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The Women of Brewster Place : A Dream Deferred and Unactualized

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Abstract

Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is a landmark novel of black female empowerment, yet even as the novel affirms the necessity for black women to band together, Brewster Place simultaneously points to the idea that systemic racism and sexism may be a hurdle over which the community cannot leap—other systemic changes must be implemented before true equality can be achieved. This novel forces readers to grapple with questions that may present unsavory answers: Is it possible to eradicate systemic racism? To what degree do the subjugated have the ability to change the prejudicial system in which they live? Are racism and sexism innate problems to American society, or are there aspects of human nature that cause division? Even as Naylor presents her diverse, vibrant, multigenerational community of African American women, creating an aura of hope that permeates each story cycle, the idea that hope is an elusive—potentially impossible—expectation is present from the novel's inception as Naylor frames *Brewster Place* with Langston Hughes's "A Dream Deferred," and then chooses to end with the final story cycle being presented as a dream—a mere vision of complete black, female camaraderie that breaks down systemic barriers, a fantasy that is "No more yielding but a dream" (Naylor 126).

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

The Women of Brewster Place: A Dream Deferred and Unactualized

by

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UNACTUALIZED

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“What do we do about self-hatred among black folks?”

“We have not climbed that mountain, have we?”

-Gloria Naylor responding to Ethel Morgan Smith in an interview in Callaloo

Introduction

Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* presents a complex novel that intertwines seven African American women and establishes a strong matrilineal culture. Naylor, reflecting on the women who inspired her as a writer, credits a tradition of popular black female writers as the inspiration behind her first novel:

It was in my college years that I began to learn about writers like Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston. Ntozake Shange was extremely popular at that point, both for the feminist critics as well as for the public at large, because *For Colored Girls* was playing on Broadway when I was still in college. So having those role models around me helped when I began to feel that I could be a writer. Being a writer, then, was not an unrealizable dream; it was a very plausible goal, because these women were there. They had done it, and I could perhaps add my voice to that whole stream of consciousness. (179)

Throughout *The Women of Brewster Place*, hereafter referred to as *TWBP*, one can almost hear Hurston’s Janie echo in Etta Mae Johnson’s need to escape her roots or in Kiswana Browne’s desire to raise up the black community. Morrison’s strong characterization of African American women with powerful voices echoes throughout Mattie’s visceral cries that bring Lucielia back to life and Mrs. Browne’s indomitable defense of her heritage. Shange’s seven protagonists give shape to Naylor’s narrative structure which features seven Brewster Place women. Naylor’s hope to “add [her] voice

to that whole stream of consciousness” is amplified in *TWBP*; instead of one voice, the seven different women of Brewster Place add to the black female experience in the 1970s and 1980s after the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements.

Naylor threads this matrilineal and intergenerational lineage throughout *TWBP* as she gives voice to dynamic black women who have complex, warm, and sometimes poignant relationships with one another. In many ways it appears as though *TWBP* is a novel of empowerment for black women: Mattie, the hub of Brewster, folds each woman into the community of intergenerational African American women, gently supporting Etta in her quest for self-actualization, thundering supplications and reigniting the will to live in Lucielia, and thoughtfully defending Lorraine and Theresa’s relationship at the Brewster community meeting. However, Naylor shatters this hope that black sisterhood can conquer all, a hope that is suspended throughout each story cycle. Unlike her literary forerunners whose writings unambivalently affirm African American women and their ability to conquer problems set before them, *TWBP* equivocates as to whether black women are able to rise above their circumstances, presenting a narrative that is both celebratory yet jaded. Naylor’s ultimately presents a systemic critique that true gender and racial equality is impossible in modern day America due to the systemic sexism and racism throughout the predominant white culture and the divisive colorism and homophobia that permeates the black community.

I. Literary and Symbolic Structures within TWBP

Naylor frames her polyvocal community of women with Langston Hughes’s poem “A Dream Deferred,” and this poem gives shape to the novel, pointing to the idea that *TWBP* is a novel set to examine the long deferral of black equality. Hughes’s poem

wonders what happens when a dream is put off: it has seven lines of hypotheses clustered together that flow unimpeded, then a break that gives the reader a short pause, two more lines that form a penultimate theory, and then a pause that springboards the reader into the final, italicized conjecture: “*Or does it explode?*” The structure of the novel mimics the poem’s organization as the seven women in six stories end in a rhetorical, nebulous ending that mirrors the What-If strategy of the poem.

In addition to structural similarities between the poem and novel, the content of Hughes’s poem, which investigates the effects of unactualized dreams, parallels *TWBP*’s “The Block Party” dream ending. Mattie’s vision of resilient sisterhood championing over the forces that seek to tear Brewster Place’s African American women down and apart from one another is grounded merely in dreams of wish fulfillment. “A Dream Deferred” disinters dreams and probes how the inability of aspirations to be fully, permanently buried coalesces into dreams resurfacing through various means such as “fester[ing]” until they overrun the wound, “stink[ing]” and spreading the stench of decay, or “explod[ing]” so that all in the dreamer’s vicinity are impacted (3, 5, and 10). *TWBP*’s dream sequence ending similarly excavates suspended dreams. There is no actual resolution and closure for the Brewster Place women mentioned in *TWBP*, so Mattie, in her dream, creates a form of closure for herself and the five remaining women of Brewster Place. After Lorraine’s rape and murder, the women and young girls of Brewster Place are left with “nightmares” and a shadowy, heavy sense of doom that “creep[s] upon them in the dark,” keeping them awake at night (176). Mattie envisions an ending that brings the women together, blending themselves so profoundly together that even their blood comingles. Cora Lee’s youngest daughter, Sonya, is found “crouching in

front of the wall, scraping at the base with a smudged Popsicle stick,” inciting Cora Lee to notice “a dark stain on the edge of the brick” that begins to “widen and deepen.” Cora Lee identifies the stain as blood and begins feverishly digging the brick out of the wall of Brewster Place, “dropp[ing] to her knees ... [taking out a] Popsicle stick and ... digging around the loose mortar near the brick.” After calling on Mattie and the other Brewster Place women to help, Cora Lee claws at the blood-stained bricks, using her “fingernails” as the Popsicle stick breaks, pouring her own blood on top of Lorraine’s as the “gravelly cement lacerate[s] her knuckles” (185). Mattie’s dream of black, female unity, however, is unactualized, the ending of *TWBP* circling back to Hughes’s poem in which dreams are “deferred.” Mattie has a dream, a dream that is as ephemeral as Mercutio’s Queen Mab in his speech on dreams, Mercutio’s words headlining Cora Lee’s chapter. Dreams are “begot of nothing but vain fantasy” and are “as thin of substance as the air” (107). Hughes’s initial question posed within the first line of his poem, “*What happens to a dream deferred?*”, remains unanswered as Mattie’s dream ending in *TWBP* never materializes in reality.

While Hughes’s poem frames Naylor’s novel of seven stories, bathing the upcoming novel in the expectation of deferred dreams, the story cycles Naylor employs throughout the novel serve to detach the Brewster Place women from one another. As each story breaks and then another begins, there is a swath of white space between the narratives, serving as a visible—and colored—boundary between the women. Castellucci Cox connects the wall that separates Brewster Place from the greater city community to the solid breaks between narrative sections:

The sinister brick wall that isolates the home of these women from the “valid” community beyond the barricade seems an apt metaphor in a text using the story cycle form. That each woman is enclosed and isolated in her own story, both literally and figuratively, is underscored by the insular condition of stories within the cycle. The gaps between stories come to represent the chasms in relationships the women of Brewster Place experience as obstacles to community. (162)

The literal separation of one woman from the next on a completely different page, each in her own discrete chapter, is a physical representation of what each experiences in the story. In an interview with *Callaloo* editor Charles Rowell, Naylor expressed that when she began writing *TWBP* she was unsure whether she could pen an entire novel-length story. Her solution was the story cycles: “My first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, was interconnected short stories. I told myself, well, I may not be able to write a whole book, but I can write one story. And then, well, I can write another story. The idea of sitting down and writing a novel was too intimidating for me in my early years” (181). The perhaps unintended consequence of this narrative choice is that the women are separated sharply as their story cycle ends, only reconnecting in Mattie’s wishful block party dream. As Naylor progressed as a writer, she developed a more nuanced approach to narrative separation. Larry Andrews examines the progression of Naylor’s writing from *The Women of Brewster Place*, to *Linden Hills*, and finally to *Mama Day*, and he notes that “*Mama Day* arrives at a more complex vision of sisterhood” (5) and this complexity of sisterhood is exhibited in the how the story lines commingle figuratively and literally. Andrews notes that the relationships between characters Naylor creates in *Mama Day* have more depth and history, yet the physical representation allows the

characters to come closer together, too. In *Mama Day*, characters are separated by a mere half inch that serves to delineate the person speaking—there is not the same substantial boundary found between the women in *TWBP*. These spaces serve to signify that there are some gaps that cannot be traversed: the white page is a barrier, much like the white community, and despite individual attempts to traverse the boundary, the women are disempowered in what they can accomplish while so systemically divided.

The boundaries between the Brewster Place women mimic the division between the reader and characters as Naylor makes use of a narrative gap during especially poignant moments. Throughout *TWBP* there are two types of narrative gaps, one that signifies the passage of time and the other that cuts the reader off from the unfolding storyline. At the inception of the novel, readers find gaps peppered throughout “Dawn,” and these spaces mark time’s passage. Brewster Place’s conception and birth are marked down and future plans made: “The city was growing and prospering; there were plans for a new boulevard just north of the street, and it seemed as if Brewster Place was to become part of the main artery of town.” Naylor then inserts three-quarters of an inch of space as time passes and updates readers that the plans to integrate Brewster Place into the heart of the city did not come to fruition: “The boulevard became a major business district, but in order to control traffic some of the auxiliary streets had to be walled off.” (2).

However, as Naylor applies the modernist gap in which an active reader is expected to fill timeline gaps, readers are distanced from the characters, echoing the larger gaps used between story cycles. Mattie’s chapter begins with her arrival at Brewster Place and then flashes back to her early life in the South. As her story unfolds,

Naylor develops Mattie's fatal flaw: her enabling of her son Basil. After Mattie pays the unrepentant—and accidentally murderous—Basil's bail money, she sits down in the darkening kitchen to wait for her son's return. The mood is ominous, the narrative pebbles trailing toward this end finally running out, and there is a narrative break. This break leaves Mattie alone at her kitchen table and then picks up after the space with Mattie coming out of a reverie as a mover asks to be let into her new Brewster Place apartment (54). Readers have been aching for Mattie to see what Eva Turner and Basil's lawyer have been hinting to Mattie for 19 pages, that Mattie's permissiveness has undermined Basil's personal growth. Thus, when Naylor short circuits Mattie's story just as it all unravels, readers are cut off from experiencing Mattie's sorrow and final clarity, cutting off access to Mattie and expected emotional catharsis. Michael F. Lynch observes that Mattie is a changed maternal figure throughout the other story cycles, indicating that Mattie recognizes her error with Basil: "Correcting her approach with Basil, Mattie offers her sisters and daughters her generous compassion and support, but lets them be responsible for their own decisions" (187-188). Mattie's story begins the linked novel and is the hub of the Brewster Place wheel. She connects the women to one another and features in small increments in most of their stories (Nicosia 2020). In the brief moments in which she is called upon to mentor the younger women, she does so succinctly: "It was rare that Mattie ever spoke more than two sentences to anybody about anything. She didn't have to. She chose her words with the grinding precision of a diamond cutter's drill" (91). As Mattie's time in the other women's story cycles are short, the relationship between Mattie and reader does not develop. Her chapter is the time where readers grow attached to Mattie, so to truncate the relationship in her moment of actualization

maintains distance from the character. Outside her story cycle, the most poignant moment to which readers cling to Mattie is when she saves Luciella. In this deeply sorrowful moment, Mattie and Luciella become alive. These moving moments grow the reader-character relationship. While perhaps Naylor uses the narrative gap to shield Mattie from readers' view and allow Mattie a private moment of grief as she considers her role in Basil's undoing, the divide also shrouds Mattie from readers, prompting a small separation between readers and the matriarch of Brewster Place.

Yet Naylor's modernist approach of stitching the novel together through short stories serves to present the reader various access points to this historical community of black women, using Mattie as an anchor stitch that holds the other women fast to the literary tapestry Naylor weaves. Each woman represents a portion of recent African American history. Each woman has her own history and experience as a black American woman, and through this diverse representation, Naylor weaves together an embroidery of black, female community. Castellucci Cox concisely details the historical, geographical, and sexual significance that each Brewster Place woman brings to *TWBP*:

Naylor overtly engages historical issues when she ascribes specific phases of African American history to each of her seven stories, representing eras as disparate as the post-Reconstruction period and the 1960s Black Movement. Mattie is the daughter of the defeated plantation South, the child of slavery who joins the migration North to a more apparent freedom. Etta Mae, a consciousness born of the Harlem Renaissance, hears her own outcry in the blues of Billie Holiday. Kiswana, clearly a product of the Black Movement of the 1960s, claims her heritage through African names and artifacts more "authentic" in her view

than her family's history. Luciela and Cora Lee inherit an inner-city world that is both physically and emotionally impoverished. Theresa and Lorraine, finally, are the victims of a contemporary world which triply oppresses them as women, lesbians, and blacks. (162)

Mattie is the natural matriarch and hub of the Brewster Place women as her age and experience allow her to counsel or come alongside each younger woman. As the “daughter of the defeated plantation South,” her intersectionality represents the oppression that African Americans faced at the hand of the slave holders and repression that women experience from a patriarchal society. And, practically, Mattie's failed parenting—and subsequent realization of this shortcoming—of Basil sets her in a position of hard-earned wisdom.

While Kiswana is the only Brewster Place woman who does not interact with Mattie in her story cycle, standing in her place is Kiswana's mother, who has the same claims to intersectionality and wisdom but comes with a different history. Clothed in “gold and ebony,” Mrs. Browne reminds Kiswana of her exceptional lineage: ““My grandmother ... was a full-blooded Iroquois, and my grandfather was a free black from a long line of journeymen who had lived in Connecticut since the establishment of the colonies. And my father was a Bajan who came to this country as a cabin boy on a merchant mariner”” (86). Threading in Mrs. Browne's heritage allows Naylor to weave in more African—and Native—American experiences into her novel of intergenerational women. Mrs. Browne's multifaceted bloodline presents a stolid counter perspective to Kiswana's passionate “product of the Black Movement of the 1960s” arguments for rapid change.

Kiswana's contempt for societal structures resounds throughout Etta Mae's story in which she defies the system through her sexuality, refusing to pander to societal expectations as she refuses to settle down; yet Etta Mae, despite her constant movement from man to man and city to city, finds her anchor in Mattie. Etta Mae's story cycle features six songs, four of which are sung by Billie Holiday and featured prominently during the Harlem Renaissance. Through the songs, Naylor threads a parallel that corresponds to Etta Mae's story.

The first set of lyrics, "My Man" by Holiday, echo as Etta Mae "never forgot" the wan craving of sensual city life she first encountered during her initial city foray (55). After she encounters the usual "self-righteous" stares from the Brewster Place neighbors, Holiday's "Ain't Nobody's Business" features as Etta Mae boldly "carrie[s] herself across the street—head high and eyes fixed unwaveringly" (57). The song/story correspondence continues with Holiday's "God Bless the Child" feeling apropos as Etta Mae laughingly regales Mattie with her recent escapade in which she stole her ex-boyfriend's car, and "Strange Fruit" appears just in time for the narrative to allude an attempted rape at the hands of a white man (59, 60). Etta Mae's is a "consciousness born of the Harlem Renaissance, hear[ing] her own outcry in the blues of Billie Holiday." Ella Fitzgerald's 1959 "Detour Ahead" breaks this Billie Holiday and Harlem Renaissance pattern, but the effect speaks to both Etta Mae's aging and to the sexual "game" Etta Mae finally loses (68). The narration reveals that Etta Mae is a "middle-aged woman" as she "slump[s]" with a "broken spirit" by the dead-end wall of Brewster Place (73, 74). Just as Etta Mae's story is coming to a defeated ending, however, Naylor weaves Mattie back into Etta Mae's narrative, a constant friend who uplifts Etta Mae by "playing her records"

and “waiting up for her.” Mattie’s apartment is the “light” Etta Mae walks towards, out of the dark, toward the female camaraderie where “light and the love and the comfort that await[s]” Etta (74).

Luciela and Cora Lee stand in for the masses of oppressed inner-city African American women as they traverse raising children in a world that is “both physically and emotionally impoverished,” yet the women learn from the intergenerational web of mothers who have traversed these narrow straits before. Mattie seeks to alleviate the financial impoverishment by offering to provide childcare for Luciela’s young daughter, replicating Eva’s kindness to her, mitigate the emotional impoverishment by mothering Luciela, and provide mild support for Cora Lee who “sincerely liked” Mattie, as Mattie “never found time to do jury duty” on her life regarding procreation and childrearing (123). Neither Luciela nor Cora Lee have a steady partner with whom they can raise their children, yet both find help from the other women who support them in their mothering roles. Through Kiswana, Cora Lee begins to finally acknowledge that “*babies grow up*” (121), and while Cora Lee’s chapter ends with her climbing into bed with a “shadow,” Kiswana’s support, made possible by having a strong mother figure in her own life, has begun the work of fostering an understanding in Cora Lee that her children need her to be present in their lives (127). Luciela also struggles in her role as a mother and begins to disassociate from herself as she waits in the sterile hospital room, waiting for her dilation and curettage to take away her unborn, yet wanted, baby away:

It was important that she keep herself completely isolated from these surroundings. All the activities of the past week of her life were balled up and jammed on the right side of her brain, as if belonging to some other woman. And

when she had endured this one last thing for her, she would push it up there, too, and then one day give it all to her—Ciel wanted no part of it. (95)

Lucielia begins to other herself in order to survive the trauma of aborting the fetus from her womb, and her hope of this being the “last thing” for the “other woman” to endure shatters her as she loses Serena. Eugene is Lucielia’s husband and the father of both children, yet he takes limited responsibility for either them or his wife and cuts Lucielia’s with his words that precipitate the abortion: ““Babies and bills, that’s all you good for”” (94). After Serena’s death, Lucielia begins to “slowly give up on the life that God had refused to take from her,” and only Mattie’s desperate, raging, gentle love brings Lucielia back to life, a whole, if deeply wounded, woman (100).

While the most of the Brewster Place women are oppressed due to their race, class, and gender, Theresa and Lorraine’s intersectionality as black, female lesbians provides additional texture to the Brewster Place women. The two, especially Lorraine, are round characters. In the mere 45 pages dedicated to “The Two,” Lorraine becomes psychologically realistic: Lorraine develops abandonment issues after Lorraine’s father rejects her at 17-years-old when he discovers her lesbianism, leading to her subservience to Theresa; Lorraine is a sociable woman who enjoys teaching elementary aged children and helping in her community; Lorraine, lightening the tension in an argument between herself and Theresa, reveals that she has worn beige bras and eaten oatmeal her entire life, displaying a need for consistency and the familiar. Naylor’s attention to creating as life-like a character as print and paper will allow enables her to present nuanced women who evoke a sense of empathy for those who may be different from themselves. Mattie does not have experience with or a formed opinion on homosexual relationships;

however, as she mulls Lorraine and Theresa's relationship over and verbally processes her thoughts with Etta Mae, Mattie's pronouncement that "'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...maybe it's not so different'" shows Mattie's recognition of the two lesbian's humanity (141). The Brewster Place women represent a diverse history, different aspects of what it means to be a black American woman, yet all are interwoven and a part of the whole that creates a snapshot of the black American female identity.

Naylor's literal division on the page while threading the women's stories together in the text serves to create a portrait of vibrant, individualized women, and the women and their hopes and dreams add optimism to the novel. Naylor takes time to paint a picture of the black female community, portraying it as awash with personality and smells as it is with skin colors:

Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home. Nutmeg arms leaned over windowsills, gnarled ebony legs carried groceries up double flights of steps, and saffron hands strung out wet laundry on back-yard lines. Their perspiration mingled with the steam from boiling pots of smoked pork and greens, and it curled on Paris cologne that drifted through the street where they stood together—hands on hips, straight-backed, round-bellied, high-behinded women who threw their heads back when they laughed. (4-5)

This is a vivid picture of black women, and it contrasts sharply with the desolate set of experiences set before them. Even as the "multi-colored 'Afric' children" encounter a

system barring them from social and “political influence,” they are portrayed as a vital community, “[l]ike an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story” (5). This female camaraderie and phoenix-like hope that is never to die gives *TWBP* a sense of purpose—the faith in its black women contrasted against the systemic racism and sexism they face hint that, with a portion of its population effectively disenfranchised, there is no hope within a system stacked against them but what they can find in themselves.

The Brewster Place women are tenacious in the pursuit of their dreams, yet Naylor depicts a community that is both literally and figuratively walled off from the greater city populace. Brewster is an actor that inserts itself into the narrative, a gendered male who is tainted by the sin of its parents: “the bastard child” conceived after “several clandestine meetings” between a government official and a corporation, it is labored into this world in a premature birth, not whole and healthy as it “was born three months later.” Readers discover that “there was no one to fight for Brewster Place. The neighborhood was now filled with people who had no political influence . . . So the wall came up and Brewster Place became a dead-end street.” As the city officials and commerce managers wall off Brewster, they create a place with no outlet that is unable to connect to “the central activities of the city.” Yet Brewster “developed a personality of its own,” just as its people do who have “their own language and music and codes.” This ill-conceived and disgraced housing project becomes synonymous with its population; just as Brewster is walled off and impotent, so too are the people who have “no political influence” where even corporate America ignores their existence, leaving them cut off and powerless in the face of systemic disenfranchisement (1-2).

This male-gendered wall is symbolically baptized in blood and vomit by a Brewster Place male after it is erected, and the wall's inauspicious consecration serves to create a symbolic covenant that this strip of space is dominated by Brewster Place males, a place of political and economic impotence and degradation. The narrator notes that "there were no crowds at this baptism" as, shortly after the wall is erected, a nameless male—known only through his matrilineage as "Mrs. Colligan's son"—is seen "stumbling home drunk and forgetting the wall was there" he then "bloodie[s] his nose ... lean[s] over and vomit[s] against the new bricks" (2). Lynch calls the wall a place that "makes Brewster Place a dead end [and] functions as the novel's central symbol of containment and frustrated possibility" (186). As Lorraine enters this male space in her chapter, she becomes a convenient sacrifice to the gang's impotent masculinity. Celeste Fraser details how C. C.'s gang experiences a "powerlessness" due to the racism they regularly experience which turns them into the "most dangerous species in existence—human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide" (170):

Those "six feet," reminiscent of a grave, dramatize the closed economy of oppression within the wall around "Black America," literalized as the wall at the dead end of Brewster Place. This wall blocks the young men from access to full patriarchal power by conferring on them the status of "dwarfed warrior-kings" with "appendages of power, circumcised with a guillotine." The young men do not rebel against the social forces that built the constricting wall, but rather resort to terror against black women to assert themselves as patriarchs. The gang rapes Lorraine against the same dead-end wall that limits their own power. (Fraser 6)

C. C. and his gang are unable to effectively rebel against the society that disenfranchises them, so they direct their anger upon the women of Brewster Place. Lorraine's lesbianism draws the gang's ire doubly as she is not only a woman but a woman who sexually rejects men, symbolically undercutting C. C. Baker and his gang's claim to a role of dominance. Fraser examines the rape and murder of Lorraine and observes that

The penis of gang-bang leader C. C. incarnates the phallic power promoted as part of the ideal of the traditional family. C. C. violently imposes patriarchy on Lorraine by announcing his intention to “slap that bitch in her face and teach her a lesson.” This lesson links voice and gender transgression as C. C. first threatens to “stick [his] fist in [her] cunt-eatin' mouth!” and later, as a prelude to rape, rubs his penis in her face saying, “See, that's what you need.” (Fraser 6-7)

Socially impotent, C. C. and his gang need to prove they are not impotent physically, imposing their will and masculinity upon the most powerless woman on Brewster Place. Lorraine's lesbianism denies her full access to the community of women as the majority shun and cast aspersions on her character. Noticeably absent from Lorraine's defense are the males of Brewster Place, with the exception of Ben, so Lorraine is cast out from the society, making her an easy target for C. C.

While the space by the wall is notoriously C. C. Baker and his gang's, Ben serves as a sentry of the wall, as he both claims his right to the space by pushing an old garbage can against the “sagging brick wall that turned Brewster into a dead-end street” yet denies himself full access to the space by refraining to engage in the activities that typically take place there. Ben's liminality, however, proves to be his destruction (89). Eugene, as he walks away from the greater Brewster community who grieves his daughter's death and

attends her funeral, moves toward the wall where Ben sits as sentry. Ben and Eugene both agree that neither of them will attend the funeral, forming a light masculine bond between the two as Eugene betrays his fatherly responsibility and Ben shirks his community obligation.

However, Ben befriends Lorraine, and through this friendship each are able to bury their previous familial losses. Lorraine finds a surrogate father in Ben as her biological father rejected her due to her lesbianism, and Ben cares for and protects Lorraine in a way that he did not when he and his wife prostituted their daughter to their landlord. Ben is neither fully allied with the greater masculine community nor completely integrated into the female populace. Ben is not included in C. C. and his gang's alleyway skulking nor does he join Lorraine and Theresa's friend group, and perhaps because of his neither-here-nor-there capacity, Ben is bludgeoned to death by a dead-end brick of the Brewster Place wall, closing the circle of masculine blood baptism. The black community, cut off from the greater city, is disempowered, yet gifted with masculinity, C. C. and his gang carve out a space that is wholly male, a fiefdom where they rule, oppressing the only people hierarchically lower than them: black women. In a world in which the women of Brewster Place are cut off from systems of power due both to their race and gender, there is limited hope for the socially lower women of the black community.

II. Racial and Gender representation within TWBP

The systemic divisions in the black female community manifest in two overt ways: oppression of the black community by the greater white culture and bias against one another due to skin color hierarchies. The privilege of white culture is made apparent

in “Dawn” as the white community ostracizes the original Brewster Place occupants, the Mediterraneans, who are “mellow-skinned” and “different in their smells, foods, and codes from the rest of the town” (4). This othering of the Brewster Place inhabitants continues and escalates as Brewster Place becomes more decrepit and isolated, and its population darker. Etta Mae Johnson’s story especially highlights the racism faced by the African American community as the narrator recounts Etta’s struggles that ultimately lead to her attempted rape:

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. The whites in Rock Vale were painfully reminded of this rebellion when she looked them straight in the face while putting in her father’s order at the dry goods store, when she reserved her sirs and mams for those she thought deserving, and when she smiled only if pleased, regardless of whose presence she was in. That Johnson gal wasn’t being an uppity n****r, as talk had it: she was just being herself. (60)

Shortly after the narration explains that Etta’s “blooming independence” necessitated her immediate removal after she was pursued by “the horny white bastard,” implying some type of molestation or harassment perpetrated upon Etta. The idea that Etta is regularly subjugated by her white counterparts at the dry goods store, expected to be deferential to whites, and required to submit to unwanted sexual advances by a white skinned man is in line with the systemic racism the black community has historically faced and the sexualization faced by black women. After examining two national surveys, Margaret L. Hunter concludes that “skin color stratification is an enduring part of the U.S. racial landscape” and that “institutional power that privileges whites and oppresses various

people of color” (175). This oppression manifests clearly in Brewster Place and is a formidable barrier to overcome, made even more imposing by the colorism perpetuated within the African American community itself as a result of white, Eurocentric dominance.

Despite the black community’s oppression at the hands of the white collective, the Brewster Place residents continue to uphold societal racism by sustaining color hierarchies which serve to further separate them from one another. On one hand the black community of Brewster Place cries out in church for racial freedom as they identify with the enslaved Israelites in Egypt in song: “When Israel was in Egypt’s land ... Oppressed so hard, they could not stand / Let my people go,” they simultaneously treat one another with mistrust as they apportion acceptance based on skin tone (63). Etta, unaccepted by the white community, is equally refused entrance into the black community. With the exception of the ever-inclusive Mattie, none of Etta Mae Johnson’s neighbors call her by her first name and only address her as “Miss Johnson” (57). Etta is described as having “sandy hair” (61), a light skinned characteristic, and the treatment she receives “baffle[s] her” (57) despite her attempts at friendliness: “[S]he’d always call them by their first names and invited them to do the same with her. But after a few awkward attempts, they’d fall back into the pattern they were somehow comfortable with. Etta didn’t know if this was to keep the distance on her side or theirs, but it was there. And she had learned to tread through these alien undercurrents” (57). The paradoxical worshipful supplication to God for freedom from racism while wielding racial hierarchies against their own, presents an additional obstacle within the black community, disallowing Etta to fully integrate into the black community; the African Americans of *TWBP* are choosing to

fight on two fronts—against the prevailing white culture and against one another on the other front.

Naylor herself provides insight regarding her personal feelings on colorism, sentiments that permeate *TWBP* and showcase the idea that true racial equality is, at the time in which she interviewed, unactualized. After her interview with Rowell, Gloria Naylor notes that “I . . . am a moral writer whether I want to think about it or not” (180), and in a later interview with Ethel Morgan Smith, Naylor is asked, “What do we do about self-hatred among black folks?” to which Naylor responds, “We have not climbed that mountain, have we?” (1432) Here Naylor encapsulates the problem faced by the women of Brewster Place: self-hatred, in addition to divisions created by colorism and homophobia, are huge obstacles for black unity. Without unity in the face of systemic racism, real equality is hard to imagine.

The racism and colorism experienced by the women of Brewster Place is formidable, but there is hope as Naylor casts Mattie into the role of champion against systemic racism, creating a maternal figure who accepts the other Brewster Place women regardless of color. While Etta is met by contempt in white society and distant from the black population, she is able to “be herself” with Mattie: Etta “breathed deeply of the freedom she found in Mattie’s presence. Here she had no choice but to be herself. The carefully erected decoys she was constantly shuffling and changing to fit the situation were of no use here” (58). Etta equates Mattie with “freedom” and drops her posturing, finding solace in her and Mattie’s sisterhood. Even Cora Lee, insulated as she is by her many children, sees a kindred spirit in Mattie as she passes Mattie in the hall with her children in tow to see *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “she sincerely liked Mattie because

unlike the others, Mattie never found the time to do jury duty on other people's lives" (123). Mattie's acceptance draws the women of Brewster Place in toward herself as a central figure, and Mattie serves as the hub of the story cycle around which the other stories turn, and the central nature of Mattie as a character is important as Mattie serves as the antithesis of discrimination in all its forms. Mattie does not engage in skin color hierarchies between herself and Etta, she chooses not to shame Cora Lee's sexuality, and she even senses her surrogate daughter, Lucielia's, uncertainty about her non-black boyfriend, immediately dispelling Lucielia's fears by telling her that "You know, we get so caught up with what a man *isn't*. It's what he is that counts" (178). Mattie's inclusivity positively impacts the women of Brewster Place and their sense of well-being; it is through Mattie that a black sisterhood is developed.

As inclusive as Mattie is, however, she cannot carry the entire fight against systemic discrimination upon her shoulders, and division within the ranks of the African American women create factions in the community that prove to be too imposing for Mattie to combat. While *TWBP* focuses on seven women, all of them with their individual flaws but all without prejudice, there is yet Sophie who speaks for a silent portion of women when she declares that Lorraine and Theresa are "that bad element that done moved in the block amongst decent people" (139-140). After this pronouncement, and as Lorraine herself is moving toward joining the community meeting, Lorraine reflects on the problem that the African American community faces:

That was the problem with so many black people—they just sat back and complained while the whole world tumbled down around their heads. And grabbing an attitude and thinking you were better than these people just because a

lot of them were poor and uneducated wouldn't help, either ... 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. (141-142)

Sophie's voice may have been the loudest of the dissension, but she stands as a representative for the “soft murmurs from the corners, accompanied by furtive glances while a few like Sophie stared at [Lorraine] openly” (143). Lorraine's reflection on the black community's need to “row together” and that a portion of the black population go on “thinking [they] were better than these people” is apropos as she approaches a community meeting where she finds that very community divided between acceptance and discrimination with Sophie at the dissension's helm, pronouncing judgement upon Lorraine and Theresa. It is tempting to view Sophie as an outlier as she is the only character that openly vocalizes discord at the community meeting, but those quiet murmurs and furtive looks hint at a fractured black community. Even as Mattie and the other six like-minded, inclusive women work for the betterment of the community, they cannot fight against the predominant societal community prejudices while also vying against internal division simultaneously.

Even within the church, a place where Mattie turns to for “deliverance” as a part of a people group who is “oppressed so hard” in a “world [that] was swiftly changing but for some mystic, complex reason their burden had not,” readers sense that predation of the socially strong against the weak stems from a systemic problem (63-64). Margaret L. Hunter's acute observation that “skin color stratification and patriarchy interact to limit the life changes of ... African American women” is made apparent in Etta and Reverend Woods's dalliance (175). The scene between Etta and Reverend Woods is rife with

animalistic imagery with Etta being viewed by Woods as a woman to be subjugated—an “untamed exotic flower”—and Woods himself being portrayed in predacious language: he finds his “power” most potent in “the jungle,” he possesses “a mouth full of strong gold-capped teeth” and salivates so much so that he must “swallow to remove the excess fluid from his mouth” (67-71). Reverend Woods exerts his masculine power, maneuvering to dominate Etta and bring her to his bed, knowing that Etta “would lose because when she first sat down in that car she had everything riding on the fact that he didn’t know the game existed” (72). Etta entered into a “game” in which she had less power than Woods; he can “shrug his shoulders” at the end of their sexual encounter, but Etta is left damaged: Etta “stand[s] on the [street] corner, looking straight ahead into Brewster,” her posture is “slumped” as she stares at “the wall that closed off Brewster from the avenues farther north” (73). Just as the wall has cordoned off Brewster Place from the expanse of the city, Etta is denied full power in a patriarchal system.

III. Is this real life? Is this just fantasy?

Though Etta is exploited by Reverend Woods, she is uplifted by Mattie who she finds is waiting up for her and who signifies the “light and the love and the comfort that awaited,” and when it comes to the final story cycle, “The Block Party,” readers are given a similar hope and comfort that black sisterhood will provide a way to abide the widespread white racism, the internal black colorism, and the cultural sexism. Before the tearing down of the rain-soaked / blood-spattered wall, Lucielia’s sentiment that ““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”” encapsulates the heart of black sisterhood (179). The oneness Mattie has sustained throughout the novel as she seeks unity instead of colorism and

looks for sisterhood rather than homophobia (“‘But I’ve loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man,’ Mattie was pondering”), is represented as the women tear down the wall, a literal boundary between themselves and the outside city and a symbolic representation of the systemic racial and gender discrimination the women of Brewster Place face. As Andrews points out, “the powerful denouement of the novel, even if expressed as dream, draws all of the women intuitively together in a common gesture of outrage as they try to eradicate Lorraine's and Ben's bloodstains from the brick wall” (10). This commonality is expressed fiercely as the women tear down a banner that expresses that oppression and find themselves beating the systemic injustice to rags: “The ‘Today Brewster—Tomorrow America’ banner had been beaten into long strands of red and gold that clung to the wet arms and faces of the women.” As the banner disintegrates, the women, in this moment of deconstructing the wall, no longer need to wait for “America” to accept them “tomorrow,” and instead they rip the banner to shreds and demolish the wall between themselves and the city, forcing cars to “screech and slide around the flying bricks that came out of Brewster Place” as they rain down bricks of subjugation into the street. The women force the barrier that has oppressed them into the space of the greater community, no longer willing to be shunted to the side, showing themselves to be a powerful force when banded together (186-187).

Yet the question remains as to whether this hope for agency—a breaking of barriers between women and men, blacks and whites, heterosexuals and homosexuals—is feasible, and the framing of this final story cycle as a dream ultimately exhibits *TWBP* to be a narrative that presents the idea that true gender and racial equality is impossible in modern day America due to the systemic sexism and racism. Just as each new character

begins the narrative cycle, we as readers are circling back to our starting point—deferred dreams. However this deferred dream is a vision of black women supporting one another, putting differences aside that does not seem feasible in the real world. Castellucci Cox notes:

While Naylor attaches the genesis of the dream to one character, Mattie, the constantly shifting perspective of the last story marks the fantasy of breaking down the wall of oppression in all its forms as an episode lying outside time a collective consciousness of all the female characters. The women isolated, do share a common terror and rage, and it is out of this story that a fantasy of communal alliance finally emerges, where the women are galvanized into action by the blood-like stain of rain on the brick wall (164)

“The Block Party” is a dream, a “fantasy,” and outside this dream sequence the women are still isolated, segmented in their own small chapters on the literal page, but divided due to systemic -isms and community dissension in the narrative. Echoes of unactualized dreams are not relegated to only Langston Hughes’s poem: each woman, even those living well after the publication of Hughes’s poem, has found her dreams deferred, but Cora Lee’s chapter elegiacally reflects the power of a dream—after fantasizing about how she will begin properly tending to her children, Puck entreats his audience to realize that “And this weak and idle theme, / No more yielding but a dream,” and as Cora Lee returns home “she turned and firmly folded her evening like gold and lavender gauze deep within the creases of her dreams, and let her clothes drop to the floor” (126-127). Dreams cannot create change unless they are acted upon, and Naylor’s multigenerational

sisterhood of black women is equally as fleeting unless deeper and more universal change is enacted.

Deep systemic issues waited to be traversed as Naylor published *TWBP* in 1982, yet now, a full 40 years later, these systemic racism and sexism problems still exist. “George Floyd” is now shorthand for police brutality against black men and women, “January 6th”—not officially called an insurrection over a full year later—colors the racial divide within the United States, and even Will Smith’s slap of Chris Rock at the Oscars displays racial frustration. Naylor’s “Novel in Seven Stories” spoke on behalf of those disenfranchised decades ago, yet her writing is still needed almost half-a-century later. Naylor vibrant characters, a flirtatious boy who eats sugar cane slowly, a subdued mother who washes rice while in a spousal disagreement, and a witty woman who banter skillfully with delinquent boys, encourages readers to view those different from themselves as people from whom to learn. Nevertheless, Naylor’s enduring classic unflinchingly delivers the message that current systemic societal issues thwart black female bonds. It may not be a heartening message, but it is authentic.

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