by the rapes, and he is self-devaluated as “not a man”, similar to what Staples writes on the emasculating
effect of slavery on black manhood. [8] Lewis criticizes Ben for lacking “the courage to stand up to the insults” [9] and losing “a fight for his dignity and respect as a black man in America” [10]. What’s more, compared with Kimmel’s description of hegemonic masculinity that includes “aggression, competition [...] a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power” [11], Ben is by no means powerful or aggressive, opposite to patriarchal masculinity. Jeune even comments that Ben’s internalization of patriarchal masculinity causes him to be one of the worst cases of emasculation in the novel. [12]

These criticisms are overpowered by a biased and monolithic view on masculinity, believing that Ben’s drunkenness, silence and “servitude” make him less manly. They fail to look at the progressive side of Ben’s personality. To diminish the negative effects of normative masculinities on black men, Mutua raises the concept of “progressive black masculinities” and defines it as “unique and innovative performances of the masculine self that, on the one hand, personally eschew and actively, ethically stand against social structures of domination and, on the other, that value, validate, and empower black humanity—in all its variety—as part of the diverse and multicultural humanity of others in the global family” [13]. This concept helps formulate a more positive view on Ben. Though he does not meet with all of the standards, he does stand against domination and protects black people in his own way value black humanity. The following argument illustrates that Ben’s former silence and passivity are caused by his previous spatial alienation on plantations, and he becomes more authentic and active in Brewster Place because he integrates with the place.

Before Ben comes to Brewster Place, his previous life on plantations serves as a contrast to his later attachment to Brewster Place. McKittrick remarks that the plantation “evidences an uneven colonial-racial economy that [...] legalized black servitude while simultaneously sanctioning black placelessness and constraint” [14]. The uneven colonial-racial economy starts with white plantation owners’ possession of land, seed, equipment and housing, then a sharecropping family is stuck in a vicious circle of working and paying. (21) Because black workers do not own the land or their homes, they are stuck in “an economized and enforced placelessness” [15]. This placelessness is an alienation process, causing sharecroppers to be slaves to their own homes. With no ownership of anything, Ben’s voice is silenced, and his agency is suppressed. Eventually, he must leave the plantation and find a new home.

As the first black man in Brewster Place, Ben arrives at the dark ghetto in the
1950s. It is dark because “the wall blocking light from the south [...] it always feels like dusk” (6). Ben plants himself like a black seed. Later, the black seed brings more and more black people in the tenement because of the Second Great Migration. [16] Ben becomes the “father” of black people of Brewster Place. Then, Brewster Place and Ben merge into one, as “Ben and his drinking became a fixture on Brewster Place, just like the wall” (4). He becomes a personification of Brewster Place with his usual relaxing place—a “garbage can [...] pushed against the sagging brick wall” (89). Ben spatially integrates with Brewster Place as he never leaves it. With little social life, his territory is limited within the street. After his death, Naylor resurrects him to be a ghost of the ghetto, allowing him to haunt the space eternally.

Ben also integrates with Brewster Place spiritually. First of all, he accepts its squalid condition and urges others to face the truth. His authenticity in facing reality makes him a real black man. The timeline of the Brewster duo ranges roughly from the 1970s to the 1980s, and during that period, there were significant racial segregations in American northeastern cities, such as Chicago, New York, Newark, etc. to increase racial income disparity. [17] Acknowledging their cramped living conditions in the cities, Ben encourages black people to “live inside” (original italics), meaning to face their desolation with courage. Ben says, “[i]f you put him on the likes of a Park Avenue and he feels he has no worth, then it’s not Park Avenue [18] if you put him on the likes of a Chicago South Side [19] and he feels he has worth, then it’s not the South Side. We all live inside.” (7) He believes that black men need to be brave and face their own pains directly so that they can rise for a better future together. Even in a ghetto, one can still be a real man by building the community.

Ben’s spiritual integration is also translated into actions. He actively turns the tenement into a hopeful home for poor black people in the city. When the street is walled off from the main boulevard, “the lifeblood” is supposed to be cut off. [20] The neighborhood is left to die by the government. However, with great compassion to the African American children, Ben protects the street assiduously. He sweeps steps, rakes garbage, patches cracks (7), and fixes broken lightbulbs (4). All of these works require great patience that an aggressive and competitive man does not have. Besides working relentlessly to maintain the rickety street, he also helps old ladies and pregnant women carry groceries (4), and frequently drops by the half-wit Brother Jerome’s apartment to check on him to go to the bathroom (36). Much more
than simply working for the people, Ben gives his love to care for them, literally regarding the blacks as his surrogate children. He brings “caring” and “providing” into the meaning of black masculinities, rendering a new black father model. Under Ben’s care, the dead-end street is filled with black people who are “thrive and all alive” (167). He finds a home for himself and creates a home for many.

Therefore, this spatial segregation incubates an authentic and caring father Ben. He actively maintains Brewster Place and makes the dilapidated tenement humane and tolerant to the blacks. Ben’s tragic death can be seen as a blood sacrifice for the community. His resurrection even makes him a semi-Christ figure for the tenement. Due to his personal and social constraints, Ben cannot fully live up to all the requirements of progressive black masculinities, but only partially. What’s more, his spatial mobility is limited by the wall that breeds a spatial binary opposition between the blacks and the whites. In spite of Ben’s efforts in serving and building the community, this binary spatial structure is restrictive in generating more progressive black masculinities. Sadly, Ben’s only boundary-crossing action, which is also his last effort, is saving Lorraine, the bullied lesbian. His baton is passed to Abshu, a Moses figure, a promising black male leader in a third space.

### III. Abshu—a Progressive Man in a Third Space

Abshu is head of the community center “right around the corner from Brewster Place” (140). This specific third-space location of the community center is formative in constructing progressive black masculinities, and implicates Abshu’s revolutionary role in the neighborhood.

Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha formulates the concept of “the third space”, “which enables other positions to emerge” [21]. This concept is useful for “examining the articulation, transgression and subversion of dualistic categories, this third space is [...] the location of difference” [22]. A third space is where binary opposition is broken and new identity emerges. The third-space community center not only has a third-space bordering location but also embodies openness and resistance. This is also what black theorist bell hooks called “the margin”, “the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” [23].

Abshu’s progressiveness is shown in his defiance against marginal masculinities, especially against using violence as a measure for masculinity. Connell talks about violence as a way of asserting masculinity in marginalized racial groups that the “youth gang violence of inner-city streets is a striking example of the assertion of
marginalized masculinities against other men” [24]. Due to marginalized social space in American society, the assertion of masculinities for black males is contorted into street violence. Black men are viewed as criminals who need to be controlled and retained within their space for the convenience of government surveillance. Similar to most black ghettos in America, the streets around Brewster Place are parts of the evil territory dominated by gangsters. Locating on the streets, the community center serves as an alternative and a shelter for children in the ghetto against violence and crimes. Black children in the ghetto, especially boys, are easily allured to the streets where “money, power, and respect” (123) can be easily gained without education or hard work. Hooks blames patriarchal capitalism for holding money instead of work ethics as a sole success standard for men. She says that “even if that meant lying and cheating, became more acceptable if it brought home the bacon” [25]. If black boys are allured to the streets, they are one step away from being incarcerated, which reinforces the racial segregation and further limits black people's room to change. Abshu fights relentlessly to “[1]ose no child to the streets” (140), because he wants them to know that being black boys from the ghetto does not mean that they will one day end up as criminals. He becomes the strong protector for young boys who want “a safe place to hang” (140) after school, which diminishes the bad influences of the streets on them. What's more, he uses Shakespeare to gentrify the boys' language, opening a new space in their linguistic world that would bring new possibilities into their lives.

Abshu embodies the spirit of transgression. He is born in a troubled family in Brewster Place and then is placed into a foster family “on the edge of Linden Hill” (137). Linden Hill is a wealthy black suburban neighborhood, the antipode to Brewster Place. He also has a college degree and a Latino-hybrid lawyer friend. His territory spreads to the city council, and even reaches Yale University to enlist protesters to join his demonstration, so he is a class, racial and cultural hybrid. Unlike the men who hide in the barbershop and Ben who never leaves the street, Abshu brings the outside world to Brewster Place and carries the ghetto's defiance to the other part of the city. The old borderline, the wall, is blurred by Abshu’s active movement. While his girlfriend Kiswana tries to tear down the wall, Abshu works hard to keep Brewster Place from demolition because he is no longer bounded by the wall. With enough time and efforts, he believes that the ghetto would eventually be changed into a space of hope for the blacks.

Looking back on Mutua’s definition of progressive black masculinities, Abshu
actively and ethically stands against social domination and empowers black humanity in the global family. Believing that there was something in Shakespeare for everyone, changing his name from Cliff Jackson to Abshu to embrace the African heritage, and befriending a man with mixed origins, Abshu crosses cultural and racial boundaries and brings possibilities and resistance to Brewster Place.

Interestingly, Abshu shares similarities with the Biblical prophet Moses, as both of them are adopted by a wealthier family and raised by the “others”, and both of them bear the responsibility to bring their people out of a place and lead them to their land of hope. In the last chapter “Dawn”, Abshu sits alone on the empty street before the dawning of the demolition. He “walk[s] into a rising sun”, and is the “[o]ne man against the dawning of the inevitable” (172), signifying that he would eventually lead the recent homeless people from Brewster Place to build a new home and to find their own Canaan. Naylor places her hope of continuing the fight on Abshu, believing a progressive man like him could be a genuine leader for all of the black people.

IV. Conclusion

From segregated space to the third space, Abshu shows more active and border-crossing masculinities than the previous guardian Ben. This study on The Men of Brewster Place reveals a hidden spatial-masculinities relation within the text, providing an alternative method in analyzing masculinities and a deeper understanding of the social construction of masculinities. At the same time, Naylor is siding with progressive black scholars in fighting against stereotypes of black men, urging more and more black men to break boundaries and change their own negative images. On one hand, black men should stop hiding in their spatial interstices and embrace more social and cultural possibilities; on the other hand, America society should be more aware of the general stigmatic images of black men and stop regarding them as either criminals or emasculated victims. Generally speaking, The Men of Brewster Place enriches gender perspectives in Naylor’s works and renders deeper insights to black men’s troubled lives in American cities. Hopefully, this study could kindle more academic interests in spatial-masculinity studies and Gloria Naylor’s works.

Notes:

[1] The Women of Brewster Place won the National Book Award for Best First Novel in 1983. The Men of Brewster Place won the American Book Award in 1999.
[2] Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (New York: Penguin Group, 1983), 2.

[3] Linda McDowell and Joanne Sharp, *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings* (London: Arnold, 1997), 4.

[4] Andrew Herod, “Masculinities”, in Rob Kitchin and N. J. Thrift, eds., *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (San Francisco: Elsevier, 2009), 297.

[5] Bettina van Hoven and Kathrin Hörschelmann, “Introduction: From Geographies of Men to Geographies of Women and Back Again?”, in Bettina van Hoven and Kathrin Hörschelmann, eds., *Spaces of Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.

[6] Athena D. Mutua, “Theorizing Progressive Black Masculinities”, in Athena D. Mutua, ed., *Progressive Black Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

[7] Gloria Naylor, *The Men of Brewster Place* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 26. Citations from this novel have the same source. For the sake of convenience, all the following citations from this novel are shown in in-text page number form with parentheses, such as (26).

[8] Robert Staples, “Stereotypes of Black Male Identity”, in Michael S. Kimmel, ed., *Men’s Lives* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), 428.

[9] Linden Lewis, “Constructing Black Masculinity through the Fiction of Gloria Naylor”, in Linden Lewis, Glyne A. Griffith and Elizabeth Crespo Kebler, eds., *Color, Hair, and Bone: Race in the Twenty-First Century* (Cranbury: Bucknell University Press, 2008), 53.

[10] Ibid., 54.

[11] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 84.

[12] Teressa A. Jeune, “The Naylorian Worldview: Taking the American Male from Slavery to Freedom”, MA Thesis (The Florida State University, 2011), 12.

[13] Athena D. Mutua, “Theorizing Progressive Black Masculinities”, in Athena D. Mutua, ed., *Progressive Black Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 2006), 35.

[14] Katherine McKittrick, “On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place”, *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 12, No. 8 (2011): 947–63.

[15] Ibid.

[16] The Second Great Migration was the migration of more than five million African Americans from the South to the North, Midwest and West. It took place from 1941, through World War II, and lasted until 1970. “Second Great Migration (African American)” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* (Wikipedia Foundation, Inc. 21 Oct. 2014. Web. 5 Jan. 2004).
[17] Douglas Massey and Nancy Denten, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 128–30.

[18] Park Avenue is a main street in the New York City embodying wealth and success.

[19] Chicago South Side is a notorious city section known for its poverty, crime and color neighborhood.

[20] Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (New York: Penguin Group, 1983), 2.

[21] Homi Bhabha, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha”, in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211.

[22] Lisa Law, “Negotiating the Bar: Sex, Money and the Uneasy Politics of Third Space”, in Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, eds., *The Blackwell Cultural Economic Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 354.

[23] Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 149.

[24] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 83.

[25] Bell Hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.

Jiamin Qi, M. A. in English literature from Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China. She is currently Ph. D. candidate of English literature at Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (Guangzhou). Her research interests include studies of 20th-century American literature and cultural studies. She has published six essays.