

## Space, Class, City: Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

*Maud Martha* is the only work of fiction by Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), the first African American poet to win a Pulitzer Prize. It is a short novel or novella made up of a series of vignettes centering around the title character, a young black woman, covering the period from her childhood to early adulthood in Chicago. The frontispiece tells us that “Maud Martha was born in 1917 and she is still alive,” creating a kind of immortality for the main character. The book was published in 1953 to positive reviews, although literary historians such as Mary Helen Washington argue convincingly that it was overshadowed at the time by Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, published in the previous year and winner of the 1953 National Book Award (Washington 271–72). As Lattin and Lattin explain,

In 1940, Richard Wright told the story of Bigger Thomas growing up in black Chicago not far from where Maud Martha was to grow up. In 1953, the year *Maud Martha* was published, Ralph Ellison added the story of his protagonist harassed from the south to New York City. Judged by the standards of these two complex, powerful urban novels, *Maud Martha* could be easily dismissed. (181)

Washington’s comparison of the reviews of *Invisible Man* and *Maud Martha* demonstrates the widespread neglect Brooks’s book met with: while “Elli-

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son's work was placed in a tradition" and "compared to Wright, Dostoevsky, and Faulkner," none of the reviews at the time mentioned Brooks's artistic lineage (272). None of the reviewers recognized, as Washington did thirty years later, that "[w]ith no college degrees, no social standing, lacking the militant or articulate voice, denied the supports black men could claim from black institutions, Maud Martha is the invisible woman of the 1950s" (272).

The book itself is also markedly different from Ellison's and Wright's novels in its subject matter and its style:

Maud does not experience the same intense search for identity that Bigger and Ellison's protagonist experience. Nor does the novel have comparable violent struggles between the black and white worlds, broad discussions of black nationalism, or tragic conflicts between characters. (Lattin and Lattin 181)

In fact, Malin Walther suggests that in a chapter centering on Maud Martha's interactions with a mouse, Brooks's novel "re-Wrights" the disturbing scene in which Bigger Thomas kills a rat, resituating it in a more humorous and contemplative domestic setting with the result that Maud Martha sets the mouse free, rather than killing it as Bigger does the rat (143).

I want to demonstrate that, although it appears smaller and less dramatic than Wright's and Ellison's novels both in its length and in its reception, *Maud Martha* is also a "complex, powerful urban novel," not in the sense of gritty depictions of street life but in its quieter, more ethereal images of the inner life and reveries of its main character. Barbara Christian, in her essay "Nuance and the Novella: A Study of Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha*," identifies the historical importance of the text: it is one of the first novels by a black woman to focus on an ordinary person who is not only a victim of an unjust society, "not just a creation of her external world," but also an active individual who "helps create her own world by transforming externals through her thoughts and imaginings" (244). The text's portrayals of Maud Martha's inner life of the mind, as well as her day-to-day life at home, and in the beauty parlor, hat shop and department stores, produce an intimate portrait of a woman who is constantly made aware of her lack of status—because of her gender, racial identity, skin color, class—yet also constantly finds ways to reaffirm her worth. As Christian puts it, *Maud Martha* is "the embodiment of the idea that a slice of anybody's life has elements of wonder and farce, wry irony and joy" (247). The book's third-person omniscient narrator puts into words thoughts and feelings that the characters seldom do; the reader has

access to this narrator's humor and judgment as it tells the story, highlighting both the "wonder and farce" inherent in ordinary life.

This article considers two of the thirty-four vignettes in *Maud Martha*: chapter 11 "second beau" and chapter 12 "Maud Martha and New York." These chapters are set around 1935, when Maud Martha is eighteen years old. Her boyfriend David is the central character in chapter 11; the subsequent chapter focuses on Maud Martha herself. Through free indirect discourse, both chapters narrate the overlapping but quite different ways David and Maud Martha fantasize about worlds outside their own. While David longs to be a member of the collegiate bourgeoisie that he observes while taking classes at the University of Chicago, Maud Martha imagines herself in the luxury of high-society New York, a city she has never visited. Neither chapter directly refers to race, but it is a central issue in the novel, even when unspoken. Moreover, the fact that both characters' fantasies hinge on class mobility illustrates the attraction of the comfortable life that, then as now, often required the privilege that accompanied whiteness, as well as wealth and education.

To better understand the representations of class and space as co-constructions in *Maud Martha*, I would like to introduce a key concept from geographical theory: the "imaginative geography." According to Felix Driver, imaginative geographies are "representations of place, space and landscape that structure people's understandings of the world, and in turn help to shape their actions" (152). Driver cites Edward Said's coinage of the term in *Orientalism* to describe the ways in which Europe's "shared collective imaginations" of non-western cultures contribute to crucial binary oppositions by which westerners identify themselves against the Other (149). What geographers emphasize is the material, embodied nature of imaginative geographies: they are not just images. Rather they are products of, and influences on, physical lived experience as raced, gendered, classed, and otherwise marked and unmarked bodies in society. In the case of oppressive imaginative geographies, such as Orientalism, the importance of these representations cannot be disputed; on the other hand, not all imaginative geographies enable imperialism.

I suggest that reading provides access to another kind of imaginative geography, which can have more liberatory potential. Sheila Honess argues for an understanding of reading as a "spatial event" that involves the reader and the writer, along with the "traces of other readers and writers: novelists, geographers, colleagues, students, reviewers, editors" as well as the conditions under which the practices of reading and writing take place (n.p.). In this way

the spatial event of reading “happens at the intersection of agents and situations scattered across time and space, both human and non-human, absent and present” (n.p.). I argue that, in the spatial event of reading, the text’s imaginative geographies play a role in the development of literary meaning, in that a reader’s impression is informed by the text’s representations of the narrator’s or the characters’ thoughts, dreams, and actions as portrayed in the text. But they can also be a product of reading literature, in that the act of reading fosters an imaginary experience of other places, other lives, and other bodies. As reader-response criticism teaches us, “readers actualize the text into a meaningful work that in turn stimulates response,” so that the meaning of the text is the product of the “dynamic transaction” between the text and the reader (Schweickart and Flynn 4).

This transaction can be powerful, and even transformative; Janice Radway argues that reading is sometimes a physical experience:

There are moments for me now when books become something other than mere objects, when they transport me elsewhere, to a trancelike state I find difficult to describe. . . . When this occurs, the book, the text, and even my reading self dissolve in a peculiar act of transubstantiation whereby “I” become something other than what I have been and inhabit thoughts other than those I have been able to conceive before. This tactile, sensuous, profoundly emotional experience of being captured by a book is. . . an experience that for all its ethereality clearly is extraordinarily physical as well. (209)

The physicality of this kind of reading resonates with the materiality inherent in the concept of imaginative geography. Rather than emphasize a divide between mind and body, Radway wants to investigate the blurring of that divide that occurs when she is in such a “trancelike state.” Troubling the split between mind and body, the spatial event of reading can transport us to new and unknown places, teach us about things we cannot learn in our “real” lives.

I argue that, in *Maud Martha*, representations of the characters’ imaginative geographies express their spatial and classed identities in relation to the body in two ways: through fantasies of clothing and consumer goods, and through the imagination of the body in other places. Finally, I’d like to conclude by considering the imaginative geographies that can be produced by the readers’ engagements with the text.

## II. CLOTHING, ACCESSORIES, AND PHYSICAL EMBODIMENTS OF CLASS

David wants to join the educated elite, “those guys” he sees on the University of Chicago campus. David’s desire to become a part of the college-educated middle class brings with it a desire for the “tasteful” trappings he deems appropriate to that class. Although his plan to acquire these various things appears shallow and superficial, David’s highly specific wants reflect his sensitivity to the role of taste in the social construction of class. Pierre Bourdieu argues that taste is a “systematic expression of a particular class of conditions of existence, i.e., as a distinctive life-style,” which is the “product of the internalization of the structure of social space” (175). David’s wish for class mobility is not expressed through any overt desire for wealth, but through a set of symbolic objects he wants to possess. He believes that owning these objects will enable him to build a more educated, middle-class identity. From the first line of this chapter, David’s yearning for class mobility is gently derided by the narrator, whose descriptions of him make him appear arrogant and self-absorbed: the chapter opens with the joking admonition, “And—don’t laugh!—he wanted a dog” (42).

David’s catalog of desirable consumer goods becomes repetitive in the chapter’s final paragraph, using the word “good” six times in his cliché-filled fantasy of the objects—the goods—he feels he needs to own in order to achieve the lifestyle and class identity he wants.

He wanted a dog. A *good* dog. No mongrel. An apartment—well-furnished, containing a *good* bookcase, filled with *good* books in *good* bindings. He wanted a phonograph, and records. The symphonies. And Yehudi Menuhin. He wanted some *good* art. These things were not extras. They went to make up a *good* background. The kind of background those guys had. (46, emphasis added)

This background, which he thinks “those guys” have, can be read to mean their upbringing, in which they were exposed to cultured conversations from an early age. David laments that he has not, as the college boys have, grown up surrounded by educated adults; in their homes, he imagines, their parents had had casual discussions “across four-year-old heads” about a book he has just begun to study, the American studies classic,

Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought*. He had not mastered it. Only recently, he announced, had he learned of its existence. “Three volumes of the most reasonable approaches!—Yet there are chaps on that campus—*young!*—younger than I am—who read it years ago, who know it, who have had it for

themselves for years, who have been seeing it on their fathers' shelves since infancy. . . ." (43)

These students have the advantage, in David's imagination anyway, of being raised to be comfortable and at ease in the intellectual milieu that he so badly wants to inhabit. His yearning for a middle-class identity centers around the university, not only as a place of learning and ideas, but also as a community of people among whom David seems to feel uncomfortable (it goes without saying, too, although he doesn't indicate it directly, that most of them are white). If only he had "a good background" with a bourgeois upbringing like those students appear to have had, he seems to say.<sup>1</sup>

But David's word "background" also implies a backdrop, the tableau in which their lives are played out. The performance of the academic is a physical act, supported by appropriate clothing and props. As mentioned above, the chapter opens with his desire for a dog; the narrator continues to describe David's newly contrived image as the "picture of the English country gentleman. Roaming the rustic hill. He had not yet bought a pipe. He would immediately" (42). In this scene, David is dressed in a tweedy professorial costume, wearing the right tie, purchased with much anxiety and planning, as well as socks, haircut, and shoes:

There already was the herringbone tweed. . . . There was the tie a man might think about for an hour before entering that better shop, in order to be able to deliberate only a sharp two minutes at the counter, under the icy estimate of the salesman. Here were the socks, here was the haircut, here were the shoes. (42–43)

He has also adopted the physical mannerisms he thinks appropriate: "The educated smile, the slight bow, the faint imperious nod" (43). In his fantasy, the herringbone-clad David is trying to act the part, ensconced in a stage set peppered with all the important "goods" to signify his desired status. His body and physical appearance are in the process of being made over to conform to an image of the class identity he aspires to, in addition to his intellectual pursuit of a university education.

In some ways similar to David's, Maud Martha's imaginative geography of a higher class involves costuming and adorning the body, but she expresses only a passing interest in intellectual pursuits and instead directs her imagination toward scenarios heavily indulging the senses. While David's physical makeover is part of his overall goal to become more like the middle-class university "chaps" and less like the working-class man he starts out as, Maud

Martha is quite emphatically still herself in her fantasies. Like David, she is fascinated by the habits of a more privileged class, but her fantasies place her directly in their realm, skipping over the “icy estimate of the salesman” and other uncomfortable obstacles that David knows first-hand. The faraway location of Maud Martha’s imaginative geography, New York City, and her own lack of experience there allow her to appropriate only the positive elements of that world, eliding the potential roadblocks. The opening of the chapter expresses her image of the city:

The name “New York” glittered in front of her like the *silver* in the shops on Michigan Boulevard. It was *silver*, and it was solid, and it was remote: it was behind *glass*, it was behind bright *glass* like the *silver* in the shops. It was not for her. Yet. (47; emphasis added)

The repetition of the words “silver” and “glass,” along with the image of the glittering name, reinforces the metaphor in this passage that describes what New York means for Maud Martha—something as shining and expensive, “solid” as a precious metal. This passage also describes part of the allure of New York in its remoteness, “behind glass,” something beautiful she can see “in front of her” but cannot touch. Perhaps because of her distance from its reality, perhaps because she hasn’t (yet?) encountered the difficulties that David has in achieving his dream, Maud Martha’s New York is almost entirely hopeful and doesn’t entail a reworking of her body so much as a swirling daydream. The youthful sense of the future in the final word, “yet,” strikes a contrast with David’s anxiety and frustration, for Maud Martha is not at this point certain that she won’t someday achieve the elegance and poise she admires in the idea of New York.

Gleaned from her cultural knowledge of New York as depicted in magazines and newspapers, her daydreams envision upper-class life there:

Maud Martha loved it when her magazines said “New York,” described “good” objects there, wonderful people there, recalled fine talk, the bristling or the creamy or the tactfully shimmering ways of life. (48)

The adjective “good” here is emphasized with quotation marks, creating an echo of the previous chapter and David’s humorous overuse of the word and his fetishization of tasteful “goods” for purchase, as discussed above. Also like David, Maud Martha envisions “fine talk” but here is none of David’s envy or wistful regret. Rather, this chapter’s imagery is overwhelmingly sensual, describing Maud Martha’s excitement over the “tactfully shimmering

ways of life” so different from her own and often focusing on the senses, as seen in the tactile metaphors such as “bristling” and “creamy.”

Indeed, Maud Martha’s New York dream is a sybaritic delirium of delicacies. Her epicurean litany of foods shows Maud Martha’s fascination with the habits of New York polite society:

they ate things called anchovies, and capers; they ate little diamond-shaped cheeses that paprika had but breathed on; they ate bitter-almond macaroons; they ate papaya packed in rum and syrup; they ate peculiar sauces, were free with honey, were lavish with butter, wine and cream. (49)

The context, in the middle of the Depression, can explain some of Maud Martha’s gourmet lusts, of course. But I also suspect she is a sensualist, chanting in repetitive anaphora (they ate; they ate; they ate). Food here is not merely a source of physical nourishment, but a sign of “lavish” living, which she physically craves. This is not a catalog of things she feels she needs in order to gain a particular status, as David’s are; it is a list of exotic indulgences that she wants to sample for herself, for her own pleasure, even if she does not know what they are, as the expression “things called anchovies, and capers” suggests.

Maud Martha can hardly bear the opulence of her New York fantasies and her lust for these expensive objects extends beyond food, although hunger remains an apt metaphor. The physical craving overcomes her completely when she peruses magazine advertisements for an expensive pair of figurines: “Her whole body become a hunger, she would pore over these pages” (47). This physical desire is not only for the commodities being sold, nor is it for membership in a particular university community; it is for “what she felt life ought to be. Jeweled. Polished. Smiling. Poised” (50). Her yearning for effortless elegance shows an eye for both the product and the lifestyle: “especially did she care for the pictures of women wearing carelessly, as if they were rags, dresses that were plain but whose prices were not” (48–49). But for Maud Martha, the attainment of this elegance is not fraught with disappointment and self-denigration, as are David’s ambitions; perhaps due to their remoteness, both geographical and experiential, the things she fantasizes about are at least theoretically within her reach if she only had the money to purchase them. Although she too imagines her own body swathed in expensive fabrics before a high-class backdrop, she screens out the negative implications that David cannot.

Crucial too is the fact that her imaginative geography of New York is for-



mulated from the images and information she gleans from her own experience as a reader of texts:

She bought the New York papers downtown, read of the concerts and plays, studied the book reviews, was intent over the announcements of auctions. She liked the sound of “Fifth Avenue,” “Town Hall,” “B. Altman,” “Hammacher Schlemmer.” (49)

The New York in her imaginative geography captures her interest as a center of high culture, and again appeals to the senses, where even the sound of the names of streets, halls, and shops are attractive. Maud Martha has “studied” these texts and developed an idealized world that embodies everything she thinks life should be. For David, studying texts seems to mean reading volumes such as Parrington’s, which signify for him the disadvantages he labors under in comparison to the other students. David’s aspiration to enter the educated bourgeoisie is closer, more within reach: it is predicated on attending a university in Chicago where he already lives, and where he is already taking classes. Yet perhaps because he has come so close, he is all the more aware of the hindrances that still threaten to hold him back.

Like a child dreaming of fairy tales, Maud Martha places herself at the center of her fantasies of New York, and her wide-eyed optimism is only gently teased by the narrator: saying that she “was intent over the announcements of auctions” shows the utter seriousness of the inexperienced young woman and at the same time the absurdity of her reading about auctions that are inaccessible to her, both because of her location in Chicago and because of her status, as a young, working-class black woman. The grammatical inversions in this chapter are unique in that they don’t occur in David’s: formal, archaic-sounding constructions like “especially did she care,” quoted above, also underscore the fairy-tale quality of the chapter, where the narrator seems to want to convey the naïve magic of her hopeful imagination. But these grammatical inversions also hint at the spatial act of transposition that is inherent in her imaginative geography, which is the other intriguing element of her and David’s imaginative geographies.

### III. DISPLACEMENT AND TRANSPOSITION AS PRODUCTION OF SPACE AND CLASS

David’s ambitious shopping list of clothing and accessories—the pipe, the good bindings—are made to look silly and snobbish by the narrator, but his character’s pathos comes from the contrast between those attempts to mimic

the performance of middle-class academia and his stark imaginative geography of race and class in South Side Chicago, where he draws a firm boundary line between east and west. Of course, this imaginative geography is not merely an individual construction: it is informed by his own embodied experience of racial segregation in early twentieth-century Chicago. Accordingly, he separates his own neighborhood (and Maud Martha's) "[w]est of the Midway" from that of the university<sup>2</sup> and its denizens "[e]ast of Cottage Grove" (44). He explains that he becomes "instantly depressed" and "want[s] to throw up" when he comes home from the university to the "mess" that is his own neighborhood (44). Here in Bronzeville, people "leaned against buildings and their mouths were opening and closing very fast but nothing important was coming out. What did they know about Aristotle?" (45). The brashness of the street life in this passage, where conversations are lively but not intellectual enough to suit him, contrasts with the polite restraint and intelligence David attributes to people in the university neighborhood, where "people were clean, going somewhere that mattered, not talking unless they had something to say" (44–45). The clownish image of "mouths. . . opening and closing very fast" makes his neighbors appear foolish, and although he stops short of calling the residents of his own neighborhood dirty, he implies it in this passage by asserting the cleanliness of the others "[e]ast of Cottage Grove" (44). Similarly, he condemns the poor condition of the buildings by blaming the inhabitants: "up in those kitchenette windows, where the lights were dirty through dirty glass—they *could* wash the windows" (45). His imaginative geography consists of a divided city, in which the clean, intelligent people are east of the line and the dirty, foolish, ignorant people are west of it. David often finds himself on what he considers to be the wrong side of the line, in more ways than one: as these passages demonstrate, he lives in an area he considers poor and dirty. But several times in this chapter he also seems to misapprehend his own location in relation to that line.

Through a kind of imaginative displacement, David's strict sense of boundaries sometimes gives way to a possibility for transgression. Although he is in Maud Martha's parents' house, he comports himself with such pomp that the narrator chides him again: "His scent was withdrawn, expensive, as he strode down the worn carpet of her living room, as though it were the educated green of the Midway" (43). The dramatic situation again resembles a performance through the narrator's choice of words, such as striding the carpet and "the educated green," that elevate him to the status of an actor or orator, but the "worn carpet of her living room" reminds us that he is just ranting in his girlfriend's house. But this passage also shows the slippage between

the two parts of David's divided imaginative geography, as he is behaving *here* in a manner more appropriate *there*. The carpet in this passage almost becomes the green of the Midway, almost but not quite, thanks to the narrator's precise use of the simile "as though it were" highlighting the distinction. However, this kind of imaginary spatial displacement continues later in David's description of his own neighborhood as if it were elsewhere: "The unhappiness he felt over there was physical" (45). Though we know he is in the living room at Maud Martha's house, the sentence implies that he is speaking from elsewhere about "there," meaning their neighborhood, a place that makes him feel sick with unhappiness.

Perhaps because in his mind he is on the other side of the boundary, David even becomes forgetful about his neighborhood:

There was a fence on Forty-seventh and—Champlain? Langley? Forestville?—he forgot what; broken, rotten, trying to lie down; and passing it on a windy night or on a night when it was drizzling, he felt lost, lapsed, negative, untended, extinguished, broken and lying down too—unappeasable. (45)

Although he cannot remember the exact intersection, he identifies with that fence on 47th Street. It makes him feel "lost" and "untended" as well as "broken and lying down too"—the ragged fence can be read as a synecdoche for the African American community in the midst of the Depression. It also more specifically bears a symbolic burden for David, standing for all the things he associates with his own neighborhood, his own "background" that hasn't prepared him enough for a life at the university.

Like the fence, too, David is in his own estimate "untended," in that his working-class parents weren't able to provide for him the kind of privileged "background" that the students at the university appear to have. As the chapter explains, not everyone in his neighborhood is dirty like the windows mentioned above:

His mother had taken in washing. She had had three boys, whom she sent to school clean but patched-up. Just so they were clean, she had said. That was all that mattered, she had said. She had said "ain't." (44)

His mother did her best to tend her sons while washing other people's laundry to support her family, keeping them clean even if she couldn't replace their worn clothes, only patch them. "His father," we are told, "hadn't said anything at all," implying he was distant or even absent from the family (44). But David wishes he had been tended in other ways, raised in a more genteel,

middle-class environment, by parents who didn't say "ain't" and who could afford to buy him new clothes (herringbone?).

Certainly the frustration David feels in his own neighborhood and thinking about his own upbringing could make him feel broken. But the fact that the fence is ineffective in its primary function as a boundary or barrier, broken and "trying to lie down," also suggests the impossibility of maintaining the rigid spatial boundaries he tries to invoke (45). His very presence taking courses on the University of Chicago campus—"the Midway"—is evidence of the permeability of those boundaries. That is not to say crossing is easy or taken-for-granted, but it is possible.

Maud Martha's imaginative geography also enables her to cross boundaries. However, she doesn't visit New York only to return to her own neighborhood depressed; she has never visited there at all. Instead, she completely projects herself into an assortment of scenes there. Unlike David, whose language betrays his insecurity and uncertainty about his location even though he attends the university, Maud Martha relocates herself at will. Whenever a train passes she imagines it's heading for New York and she is on board: "She sat inside with them. She leaned back in the plush" (47). The physical sensation of sitting in the train seat, feeling the plush fabric against her skin, is not mediated by a metaphor; rather, Maud Martha transports herself onto the train that she knows is going to New York. The imagined mobility in this passage is two-fold: she imagines that she is in another place (on a train) and on her way to another city.

She *is* on the train, looking out the window at all the "unfortunate folk who were not New York-bound and never would be" (48). Harry B. Shaw points out that Maud Martha's fantasy of New York "is more to escape a stultifying mental and aesthetic environment," while David wanted to "change his style to escape his own heritage" (262–63). Her escape, in this imaginative act of geographic transposition, performs a kind of switch, where she is no longer the unfortunate person who isn't going to New York, but rather she is going there, looking out at the unlucky ones. Similarly, she transposes herself to the famous Fifth Avenue:

She was on Fifth Avenue whenever she wanted to be, and it was she who rolled up, silky or furry, in the taxi, was assisted out, and stood, her next step nebulous, before the theaters of the thousand lights, before velvet-lined impossible shops; she it was. (49)

Maud Martha is there, decked out in silks or furs (again the focus on cloth-

ing). In her embodied imaginative geography she physically travels to and occupies the city in her imagination and she feels the textures of the plush, silk, fur, and velvet against her skin.

Maud Martha's fantasy, inspired by the magazines and newspapers she reads, focuses on the distant and unknown, not only the cosmopolitan city of New York, but also the imported luxuries to be found there. The chapter is peppered with references to exotic imported goods. She revels in the idea of consuming expensive products from other countries: "Chinese boxes," "Italian plates" (48), "Russian caviar" (49), "a Persian rug," "tea, as in England" (echoes of the "English country gentleman") (50).

Maud Martha reserves her best metaphors for a decorative screen she envisions in a beautifully furnished home. The narration doesn't attribute it to a particular source, but fits in with the kinds of interiors that Maud Martha delights in. She describes the screen, thinking that it might be "Japanese. . . with rich and mellow, bread-textured colors" (50–51). The colors of the screen are, like the people she imagines inhabit the New York of her daydreams, rich and mellow. But here a visual attribute, color, has a tactile description that evokes the feel of bread, its rough crust and cushiony inside. The reference to food underscores the hunger metaphor that runs through the chapter, too: her appetite for the imagined New York permeates even her figures of speech. The fantasies in which she indulges are like her daily bread, feeding her spirit as well as her body with the sustenance she needs to thrive in the midst of the challenges in her life.

She acknowledges that her daydreams, in which she "dwell[s] upon color and soft bready textures and light, on a complex beauty, on gemlike surfaces," might not come true (51). But she defends the pleasure she derives from them:

What was the matter with that? Besides, who could safely swear that she would never be able to make her dream come true for herself? Not altogether, then!—but slightly?—in some part?

She was eighteen years old, and the world waited. To caress her. (51)

Maud Martha's pragmatism has struck a bargain with her daydreams, allowing her to enjoy the imagined New York even as she realizes that she probably won't ever attain that level of luxury. She optimistically elects to incorporate her sense of aesthetics into her life "slightly," as we can see in later chapters from her appreciation of "her finest wedding gift, a really good white luncheon cloth" (167). Although her fantasies are not "real," they have a real

effect in her life.

#### IV. LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES OF MAUD MARTHA

Later in the book, in chapter 18, entitled “we’re the only colored people here,” Maud Martha and her husband go to the movies in a fancy, mostly white downtown cinema. After depicting their delicate dance of anxiety and forced nonchalance, the narrator explains the value of the movie for Maud Martha:

you felt good sitting there, yes, good, and as if, when you left it, you would be going home to a sweet-smelling apartment with flowers on little gleaming tables; and wonderful silver on night-blue velvet, in chests; and crackly sheets; and lace spreads on such beds as you saw at Marshall Fields. (77)

This description, inspired by the brief experience of the movie (along with trips to a downtown department store) and its ability to transport her to another kind of life, shows that Maud Martha still has the power to create imaginative geographies replete with sensual and luxurious details of color, texture, and fragrance.

In this later chapter, too, the narration provides a strong contrast with her reality, living in a kitchenette apartment in a run-down building:

Instead of back to your kit’n’t apt., with the garbage of your floor’s families in a big can just outside your door, and the gray sound of little gray feet scratching away from it as you drag up those flights of narrow complaining stairs. (77)

Unlike the New York chapter, Maud Martha is older now and has experienced more of the restrictions and disappointments that her past boyfriend David had also encountered. But her habit of creating pleasurable fantasies—“learning to love moments”—helps to sustain her even in the “gray” circumstances of her daily life (78). Like the imagined geographies of New York that thrilled her at eighteen, Maud Martha’s imagined geographies of upper-class creature comforts continue to feed her craving. She might not any longer feel she *is* on the train or on Fifth Avenue, but she feels *as if* she “would be going home to a sweet-smelling apartment,” which pleases her. By projecting themselves into imagined places and imagined embodied experiences, David and Maud Martha try to open themselves to possibility. As readers following these two fictional characters as they undergo this projection, we also project ourselves into other times, other places, other lives. Representations of class and space

in the novel allow us as readers to temporarily access imaginative geographies that are not “real,” but that can have real effects on our lives.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See also Shaw 263; his reading of David’s desire for a good background is similar to mine, although he doesn’t read a double meaning into the word “background,” as both upbringing and backdrop, as I do.

<sup>2</sup> The University is referred to as “the Midway” because it is located on the site of the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893.

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