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II. FAKTAI IR APMAŠTYMAI / FAKTY I ROZWAŻANIA

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THE CITYSCAPE IN THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN-AMERICAN URBAN NOVEL

This paper discusses the cityscape as an essential element of African American fiction. Since the time of Romanticism, the city has been regarded as the embodiment of evil forces which are alien to human nature and radiate fear and death. For decades, African-Americans have been isolated in the black ghettos of major American cities which were in many ways responsible for their personal growth or their failure. Often this failure is determined by their inability to find their bearings in a strange and alien world, which the city symbolizes. The world beyond the black ghetto is shown as brutal and terrifying, while the world inside is devoid of hope. Crime, vandalism, poverty, overcrowding, and social conflicts turn out to be the landmarks of big cities, because the people who migrate to them and make up most of their population are also the poorest and least adapted to urban life: they have lost their roots, and feel displaced in the anonymous urban society. A number of African-American novels depict protagonists who are unable to adapt to life in a big city, and end in degradation and misery. James Baldwin's novels are among the most representative. His disordered and dislocated characters are products of the external world of the city of the machine age, and as such they are characteristic of all African-American fiction. This paper analyzes some of the recent black novels that reverberate with Baldwin's ideas.

KEY WORDS: cityscape, African-American fiction, urban novel, black ghetto, color line.

Because of the centrality of the city in the lives of African Americans, the cityscape has become an archetypal element of African-American fiction. Writers of every generation explore the urban experience of former slaves and their descendants, which is usually dramatic. Titles speak for themselves: *The City of Refuge* by Rudolph Fisher, *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin, *A Rage in Harlem* by Chester Himes, *Philadelphia Fire* by John Edgar Wideman, *The Women of Brewster Place*, *The Men of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* by Gloria Naylor, and *Spirits in the Streets*

by Alexis Deveau—to mention only a few. Despite great progress in the relations among different ethnic and social groups in the USA, the color line continues to cut across the city, with whites moving to the suburbs and blacks left in the city. “The City on the Hill” is as hard to get to as ever.

Lehan insists that “the city is our destiny and has been since the end of the Civil War” (1998: 184). Urban life is the focus of numerous books by African American writers, and the reason why becomes clear if one takes into consideration that, after the Reconstruction period, the population

of the biggest American cities became predominantly black. Intimidated by white supremacists in the Jim Crow South, African-Americans hoped that moving to the huge cities of the North would change their miserable position. The population of the cities grew to a great extent, at the cost of black migrants. Today, over 50% of Washingtonians, 33% of the citizens of Chicago, and 25% of New Yorkers are blacks. For them, the city seemed a source of inspiration and hope, but in reality it turned into a locus of desolation, poverty, and death for those who found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder. C. L. Brace was already warning of the dangers of a big city populated by people who had lost all hope back in 1880:

...the young ruffians of New York are the products of accident, ignorance, and vice.... All the neglect and bad education and evil example of a poor class tend to form others, who, as they mature, swell the ranks of ruffians and criminals. So, at length, a great multitude of ignorant, untrained, passionate, irreligious boys and young men are formed, who become the "dangerous class" of our city (Brace 2007: 669).

At the turn of the 19th century, this resonated with the Russian writer Anton Chekhov's grim view of the connection between economic progress and social change. In his best-known play, *Uncle Vanya*, Dr. Astroff bitterly acknowledges the degradation of society caused by the selfish interests and greed of the industrialists, through whose actions people are turned into competitors who have to struggle for survival without the economic tools to do so. Astroff sums up the consequences of this approach that are most visible in a big city:

We are confronted by the degradation of our country, brought on by the fierce struggle for existence of the human race.

It is the consequence of the ignorance and unconsciousness of starving, shivering, sick humanity that, to save its children, instinctively snatches at everything that can warm it and still its hunger. So it destroys everything it can lay its hands on, without a thought for the morrow (Chekhov 2013: 27).

In the United States, the situation was even more complicated—the race and ethnic barrier was added to social inequality and class boundaries, which made social uplift extremely difficult.

Since the time of Romanticism, the city has been regarded as the embodiment of evil forces which are alien to human nature and bring about misery and death. At the end of the 19th century, Josiah Strong, a leading US religious and social writer, prophetically pointed out, "The city is the nerve center of our civilization. It is also the storm center" (Strong 1885: 128). The storm broke out in the years of the Black Revolution. The tremendous gap between wealth and poverty, overpopulation in the cities, isolation of blacks in the ghettos, lack of jobs, homelessness, and other social problems were dismal for African Americans, who had lost their links with the natural world that had given them the stamina to survive the ills of racism and discrimination. In the big cities they discovered that they could not get their bearings in the strange and alien world which the impersonal city symbolized.

The American city began to grow in the period of industrialization. African Americans who had kept the genetic memory of Africa, the lost paradise where people live in harmony with nature, could not get used to the way of life in the big Northern cities, which had become a locus of crime, vandalism, destitution, overcrowding, and social conflicts. The poor blacks who had migrated to the North were least adapted to urban life. The world beyond the black ghetto was bru-

tal and terrifying, and the world inside was devoid of hope to the person with “no name in the street”—as James Baldwin titled one of his famous books of essays.

A number of African-American novels depict protagonists (as a rule, black males) who are unable to adjust to the city, and end in degradation and misery. For Richard Wright, Chicago epitomizes the frustration and despair of people living in a big city. He insists that:

These cities are, for the most part, vast pools of human misery, networks of raw human nerves exposed without benefit of illusion of hope to the new, godless world wrought by industrial man. Industrial life plus a rampart capitalism have blasted the lives of men in these cities; those who are lucky enough not to be hungry are ridden with exquisite psychological sufferings. The people of these cities are lost; some of them are so lost that they no longer even know it, and they are the real lost ones. They haunt the movies for distraction; they gamble; they depress their sensibilities with alcohol; or they seek strong sensations to dull their sense of a meaningless existence... (Wright 1993: 485).

This is a man-made world with man-made laws and a system of domination and subjugation, unlike Plato’s city “established in accordance with nature.” Prof. Joanna Durczak draws attention to the writers for whom “the city *is* nature, although nature transformed, processed and reprocessed till it is unrecognizable as such” (Durczak 2013: 25). In this transformed nature, the city emanates danger and fear, and it is hardly surprising that Wright’s highly acclaimed novel *Native Son* begins with a section titled “Fear;” likewise, *The Outsider* opens with “Dread.” The city becomes a symbol of authority and power that destroy the person, who is driven either to alienation and moral degradation or to physical death.

This approach is also characteristic of James Baldwin, a true son of New York who made his native city the setting for his books—books that help to understand the problems awaiting a person in the concrete jungle of New York: joblessness, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, disguised segregation, and other social diseases resulting in distressed neighborhoods inhabited by poor blacks. In this way he is close not only to Wright and Ellison, but also to the writers of the Third Black Renaissance. Though he left the city in 1948, it remained a sore point in his memory, bringing back the painful experiences of his youth. The narrator in his story *Previous Condition*—who strongly resembles the writer himself—bitterly admits:

We lived in an old shack in a town in New Jersey in the nigger part of town, the kind of houses colored people live in all over the U.S. I hated my mother for living there. I hated all the people in my neighborhood. They went to church and they got drunk. They were nice to the white people. When the landlord came around they paid him and took his crap (Baldwin 1971: 71).

For him, New York was full of ambivalence: it was a symbol of pain and despair, misery and humiliation, but also of his triumph and glory when his books of essays *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961) made him a celebrity, a cult figure who appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. He became world-famous as an ardent spokesman for the rights of the American Blacks, and the city turned out to be a location he would explore again and again in an attempt to show the acuteness of the race problem in the USA. More often than not it is New York which is physically present in Baldwin’s novels and short stories, and almost always it is depersonalized

and alienated. His disordered and dislocated introverted characters are lonely and desperate; they are locked in the squalor of their homes and isolated from and inaccessible to one another in the struggle for survival. They are the product of the city of the machine age, and as such they are characteristic of all African-American fiction of the period. The writer emphasizes the dehumanizing features of urban life which bring about despair, pain, moral degradation, and rejection of accepted norms. His cityscape is closely connected with the social and historical conditions in which it developed, and, therefore, is instrumental in expressing the frustration of all those unhappy dysfunctional blacks who are turned into maladjusted outcasts. They are constantly made to feel that they do not belong, that they are the threatening Other. Baldwin has no illusions that the situation can be changed easily. He understands that the American blacks have no other home but America, and their destiny is inseparable from the destiny of the country, but that change is a long, on-going process.

The cityscape in Baldwin's books may present either the exact topography of the place, its streets and buildings, and thus contribute to the authenticity of his characters, or may be used to convey the characters' mood and state of mind and thus ensure a deep psychological insight into human nature. In his most ambitious and best-known novel, *Another Country*, New York is depicted as a void breeding violence, hatred, and despair. It is a city of profound anguish and disillusionment. It is dark, hideous, and tenebrous, full of terrifying sinister imagery. In his descriptions of the city, Baldwin resorts to nearly the same epithets that can be found in Wright's novels: *empty* streets, *lightless* apartment

buildings, *dark* sky (Baldwin 1965a: 69, italicized by Baldwin). Its citizens feel threatened and unable to overcome fear. The human condition is tragic, and this idea is reiterated in the cityscape in other works by Baldwin.

For her as for most of Manhattan, trees and water ceased to be realities; the nervous, trusting landscape of the city began to be the landscape of her mind. And soon her mind, like life on the island, seemed to be incapable of flexibility, of moving outward, could only shriek upward into meaningless abstractions or drop downward into cruelty and confusion (Baldwin 1971: 179).

This passage describes Ruth, the protagonist of the story *Come Out The Wilderness*, precisely explaining the connection between the enormous pressure of New York and the people lost in its maze. New York turns out to be a monster which is ready to devour its children. If only the stones of Beale Street could talk! What stories would they tell? The images of New York develop from the themes of death, imprisonment, void, exile, darkness, and loneliness. The city is a prison with no exit; its inhabitants are harsh and belligerent; what they see around them is disastrous and doomed. One has to be very strong and goal-oriented to survive in this impersonal "murderous" city "with heat coming up from the pavements and banging from the walls of houses with enough force to kill a man" (Baldwin 1965b: 12). Baldwin knew this only too well from his own experience. The protagonist of the story *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon*—who, like the writer himself, went to Paris in an attempt to save his sanity—confesses, "And I couldn't get used to the town again, I'd been away too long, I hated it. It's a terrible town, anyway, the whole thing looks as though it's been built around a jailhouse" (Baldwin 1971: 69).

However, the city is also a battlefield for many blacks in their centuries-old struggle for human rights. Much of the vocabulary dealing with Harlem comes from the sphere of the military: *a city long besieged, a battlefield, a war was being waged*, etc. This approach is taken by other writers dealing with the situation in black ghettos, even by those of the younger generation. In his apocalyptic PEN/Faulkner-winning novel *Philadelphia Fire*, John Edgar Wideman, one of the most gifted of the contemporary African-American writers, shows the tragedy of the people living in the black part of the city. They are destroyed both spiritually and physically. Ironically, the scene is set in Philadelphia, the home of the Declaration of Independence. Going by a PTC trolley car, the novel's protagonist Cudjoe makes a remark that emphasizes the idea of warfare in the city:

As you ride beneath city streets there are distant explosions, muffled artillery roar and chuckle of automatic weapons, sounds of war you don't notice in the daylight world above. Down here no doubt the invisible warfare is real (Wideman 1990: 21).

There are numerous signs of the war being waged, like the broken concrete benches in a public park:

Somebody had expended enormous energy attacking them. Not casual violence but premeditated murder. You'd need heavy-duty weapons to inflict this damage. Sledgehammers. Crowbars. Why kill these benches whose sole purpose was offering people a place to rest their asses and enjoy the park? Why would anybody need to go declare on a bench? Whose life was that fucked up? (ibid.: 29).

The negative energy of young blacks who feel excluded is directed against anything that is connected with what is, to them,

“white culture.” It is an act of malicious desecration that is to express both their hatred towards the system and protest against the conditions of life that have turned them into second-class citizens of the country which claims to be the beacon of democracy.

This war can come to an end only if people stop looking at each other as enemies and accept the “burden of their humanity.” In his short novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Baldwin shows the possibility of change. Beale Street, which, in fact, used to be a major entertainment district in Memphis, TN, and is the home of Beale Street Blues, becomes the quintessence of black experience in America, and this experience defies simplification. Baldwin was a precursor of the new generation of writers who foresaw major oncoming changes in the relations between races in the USA. The street is forever there, witnessing transformations in the lives of its inhabitants, full of mysteries, tears, and—this is important to underline—joys. It has seen too much, but the long years of indefatigable struggle of black Americans for their rights have yielded great results. African Americans living on Beale Street (and all over the USA) have finally acquired a voice of their own to testify and challenge. Their voice can be heard.

The geographical map of contemporary black American writers covers the whole country, not only the traditional black areas of Washington, DC, New York, or Chicago. The world as it is represented in the works of Melvin Dixon, Maurice Glenn, Gloria Naylor, Paul Marshall, Ntozake Shange, Al Young, and other writers is no longer one-dimensional, reduced to the reality of the black ghetto of Harlem or South Side. Their characters try to find a home where they can at least be safe, if not happy. They begin to feel like a part of the universe which is

complex and versatile. They develop a positive attitude to themselves and their history and learn to love cleaning off the poison of hatred and animosity and restoring the ability to see colors and feel the fragrances of the world around them. Their vision of the world as “close to hell” has altered. The city that used to be man-made, i.e., opposed to the natural world and arousing hatred, fear, and despair, is gradually losing its destructive powers. It ceases to lock its inhabitants within its borders, functioning as an isolationist inhuman force. Instead, it begins to offer. When Cypress, one of the three sisters in Ntozake Shange’s novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, finds herself in New York, she is at first “constrained by cement, noise, thousands of people she’d never had to take seriously. Whole blocks of black people without trees. Dance studios that looked into other dance studios. Or vacant lots crammed with tires, garbage, used strollers, broken bottles, and stench” (Shange 1982: 193). But, trying to find

her place in the world, she discovers the transforming power of art that comes out of love. She does not want to agree to the black-and-white picture of life dividing people across the color line, and comes to the conclusion that it would be no good to go to distant lands in an attempt to begin a new life.

For Cypress the terrain of the new world was art. Her dance, like her people before her, adapted to the contours of her new land. She choreographed for the wilderness and the metropolis of the Saars, Bibions, and Edwards, who let her have space, a natural element (ibid.: 196).

This is a positive sign that allows Shange to encompass the pain and despair of millions of blacks and to discover the home they have been looking for.

With a change of focus there came a change in the attitudes. Any place is only what people make it. Beale Street begins to talk, and her language is the language of poetry imbued with the power to transform.

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MIESTOVAIZDIS ŠIUOLAIKINIAME AFROAMERIKIEČIŲ MIESTO ROMANE

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamas miestovaizdis kaip esminis afroamerikiečių grožinės literatūros elementas. Nuo Romantizmo laikų miestas buvo laikomas blogio įsikūnijimu, svetimu žmogaus prigimčiai, skleidžiančiu baimę ir mirtį. Kelis dešimtmečius afroamerikiečiai buvo izoliuoti didžiųjų Amerikos miestų juodaodžių getuose. Šie miestai daugeliu atvejų buvo atsakingi už juodaodžių asmenybės augimą ar žlugimą. Dažnai tokia nesėkmė buvo aiškinama jų nesugebėjimu rasti savo vietą keistame ir svetimame pasaulyje, kuri simbolizuoja miestas. Pasaulis už juodojo geto ribų vaizduotas brutalus ir bauginantis, o viduje – kaip netekęs vilties. Gyventojų perpildytas miestas ir jo socialiniai konfliktai, nusikalstamumas, vandalizmas ir skurdas tapo ryškiais skiriamaisiais didmiesčių ženklais. Taip yra todėl, kad žmonės, imigravę į didmiesčius, sudarė didžiąją gyventojų dalį ir buvo skurdžiausi bei mažiausiai prisitaikę gyventi mieste: jie prarado savo šaknis ir pasijuto perkelti į beveidę miesto visuomenę.

Daugelyje afroamerikiečių romanų vaizduojamas veikėjas, nesugebantis prisitaikyti prie gyvenimo didmiestyje ir galiausiai degraduojantis bei skurstantis. Jamesas Baldwinas yra vienas ryškiausių tokio tipo romano atstovų. Jo netvarkingi ir sutrikę personažai yra išorinio miesto, automobilių amžiaus pasaulio produktas, todėl jie būdingi visai afroamerikiečių grožinei literatūrai. Straipsnyje analizuojami kai kurie naujausi juodaodžių romanai, atspindintys Baldwinio idėjas.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: miestovaizdis, afroamerikiečių grožinė literatūra, miestas, romanai, juodaodžių getas, spalvos linija.

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KRAJOBRAZ MIASTA WE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ AFROAMERYKAŃSKIEJ POWIEŚCI MIEJSKIEJ

Streszczenie

W artykule omówiono zagadnienie krajobrazu miasta jako zasadniczego elementu literatury afroamerykańskiej. Od czasów romantyzmu miasto było postrzegane jako wcielenie zła, obce naturze ludzkiej, siejące strach i śmierć. Przez wiele deścięcioleci Afroamerykanie byli odizolowani w czarnych gettach wielkich miast amerykańskich. Miasta te w większości wypadków ponoszą odpowiedzialność za osobiste sukcesy lub porażki czarnoskórych mieszkańców. Często takie porażki były uwarunkowane ich nieumiejętnością znalezienia swego miejsca w dziwnym i obcym świecie, który symbolizuje miasto. Świat poza granicami czarnego getta przedstawiany jest jako brutalny i przerażający, a świat wewnątrz getta – pozbawiony nadziei. Przystępczość, vandalizm, ubóstwo, przeludnienie i konflikty społeczne stały się wyznacznikami dużych miast, bowiem ludzie, którzy tu się przesiedlali i stanowili większość mieszkańców, byli najuboższą i najmniej przystosowaną do życia w mieście grupą społeczną: utracili swoje korzenie i zostali przeszczepieni na grunt bezimiennego społeczeństwa miejskiego.

Bohaterem całego szeregu powieści afroamerykańskich jest człowiek, który nie potrafi przystosować się do życia w wielkim mieście i kończy życie w nędzy i upodleniu. Jednym z najwybitniejszych przedstawicieli tego typu powieści jest James Baldwin. Jego zdezorganizowani i zdezorientowani bohaterowie są wytworem świata zewnętrznego miasta wieku maszyn i jako tacy są typowymi postaciami całej literatury afroamerykańskiej. Artykuł zawiera analizę niektórych najnowszych powieści afroamerykańskich, w których pobrzmiewają idee Baldwinia.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: krajobraz miasta, literatura afroamerykańska, powieść miejska, czarne getto, linia kolorystyczna.