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EXPLORING MEMORY SPACES AS ALTERNATIVE URBAN DISCOURSE: CITY IMAGINARIES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN URBAN "MEMORY" NOVELS, 1990S-PRESENT*

BY LÂLE DEMIRTÜRK

Starting with the late nineteenth century, urban novels have played an important part in the expression of a particularly African American quest for identity. In the late twentieth and early twentieth-first centuries, African American urban novels grapple with the African American experience of postmodernity. Therefore, examining their representations of the city is crucial to understanding racialized and gendered spaces through which African American urban subjects' struggles are depicted and reveal unequal social processes and power relations. To adapt Homi Bhabha's view, we can argue that the experience of the American metropolis "cannot be fictionalized without the marginal oblique gaze" (Bhabha 62) of its African American urban subjects, because cities are inevitably caught in the vortex of power and resistance. Bearing witness in memory to the new metropolitan experience, the African American urban novel contributes to the project that Bhabha outlines. The African American urban novel mediates, as Sam B. Girgus suggests, "the ideological dilemma of achieving a common culture based on difference and heterogeneity" (qtd. in Brooker 163). Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy point to the current cross-disciplinary studies of the city in the humanities and social sciences, which, as they argue, challenge "common-

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place conceptions of the city as a synthetic totality" (Balshaw & Kennedy 1). Focusing on the city as a setting for their narratives, African American writers employ similar challenges. While doing that, they not only offer a bleak environment in which the city dehumanizes its residents but also represent spaces in which the individual flourishes. Since these novelists do not consider anti-urbanism as an effective reaction to influential discourses pathologizing contemporary black urban life, some writers refuse "to surrender ideals of urbanity even as they remain sharply critical of the racial order of actually existing cities" (Dubey 238).

In this context, the emergence of African American urban "memory" novels, such as John Edgar Wideman's *Two Cities* (1998), Asha Bandele's *Daughter* (2003), and Diane McKinney-Whetstone's *Leaving Cecil Street* (2004), as I argue in this essay, call for a new mapping of the city with multiple meanings and images. They read the city as "palimpsest" (Huyssen 81), where memories speak of "other" cities, substituting a representation of the past for an elucidation of the present. Memory discourse based on the conception of urban palimpsest articulate urban memories in order to restore an appreciation of the city in the present.** In addressing the power of memory discourse in conveying the experience of the city as multiple-coded text, Andreas Huyssen suggests that "the act of remembering is always in and of the present, while its referent is of the past" (Huyssen 3-4). Similarly, these novels allow for the construction of alternative representations of the lived city, while showing how the role of memory as a "reconstructive experience" (Harding 135) is central to any criti-

** In his book, entitled *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), Andreas Huyssen points out that "the explosion of memory discourses at the end of the twentieth century has added significantly to the ways we understand history and deal with the temporal dimensions of social and cultural life" (4-5).

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cal discourse of the city. Andrew Kincaid suggests that memory does not always imply nostalgia for the past but rather a strong reaction to the present in the sense that memory becomes a method of critique (Kincaid 39). Kevin Lynch claims that every city resident "has had long associations with some part of his city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings" (Lynch 1). Textual inscriptions of the present and past cities challenge our images and conceptions of the city, which Saskia Sassen defines as "a strategic lens for producing critical knowledge" not merely about the urban issues but also "about major social, economic, and cultural refigurings in our societies" (Sassen xvii).

The novelistic evocations of the city press on a sense of urgency about the present while opening up spaces for thinking about the past. Memory discourse in these novels, as a form of discourse about the city, provides us with a useful tool for exploring aspects of spaces and of urban life in the city. Since the city is a set of "the intersections of multiple narratives" (Massey 171), memory device enables the cities to be mediated through the subjective thoughts of the protagonists. Since these characters look at the present through the prism of the past, they talk of the urban subject in themselves. As they retrieve the past, it is "felt as a living memory and active influence in the present," while this kind of "retrieval" becomes an "active responsibility both for the past and for the future" (Wilson 139). Hence, cities that emerge out of the characters' memories create a microcosm, which creates a world of daily struggles, but it is also where their dreams and expectations for a better future in the city emerge.

In this context, John Edgar Wideman's *Two Cities* (1998) opens with the image of the city as a zoo, whose second synonym, as the narrator Mr. Mallory looks it up in the dictionary, seems to draw the image of the city in its fullest all through the novel as "a place or situation marked by confusion or disorder" (1). Words and meaning

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that are so important to the narrator lead us to the representation of the city. The zoo represents a personal space to Mr. Mallory because that is one of these places "he had walked with John Africa" (2), which becomes his trope of the city. Mr. Mallory's memories of the imagined city (of Philadelphia) as he experienced it with John Africa represent the lived city (of Pittsburgh) as a palimpsest where the two cities seem to overlap in his mind. He maps the territories where he stood with John Africa—a map that we (as readers) need to learn our way in his city, which has deeper meanings to him so long as he reconstructs it with John Africa's utopian vision, later replaced by a dystopian reality.

Although Mr. Mallory's city is a multilayered vision of surveillance and state-supported violence, the hostile racist attitudes can be pushed aside as he finds solace in the literary semantics of the city whose keywords—such as the zoo, zombie, or zoogeography, which he re-reads from the dictionary—seem to highlight the natural landscape deeply embedded in John Africa's alternative discourse on the city. Africa's signifiers help explore not only what the city represents to him but also whether or not John Africa's words in the past have been "getting him ready for this moment, this morning" (6) in order to ascribe meaning to his everyday reality. Thinking about the fact that "John Africa's dead, the dead of the gray, dying city" (6), sets Mr. Mallory's mind back to Pittsburgh, instead of Philadelphia: "Today he's in another city, alone in a room on Cassina Way. Then and now. Two cities" (7). It is only through John Africa that Mr. Mallory represents places, specific locations in space that provide an anchor and a meaning to who he is, for remembering John Africa means remembering imagined spaces of resistance as an alternative urban discourse.

The bombing of MOVE on Osage Avenue that kills everyone in the headquarters, including John Africa, leads Mr. Mallory to the imagined city, Philadelphia, which

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represents a site of destruction (and state-supported violence) where emotional resilience is impossible: "What kind of world is this, John Africa? Homes bombed. Women and children roasted alive. A man shot, burned, chopped to pieces, swinging through the air in a bucket" (7). The horrible site of urban spaces, which fail to harbor the past as it is, is reinforced by the official cleaning of the mess left off by the bombing: "They stand on the bridge discussing the terrible fire. John Africa and his MOVE family, men, women, and children incinerated, their ashes shoveled up, bagged, trucked to the dump, tossed in the trash" (8). The story of MOVE creates a story of the imagined city as a white space rescued by liberal white people and city officials. Since John Africa and MOVE fail to access white public space in the city, the bombing of MOVE marks the historical moment when Philadelphia is "not the same city it was before" (Strauss 17). Mr. Mallory shares John Africa's conception of the city as a decaying city which needs to build an alternative communal life. The memory of John Africa, a meaningful reader of the city, inadvertently becomes a way of reconfiguring the city under a new light. Re-thinking the city from within the domain of John Africa enables Mr. Mallory to have a dual consciousness of the city. In a city where the dead become visible, then the place provides an orientation to past and present for its residents. Mr. Mallory's memories implicate the influential public discourse aimed at political disempowerment of the African American urban (utopian) discourse. These memories help him interrogate the rights to the city: At a symbolical level, Mr. Mallory participates effectively in the social production of the imagined city spaces of MOVE, decoding white dominant public discourse of the lived city.

On the other hand, Robert Jones, the boarder at Kassima's house and also her lover, lives in two cities: He tries to remember how "the row houses on Cassina" (16) were remodeled, transforming these urban places into unfamiliar ones. Living in the house with Kassima makes him

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rethink how his parents had lived on Cassina Way long before he was born. Kassima tells him he is almost in "a different place now" (34). Robert has a hard time believing his family ever lived in this house or another one. As a disabled veteran now, he feels that there is no "room inside the house for the emptiness he needed to fill" (39). Kassima also has two cities: the one before her husband's jail term, during which he died of AIDS and she lost two sons to the urban violence, and the one after that term where she feels strong enough to start a new relationship with Robert Jones: "I decided I wanted to go on living. Had to start all over again" (51). Her critical perspective on the city extends to the racialized social spaces: "Black boys are born beating they hard heads against a brick wall. . . . Crazy country of ours accuses them of everything but being citizens and human beings" (55). The representation of the city as a "jungle" (59) seems to pervade Kassima's conception of the city as a space disrupted by the ideology of whiteness.

Mr. Mallory's two cities seem to take on a different shape as he writes letters to the famous Italian sculptor Mr. Giacometti without ever sending them. He believes he is an artist "learning from your art to use my camera in new ways" (81). In his self-imposed role as a wanderer, capturing the urban scenes and people with his camera, he tries to capture change while admitting it is impossible. He tries to do with his camera what Mr. Giacometti did with his oversized or undersized pieces of sculpture: "I want people to see my pictures from various angles. . . . No single, special, secret view sought or revealed. One in many. Many in one" (91). His photos capture a palimpsest image of urbanites as he voices the urban subject in himself and as he bears responsibility to the city. When the gang members threaten people's security in the city, he takes their picture and boldly asks them, "Where were you when we needed you. When the police army attacked John Africa and his people, when they slaughtered women and

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children and burned down our neighborhood" (99). Kassima's conception of the city as jungle is revisited by Mr. Mallory in his later letters to Mr. Giacometti. He praises the multiracial city where urbanites engage in dialogue: "They say artists of all colors meet and talk in great cities like Paris. The idea excites me. Those gatherings and conversations might change a city, its history, its future" (116). He uses his camera (as a tool) for taking pictures that represent the world "arranged nice and neat" (118-119), while also representing "the damage" fresh in memories. Before Mr. Mallory dies he asks Kassima to burn his "unfinished work" (140)—the negatives of a city that were never meant to stand for real, but for the alternative city of dialogues he dreamed, lost with the violent death of John Africa. Mr. Mallory's vision of the city and Mr. Giacometti's perspective on his models converge with John Africa's vision of the city as "the invisible prison" (146). This is no different from Kassima's vision of the city, which is similar to what Mr. Mallory sees: the city is much like the jail where the prison is located as the symbolic site in which they are "taking away time" (161). Realizing that it is impossible for the camera to absorb the "ash-colored cityscape as it is" (154) with all the people in it at one time, Mr. Mallory moves closer to Mr. Giacometti, who had to face his own failure and disappointment in the limitations of his art.

After Mr. Mallory's death, Kassima gathers all of what Mr. Mallory left in his room while she remembers the names of the dead; that is what a city is all about. She gradually remembers how she talked to the black mothers in the place where she felt that the gang members were responsible for one of her son's death: "Ask the police for protection and you discover real quick you're in the wrong part of town to be asking for anything" (206). The city's failure to act on the lives of the black community signifies corruption of the cops. Wideman's representation of the city culminates in Kassima's memories where young men

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had started "dying like flies" (222) or something "terrible happening to everybody everyday in Homewood" (222) In the city, whether it is Pittsburgh or Philadelphia, black boys and children can be killed like Emmett Till, lynched like a wild animal. With the black urbanites' "shouts," "[p]anicked" and "[s]cared eyes" (224), the city then represents a site of fear and destruction. Kassima constructs an urban discourse in which black boys/men are not only treated unfairly but the black youth needs and deserves better urban spaces to become respectable citizens. If we take her critical vantage point on the city and its officials, we can claim that there is an important role for African American youth in the struggle of local community to reconstruct stronger communal bonds

The "white people," as John Africa says, "who own this city" (228) seem to fail in promoting a transformation of the public sphere into a democratic one, because there is no real city diversity when groups and organizations such as MOVE, that have counter-ideologies, are destroyed. However, Kassima is strong enough to stand against her pain at Mr. Mallory's funeral, where she feels there is "a voice whispering to me don't worry, everything's going to be all right" (238). The novel produces an urban discourse in a complex way: Mr. Mallory unravels his memories with John Africa in Philadelphia, who represents the urban utopia, and spatializes them in another city, Pittsburgh, which becomes a site of memory and imagination. The imagined city and the lived city seem to converge in Mr. Mallory's struggle to translate his memoirs to photos. His photographic representations of the city "translates his own personal healing into a communal affirmation of the unacknowledged suffering through which urban black Pennsylvanians are surviving" (Simpson II 233). In other words, he re-inscribes his memories on city spaces through his construction of a city imaginary. John Africa's pseudo-presence invokes an imagined city, signifying the "'hidden agenda' of *cosmopolitical cityspace*" (Soja 229-30), where

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the social control in the city is ensured by the "militarization of space" (Soja 338).

Asha Bandele's *Daughter* (2003) challenges the prevailing ways of thinking about race and urbanity, developing an alternative universe of discourses on the city through "imagined pasts," while addressing the material burden of race in postmodern American cities. However, determinations and agency of African Americans, shaping their responses to the world into which they are born, reconstruct the city as a text to be read. James Donald believes that the city constitutes an "imagined environment" (Donald 422), because this concept points to the fact that "we 'read' the city . . . [in that] we make sense of a host of complex signs and signals" (Donald 457). Similarly, the memories of the novel's characters indicate that "it is vital to grasp the distinction between the way the city is conceptualized and the way it is experienced" (Donald 434).

Aya's relationship with her mother Miriam is severed because Miriam has to work hard to earn a living. Aya's desire for fun with a man ends up in her murdering him. Aya, on probation, spends her year in going to school and studying hard to "be the daughter I raised you to be" (19) As Miriam expects, Aya, who feels free only when she jogs on the streets, is soon murdered by a policeman who mistakenly believes she is a criminal. All through her days at the hospital, where she dies, Aya is visited by her mother, whose memories take us to the experiences which shaped her into a woman who "had tried to invent herself as an entity who needed no one" (56).

Calling in on Bird, her lover, and Aya's father, Miriam remembers her two separate lives in Brooklyn. Overly protected by her religious class-conscious parents in an oppressive household and growing up in a friendless environment, Miriam's deep love for Bird, a janitor at school, opens up a new space for her. Bird, who used to be a soldier in the Vietnam War, is very much taken either by all forms of racism that he experienced in US or by rapes of

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Vietnamese women and children that he witnessed. Bird knows how to enjoy the city and its "energy" that he instills in Miriam, who starts "seeing her city for the first time through this man's eyes" (86), while Bird also feels that Brooklyn is "disorganized but decipherable. Fragmented, but familial" (87). Still in search for a quiet place where there is no war, associating the New York city with Vietnam because of occasional riots, he believes that there is not an open war in the city but "an undercover one" (87), because "the police can just kill us" (87). Bird's ability to read the city also makes him keen on his plans for the future: all he wants to get is a "decent education" (88). He has a broad vision of life: Despite the fact that Brooklyn seems to be an urban jungle due to police brutality, it was here that he "could always call himself back to hope, back to vision" (110).

Always trapped by unequal opportunities in employment and schooling, Bird's desire to go to the University after saving money in a decent job is never fulfilled. Racist public policies strain his life with constant unemployment even more when Miriam's parents see them kiss each other on the streets, causing Miriam to quit her house to live with him and his grandmother, Mama. As Miriam and Bird are living as a married couple, Miriam's pregnancy turns into a nightmare when white policemen, who always harass Bird in his neighborhood to humiliate him, shoot him to death. After signing official papers where she sees Bird as a corpse for the last time, Miriam feels lost in the city: the days of "sharing Brooklyn" (92) with Bird are replaced by a sense of "walking on streets that could have belonged to any city" (173). Her memories of hard work, of grandmother's death, and of moving out of the neighborhood that emerges out of the Brooklyn of the past or the imagined Brooklyn is now juxtaposed with the Brooklyn in the present, the lived Brooklyn, where Miriam's neighbor Althea, who helped her through Aya's funeral, spread the news of Aya's death all through the neighborhood. The

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Brooklyn that emerges out of Miriam's memories as a divided neighborhood of violence and robberies is now replaced by the lived Brooklyn, which became a lively site of communal bonding, because "the memory of closeness that had followed these families whose childhood homes had been small southern towns, still lingered" (176). The sense of community that brings Miriam back to herself is something she herself promotes to other female inmates in the jail, where she is put for "the attempted murder of a police officer" (239) in order to avenge Aya's murder. Left with the memories of a "husband" and a daughter killed by police officers, and with that of only Mama, who died a natural death, Miriam gradually clings to life after a brief period of lapses into moments of vision when she actually talks to Aya: "But she never felt more alive" (247). Aya's "telling" her that "understanding was better" (251) carries Miriam on into hearing Sonia Sanchez's poems that Aya recited, which helped her become "a different woman" (253). Miriam's encouraging other women in the jail to tell their painful stories to help them realize—unlike what she did to Aya, to whom she never listened—the importance of telling your daughters everything: "Tell them before they have a chance to slip out the front door, out through your fingers" (259).

In view of all these events, the novel promotes familial stability as a remedy for urban poverty. In Bird's case, his family is a representation of unmitigated trauma. His father shoots his mother to death when he is six years old. Brought up by his grandmother and victimized by his Vietnam War experiences, he is often subjected to physical abuse by the police in his neighborhood and racist employment policies in his job applications. Similarly, Miriam is victimized by the alienation imposed on her by her parents, whose religious fanaticism results in overprotection. Her family denotes how residents wall themselves against each other to protect their "values." When Miriam's parents see Bird kissing Miriam on the street,

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they consider him an "animal" (111). Hence, those African Americans who literally live on the streets outside of their sociocultural enclaves are an urban underclass of criminals. Bird's experiences also show that some parts of Brooklyn are left behind by the processes of capital development because it is too poor and too black to be of interest to the rest of the city. His desire for departure from home to the University underlines the desired flight from poverty. His experiences from childhood on discredit the city as a marketplace of abundant consumer options and severe job competition. Although the novel depicts the grim aspect of the African American urban experience, the beginning stages of Bird's date with Miriam affirm a specifically urban ideal of sociality among strangers. The redemptive weight from racial oppression for Bird is not just placed on the family, but the small community feeling and partnership that he establishes with Miriam at home saves her from the emotional pressure and exclusionary practices of her parents.

In contrast to Bird's hopeless life, Miriam's experiences with her neighbors after Aya is killed and later with strangers (her female mates) in jail, following her gunned attack at the police station, suggest that, to use Madhu Dubey's words, "constructive responses to crisis conditions must be sought and found not within organic settings from the past but within the terms of the contemporary city" (65). The novel valorizes human agency and emphasizes communal bonding as necessary for social transformation of the city heading us towards a future with a deeper urban consciousness on the fact that where "we live makes a big difference in the quality of our individual lives" (Dreier, Mollenkopf and Swanstrom 3). The imagined city for Miriam (and Vietnam for Bird) are spaces of confinement where they cannot develop their subjectivity in their own terms of value, but these places are not set as spatial/temporal elsewheres as viable responses to dystopian urban conditions.

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Diane McKinney-Whetstone's *Leaving Cecil Street* (2004) presents a set of memories of her characters—in an African American-middle class residential neighborhood—who live in a West Philadelphia neighborhood, trying to forget the pain inflicted in their past experiences in order to reconcile with their present lives in 1969. As the street residents struggle and learn to become a community, the street seems to come alive with the people strolling or talking with each other in helping develop an urban identity as Cecil Street residents.

Cecil Street stands out as the protagonist of the novel: "Safely tucked away in the heart of West Philadelphia" and "a charmed block" (3) in its own right, Cecil Street represents "the transition from white to colored to Negro to Black Is Beautiful" (3), constructing the historical site as well as the geographical site of the urban neighborhood where the annual block party represents the strong bond of community. Set against the white-over-black violence in the 1960s (i.e., the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.), all the black people on Cecil Street, including Joe and his wife, Louise; Deucie Powell, who recently came to find her daughter Alberta; Alberta and her daughter Neet; and Neet and Shay, the daughter of Joe and Louise—all learn to confront their (inter)personal problems that their past experiences impact on their present lives.

Having quit his job as a musician and having played tenor sax in clubs in the same year he married Louise, Joe and his new wife moved to Cecil Street in 1954. Since their marital relationship fails, Joe often turns to his memories of happy days when he was happy with his life, when he had a loving relationship with Valadean, who ended up on Cecil Street, and also with Alberta, who was forced into prostitution by her stepmother, the owner of a whorehouse. Joe does not remember Alberta until the last scenes of the novel. There were his memories of how he played his *self* into his sax on the porch, expressing what he could never express to his wife: "Afraid that the playing might

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whisper in his ear that he had to choose either his life on Cecil Street with Louise and his baby girl and the stability of a good job with the transportation authority, or the jazz musician's life that was irregular and bitter and lush and lovely. Afraid that in the choosing he might end up leaving Cecil Street" (8-9). The same sax represents to Louise all that should be buried in the past and hence in the cellar of their house. Since Louise is jealous of his lovers—Joe remembers as he plays the sax—he gives up on playing it on the porch, but plays it in the cellar, where he also cries heartily. His past memories are not only built upon racial violence when he, a nine-year-old child, had to identify his dead father's remains "shot in the head by a racist Pittsburgh cop" (10); when he saw his best friend "beaten to a pulp" (10); when his sister died when she was pregnant; and when he buried his mother in a year. The urban palimpsest Joe carries in his head creates a multilayered text of the city, be it Pittsburgh of the past—the site of his painful memories—or in different cities where he worked in clubs and had different lovers as a way of shielding himself from directly confronting his fragmented past memories. His occasional happy moments with his wife are intervened by Valadean's presence in the neighborhood. Starting a passionate relationship with Valadean as a secret from his wife seems to give Joe a feeling of reliving his past the way he wanted to, and hence Pittsburgh in the past evokes a sense of the city as a site of freedom and joy, unlike West Philadelphia, where he feels "confined" to a secure life, unable to feel any self-fulfillment except when he shows Valadean different places of Philadelphia.

Joe and Louise are unaware that Deucie, Alberta's dying mother, who has come out of the mental asylum, is all naked in the cellar of their house. Deucie's memories of her past life also connote memories of different cities. Her memories take her away from the cellar, when she secretly watches Joe. Her mother, who spent her money on herself

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and clothes, never cared for her child or husband, causing her husband to work long hours, which almost cost him his leg. Deceiving her husband on his deathbed with her merchant marine lover, she sent Deucie to live with a cousin in New Jersey to move her out of her way. Sleeping with a switchblade to protect herself against being raped by her cousin's husband, Deucie hitchhiked to Philadelphia and fell in love with a man called Jeffery. As Deucie stays in the cellar for over a month, she eats from Louise's cat's bowl. Deucie acts like a wild animal as Alberta reconciles with her past and as Louise finds and helps her get to Alberta's house from the cellar to lay her down on a bed to help her die comfortably.

Joe's next-door neighbor Alberta has been ostracized by "most of Cecil Street" (13) because of her rigid religious practices and physical abuse and treatment of her seventeen-year-old daughter, Neet, to get her "to be as devout as she herself was" (14). Treating her daughter as a sinner all the time is later understood as a projection of her own shame and guilt for her enforced prostitution and having an illegitimate daughter, whom Brownie raises as his own: "He'd made her [Alberta] respectable after all, married her though she was pregnant. He'd given the child who wasn't his a name and treated her better than if she'd been his" (232). Alberta's turning to the church as the only way of life ends up in forcing Brownie to her own church, and when he resists she divorces him. Alberta's vision of the city is a hellish location of sin and sinners from which only the church can save her. Unaware of how Neet's life was ruined as a little child, raped by Mr. G. in the church, Alberta fails to realize that the church may not prove to be a positive alternative to the real city out there. Feeling corrupt but later on innocent again with Freddie, Neet confronts her pregnancy (with Shay's help), that ends up in a disastrous illegal abortion from which she cannot recover for a long time, especially when she learns that she will never have children. Neet's search for a homely site in the

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church caused her to appear as devout as her mother but at the cost of refusing to open herself up to everything connected with the city. Louise, on the other hand, is wrapped up in her past memories because her mother had died when Louise was ten years old—an event which left her emotionally scarred as a failing mother for Shay, who compensates for her motherly support with her father's emotional attachment to him. Louise needs to go through serious dental operations because "a dentist was a luxury when I grew up" (90).

All these individual characters' present life on Cecil Street is intervened by their memories, causing them to hold to one another at a time of crisis, such as Neet's near death during abortion and recovery. Cecil Street people act as a true community of friends helping each other out even though they may not like each other in their everyday life: Joe feels "his block of Cecil Street [to be] a storybook of what community meant—of life wrought with the struggles of being black in Philadelphia in 1969" (67). Although Cecil Street people gossip about each other to the extent that Alberta can even overhear from the window what Louise thinks of her, "fanatical, spiteful, hateful, pseudosanctified, mean, just mean" (163), they never spread the secret sexual relationship that Freddie and Neet have. They decided to be "tight-lipped when necessary to protect their own" (132). And right after the wrongly done abortion, they can get together to rush the bleeding Neet to the hospital, while they keep being concerned about Alberta and Neet, as Neet tries to recover at home: "The whole of the block of Cecil Street was in a state of mourning" (133). As they start blaming it on the hospital for never taking care of black people as good, to which Louise, a professional nurse at the hospital, agrees, Cecil Street becomes a protective community for Neet: "So they wouldn't, couldn't blame Neet. One of Cecil Street's brightest flowers. All they could do for Neet was grieve. And that's what the whole of Cecil Street did" (136). How-

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ever, untimely pregnancy and abortion have made it impossible for young people such as Shay and Neet to "experience for a couple of hours the normal life of a teenage girl growing up in Philadelphia in the sixties" (102).

Joe and Louise, Alberta and Neet, and Neet and Shay may have problems of their own, but they are able to work out their problems after they undergo critical moments of their lives: For Joe, "settling down in Philadelphia on his block of Cecil Street" (69) stands for the best choice in his life in contrast to Pittsburgh, where he grew up on many losses of beloved ones. Long before he even remembers the true identity of Alberta, Joe respects her for being "at least bold enough to live the life she chose without conforming to what Cecil Street thinks" (71). He tries to get Neet and Shay to become friends again after the abortion, but it takes a long time for Neet to forgive Shay for taking her to the inexperienced young girl who did the faulty abortion. When Joe pays his frequent visits, he comes to remember Alberta and their past relationship. The ambiguity of who Neet's father was is never resolved, but for once Joe and Alberta have sex in Alberta's house after so many years. This becomes the pivotal moment when Alberta, after also learning that Neet was raped by a Mr. G. from the church, makes her decide to move to the late Pat's house, where Deucie had attacked Pat with an ice pick on the chest to find her daughter Alberta. The secret relationship with Alberta and Joe is now over, while Joe had already given up on his relationship with Valadean.

The mood of the neighborhood also changes for the better: Cecil Street tries to come back to itself as it celebrates the occasion for "the second block party as a mood-enhancing activity to get beyond the tragedy with Neet" (203). The block party consists of 200 people who "looked sinewy and connected, like those mammoth caterpillars in African dances" (251). For Joe the block party means not just a pastime but a significant occasion that "rebuilt their community every summer around block-party time, rebuilt

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parts of themselves as they did so" (252). The community feeling constitutes the moment when the boundaries between the memories of the past and the experiences in the present seem to dissolve and converge. Memories of different places, where Deucie, Louise, Joe, and Alberta have grown up in pain, enable each one of them to come to terms with their restlessness and tension in the present urban neighborhood at a time when they do not feel at home. The effort to help and understand each other works gradually to better the relationship between Joe and Louise, Alberta and Joe, Joe and Valadean, Neet and Shay, and Deucie and Alberta, as they look with hope and expectancy to the future. Joe now starts to play his sax during the daytime for the whole community, including Louise, and hence he "played for Cecil Street" (291). Alberta left Cecil Street on the night of the block party but "Cecil Street didn't leave her" (296). The street residents paid visits to her to help clean what used to be Pat's old whorehouse to help Alberta's move in to make it a home for the family. Joe's blowing his horn helps him transform his present by reconciling his past. The healing through memories is also a way of learning to transform the city into an urban home. The impact of the communal bonding on the Cecil Street reminds us of what McKinney-Whetstone said of her novel in an interview:

> "I hope that people take with them the beauty, the closeness, of this block. . . . So much is made of the negative aspects of African American communities—the crime, the drugs, the poverty—and I am not suggesting that those conditions do not exist . . . but all over the country there have been African American communities that thrive, that are desirable places to live." (McKinney-Whetstone 7)

Cecil Street people seem to reinforce their public identity as residents on this particular street in the city, gradually transforming that street into a site where, as Jane Jacobs would argue, they "settle for some form of 'togetherness,' in which more is shared with one another

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than in the life of sidewalks" (Jacobs 62). In doing that, they prove to be a "successful city neighborhood [as] a place that keeps sufficiently abreast of its problems so it is not destroyed by them" (Jacobs 112). Cecil Street as a site of fragmented urban realities of the imagined cities in the past has gradually transformed into a site of a closely knit community, whose values are tested by the unequally structured web of power relations implicated in the memories of the characters. Hence, the street residents have fulfilled the need to develop an urban understanding of place and community as the basis for constructing alternative relations and identifications with the dominant social order.

All in all, these novels help us treat urban spaces as part of an unequal social system of linked locales whose meaning is determined by narratives of race. These novels do not just represent the city and the problems it poses for its African American subjects, but actively "shape public responses to the perceived crisis of postmodern cities" (Dubey 238). Wideman's *Two Cities* explores the racial implications of an urban nightmare based on the impossibility of surviving by anti-urban alternatives to the white dominant culture, while posing the imagined city as an alternative democratic city to come. Bandele's *Daughter* bespeaks the viability of self-creation in the city, while calling for an urge to develop an urban tolerance of difference beneath the illegible and irrational surface of the class/race-divided city. McKinney-Whetstone's *Leaving Cecil Street* deconstructs the subterranean networks of community beneath the race-divided city. In these texts, there is a need to re-inscribe the city with a deep hope for a sense of diversity in an attempt to determine the possibilities for a truly democratic inclusiveness. The imagined and lived cities uncovered in these novels not only decode the multiple meanings of urban realities and identities, but also delineate how African American urban subjects operate in postmodern city spaces. Hence, the African

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American urban "memory" novels point to the importance of "memory spaces," or memory-cities, as strategies of maintaining "a sense of history in an urban scene" (Balshaw 33), and evoking "a shared historical consciousness of the city" (Balshaw & Kennedy 16), while developing a critical literacy to deconstruct the visible city as text and to navigate the racial narratives of the urban palimpsest. These novels employ memory device as a new strategy of reading the city to explore the social and cultural complexities of the American postmodern cities, opening up cultural spaces where alternative (and hopefully more democratic) formations of white dominant urban discourse can be negotiated.

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