

The City and Gender Expression in Nik Nicholson's *Descendants of Hagar* and Leona Beasley's *Something Better than Home*

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Abstract

The city has become a hub of economic, social, and cultural exchange. Therefore, it appears to be the ideal place for shaping new normativities relating to gender and sexuality. However, we discover in *Descendants of Hagar* and *Something Better than Home* that it is more complex to live in the American South due to conservatism and underdevelopment. That is why the main protagonists seek migration to northern cities, perceived as more developed, promoting gender equality, inclusivity and offering opportunities for freedom and self-expression. Through the theoretical framework of gender studies, we argue that developed cities create institutions and safe spaces that support the inclusion and security of marginalized individuals.

Keywords: The city, gender expression, inclusion, gender studies.

La ville et l'expression du genre dans *Descendants of Hagar* de Nik Nicholson et *Something Better than Home* de Leona Beasley

Résumé

La ville est devenue un centre d'échanges économiques, sociaux et culturels. Elle semble donc être l'endroit idéal pour façonner de nouvelles normativités en matière de genre et de sexualité. Cependant, nous découvrons dans *Descendants of Hagar* et *Something Better than Home* qu'il est plus complexe de vivre dans le sud des États-Unis en raison du conservatisme et du sous-développement. C'est pourquoi les principaux protagonistes cherchent à migrer vers les villes du nord, perçues comme plus développées, promouvant l'égalité du genre, l'inclusion et offrant des opportunités de liberté et d'expression de soi. À travers le cadre théorique des études de genre, nous soutenons que les villes développées créent des institutions et des espaces sûrs qui soutiennent l'inclusion et la sécurité des individus marginalisés.

Mots-clés : La ville, expression du genre, inclusion, études de genre.

Introduction

If you are willing to take a step back, you will realize that, far from being a recent social phenomenon, homosexuality and other forms of gender transgression are a constant in human history. They were practiced in the form of tendencies or institutionalized forms, in restricted communities but also in large cities (similar to today's towns). A fact corroborated by modern historiography through the examples of ancient Greece and Rome. As R. McAfee (1992, p. 13) notes, "homosexuality was common in ancient Rome, Greece, and China as well as other ancient countries". Moreover, the biblical reference to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, two ancient cities destroyed, according to the story, because of the practice of homosexuality, bears witness to the existence of this practice among ancient peoples.

However, the evolution of society has had an impact on mentalities, which have changed. The emergence of monotheistic religions and historical contingencies have given rise to a new posture in which homosexuality and all other forms of gender transgression were challenged and condemned. As far as the United States is concerned, the condemnation of homosexuality as well as transgressive gender expression began with the arrival of the Puritans. They are described as "a community of believers, by which the commands of God were obeyed in the preaching of the word, and the administering of the sacraments" (H. Osgood 1991, p. 4). Moreover, they "were the advocates of a definite religious system which they came to the new world to put into practice" (H. Osgood 1991, p. 1). As a matter of fact, religion is undeniably one of the reasons why sexual and gender deviance has been condemned. The legacy of the Puritans' religious beliefs spread far and wide in the southern United States compared to the north.

In addition to religion, it should also be noted that the North and South of the United States have experienced divergent socio-economic development. While the North opened up to industrialization and urbanization very early on, the South, whose economy was based on plantations and slavery, remained a rural region for a long time. It is with this in mind that J. Poole and C. Gause (2011, p. 41) argue that "the southern United States is as synonymous with religious fundamentalism as it is with rural geography". These provisions have made the southern United States a conservative region, closed in on rigid cultural beliefs and values. A. Annes and M. Redlin (2012, p. 60) add that "rural areas were portrayed as inhospitable places for homosexual sexuality".

In N. Nicholson's *Descendants of Hagar* and L. Beasley's *Something Better than Home*, this difference between the northern and southern regions of the United States is well illustrated. As we read these novels, we discover that living in the cities of the southern United States is more complex than living in the cities of the north, especially for minority and vulnerable populations. Linny in *Descendants of Hagar* and Onnie in *Something Better than Home* feel marginalized not only as black women, but also as lesbians in their Southern U.S. hometowns. Hence, their shared desire to migrate to the cities of the North, which are reputed to be more developed, oriented towards gender equality, opened to diversity and inclusive, in order to experience freedom and self-expression. Based on this observation, we ask the following question: how is the city represented in literature, and what facilities does it offer to guarantee the social inclusion of marginalized populations such as blacks, women, and homosexuals?

The objective is to show that the city sets up institutions and safe spaces to guarantee the inclusion, fulfillment, and security of marginalized individuals. To achieve this goal, we will resort to gender studies which is "an interdisciplinary academic field that examines gender inequality, women's lived experience, sexuality, masculinity, and the interaction of gendered social processes with race, class, and other systems of inequality" (W. Scarborough and B. Risman 2020, p. 41). This theory will be useful in the context of our work, as it will help us to highlight the inequalities linked to gender, race, and sex, that the characters experience in the city. The first part of this work will address the weight of conservatism in the southern United States, then we will show how gender is expressed in this part of the country. Finally, we will present the north which appears to be an Eldorado for marginalized people.

1. The Weight of Conservatism in the Dixie

The Dixie represents the southern part of the United States. In this country, the South has a reputation for conservatism. Religion, patriarchy, and racism etc., are most pronounced in this part of the United States. At least, that is what is reflected in the novels *Descendants of Hagar* and *Something Better than Home*. In Eleven Light City, Georgia, where Onnie, the major character of *Something Better than Home* lives, she is educated in religion from an early age. In fact, Onnie hails from Georgia, a southern U.S. state, historically recognized as one of the first thirteen colonies of colonial-era British America. These colonies were ruled by the Puritans, who came to establish their Christian faith in all social spheres of the New World. Ultimately, the South was the region most impacted by the religious conservatism left as a legacy by the Puritans.

We can understand this through the attitude of Onnie's mother, who is described as a character with a great interest in religious things, and who does not hesitate to instill this in her child. Onnie says "Mama's heart sang with joyous pride when I recited Psalms 23 at age four" (L. Beasley 2017, p. 79). Onnie's mother illustrates herself as a good Southern mama, acting as a spiritual guide for her daughter. Of course, the aim of the proliferation of religious conservatism in the American South is to preserve the traditional and moral values that govern society. However, conservatism in the cities of the American South is not limited to the popularization of the Christian faith. It expresses itself in a variety of ways, including racism. We see this in the second novel on which our work is focused.

In an article entitled *Le Conservatisme Américain : Un Processus Politique à la Recherche d'une Idéologie*, the American historian D. Farber (2014, p. 24)¹ says that "l'identité du conservatisme est toujours fondée sur l'intolérance". As a matter of fact, conservatism, which is strongly opposed to the weakening of the social order, does everything possible to perpetuate the achievements under which society functions. In the American South, the prevailing social order was one of black domination by white. Since slavery was a fundamental lever of the economy in Southern cities, there was no question of giving it up, and whites did not want to relinquish their privilege. P. McIntosh (1989, p. 1) defines white privilege as an "unearned race advantage [that confers] dominance".

Thus, in the novel *Descendants of Hagar*, talking about her experience as a black slave in Zion, Georgia, Miemay, the great-great-grandmother of Linny, the main protagonist, says, (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 40)

ever seent a man burned alive? Hear 'im beg fo 'is life? How 'ee scream in the fire? that's what white Christians do ta us on Satday night, den be in chuch Sunday monin. Fa years, got ta sit in dat chuch gally fa niggas and lissen ta how bein good slaves what God want.

Indeed, it was important for the whites to use religion as a pretext to numb the conscience of black slaves in order to perpetuate their exploitation, thereby increasing their wealth, which came essentially from this activity. So, while they were subjected to the worst violence, most black slaves continued to be devoted to the service of their white masters.

Similarly, in the post-slavery period, black people continued to suffer racism in another form. Blacks were deprived of their basic rights through segregation. That is what Linny explains in the following lines, "some white people already say we don't deserve the land we

¹ "The identity of conservatism is always based on intolerance" this translation is provided by myself.

on. If Hilliard was somewhere else, it be full of white folks, but they ain trying to live surrounded by no niggas” (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 130). Ex-slaveholders in the American South continued to see blacks as subhuman, hence the need to live apart. Linny adds that “the Klan even gave a speech to Zion right in the middle of the town. They warned all niggas, we were never to sleep in that house where white folks once laid they heads” (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 130). The Klan Linny is referring to here is none other than the Ku Klux Klan, it is an extremist white supremacist organization in the United States that works against the recognition of African American rights and that promote racism predominantly in the U.S. southern cities. By forbidding blacks to stay in places where whites have already stayed, the Klan is only intended to reassert its supremacy over the inhabitants of Zion.

In the cities of the South and specifically in the city of Zion, the Klan has committed enough violence against black people, regardless of gender. Linny makes a revelation along these lines, she says, “the Klan tied the man to a tree, and beat him almost to death. The woman was raped. They say the man asked them to kill him so he could stop hearing the woman begging them to stop” (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 130).

Because of conservatism, southern towns like Zion are a dangerous place for black men as much as black women. However, black women and children are the most exposed and vulnerable. This is the reason why Linny states this “please don’t be no woman caught by a mob. Lord, the things I done heard they done to a woman. It’s been a while since they actually killed a woman round here, but they’ll rape a nigga girl child, or woman if they find ‘a on a road by ‘aself” (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 235). This excerpt shows that the southern cities are not a safe place for black people and women.

From the above, we can see that both novels present a similar geographical space. Whether we are talking about Linny or Onnie, the observation is that they are both young black women from Georgia, a state in the southern United States. What is more, they are also confronted with the effects of conservatism in their daily lives in Eleven Light City for Onnie and Zion for Linny. In his book *The Mind of the South*, W. J. Cash (1969, p. vii) asserts that he has the “profound conviction that the South is another land, sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation”. Definitely, conservatism, which is widespread in the American South, is what makes this area so special. Over the years, the south has remained attached to some traditional values of its own. As a result, Southerners seem to be resistant to the various social

changes that oppose conservatism. Depicting the attitude of Conservatives, D. Farber (2014, p. 114)² says:

De manière générale, les conservateurs se sont opposés à l'élargissement des frontières d'une citoyenneté pleine et entière à tous ; ils se sont rassemblés derrière les actions et les discours dénigrant les minorités qui se battaient pour l'égalité de leurs droits devant la loi, comme les féministes, les Afro-Américains, les homosexuel (le)s et les immigrés.

This quote from Farber raises the question of the acceptance of all categories of minorities in the South. Convinced that accepting these minorities would undermine the social order, the Conservatives are vigorously against their inclusion, especially when it comes to homosexuals. These characteristics of conservatism can be verified in the two novels through the experience of the characters in *Eleven Light City* and *Zion*. In the next section, we will address the issue of gender expression in the Dixie. After addressing the issue of racism in the conservative South in this first part, we will now talk about the place of women as well as that of homosexuals in the southern U.S. cities.

2. The Expression of Gender in the U.S Southern Cities

The conservatism that has become so widespread in the American South has naturally had an impact on the way people live in the cities of this region. Thus, the ideologies that dominate this part of America are, among others, heteronormativity and patriarchy. The cities of the American South, as depicted in the novels *Descendants of Hagar* and *Something Better than Home*, fit perfectly into these systems of thought.

In the cities of Zion in *Descendants of Hagar* and Eleven Light City in *Something Better than Home*, the expression of gender corresponds strictly to what J. Butler (1990) calls the heterosexual matrix. This concept means that “sexes, genders and desires are maintained and naturalized under a binary heterosexual logic” (H. McCann and W. Monaghan, 2020, p. 122). Therefore, it is established that women are naturally feminine, attracted to men and they are genuinely heterosexual. The same goes for men, who are reputed to be strong, virile and attracted to women. From then on, anyone who does not fit into this binarity is a deviant and is consequently rejected. The heterosexual matrix of which Butler speaks is a kind of unit of measurement that serves to regulate the expression of gender in society. Knowing that gender

² “Generally speaking, conservatives opposed the extension of the frontiers of full citizenship to all; they rallied behind actions and speeches denigrating minorities who were fighting for equal rights before the law, such as feminists, African-Americans, homosexuals and immigrants.” This translation is provided by myself.

in a patriarchal and heteronormative community is recognized in a binary form, it is obvious that Linny and Onnie feel excluded because they do not meet certain criteria.

To be considered a real woman based on J. Butler's heterosexual matrix, a woman would have to be feminine first, then a mother and a wife. According to J. Novkov (1991, p. 156), "our understanding of [female] gender arises from society's need to see women primarily and essentially as mothers". In fact, this way of defining a real woman is opposed to Linny and Onnie's aspirations.

In *Descendants of Hagar*, Linny is marginalized by the other women of Zion because she is different from them. This is because Linny has no intention of marrying a man or having children. When these women gather to do "women's things", Linny is not allowed to participate. This is what she explains in the following sentence, "I was sent to do some task, wash laundry, or watch children, or cook or boil water, but never just be there, to watch them move into motherhood" (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 94). Clearly, Linny is aware that her desire not to have children or to live like the other women of Zion makes her an outcast. She does not meet all the criteria for being a real woman. She admits that she is treated "like some eternal child, less than a woman, less than a man" (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 94) because she has decided to live differently.

Furthermore, Linny does not have a feminine appearance, as recommended by the heterosexual matrix, which makes her life in Zion even more complex. Jenny, one of her sisters, criticizes her for this, telling her to stop wearing "pants all the time, and start acting like a lady" (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 327). The people of Zion are conservatives; they will not admit that Linny is a woman, because she is a lesbian and dresses in men's clothes. Yet Linny herself, in her innermost being, recognizes herself as a woman, that is why she says "I was a woman and would be, no matter what I did" (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 100).

Additionally, in Zion, women do not have the same rights as men. Because of patriarchy that positions men as superior to women, it was decided that "all the women learn to sew and cook enough to take care of their families" (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 11) while "men talk money, going places, laws, and building things" (Nicholson 2017, p. 102). Indeed, in conservative communities, there is a gender hierarchy that places men at the top and women at the margins. And in the city of Zion, this hierarchy is well respected.

And when we look at Onnie's situation, she also faces the same challenges as Linny. Although *Descendants of Hagar* depicts an America of the 1910s and *Something Better than*

Home that of the 1970s, there has been virtually no evolution, at least in the Southern cities, regarding the expression of gender and sexuality. Onnie is just as subject to the heterosexual matrix principles. Onnie who is a tomboy, cannot assert herself because in the conservative culture of the South, women must look feminine. She says, “I didn’t dare ask Mama if I could dress in boy’s clothes” (L. Beasley 2017, p. 27). Since Onnie’s mother realized that her daughter is a lesbian in addition to her masculine appearance, she has made it her mission to convert her back into a real woman, which is why she says, “Mama had been on a campaign to femme me up since the kissing-game fiasco” (L. Beasley 2017, p. 27).

Moreover, Onnie who defines herself as a lesbian recognizes that she cannot clearly assert herself in the Southern city of Eleven Light City. Operating under the ideology of heteronormativity, apart from the man/woman pair and heterosexuality, which are officially recognized in society, all other forms of gender expression and sexuality are condemned in Eleven Light City. Defining heteronormativity, K. Kimport (2012, p. 3-4) declares that it is

The institutionalized assumption that bodies are constructed into oppositionally situated (sexual and social) categories (...). It is premised on the assumption that sex, gender, and sexuality are fixed, immutable. It assumes an a priori existence of sex, gender, and sexuality that induces particular forms of expression (sign) that are interpreted as evidence of subject’s sex, gender and sexuality (signified). Further, one’s identity in one category is linked to one’s identity in another. (...). Evidence of a body’s sex and sexuality as well.

As a lesbian, Onnie does not feel safe in Eleven Light City, where she cannot assert herself with her girlfriend Karla. She says, “if Karla and I tried kissing on the streets of Eleven Light City I guess we’d be arrested, beat up, or sent to juvenile detention” (L. Beasley 2017, p. 116).

The cities of the southern United States, as represented in the corpus, are conservative. As a result, the expression of gender and sexuality in these cities, is strictly in line with the ideology of heteronormativity. Besides, in these southern cities, women are marginalized because of patriarchy. Therefore, unable to express their gender identity in their hometowns, Linny and Onnie decide to head north, in search of freedom and above all, an environment conducive to the expression of their gender and lesbian identity.

3. The North: An Eldorado of Freedom and Self-Assertion

The northern part of the United States has always appeared in literature as a safe place for marginalized populations. For example, as slavery raged in the cities of the South, the slaves who managed to escape headed for the cities of the North in search of a better life. For E. Bonacich (1975, p. 612), “slavery (...) had an impact on states in the North where it had no chance of being reinstated. Abolition had been achieved decades earlier in this region”. The

fact that the North of the United States had abolished slavery before the South is one of the reasons why slaves were attracted to this destination. Among the slaves who fled to the North, some became fervent activists for the abolition of slavery in the South and throughout the United States. We can mention the famous Harriet Tubman, who was a fierce activist against the abolition of black slavery as well as a feminist and anti-racist activist.

It was the same during the Great Migration, when freed slaves headed north to work in factories and other industries. As E. Bonacich (1975, p. 623) says, “northern capitalists (...) would support their immigration as a source of cheap labor which could be used to undermine militant white unions”. This excerpt shows that cities in the North had a diversified economy and experienced industrialization before those in the South, which were more focused on plantations. In *Descendants of Hagar*, the blacks who live in Zion are looking for a new work experience, they want to head north to take advantage of the job opportunities that are abundant there. Worried about the looming labor shortage in the South, Hunter Beaumont, a white descendant of a slaveholding family, tries to dissuade them. He says, “what you leaving for? Got good job here. Got your family here. Most of you in Zion get your own land. Why would you give up everything to go up north?” (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 382). The fact is that, at some point in their history, blacks, now free, wanted access to another kind of employment rather than to languish on the plantations.

In addition to racial issues, blacks have also suffered discrimination based on gender expression and sexual orientation in the conservative American South. This is also a factor driving them to migrate north.

In *Something Better than Home*, Onnie is tired of being marginalized in Eleven Light City because of her lifestyle. Consequently, she decides to move to California. She says on this purpose, “call me a fool or a failure, but I wanted my freedom” (L. Beasley 2017, p. 20), “I’d been to California and had seen gay folks living out in the open” (L. Beasley 2017, p. 219). During her stay in California, she even attended a “lesbian club” (L. Beasley 2017, p. 121). The fact that there is a lesbian club in California is akin to what J. E. Muñoz (1999, p. 4) calls disidentification. He explains that

Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majority public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.

This survival strategy enables people whose expression of gender and sexuality clashes with societal norms to have their own place of expression, right in the heart of the city. For R. Aldrich, (2004, p. 1721) “cities have provided venues where men who have sex with men (and women who have sex with women) can meet: pubs and clubs, cafés and cabarets”. It should be noted that the well-documented Stonewall riot in Greenwich Village, New York, in 1969 was the beginning of a fierce struggle for LGBTQ+’s (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+) inclusion. Yet, *Something Better than Home* describes the period of the 1970s, which marks the peak of the LGBTQ+ community’s struggle for recognition of their rights. So, when Onnie says she has seen people in California who are openly gay, it may be true, because “large cities are often understood as sites of homosexual freedom, affirmation, and inclusivity and places where same-sex desires can be enacted openly” (L. Johnston and R. Longhurst 2010, p. 105). Thus, the northern United States emerged as a safe place where Onnie could freely express her identity. The resulting reflection is that there are more laws to protect minorities in northern cities, and this is perceptible in the fact that they are allowed to create spaces for them, like clubs within the city of California.

Likewise in *Descendants of Hagar*, Linny has decided to “leave Zion soon” (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 327) and move to New York with her lover Coley. Actually, Coley says blacks are free in New York, and Linny felt the need to leave Zion and settle there. Coley says “in the North, white folks don’t out right call [black people] a nigga” (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 179), “where I am from, we don’t live in constant fear of being attacked or hung. We have our own newspapers and are actively fighting for our rights. We aren’t bowing to whites. We have Colored police officers patrolling in Harlem” (N. Nicholson 2017, p. 363). New York, which is a northern city, is presented by Coley as a place where blacks are protected by the apparatus of the state and also allowed to make their voices heard and campaign for their rights. Linny’s will, is to follow Coley, with whom she has fallen in love. Besides, she wants to stay in a place where there is less racial pressure compared to Zion. Finally, she hopes to be in a place where she can express her gender identity and sexuality peacefully. Even though it is in the 1910s it is with great hope that Linny wishes to migrate north.

Furthermore, when it comes to women’s rights, in *Something Better than Home*, Miss Pearlman, the new teacher of Eleven Light City, has a mentality that differs from the other

women in this town. She comes from Ohio, a northern American state. Onnie says “Miss Pearlman didn’t believe girls should only wear dresses and skirts like Principal Bradley and her flunkey teachers. Nor did she believe girls could only be teacher and nurses” (L. Beasley 2017, 59). What Miss Pearlman believes is that “civil rights and equal rights are about choices” (L. Beasley 2017, 59). This is testimony that in the north, girls are educated to know their rights, to have dreams and to pursue a professional career. Marriage and childbirth are not the only options in their lives, as is customary in the South. This is what Miss Pearlman tries to pass on to her pupils. Later in the novel, we discover that Onnie now lives in California with her lover Karla. She has graduated from university and is now working for a company. Being in California, she fully expresses her identity without living in the closet, as was the case in the South, in *Eleven Light City*.

Conclusion

This research work was an opportunity for us to address the issue of gender expression in the city as represented in American literature. The study describes the atmosphere that prevailed in southern and northern U.S. cities in the 1910s for *Descendants of Hagar* and the 1970s for *Something Better than Home*. These periods mark, respectively, the period of the Black Codes and that of the demands of feminists and lesbians who joined the Civil Right movement in the struggle for inclusion and respect for their rights.

Based on gender studies and the lived experiences of the main characters Linny and Onnie, it has been shown that the cities of the southern United States, as depicted in these novels and at the time when the actions take place, do not favor their inclusion due to the prevailing conservatism. In a region where conservatism is rampant, it is obvious that individuals who do not meet gender and sexual norms are stigmatized. This is what drives Linny and Onnie to migrate to the north, an area known to be more welcoming to minorities, and the northern cities offer infrastructure such as lesbian clubs that are a sign of homosexuals’ inclusion. What is more, taking into account the periods referred to in the novels, the north is a place where black rights are almost respected.

Eventually, we are not saying that cities in the North are better than those in the South, but we are drawing on a literary context. If today’s southern cities seem to be tolerant of blacks, women and sexual minorities, and supportive of the expression of their gender identity, the fact remains that in previous centuries, it was difficult for these people to live peacefully and

experience freedom in the southern region of the United States. We believe that this is what N. Nicholson and L. Beasley try to show in their novels.

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