Housing the Black Body: Value, Domestic Space, and Segregation Narratives

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” satisfying a man.”

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

—Gwendolyn Brooks, “kitchenette building” ll. 1-7

Introduction: Valuing Home

“Iron Ring in Housing,” a 1940 article in The Crisis on the significance of the Supreme Court case Hansberry v. Lee, begins by insisting: “There is no right more elemental nor any liberty more fundamental in a democracy than freedom to move where and when you please” (205). Linking mobility and housing, the article connects these two issues to the rights and privileges of citizenship in a democracy. Hansberry takes on residential segregation by confronting that practice not merely as a restriction on domestic space but mainly as a constriction of civic identity. The case intimates that, given the centrality of segregation to restrictive practices affecting citizenship, the relationship of African Americans to places of residence and to domestic space in general is indicative of their relationship to legal structures. The social and legal developments that directly and indirectly encouraged segregated housing during the mid-twentieth century created the conditions for African Americans to feel estranged from their domestic spaces.¹ The feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction with the “kitchenette” expressed in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem define the housing problems to come for many African American communities, and such sentiments factor into representations of domestic space in mid-20th-century African American narratives.

Frank London Brown’s Trumbull Park (1959) and Gwendolyn Brooks’s Maud Martha (1953) focus on Black life in Chicago during the 1940s and 1950s, and—like “kitchenette building”—both examine the realities of segregated residential spaces. Accordingly, these novels can be read as segregation narratives. Each text demonstrates how housing policies not only structure where Black people live, but also undermine their relationship to domestic space. Specifically, the texts represent characters as alienated from their domestic spaces due to legal formulations and social perceptions of Black domestic space as “valueless.” The construction of Black-occupied spaces as “valueless” func-

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tions within both segregated and integrated spaces, and results in “placeless-
ness” for Black subjects or the displacement of the Black subject from the value
more generally attributable to belonging and security within the home.

I recognize two elements of the concept that I call domestic space: the family
and the physical structures of homes (houses, apartments, tenement buildings,
and the like). Black domestic space in both senses has often been understood as a
refuge from the racism and oppression of the US social world. bell hooks's theo-
ry of “homeplace” as a “safe place where black people could affirm one another
and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination” grows
out of this way of thinking (42). Her understanding—situated in a world of
racially segregated/integrated neighborhoods—posits Black domestic space as a
site resistant to effects of oppression. This resistance is rooted in the idea that
families are able to create and sustain boundaries that maintain a distinction
between interior and exterior space. This ability to distinguish inside from out-
side is elemental to understandings of domestic space, particularly domestic
architecture, that link it to conceptions of interiority. 2 Trumbull Park and Maud
Martha illustrate how representations of domestic architecture and the life it
houses reveal not simply Black interiority, but also social and legal perceptions
of Blackness. In these texts, the spatial realities of segregation construct Black
domestic spaces and continuously encroach on families and housing structures.

The refusal to integrate public housing projects and the enactment of race-
restrictive zoning ordinances demonstrate ways that federal, state, and local
level racist practices were encoded into law (Meyer 7). Private groups and prac-
tices, however, especially occupy the attention of Brown and Brooks and are cen-
tral to my discussion. These practices that derive from individual White citizens
and their communities were not federal or state legislation; but nonetheless, they
assume legal status and uncover the relationship between White privilege and
law. Ultimately, they have the force of law in restricting Black existence. In par-
ticular, I consider neighborhood associations and their tools, racially restrictive
covenants, and how their presences directly and indirectly police Black domestic
spaces in both Trumbull Park and Maud Martha.3

Both the associations and the covenants themselves are based on an under-
standing of Whiteness as property. Property is not simply objects of ownership
(like houses), as Cheryl J. Harris explains, but rather “expectations in tangible or
intangible things that are valued and protected by law” (1729). Harris specifies
that within “the worlds of de jure and de facto segregation, whiteness has value,
whiteness is valued, and whiteness is expected to be valued in law” (1777).
Therefore, narratives that deal with issues of segregation—even if they concen-
trate on integration—will also be explorations of the value placed on Whiteness
and the social protection(s) that it affords and is afforded. A legal protection of
segregation occurs because there is a value socially invested in Whiteness that is
not similarly invested in Blackness. Such “hypervaluation of whiteness,” as
Harris terms it (passim), is apparent in important Supreme Court cases that con-
tend with restrictive covenants such as Hansberry v. Lee, Shelley v. Kraemer, and
Corrigan v. Buckley. Regardless of whether the covenant under consideration was
upheld or not, none of these cases questions the validity of covenants as legal

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documents; all implicitly recognize the White right to exclude Black people. There is a fundamental understanding that “a change in color leads to a change in value” and vice versa (Delaney 170). Such cases legalize and protect the right to generate a value-laden boundary between Black and White spaces. In the legal discourse, Black domestic space not only comes to be seen as a threat to White spaces and to White assessments of “value,” but such space also becomes aligned with “valuelessness.”

The Limits of Integration: Brown’s Trumbull Park

The legal protection of segregation finds concomitant social safeguarding of segregation in the work of neighborhood associations, which were organized groups of property owners and their supporters who used legal strategies such as racial restrictive covenants and less formal (and more violent) forms of intimidation to exclude Black families from neighborhoods. Chicago felt the presence of these associations particularly, as shown in the reference made to them through the White character Karl Lindner, the representative from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, in Lorraine Hansberry’s play A Raisin in the Sun (1959). Lindner visits the Younger family on behalf of his community’s association to try to convince this Black family not to move into the house they have bought in Clybourne Park: “we are prepared to make your family a very generous offer. . . . Our association is prepared, through the collective effort of our people, to buy the house from you at a financial gain to your family” (118). He comes armed with money to enact social pressure from the Whites to ensure a segregated housing community. In justifying the offer, Lindner explains to the Younger family, “a man, right or wrong, has the right to want to have the neighborhood he lives in a certain kind of way” (117). The “certain kind of way” of living that Lindner obliquely references is “White”; the Clybourne Park residents want their neighborhood to maintain this exclusive property.

A similar argument can be made about the efforts to preserve a White community by the South Deering Association, a neighborhood association in Frank London Brown’s Trumbull Park. These property owners are much more violent and aggressive in protecting the “Whiteness” of their neighborhood depicted by terrorized Black families. Brown’s novel centers on the Martin family who move from a Black neighborhood in Chicago to a White housing project. When the Martins arrive in Trumbull Park, they are met by a mob: this mob acts as a physical boundary that literally stops Black families from moving in, and if the families eventually do so, hundreds of protestors entrap them in their homes. Often the maintenance of boundaries can take precedence over what lies inside them because without the boundaries, there can no longer be a way to differentiate. Moreover, boundaries and limits, as Lindon Barrett argues, are the “‘essential’ matter of value” because they indicate the same sense of arbitration that the concept of value demands (16). In fact, the mob itself materializes the boundary demarcating the site where value (Whiteness) lies—the very boundary or racial “force field” that the covenants attempted to produce and the legal cases to perpetuate. Therefore, the mob’s desire to form a physical boundary represents its collective need to instantiate and protect a system of valuation and differentiation.

The formal reiteration and reconstitution of difference at the heart of this valuation is apparent in the mob’s irate chant, “Get out, Africans—get out! Get out, Africans—get out! Get out, Africans—get out!” (27). The insistence on using the term “Africans” to refer to the Martin family is a conscious denial of this (and
any) Black family’s US nationality and citizenship. The chant marks the Martins as “Africans” who are civic outsiders or foreigners to the space of the neighborhood, and consequently, they are excluded from the rights afforded citizens like the members of the South Deering Association who have a “right” to be housed there.

The chant iterates how both US citizenship and membership in the community are racialized in the minds of the neighborhood association. Later, when a (White) policeman strikes a White member of the mob to calm him down, the captain reproaches this officer by saying, “Don’t rough up these people! They got rights!” (47). The captain intimates that as citizens of South Deering (and the US), these protestors have specific guaranteed rights; however, he is not talking about a right to assemble or to protest, but rather a right to a White community, which carries with it a right to protect that community from a Black intrusion. If limits and boundaries are about the definition of value, then that which lies outside of the value-boundary is arguably without value; in other words, non-Whiteness is understood as value-deficient. Accordingly, the South Deering mob attempts to keep out a non-White “valuelessness” that poses a threat to its property and themselves. This sense of raced “valuelessness” becomes an integral element in the delineation of Black domestic structures. It is not simply that these structures lack (monetary) value, but rather, that sense of lack is translated into representations of spaces that are threatening and without value as domestic or familial spaces.

In *Trumbull Park*, Brown comments on the physical structure of Black-designated housing. The most typical characteristic of a Black family’s house in Trumbull Park is broken windows. Bricks, rocks, and cans of sulphur coming from the White mob repeatedly destroy the windows. Black resident Arthur Davis tells the protagonist Buggy Martin: “behind that board there are some windows—at least window frames. The windows have been broken so many times that the Housing Authority put this board up instead of glass. They can’t keep replacing the windows, and they won’t make the cops keep the people from breaking them” (149). The window breaking is a daily, seemingly unstoppable occurrence. This destruction violates the sense of security the homes should offer their residents and does away with any sense of privacy.

A connection of value and violence sheds light on the effects of the White mob’s actions in the narrative. The mob literally destroys the economic value of the Black families’ homes, while simultaneously creating a vector of value. In the calculated acts of destruction, the mob attempts to formulate and sustain its own sense of value against the “irreparable injury” that the Black presence seems to guarantee. The symbolic act of valuation is intended to deny value to both Blacks and the spaces they occupy and at the same time to resist any perceived change to the larger neighborhood affected by a Black presence. One resident’s comment, “Every place that they’ve [Black people] taken over, they’ve turned into a slum,” articulates a belief that Black neighborhoods are marked by inferior living conditions and that they likely harbor criminality (qtd. in Meyer 120). Herman Long and Charles S. Johnson insist: “The ill-kept and unsightly outward aspect of [segregated spaces], with their teeming population, becomes associated in the minds of other city residents with the current occupants themselves, who merely inherited the area in the last stages of usefulness as a dwelling place” (3). Both African Americans and their domestic spaces are seen as undesirable because of the connection to dilapidation and delinquency.

The space of Black housing is not merely dangerous, but also confining. Throughout the text, the homes of Black residents in Trumbull Park are described as prisons. Buggy Martin insists that Trumbull Park in its regularity and sameness “looked like a great big prison” (84). Moreover, the “book signing” that Black families must do to enter and leave their homes because of the
mob violence and racist demonstrations by the White rioters produces an atmosphere of incarceration. The signing in and out creates an invasive surveillance that is “panoptic-like” in that the Black characters’ movements are always being monitored and are under constant scrutiny. The result criminalizes the Black families, who are the victims of the violence. The police presence that should be protecting these families instead inspects and constricts them. The police are less protective forces than prison guards. Arthur alludes to this irony when he asks: “Who are they . . . protecting? Us . . . from the rioters? Or the rioters . . . from us?” (Brown 248). Living in Trumbull Park, then, means living in a domestic prison and being transported in police wagons or “cages.” In fact, Buggy says, “We were living in a jail, and we went out of Trumbull Park in a cage and came back to Trumbull Park in a cage” (360). Reduced to prisons for criminals, the houses are no longer residential sites for families, and their value has been demoted to that of jail cells.

In light of this construction of carceral space, the moment when one of the members of the crowd calls Buggy a “jailbird nigger” becomes central (97). The comment mocks Buggy (and all Black residents) who must ride around in a patrol wagon because of the menacing presence of the violent mob. This epithet also reinforces the connection of Blackness with criminality. The assumption of Whites throughout Brown’s novel that Black men such as Red or Kevin always have knives—whether they actually do or not—exposes an ingrained reduction of Black individuals to natural criminal types (35, 206). This connection is basic to the members of the neighborhood association and their desire to keep Black residents out of the areas. In the White cultural imaginary functioning in Trumbull Park, Black physical space is conceptualized as congruent with the bodies that inhabit it. Therefore, the criminality expected of the Black families who move to Trumbull Park is derived from the conflation of criminality with Black segregated areas. This criminality is perceived as inhering to the Black body itself, meaning that it can be transported along with a Black family (along with their furniture) into any neighborhood. Thus, Black bodies themselves threaten White spaces. Following this racialized logic, every Black body is necessarily concealing a destructive weapon creating a need for race-sensitive boundaries and policies that ensure them.

A consideration of how the narrative portrays familial relations is also vital to understanding how policies influenced the relationship between Black subjects and domestic space. In terms of the representations of family structures, Trumbull Park is conflicted because families move toward the act of coming together under the difficult circumstances, but the narrative also illustrates how personal relationships were strained. A primary goal of Trumbull Park is to emphasize the growing sense of community among the resident Black families. Mary Helen Washington contends that Brown’s work actually has a “collective protagonist, a community of couples acting” (Foreword xvi). She argues that “with each one of the characters encouraging the others, men and women together, almost in counterpoint, they collectively perform their first acts of defiance” (xiii). The formation of the “Vigilante” meeting group—a Black “counter” neighborhood association—reflects this idea. Through his experience with the “Vigilantes,” Buggy manifests an increasing faith in the ability of Black people to come together. Earlier in the text he expresses suspicion about “that stuff about Negroes sticking together” (132), but later after the “Vigilantes” begin to take action, he insists that what he “had told to Helen about Negroes not sticking together was beginning to soften at the edges and melt away” (260). Brown provides a narrative that is optimistic in terms of group solidarity and cooperation.

Ironically, this growing sense of inter-familial connection is coupled with growing distances within individual couples, a weakening of intra-familial con-
nections. In thinking about how their lives had changed since they moved into Trumbull Park, Buggy explains that he and his wife Helen had “become so wrapped up in [their] own growing anger that [they] hadn’t had time to get the feeling of closeness with the world around [them]” (216). This “anger” is not simply keeping them from the “world,” but also distancing them from each other. At one of the “Vigilante” meetings, Buggy expresses his frustrations that the debate on what the group should do was dividing up households: “I didn’t dig all this—I mean, how the wife voted one way and the husband voted the other. Were these wives voting different from the way their husbands were voting just to be contrary? Was there something coming between them that made one do the opposite from the other just for spite?” (271). The narrative signals not only the split between husband and wife, but more importantly it shows Buggy’s inability to recognize that these women might have an opinion outside of their husbands’.

This inability, while a reflection of the influence of patriarchal culture, also symbolizes a dis-connect between husbands and wives occasioned by life in Trumbull Park. An emotional distancing marks Buggy and Helen’s first day in their integrated neighborhood. Buggy criticizes their friend Red and refuses to support him when Red attempts to defend himself against the White mob, while Helen indicates her approval of Red’s actions and her disappointment with her husband’s (30). Similarly, the brief reference to William Thomas’s relationship with his wife displays this dis-connect and the distancing “anger” that Buggy described:

From that minute on, until Mr. and Mrs. Thomas moved out of the project a year later—broken, nervous, talking about divorce, not speaking to each other, not speaking to any of us—William Thomas was never—not even in the closest room, not even in a moving car driving away from Trumbull Park—able to say that the white people were breaking the windows, or setting off the bombs, or gathering in the mobs that once surrounded his wife and threw a bomb straight at her. (253)

Brown closely connects events in Trumbull Park with the Thomases’ marriage. The broken windows and bombs have alienated the Thomases from each other and not brought them closer together. Although he does want to proffer a sense of solidarity in his narrative, Brown apparently cannot help but recognize—even if momentarily or parenthetically—that the actions of the South Deering Association can also strain and even destroy marital relationships just as its members continuously destroy the houses’ windows.

The idea that White neighborhood associations would have a strong impact on an integrating Black family’s relationship to domestic space is not difficult to imagine. However, the power of Trumbull Park lies in its demonstration of the effect that these private associations can also have on segregated spaces. Neighborhood associations and restrictive covenants did not only impinge on the lives of African Americans who lived in integrated spaces; they also structured the lives of those living in segregated spaces. In fact, these associations and their influence(s) work to collapse the distinction between integrated and segregated space for Black families. In Chicago, White neighborhood associations held Blacks from crossing out of segregated areas. The situations in the legal cases Corrigan, Hansberry, and Shelley all reflect a desire on the part of Black families to move outside of the “iron ring” of restrictive covenants that produced overcrowded and inadequate neighborhoods. Black families in Chicago and all over the country got trapped for decades in areas that were increasingly unable to house effectively those who lived there and whose conditions deteriorated, so much so that the Black body itself became connected with the spatial degradation housing and defining Black domestic space in social and legal discourses.
Brown’s novel portrays how the impediment of the boundary line that neighborhood associations imposed on Black families alienated them from their domestic structures in non-integrated areas. Although the novel focuses on integration, Buggy and his wife initially live in the Gardener building in the segregated part of Chicago. Buggy points out that he had always lived in the building—like most of the occupants (15). In fact, the old writings on the building’s walls suggest that the residents’ lives are inscribed on the walls (11); their existences are intimately connected to the building itself. Unfortunately, the narrative continually aligns the building with death and destruction. The reader soon discovers that the Gardener is rotting; the novel opens with a description of a young child, Babydoll, falling from a “rotten porch” on the fourth floor and dying. This sense of rotting denotes the “valuelessness” of the building.

The implication throughout the narrative is that spaces like the Gardener building are not “decent” housing (320); in effect, they are not places to raise a family (safely). Long and Johnson provide a context for the porch that “kills” Babydoll: Segregated neighborhoods “tend to exhibit the greatest municipal neglect, not only because the dwellings and surrounding facilities are hardest to keep in repair but because the residents themselves have the least to say about the services provided by the city” (2-3). Helen’s discussion with Buggy after Babydoll’s death signals that the building suffers from the willful “neglect” of Black inhabited space: “Poor Babydoll. I told Mr. Gardner about that porch. It’s two or three places there that need fixing. I don’t know why the health department don’t do something to him, to make him fix this place up” (Brown 12). This neglect represents the Martins’ lack of control over the conditions in their domestic space, and it is linked to their lack of influence in the social sphere.

Moreover, Brown’s narrative figures the Gardener building as a creature that is continually consuming or killing the tenants in the building; it has a destructive agency: “Look, look, at that big, ramshackle, firetrap [the Gardener]. Look at it, look at what killed Babydoll” (9). Later in the narrative, Buggy also accuses the building of killing both his mother and his father (81, 404). If the tenants’ lives are intrinsically connected to the building, and the building is rotting (dying), then death becomes part-and-parcel to residency. To live there is to die. Therefore, the building engenders sickness and death, and segregated Black domestic space comes to embody these notions.

The Gardener assumes important parallels to the home in Trumbull Park relationally linking Black residential conditions in segregated and integrated spaces. Buggy describes his moving out of the Gardener building as “getting out of jail through the front door” (Brown 16). In his mind the building is also a kind of jail, like the homes in Trumbull Park; he and his family have exchanged one kind of domestic space for another, but the imprisoning nature of the space has remained the same. Even the trope of broken windows forges a parallel between the Gardener and Trumbull Park homes. After Babydoll’s death, Buggy is looking up at the building as he says, “Windows, windows, most of them with only one pane. A lot of the windows were broken completely, and in their place were weather-stained, yellowing pasteboards” (9). Broken windows characterize this housing space as well. In some ways, their living conditions do not appear to have changed at all in the move from the Gardener to Trumbull Park.

This troubling similarity is precisely what Buggy observes:

We were out of the Gardener Building, but now the world around us was icy and mean with the evil stares of the people we had to live with. And the noise of those bombs made the diesel train behind the Gardener Building and the broken banisters seem like maybe I had exaggerated how bad it had been in the first place. I had thought that diesel meant to me the death, dirt, and gloom of the Gardener Building, but it seemed to have caught up with me in a different way in Trumbull Park. It looked like there was no place for a broke colored man to go. No hiding place. No place to run. I felt choked, trapped, and boxed in. (Brown 131)
That which the diesel represents, the intangible that brings the “gloom” and claustrophobia, is as present in the integrated Trumbull Park as it was in the segregated Gardener; the homes are equally confining. Brown insinuates that this kind of claustrophobia is exactly what Black families must have felt as covenants restricted their movement and forced people to live literally on top of one another because of the limited living space available to them. Ironically, moving to an integrated space did not mean liberation from this feeling of restriction. The different domestic spaces, then, are haunted by an “unchanging” sameness mandated by White communities to protect their self-perceived intrinsic value.

Domestic Confinement and Disappointed Domesticity: Brooks’s Maud Martha

Gwendolyn Brooks’s Maud Martha is a strikingly different narrative from Trumbull Park. While Brown’s narrative is continuous and linear, Brooks creates a fragmentary poetic narrative made up of “short vignette chapters” that range in length with seemingly “no continuity between one chapter and the next” (Washington, “Taming” 454). More important than this structural difference, Brooks never mentions a restrictive covenant or neighborhood associations. In fact, she places the narrative action entirely in a segregated world. Nonetheless, the novel is one driven by issues of integration (Christian 246), making it as much a text about the dynamics of segregation and integration as is Brown’s later work. Brooks’s representation of segregated space explores the world that neighborhood associations like South Deering had indirectly formed and directly attempted to stifle through their actions. Unlike Buggy and Helen, who are able to “liberate” themselves from the Gardener, Maud Martha is “narratively” imprisoned within her domestic space; Maud Martha does not make it out of the Gappington Arms kitchenette building by the novel’s close.

Maud Martha is not simply trapped in the space of her two-room kitchenette apartment, but rather she is also continuously unsatisfied with it and disgusted by it. Her initial excitement about her apartment is quickly undermined by the realities of the space. No matter how much she cleaned with “water containing melted American Family soap and Lysol every other day,” she could not stop the first roach from arriving (Brooks, Maud Martha 62-63). It is as if a kind of filth inheres in the building and spreads uncontrollably. This unstoppable roach evidences Maud’s inability to control the unsanitary conditions of her home. Such a contaminating element is what Brooks describes when Maud talks about “the color and sound and smell of the kitchenette” that spreads to everyone and everything in the building draining the life from it (63). The occupants’ bodies become linked to the structural realities of the building.

Whether tenements or houses, segregated domestic spaces to which Blacks are relegated exude the substandard. Maud comments on how much she loved the house where she grew up, yet the first impression that the reader receives of her childhood home is that it is marked by a sense of inadequacy and unpleasantness: “There was a small hole in the sad-colored rug, near the sofa. Not an outrageous hole. But she shuddered. She dashed to the sofa, maneuvered it till the hole could not be seen. She sniffed a couple of times. Often it was said that colored people’s houses necessarily had a certain heavy, unpleasant smell. Nonsense, that was. Vicious—and nonsense. But she raised every window” (Brooks, Maud Martha 17). The impending visit of a young White boy, Charles, causes Maud to experience a feeling of anxiety. Although Charles never actually appears in the text, this moment is significant because the presence of a White
person—or even the threat of White presence—introduces questions of value. What the narrative reflects is a consciousness of how White people view Black people and their homes, and it shows how such views can structure how Blacks see their homes and, accordingly, themselves. Maud’s hiding in the bathroom at the end of the chapter is her attempt to prevent Charles from “viciously” seeing her in the way that she believes he sees her home: as valueless. Ultimately, the same kind of rotting that contaminates the Gappington and the Gardner becomes a presence in Maud’s segregated family home (the “heavy, unpleasant smell” and “outrageous hole”) by the narrator’s mere mention of a White person.

Maud Martha’s relationship to these domestic spaces shapes her familial relationship, similar to the way domestic space affects marital interactions in Brown’s novel. The relationship between Brooks’s protagonist and her husband Paul is the most significant familial relationship depicted in Maud Martha. This marriage unfolds with a nearly insurmountable distance between Maud and her husband; the two are unable to communicate effectively, and they are thus estranged for most of the narrative. When she feels jealous of Maella because of Paul’s dancing with her at the Foxy Cats Club, Maud checks her rising anger at this supposed usurper; she decides that “if the root was sour what business did she have up there hacking at a leaf?” (Brooks, Maud Martha 88). Her marriage itself is the root that has soured. The “sourness” of the marriage parallels her disappointment with her “rotted” apartment. In fact, critic Harry Shaw argues that the physical realities Brooks inscribes for Maud Martha’s apartment render the eponymous character disappointed with her marriage (129). Moreover, Brooks follows “the kitchenette,” the chapter that most specifically describes Maud’s dissatisfaction with her home, with a chapter that explores the protagonist’s increasing disinterest in Paul and his desires: he embarrasses his wife with his crudeness in public and private, and she rejects his sexual advances by suggesting that she make sandwiches instead of making love (65-68). That is, the structure of the narrative connects Maud’s feelings about Paul with her frustrations with their living space. Brooks’s linkage reveals an intimate connection between both of her character’s frustrations (home and husband), and emphasizes the emotional distance Maud feels from both.

Maud Martha suffers from domestic disillusionment, but this disillusionment does not limit itself to her experiences within her home; Brooks extends it to her encounters outside of her domestic space. This “movement” of her disillusionment becomes clear when she takes her daughter Paulette to see Santa Claus. During the visit, Santa Claus shows no interest in Paulette and ignores the little girl as she speaks:

“Mister,” said Maud Martha, “my little girl is talking to you.”
Santa Claus’s neck turned with hard slowness, carrying his unwilling face with it.
“Mister,” said Maud Martha.
“And what—do you want for Christmas.” No question mark at the end.
“I want a wagon, a doll, a bear, a big ball, and a tricycle with a horn.”

This lack of concern causes Paulette to ask her mother, “Why didn’t Santa Claus like me?” Maud Martha tries to make her disappointed daughter believe that Santa had liked her and that he had just been preoccupied; however, she has a lingering fear that her daughter is beginning to recognize the reality of racism and prejudice. Maud Martha hopes that Paulette is not at a point where she would begin to put the pieces together. The chapter ends with a prayer-like moment when Maud Martha wishes: “Keep her that land of blue! Keep her those fairies . . . and Santa every winter’s lord, kind, sheer being who never perspires,
who never does or says a foolish or ineffective thing... who never has occasion to pull the chain and flush the toilet” (176). This wish intimates that she does not want her daughter to become disillusioned by racism (just yet).

Significantly, Maud Martha attributes to this disillusionment the odd and very particular negative characteristics that she connects to her husband Paul. The “toilet” reference stands out especially. After going out to a “musicale” one night, Maud Martha observes that Paul “went immediately into the bathroom.” She is frustrated and a bit appalled by the fact that he “did not try to mask his need” at all (66). Paul’s behavior is not the behavior Maud Martha expects of her husband; his actions do not represent the domestic life that she had imagined.

Moreover, by ending with the image of the “toilet,” the text locates the reader squarely within the domestic space with which Maud Martha is unsatisfied, while also evoking issues of sanitation. Maud Martha couches this social disillusionment that she fears for her daughter in the images of (disappointed) domesticity.

Maud Martha’s role as a mother is vital to understanding her feelings about her domestic life. Her relationship to her daughter Paulette often parallels her feelings about her marriage (102-07). However, the way the narrative introduces Maud Martha’s second pregnancy in the last chapter points out her rising dissatisfaction with her domestic space. The announcement of this pregnancy is located in the celebratory chapter “back home from the wars!” which describes the moment after World War II when life seemed promising for many African Americans: “There was Peace, and her brother Harry was back from the wars. . . . [O]utside it was bright, because the sunshine had broken through the dark green of that shade and was glorifying every bit of her room” (177). In the chapter, Brooks connects the new pregnancy with this moment so that both appear to be equally promising. Washington, too, reads this chapter as one in which Maud is able to free herself, even if momentarily, from the domestic enclosures that have defined her character throughout the narrative (“Taming” 465).

However, just as in Brown’s text, there is a parenthetical disturbance of the optimistic narrative; a foreboding elliptical insert interrupts the celebratory tone of the chapter:

She did not need information, or solace, or a guidebook or a sermon—not in this sun!—not in this blue air!

... They “marched,” they battled behind her brain—the men who had drunk beer with the best of them, the men with two arms off and two legs off, the men with parts of faces. Then her guts divided, then her eyes swam under frank mist. And the Negro press (on whose front pages beamed the usual representations of womanly Beauty, pale and pom-padoured) carried the stories of the latest of the Georgia and Mississippi lynching. . . . But the sun was shining, and some of the people in the world had been left alive. (178-79)

Brooks juxtaposes the images of excited returning soldiers with dismembered men and lynched figures. The reality is that the post-war experience posed difficulties for the struggle for African American freedom, and there was a continuation of racial violence particularly in the South. The insert “places the optimism in the sobering context of the maimed bodies of the soldiers and the news of lynchings” (Andrews 69-70). This elliptical moment in the text, buttressed by references to the “blue sky” and the sun “shining” on both sides, inserts a level of self-conscious irony into the chapter’s celebratory tone.

If there is a symbolic parallel between the returning soldiers and the pregnancy being drawn, one must also consider other levels of meaning for the fiction’s pregnancy because socioracial realities complicated its historical counterpart—the soldiers’ excitement is undermined by the image of lynching in the text. What another child actually means is even less room in the two-bedroom
kitchenette. Because of this new child, Maud Martha and Paul will likely need to move, and because one of the last details in the plot is that Paul has lost his job (Brooks, *Maud Martha* 159), such a move is not likely possible. The promise (or threat) of further domestic confinement is what lurks behind the text of the chapter and threatens to emerge, as did the elliptical statement.

This understanding provides a productive way to parse a significant statement in the chapter: “What, what, am I to do with all of this life?” You-me Park and Gayle Wald explain that “World War II marked the moment when African American men began to organize politically around the war effort to demand their rights as citizens. . . . But where were black women’s desires for citizenship and mobility within and between separate spheres being presented?” (278). Park and Wald contend that Maud Martha’s question is a fictive asking of this question about new opportunities for Black women’s citizenship and mobility in the middle of the twentieth century.

This level of meaning may be read in the text, but other, very particular reasons also fuel her question. Maud Martha is actively looking at and thinking about the physical realities of her apartment when she asks this pivotal question about what to do with all of this “life”; she is asking where is she to put, to house all of the “life” that she is carrying: her children. In part, it is a question about housing. The novel, then, ends with an unarticulated fear about the realities of the physical domestic space for the Black family (the figurative domestic space). Therefore, Maud’s question parallels Buggy’s statement in Brown’s text: “It looked like there was no place for a broke colored man to go. No hiding place. No place to run” (Brown 131). Both insist on a lack of a place to house Black bodies; a “no-placedness” characterizes their respective experiences.

The “no-placedness” in these texts is actually a social and legal creation that becomes prominent in the African American lived experience. In his discussion of place in *Workings of the Spirit*, Houston Baker argues,

> [for] place to be recognized by one as actually PLACE, as a personally valued locale, one must set and maintain the boundaries. If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a setter of place but a prisoner of another’s desire. Under the displacing impress of authority even what one calls and, perhaps, feels is one’s own place is, from the perspective of human agency, placeless.

(104; original italics)

In Baker’s understanding, having one’s place defined or controlled by an outside “authority” complicates one’s relationship to that place. This idea of constituting and maintaining describes succinctly the social work done by neighborhood associations, racial covenants, and even court cases. Moreover, the establishing of boundaries connected to “place” is the very domain of values (or valuation). Thus, Baker’s idea of “placelessness” is intrinsically connected to the idea of “valuelessness” that I have been exploring. We can recognize the “displacing impress of authority” in preventing families from establishing homes past Cottage Grove Avenue in *Maud Martha* and in forcing families to sign in if they want to leave or enter their homes in *Trumbull Park*. Additionally, as Brown’s novel illustrates, the structural and psychological realities of segregation that the legal documents and social practices engineered and encouraged did not limit themselves to the actual geographical coordinates of segregated areas. The attempt to confine a subject to a particular place, which characterizes the practice of segregation, can paradoxically engender a feeling of having no place for that subject inside and outside of the segregated area. The sense of having no place travels, as it were, and has the motility of a policing force.

The actual inability to move and the feeling of immobility constitute the sentiment that travels between segregated and integrated spaces. Given this idea,
we can push Baker’s conceptualization somewhat further to include this effect by also talking about “spacelessness.” Along with the lack of a definite place of value, Black bodies do not have the freedom to move that space indicates. The societal investment in Whiteness impedes this movement through space, and acts of segregation are structured around this investment. Arguably, it is bell hooks’s perception of such “spacelessness” that encourages her theorizing of “homeplace” for African American subjects. My discussion has focused on the relationship that the characters in these narratives have with domestic space, but this relationship is one that is fully intelligible by understanding the place of African Americans in the social realm. It is for this reason that Buggy Martin sees his home in Trumbull Park as a prison and Maud Martha connects the disillusionment of social racism with the disillusionment with her home life. In effect, the way that the Black body is housed in these mid-20th-century segregation narratives becomes a representation of how they are “housed” in the body politic: estrangement in one parallels disenfranchisement in the other.

Notes

1. Hirsch explains that federal policies and organizations meant to dismantle housing discrimination and segregation actually reinforced and extended them in the post-World War II period. Also, some social methods of intimidation discouraged African American from integrating as well as distressed those who did. Such official and unofficial mechanisms forced African Americans to remain in congested, uncomfortable, and over-priced living spaces (Drake and Cayton 174-80).

2. See Bachelard and also Wallace.

3. A race restrictive covenant is “a mutual agreement entered into by a group of property owners not to sell, rent, lease or otherwise convey a property to Negroes or other particular minorities” (Long and Johnson 10-11).

4. In his discussion, Barrett also calls attention to the significant relationship between violence and value. Additionally, “irreparable injury” is the language used in the Corrigan lawsuit to describe the situation that would be created by African American owning property in the covenant-protected neighborhood.

5. Contributing to this dis-connect between husband and wife are the different experiences that Black men and women have in Trumbull Park. At one point in the narrative, Buggy realizes that while the men escape the terrors of the mob violence most of the day while they are at work, the women face this harassment all day everyday (Brown 245).

6. The novel is derived from a sequence of poems that Brooks had written (Melhem 13).

7. See Spivey’s and also Singh’s respective discussions of the post-World War II period.

8. Tuan, whom Baker cites in his Workings, differentiates “space” from “place.” He explains, “space as that which allows movement”; it denotes having the freedom to move (6). “Place” is “pause”: “each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place.” This pause allows a subject to attach significance to this particular point in space (12). Massey and others have reconfigured “place” by insisting that it also results from the interaction of social relations so that a network of social forces, such as those embodied in the geographical matrix of segregation, can inform the attachment that an individual has to “place.”

9. See Note 8.

Works Cited


"Iron Ring in Housing." The Crisis 47.7 (July 1940): 205, 210.