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**African American Masculinities in Ann Petry's Oeuvre  
(PhD Dissertation Booklet)**

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## PhD Dissertation Booklet

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## **Summary of the Dissertation**

### **Objectives**

This dissertation investigates fictional writings of Ann Petry, a female African American novelist of the mid-twentieth century, whose representations of African American men/women are usually studied in relation to Richard Wright's protest fiction. It primarily concerns how Petry represents African American masculinities in her fictional works to challenge traditional notions of African American masculinities and subvert stereotypes about them. Petry's contribution to the advancement of mid-century black fiction – especially with regard to her representations of African American masculinities – is underappreciated and overshadowed by her contemporary black male authors. Thus, this aims to highlight Petry's nuanced and sophisticated depictions of African American masculinities beyond the boundaries of the protest novel genre. Petry's studied writings pave the way for a more comprehensive insight into the complexity and diversity of African American men's experiences and serve as a powerful tool for challenging and transforming dominant cultural narratives in the US from the 1940s to the 1960s.

The dissertation argues that Petry transcends the initially restrictive boundaries of protest fiction as established in the man-authored black fiction. The objective of this dissertation is to provide a comprehensive and multilayered assessment of Petry's oeuvre through the contemporary intersectional analysis of her black male characters. I investigate how her black male characters are constantly being constructed at the intersection of race, gender, class, and other social categories. In addition, I read their masculinities in relation to hegemonic masculinity and (black) femininity to exhibit the impediments hindering the way of accomplishing their masculine identities. These challenges range from oppression experienced on a personal level to stereotypes on a social level and systemic barriers on a hierarchical level.

This study seeks to illuminate how Petry redefines the oppressive inclinations imposed on African American men by examining the interplay of race, gender, class and other axes of difference based on the three aforementioned levels. For instance, she subverts negative stereotypes about African American masculinities in her depictions of examples of black men who transcend the socially reinscribed frames and occupy positive positions in society. However, Petry's works alternate between reinforcing and subverting stereotypes in accordance with the (sub)genre of the studied texts. This unresolved debate is considered as a possible way to evaluate her oeuvre and reflect on her time's sociopolitical milieu in this study.

An overarching question on the level of the general project is shifting focus from studying the black female characters to the male ones in Petry's fictional texts. Petry's work is traditionally read as being on the periphery of Richard Wright's naturalist protest school of fiction, which masculinized mid-century black fiction (Ward Jr. 2004; Clark 2013; Miller 2016). This view has been critiqued by focusing on Petry's dynamic representations of female characters, which is still a current debate (Holladay 1996; Eby 2008; Griffin 2013). If so, does the return to male issues mean a conservative return to the old male-oriented focus of the protest novel tradition? This dissertation sets out to argue otherwise by applying an intersectional analysis to Petry's works. This perspective results in a sensitive reconsideration of the deep-rooted male stereotypical positions, as in *The Street*, and a thorough problematization of these positions in other works, as in *The Narrows*. In addition, Petry changes the traditionally male-dominated modes of representation. She disrupts the monolithic idea of black masculinity represented by black male authors vs. black femininity by black female authors. Thereby, she extends her depictions of African American masculinities beyond the dichotomous male vs. female critique. She, instead, constructs the masculine identities of her black male characters according to a progressive feminist initiative.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation implements an intersectional model to study African American masculinities in Petry's works. Analyses of the black male characters are conducted in this dissertation by following an intersectional reading method which primarily includes a two-step strategy of identify-by-explaining, and asking the other question about the categories. The first step identifies the interconnected effect of categories in shaping black masculinities and explains how race is gendered, and classed. It unravels the intersectional process of race, gender, and class and pinpoints how it leads to reinforcing/subverting certain stereotypes about black men. Race is considered the master category in constructing African American masculinities to avoid the infinitive number of intersecting categories. Additionally, this step focuses on the relational nature of African American masculinities; i.e., it helps to measure their masculinity in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Secondly, asking the other question step is utilized to elaborate on the role of categories which may render invisible in the process of constructing the studied masculinities but are of an essential quality in their identity formation.

Race, gender, and class are intersecting concepts that constitute the lived experiences of African American men in Petry's works. This intersection problematizes the construction of African American masculinities. It results in intricate forms of discrimination and marginalization for them on a personal level when other categories enter the picture. Consequently, the masculinity of Petry's black male characters is viewed in reductive and restricted ways and shapes, damaging stereotypes and misconceptions about their abilities and potential as men on a social level. Ultimately, these men face social and economic disadvantages such as poverty and unemployment due to the intersection of their race with other categories on a state level. As men, they fail to accomplish the expected male roles of fatherhood, providing, and protection. In addition, an intersectional perspective paves the way for a more comprehensive appreciation of Petry's representations of African American masculinities. The categories are not analyzed per se as in previous one-dimensional methodologies. Instead, intersectionality perceives how the racism directed against black men is stereotypically gendered. It unravels the gendered dimensions of their race and the racialized aspects of their gender.

## **Structure**

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides a theoretical and methodological background, focusing on how Petry's black male characters are to be analyzed according to the lenses of intersectionality. It explores possible ways of using intersectionality as a method to study Petry's black male characters throughout three sections. The emergence of intersectionality in social theory and a critical reading of its application are covered in the first section. The second section of this chapter focuses on intersectionality as a model to investigate African American masculinities in relation to American hegemonic masculinity by outlining an intersectional reading method. It starts with conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity in masculinity studies and its intersectional nature. A three-step strategy of identifying categories, describing them, and asking the other question about them is adopted to investigate further their interconnected implications with other structures of subordination, inequality, and discrimination. The last section delineates intersectionality as a new trajectory in literary criticism. The section covers the implementation of intersectionality in literary representations of black masculinities in scholarly works. Lastly, it underlines stereotypes as an analytical category to be studied from an intersectional viewpoint.

The second chapter surveys the literary-historical backgrounds of Petry's nuanced representations of African American masculinities. It poses the question of how Petry's representations of black masculinities relate to stereotypical representations of black male characters in protest novels. First, the chapter delineates the tradition of the protest novel in the US literary scene of the 1940s and 1950s and relates Petry's reception to it. Secondly, it discusses Petry's two rarely discussed non-fictional texts on African American masculinities: "Harlem" and "What is Wrong with Negro Men?". They provide insights into Petry's political disposition and non-essentialist understanding of the marginalizing effects of race, gender, and class in demonstrating the psychological complexity of the urban poor with a focus on black men. Thirdly, it foregrounds Petry's white life novel *Country Place* to showcase her representation of white masculinities as a backdrop to her works on black male characters. In other words, representing the novel's white masculine identities as insecure and anxious is to question the traditional ways of defining Petry's fictional black male characters in relation to hegemonic masculinity.

Chapter three discusses how Petry challenges black masculine stereotypes in *The Street* and destabilizes white masculine identities in *Country Place*. The first section peruses Petry's representations of the Mandingo: the most prevalent and oppressive stereotype about black men in US society that encodes African American masculinities as sexually driven in *The Street*. I analyze the Super and Boots Smith in this novel as black men who sexually violate women to make amends for their feelings of marginalized masculinities, in parallel with hegemonic masculinity and black femininity. This section tracks how Petry revisits the Mandingo stereotype and dismantles it as an attempt to show the problems of adopting such an oppressive stereotype by black men. It presents the black male characters' failure in transcending the stereotypical representations of their masculinities despite Petry's unquivering efforts to portray the inevitable forces perpetuating them as sexually driven. The second section foregrounds Petry's white life novel *Country Place* to showcase her representation of white masculinities as a backdrop to her works on black male characters. In other words, representing the novel's white masculine identities as insecure and anxious is to question the traditional ways of defining Petry's fictional black male characters in relation to white masculinities regarded as the norm.

The fourth chapter emphasizes the progressive aspects of Petry's black masculinities in *The Narrows*. It underlines their self-consciousness vis-à-vis their racial affiliations and persistent contention for social reform. These masculinities define their identities in more liberal terms and

embrace less oppressive oppositions in society than the black male characters of Petry's protest fiction. Not all of them succeed in their pursuits, as they remain marginalized by a relentless intersection of their race with other social categories. However, they resist the hierarchical disparities and white hegemonic ideals of masculinity. They are non-assimilationists, refute stereotypes, and exhibit a determined will for social justice. In the first section of this chapter, I start with studying the intersections between the canonical categories of race, gender, and class in constituting the novel's main character as a politically progressive black man. Then, the second section shifts the focus to investigate the role of the less discussed intersectionalities, namely, age, ability, and sexuality, to showcase a different range of impediments the black male characters of Petry's novel face. At the same time, they exemplify manifold, unsettled, and fluid black masculinities. They transcend the overshadowing notion that white hegemonic masculinity is the only available role model for black male subjectivity.

Chapter five analyzes a selection of Petry's short fiction from *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* in accordance with Petry's project of refining portrayals of African American masculinities. The chapter peruses how Petry reforms black masculine rage and adds nuances to her representations of black male characters. The first section of the chapter reads Johnson in "Like a Winding Sheet" and William Jones in "In Darkness and Confusion as black men who perform violence and practice it as a self-defense mechanism to conceal their feelings of masculine marginalization. While "Solo on the Drums" and "The New Mirror" present less to non-violent black men. These short stories underline new aspects of Petry's portrayals of African American masculinities regarding their middle-class affiliation and privilege. More significantly, they contribute to Petry's varied and multifaceted constructions of black men and accentuate her reliance on African oral traditions and (jazz) music traditions.

## Results

This dissertation has started out to investigate the representation of African American masculinities in Petry's oeuvre, problematizing major critical conventions that position Petry's oeuvre as naturalist protest fiction. The dissertation has set about to apply the method of intersectionality for the analysis of Petry's African American male characters as the critical lens through which the social positionings of her male characters can be re-examined. The dissertation has argued that Petry represents African American masculinities as multilayered and complex to



contest traditional conceptualizations of African American masculinities. Along with challenging white role models for black masculine identities, the dissertation has examined how Petry subverts stereotypes about this group of masculinities.

The dissertation formulates new considerations about Petry's position in the canon of African American literature. The first step towards a more comprehensive and inclusive evaluation of Petry is to study her beyond the reductive labels of protest genre and native daughter to Richard Wright. Secondly, her most anthologized and critically-acclaimed works, such as "Like a Winding Sheet" and *The Street*, do not represent her entire body of work. They limit the interpretation of her progressive aesthetics, her experiments with innovative styles of writing fiction in *Country Place* and delineating black masculine identities in non-essentialist methods in *The Narrows*, and selected short stories from *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*. Petry's nuanced portrayal of black masculinities opens up unprecedented ways of unraveling their stereotypical representation as an intersection of race, gender, and class.

I have argued that Petry's works transcend the restricted latitude of protest fiction, which primarily revolves around the victimization of a single protagonist and society's inflicted adversarial atrocities upon this character. Instead, Petry populates her stories with various characters, introducing manifold narrative perspectives and her characters – major and minor – are reciprocally essential to the development of the plot. Thus, Petry's fictional texts are more modernist and in the tradition of Harlem writers in their multiple and interwoven storylines than that of the protest school. As argued in the dissertation – based on other critics' readings – Petry's projection of blackness as multilayered, not singularly-layered, pioneers a tradition carried on by writers such as James Baldwin, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison.

The dissertation has addressed a fundamental question about Petry's reception in literary history and her position in American letters. Petry's work is traditionally read as being on the margin of Wright's naturalist project with a focus on her dynamic representations of black female characters in recent criticism. Shifting the focus to male issues runs the risk of a conservative old male focus in early critical reception. However, this study has delineated a sensitive reconsideration of the dominant male stereotypical positions as in the case of the Mandingo, from an intersectional perspective. The dissertation has exhibited how Petry's black male characters offer versions of protest fiction stereotypes as in her early fiction, not yet far removed but later fully problematized. For instance, the Super's age and regionalism intersecting with his race in *The*

*Street* write him off the Mandingo stereotype. More radical examples surface in *The Narrows*: Weak Knees defines his black masculinity more liberatingly despite his conspicuous disability. He refuses to assimilate with American hegemonic masculinity as an ideal and chooses more traditionally feminine roles to construct his masculinity.

An intersectional reading of Petry's representations of African American masculinities has accentuated a subversive potential dimension, not fully grasped in the previous scholarship on her oeuvre. This subversive potential is showcased in the ways she redefines black men against the dehumanizing matrix of their race, gender, class, age, ability and sexuality in American society. She empowers them within the same matrix as the intersection of these categories helps them move beyond hegemony-dominated and reductive configurations of their masculine identities. Petry delineates gender in her portrayals of black male characters in non-essentialist attributes and abandons the masculinist style of protest fiction. She focuses on pinpointing the individualistic side and shared social behaviors of her male protagonists in their black communities.

This dissertation has expanded the scope of critical attention to Petry's work in journalism, non-fiction, and the white life novel in chapter two. It has inspected two of her non-fictional pieces and a novel featuring central white characters. Firstly, her journalistic practices are reflected in her distinctive consideration of details in describing specific loci, events and characters. Her experience as a reporter in journals like *Amsterdam News* and *People's Voice* contributed to developing her skill as an exceptionally observant writer and adopting a travesty of characters of different colors, classes, ages, willpowers, propensities, and desires in her diverse writing styles. As shown in chapter two, a considerable part of Petry's fiction is grounded in the stories she covered as a newspaper reporter: she fictionalizes the story of the Harlem riots of 1943 in her 1947 short story "In Darkness and Confusion". *The Street's* account of Lutie Johnson and her son Bub documents her firsthand experience with stories about children left alone at home while their (single) mothers had to work. Petry's complex and lifelike representations of her black characters – including men – can be linked to her job as a reporter who directly connected with Harlemites and their debilitating living conditions for years.

Petry's reliance on oral storytelling and jazz music elements knotted into her narratives in novels and short stories have also been discussed in the dissertation. Oral traditions and black culture with roots in Africa function as a site of contestation and subversion of the patterns of the dominant systems for black men and women. The intervention of African (American) oral tradition

– as in familial modes of storytelling and music – and multiple characters and their viewpoints in narrative distinguishes Petry’s writing style from that of her male contemporaries. Her characters’ reliance on oral traditions and music in the postbellum urban North can be juxtaposed with the folk beliefs and blues African American people embraced in the dehumanizing circumstances of the antebellum South. Investing in this technique indicates a subversive element as it provides the characters with a remedial potential to overcome their debilitating life conditions. Petry’s deployment of family narratives and African American oral traditions, as in “The New Mirror,” and other black forms of expressions, such as jazz music, as in “Solo on the Drums,” reinforces the omnipresence of Harlem Renaissance aesthetics and legacy in her works.

This dissertation has pointed out how Petry’s black male characters are not confined to the pathological presumptions about black men as aggressive, violent, criminals, and rapists. Petry does not represent them as solely tragic and desperate figures whose only access to their humanity is through enacting violence on others. She demonstrates them as something more than the mainstream stereotypes and provides insightful elaborations about their potential for social reform. These masculinities display an interdependence and spiritual connection they aspire to accomplish with their families and communities. The aspects of gender egalitarianism and fatherhood are covered in her process of constructing African American masculinities, such as in her short fiction. Petry plays a role in raising awareness about the negative influence of adopting stereotypes and emphasizing social and political consciousness leading to the advancement of the black community.

Reading Petry’s works beyond her marginalized position in relation to other black male writers of protest fiction can be supported by her discerning agenda of renouncing the intersectional effect of racial discrimination with classism and the essentialist and patriarchal dimensions of the gender roles as exemplified in the studied texts of this dissertation. It can be inferred that Petry’s agenda anticipated the 1960s black nationalist movements reinforcing her political disposition to combat the debilitating effect of race, gender and class in her oeuvre.

Petry’s work has started to gain more critical attention posthumously, and several important books are dedicated to scrutinizing her literary legacy (Ervin 1993; Holladay 1996; Lubin 2007; Clark 2013; Griffin 2013). The Library of America published two of her novels and three non-fictional pieces in an edited volume by Farah Jasmine Griffin in 2019, indicating a modern and growing interest in Petry’s works. This study aspires to contribute to locating Petry on the map of

African American letters and enlisting her as a representative of the black novel written during the mid-twentieth century. Petry embodies a black female author whose unique perspective on African American novelistic practice and sociopolitical sensibility slowly prevails throughout the twentieth century. Her oeuvre continues to open new horizons for the next generation of (black) writers to follow and scholars to ponder.

## Publications

- Abdullah, Hogar Najm, 2022. "Raceless or Race-Inflicted? Insecure and Anxious White Masculinities in Ann Petry's *Country Place*." *Acta Philologica*, 58: 93-106. DOI: 10.7311/ACTA.58.2022.9.
- Abdullah, Hogar Najm. 2021. "Review of The Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature by Jean-Christophe Cloutier." *Americana e-Journal in Hungary*, XVII (1): <https://americanajournal.hu/vol17no1/abdullah-rev-cloutier>.
- Abdullah, Hogar Najm. 2021. "Review of Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality by Jennifer C. Nash." *Americana e-Journal in Hungary*, XVII (1): <https://americanajournal.hu/vol17no1/abdullah-rev-nash>.
- Abdullah, Hogar Najm. 2021. "'Brutalized' Black Men: The Performance of Intersectionality in Ann Petry's *The Narrows*." *BAS, A Journal of Romanian Society of English and American Studies* XXVII: 221-231.
- Abdullah, Hogar Najm. 2021. "Free Slaves and Enslaved Free: Toni Morrison's Chiastic Fable of Freedom in *A Mercy*." In *Essays in English and American Studies: Students and Supervisors*, edited by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács, 35 -43. Szeged: JATE Press.
- Abdullah, Hogar Najm. 2021. "Buried within Sites and Sediments: The Relationship of Memory and Place in Georges Perec's *W or The Memory of Childhood* and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*." *Journal of Duhok University* (24)1: 1-8. <https://journal.uod.ac/index.php/uodjournal/article/view/1143/834>.
- Abdullah, Hogar Najm. 2020. "Review of Henry James' *Travel: Fiction and Non-Fiction* ed. by Mirosława Buchholtz." *European journal of American studies (European Association for American Studies)*. December 18, 2020. <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/16637>.

## Conferences

- August 29 – 31, 2022. The ESSE-16 Conference: The ESSE Doctoral Symposium. Mainz, Germany. (Presenter). Constructing African American Masculinities in Ann Petry's Oeuvre.
- June 14 – 16, 2022. Interdisciplinary Conference on Men and Masculinities, University of Washington Tacoma, USA. (Presenter). An Intersectional Perspective of African American Masculinities in Ann Petry's Fiction.
- May 12 – 14, 2022. BAS 31 Conference, University of Timisoara, Romania. (Presenter). Relocating Ann Petry in the Mid-twentieth Century African American Fiction.
- March 21 – 25, 2022. Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA) Conference, Heidelberg, Germany. (Presenter). Constructing African American Masculinities in Ann Petry's Oeuvre: An Intersectional Perspective.

- January 27 – 29, 2022. HUSSE 15 Conference, Budapest, Hungary. (Presenter). Sexuality, Ability and Age: The Role of Neglected Intersectionalities in Constructing African American Masculinities in Ann Petry's Novels.
- March 19th, 2021. Cultural Texts and Contexts in The English-Speaking World (vii) Conference, University of Oradea, Romania. (Presenter). 1950s Black Masculinity's Dilemmas of (In)Visibility in Ann Petry's *The Narrows* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.
- May 14 – 16, 2020. BAS 30 Conference, University of Timisoara, Romania. (Presenter). "Brutalized" Black Men: The Performance of Intersectionality in Ann Petry's *The Narrows*.

### **Teaching Practice**

February – June, 2021

Co-taught the seminar "Slavery and Social Injustice in African American Literature" to BA students at University of Szeged.