

## Selfhood by means of Sisterhood in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper maintains that *The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel that celebrates women's communion and its impact on the fulfillment of their quest of selfhood. It explains the way the novel rejects the restrictive sense of selfhood and calls for a more inclusive selfhood merged in collective experience. Despite the fact that the seven main female characters are totally different, they have shared memories and dreams. The latter plays a central role in women's unity and fulfillment of selfhood. Shared memories and dreams function as a healing device and a mechanism that activates their collective consciousness and enable them to challenge pain, accomplish communal alliance, and fulfill their quest of selfhood and emancipation. The women of the novel come to understand the power of their communion stemming initially from their shared memories and dreams. They also come to understand that only a selfhood born within a communal frame can survive and challenge the cycle of abuse they are subject to. As a result, the paper concludes with asserting that the women in the novel collectively break the wall that stands for their seclusion and misery.

### INTRODUCTION

*The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel that celebrates women's communion and its impact on the fulfillment of their quest of selfhood. This paper aims at explaining the way the novel rejects the restrictive, individual sense of selfhood and calls for a more inclusive selfhood merged in collective experience.

By dealing with a group of women characters rather than only one protagonist, Naylor is not only aware of the diversity of black women and their struggle, but is also aware of the importance of the unity of women despite their differences. Naylor's vision of selfhood is quite unique in the sense that she declines the notion of the female selfhood relying on separating oneself from the others. Thus, I will explain that the women of Brewster Place fight back the intersectional restrictive forces and celebrate their liberation only when they rely on each other and form a tight communion. To prove my point, I will explain the seven women's individual journeys, failures, and eventual recovery and fulfillment only through the help of other women.

What is noteworthy is that Mattie, a mother figure in the novel, is present in most of all the seven stories. Thus, special attention will be given to her role in the emancipation of the women in the novel. All of the women's stories have, to

a certain extent, a satisfactory ending, except for the one of Lorraine. Lorraine, one of the two lesbians in the novel, is rejected by the other women and ends up raped and ruined. Naylor, however, inserts a sort of poetic justice for Lorraine by killing Ben, the tenement janitor. Through her immediate response to the pain inflicted on her, Lorraine enacts her determination to survive and resist the atrocities of the male dominated society she lives in. While Naylor depicts the positive impact of women's support and union through the stories of the other women, Lorraine's rape portrays the appalling impact of this lost union.

Eventually awakened, the women come together after Lorraine's rape. Her rape not only leads her to get the sympathy of the rest of the women, but also triggers the women's consciousness about the necessity to unite against the gender and racial oppression they suffer from. Naylor crystallizes the women's alliance through a dream-- a point that disturbs many critics and readers. However, I will maintain that Naylor's deferred dream implies her vision of selfhood as a thorny, demanding, and relative issue needing constant strength and exertion.

I will also explain that shared dreams and memories play a central role in women's unity and fulfillment of selfhood. They function as a healing device and a mech-

anism that activate their collective consciousness and enable them to challenge pain, accomplish communal alliance, and fulfill their quest of selfhood and emancipation. Eventually, the women collectively break the wall that stands for their seclusion and misery. They come to understand the power of their communion stemming initially from their shared memories and dreams. They also come to understand that only a selfhood born within a communal frame can survive and challenge the cycle of abuse they are subject to.

Believing that the individual black woman has received, to a certain extent, enough attention, Naylor creates her *The Women of Brewster Place* to deal with a whole community formed by black women. Many novels written in the same era have tackled the idea of women trying to achieve autonomy. For example, Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Celie in *The Color Purple*, Helga Crane in *Quicksand*, as well as Sula and Nel in *Sula*, are few examples of individual women who struggle to achieve their selfhood, who are abetted by other women, and who reach satisfactory endings. Nevertheless, and despite their focus on black women's search for selfhood, none of the previous novels underline the power of the group in forming a woman's identity and selfhood or break the tradition of the unique female protagonist and at the same time celebrate female communion. After all, for Naylor, a woman may slake her quest of selfhood but the latter is maintained and strengthened only by the support of other women by forming a matriarchal communion. *The Women of Brewster Place* is worth examining for it stands as an umbrella that covers some of the issues treated by the previously mentioned novels, and above all tackles a new aspect which is that of the necessity of women's liaisons in forming selfhood.

#### LOCATING THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

Growing up during the Civil Rights and feminist movement, Gloria Naylor, a celebrated African-American writer and author of six novels, gradually becomes aware of the absence of literary works written by African American women writers in her college courses. The latter prompted Naylor to produce works that depict African American life in general and black women's "multifaceted" nature and struggle in particular. In that, Naylor in one of her interviews with Charles H. Rowell asserts: "We were all working with benign ignorance of what was out there in Black America. . . . And I realized that I had been deprived through benign ignorance of knowing about this literary history. I decided that, if I had one book in me, I wanted it to be all about me, and the me in this case was a multifaceted me" (qtd. In Vinson 1).

Accordingly, all of Naylor's works underscore the African American rich and complex history, bring the African American interests to the center of literature, envision a new black community, and celebrate black women's existence as well as struggle. Years after her graduation, Naylor becomes more acquainted with black women writers whose works were a source of inspiration. "At one point, we were taught that American literature was only a task for white-middle men", Naylor asserts, "When I finally discovered writers like

Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, it was like a whole hidden world opened up to me" (DiConsiglio 3).

Being influenced by some women writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison, it is no surprise that Naylor produces *The Women of Brewster Place* as a novel that responds to the wide-ranging concerns of black women writers and "to patriarchal society's devaluation of women by revalorizing female values." Barbara Christian asserts that Naylor strongly retorts "the Western patriarchal emphasis on the individual" by focusing on the "necessity of honoring female values" ("Naylor's Geography" 118). To some critics like John DiConsiglio, Morrison and Walker's influence on Naylor is just a starting point in her literary career- a starting point that permits Naylor's fiction to surpass even the one of Morrison and Walker. Outstandingly, Naylor's fiction in general and *The Women of Brewster Place* in particular, surpassing Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Morrison's *Sula* (1973), focus more on place and shared memories with characters that revere the strength generated by empathy and union of women to face racial and androcentric oppression (DiConsiglio 4).

Yet, like most works written by an African American woman writer, *The Women of Brewster Place* has received criticism, denigration, and even disparagement. The novel has been reproved for lack of unity and objectivity. It was described as "a short story sequence, a contingent novel, a composite novel, short story composite, anthology novel, integrated short-story collection, a hybrid novel" (Nicosia 193). The novel was even accused of being unoriginal presenting characters that are often described as "archetypal, stereotypical, or flat" (Labin 2). After all, in its essence, the novel presents interconnecting stories in which all the women of the novel, being stereotypes of the African American woman and her daily struggle, rely on each other and eventually come together celebrating the power of women's communion in forging their sense of selfhood. Consequently, the novel highlights the strength generated by women's communion, on the one hand; and the fulfillment of the quest of selfhood by one's sense of belonging and harmony with community, on the other.

#### THE COLORED DAUGHTERS OF BREWSTER PLACE: A STORY OF SEVEN WOMEN

The novel brought Naylor great acclaim because of its intersectional nature in treating race, gender, and class issues. Most of all, it is unique in the way it breaks the tradition of focusing on a unique protagonist-- a point that makes the novel worth analyzing. *The Women of Brewster Place* tells the diverse stories of seven women who eventually have to come together and form a tightly knit society that enables each and every woman to achieve her selfhood. Focusing on a group of women characters rather than one is in itself a form of resistance against the male dominated standards of canonized literature- a genre that Sandra Zagarell calls the "narrative of community" (454). The latter, Nina Auerbach maintains, is a genre that defies the individualistic male ethos and "the solitary woman living for and through men, attaining citizenship in the community of adulthood through

masculine approval alone” and replaces them by idolizing the communion and unity of women (5).

*The Women of Brewster Place*, composed of seven stories, portrays the life of desperate, poor, abused, abandoned, bright, strong, and firm black women belonging to different backgrounds and classes but live together in the imaginary street of Brewster place. The latter is sequestered by a wall embodying the various limitations the denizens suffer from. On the diversity of women characters in her novel, Naylor in an interview with Kay Bonetti explains:

One character, one female protagonist could not even attempt to represent the richness or diversity of the black female experience. So, the women in that work you find consciously differ, beginning with something as simple as their skin color, and they differ in their ages, their religious backgrounds, their personal backgrounds, their political affiliations, even their sexual preferences. (qtd. in Vinson 1)

The novel portrays the women’s craving to quench their search for selfhood. Preys of social, sexual and racial bigotry, the women struggle to survive the woeful circumstances they live in, and most importantly endeavor to form a firm sense of selfhood. Though each woman struggles “like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time” (Naylor 5), I argue that they transcend the sordid surrounding they live in, impose an unyielding sense of female black selfhood, and celebrate radiantly liberation only when they rely on each other and form a firm communion. Actually, Naylor’s vision of selfhood is quite unique in the sense that she declines the notion of selfhood relying on separating oneself from the others. On the contrary, Naylor assumes in her novel that selfhood hinges on “the connectedness among individuals” that “provides Black women deeper, more meaningful self-definitions” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 113). In that, Naylor provides instances of women who fail in forming their selfhood when relying solely on themselves and separating themselves from the women in their community but ultimately reach an unwavering selfhood when connecting with, helping, tolerating differences and communicating with other women.

Brewster Place, “The bastard child of several clandestine meetings” (1), is the setting that gathers various women with different stories but each is linked to others in one way or another. “These women come from a variety of backgrounds, with individual goals and dreams; they experience, fight against and sometimes transcend—the fate of the black women in America today” (Naylor, Book Cover). The novel consists of seven narratives telling the stories of Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Lucielia, Kiswana, Cora Lee, Lorraine and Theresa by recounting their past through flashbacks and portraying their present situations. The novel presents an unconventional love story- a love story between women. The women’s love and care becomes a defense mechanism against men’s absence and abuse, racial bigotry, and poverty.

The first woman who is devastated by men is Mattie Michael. After Butcher Fuller’s escape and her pregnancy that caused her father’s wrath, Mattie is solaced by her friend

Etta Mae Johnson and Miss Eva. Miss Eva has always said to Mattie that she is spoiling her son, Basil, but Mattie insists on being too protective until he becomes selfish and offensive. Basil’s crime and carelessness lead Mattie to be homeless again finding herself in Brewster Place. And it is Etta Mae again who helps Mattie in finding a house in Brewster Place. Etta Mae Johnson, a constant wanderer who loves temporary liaisons with men, ends up lonely after her deception with the preacher Moreland Woods. The latter leaves Etta Mae in distress, but she ultimately finds “love and comfort” in her friend Mattie. The novel, then, moves to a more vigorous and less victimized woman, named Kiswana Browne, who tries to find and assert her female black selfhood. Kiswana believes in social upgrade and women’s support, and she implements that with Cora Lee, a young woman obsessed with babies. Lucielia, another victim of men’s capriciousness, irresponsibility, selfishness, and domination, is saved from her throbbing despondency by Mattie. The novel, ultimately, presents the story of two lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa, who try to escape the heterosexism they suffer from. Lorraine is the victim of Baker’s violence who brutalizes and rapes her. It is only after this event that all the women are united and act together, even if it is only in Mattie’s dream. The women demolish the wall that isolates Brewster Place and represents the social and sexual injustices imposed on them. The novel’s ending celebrates the healing power of women’s union not only in fighting back injustices, but mostly in fulfilling their quest of self-fulfillment and self-assertion as the outcome of one’s sense of belongingness.

Although the novel recounts stories of different women, it does relate them by their residence, Brewster Place. The latter is cut off from the rest of the world by a wall. Each woman “will somehow relate to that wall” as Naylor explains to Bonetti (qtd. in Vinson 5). As long as this wall exists, each woman will continue to exist not only individually but also collectively. Brewster Place becomes the only home the devastated women could find. “Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home” (4). Trapped in that dead-end street, the women share certain details of their lives; they experience “the birth and the death of their dreams” (Labin 2). These dreams center on fighting back the sexism and social injustices as well as asserting their selfhood in the face of social prejudices.

### **Mattie Michael: A Sapphire and a Welfare/Unfitting Mother**

A uniting figure in the novel whose story marks the beginning of women’s saga of suffering and struggle in Brewster Place is Mattie Michael. The problems in Mattie’s existence stem from the men she knows- her father, Butcher, and her son. They prove to be disquieting, manipulating, and egocentric patriarchal figures. In addition to causing trouble and sorrow, these men abandon Mattie in greatest moments of need-- Butcher forsakes Mattie and his responsibility as a father, her own father tortures her and selfishly blames her, and her son deceives her by escaping prison causing the loss of her house. These repeated deceptions and assaults transmute

Mattie and steer her on her quest of selfhood. Auspiciously, she becomes a leading character, a mentor, and a mother figure for many women once in Brewster Place.

Before going to Brewster place, Mattie spends her early years in Tennessee under the over protective and severe authority of her father. Her father's oppressive surveillance and exaggerated care made of Mattie a compliant and docile creature willing to accurately follow the orders she receives. By dominating Mattie and strictly molding her behavior instead of orienting and raising her awareness about her society, her father created an obedient daughter. She becomes the victim of social isolation, lack of communication with the external world, and manipulation of her conduct.

Although she knows that "her father would kill her if he heard she had been seen walking with Butch Fuller", she is easily deluded by the convincing and charming words of Butch Fuller (10). Recognizing that Mattie is the kind of a young woman who is easily manipulated, Butch Fuller firmly tells her: "now that I done gone through all that, I hope I can get what I came for," he said slowly, as he looked her straight in the eyes." (9). When feeling that Mattie is hesitant and afraid of her father and after "reading her[Mattie's] thoughts", Butch skillfully makes Mattie change her mind after telling her: "of course, now, if a big woman like you is afraid of what her daddy might say?" (10). Finally, Butch got what he "came for" leaving Mattie facing her father's wrath and society's cruelty.

Once Mattie breaks the rules of her father and behaves in a liberated way, she suffers from his fury. After knowing his daughter's pregnancy and feeling that his venerable patriarchal authority has been violated, Samuel Michael severely beats the daughter he claims to cherish but who "had chosen this man's [Butch] side against him". "... he tried to stamp out what had hurt him the most and was now brazenly taunting him\_ her disobedience" (23).

Samuel Michael's reaction and violence towards his daughter is only the outcome of his socially inherent authority over his family and his daughter. Within patriarchal families, husbands should control and have authority over their wives and children, Collins explains (*From Black* 41). Even violence within familial frames is considered to be natural. "For women with spouses who batter and children with abusive parents, domination becomes intertwined with love" (Collins, *From Black* 41).

The patriarchal hypocrisy is proven by not chastising or even rebuking the true convict and womanizer Butch Fuller. As such, just like any other androcentric figure, instead of consoling his daughter in her quandary, Mattie's father puts all the blame on his daughter to satisfy his own mannish vanity. He ruthlessly beats his daughter turning her into a "pile of torn clothes and bruised flesh on the floor" (24). Used to obedience, "instinctively her body cried to obey" (22), but did not only to protect her baby.

The nurturing and protective love Mattie's mother offers to her helps Mattie evade her father's cruelty. She determinedly defies her husband saying: "Hit my child again and I'll meet your soul in hell!" (24). She turns to her daughter placating her:

Ain't nothing to be shamed of. Havin' a baby is the most natural thing there is. The Good Book call children a gift from the Lord. And there ain't no place in that Bible of His that say babies is sinful. The sin is the fornicatin', and that's over and done with. God done forgave you of that a long time ago, and what's going on in your belly now ain't nothin' to hang your head about—you remember that? (20)

Despite the fact that it is difficult for women to resist family practices that oppress them (Collins, *From Black* 41), a growing consciousness and thoughtfulness prompts Mattie to mull over her current life and future possibilities. Her father's aggressiveness and Butch's vile nature make her see herself and her life differently. She is no longer that naïve obedient girl who can be easily controlled. The experience she has undergone makes her a decisive, responsible woman who wants to take control of her own life. Mattie's metamorphosis towards her life in general and men in particular marks the beginning of her quest towards selfhood. The starting point of her journey is her decision to leave home and go to Ashville. Mattie becomes determined to maintain her self-assertion as well as economic independence to raise her son Basil. However, she has never expected that her own son will betray her and will turn into selfish and manipulative man. "Sugar cane and summer and Papa and Basil and Butch. And the beginning- the beginning of her long, winding journey to Brewster" (8). This quotation summarizes Mattie's source of trouble and the beginning of her struggle.

"We don't take children", "where's your husband?", and "This is a respectable place!" become a part of Mattie's daily life (29-30). Despite the callous social criticism and rejection she suffers from, Mattie struggles to fulfill her son's needs. By presenting Mattie's daily fight against the economic and social ordeals, Naylor is speaking for all the black women of her time who endure abuse and maltreatment for being single mothers. Mattie along with many black single mothers represent what Collins names as "unfitting mothers" (*From Black* 55). Collins maintains that there are two types of mothers: "'real' mothers and 'unfitting mother'". While "'real' mothers" are "affluent, married, white, and holding American citizenship" and "fit cultural criteria for idealized motherhood", "unfitting mothers" belong to "other categories of women of the wrong social class, marital status, race, and citizenship status" and "are judged to be less fit and less worthy to be mothers" (Collins, *From Black* 55). It is within this social atmosphere and dogmas that Mattie, the "unfitting mother", struggles to survive and ensure a better life for her son.

In one of Mattie's worst moments of agony, after having no money or place to go to, and while "she was so tired that she couldn't think, and her legs were starting to tremble from lack of sleep and the heavy load she had carried around all the day", Mattie finds an old woman named Eva Turner who becomes a surrogate mother for her. "Mattie followed her[ Eva] up the stone steps, trying to adjust her mind to this rapid turn of events and the nameless old woman who had altered their destinies" (32). With Eva's constant help

for her, Mattie finishes by finding a job in a book bindery to provide for her son.

While Mattie has been developing a growing strength, an eminent sense of responsibility, and an exaggerated protective attitude towards her son Basil, her son was developing an egocentric nature, a repugnant undependable nature, and a careless attitude. In a way, Mattie falls in the stereotype of the welfare mother who fails to properly raise her children as being responsible, mature, and endorsers of work ethic (Collins, *Black Feminist* 79). Noticing how Basil is growing indolent, selfish and taking advantage of his mother's excessive love for him since his young age, Eva advises Mattie to be firm with her "little spoiled nigger" (39). Mattie, however, disregards Eva's advice until she later regrets the "void in his being that has been padded and cushioned over the years, and now that covering had grown impregnable" (52).

Expectedly, Basil fails his mother. Although he is assured that he will be acquitted, he is afraid of the idea of enduring a trial and thus runs away. Besides his spoiled nature, Basil's actions with his mother are representative of the many black men who rarely feel compelled to care for black women and who prioritize "self-preservation" (hooks, *Ain't I* 35). It is this instinct of "self-preservation" that propels Basil to abandon his mother and ruin her life. Furthermore, it is Mattie's sense of selflessness that intensifies Basil's egoism and sense of self preservation. Collins, both in her *From Black Power to Hip Hop* and *Black Feminist Thought*, maintains that African American women are victims of their own adherence to the social belief about the necessity of being self-sacrificing. These expectations of sacrifice often border on exploitation. As such, many black women and black mothers pay the cost of neglecting their own needs expecting that their children may provide solace and love (*Black Feminist* 196-97; *From Black* 143).

Having only faded memories, Mattie "tried to recapture the years and hold them for introspection, so she could pinpoint the transformation, but they slipped through her fingers and skid down the dishes, hidden under the iridescent bubbles that broke with the slightest movement of her hand" (53). After losing her house and her son, Mattie ends up lonely in Brewster Place. Interestingly enough, Mattie, this time, experiences a salient awakening. Thinking that the moment she defied her father and left Tennessee was the greatest change and fulfillment of her life, Mattie realizes now that it was but a first step in her struggle against social injustices and patriarchal abuse; her son's cruelty and mischief become the substantiation. Mattie's metamorphosis starts when she recognizes that Basil is not her cherished son but a man like all the men she suffered from in her life. Starting a new life, asserting her selfhood, fighting back social and gender injustices, and helping other women surrounding her become the aspiration of Mattie. On this new life, Mattie states that "All the beautiful plants that once had an entire sun porch for themselves in the home she had exchanged thirty years of her life to pay for" just like her "would now have to fight..."(7).

### Etta Mae: Refusing to Play by the Rule

Just like Mattie, Etta Mae is the victim of the predominant sexist and racial ideologies that restricted black women's life and their notion of self-definition (Walker 63). Etta spent her youth in Rock Vale which was not ready for her "blooming independence" (60). In her early days, Etta suffered from white men's control and injustice. In spite of that, she insisted on displaying her rebellious nature. Her persistence on "just being herself" and her untamed demeanor were disturbing to her surrounding (60). "Rock Vale had no place for a black woman who was not only unwilling to play by the rules, but whose spirit challenged the very right of the game to exist" (60). Once she rejects the sexual advances of a white man, her father paid the price by having his properties destructed. Naylor explains:

But Rutherford County was not ready for Etta's blooming independence; and so she left one rainy summer night about three hours ahead of dawn and Jonny Brick's furious pursuing relatives. Mattie wrote and told her they had waited in ambush for two days on the county line, and then had returned and burned down her father's barn. The sheriff told Mr. Johnson that he had gotten off mighty light-considering. Mr. Johnson thought so too. After reading Mattie's letter, Etta was sorry she hadn't killed the horny white bastard when she had the chance. (60)

Interestingly, Naylor, through the life of Etta Mae, depicts the abusive social conditions that impel black women to move from the south to the north pursuing a selfhood beyond canonized and preconceived ideals. Unlike Mattie, for instance, who decides to assert her selfhood by eliminating all relationships with men in her life, Etta pursues defying social codes and fulfilling her spirit of independence through roaming from one city to another and establishing ephemeral relationships with men. Etta's attempt to pursue her freedom through relationships with men reflects the limited choices she has. The latter is based on the flawed conceptions of being a black woman (Walker 63). Though Etta thought that her frivolous liaisons would challenge the predominant sexist and racial ideology, they just fossilize the stereotype of the black woman as being a "sexual savage" who is "available and eager" for relationships with men (hooks, *Ain't I* 52).

Etta gradually understands that her strategy is by no means a liberating one due to the nothingness she plunges in. Consequently, she becomes convinced that she should try the other "stereotypical" image of the "good woman" (Ball 2). She becomes convinced that she cannot disregard adhering to the norm, having stability, and getting married. Etta's emergent desire echoes Collins' description of the conventional idealized family. The latter is "a well-functioning family" that "protects and balances the interests of all its members", Collins asserts. "Held together by primary emotional bonds of love and caring", conventional assumptions, view family as "a private haven from a public world" (*From Black* 39).

Finding a preacher named Reverend Moreland Woods, Etta thinks that she has found the appropriate man to settle down with. But like all other men, he seduces her and

then abandons her. Etta's feral and unruly nature betrays her; Reverend Woods easily knew that "Etta was the type of woman who not only knew which way to turn, but, more often than not, had built her own roads when nothing else was accessible" (68). The Reverend's view about Etta resembles most black men who claim that they could not get along with black women because they were loose, uncontrollable, even evil (hooks, *Ain't I* 85). He by no means sees in Etta a future wife, and Mattie easily recognized what "he's got in mind" (69). Mattie tries to warn her friend but Etta falls in the Reverend's trap. The relationship between Etta and Reverend depicts the countless deformed black female/male relationships. Commenting on the prevalent type of relationships between black men and women, hooks maintains that black women "rarely experience natural love". She further explains that "the love quality, plus the quality of respect for females is impoverished by the pimp/whore syndrome imposed for so long" (*Ain't I* 116).

After her affair with the Reverend and her abysmal deception, an "uncanny fear" haunts Etta- the fear of never being able to rise again. But then, she is relieved by the idea of having Mattie to console and anchor her. While coming back to Mattie's house, she is reassured that "...someone [Mattie] was waiting up for her". She "laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her" (74). The serenity that Etta feels stems from her friend's presence. She is certain of Mattie's constant backing for she has always been there for her in moments of grief and joy. In sum, Mattie is a refuge for Etta.

Even when Mattie is hurt by Etta's words, she resorts to their memories to justify her attitude: "they shared at least a hundred memories that could belie those cruel words. Let them speak for her" (70). Mattie is a confidant, a mother figure, and a guru. The narrator explains that "Sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is time for silence. A time to let go and allow people to hurl themselves into their own destiny. And a time to prepare to pick up the pieces when it's all over" (70). Mattie masters all of these skills. She never ceases to support Etta even when she keeps on being wrong. Knowing that Etta's itinerary has taken the wrong direction, Mattie persists on orienting her towards a more efficient strategy to attain selfhood.

Mattie relies on sisterly love, the power of memories, and communal strength. After Mattie and Etta's fight, Mattie resorts to her memories with her friend and Etta is reassured of having her friend waiting for her. According to Linda Wells, this incident depicts Mattie's appeasing impact and "ennobling power of love" in sustaining her friend (qtd. in Vinson 7). Furthermore, Mattie insists on showing Etta the power of sharing and the power of belonging to community when taking her to church. Though Etta concentrates more on seducing the minister, she gradually comprehends the power inherent within a community. She "looked at her [Mattie], at them all, and was very envious"- envious of the power they gain once together (64). Gradually, as she sits with the church congregation, she sees "the scenes of her life reeled out before her with the same aging script; but now hindsight sat as the omniscient director and had the young

star of her epic recite different brilliant lines" (64). As such, Mattie successfully incites Etta to muse about her selfhood in relation to her past, her present, her future and relate it to the community. The latter enables Etta to become conscious of her "identity through time" (Vinson 7). Instead of finding stability and a permanent place with a man, Mattie helps Etta in finding a home in Brewster Place as a community of black women asserting their "...humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (Collins, *Black Feminist* 102).

### Kiswana: a Committed Activist

While Mattie and Etta were forced to leave their homes and found Brewster Place as their unique refuge, Melanie Browne, a young educated woman from a rich family, deliberately decides to go to Brewster Place. Undoubtedly, Mattie is the mother figure and the savior of other women in Brewster Place, but Melanie also proves to be influential in uplifting women in her community. Before coming to Brewster Place, Melanie lived in Linden Hill where she felt that she is deracinated of her identity and origins. For a woman like Melanie who cherishes her origins, living in a racist aristocratic white community is her greatest torment. Defiantly, she leaves her home, changes her name and lives in Brewster Place. By adopting the African name "Kiswana", she intends to celebrate and assert her African roots.

Unlike her haughty mother who talks about the people of Brewster Place with a degrading tone describing them as "these people", Kiswana angrily answers her mother: "what do you mean, *these people*. They are my people and yours, too, Mama - we're all Black. But maybe you've forgotten that over in Linden Hills" (83). By presenting both Kiswana and her mother and their conflicting beliefs, Naylor highlights the intersectional nature of the oppression black people are subject to besides gender, class, economic and racial discrimination which impair the lives of black women. Kiswana rejects the very truth that her parents' money and social status strengthen her position in defending her people. She rejects the "bourgie" school and the future influential job her parents' money will insure believing that it will encumber her quest for selfhood and individuality. Kiswana's social and racial views are similar to Collins' beliefs about the common fate and oppression of black people and black women in particular. Collins maintains that all black women are one way or another all affected by intersecting oppressions regardless of their social class or other differences among them. Living in a society that has always demeaned African-American women, black women inevitably face similar challenges and hardships (*Black Feminist* 25). Similarly, hooks explains that "Within the institutionalized race, sex, class social system in our society black females were clearly at the bottom of the economic totem pole" (*Feminism Is* 40)

Defiantly, Kiswana tells her mother: "my place was in the streets with my people, fighting for equality and a better community" (83). It is in Brewster Place that Kiswana believes she can be self-assertive, incite other black women to assert their selfhood, and uplift her black people. Refusing to be "a white's man nigger who's ashamed of being black" like her mother whose chief purpose is survival, Kiswana

insists on struggling with her people and sharing as well as experiencing their misery (85). Embracing feminist and liberation ideals, Kiswana's social uplift "lies with a vision of social change which challenges class elitism" (hooks, *Feminism Is* 43).

Kiswana's mother tries to indoctrinate her daughter telling her: "you constantly live in a fantasy world- always going to extremes turning butterflies into eagles, and life isn't about that. It's accepting what is and working from that" (85). Kiswana had high expectation and thought that her goals would be easily achieved, but at one moment her mother seemed right and the conditions once in Brewster Place proved to be very challenging. In her "Autonomous, but Not Alone: The Reappropriation of Female Community in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Housekeeping*", Karen Walker explains that "Kiswana comes to Brewster Place with good intentions of uniting the community in a campaign to improve living conditions there, but her efforts instead highlight the alienation of the women in the community, as well as the cycle of male oppression that forces that position" (64). Despite her young age and her previous luxurious life, Kiswana succeeds in raising the awareness of the women of Brewster Place and uniting them to fight their tyrant white landowner. By bringing the community together against their landlord and helping other women, Kiswana defies not only her mother but also the social regulations proving that survival does not require submission or acceptance of the imposed social codes.

### Cora Lee's Deviated Motherhood

One of Kiswana's achievements is helping Cora Lee with properly raising her children, liberating her from sexual exploitation, and fulfilling a self-sustained selfhood. Cora Lee, an obsessed woman with babies, makes of having babies with the numerous "shadow" men her preferable occupation. Just like in her childhood when she "was an easy child to please" (108), Cora Lee once a woman becomes an easy prey for men who "showed her the thing that felt good in the dark" (113). In that, the narrator explains: "the thing that felt good in the dark would sometimes bring the new babies, and that's all she cared to know, since the shadows would often lie about their last names or their jobs or not having wives. She had stopped listening, stopped caring to know" (114).

Accordingly, Evelyn Hammonds explains that black women's body and sexuality is often associated with speechlessness, silence, void, and darkness. Such associations underscore black women's bodies as mere controlled vessels of their subjugated souls (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 123-24). An example of this manipulation and abuse is Cora Lee's submission to men because they dominate her body. The narrator explains the infuriating obedience Cora Lee presents to one of the men she knew:

...she had almost learned to cope with his peculiar ways. A pot of burnt rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth, but that had been their fault for keeping her so tied up she couldn't keep the house straight. But she still carried the scar under her left eye because of a baby's crying, and you couldn't

stop a baby from crying. Babies had to cry sometimes, and so Sammy and Maybelline's father had to go. (113)

By giving the example of Cora Lee, Naylor seems to expose and condemn social views about black womanhood and motherhood. The latter is best explained by Collins in her *From Black Power to Hip Hop*. According to Collins, more often than not, ideological constructions engender myriad degrading views about black women. African American women are seen as bad "'unfit' mothers", "sexually irresponsible", "abusive mothers", and "welfare queens" (68). Collins, just like Naylor's depiction of Cora Lee's tragic routine, amends black womanhood and motherhood by explaining that because of the segregationist policies and their inaccessibility to educational and proper social assistance and knowledge, black women often fail to perform their responsibilities (*Black Feminist* 195). Actually, it is this lack of education that aggravates Cora Lee's situation. Her parents noticed that their daughter was different and suffered from something, but they never tried to know what was wrong with her nor attempted to protect her. Cora Lee, who seems to be psychologically unstable, finds it difficult to resist men's beastliness or take care of her children.

Despite all the chaos and abuse Cora Lee endures, Kiswana arrives bringing hope, optimism and change in her life. Kiswana saw the desperate life of Cora Lee and her children. Thus, she decides to help Cora Lee by awakening her motherly love and aspiration for a self-contained selfhood. By so doing, Kiswana, as a successful black activist, implements her liberating ideology in empowering Cora through inciting and fostering a sense of self-reliance (Collins, *Black Feminist* 219).

Kiswana does not rely only on consciousness raising to alter and uplift Cora Lee, but also relies on performing her role as an "othermother". Similar to Collins views about "othermothers", Stanlie M. James in "Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?" explains how crucial the othermothers' role is in assisting "blood mothers" in their responsibilities. James adds that othermothers's role vary from serving to relieve blood mothers from the stress and frustration resulting from the external pressures and their inability to meet their children's needs, to acting as role models for children (46).

By helping Cora Lee, Kiswana changes Cora's family life, and fulfills her desire of uplifting others around her. Kiswana's intentions and acts towards Cora are primarily triggered by her love of her community, and "there is no better place" bell hooks explains, "to learn the art of loving than in community" (*All about* 129). Kiswana's love of Cora's children prompted her to invite them to watch a play- an act that becomes a turning point in Cora's family. It is thanks to Kiswana's love and support that Cora Lee's self-esteem, as an individual and a mother, is restored and intensified. She starts to perceive her children differently thinking about the necessity of taking care of them and preparing them for a possible bright future. Cora's newly acquired energy is directed not only towards her children's education but also towards establishing a firm sense of selfhood. Kiswana takes Cora Lee out from a state of lethargy to vitality, evasion to

confrontation, and surrender to desire to fight. In that, the narrator closes Cora Lee's story with an unusual description: "She [Cora] then went through her apartment, turning off the lights and breathing in hopeful echoes of order and peace that lay in the clean house" (127).

In the miserable environment the women of Brewster Place live in, support, consolation, and succor never cease to exist. Examples of that are Mattie and Kiswana's support of other women in the novel. Still, it is Mattie who triggers nearly all the motion in the novel. Linda Wells explains that Mattie is "the central connecting force in the text", "the foundational matriarch", "the primary agent of female coalescence", and "the moral agent in the novel" (qtd. in Vinson 6-7).

### Ciel: From Fantasy to Reality

Lucielia Louse Turner (Ciel) is one of the survivors owing to Mattie's healing powers. Through the story of Ciel, Naylor depicts black men's irresponsibility and apathy towards women's suffering. Ciel, a young beautiful girl, is married to Eugene, "a tall, skinny black man with arrogance and selfishness", and has a baby (93). When she is pregnant again, Eugene, unable to support his family, forces her to abort. Eugene, like most men in the novel, is the incarnation of the abusive egocentric male figure. An example of that is one of the conversations with Ciel where he tells her: "I'm fucking sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that's all you good for" (94). Eugene's words reveal how careless he is about his family and how frustrated he is about his inability to improve his economic status. Eugene's attitude towards his family and economic status correspond the cases of many black men in the American society. Collins and hooks' examination of black men's status is worth mentioning in this case. While hooks states that black men not only objectify and underestimate black women's suffering but also resent and accuse their wives and children for their failure (*Ain't I* 76-101), Collins specifies that these black men become dangerous to those closest to them (*Black Feminist* 158). Indeed, Eugene ends up by inflicting psychological and physical pain on both his wife and daughter.

Besides the adrocentric bias she suffers from, Ciel's desperation is intensified by her inability to confront her past and her husband. She creates a secluded world where she passively buries all her painful memories and darkest thoughts. It was because of this hidden world that she "found it difficult to connect herself up again with her own world" (95). Once again, when Eugene threatens to leave her, she tries to explain to him the painful memories of her abortion, but does not because "that would require that she uncurl that week of her life, pushed safely up into her head, when she had done all those terrible things for that other woman who had wanted an abortion"(100). Ciel searches "desperately for the right words" to exteriorize her fears and harrowing experience but fails (100). While Ciel was begging Eugene to change his mind about his selfish decision to leave them, their daughter, Serena, dies because of an electrocution. Serena's death propels Ciel into a total state of oblivion.

Along Ciel's journey of agony and suffering, it is Mattie who spurs her to change her life and overthrow the idealistic vision she had about her life and Eugene. Trying to defend Eugene and justify her love for him, Ciel says:

"Oh, Mattie, you don't understand. He's really straightened up this time. He's got a new job on the docks that pays real good, and he was just so depressed before with the new baby and no work. You'll see. He's even gone out now to buy paint and stuff to fix up the apartment. And, and Serena needs a daddy" (91-92). But Mattie firmly tells her: "You ain't gotta convince me, Ciel". (92)

Trying again to embellish Eugene's portrait, Ciel proudly says that her daughter loves her father and always repeats his name. But Mattie brings her back to reality by telling her: "Better teach her your name. ...She'll be using it more" (92). Ciel's insistence on ignoring Mattie's advice and embellishing Eugene's image echoes Collins statements about the numerous women who reject advice that promote self-preservation at the expense of their relationships with men. Because they see that self-preservation ideals as feminist principles and because they see that these principles are "anti-family and against Black men", they often "do not want to give up men- they want Black men to change" (*Black Feminist* 152).

Mattie, being herself a survivor of men's baseness, perseveres in enlightening Ciel and reinstating her to reality. Consequently, Mattie evokes the truth about Eugene because "fantasy has no chance of survival in Brewster Place. Mattie bursts the bubble of Lucielia's dream world" (9). Furthermore, Mattie triggers Ciel's reasoning by being sometimes implicit in her words. When Ciel accuses Mattie of hating Eugene, Mattie calmly responds "May be I just love you too much" (95). Such an answer does not only confirm Mattie's love for Ciel and her daughter, but does also question Eugene's feelings towards them and insinuate that Ciel needs someone who truly deserves and loves her. Mattie's persistence on making Ciel see the truth gradually becomes fruitful. In that, the narrator explains that Ciel gradually becomes aware that whenever she defends Eugene, "she wasn't talking to Mattie, she was talking to herself. ...Ciel's mouth flew open to ask her what she meant by that, but she checked herself. It was useless to argue with Mattie. You could take her words however you wanted. The burden of truth lay with you, not with her" (92).

Mattie's words compel Ciel to see the reality of things and look beyond the surface meaning of words. In her *Talking Voices*, Deborah Tannen asserts that a good speaker should make the listener take part in the conversation, and most importantly incite his/her critical thinking. She adds: "by requiring the listener...to fill in unstated meaning, indirectness contributes to a sense of involvement through mutual participation in sensemaking" (23). Every time Lucielia has to fill in the "unstated meaning of Mattie's words, she is helping herself make sense of her world" (Tannen 23). Similarly, on the power of words, the speaker, and the interaction between speaker and listener, Stephen Tyler maintains: "... an utterance speaks more than it says, meditates between past and future, transcends the speaker's conscious thought,



and creates in the mind of the hearer worlds unanticipated” (qtd. in Tannen 24). This is exactly what Mattie does with Ciel. Every time she speaks to Ciel, she enables her to confront her past, mull over her state of subordination and current life with Eugene, and reflect about her future.

Despite Mattie’s constant guidance and support, Ciel’s reveries about the life she wished to have with Eugene engulfed her until the death of Serena. Eventually, it is Mattie again who saves Ciel from her sorrow and “the closing off the spirit” she undergoes (101). Advising and sharing “interpersonal memories of loss” seems to be ineffective with Ciel (Vinson 9). The latter is crystal clear when a neighbor woman tries to comfort Ciel:

A neighbor woman entered in studied certainty and stood in the middle of the room. “Child, I know how you feel, but don’t do this to yourself. I lost one, too. The Lord will ...” And she choked, because the words were jammed down into her throat by the naked force of Ciel’s eyes. Ciel had opened them fully now to look at the woman, but raw fires had eaten them worse than lifeless—worse than death. The woman saw in that mute appeal for silence the ragings of a personal hell flowing through Ciel’s eyes. And just as she went to reach for the girl’s hand, she stopped as if a muscle spasm had overtaken her body and, cowardly, shrank back. Reminiscences of old, dried-over pains were no consolation in the face of this. They had the effect of cold beads of water on a hot iron—they danced and fizzled up while the room stank from their steam. (102)

While in the beginning Mattie relies on retrieving Ciel from her unrealistic world, she later on employs a more effective strategy which is that of connecting Ciel to the collective history and memory of women. Thanks to Mattie, “Ciel’s experience moves from an exclusive individual pain, to a pain endured by centuries of women” (Vinson 9). Ciel is no longer that forlorn abandoned woman who lost her daughter and is betrayed by her husband. Mattie helps her feel, Wells explains, that she belongs to a large tightly knit community of other miserable abused women “...Who too had to find a way to exercise the pain” (qtd. in Vinson 10). Ciel, while being rocked by Mattie, learns how to confront her memories of agony, externalize them, and disregard her pain. Ann Fowell Stanford describes the rocking scene as “a movement from a larger unframed history of women’s brutalization and, oppression into the specific frame of her [Ciel’s] own life” (qtd. in Vinson 10). Thanks to Mattie, Ciel falls into a trance and experiences a mystical rebirth as Mattie rocks her. Mattie rocks Ciel

into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother’s arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children’s entrails off laboratory floors. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on. She

rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it—a sligh silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled—and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (103)

Mattie baths Ciel and puts her to sleep after the extraordinary rocking scene. Released from her pains and restored “to the world of the living” (Puhr 520), Mattie, the healer, is sure that Ciel is ready for the “morning that would come” and bring change with it (105). Mattie’s demeanor with Ciel equates the one of the many black women who engage in consciousnessraising activities. The latter, hooks explains, relies on women bonding and creating sites where women “uncover and openly reveal the depths of their intimate wounds” (hooks, *Feminsim Is* 7-8). Ultimately, women are not only healed, but also gain strength to challenge social oppressions. Similarly, Ciel survives and becomes determined to lead a life based on self-assertion. Thus, she leaves Brewster Place and goes to San Francisco where she finds a promising job and a reliable supportive man.

#### **Lorraine and Theresa: Victims of Conservative Gender Roles**

Unlike the previous stories in the novel that deal with the struggle of a unique woman against the intersecting gender and racial forces that thwart her sense of selfhood, the story entitled “The Two” depicts the fight of two women, Lorraine and Theresa, to protect their love and existence. As lesbians, they fight the conventional social codes that smother their liaison. Theresa is self-sufficient and satisfied with herself as being a lesbian, but Lorraine is mortified of being a lesbian and constantly seeks the acceptance of others. Despite their differences, Lorraine and Theresa represent the ultimate stanchness and love of a woman to woman. Their move to Brewster Place is the outcome of their determination to protect their couple and escape the discrimination they face in a middle-class neighborhood they used to live in.

#### ***Lorraine and theresa’s rejection by the women of brewster place: when the oppressed becomes an oppressor***

The residents of Brewster Place are displeased with the existence of the lesbians as creatures endangering the conventional structure of family. The latter mirrors the social limitations in defining a woman who is accepted only if conforming to the communal pattern. Within this framework, Collins explains that in a society that views black women’s chief mission is “inspiring Black men”, “keeping the house”, and “building blocks of the nation”; any violation or failure to fulfill these functions will result in censure (*From Black* 110). Consequently, Lesbians are viewed as a challenge to the premises of the social system by rejecting the “conserva-

tive gender ideology essential for Black families, communities, and the Black nation" (Collins, *From Black* 111).

Lorraine, fond of communal acceptance and social uplift, asserts that: "Black people were all in the same boat-she'd come to realize this even more since they had moved to Brewster- and if they didn't row together, they would sink together" (142). Unfortunately for her, once rumors spread about her and Theresa as being lesbians, all the community rejects them. Theresa kept on reminding Lorraine of their difference and warning her about the hostility of the residents of Brewster place, but Lorraine has always believed that they are her people and she is not different from the other women. In that, she ponders "why should she feel different from the people she lived around?" (142).

The women's attitude towards Lorraine and Theresa reveals their docile, submissive, and subordinate state. On the one hand, the fact that they cannot tolerate Lorraine and Theresa's love portends "an alliance with the sexist ideology of their own oppressors – both black and white" (Walker 66). On the other, their rejection and marginalization of the two reveal their illusive vision as being superior and privileged for being heterosexual. On this issue, Collins explains that lacking any racial or social privilege, black women often consider straightness and heterosexuality as their unique privilege (*Black Feminist* 126).

During a meeting organized by Kiswana, instead of dealing with the injustice of the landlord and the miserable conditions the people of Brewster Place are living in, Sophia, one of the women in Brewster Place, says "what we should be discussin... is that bad element that done moved in this block amongst decent people" (139-40). Believing that the sexual orientation of the two is a greater evil than their miserable conditions, the abuse of the landlord, the crimes of C.C. Baker and his gang, Sophie like the other women in Brewster Place reveal not only their inherent homophobia but mostly the pre-conceived ideas they are made to believe in. These women are at the same time oppressors and victims; their condemnation of the two is the outcome of their own oppression.

Furthermore, the women's rejection of Lorraine and Theresa reflects their insecurity. Because of Lorraine and Theresa's independence and rejection of men, the other women perceive their relationship as a judgment and condemnation against them for being dominated by men. Sophie and the other women's condemnation of Lorraine and Theresa on the basis of their sexual orientation mirrors the social views of the time. In sum, sexuality was one aspect of the intersectional system of oppression. In the sixties, seventies and early eighties, while heterosexuality was deemed to be normal, homosexuality was believed to be deviant on the basis of binary thinking. Heterosexuality becomes one of the pillars of the hegemonic ideology. As such, just like what happens with Lorraine and Theresa, lesbians were stigmatized, sequestered, and rejected (Collins, *Black Feminist* 129).

Despite her religious beliefs and piety, it is again Mattie who defends the two lesbians. Sophia, knowing the might and impact Mattie has on other women in the community, tries to convince her of the abominableness of the two referring to the Bible. But Mattie answers her: "My Bible also

says in First Peter not to be a busybody in other people's matters, Sophie. And the way I see it, if they ain't botherin with what goes on in my place, why should I bother 'bout what goes on in theirs?" (140). Unlike the narrow vision of the other women who reduce Lorraine and Theresa's love into a mere sexual act, Mattie appreciates the bond, serenity and power that this love generates. This is explained when Mattie discusses the significance and essence of loving women with Etta: "Well, I've loved women, too. There was Miss Eva and Ciel, and even as ornery as you can get, I've loved you practically all my life... I've loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man. ... And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did" (141).

Mattie's declaration is just an affirmation of her approval of the lesbians' relationship. According to Larry Andrews, the support and power the lesbians' relationship generates remind Mattie of the various relationships she has had with different women. Interestingly, she asserts that her relationships with other women, just like the one of the lesbians, surpass any relationship she has ever had with men "in the distorted world of black relationships" (287).

### **C.C. Baker's hypermasculinity and the right of domination**

The women of the community are not the only ones who reject the presence of the lesbians; the men of the community also do. hooks describes black men's hatred and obsession with women as an outcome of a forced racist policy that encouraged men "to phobically focus on women as their enemy" in order to "blindly allow other forces –the truly powerful de-humanizing elements in American life-to strip them daily of their humanity" (*Ain't I* 114). As such, being themselves subjects to racial deprivation, C. C. Baker and his friends, standing for young men in Brewster Place, pour their frustration, worthlessness, and anger on Lorraine. In that, Naylor states:

These young men always moved in a pack, or never without two or three. They needed the others continually near to verify their existence. ... C.C. Baker was greatly disturbed by the thought of Lorraine. He knew of only one way to deal with women other than his mother. Before he had learned exactly how women gave birth, he knew how to please or punish or extract favors from them by the execution of what lay curled behind his fly. It was his lifeline to that part of his being that sheltered his self-respect. And the thought of any woman who lay beyond the length of its power was a threat. (161-62)

Because of her exclusion from the community and her lesbianism, Lorraine becomes the "weakest element" in the "cycle of oppression" and turns paradoxically into a threat that should be exterminated (Walker 67). From a similar standpoint, Collins explains that lesbianism does only instigate exclusion from the patriarchal hegemonic society, but most importantly renders lesbians vulnerable creatures open to males' domination and violence. Moving from believing that sexuality is related to an individual's "biological make up" to believing that sexuality is rooted in "a system of power", many African-American people perceive that

“heterosexism can be defined as the belief in the inherent superiority of one form of sexual expression over another and thereby the right to dominate” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 126-28). It is because of C.C. Baker and his gang’s belief in their “right to dominate” Lorraine that they express their loathing and desire to punish her through violence (Collins, *Black Feminist* 128).

Kiswana becomes infuriated because of C.C. Baker when he harasses Lorraine. Thus, she determinably defends Lorraine. C.C. Baker, like most men in a patriarchal society, “fear[s] and resent[s] women who do not assume traditional passive roles” (hooks, *Ain’t I 79*). Thus, Kiswana’s strength and determination accentuate his sense of insecurity and fuel his desire to assert his power and “verify his existence” (161). It is Lorraine, later on, who pays the price of Kiswana’s defiance and C. C. Baker’s obsession with male domination.

“Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence- human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide” (70). Eventually, C.C. and his gang brutally rape Lorraine revenging their denied masculinity. hooks perceives black men’s violence as an allusion to “a positive expression of masculinity” fostered by “insecure feelings about their selfhood.” She further explains that many young black men have the impulse to show their peers that they are bold, machos, and willing to commit violent acts. Unsurprisingly, within a sexist society that “fosters, condones, and supports male’s violence”, black men become inclined to direct “frustrated aggression” towards those without power (*Ain’t I* 104-05). As such, C.C. Baker and his gang perceive Lorraine’s lesbianism as a violation of their power and “an attack on male [their] right to access women” (Rich 23). Violence becomes the only means to reinstate their manliness and assuage their frustration. They find it compulsory to correct and fix Lorraine’s deviant and subversive orientation through rape (Barnett 133).

#### ***Lorraine’s rape: a lost soul and a failed female bonding***

Theresa has always told Lorraine to be proud of her lesbianism as a part of her selfhood and whole existence. So, when C.C. and his gang rape Lorraine, they aim at inserting their masculinity, punishing her for lesbianism, and above all demolishing an important aspect of her selfhood. Eventually Lorraine survives, but it is her body not her soul that does. According to Pamela Barnett, “the rape socially sexes Lorraine, reducing her to only her wounded inside, thus insisting that she is essentially female and no different from the other women” stripping her of essential part of her identity (124). Evidently, After Lorraine’s rape, the narrator describes the scene when Mattie sees Lorraine saying that she sees “the body crawling up the alley” (172) suggesting that all what remains of Lorraine is her body but by no means her soul.

Lorraine’s rape is a warning and a protest against women’s failing bonding. While Naylor depicts the positive impact of women’s support and union through the stories of Mattie, Etta, Cora Lee, and Lucielia, Lorraine’s rape portrays the appalling impact of this lost union. Naylor in an

interview with William Goldstein explains that “in the case of Lorraine there was no woman on that block willing to help her and she was in trouble. . . . And she had no one to go to” (qtd. in Vinson 11). Tragically, the women whose sense of selfhood is already endangered failed to help or support Lorraine—worse, eliminate her from their community. Audre Lorde, in her “I Am Your Sister. Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities” maintains that “lesbophobia and heterosexism” create more boundaries and differences among black women causing “distancing”, “misunderstandings”, and divisions. The latter will hinder the implementation of the ideals of sisterhood and the reclamation of their rights (qtd. in Davies 13). Similarly, the women of Brewster Place are paralyzed and unable to fight back their real enemy because of their homophobia. Mattie is the only woman who is conscious enough of impact of this divisionist attitude perpetuating homophobia. Her acceptance of Lorraine and Theresa despite their sexual orientation echoes hooks call for “push[ing] against the boundaries of heterosexism to create spaces where women, all women, irrespective of their sexual identity and/ or preference, could and can be as free as they want to be (hooks, *Feminsim Is* 98-99).

#### ***Killing ben: Reinstating justice and summoning female voices***

Seeing “Ben as part of a continuum of male violence” and a passive father who witnesses his daughter’s rape (Awkward 60), Lorraine with her aching body, wrecked soul, and repressive anger, conjures up all the pain she has gone through and kills Ben. Her immediate response to the pain inflicted on her reflects her desire of agency, rebellion, and deliverance. Though her raped black body is ravaged and her soul is aching, Lorraine finally decides to withstand the misogynic oppression she has been suffering from. Killing Ben is an act of rebellion, but above all an act that reveals Lorraine’s determination to survive despite the atrocities she has gone through. At one moment, the act of rape reduces Lorraine into a mere body without any soul, but soon that emptiness is replaced with an eagerness to act. The act of killing Ben is not just an atonement for her pain and rape, but also an act to inflict some sort of justice. Similarly, Virginia Fowler maintains that Lorraine’s murder of Ben “provides a kind of poetic justice for all the women who have been assaulted by men in the course of the novel” (54).

Though both are tragic, Lorraine’s rape and the moment of killing Ben are very important and intense in the sense that they alter the course of action in the novel. One the one hand, killing Ben awakens Lorraine’s desire for survival and resistance ;on the other, it unites all the women of community. After all, the women come to realize that “what happens to Lorraine could happen to all of them and has indeed happened to many of them, albeit in milder forms” (Walker 54). When Mattie sees that Lorraine has killed Ben, she runs to her to prevent further harm. Interestingly enough, this moment is a one of affinity, fusion, and comfort. “Mattie screams went ricocheting in Lorraine’s head, and she joined them with her own as she brought the brick down again, splitting his forehead and crushing his temple, rendering his brains just a bit

more useless than hers were now. Arms grabbed her around the waist" (173). It is the first time for Lorraine that she feels such a propinquity and understanding. It is different from her relationship with Theresa or Kiswana; the scene with Mattie is so intimate and overwhelming that the thoughts and brains of the women become one. Laura Nicosia describes this unifying moment between Mattie and Lorraine through "their shared acts of primal screaming" as one of healing and of "melding terrors" - shared terrors of social and adrocentric oppression (185).

Even though this moment of sharing is somehow late to prevent Lorraine's tragedy, it does succeed in bringing all the women together. They finally accept her as a woman, comprehend their connection with her, and sympathize with her. They come to understand, as Naylor explains in an interview with Goldstein, that "Lorraine wasn't raped because she is a lesbian" but because she was a woman. "And, regardless of race, regardless of social status, regardless of sexual preference, the commonality is the female experience" (qtd. in Vinson 11). Having their own lives and memories affected by the racist and sexist dominant ideologies, Lorraine's rape becomes an evidence and a collective reminder of the necessity to unite against these intersectional oppressions (Vinson 11).

### TOWARDS FEMALE BONDING

In the novel, memory plays a central role in healing the women and helping them to find a firm sense of selfhood. However, Lorraine's communal rejection, her rape and her lost memories aggravate her trauma. Lorraine is unable to retain her memories as her "screams tried to break through... But the tough rubbery flesh sent them vibrating back into her brain, first shaking lifeless the cells that nurtured her memory" (171). Not only is it that Lorraine is unable to retain her memories, but even if she does no one in that stringent misogynic community will believe her. In that, when one of C.C.'s gang is afraid of Lorraine telling the others about their crime, C.C. Baker replies: "Man, how she gonna prove it? Your dick ain't got no fingerprints" (171).

### A Shared Dream and Shared Memories: Re(membering) of the Women of Brewster Place

Eventually, every woman in Brewster Place "dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress. She had come to them in the midst of the cold sweat of a nightmare, or had hung around the edges of fitful sleep" (176). The feeling of concern and union reaches even Ciel who has left Brewster Place even before the coming of Lorraine. In that, she says: "...Something about that wall and Ben. And there was a woman who was supposed to be me, I guess. She didn't look exactly like me, but inside I felt it was me. ...And something bad had happened to me by the wall- I mean her- something bad had happened to her" (176). Ciel's connection and affinity with Lorraine though never knowing her reinforces the idea of women's communion.

Besides that, this magical sororal bond suggests a sharing of collective memory- a memory of trauma. It is not

surprising that the women were not present but share the same memory because as Marianne Hirsh explains: "memory can be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event" (106). After all, the shared memories and dreams reveal women's union and recognition of a common menace. Furthermore, they function as "a healing device and a tool for redemption" leading women to engage in "an active process" of "interpreting and further crystallising shared past experiences (particularly trauma)... thus providing opportunities for transforming the pain they experienced and for further healing" (Wang 309). Sharing memories and "re-membering", Davies explains, bring back together the disparate members of the society. It is this re-membering that crosses the spatial, racial, and sexual boundaries and unites peoples against a common menace (12). As such, in the novel, trauma and pain as well as shared memories and eventual re-membering are gradual changes that reveal women's consciousness about their status as victimized black women and the inevitability of making a change. Sensing a sort of power in their union, the women just like in their collective memory come to realize the need to establish their selfhood collectively.

### Mattie Deferred Dream: a Collective Consciousness Reappropriating the Female Self and Community

Besides the women's union through dreaming of Lorraine's rape, Naylor once more gathers the women in a dream about the block party objecting the racist and sexist oppressions. The women, under the rain, destroy the wall that symbolizes their collective racist and sexist oppression as Naylor explains in an interview with Bonetti (qtd. in Vinson 5). The women's attempt to break the wall, which is a symbol of their oppression and of their connection, indicates a drastic determination about overthrowing the intersectional oppressive forces that curb their freedom and massacre their individuality. The action of breaking the wall allows the women to survive and exist collectively. It is no surprise that at the moment of breaking the wall it starts raining. Just like the rain which is a symbol of purification, refinement, and rebirth, the women's lives are purified and a nascent selfhood is remarkable.

Many critics find that withstanding repression and establishing a selfhood through a dream is deceiving. While Laura Nicosia, for instance, perceives devoting the ending chapter to a dream as "a punishment for women's homophobia and division" (191), and Michael Awkward sees that ending the seven different stories with a dream "deepens the sense of fragmentation in the novel" (62), I believe that having Mattie uniting the women in her dream is a reflection of her actual deeds along the novel. While in the previous chapters of the novel, Mattie helps each woman to get out from her misery by relying basically on memory, she eventually gathers up all the women through a collective memory and a collective dream to fight against a greater evil- the racist and sexist horrors that ruined their lives. The self-sustaining and resilient Mattie, eventually, mobilizes all the women to assert their selfhood.

According to Karen Castellucci Cox, Mattie's dream becomes "a symbolic act" that fuels women's "communal memory", "collective consciousness", and shared "terror and rage" resulting in the emergence of a "communal alliance" between the women who are "galvanized into action" to break the wall and enact their agency of emancipation and pursuit of selfhood (151-64). While in the previous dream about Lorraine's rape every woman individually envisions Lorraine's suffering and identifies herself with her, Mattie's final dream gathers all the women and presents them tightly acting together. The women of Brewster Place move gradually from considering their personal suffering to sharing their collective oppression, memories, and traumas. Furthermore, the move from a shared dream into a shared action is very significant in the sense that it portrays women's ongoing efforts towards their union and redemption. They come to understand the power of their communion stemming initially from their shared memories and dreams; only a selfhood born within a communal frame can survive and challenge the cycle of abuse they are subject to.

Noticing that "there is still blood on this wall", Mattie calls out: "We gonna need some help here" (186). Though Kiswana protests that "there no blood on those bricks... You know there's no blood" (187), she ends up convinced of the ugliness of the scene as Ciel puts the brick in Kiswana's hand. "Kiswana looked down at the wet stone and her rain-soaked braids leaked onto the surface, spreading the dark stain. She wept and ran to throw the brick spotted with her blood out into the avenue" (187). Lorraine's blood becomes her own blood. After all, every woman senses that it is her own blood. Even Theresa, who previously rejects and is rejected by the other women, joins the women at this moment. Cora Lee gives Theresa a brick saying: "Here, please, take these. I'm so tired" (187). All the women, despite their differences, engage in breaking the wall. The women obey their mother figure and spiritual leader by breaking the wall passing the bricks "hand to hand, table to table, until the bricks flew out of Brewster Place" (186). Interestingly, breaking the wall becomes a "communal catharsis", and a primary thrust towards women's quest for change and selfhood (Walker 68).

As such, by highlighting shared dreams, communal memories, and collective actions, Naylor maintains that the quest of selfhood can be fulfilled only collectively. As the women join their memories, stories, dreams, and suffering, "they begin to more thoroughly understand their individual subjugation... which then prompts communal support, reclaimed agency, and resistance" (Vinson 2). They cease to exist as victimized, shadowy, and othered individuals in a biased community and start to live as individuals who belong to a tightly knit community that allows them to hone their own personal future and face the racist and sexist ideologies. As such, Naylor reveals the potential of women's union, in general, not only in forging their sense of selfhood but also in amending their surrounding.

Breaking the wall marks the culmination and the beginning of women's continuous struggle to undermine the

intersectional oppression they suffer from. Using Langston Hughes' poem, "Dream Deferred", the novel's epilogue corroborates this idea. Not only does the epilogue imply that this dream may be realized later on, but also does connote that women's survival and resistance require constant strength and exertion. Similarly, Jill L. Matus explains that "Naylor inscribes an ideology that affirms deferral; the capacity to defer and to dream is endorsed as life-availing" (138). Naylor is an exceptional writer par excellence; exceptional in her vision of selfhood, rebellion against oppression, and even ending her novel. When asked about the significance of the novel's open ending, Naylor answers Angels Carabi: "This is going to depend on the reader. When she [Mattie] wakes up, the party is going to take place, but the clouds are coming and you know it's going to rain. Is this going to be a deferred dream? Well, I decided to let each reader decide" (qtd. in Vinson 14). From this spectrum, the novel's open ending is evocative in the sense that it conveys Naylor's view about women's struggle as well as her vision about community. Naylor, as Jill Matus avers, "resists a history that seeks to impose a closure on Black American dreams, recording also in her deferred ending a reluctance to see 'community' as a static or finished work" (63). Naylor's vision of Brewster Place as a black community corroborates Collin's positive perception of the "ghettoization". She explains that while this ghettoization aims at imposing racial and social injustices, black neighborhoods become a separate space to "craft distinctive oppositional knowledges" (*Black Feminist* 9-10).

## CONCLUSION

The various women's stories in the novel give the impression that the novel is a narrative about victimized passive women, but the story entitled "the Block Party" makes the change. What is striking is that readers do not see a clear struggle from the beginning against the social bias the women suffer from; all what the stories portray is the women's attempts to survive. By postponing the whole action until the end of the novel, Naylor gives the impression that the novel is about to start. It makes readers look forward to what is going to happen later on. In this sense, Naylor seems to deal with a postponed quest for selfhood. But once the women engage in this quest, it proves to be revolutionary and intense. Crystallizing women's revolt through a dream does by no means reduce its credibility. The dream is, in fact, very suggestive in the sense that it opens vast horizons for the reader to perceive the multifaceted aspects of the notion of selfhood. Dealing with seven different women, describing the details of their lives and troubles, and uniting them at the very end of the novel reveal Naylor's perception of selfhood as the outcome of a profound empathy and communion between women after endured torment and pain because of the acute oppressive and hostile social system. It is their selfless love, or as the Greek philosopher Plato names it "*philia*" that enables the women to survive and unite. And only their union and establishment of a matriarchal community can secure a self-assertive selfhood.

It is no surprise that *The Women of Brewster Place* proves "to be as significant in its way as Southern writer William Faulkner's mythic Yoknapatawpha County or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*" (Labin 3). After all, the realistic portrayal of the novel renders it more of a social treatise on the impact of poverty, violence, racial and gender segregation. Furthermore, the realistic depiction is conspicuous when Naylor uses the stereotypical images about black womanhood to describe her women characters: the mother figure, the welfare mother, the Amazonic, and the Jezebel. However, each time she eventually liberates the women from these limiting clichés. After all, her realistic depiction of the diversity of the black urban woman's experience, struggle, limitations, and possible options to throw back mainstream gender and racial ideals inspires many black women in the real life to reappropriate their lives and pursue their dreams. This study has shown that each individual black woman's life has had many obstacles and challenges to overcome, but could not have been overcome without the aid of other women who have undergone different yet, paradoxically, similar circumstances. Hence, a communal selfhood created only through the bond of sisterhood.

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