

Excavating Mecca: Gwendolyn Brooks' s Spatial Sensitivity*

Kim, Eui Young
Associate Professor, Inha University*

[Abstract]

This essay explores Gwendolyn Brooks's reconstruction of the Mecca flats in her long poem "In the Mecca." It seeks to supplement previous readings that emphasized the symbolic and metaphorical dimensions of the poem by examining Brooks's accurate rendition of the Mecca as a built environment. This shift in focus is achieved by reading "In the Mecca" along Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs suggests that the common areas of high-rise buildings are interior streets. The safety of such areas depends on surveillance provided by the residents, something that the Mecca lacks. Pepita's disappearance goes unnoticed, and the fruitless search for the girl exposes how the design of the Mecca has resulted in subjective withdrawal of its residents. After exploring both the failed promises and fundamental flaws of the architectural logic behind the Mecca, Brooks notes that the demolition of the Mecca in real life left untouched the way space is organized in the ghetto. The ending calls for an overcoming of the linear and symmetrical aesthetic of architectural modernism by upholding an alternative, uneven approach to space.

* This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2019S1A5A2A01035050).

Key Words: Gwendolyn Brooks, “In the Mecca,” the ghetto, urban planning, architectural modernism

I . Introduction

Gwendolyn Brooks’s long poem “In the Mecca” was published in 1968 as the first half of her eponymous collection of poems *In the Mecca*. On the one hand, the title initiates the religious theme of sacrifice and redemption that runs throughout the poem’s 807 lines. Mecca is the name of the holy city of Islam, the birthplace of the prophet. On the other hand, the name has a wider, more secular usage as the center of activity or interest that is not always but often commercial. In addition to the contradictory pull of the sacred and the secular embedded in the word, the Mecca is also the name of a historical building in Chicago. The Mecca flats opened in 1892 as luxurious apartments for the middle class. A huge architectural structure, the four-story building was a block long and a block wide with ninety-eight units. It was one of the first residential apartments to incorporate an interior courtyard and one of the very few that adopted the experimental feature of interior atria. The name of the building clearly promotes the idea that this is the mecca of apartment living, a relatively new phenomenon at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite such high hopes, the Mecca was located too closely to Bronzeville, the black neighborhood in Chicago, and was engulfed by the ghetto during the depression years. By 1938, the Mecca was subdivided into 178 units, and it is estimated that it housed more than a thousand tenants. The building was razed in 1952 as a part of the urban renewal efforts of the adjacent institution, the Illinois Institute of Technology.

Critics have pointed out that Brooks’s Mecca is “a perceptible metaphor as well

as a symbol” (Taylor 128). In the poem, the Mecca building “stands in synecdochally for the entirety” of Bronzeville and ultimately “serves as a cross-section of a black nation” (Wheeler 107). Brooks’s ability to endow the Mecca with so much “historical, metaphorical, cultural, and political weight” testifies to the literary achievement of this text (Clarke 45). Yet this emphasis on the metaphorical and symbolic meaning of the Mecca has drawn scholarly attention away from Brooks’s interest in the materiality of the building. This latter aspect of “In the Mecca” needs to be established firmly at the beginning of this discussion. One needs not look far, for the opening pages perform a transition from the symbolic to the material on the threshold of the Mecca.

The opening of the poem substantiates Brooks’s archaeological approach to the building. When the title page of the volume *In the Mecca* is flipped, Brooks’s dedication appears on the verso page. The book is dedicated to four “educators extraordinaire”: Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, and Mike Alexandroff (402).¹ On the recto page, the title of the poem “IN THE MECCA” appears (403). It is a textual *déjà vu*, since the poem has the same title as the book, yet typography marks the differential status of the two titles. When this page is turned, on the verso page are four epigraphs. Brooks presents four quotations, reports from people who have seen or lived in the building.² On the recto page appears a tribute to the students she met in her poetry workshop. When the page is turned yet again with the expectation of finally seeing the poem, the readers encounter one final epigraph on the verso page. Then the poem proper begins on the recto page. The Mecca, that is, is buried under layers of text. Brooks requires her readers to carefully work through each layer as if excavating the site where the Mecca once stood. Instead of removing dirt, the readers lift each page of text. This action of flipping the page is nonetheless a physical activity that promises to reveal to us the Mecca as

a once material, built environment.

The poem delivers on the promise. When we reach the Mecca, we enter the building with one of its residents as she comes home from work. The poem announces, “S. Smith is Mrs. Sallie” (407). She has just entered the building and checks her mailbox where her name is inscribed as “S. Smith.” Content-wise, this is a somewhat plain statement of fact. Formally, however, this line salvages the inscription from the ruins of the Mecca as an archeologist would recover some artifact from an excavation site. By presenting “S. Smith” in an objectivist manner, the poem establishes at the threshold of the Mecca that it will aspire to not only represent but also present the material dimension of the building.³⁾ This is further corroborated by the sharp attention Brooks pays to how space is organized in the edifice: “Mrs. Sallie / hies home to Mecca, hies to marvelous rest; / ascends the sick and influential stair” (407). Mrs. Sallie has entered the building, but she is not home. To get home, she needs to mount the stairs because her apartment is on the fourth floor. It takes Mrs. Sallie three pages to reach the top floor, at which point the readers encounter this two-line stanza:

A boy breaks glass and Mrs. Sallie
rises to the final and fourth floor. (410)

The sound of breaking glass and the visible brevity of the stanza jerk the poem away from Mrs. Sallie’s musings back to the physical environment. What needs to be noted here is the care with which Brooks weaves a sense of space into the poem. At the entrance, one sees the rows of mailboxes. The building has four floors and residents use the stairs and corridors to navigate the massive structure. This common area is defined by disorder as indicated by the sound of breaking glass. Indeed, Brooks is upfront about the common areas of the Mecca; she notes from the start

that the stairs are “sick and influential.”

Once this aspect of the poem is noted, it becomes necessary to ask why Brooks devotes so much attention to the architectural features of the Mecca. Some critics have argued that the poem is a case of counter-memory, an act of rewriting the history of the building and intervening in the way we remember the lives of the Meccans and, by extension, African American Chicagoans of the early twentieth century (Doreski 128-29, Lowney 4-6, Rinner 156-58). This argument is strengthened by the fact that “In the Mecca” was published in 1968, more than fifteen years after the demolition of the building. The epigraph set apart on the verso page preceding the poem states, “Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise” (406). This biblical sounding epigraph establishes with its past tense that the Mecca is no more and that the poem is an act of retrospective reconstruction.⁴ Critics have emphasized that the Mecca was vilified as the symbol of urban decline as Chicago pushed toward its demolition in the late forties and early fifties. There was significant discursive damage inflicted by this media campaign, and redressing this damage was undoubtedly one of the many concerns that drove Brooks to compose this poem.

Although such critical focus on the revisionist work performed by “In the Mecca” explains in part why Brooks returns to the now-demolished building, it does not engage with the poem’s interest in representing space as it was lived and experienced in the Mecca. This essay provides an alternate focus by highlighting Brooks’s sociological insight into the spatial arrangement of the ghetto. Critics who read the poem as counter-memory tend to align sociology with the media campaign for the demolition of the Mecca. The following remark from John Lowney’s article is exemplary: “[Brooks’s] polyvocal reconstruction of the Mecca counters reductively racist sociological narratives of urban decline” (6). This binarism forgets or erases the fact that the years between the demolition of the Mecca and the publication of “In

the Mecca” saw, among other things, the arrival of Jane Jacobs’s landmark study of the city, *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities*. In this essay, I read “In the Mecca” along Jacob’s study to foreground Brooks’s sensitivity to and critique of the built urban environment in which the Meccans found themselves. The points of intersection between the two texts are multiple, which testify to the empirical acumen of the poet and the nuanced theorization of the urbanist. What follows, therefore, is not a mechanical application of concepts drawn from Jacobs to the poem. Rather, I hope to demonstrate how Brooks incorporates sociological analysis in literary writing and how this propels her poem into regions that often overlap with Jacob’s analysis.

II. Interior Streets

In some ways “In the Mecca” is reminiscent of Brooks’s earlier work by the title *A Street in Bronzeville*. *A Street in Bronzeville* is a collection of short poems depicting numerous inhabitants of Bronzeville. Because “In the Mecca” also depicts the inner thoughts of over fifty inhabitants of the massive building, itself a part of Bronzeville, both works similarly encapsulate the human multitude inhabiting a place.⁵⁾ Yet there is a crucial difference between the two texts: the earlier work is a group of short poems, whereas “In the Mecca” is one extended poem. “In the Mecca” is driven by the search for a lost child. The poem can be divided into four parts, identifiable by tonal differences: the part leading up to the family’s realization of Pepita’s disappearance, the family’s frenetic search for Pepita, the official search conducted by the police, and the final revelation of her death. At the center of the long poem is the issue of neighborhood safety.

What makes certain areas of the city safe and others unsafe? This is a question

explored by Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Published in 1961, Jacobs's work singlehandedly changed the way scholars and planners understood the city. One of her main contributions related to her theorization of sidewalk safety—how the constant presence of eyes upon the street ensured that the streets are safe. As she elaborates this point, Jacobs makes the important observation that the corridors and common areas of high-rise public housing projects are interior streets. “They are,” she explains, “streets piled up in the sky in order to eliminate streets on the ground” (42). This is especially true of an architectural structure like the Mecca because the building took up a whole block, meaning that the corridors of the primary wings were a block long. From the viewpoint of safety, these spaces have the odds stacked against them. “These interior streets, although completely accessible to public use, are closed to public view and they thus lack the checks and inhibitions exerted by eye-policed city streets,” writes Jacobs (42-43).

“In the Mecca” is set almost entirely in the common areas of the building. Except for the brief scene of Mrs. Sallie making dinner for her children, most of the action takes place in the corridors and on the stairs. Brooks's interest in this kind of space is unmistakable. In an interview given a year after the publication of the poem, Brooks reveals that she has firsthand knowledge of the building.

Haven't I told that story? Well, when I was nineteen, and had just gotten out of junior college, I went to the Illinois State Employment Service to get a job. They sent me to the Mecca building to a spiritual adviser, and he had a fantastic practice; lucrative. He had us bottling medicine as well as answering letters. Not real medicine, but love charms and stuff like that he called it, and delivered it through the building; that was my introduction to the Mecca building. (*Report* 162)

In relation to the discussion at hand, what needs to be highlighted is the detail that her job was to deliver items “through the building” and “that was [her] introduction to the Mecca.” She never lived there or had close acquaintances living in the building. Rather, she spent most of her time navigating the stairs and corridors, getting a good sense of how the building was structured and how the residents related to those spaces. When Brooks recreates those corridors and stairs in her poem, she is less interested in what they look like or smell like. She emphatically does not take the route of the infamous *Harper’s Magazine* feature. John Bartlow Martin, who visited the Mecca in 1950, writes of his experience in what one might call documentary style: “Inside, a powerful odor assails the visitor at once, musty, heavy, a smell compounded of urine and stale cooking and of age” (87). Then he notices the striking corridors of the Mecca: “It is dark here. Ahead stretches a corridor; it is like a tunnel, it seems endless and it is indeed a block long, running all the way to the Dearborn Street entrance; down its whole length hang only five light bulbs, glowing feebly in the gloom” (87). Unlike Martin, Brooks is much more interested in exploring what causes the lack of eye-policing in these spaces. Inadequate lighting is only part of the story.

To really understand the blindness of the corridors, Brooks examines how the building inflects the lived experience of the residents. The opening section of “In the Mecca” is deceptively peaceful. The pace is unhurried. Mrs. Sallie interacts with four of her neighbors as she rises to the fourth floor. A couple of them she “sees” (407, 408); she “speaks” to one of them (408); and one neighbor “bursts” out of her door and quickly moves out of Mrs. Sallie’s vision (408). Brief or prolonged, any contact with Mrs. Sallie allows the speaker to peep into the interior world of these residents. Brooks devotes one stanza to each of them, but the length of the stanzas is dictated by how long they stay on Mrs. Sallie’s radar. So Hyena, who bursts out of her

apartment, is allotted only four lines, whereas Alfred, whom Mrs. Sallie encounters before the final flight of stairs, is allotted thirty-seven lines. The irregular length of these free-verse stanzas emphasizes the diversity of subjectivities living in the Mecca while simultaneously reflecting the temporal and spatial dimensions of each contact. Once Mrs. Sallie reaches her apartment, she immediately starts to prepare dinner for her children. She prepares a hock of ham, mustard greens, six yams, and cornbread made with water instead of buttermilk. Not only are these the cheapest ingredients, but there is not enough to feed her nine children. When dinner is cooking, Mrs. Sallie finally takes her hat off: "Now Mrs. Sallie / confers her bird-hat to her kitchen table" (410). At this moment, the readers are briefly invited into her mind and they find out to their surprise that she is a lover of beauty. She examines her kitchen critically and thinks, "I want to decorate!" but immediately acquiesces to the constraints of poverty and single-parenthood: "But what is that? A / pomade atop a sewage. An offense. / First comes correctness, *then* embellishment!" (410).⁶ After this peek into the mother's mind, we are introduced to each of her children and their inner worlds. A single stanza is devoted to each, except for the three small boys who are lumped into one stanza because they are hungry and can only think of food.

What interrupts this unhurried pace is, of course, Mrs. Sallie's realization that her youngest is missing.

SUDDENLY, COUNTING NOSES, MRS. SALLIE
SEES NO PEPITA. "WHERE PEPITA BE?"

... Cap, where Pepita? Casey, where Pepita?
Emmett and Melodie Mary, where Pepita?
Briggs, Tennessee, Yvonne, and Thomas Earl,
where may our Pepita be?— (415)

The capital letters, as well as the staccato of the repeated question, mark the abrupt shift in pace. Most heartbreakingly, Mrs. Sallie's question brings back the same answer from each of her children. Like waves, their answers lap at the mother: "*Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er / Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er*" (416). This is the answer that Mrs. Sallie gets from her immediate neighbors as well. Brooks's decision to have all these characters say that they have not "seen" Pepita is significant because it is exactly what will happen in the blind-eyed spaces of the Mecca. No one has seen Pepita, and the discovery of her disappearance is made late in the evening, and even then only by the mother of the child. The peace that was so carefully weaved by Brooks's poetic lines up to this point was the bliss of ignorance, the result of a deferred realization (because nobody saw) of an evil that has already befallen. Compare this situation to an incident that Jacobs narrates in her book.

The incident that attracted my attention was a suppressed struggle going on between a man and a little girl of eight or nine years old. The man seemed to be trying to get the girl to go with him. By turns he was directing a cajoling attention to her, and then assuming an air of nonchalance. The girl was making herself rigid, as children do when they resist, against the wall of one of the tenements across the street.

As I watched from our second-floor window, making up my mind how to intervene if it seemed advisable, I saw it was not going to be necessary. From the butcher shop beneath the tenement had emerged the woman who, with her husband, runs the shop; she was standing within earshot of the man, her arms folded and a look of determination on her face. Joe Cornacchia, who with his sons-in-law keeps the delicatessen, emerged about the same moment and stood solidly to the other side. Several heads poked out of the tenement windows above, one was withdrawn quickly and its owner reappeared a moment later in the doorway behind the man. (38-39)

Jacobs describes many more neighbors appearing at windows and doorways, practically encircling the man. They are determined not to let the girl be dragged off against her will. Jacob's story ends happily—the man turns out to be the girl's father. But Pepita's disappearance, which no one saw, ends differently.

III. An Unfulfilled Promise

While enumerating the necessary qualities of a safe sidewalk, Jacobs mentions the following: "The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers and to insure the safety of both residents and strangers, must be oriented to the street. They cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind" (35). In the case of the Mecca, each door should perform the role of the building. The doors in the Mecca are physically oriented to the long corridors. However, this correct orientation of the doors is undermined by the fact that these are doors and not windows. Behind closed doors, the residents have clearly turned their backs on the corridors and left them blind. Brooks depicts this reality in the third section of "In the Mecca." As the police now conduct the search for Pepita, they pound on each door and are greeted by uncooperative, indifferent, or dissociative occupants. One resident responds, "No, Alfred has not seen Pepita Smith. / But he (who might have been an architect) / can speak of Mecca" (421-22). Another resident is thankful to the point in her response but takes this opportunity to express her disgust of toddlers: "She has not seen / Pepita—'a puny and putrid little child'" (423). But perhaps such expression of disgust is better than what follows: "Mazola / has never known Pepita S. but knows / the strangest thing is when the stretcher goes!—" (423). As far as Mazola is concerned, Pepita has never existed. Mazola, uninvited, begins to speak of her fascination over

dead bodies. After eight stanzas of such erratic responses, the poetic speaker finally intrudes with the question, “How many care, Pepita?” (427). The question is repeated one more time in the succeeding stanza (429).

Critics have celebrated polyvocality—Brooks’s portrayal of the rich and diverse subjectivities of the Meccans—as the chief achievement of this poem (Jones 193, Kukrechtová 459, Lowney 6). Jeni Rinner goes so far as to suggest, “Despite the attention to the architectural history of the Mecca at the outset of the poem, Brooks is interested in the building only in so far as it houses the Mecca residents” (159). The Mecca, however, is not just a backdrop to this human panorama. When placed in situ, these stanzas stand as so many closed doors along the dark and long corridors of the Mecca.⁷⁾ The subjective withdrawal of these residents clearly has made the Mecca more hazardous for young children. In their responses to the police, the residents repeatedly prove that they either do not know Pepita or do not care about her wellbeing. For Brooks, therefore, it matters profoundly that these residents are located in a building where their indifference has disastrous, albeit unintentional, consequences. The end of the search is a cruel extension of Pepita’s invisibility. The search is over but the police officers do not know it because yet another resident of the Mecca denies Pepita.

The murderer of Pepita
looks at the Law unlovably. Jamaican
Edward denies and thrice denies a dealing
of any dimension with Mrs. Sallie’s daughter.
Beneath his cot
a little woman lies in dust with roaches. (433)

Even though the officers do not see her, the poem reveals her body. Flaunting its spatial sensitivity, the poem pinpoints Pepita's precise location within the building—in Jamaica Edward's room, beneath his cot, "in dust with roaches." The Mecca has claimed Pepita's body.

This is not to suggest that Brooks blames the residents for the death of the child. Instead, she takes painstaking effort to demonstrate that the spatial logic of the Mecca is "sick and influential," ordering the way its inhabitants interact with each other and relate to the world in general. Intersubjective communication is scarce in the Mecca. Despite the rich interiority of each inhabitant—many of them hurting from the pain inflicted by a racist society—these interior worlds are locked into the stanza or shut into each room. Interaction is often dangerous and full of menace, as evidenced by their stories of betrayal, violence, and exploitation. The poem, in other words, sets up a dialectic between the spatial compartmentalization of the Mecca and the inhabitants' retreat into the self. Some are religious, others live in the past, and still others are seized by desires in all its manifestations. As Cheryl Clark points out, "The modes of narration remain split, which signifies the impossibility of reconciliation inside the Mecca" (45). The form of the poem captures the difficulty of overcoming the dialectic of the subjective and objective realities of the Mecca.

One also needs to bear in mind that "In the Mecca" is followed by a section named "After Mecca" and is therefore not the final destination of Brooks's poetic journey. The poem points to a place beyond the Mecca when one of the residents, a poet figure, announces toward the end:

I hate it.
Yet, murmurs Alfred—
who is lean at the balcony, leaning—
something, something in Mecca

continues to call! Substanceless; yet like mountains,
like rivers and oceans too; and like trees
with wind whistling through them. And steadily
an essential sanity, black and electric,
builds to a reportage and redemption.

A hot estrangement.

A material collapse

that is Construction. (433)

The poem depicts the moment before a radical change. The Mecca, in other words, needs to collapse for “Construction” to begin. Alfred’s positioning in this passage is particularly significant. He is leaning on the balcony, facing the atrium of the Mecca. The two internal atria of the Mecca were a highly unusual design feature. At the center of each primary wing of the Mecca was an enormous skylit atrium. The architectural historian Daniel Bluestone explains the architecture thus: “In each wing a ground-story lobby, stairs and heavily foliated ornamental balconies, cantilevered from the atrium’s walls, provided access to the individual apartments” (384). This is a structure that architects experimented with for a brief span of two years. After only three examples, one of which is the Mecca, Chicago architects decided against the use of internal atrium in residential buildings. They continued to adopt it in shopping malls, office buildings, and hotels, and the design feature is still with us today in such buildings. As Bluestone analyzes, these atria “made a spectacle of the comings and goings of residents, of the concourse of daily human life” (384). It is therefore not an accident that Alfred is positioned at the balcony, leaning into the expansive space of the atrium, as he envisions a post-Meccan world. He not only places himself in the corridor, which opens the possibility of enhanced safety in the future, but he orients himself to the public space that had been available all along to the residents of the Mecca.

Isolation and withdrawal are not an inevitable fate of apartment buildings. Jacobs corroborates this in her discussion of Blenheim Houses, a sixteen-story building. In this particular case, “the corridors were well designed to induce surveillance from within the buildings themselves. Uses other than plain circulation were built into them. They were equipped as play space, and made sufficiently generous to act as narrow porches” (43). This resulted in safe public spaces within the building. At least one design feature of the Mecca held the same promise. Yet this promise was left unfulfilled because, as Bluestone notes, the building “contained two rich but contrary tendencies” (384-85). One tendency was the protection of privacy and the other was the cultivation of gregarious gathering. The first of the two had clearly won the battle over the Mecca. Nevertheless, Brook’s poetic reconstruction of the building preserves the building’s most extraordinary architectural feature.

IV. Odd or Even

The Mecca was indeed demolished in 1952. Why, then, does Brooks call for its collapse in 1968? One way to answer this is to say that the Mecca was not just a building but a way of life or a state of mind, and Brooks is calling her people to a renewed sense of community. This approach, however, once again erases Brooks’s interest in the spatial arrangement of the ghetto. The poem begins with the following invitation to the readers.

Sit where the light corrupts your face.
Mies Van der Rohe retires from grace.
And the fair fables fall. (407)

To anyone familiar with the history of the Mecca, this is a puzzling way to start the poem. The lines imply a connection between Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the Mecca. However, he did not build or design the Mecca. In fact, he is a figure closely associated with the demolition of the building. The Illinois Institute of Technology hired Mies in 1938 to head the institute's Department of Architecture and redesign the campus. Bluestone writes, "Mies, who eventually designed twenty-two buildings for the institute, proposed strikingly modern-styled buildings in brick, glass, and welded steel. Clean, abstract lines and carefully proportioned spaces resonated with the broader agenda of 'cleaning up' the neighborhood" (396). The institute acquired the Mecca in 1941 as a part of their renovation plan; the building was finally demolished in 1952 and in its place Mies's Crown Hall was erected. Nothing could be starker than the contrast between the massive and ornate Mecca and Mies's Crown Hall that looks like a floating glass box flooded with light. Yet Brooks establishes a continuity between the architects of the Mecca and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

Brooks's analysis is corroborated by Jacobs. The introduction of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is devoted to a discussion of what was then the orthodox theory of city planning and city architectural design. Jacobs mentions one main line and one minor line of ancestry. The major influence was the modernist ideal represented by Le Corbusier. But Jacobs also examines another, more minor, strand: the Chicago School aesthetics that started at the Columbian Exposition of 1893. "The Chicago fair," explains Jacobs, "snubbed the exciting modern architecture which had begun to emerge in Chicago and instead dramatized a retrogressive imitation Renaissance style. One heavy, grandiose monument after another was arrayed in the exposition park" (24). The Mecca was designed in 1891 and opened in 1892 as a hotel for the visitors to the Columbian Exposition in the city. It

reflected the architectural style mentioned in Jacob's discussion.

However, Jacobs emphasizes that the clash in styles is only a superficial difference. Both the modernist approach and the Chicago style shared the underlying idea about city planning. The difference in style should not blind us to the shared premises. Crown Hall is thus the reincarnation of the Mecca and a reaffirmation of the ideas that created the Mecca in the first place. The fair fables of architectural modernity have repeatedly failed black Chicagoans; the razing of the Mecca meant the loss of housing for more than thousand Meccans and simply intensified the overcrowded conditions in Bronzeville. After Mecca, the Chicago Housing Authority built predominantly high-rise structures to house African Americans. "In fact, of the nearly 21,000 low-income family apartments built by the CHA from 1955 through 1968, all but about 2,000 were in high-rises," according to the *Chicago Tribune* (Ziamba 12). These high-rise buildings allowed planners and developers to pack even more streets and black bodies into limited and scarce ground space. The removal of the Mecca, therefore, hardly ushered in a change in the spatial arrangement of the ghetto. In a sense, black Chicagoans continued to live "in the Mecca" during the years Brooks worked on her long poem.

Where, then, does the poet locate the possibility of change? The ending of the poem is difficult, almost cryptic. It is also one of the most painful passages in the poem, and critics tend to shun the ending, preferring Alfred's prophetic announcement of the coming of "an essential sanity" as the more satisfactory closure.

She never went to kindergarten.
She never learned that black is not beloved.
Was royalty when poised,
sly, at the A and P's fly-open door.
Will be royalty no more.

“I touch”—she said once—“petals of a rose.
A silky feeling through me goes!”
Her mother will try for roses.

She whose little stomach fought the world had
wiggled, like a robin!
Odd were the little wriggings
and the chopped chirpings oddly rising. (433)

A crippling sense of loss dominates the penultimate stanza. The poem’s invocation of Pepita reveals that she was a fledgling poet—beauty gave her pleasure and she spoke in rhyming couplets. At the same time, she was so young that she had “never learned that black is not beloved.” The sense of wasted possibility is so strong in these lines that reading becomes difficult. The saving grace of the penultimate stanza comes at the end, when Mrs. Sallie’s consciousness re-enters the poem with the determination to try for roses. The funeral has always been a site of community-building for African Americans. As testified by the open-casket funeral of Emmett Till, a Chicago teenager who was brutally killed during a visit to Mississippi in 1955, funerals can turn into a political statement. Mrs. Sallie’s decision to “try for roses” carries the cultural weight of that history and signals the possibility of forging a broader solidarity among the residents of the Mecca.

The poem, however, does not end with the roses. It ends with Pepita. The final stanza is disturbing because it describes the strangling of the child. The poem cuts back in time to her dying moment. In visiting that fatal scene, however, Brooks chooses to focus not so much on violence as on Pepita’s energy. Pepita has “fought the world” and wriggles like a robin. The child is compared to a bird and the sounds that close the poem are “the chopped chirpings oddly rising.” D.H. Melhem suggests that “Pepita’s inviolate spirit, become bird, will not be subdued” (174). The passage

does indeed depict the departure of the spirit from the body, and the bird imagery paradoxically foregrounds both Pepita's physical frailty and her transition into a different state of being. Reinforcing the bird imagery is the final phrase "oddly rising." Brooks deliberately contorts the grammatical construction to end her poem with the word "rising," marking an emergence at the site of destruction. Whatever shape this energy takes in the future, it will have to be "odd," a word that is repeated twice in the final lines. "Odd" flies in the face of Mies's perfectly symmetrical building with the smooth glass walls; "odd" flies in the face of the spatial logic that sought to manage black bodies in the Mecca. Decidedly turning away from such projects of modernity, Brooks embraces unevenness as a positive force that will swerve the course of history into a different direction.

V. Conclusion

This essay attempts to supplement rather than refute previous readings that celebrate Brooks's portrayal of the Meccans. This multivalent long poem captures not only the subjectivities of the inhabitants but also their material conditions. Because Brooks steers clear of a documentary-style reportage, some critics have taken this as a sign of Brooks's greater interest in the interiority of the residents. Yet Brooks's accurate rendition of the Mecca as a lived experience, the precise reflection of the characters' location and movement through the building, as well as the recreation of that experience through the formal deployment of the stanzas, all point to a deep concern for the spatial arrangement of the ghetto. "In the Mecca" ultimately demonstrates Brooks's insight into and critique of the urban development policies that shaped and continued to shape Chicago's Black Belt.

Notes

- 1) The collected works of Gwendolyn Brooks, entitled *Blacks*, includes *In the Mecca* in its entirety. Brooks's poetry is cited from *Blacks* by page number.
- 2) More specifically, they are: John Bartlow Martin, *Harper's Magazine* reporter; Richard "Peanut" Washington, a Blackstone Ranger; Russ Meek, a Chicago political activist; and a Meccan, cited in Martin's article on the Mecca.
- 3) This strategy is reminiscent of Langston Hughes's "Neon Signs" in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. The scope of this article does not allow a comparative study of Hughes's serial poem and Brooks's long poem, but it is important to point out the traces of Hughes in Brooks's poem. For a preliminary study in that direction, see Russell 33-34.
- 4) Cf. Matthew 1:18.
- 5) For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between the two texts, see Wheeler 107.
- 6) The final line is a humorous rendition of "First Fight. Then Fiddle," one of Brooks's earlier sonnets.
- 7) Many critics have remarked that the form of the poem reflects the architectural design of the Mecca. See Clarke 30, Hughes 272, Kukrechtová 460, Rinner 160, and Wheeler 87.

Works Cited

- Bluestone, Daniel. "Chicago's Mecca Flat Blues." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 57.4 (1998): 382-403.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Blacks*. Chicago: Third World, 1987.
- _____. *Report from Part One*. 1972. Detroit: Broadside, 1991.
- Clarke, Cheryl. "*After Mecca*": *Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005.
- Doreski, C. K. *Writing America Black: Race Rhetoric in the Public Sphere*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Hughes, Sheila Hassel. "A Prophet Overheard: A Juxtapositional Reading of Gwendolyn Brooks's 'In the Mecca'." *African American Review* 38.2 (2004): 257-80.
- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. 1961. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Jones, Gayl. "Community and Voice: Gwendolyn Brooks's 'In the Mecca'." *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Ed. Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987. 193-204.
- Kukrechtová, Daniela. "The Death and Life of a Chicago Edifice: Gwendolyn Brooks's 'In the Mecca'." *African American Review* 43.2-3 (2009): 457-72.
- Lowney John. "'A Material Collapse that Is Construction': History and Counter-Memory in Gwendolyn Brooks's *In the Mecca*." *MELUS* 23.3 (1998): 3-20.
- Martin, John Bartlow. "The Strangest Place in Chicago." *Harper's Magazine* Dec. 1950: 86-97.
- Melhem, D.H. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1987.

- Rinner, Jeni. "Gwendolyn Brooks and the Location of Black Identity." *MELUS* 40.4 (2015): 150-72.
- Russell, Mariann. "Langston Hughes as Source for Gwendolyn Brooks." *Langston Hughes Review* 7.1 (1988): 31-34.
- Taylor, Henry. "Gwendolyn Brooks: An Essential Sanity." *Kenyon Review* 13.4 (1991): 115-31.
- Wheeler, Lesley. *The Poetics of Enclosure: American Women Poets from Dickinson to Dove*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2002.
- Ziembra, Stanley. "How Projects Rose to Failure." *Chicago Tribune* 2 Dec 1986, sports final ed., sec. 1: 1+.

국문초록

메카 발굴하기: 그웬돌린 브룩스의 공간적 감수성

김 의 영

단독 / 인하대학교 부교수

본 논문은 그웬돌린 브룩스의 장시 「메카에서」가 시카고의 메카 아파트를 재현하는 방식을 살펴본다. 시인이 메카 아파트의 공간적 특성을 정확하게 반영하는 부분에 주목함으로써 메카의 상징적 의미를 강조해온 선행연구를 보완한다. 기존의 독법으로부터 탈피하기 위해 본 논의에서는 도시이론가 제인 제이콥스가 제공하는 통찰을 활용하여 작품을 분석한다. 문학작품인 「메카에서」와 사회과학서인 『미국 대도시의 죽음과 삶』의 접점을 살펴봄으로써 시인의 공간적 감수성의 정도를 가늠할 수 있기 때문이다. 제이콥스는 고층건물의 공공공간이 건물 내부에 있지만 도시의 보도와 같은 기능을 한다고 주장한다. 이와 같은 공간의 치안은 주민들의 시선이 얼마나 머무느냐에 달렸는데, 바로 이 지점에서 메카 아파트의 취약함이 드러난다. 폐피타가 실종되었으나 그 사실을 아무도 몰랐고, 아이를 찾기 위한 수색은 메카 주민들이 얼마나 극단적으로 내면세계에 함몰되어 있는가를 여실히 드러낸다. 메카 아파트가 지녔던 가능성과 결함을 모두 살핀 시인은 최종적으로 건물의 철거가 계토의 공간논리를 무너뜨리지 못했음을 지적한다. 작품의 결론에서 시인은 모더니즘 건축의 도시계획의 기획을 뛰어넘는, 고르지 않은 공간구성의 필요성을 역설한다.

주제어: 그웬돌린 브룩스, 「메카에서」, 계토, 도시계획, 모더니즘 건축

논문접수일: 2020.01.13

심사완료일: 2020.02.13

게재 확정일: 2020.02.27

이름: 김의영 (부교수)

소속: 인하대학교

주소: 인천광역시 미추홀구 인하로 100 인하대학교 5남115호

이메일: cykim@inha.ac.kr