

Gloria Naylor, Ann Petry, and 'Black Feminist Regard'

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Brief communication:
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ABSTRACT

In "Black Feminist Regard—as Ethics, as Aesthetics," critic Aliyah Abdur-Rahman draws on Toni Morrison's notion of "self-regard" to conceptualize Black feminist regard as a "radical ethic of being and relating" that contributes to Black women's collective knowledge and imagination. This essay argues that Gloria Naylor and Ann Petry's correspondence and fiction demonstrate an ethics and aesthetics of Black feminist regard. I examine their archives for letters they exchanged, publication materials Naylor provided for the reissue of Petry's novel *The Street*, and Petry's journal entries that reference Naylor to establish the writers' regard for one another. Naylor's admiration for Petry shaped her pedagogy and fiction writing. Her debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) expands the imaginative landscape of Ann Petry's breakthrough bestseller *The Street* (1946), but rather than just trace a line of influence from Petry to Naylor, I contend that Naylor's regard for Petry's work enabled her to see possibilities Petry could not see. To regard is also to look at. To this end, I analyze how Naylor's *Brewster Place* looks back at Ann Petry's *The Street* in order to shatter the walls of constraint that entrap Black ghettoized communities, especially women and single mothers.

KEYWORDS

African American literature; Black feminism; cultural criticism

Drawing on Black feminist literary and cultural criticism by Aliyah Abdur-Rahman, Kevin Everod Quashie, and Jennifer C. Nash, this essay argues that Gloria Naylor and Ann Petry's correspondence and fiction demonstrate an ethics and aesthetics of Black feminist regard. I examine their archives for letters they exchanged, publication materials Naylor provided for the reissue of Petry's *The Street*, and Petry's journal entries that reference Naylor. For instance, Naylor's promotional comments for Beacon Press's reissue of *The Street* recounts an intimate history with the novel that shaped her own placemaking practices. After reading Naylor's praise, Petry copied the other writer's words in the pages of her journal; she recalled the moment she received the package from

Beacon Press, opened it, held the new edition in her hands, and beheld the sight of Naylor's words.

The essay, which will be published in 2023, examines Gloria Naylor and Ann Petry's ongoing correspondence as a practice of Black feminist regard and argues that their mutual regard for one another and for each other's work is an ethical and aesthetic model of Black feminist creativity and placemaking. I used their intimate correspondence as a new way to approach the intertextual relationship between their debut novels. Indeed, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) is like a returned gaze that shatters the walls of constraint in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946). In this sense, regard moves beyond admiration to embrace the ethics of critical engagement and revision.

Archival documents and recollections affirm an exchange of careful reading and responsiveness that persisted for over ten years. As a younger writer, Naylor's admiration for Petry influenced her own pedagogy and fiction. Naylor's debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) expands the imaginative landscape of Ann Petry's breakthrough bestseller *The Street* (1946). But rather than just trace a line of influence from Petry to Naylor, I contend that Naylor's regard for Petry's work enabled her to see possibilities Petry could not see. To regard is also *to look at*. To this end, I analyze how Naylor's *Brewster Place* looks back at Petry's *The Street* in order to shatter the walls of constraint that entrap Black ghettoized communities, especially women and single mothers.

Ann Petry's and Gloria Naylor's archives are a rich resource for Black feminist scholars. Their correspondence and promotion of one another's work put the principles of Black feminism into practice. Furthermore, Petry's and Naylor's placemaking aesthetics affirm the liberatory potential of Black women's geographies. While this essay makes its primary contribution to Black women's literary studies, its implications are far-reaching as the work of both writers touches on the spatial and social histories of racial segregation, housing injustice, and gender and sexual violence.

A chapter based on this project will be published in an edited anthology on the life and writings of Gloria Naylor which will be published in 2023.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer D. Williams is an assistant professor of English at Howard University in Washington, DC. Her research and teaching interests include twentieth and twenty-first-century African American literature and women's, gender, and sexuality studies, particularly in relation to space, race, and class. Dr. Williams was a National Endowment for the Humanities fellow. Her current book project, *Intimate Cities*, examines Black women's literature and urban segregation. You can find her publications in *The Black Scholar*, *Meridians*, and *Contemporary Women's Writing*, among other places.

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