

## Inner-witnessing as a spatial everyday practice in Ann Petry's *The Street*

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Some scholars approach Ann Petry's portrayal of Lutie Johnson's fate in the hostile background of *The Street* (1946) through a naturalistic and deterministic lens: the protagonist, a single black mother, dreams of improving her lifestyle by reproducing a white upper-middle class model. Given Lutie's gender and race her dreams are, following this critical method, condemned as impossible. This approach to Petry's novel does not take into account the deep geographical analysis that the author provides of Lutie's struggle. Employing a spatial paradigm, this essay aims to offer an interpretation of Petry's novel that challenges traditional geographic patterns evident in the street's urban description. Such opposition reflects Katherine McKittrick's approach to the definition of 'Black women's geographies' as sites of struggle. Analyzing the novel's employment of everyday practices, such as communicative expressions, and Kelly Oliver's notion of inner-witnessing as one of them, proves how Lutie Johnson's subjective mapping constitutes an everyday practice within the novel. As such, Petry's portrayal of Lutie's creation of space through these everyday practices illustrates how in her interactions with the street's dynamics Lutie provides a witnessing cartography of struggle that opposes traditional geographic interpretations.

**Keywords:** *subjectivity, witnessing, everyday activities, space, architecture, sociology*

When Ann Petry writes about Lutie Johnson's life on Harlem's 116<sup>th</sup> St., she writes the street. Such spatial addressing makes visible the protagonist's perception of the urban landscape, defining it as a contradictory experience. This opposing reality illustrates what McKittrick (2006,7) identifies as Black geographies, a "subaltern or alternative geographic pattern that work alongside and beyond traditional geographies and a site of terrain struggle". These alternative structures centralize a Black vantage point, one that speaks about the ways in which the body in its production of space through everyday practices becomes a spatial signifier. McKittrick's (2006,3) perception raises the awareness of how Black bodies modify space and place from a "perspective of a terrain of struggle where the black body meets the white world".

The opening of the novel depicts this struggle through the wind, a force that transforms the environment around 116<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem into an inhospitable one. It tries to impede Lutie from signing a contract to rent an apartment and be independent. For the protagonist changing her living arrangement opens up the possibility of moving up on the social scale. Lutie's identification of a spatial location, an apartment, with the fulfilment of her dreams illustrates the central role that space plays in the protagonist's psyche. As such, it reveals the mapping of the protagonist's subjectivity. This mental structure clashes with the challenge posed by the urban (external) spatial circumstances. Despite the windy interference, Lutie Johnson arrives at 116<sup>th</sup> St. in Harlem, faces the wind, which blows her "eyelashes away from the eyes" (Petry,1946, 2) and meets up with Jones, the Super, to visit the vacant apartment located on the building's fourth floor. The opening of the novel designates two key elements to interpret Lutie's deed: movement and the spatial narrative it engages. The protagonist challenges the wintry blast, as if confronting an evil force that leaves her eyesight unprotected but does not prevent her from witnessing the prying gazes of both Jones and Mrs. Hedges, the lady who lives on the buildings' first floor and who continuously looks through the window like a snake charmer. Lutie's insight about the nature of the apartment's setting does not prevent her signing the apartment's lease. In this first scene, Petry pictures Lutie as a determined and strong-willed protagonist and the setting as a mirror of gazes. It also illustrates the protagonist's choice of ignoring the threatening nature of the location. The novel's opening clashes the idealistic nature of Lutie's pursuit with the threatening nature of the environment she chooses. Being a black woman within the urban background evidences how race and gender influence how the Black female subject makes use and relates to space. Petry's emphasis on Lutie's determination signals her position or 'practice' against the windy force and the inquisitive gazes of the apartment's spectators: Super (Jones) and Mrs. Hedges.

Through the metaphors- wind and gazes- Petry challenges what traditional

geography determines to be transparent space, one that McKittrick (2006,5) defines as the idea that “space just is and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation”. I argue that Petry employs the notion of witnessing, through the characters, as an everyday practice to destabilize this transparency. This practice of observation relies deeply on subjectivity, and the individual’s observation of the external world. To theoretically frame this notion of witnessing, this paper employs Kelly Oliver’s (2004, 81) notion, one that departs from “a tension between finite historical contexts that constitute subject position on one hand and the structure of addressability and response-ability of subjectivity on the other”. In this way, Oliver’s (2004,81) idea connects the historically localizable subject position with the response-ability that enables subjectivity . Oliver describes witnessing as a tension, or struggle. One that, in my analysis, substitutes Oliver’s historical context for a geographical one. Such positioning enables the individual’s subjective dialogical relationship with their surroundings. It provides relational and subjective agency. Giving voice to characters’ subjectivity in the novel not only transforms them into subjects, but enables an interpretation of observation/ subjectivity (witnessing) as an everyday practice that conveys a specific making of space. Through witnessing Oliver (2004,81) argues that one “has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious or now political connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, or bearing witness”. Given McKittrick’s (2006,15) analysis of the challenges behind transparent space, witnessing in Petry’s novel, I argue, pictures the street as a deep space, one that inscribes the production of space through “ideological and political shifts that impact upon and organize the everyday”. Furthermore, as McKittrick clarifies (2006,15), “spatial expressions are wrapped up in everyday struggles”.

To contextualize the notion of everyday practice, this essay employs Bourdieu’s notion of space and positionality in its relation to Oliver’s witnessing, Michel de Certeau’s creative interpretation of everyday practices and McKittrick’s approach to practices as expressive forms. Social space, argues Bourdieu (1995), finds its manifestation in spatial oppositions. It is a relational terrain, one defined by inclusions and exclusions that find in physical space a structure of juxtaposition of social positionings. Moreover, Bourdieu notes that social space is inscribed in the objectivity of spatial structures and in the subjectivity of the mental ones. As Bourdieu points out, space structures itself outside an individual (social world), and in the subjective structures within their mind. In this way, from a sociological point of view, the subject’s relationship to space is simultaneous. Within this definition, the act of witnessing represents this dialogical tension between mental space (structures, perceptions), and the social world as deep space. More specifically as Oliver describes, this mental structure lies at the base of

what she defines as ‘inner witnessing’, the meeting point of subject position and subjectivity. I propose to interrogate Oliver’s notion of subject position employing Bourdieu’s (1995,11) definition of physical space as “the site where an agent or a thing is situated, ‘takes place’, exists, in short as a location”. The social space in its relational nature, moves the subject to establish a dialogical relationship with the surroundings, one based on addressability. De Certeau’s (1984, xiv) notion of everyday practice illustrates the subject’s relationship with the creation of space as the means through which users “appropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural productions”. His emphasis on the polemological nature of everyday practices illustrates how they modify culture by articulating conflicts that “alternately legitimizes, displaces or controls the superior forces” (Certeau, 1984,xvii). In this way, through these daily mechanisms the “weak make use of the strong, thus lending a political dimension to everyday practices” (Certeau, 1984, xvii). Similarly, McKittrick (2006,1389) interrogates Black expressive cultures within the empowering framework designed by Certeau’s; for her, these procedures act as new and contestatory geographic acts. Employing witnessing as an everyday practice this essay aims to interrogate how space becomes a site of contestations in *The Street* (1946).

Petry’s illustration of Lutie’s and the rest of the novels’ characters’ subjectivity incorporates Oliver’s inner-witnessing as an everyday practice that metaphorically inscribes deep space as defined by McKittrick. This mapping finds its echo in the visibility that Petry provides to the characters’ subjective relationship with space. The intersection between subjectivity, inner-witnessing and everyday practices pictures what McKittrick (2006,17) identifies as Édouard Glissant’s notion of the poetics of landscape: “A geographic struggle that brings together the everyday, the invisible, and the discursive/metaphorical- a political articulation of three-dimensionality and expressive cultures”. This essay examines different everyday practices that depart from inner-witnessing and provide a three- dimensional reading of *The Street*’s geography.

### 1. the everyday practice of dreaming

During the second chapter of the novel Lutie has already moved to 116th Street and while she travels by train she reflects about personal space. She observes both the crowd and the world of dreams that each individual creates in order to design an illusion of privacy. Lutie witnesses how:

As the train gathered speed for the long run to 125th Street, the passengers settled down into small private worlds, thus creating the illusion of space between them and their fellow passengers. The worlds were built up behind newspapers and

magazines, behind closed eyes or while staring at the varicolored show cards that bordered the coaches. (Petry, 1946,27)

It is key to highlight the private nature of each passenger's dream, one created to isolate themselves (generating mental space) to escape the multitude around them. As William Scott (2006, 96) notices private space is not available on 116th Street and by recalling a domestic space like that of the Chandler's, Lutie spatially frames her dreams:

Like some of the other passengers, she was staring at the advertisement directly in front of her and as she stared at it she became absorbed in her own thoughts. So that she, too, entered a small private world which shut out the people tightly packed around her. For the advertisement she was looking at pictured a girl with incredible blond hair. The girl leaned close to a dark-haired, smiling man in a navy uniform. They were standing in front of a kitchen sink... (Petry, 1946,28)

What continues is a deeply detailed description of the kitchen that reflects what Meg Wesling (2006, 125) interprets as Lutie's quest for freedom and autonomy: a desire for both public mobility and domestic security that generates a distinction between public and private spheres .

From Chapter Two's opening scene, it becomes clear that Lutie's pursuit separates and isolates her from the rest of the community at 116th Street. As Wesling (2006,129) further elaborates, her mission and later failure demonstrates "the violent effects of the contradiction between a national mythology of democratic inclusion and the material reality of segregation and exclusion- and the extraordinary costs of Lutie's fidelity to the individual narrative of the American dream". Wesling's observations concur with McKittrick's denouncement of the homogenous and traditional character of geographic transparent space which dictates how Lutie's dream follows a spatial paradigm that ostracizes Black subjects. The Chandlers instill in Lutie the democratic myth inspired by Benjamin Franklin about the potential that everybody has to become rich if they "worked hard enough and figured out carefully enough" (Petry,1946, 43). Marjorie Pryse (1986, 118) further clarifies that what Lutie does not take into account is that this myth's narrative spatially excludes black women and black men.

Lutie's subjective mapping of the 'ideal space' responds to an individualistic and social model that displaces different responses or experiences of it, since struggle threatens its 'ideal' homogeneity. Her perception departs from the way in which the Chandler's are able to cover up a suicide: "but she was interested in the way in which money transformed a suicide she had seen committed from start to finish in front of her very eyes into 'an accident with a gun'" (Petry,1946,41). The

protagonist's appreciation of optimal space stems not only from the Chandlers' spatial model based on privacy and separateness, but also on the material possibilities inscribed in it, ones that can disguise the implications of an autolytic act. These elements are alien to her current living situation at 116th Street, where living: "is like living in a structure that has a roof, but no partitions, so that privacy is destroyed, and even the sound of one's breathing becomes a known, familiar thing to each and every tenant" (Petry, 1946,267). Such reflection opposes the material creation of space and narrative found at the Chandlers' residence.

Given the individualistic nature of her spatial aspirations, Lutie isolates herself and her son, Bub, and makes it impossible to create a communal synergy. Furthermore, I argue that her impossibility of relating to others, concretely to women, endangers her, since she does not establish what Patricia Hill Collins (1991, 100) defines as a safe space: "social spaces where Black women speak freely. The first safe site that Collins identifies is women's relationship to other women, a cooperation that generates empowerment by promoting the transmission of everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women (Hill Collins, 1991,102). Likewise, Pryse (1986,20) emphasizes that Lutie's lack of connection to other women makes her powerless .

Contrary to Lutie's dreams, Jones' dreams emphasize how his ideal notion of space has partnership at its base. His sense of companionship opposes Lutie's idealization of individual space. Moreover, as Petry (1946,86) narrates, for Super the concept of alliance is interchangeable with that of ownership because it lies on his subjective mapping of identity, one related to space and materiality:

After he left the sea, he had a succession of jobs as a night watchman. And he was alone again...Until finally he couldn't stand it anymore and got a job as super in a building in Harlem because that way there would be people around him all the time. He had been on 116th Street for five years. He knew the cellars and the basements in this street better than he knew the outside of streets just a few blocks away...But know that he had an apartment of his own, he had grown so much older he found it more and more difficult to get a woman to stay with him...He had thought he would see more people as super of a building, but he was still surrounded by silence.

Lutie escapes her reality on the train by looking at the advertisement that describes a domestic space like that of the Chandlers', and the Super looks at inaccessible women, despite his partnership with Min to escape his own reality. Lutie's youth and beauty become Jones' obsession. After looking at Lutie leaving the building for the Junto, Jones decides to get rid of Min, a shapeless, unattractive woman in Jones's eyes. The Super's practice of dreaming shows how it departs from a notion

of ownership, concretely, one that “is often wrapped up in a legacy of race/racism bolstered by compelling hierarchical categories”. (McKittrick, 2006, 5). Petry's description of Min shows how she is a woman that does not fulfill Jones dreamlike perspectives, but unlike him and Lutie, her actions are oriented to transform her reality. Her agency departs from her acknowledgement of Lutie's taking over her space- the Super's apartment and his mental space- and immediately takes action.

## 2. Conjuring as an everyday feminist practice

When Min witnesses a shift in Jones' behavior towards her, she rapidly identifies in Lutie its direct cause. Min's interpretation of Jones follows a spatial predicament, one centered in his mental structure: “He thinks I don't what's on his mind”, she said to herself...Not that there was anything wrong with Jones; it was just that he had lived in basements such a long time he was kind of queer, got notions in his head about things” (Petry, 1946, 96-97). Contrary to both Lutie's and Jones' tendencies to escape from reality through dreams, Min instantly reacts to avoid Jones' abandonment by visiting a root doctor that Mrs. Hedges had recommended her: “it was the first defiant gesture she had ever made. Up to now she had always accepted whatever happened to her without making any effort to avoid a situation or to change one” (Petry, 1946, 125). She addresses her approach to conjure as ‘defiant’. This particular adjective confers a specific connotation to her agency, one that intersects with McKittrick's interrogation of Black expressive cultures as everyday practices that disrupt geographic acts. Min's deviant gesture through her interaction with Mrs. Hedges inscribes a new space within the novel, concretely Collins' notion of safe space. By showing how Mrs. Hedges, who has gotten the information from her girls, gives Min this empowering information, she gives her access to a crucial space for black cultural geography. Once Min visits the Prophet, she acknowledges that “for in coming here like this, in trying to prevent Jones from putting her out, she was actually making an effort to change a situation” (Petry, 1946, 126). It is Min's appropriation of space in the Super's apartment by hanging a cross on the wall, which prevents Jones from kicking her out. Thus, this employment of space marks a transparent geographic plane, the wall, with the complexity of the deep spatial narrative inscribed in the cross.

Following Kinitra Brooks, Kameelah L Martin and LaKisha Simmons's (2021, 452) definition of conjuring feminism, as black women's liberatory epistemology transmitted from woman to woman through everyday practices such as cooking, root work, and spirit work, one can argue that Min's interaction with Mrs. Hedges falls within this epistemic construct. What the Prophet suggests that she do is to follow a routine that will transform her current situation:

'Now listen carefully. Every morning put one drop of this red liquid in his coffee. Just one drop. No more.' When Min indicated that she understood he went on: 'Every night at ten O'clock burn these candles for five minutes. You must clean the apartment every day. Clean it until there isn't a speck of dirt anywhere. In the corners. On the cupboard shelves. The windows sills...He pointed at the cross with one of his long fingers. 'This', he said, 'will keep you safe at night. Hang it right over your bed. As for the powder'...it is very powerful. (Petry, 1946,114)

The prophet with his spiritual rituals directs Min's everyday actions to achieve her objective. In this way, these ordinary rites convey a spiritual meaning to reality that empowers Min. Furthermore, Pryse (1986, 125) identifies in the Prophet figure an alternative source of power within the novel, since his knowledge of 'folk' ways is the strongest evidence of cultural cohesion with the Black community. In this way, Ann Petry offers, "black folk wisdom as a corrective to white values in a world where black women can choose between individualism or women's community" (Pryse, 1986, 21). Min's inner-witness motivates her approach to the root doctor's whose interference works to culturally and personally enable Min. Jones's reaction towards the hanging of the cross is one of backing away from Min, since for Jones:

a cross was an alarming and unpleasant object, for it was a symbol of power. It was mixed up in his mind with the evil spirits and the powers of darkness it could invoke against those who outraged the laws of the church...For it seemed to him the great gold-colored cross was hanging directly in front of him instead of over the headboard of the bed where he had last seen it. ( Petry, 1946,119)

After Min finally leaves Jones and his apartment, the cross fills up the space left vacant, as a metaphor of her marked spatial absence:

The cross was gone, but while it hung there, the walls had darkened with grime and dust, so when it was removed its outline was left clear and sharp on the wall- an outline the exact size and shape of the cross itself...It was everywhere in the room. He saw it again and again plain before his eyes. She had conjured him with it- conjured him and the apartment and gone. (Pryse, 324-325)

Min's compliance with the Prophet's instructions transforms everyday activities into a routine that prevents a specific outcome. She leaves just before Jones' violence explodes. The fact that Min gets her information from Mrs. Hedges illustrates the notion of inner-witnessing that Oliver elaborates when emphasizing the need for addressability and response- ability at the base of subjectivity's structure. For Lutie, self-perception departs from an external address, that of the Chandlers, who



reproduce a racist prejudice that transforms her into a wench. The Chandlers' jezebel stereotyping of Lutie finds a replica in Junto, who wants to claim her as his trophy, Mrs. Hedges who offers her a job in her whorehouse, or Jones who perceives in Lutie the fulfilment of his dreams. Contrary to what Prophet David offers to Min, these characters aim to exploit Lutie. Petry's exhaustive description of the different body reads of Min's and Lutie's physiques reproduces how black women's bodies are territorialized through an external objectification of their sexuality that sets their femininity between socially constructed categories and material realities.

### 3. Beauty as capital- an everyday practice of visibility

Essential to understand Lutie's struggle and her self-image and self-appreciation against the predatory gazes of those around her- within the urban space- it is necessary to analyze how Petry articulates the protagonist's sense of womanhood, as well as how society (personalized in the street) interprets it. What unfolds is a discursive exchange that has visibility and its implications at its core. As Heather Hicks (2003,21) observes, Petry's depiction of surveillance and spectatorship articulates the racist social formation of Harlem and works to depict "the dynamics of 1940s Harlem in terms of visibility and, more particularly, in terms of looking and watching" (Hicks, 2003,22). As Hicks further states Petry's depiction of spectatorship and surveillance is a distinctive one, since the first is a mode of watching that has sexual desire as motivation and the second has as the underlying cause an unescapable will to power (22). Hicks also elaborates on the particular role that gender plays in each of these actions. She refers to the male gaze as the one that enables spectatorship, a fact illustrated through Jones's obsession with Lutie, as well as, Boots's and Junto's fascination with her. I concur with Hicks's observations applying them to the geographic and relational paradigms operating under what McKittrick (2006,47) identifies as the 'spatialization of black femininity': "black women's sense of place and those who see/ consume the black body can be ensnared by the racial workings of sex and sexuality". Additionally, the logic of visualization embedded in this spatiality sets blackness and black womanhood amid socially created groups and material realities. Such picture is representative of deep space.

Junto's character embodies the power characteristic of surveillance's structure. He even destroys Lutie's money dreams regarding her singing job at the club when he asks Boots to pay her with presents rather than a salary. Lutie then understands the power dynamic that permeates the urban grid: "Slowly she began to reach for some conclusion, some philosophy with which to rebuild her shattered hopes. The world hadn't collapsed about her. She hadn't been buried under brick and rubble, falling plaster and caved-in sidewalks. Yet that was how she had felt listening to Boots" (Petry, 1946,262). In Lutie's mind, having a singing career at the Junto

would be the means through which she could get out of the street with her son. In an act of self-reflectivity, she blames herself for having dreams without a solid foundation. Furthermore, Petry describes Junto as a man who cannot see race, a fact that according to Hicks can be afforded “as long as the racial hierarchy remains so naturalized that his power is unquestionable” (Hicks, 2003,29). He controls the Street’s economy; even what Lutie gets in exchange for singing with Boots. Junto’s perception of Lutie emphasizes the logic of visualization in its material expression. By preventing her access to material independence, he controls Lutie’s dynamics and mediates her accessibility to social space.

Lutie’s continuous struggle to escape the objectification that she perceives in Jones’ eyes describes her agency. Her awareness of the dangers that a single black woman faces when trying to make it on her own is equally articulated in Min’s justification for her need to have a safe living arrangement, one based on a partnership with a man: “No, a woman living alone really didn’t stand much a chance. Landlords took advantage and wouldn’t fix things and landladies became demanding about the rent, waxing sarcastic if it was even so much as a day behind” (Petry, 1946,318). For Min, the safe way is to find a man who can secure her spatial position and protect her. Min’s articulation is an economic and spatial one. Lutie’s experience with Jones as a supervisor elaborates on the danger that Min speaks about in terms of a spatial invasion. First, without Lutie’s permission, he paints the apartment in bright colors to make the place more comfortable for her. Such invasion marks the transparency of the flat with the Super’s presence, thus implicating a sense of ownership within it. When Lutie is away at the Junto he enters with Bub’s permission into the apartment and spies all the rooms while imagining Lutie’s everyday activities in them: from cooking, bathing, dressing and even when she is bathing “The room would be hot from the steam of the water and sweet with the smell of soap. He would just be able to see through the steaminess” (Petry, 1946,92). Jones ability of ‘seeing’ Lutie despite the steaminess articulates his objectifying gaze. Jones invasive enterprise leads him to try to rape Lutie. Mrs. Hedges prevents it from happening.

Mrs. Hedges’ character is a more complicated one. With her depiction of invisibility and spectatorship within Hedges’ character, Petry enables a contradictory axiom. On one hand, Mrs. Hedges’ physique disfigured after a fire and her great height making her want to be invisible, on the other hand, such hiddenness gives her spatial control:

And she frequently wished that she had never left the small town in Georgia where she was born. But she was so huge that the people there never really got used to the sight of her. She had thought that in a big city she would be inconspicuous and had hoped she would find a man who would fall in love with her. ( Petry, 1946,206-207)

Mrs. Hedges' play on invisibility defies the bodily geography attributed to black women's bodies. Furthermore, it challenges the traditional ways in which the black female body has been geographically inscribed. Petry's careful construction of this character continues to challenge transparent space because it defies its clarity by juxtaposing it. Mrs. Hedges' vulnerable position enabled her to establish a partnership with Junto. She is the one who contributes to his economic development by giving him ideas:

She told Junto people had to dance, drink, and make love in order to forget their troubles and that bars and dance halls and whorehouses were the best possible investments. Slowly and cautiously Mr. Junto had become the owner of all three, though he still controlled quite a bit of real estate...Looking at the window was good for her business, too. There were always lonesome, sad-looking girls just up from the South, or little girls who were tired of going to high school, and who had seen too many movies and didn't have the money to buy all the things they wanted. (Petry, 1946,215)

For Mrs. Hedges, physical invisibility has increased her knowledge of the city as a social construct. Her constant viewing of the street is the source of her information. She acts like a sociologist and psychologist who infers not only people's needs, but also their dreams. Mrs. Hedges' inner witnessing informs her agency. She utilizes this information to make an economic profit. She incites Junto to build places that could provide the dreamlike illusions that the pedestrians need in order to escape their crowded and oppressive reality. Mrs. Hedges' everyday practice of observing echoes De Certeau's interrogation of walking as a spatial practice in the city, but in Mrs. Hedges' case, rather than walking she oversees the street and "can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding" (De Certeau, 1984,91). As he further reflects:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below", below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk- an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's' arms...It is as though the practice of organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. (De Certeau, 1984,93)

Mrs. Hedges' constant observation of the street allows her to recognize the blindness that De Certeau describes and works with Junto to generate spaces that provide the illusion of a hastened dream. Mrs. Hedges, like Junto, makes

an economic profit from an everyday practice. She even offers Lutie a job at her whorehouse, manifesting how Lutie's appearance reproduces the dreams of her customers. Hicks (2003,27) argues that Mrs. Hedges embodies a mode of controlling surveillance that "exists in a dynamic tension with the fascinated looking the Super exemplifies". What Petry illustrates through Lutie's position is the dangers that a single black mother faces in the urban paradigm.

#### 4. Silence and sound in everyday practices

Petry's novel finishes after Lutie kills Boots when he tries to rape her. Lutie goes to meet him in order to ask for the two hundred dollars she needs to pay the lawyer who has to get her son out of Reform School. Bub has fallen victim to Jones's plan of getting back at Lutie, after his failed rape attempt. When Lutie enters the Shelter to visit her son after the police caught him, she notices how its atmosphere, compared to that of the street, is a silent one: "The room absorbed sound. She couldn't hear even a faint murmur of traffic or voices from the street outside" (Petry, 1946,351). The fact that silence is the predominant feature of this institution contrasts with the street's polyphonic nature. The social practice of not hearing, in this case, counteracts what Varguese Yeldho (2020,69) identifies as Harlem's everyday sounding practices- sound, music, noise- that are part of the racially informed "everyday". When the practice of not sounding, silence, breaks in, it highlights how sound is part of the habitual. Lutie's inner awareness of this disruption reinforces this understanding and exemplifies the novel's aural quality.

Through the relationship between silence and the urban sound, Petry highlights how women like Lutie go to bars like the Junto in order to momentarily escape "creeping silence that could be heard under the blaring radios, under the drunken quarrels in the hall bedrooms, was no longer bearable" (Petry, 1946,124). Lutie's inner-witness reflects how the Junto fulfills its goal of providing the illusion of company through its polyphonic nature. As the author further describes: "Lutie Johnson was one of these. For she wasn't going to the Junto to pick a man or to quench a consuming, constant thirst. She was going there so she could for a moment capture the illusion of having some of the things she lacked" (Petry, 1946,124). Lutie goes to the Junto to escape the silence imbued in her residence and coincidentally, that same night, she begins singing. Her performance adds to Junto's soundscape. Through her signing and with the economic profit she aims to get from it, Lutie articulates and defines the role she envisions to have within the street's dynamic. Petry designs space by showing how musical expressions are geographic because they alter the landscape. As such they make space available through which "blackness can be read as an integral and meaningful part of landscape" (McKittrick, 2006,139)

Aware of the implications that asking Boots for money may have, Lutie goes to a beauty parlor to increase her self-confidence and the chances of getting the money from him. She projects the dreamlike expectations that he may have, thus signifying her awareness of others' subjectivity. Lutie's inner witnessing influences her decision and makes her capitalize her beauty through everyday practices that make her more desirable. It is necessary to highlight how silence frames this geographic setting, disrupting the chatty nature of the scenery. I argue that Petry employs silence to describe the beauty parlor as a transparent space and that Lutie's inner witness disrupts it:

It was quiet in the beauty shop except for the noise that the manicurist made. She was sitting in the front window chewing gum, and the gum made a sharp, cracking sound. It was the only sound in the place. The hairdresser, normally talkative, was for some reason in an uncommunicative mood...It was so quiet that the awful stillness Lutie had found in the Shelter settled in the shop...And even under the words Lutie heard the stillness (Petry, 1946,354)

This visit to the beautician leaves her feeling empowered. Petry (1946, 357) employs sound to geographically inscribe the protagonist's agency: "As Lutie climbed the stairs, she deliberately accentuated the clicking of the heels of her shoes on the treads because the sharp sound helped relieve the hard resentment she felt; it gave expression to the anger flooding around her". Lutie enters the building marking her steps with a feminine sound, that of the heels clicking. She emphasizes her determination through sound, thus defeating the institutional silence that had previously paralyzed her.

What later unfolds, Lutie's killing of Boots, is the result of the exploitative white paradigm that continuously permeates the street's structure. The lawyer who assists Lutie when she asks for advice takes advantage of her:

He stared at her, trying to estimate the fee he could charge, trying to guess her reason for coming. A divorce, he decided. All good-looking women invariably wanted divorces. He was a little chagrined when he discovered he was wrong. She had such a good figure it was difficult to tell whether her clothes were cheap ones or expensive ones. And then, as the case unfolded, he began to wonder why she didn't need a lawyer for a case like this one. (Petry, 1946,335)

The lawyer's thoughts reveal how he also pays attention to Lutie's appearance and how he is aware of her ignorance about judicial matters. He decides to exploit her obliviousness and asks for two hundred dollars. He employs Lutie's fear of the street to convince her:

'I'll paint a picture of you working hard, the kid left alone...And then, of course, the street'. 'What do you mean? She asked. 'What Street?' 'Any street...' 'Any place where there's slums and dirt and poverty you find crime...Now why in the hell doesn't she know she doesn't need a lawyer?... It was like picking two hundred bucks up in the street. (Petry, 1946,335).

When Lutie meets Boots, he tells her that Junto is the answer she needs and that in order to get the money, she just has to be nice to him. When Lutie sees Junto, she recognizes how he was the one who decided not to pay her for singing at the bar and how such orders were sexually motivated. Similarly, Junto's whiteness provides Lutie with another reading of Boot's unwillingness to pay her. When Lutie rejects the proposition, Junto leaves the apartment and marks his actions through sound: "There was the sound of a door closing, and then silence" (Petry, 1946,363). Boots tries to convince her to be with Junto, but decides to take advantage of her: "he was going to trick him and Junto would never know the difference...Yeah, he can have the leavings. After all, he's white and this time a white man can have a black man's leavings...This would be his revenge" (Petry, 1946,362).

Boot's thirst for revenge leads him to try to rape Lutie, who ends up killing him. She is able to take the two hundred dollars from Boot's wallet and decides to leave New York City and her son, Bub, behind. She takes a train to Chicago and as the train starts to move, "she began to trace a design in the window. It was a series of circles that flowed into each other" (Petry, 1946,373). These circular patterns counteract the Street's linear designs that Petry employs when syntactically scheming the building in 116<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem. The window is a transparent space, materially and metaphorically, and Lutie's circles are her signature.

##### 5. Organizing space: architectural (subjective) designs in Petry's Street

Petry's awareness of the complexities behind the street's human geography also incorporates an architectural framework that draws a more complicated map of deep space in the novel. The careful description of the building at Harlem's 116<sup>th</sup> St. engages a deeper analysis of the author's spatial design of the novel. Bill Hiller and Julianne Hanson's (1989, 2) reflection about architecture's social logic of space emphasizes how it "creates the special relation between function and social meaning in buildings. The ordering of space in buildings is really about the ordering of relations between people". This arrangement creates a ladder of boundaries. These borders are a constant reference in Petry's novel. Overcoming them is Lutie's aspirations. For Lutie what defines success and spatial capital are limits that secure a person's privacy and emulate the Chandlers' model. A model that departs from the intrinsic

individuality that characterizes the myth of the American dream. Lutie lives in the fourth floor, a location that isolates her and that increases her vulnerability.

When interrogating the nature of the building in Harlem's 116<sup>th</sup> St. from a social point of view, it is necessary to highlight Petry's careful depiction of its structure and order. Buildings are not simply architectural objects, but transformations of space into objects (Hill & Hanson, 1989, 1). Such functionality involves a specific spatial syntax that establishes spatial outlines. This functional narrative from an architectural point of view engages in the novel what Joe Varguese Yeldo (2020, 70) identifies as an isovist perspective, one determined by the characters' visual fields and vantage points from where they observe and interact with the environment. Petry's complex character portrayal incorporates this vantage point; the isovist perspective enables observation, response-ability and the visibility paradigm that engages the spectators' commentary. Hill and Hanson (1989, 20) propose a reflection on the architectural syntax model that engages a reading of space determined by two kinds of relations: those between the building's tenants and those between occupants and outsiders. This spatial interpretation transforms the front parlor's usage from a "space that traditionally was unimportant in everyday life but of considerable importance as a social category of space" (Hill and Hanson, 1989, 19). Regarding the building's interior, it defines a more ideological space, because it represents a controlled transaction (Hill and Hanson, 1989, 20). Engaging in an interrogation of space from this dichotomy between the outside and inside of buildings, Hill and Hanson elaborate a spatial analysis from a local to a global phenomenon. They point out how the exterior space constitutes an immutable category and the internal one generates a space of negotiation between people whose social identities form part of the global system and others whose identities do not (Hill and Hanson, 1989, 21). As such and as exemplified by Petry's ordering of 116<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem, the building also has an important role in the articulation of space. Through her characters' subjectivities Petry illustrates a three-dimensional spatial perspective from the broader context (the street), to habitable spaces (apartments), to domestic spaces (one's apartment), to mental spaces (internalized spatial structures) and the relational synergy between these positionings

## 6. Conclusion: agency and the creation of space through everyday practices

Petry's careful writing of the street and of its buildings finds a parallel in the characters' internal cartographies of subjectivity and struggle. Lutie's approach to space is a relational one, a dialogue between her aspirations (internalized alien models) and her struggle. Her quest for meaning generates a polyphonic ensemble of individual cartographies through her dialectical exchanges with the rest of the characters. Ann Petry's construction of *The Street* as a novel and as a spatial narrative

gives space for the characters' to defy transparent, or 'normative', geography and provides them with the everyday tools to create their own spatial meanings. The aim of this article was to overcome the deterministic lens that did not give agency to Lutie, by showing how through her inner-witnessing she defies the meanings imposed on her. Spaces are not transparent, their narrativity is not a simple one. The everyday and the ordinary are spaces for resistance and creativity.

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