Article

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Finding a Space to Call Home in Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta*

Abstract: Tayari Jones, one of the more memorable contemporary African American voices, debuted at the beginning of the 20th century with her novel *Leaving Atlanta* (2002). She did not gain notable recognition until the publication of *An American Marriage* (2018) a decade later. Nevertheless, a number of scholars praised her first effort and included it in famous African American critical anthologies as an example of the voice of a new generation. In her debut while she tackles a painful episode in American history, the Atlanta Child Murders, Jones achieves a multivocal child-led narrative that supplies a new perspective on the events, which does not take as a starting point statistics and easy solutions. Tasha, Rodney, and Octavia are left to navigate their oft dangerous and difficult social and private environment as the threat looms over their lives as an 'unspeakable' and invisible presence. Each of them becomes a victim to the spaces that predetermine their existence. The present article evaluates the characters' ability to find a space that they would consider a home in order to reach conclusions about general belonging patterns, coping mechanisms, and available alleys for escape.

Keywords: *belonging; space; race; Tayari Jones; Leaving Atlanta; Atlanta Child Murders; contemporary African American literature; violence.*

University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.14.2.2
https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/ ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)
Volume 14 | Issue 2 | 2024 |
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The American author Tayari Jones truly started gaining recognition at the beginning of the 2020s with the publication of her novel about incarceration, *An American Marriage* (2018). Prior to this success, her name appeared in broader overviews of Southern literature and the literature produced by young black female writers, but was not present in the entire variety of contemporary companions and anthologies to African American literature. She herself confesses in a recent interview: "… it took a long time for my career to take hold. I mean, it wasn't until *An American Marriage* that I was even reviewed in the *New York Times*" (Jones, "The Great American" 65). In a market saturated with countless books and publishing houses vying for attention and at a time when black women do not approach writing and publishing as an activity of a sisterhood (the way they did in the second half of the 20th century) – instead each author ensures their own survival – it is difficult to establish oneself as a serious and original voice. Jones even considered changing vocations and letting go of her writerly pursuits. Having said that, early in her career the author demonstrates in her debut novel *Leaving Atlanta* (2002) that she is in a possession of an insightful and refreshing perspective fueled by her intimate knowledge of the South, and more specifically Atlanta. In all works to follow, she would continue to probe the depths of this conflicting place and the implications it carries for the often struggling black community. Through her child-inflected narratives, *Leaving Atlanta*, her take on the Atlanta Child Murders, adds another chapter to the experience of loss and fear sprung by the regional and national tragedy. The present paper attempts to trace how said experience influences ideas about and possibilities of spaces one may define as a home to uncover belonging patterns, coping mechanisms and opportunities for escape.

On a broader scale, the South as a space has usually been perceived as a rural region where characters return to authenticate their selves and heal through communal practices in African American literature and in commonly voiced opinions. Such an understanding of the area as a primary home comes out of an agricultural past during which slaves populated plantations mentally and physically picking cotton or working the land. Later developments during the post-war period would lead to several sizable migrations North, but would still leave the impression that the South was always there waiting for African Americans to come home. From such a vantage point then, as Trudier Harris notes, "with her solid base in Atlanta, Jones makes clear that the younger generation of African American writers echoes its elders in looking to the troublesome South for a large part of its imaginative inspiration" (Harris, "History as fact" 474). While that may be true, it is fairly evident that Tayari Jones does not fit neatly into the boundaries of the typical representation of Southern life. Her chosen setting is increasingly urban by all intents and purposes, which gives rise to anxiety of belonging. On the topic she has said, "I think it's worth saying that stories from the urban South are still Southern stories ... In writing about Atlanta, I have had to confront stereotypes about Southern life, and there are people who don't think that you can be Southern and a city person at the same time" (Jones, "The Great American" 65). Jones supplies the point of view of the urban south, an area that seems absent from the popular imagination.

However, she does not only look back at past traumatic events to unveil information not present in history books, but also to inspire a more positive, nondiscriminatory tomorrow. As Terrence Tucker explains, "in works by Tayari Jones and Jesmyn Ward, the authors demand their readers confront the South's Jim Crow past in order to conceive of an inclusive, antiracist future" (Tucker 221-2). The past of the South in Jones's novels appears to be the key to the present and the future. The depiction of the experience of the Atlanta Child Murders not only scrutinizes the murders themselves, but also how the media utilizes and polices black bodies and the repercussions to belonging to a certain class or region as aspects, which seem more current than ever before.

If we look at the hard facts of the string of murders, then twenty-eight (twenty-six of them male and two female) young and old members of the African American community were abducted and killed in the span of three years. Wayne Williams was arrested and convicted of two of the murders (both of them adults). Many people, those in the justice system included, considered the case closed with the end of Williams' trial even though the prosecution could not prove that he was responsible for the rest of the homicides. Such a short clinical overview is not capable of reconstructing the overwhelming fear ruling over the South at the end of the 1970s, when new victims would be added to the list of deceased shown on television. One of the aims of Jones's novel is to showcase how the tragedy swept the inside of all African American homes and how they were made to change their routines and lifestyles to save themselves of this invisible threat. According to Trudier Harris "Jones takes horror and "domesticates" it, in that she brings it front and center to the children in a fifth-grade class whose home lives are in turmoil even as they endure the snatchings and murders of two of their classmates" (Harris, "Untangling History" 273). Jones transforms a list of names into a constant shadow over the lives of her three main characters. Tasha's desire for social acceptance, Rodney's abusive family environment and Octavia's lonely survival are overshadowed by an even greater danger to their existence and to the frivolity of childhood. Presenting the story from the perspective of three different children constructing their own specific narratives is quite a feat – critics have been most impressed by Rodney's chapter where the narrative is represented from a second-person point of view which signals Rodney's detachment – and is not an unintentional choice. In an interview, Jones has argued that:

For most people, children just don't really have personhood. When a child is killed, people say how hard it must have been for the mother, or they wonder what that child would have been like as an adult. The thinking is that what is lost is the adult that child would have eventually become. Not that child herself. (Grandt 74)

In other words, children are not usually written as fully-fledged individuals who have agency. Their deaths affect parents and are believed to deter the transition from child to adult. Jones seems to imply that the child's perspective remains unvoiced in an invisible space behind adult opinions and grief. By moving school girls and boys at the forefront she provides them with a voice and puts into question their experience of time and place amidst the crisis of the community.

While the murders take place, children in the school nearby still have to attend

regularly and participate in all their usual activities. Their school as their second home seems unable to provide them with a safe environment, where they can feel appreciated and satisfied. Most of the characters suffer social exclusion or are unsettled by the fact that they underperform academically. Even though many of them feel threatened and confused due to the increasing number of snatchings, they cannot help caring about low-scale issues and desires – including how to become part of popular cliques, how to talk to the person they like, whether they would be invited to social events, whether they have completed their projects on time and where they would sit during lunch hour. In Tasha's chapter, for example, the heroine seems obsessed with getting an invitation to a specific slumber party. "For the past two weeks, Tasha had eavesdropped as Monica and Forsythia had revised the guest list at lunchtime, scratching off names and adding others. Tasha tried not to appear anxious as Monica shuffled the envelopes … It was possible that one of the fancy envelopes had her name on it" (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 53). In the end, Tasha does not get an invitation to the fated gathering, which never takes place due to a lack of parental supervision, but that does not stop her from her pursuits of popularity. She is unable to distance herself from desire to fit in and be part of Monica's group, which makes her appear desperate for attention or cold-hearted at times. She tells Jashante that she would rather he be taken by the child murderer than become her partner in the relays because she does not want to ruin her expensive coat and she feels, to an extent, that he would embarrass her in front of her schoolmates. "I hope you die. I hope the man snatches you and … "I hope you get asphyxiated and when they find you you are going to be …" What was the other word? Decomposed" (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 45). Her hurtful words tellingly utilize the language of the media to define her awkwardness. She has difficulty pronouncing them because she has never heard them in a context different from the one created by the narrative of media reports. Since she has had nobody to have a conversation with about the tragedy, she transfers the fear and ineptitude she feels onto a very much standard exchange in school. According to Courtney Thorsson, the novel "represents a world in which social rejection and the threat of murder both have weight. The novel treats this condition as simultaneously devastating and utterly ordinary" (Thorsson 325). In other words, children's day-to-day accomplishments and disappointments, related to their social environment, are no less important to them than the constant larger homicidal threat. Life is not put on hold because there is somebody who is dispensing with the future of the community. Children struggle to make sense of their reality and are prone to inevitably connect it to the greater danger facing all of them. In some cases in order to retain some sense of normality nobody explains to children in the school what happens around them – the exception being Officer Brown's visit and his incomplete version of the truth. When Rodney disappears, his chair is removed from the room and teachers pretend that he did not exist in the same space a week ago. Octavia ponders the meaning behind his non-existence. "What was he [the teacher] going to do when he got to Rodney? Was somebody going to say, "Dead"? Or should I say, "Absent"? Somebody should stand up and say, "Missing, like his chair!"" (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 172). Octavia ponders how to voice out lack and

abandon. Unable to conceptualize loss, children internalize their feelings and focus on ordinary items like the chair or events like the slumber party to understand or escape the broader reality. The school does not provide them with the tools that would ensure their attainment of belonging.

Perhaps the lunchroom is the space in the school, which most clearly indicates different degrees of acceptance and of power distribution. The spot a student occupies signifies their general position in the hierarchy of their small replica of a social ladder. The table Octavia habitually sits on seems to carry an additional meaning of banishment. Whenever somebody falls out of favor with the popular kids, they resort to this specific space in the lunchroom. When Tasha wounds Jashante she has no other place to occupy and ends up entering this space of exclusion. “If she sat with Octavia today, she could never eat with Monica and Forsythia again. Unpopularity was terribly contagious” (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 48). Unpopularity is likened to a chronic disease one cannot heal from once they catch it and the table appears to be essential to going down with something. As a marked space of meaning Octavia’s lunch table may be understood as an example of what Michel Foucault defined as heterotopia. Foucault believes that heterotopias are types of places that “are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (Foucault 24). He describes them according to several principles: they are present in all existent cultures, each society can make them function in a different way, a single place may harbor a number of alternative spaces, they are connected with time, they are not freely accessible to everybody, and they are related to all remaining space. In *Leaving Atlanta*, Octavia’s lunch table as an outsider place is part of the larger social space of the lunchroom, but it is not available to all as it leads to banishment and ostracism. The act of sitting down on it may be viewed as a very particular ritual. This becomes obvious when Rodney is tempted to spend some time with Octavia at lunch, but eventually opts not to for fear of being mocked. In his words, “today you don’t want to sit at the last table on the right where you normally take your lunch alone. Octavia looks at you welcomingly; her face brims with a frightening expectation as she nods slightly toward the empty stool beside her own. The strap of her new training bra peeks pink below the sleeve of her shirt. To sit beside her requires a bravery you can’t muster” (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 100). His newly awakened fondness for the lonely girl is not enough to suppress his apprehension or to increase his confidence. As a result, the meaning of place influences and defines available relationships for young men and women. Octavia’s table is in no way a distinct example of separate spheres of belonging or lack thereof. Many social spaces divide themselves according to similar criteria effectively creating outsider spaces and perspectives.

Rodney’s insecurity and attempts at rebellion seem to have deeper roots than it might appear initially. He is terrified of his father’s presence at their house and he is in constant distress. It may even be reasonable to suggest that he is more afraid of said figure than of the murderer who is snatching children. “You have heard of an epidemic of disappearing black fathers, but you know you will never be as lucky. Yours comes home every evening from a long day spent lying on his back underneath malfunctioning

automobiles" (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 110). It is a fact that the image of the African American father is not a completely positive one. In many cases, they appear absent or non-existent. Representations such as the one in Jacqueline Woodson's *Red at the Bone* (2019) are rare and far between. Such is the terror that Rodney bears that he would rather his father was part of the widely-known statistics than present in their house. There is a hint at an explanation of Claude L's demeanor and general dissatisfaction – he is stuck fixing other people's cars, breaking his back and spirit in the process. His backstory about his upbringing also sheds light on the reasons for his forceful encouragement of Rodney. As the chapter progresses the father-son relationship continues to sour. Two events in particular play a decisive role in the resolution of Rodney's story: mending the drainpipe and the public beating.

One morning, Claude L wakes Rodney up and invites him to go outside on an undisclosed assignment. The son's reaction to this activity is more interesting than the actual taping of the drainpipe to follow. The moment Rodney hears that he has to spend time alone with him, he is overwhelmed with fatalistic thoughts and recalls one of the rumors about the murders: that the father is the perpetrator. "Apprehension envelops you, permeating even your bones. Father never solicits your assistance in such decidedly male endeavors. What did rotund Officer Brown say? *If you don't know who it is, you don't know who it's not*" (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 116). Once more events in the life of a character are explained through the tragedy, sweeping the community. The language of danger seems to be universal and ubiquitous. For Rodney the father figure feels so imposing that it might transform itself into the face of a murderer and the home does not appear to be a safe space anymore. The feeling only increases in the aftermath of Rodney's public physical punishment. When Claude L discovers his frequent theft of candy from the local shop (the only act of rebellion the character is entitled to), he decides to make an example out of him in front of his classmates (a practice that many parents have resorted to during the school year) and increase children's awareness of the consequences of going out alone. Open humiliation proves to be the final nail in Rodney's coffin, making him consider his significance as an individual. The episode also becomes one more argument why the school is not a place of belonging. "There were no clucks of sympathy. No one said, "He didn't have to whip him like that, all in front of everybody," like they had when the tired mothers invaded the classroom with their violence and fury" (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 138). Rodney receives no real or pretend sympathy from his classmates, which convinces him that the alternative timeline in which he was never born might a better option. His clear lack of belonging is what pushes him to accept a ride in a stranger's car "in the direction opposite of home" effectively joining the list of missing and murdered children. According to GerShun Avilez, Rodney's "inability to get home registers his actual spatial confusion that results from the embarrassment of receiving a whipping" (Avilez 25). It might be said that it is not only confusion that he experiences, it appears to be more than an elaborate mistake. For him no available space provides a semblance of home so he would rather run away or be reckless than return to the reality of an outsider which is full of terror, social ostracism,

and loneliness. It should be noted that fatherly presence affects the other main characters as well. In Tasha’s case the return of the patriarch signals the fortification of the home, while Octavia’s life with a single mother exposes her to threats of sexual abuse and drug use.

Rodney’s disappearance uncovers an additional layer to the perception of the Atlanta murders. In a number of accounts about the snatchings victims tend to be described as coming from the lower strata of society and from homes of neglect. James Baldwin has said: “… the only “pattern” I could discern in the murders was that the victims were young Black males – there were also two Black female children – living in the purgatory, or the eternity, of poverty. To be poor and Black in a country so rich and White is to judge oneself very harshly and it means that one has nothing to lose. Why not get into the friendly car? What's the worst that can happen? For a poor child is, also, a very lonely child” (Baldwin 64). In other words, most children lived in relative poverty, a type of existence, which made them incredibly lonely, so an invitation for communication would become an opportunity to escape their imposed exile. In a similar vein, Bernard Headley explains, “at its existential core, the Atlanta tragedy was a story of the world of sad children being forced to grow up much too fast; children from dreary, neglected homes worth escaping, even at odd hours of the night” (Headley 27). For Headley the result of poverty is somewhat different: poor children as individuals lacking supervision were freer to roam the streets, which faced them with the harsh reality of crime and abuse. What seems easily discernible is that poverty becomes an essential factor in the discussion of the killings. Tayari Jones does create a character that fits more neatly into the well-known pattern of the events in the face of Jashante Hamilton. As an older boy from the projects who lives alone with his mother and occasionally turns to hustling for money, he eventually becomes one of the abducted children; his body is never recovered. Monica echoes many students’ opinion of him: “He been kept back so many times that even he don’t know what grade he supposed to be in. And”—she lowered her voice—“he lives in the projects” (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 40). His underperformance in school seems less important or shameful than the fact that he inhabits a poverty-stricken part of the city, a place in the margins. Jashante’s character epitomizes some of the most pressing issues burdening the African American community through his shifting from place to place but never finding a safe harbor. In contrast to Jashante, from an outside perspective, it might seem that Rodney has a way more comfortable lifestyle and would not fit with the general pattern of victims – he gets by in school without reaching top grades, the Greens have a dependable income and an image of a nuclear family, and he is not subjected to social ostracism. Having said that, as evidenced above, even in a supposedly near-perfect environment, one can experience aversion and have difficulty finding a space of belonging.

Octavia may have become the next victim in this string of lonely children if she was not luckier than both Rodney and Jashante. Unsure of her father’s reasons for calling and afraid of change, she decides to visit the park on her own. She says: “In my pocket I had a sharp pencil so I could stick it in the eye of anyone that might try and snatch me”

(Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 212-213). Childishly she believes that a pencil would be able to save her, if the murderer decides to strike again. It is clear that she does not assess the danger of the situation in a serious way. In the end, she falls from the swing in an attempt to stop a stranger who resembles her Uncle Kenny and reasons that it is better to go back home because night had started to descend. The park as a place is supposed to be populated with children who play and grow up together. However, the threat looming over all of them has transformed it into one more place of abandon and fear. Though allowed entry as opposed to popular people's spots in school, Octavia does not feel safer or at home there as well – something that she did experience in the past, if we take into account her stories of old and forgotten escapades. The girl's reckless act is the last incentive her mother needs to send her to South Carolina to live with her father. In her rage, Yvonne asks her, "How many children got to die before you learn to bring your ass home?" (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 219). At the height of emotion, Yvonne comes to the conclusion that she cannot physically and psychologically protect Octavia as a single mother who needs to work night or double shifts. Her rage and reproach are as much aimed at her daughter as they are at her for not being able to provide enough supervision and avoid such accidents.

The eventual goodbye that they have to say to each other is overshadowed by the recovery of Rodney's body. Amidst a wake and a funeral, Octavia has to come to terms with the future that is being arranged for her, while her mother mourns the figurative and literal loss of a child. Octavia wonders: "Why everybody always say you lost somebody? Rodney not lost. They make it sound like you mislaid your lunch box or something." … People need to say the words they mean. Rodney not *lost*, he *dead*. And Mama need to stop tearing up because she not about to *lose* me, she throwing me away" (Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* 251). Evidently, Octavia feels hurt and as if her mother were abandoning her. She utilizes the language of the murders to explain her own situation. From the beginning of her story, she makes it clear that truth and forthrightness are difficult to establish. People hide behind their insecurities and smudge over events to protect children in effect making them incapable of understanding the world around coherently. The reality of leaving Atlanta concludes the novel, but the question remains whether such a move would be beneficial and whether the best solution to the threat is to escape the city. According to Trudier Harris, "South Carolina is no more immune to young black bodies disappearing than is Atlanta. This means, again, that totally escaping the cultured hell of the South is not the issue for characters that African American women writers create; the issue is trying to find a way to live in it in spite of the insanity and the constant threats to life and limb" (Harris, *The Scary Mason-Dixon* 172-173). Even though Octavia is to leave Atlanta, conceptually she remains part of the American South, so her life would not be completely dissimilar, free of prejudice or safe. There might not be a specific danger like the murderer in Atlanta, but she would still be subjected to common-for-the-community perils and it is not clear whether she would feel at home there. The relocation, though reasonable, seems a desperate choice. Overall, such a movement within the South contrasts with the approach of earlier works by African American writers who tended to

send their characters outside the country in places like Canada or France in search of freedom and safety; contemporary authors look for a hard-earned home within the confines of a prejudiced world.

Leaving Atlanta as a novel that tackles the complexity of the Atlanta Child Murders succeeds in achieving an alternative perspective. Focusing on the separate but still interlinked experience of three children in danger, the author fleshes out their struggle to belong and escape the overwhelming fear that has swept the community. Instead of supplying a healthy home environment, their school and individual houses make them feel more alone and dissatisfied. Escape is difficult and not available to all: Rodney finds it in death, while Octavia literally leaves "the city too busy to hate". As the latest of a string of books about the murders, *Leaving Atlanta* reveals contemporary anxieties and the voice of a younger generation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Citation: Boneva-Kamenova, B. Finding a Space to Call Home in Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta. University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 14(2), 2024: 15-24, https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.14.2.2

Received: September 1, 2024 | **Accepted:** October 3, 2024 | **Published:** October 9, 2024