



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 28 | Spring 2019

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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	28
Issue Date	Spring 2019
Publication Date	28/06/2019
Editors	Skylar Lanier and Dominic Richard

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City Limits: Literal and Figurative Boundaries within the American City in John Fante's *Ask the Dust* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

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This essay explores the idea of city limits, real and metaphorical walls, and boundaries raised within and around the urban environment. The focus is on American urban epicentres, and by analysing two literary works, John Fante's Los Angeles novel Ask the Dust and Lorraine Hansberry's Chicago play A Raisin in the Sun, it interrogates what form the walls within those spaces might take, why they are raised, and what effects they have on the city's inhabitants – especially the marginalised groups who tend to be either excluded, restricted or enclosed by them. In this essay, I suggest that boundaries are created or enforced as a result of a fear of loss of space and power within the urban environment which leads to the consistent marginalisation of the Other as exhibited in both texts. In other words, the essay will demonstrate that the physical and fiscal boundaries represented in the novel and play are masking a more complex set of boundaries of racial exclusion and hierarchies in place within the American urban space.

The multitude of intersecting lives within limited city spaces produces an anxiety which often results in the othering and exclusion of some groups of people, driving the less fortunate towards and outside of the city's margins. Within the urban environment people tend to build walls: both real, solid walls, such as those of gated communities, and metaphorical and institutional, such as the spatial confinement and oppression of segregation. The building of walls or drawing of limits reveals an attempt to claim a space of one's own within the ever-evolving, ever-expanding built environment of the city. The idealisation and active promotion of city life creates, for the marginalised, an illusion of choice regarding what places they can inhabit, and the opportunities afforded them. This mirage attracts more people to its centre while increasingly pushing the underprivileged further towards the margins.

By examining two literary works depicting life in urban American epicentres, Los Angeles in John Fante's novel *Ask the Dust*, and Chicago in Lorraine Hansberry's Southside play *A Raisin in the Sun*, I will analyse some of the limits created within and surrounding urban America and how they are felt, experienced or even enforced by the protagonists. The physical limits of where the city ends and nature begins will be considered, as well as limits segregating racial minorities from the dominant groups. Further, I will consider the more abstract limiting forces such as the ways in which

racial bias denies some people the chance to realise their dreams, robbing them of the right to exist within the city space on equal terms with someone of a lighter complexion. Ultimately, I will argue that, as demonstrated in both texts, the continued marginalisation and building of boundaries within the city is produced by a fear of a loss of power and privilege, triggered by the confined environment of the man-made, the limited resources, and a deep-rooted culture of oppression.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, so called ‘city boosters’, such as writers, reporters and other city promoters, endeavoured to establish Los Angeles as a major, growing U.S. epicentre. ‘Boosterism’, is not exclusive to the West but is a discourse and method employed in any major (or developing) city to create an image that is “manufactured, packaged and promoted” to attract mobile capital – such as tourists and immigrants (Fine 4). The concept is, however, often tied to the promotion of the Golden Coast, or ‘the land of sunshine’ of California. With the moving pictures of Hollywood quickly becoming the state’s leading industry, the boosters were able to crown it, as explained by David Fine, the “American Dream capital, keeper of our national fantasies” (Fante 46; Fine 12). Novelist John Fante wants to dismantle this booster idyll of sunny L.A in his novel *Ask the Dust*. The neighbourhood of Bunker Hill, where the novel mainly takes place, is widely different from the image of L.A. promoted by boosters. The aspiring author Arturo Bandini, considers all the hopefuls that flood the city with just “enough [money] to keep alive the illusion that this was paradise, that their little papier-mâché homes were castles” (Fante 46-7). This observation argues that the idealisation of L.A. as “paradise” is an “illusion”; a mere dream or idea. By describing the houses as “papier-mâché,” Fante portrays the built landscape of the city as frail, like the dream the migrators are pursuing.

Though at times critical of L.A., Bandini, who himself migrated to the city from a small town in Colorado, similarly buys into the image of it and continues to chase the illusive dream. He wants to find his place within the city and continues to pursue both his dreams of becoming a successful author, and Camilla, a local Chicana girl. Bandini and Camilla’s complicated and often destructive relationship is reflected in this following section of the text, where Bandini praises the artificial and the man-made:

This great city, these mighty pavements and proud buildings, they were the voice of my America. From sand and cactus we Americans had carved an

empire. Camilla's people had had their chance. They had failed. ... Thank God I had been born an American! (45)

As demonstrated by the semantic field, the patriotic feelings Bandini holds are all about possession and conquering, the carving of an "empire." Historically, this brings to mind the Anglos taking control of the land in mid-19th century, and, as explored by David Fine, how they "saw the darker-skinned population – including those whose arrival predated theirs – as dangerous aliens" (5). To Bandini, the "dangerous aliens" are "Camilla's people," the Mexicans who must not be allowed to pollute the city climate. Julian Murphet comments, "Chicanos have never ceased to immigrate (legally and otherwise) to a land that was once their own, but now seeks violently to exclude and marginalize them" (123). Ultimately, city boosterism only endeavours to attract a certain kind of migrator to the city – one that is typically white and wealthy – while continually excluding the perceived Other.

Through repeatedly making comparisons between Camilla and nature – "[s]he belonged to the rolling hills, the wide deserts, the high mountains" – and referring to her as "[a] flower girl from old Mexico," Bandini seems to be linking his fear of the people of "old Mexico" to the imposing desert at the very margins of the urban environment, reclaiming the stolen land of "sand and cactus" on which the city was built (Fante 167; 67). In 1930's Los Angeles, the self-proclaimed "conqueror," Arturo Bandini constantly feels the need to reaffirm his whiteness and assert his power through othering bodies of a darker complexion, in order to secure his right to a place within the city and enable his own upward mobility (Fante 108).

As seen in *Ask the Dust's* descriptions of the Californian natural environment, the encroachment of the imposing desert and risk of natural disasters offers another threat to the claim of space. In fact, in the building of "Fantasy Land" (which Los Angeles sets out to be), the obsession with built structures and the constant expansion of city limits can be interpreted as man and the man-made battling nature (Fine 16). Charles Scruggs suggests that "[Los Angeles'] artifice reflects a human impulse to resist the encroaching dust of the desert," emulating ideals of American expansionism (240). Bandini names himself a conqueror, asserting his power over the environment, yet he views nature as threatening or imposing. During a visit to Long Beach, he describes the way the "dunes *hid* the boardwalk," and how the breakers were "*eating* the shore," personifying nature and representing a fear of being consumed by it (110; 111, my italics). This section is directly followed by the shock of an earthquake during

which nature comes alive, leaving “[b]uildings cracked like crushed crackers” (113). Fante’s onomatopoeia mimics the sounds of crumbling crackers to signify the uncontrollable force of nature and to highlight how the man-made structures pale in comparison, turning into “traps to kill you when the earth shook” (117). In *Ask the Dust* the threat of nature is a constant, whether it is represented through the ease with which the built environment can be torn down by a sudden eruption, or through the presence of the silent, looming desert, lingering at the very edges of the city.

The threat of nature is equivalent to the threat of the Other reclaiming the space where Los Angeles was built, as if the protagonist can sense that the space does not truly belong to the dominant groups (to which he, being a white American man, belongs). The built environment and dominant group’s claim of space is fragile and temporary in comparison with that of the Californian natural environment and the people who called it home long before they did. To Bandini, the vastness of the desert, and the risk of being “swallowed by [it],” comes to represent an existential dread, a fear of being erased (139). Towards the end of the novel when Bandini is searching for the missing Camilla in the Mojave, he narrates: “Beyond the ridge were other ridges like it, hundreds of them stretching infinitely away. The sandy earth revealed no footstep, no sign that it had ever been trod” (193). The Mojave holds the power to erase man’s “footstep.” The desert represents something vast, unknown and unstructured, heavy with what Bandini identifies as a “supreme indifference,” ready to erase him without second thought (193). Not daring to tread further beyond the limits of the familiar, Bandini drives back to the safety of the built city, turning his back on Camilla and the desert. Banished to, and lost within, the Californian wasteland, as opposed to confined in “the little prison”; the constricted space made up of the four walls of her L.A. apartment, Bandini considers Camilla to be home at last, fully marrying the image of the racial Other and the infringing desert (167).

Bandini’s fear of losing his claim to space is conveyed in the way he treats Camilla, as representative of both nature and the Other. As a result of the threat he identifies in her, Bandini’s relationship with Camilla turns destructive and becomes more about conquering and asserting power than romance or intimacy: “On paper I stalked her like a tiger and beat her to the earth and overpowered her with my invincible strength” (77). The verbs “stalk,” “beat,” and “overpower” indicate violence and predatory tendencies, a desire to control, which is directly related to Bandini’s racism. He is trying to assert his own power and ‘Americanness’ by actively othering

Camilla, insisting on her being Mexican: “a bashed and busted race” (17). Scruggs argues that, “Arturo understands, on some level, that his racial insults ... are a reflection of his own insecurity as an Italian American” (235). This fear of being outed as less American (i.e. a less *white* American) can be described through Sara Ahmed’s theory of “The phenomenology of whiteness,” applicable both to this novel and the segregation in Hansberry’s play. Ahmed considers how man-made spaces are created with whiteness in mind, and that a disorientation occurs when a darker body enters that space, it is seen as “out of place” (161). Her essay explores which bodies are allowed to freely move and “inhabit” certain spaces, as well as who can move “with ease across the lines that divide spaces,” supporting the idea of racially othered bodies being forced to the margins of the city, the city being a space dominated by white bodies (162). In a representation of the hierarchy of exclusion and levels of privilege, Camilla is reduced to the actual margins of the city, the Mojave, while Bandini with his lighter complexion is able to drive back into the heart of the city, as his claim to that space is greater.

Moving from Arturo Bandini’s sunny California to an African American family in post-war Chicago, the Youngers of Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* offer the perspective of the ‘Others’ that ‘wall-builder’ figures like Bandini actively exclude. As touched upon earlier, city boosterism was not a concept exclusive to the West, but was further employed in promoting other cities as “hubs through which human mobility is channelled” (Rath 3). For example, the city of Chicago was, in literature and advertising, portrayed as an industrial and fast-paced urban epicentre of upward mobility and opportunity (Smith 5). In Hansberry’s play, the Youngers represent the marginalised of the city, living a reality far from the commercial and idealised boosterist image, in the cramped, rat-infested Chicago slum. The Youngers are not banished beyond the borders of the city like Camilla, but rather constrained *within* the spatial confines of the American ghetto in Chicago’s Southside, and denied the opportunity to move freely across those confines. In *The Paradox of the Urban Space*, Sutton and Kemp explain that “[t]hroughout America, spatial policies and practices standardize the landscape to benefit dominant groups ... [t]he downside of this standardization occurs in racially and economically segregated neighbourhoods” (1). Unsurprisingly, the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ mentality of segregation only ever works in favour of the dominant race or class that enforces it in the first place, leaving the marginalised vulnerable and restricted.

Evidence of the Youngers' spatial restriction can be found in some of the play's stage directions, describing their environment where the four walls of their apartment functions as a metaphor for the wider limits of racial segregation. The personification of the interior reflects the mentality of the characters, for example: "*The furnishings ... have clearly had to accommodate the living of too many people for too many years – and they are tired ... the carpet has fought back by showing its weariness ... Weariness has, in fact, won in this room*" (*Raisin* 1.1). With a semantic field suggesting struggle and fatigue, this introduction implies that – like their furniture – the Youngers are tired of life in the constricted space of their kitchenette apartment in Chicago's Black Belt. In contrast to Camilla's seemingly self-imposed exile to the desert, which sees her fleeing the suffocating city, Mama Younger, the family's matriarch, keeps fighting for a place of their own *within* the urban space. In spite of this "weariness" imbedded in the very walls of the apartment, in the play, sunlight is employed to signify hope, and Mama's plant symbolises the prospect of growth and well-being, something she never completely gives up on. When speaking of her children Mama says: "Like this little old plant they ain't never had enough sunshine or nothing" (1.1). Not unlike the way Mama tends to the plant, she carries with her this dream of a home outside of the ghetto's boundaries, where her family can have room to grow.

America is labelled as the land of possibilities, and its epicentres; the major cities, with the help of boosterist discourse and promotion, attracts dreamers from everywhere. However, for the marginalised the opportunities to realise these dreams are limited, resulting in an illusion of choice. The title of Hansberry's play derives from Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem," which is included in the play's epigraph. In Hughes' poem, the speaker questions: "What happens to a dream deferred?", suggesting that an unrealised dream does not simply go away, it will always return in some shape or form. Due to the impenetrable fiscal barriers keeping the marginalised in segregated areas, Mama has long since had to defer her dream of "a little old two-story somewhere, with a yard where Travis could play in the summertime" (*Raisin* 1.1). Yet, with the promise of her late husband Big Walter's life insurance, the dream of the "emblem of American citizenship": homeownership, is rekindled as she decides to try and relocate her family to Clybourne Park (Coates). However, as described by Coates, in post-war America, African Americans' dreams of homeownership would often be exploited by "unscrupulous lenders who took them for money and for sport." They

would be hoodwinked into signing unfair contracts, leaving them with unsurmountable debts and proving the dream of mobility towards a better future and a safer living environment, to be a mere fantasy.

Walter, Mama's oldest son and the oldest man in the family, is frustrated and plagued by not being able to fulfil his dreams: "I want so many things that they are driving me kind of crazy..." (*Raisin* 1.2). He wants to quit his job and start a business, to move up, but all he can see of his future is a "big, looming blank space – full of *nothing*," an empty feeling of hopelessness that comes with the limited choices offered to him as a black man in a space tailored for the wealthy, white man (1.2). Furthermore, while the less fortunate in society are conditioned to desire the same things as the dominant groups, they are not afforded the same opportunity to acquire these things. They are shut out by a metaphorical wall separating them from those opportunities, leaving them no choice but to defer their dreams until they eventually "dry up," "fester" or "explode" (Hughes 74).

The lack of opportunities and decay of the urban American ghetto creates, in the Youngers, an urgent need to break free from its confines. Ruth Younger is perhaps the character suffering most from their environment, since she – as a soon to be mother of two young children, and wife to a man who is blinded by the frustration born out of the injustice of their situation – finds herself having to carry the burdens of the rest of the family. Taking matters into her own hands, in a desperate plea for action, she urges: "I'll strap my baby to my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America ... but we got to MOVE! We got to get OUT OF HERE!!" (*Raisin* 3.1). Leaving the physical constraints of Southside Chicago is crucial for their well-being and survival, as Hansberry insists: "We [African Americans] must come out of the ghettos of America, because the ghettos are killing us; not only our dreams ... but our very bodies (*Young* 131-2)." Ruth is prepared to "scrub all the floors of America"; to do the nation's dirty work to be able to transgress the drawn lines, in hopes of securing a better future for them.

The representation of racial exclusion in the two novels differs in that, while *Ask the Dust* portrays the experience of the white, Italian-American writer; oftentimes the person performing the othering, *A Raisin in the Sun* stages the trials of the oppressed; the *victims* of othering. Keeping this in mind, it should be stated that some of the frustration the city awakens in Walter – that of wanting so many things that remain out of your grasp – can, similarly, be found in Arturo Bandini. This

demonstrates why Bandini, who himself feels threatened by those more privileged than him, feels insecure in his position within the city environment. He often feels like an outsider walking around L.A. noticing the affluence of individuals wealthy enough to live in Bel-Air, for example (Fante 13). Within the city space where the social and financial gaps are so vast, yet the display of luxury so conspicuous, one is always going to be left wanting. There is not always a clear division between the fortunate and unfortunate within the urban space, but rather there are levels of privilege resulting in a complex fight for the claim of space and resources within the city climate. In the end, Bandini is able to 'make it' and realise his dream of becoming an author because being a white male, he has fewer limits restricting him from what he desires, in contrast to someone like Camilla or the Youngers. The Youngers of Hansberry's play are restricted by the enforced limits of segregated spaces within the city as well as the fiscal barriers that prevent them from transcending them. Even though the Youngers are determined to move out of the constraints of Southside, we can only imagine what new forms of oppression they will have to face in a new home. They continue to be marginalised, even when crossing some of the physical barriers, simply, by being black in a racially prejudiced America.

Ultimately, the physical and fiscal barriers of segregation and the constructed opportunity structure are revealed to be built on the foundation of racial oppression. Evidence of this can be found in the appearance of Mr. Lindner, who happens to be the only white character in the play. Mr. Lindner functions as a spokesperson for the block association in Clybourne Park, the area to which the Youngers are hoping to relocate. In his poignant article about centuries of discrimination towards people of colour – from slavery to the racist housing market – “A Case For Reparations,” Coates describes: “White neighborhoods [sic] vulnerable to black encroachment formed block associations for the sole purpose of enforcing segregation. They lobbied fellow whites not to sell. They lobbied those blacks who did manage to buy to sell back” (Coates). While attempting to dissuade the Youngers from infiltrating his exclusively white neighbourhood, like Bandini does to Camilla, Lindner makes a point to repeatedly 'other' the Youngers by, for example, addressing them by using the dividing pronoun “you people” (2.3). Though claiming that racial bias does not enter into his “proposal” – “[i]t is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing ... that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities” – this interference, on his part, is clearly an attempt to keep the

marginalised concentrated within their limited areas (2.3). The block associations would not stop at crude remarks but, as Coates writes: “Chicago whites employed every measure from ‘restrictive covenants’ to bombings, to keep their neighbourhoods segregated” (Coates). By entering into the white neighbourhood, the Youngers would be disrupting the spatial homogeneity. As Sara Ahmed puts it: “When the arrival of some bodies is noticed ... it generates disorientation in how things are arranged” (163). The arrival of the Youngers to Clybourne Park would force its white inhabitants to share ‘their’ space with a group of people who they have continually othered, and as a result they would have to recognize their own privilege and relinquish some of their power.

When the Youngers refuse to cooperate and listen to Mr. Lindner’s warning and attempted reinforcement of the metaphorical city walls, he blatantly questions: “What do you think you’re going to gain by moving into a neighbourhood where you just aren’t wanted [?]” (2.3). The issue is not simply a racist housing market and the risk of declining property values – which Coates explains the arrival of a black family would result in – but, as Ruth suggests in the following passage, about a fear of integration and of an irreversible loss of privilege and exclusive right to a space (Coates).

BENEATHA What they think we going to do? – eat ‘em?

RUTH No, honey, marry ‘em. (*Raisin* 2.3)

Simon Parker presents the idea of “the city as an ecological unit in which different classes and ethnic groups [compete] among one another for resources and living space,” suggesting that this hierarchy of oppression is reinforced by the survivalist instinct to “eat or be eaten” (88). This idea is reflected in the lines above where the youngest daughter Beneatha recognises a fear in the dominant race of being consumed or obliterated by an outside force. This is the same fear of a loss of power and dominance portrayed in the anxiety surrounding the force of nature in *Ask the Dust*. Fuelled by this fear of a loss of claim to space, the limits are reinforced by the dominant groups, revealing the walls that restrict the Other from the dream of mobility to be far more complex than expected. Even when reaching the supposed ‘centre’ of the metropolis (which in this play takes the form of white suburbia), that boosterist discourse promotes, it appears that what the physical walls and fiscal barriers were concealing was a mere illusion, revealing a complex structure of invisible racial barriers raised by systems of oppression and in the name of white fear.

Like Camilla escapes Los Angeles in order to be free from the rampant racism and oppressive structures in place within the urban environment, Beneatha, whose name signifies her place as a young African American woman in this hierarchy of oppression and opportunity, has to consider moving outside the limits of the country, altogether, in order to realise her dream of becoming a doctor (*Raisin* 3.1). It appears that the racism is so deeply rooted in the country, and within its epicentres, that it is impossible to overcome.

As seen both in Fante's Los Angeles novel and Hansberry's Chicago play, the limits or walls of the urban environment exist both around the cities, trying to keep aliens out, as well as within the city space, limiting the marginalised groups and individuals, already living and existing within its boundaries, to segregated areas. In more abstract terms the walls can be representative of systems of institutionalised racism such as that of the housing market and the access to education and jobs that restrict and separate the minorities from the opportunities afforded the dominant groups within the city environment. As such, while continuing to attract mobile capital from all over the world, the urban American environment remains a complex hierarchy of racial oppression and wall-building that directly contradicts the sought-after illusion of inclusivity and equal opportunity. At the expense of securing the claim to space, property and resources to the groups higher up in the established urban structure of opportunity, the marginalised of the metropolis continue to be restricted by barriers, both physical and metaphorical.

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