

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place

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Values of sisterhood and reciprocal support amongst black women are powerful tools that empower community. Black women have always played a significant role as mothers and culture bearers, trying, at the same time, to fill the role of absent emasculated disempowered black men, due to social oppression and low economics. In a marginalized community where men were deprived from the very roles that would make them feel like real men, disempowered by social and economic forces, and rendered unable to enact their roles as providers and protectors, women had to take the initiative and take care of their houses, children, and even the men, resisting whatever social, economic, racial, or gender circumstances bound. Not only did African American women sustain their lives, but also the culture and identity of their ethnicity: "From the enslavement period to the contemporary times, African American women's resistance has been a necessary aspect of survival not only for the women themselves but for the entire community" (Rodriguez 95). It is such resistance to the main-stream culture norms and values that allowed an African American race to exist.

If black men suffer from racism, and white women complain about sexism, it is African American women who undergo a 'triple jeopardy': racism, sexism, and classicism, or what Deborah K. King terms 'multiple jeopardy'. King suggests that, these oppressive components are interdependent, not incremental, and that one factor does not supplant another; rather, they coexist. For King, the modifier 'multiple' does not just suggest 'several' and/or

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‘simultaneous’. The term, however, indicates that multiplicative relationships among the three factors exist; each multiplies another (51). It is that trio, all at once, which sets African American womanhood off and gives it shape. Womanhood is dialectical, rather than one-dimensional. “Human beings are located within relationships of subordination and domination and these relationships simultaneously shape and are shaped by racialised, economic, and gendered inequalities” (Bhavanani 31).

Against this background of multiple oppressive factors, African American women’s resistance takes diverse directions: sisterhood, mutual support, bonding, nurturing, loving, mothering, and even lesbianism. All these forms of women relationships, on the one hand, empower women against the hostile patriarchal culture they live; on the other, they empower the African American community in its entirety. “Female networks promoted self-reliance and self help. They sustained hope and provided survival strategies.” (Cash 31).

A distinction is made here between feminist writing and what is termed womanist writing. The term ‘Womanism’ is first introduced by the Afro-American novelist Alice Walker in her *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* to represent a different version from the western mainstream (mainly-white and hence maybe discriminative) feminism. Walker, along with many critics, finds little difference between womanism and black feminism, as they both address issues of gender and sexuality with relation to issues of class and race, and both terms cover the area where such issues are addressed outside the realm of white feminism and concentrate mainly on black women or women of color and their struggle against racism and classicism to achieve equality and liberation: “Like Walker, many African American

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

women see little difference between the two since both support a common agenda of black women's self-definition and self-determination" (Collins). Thus, both womanism and black feminism are almost two variations of the same realm. In her acclaimed collection of essays *IN Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* Alice Walker defines 'womanist' as "a black feminist or feminist of color" (xi), also she is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi). Walker uses the term womanism interchangeably with black feminism. In both cases, she intends the term to express black women's standpoint, as an alternative to feminism. On the other hand, feminism is a white movement that address issues of gender, but with a narrow and limited scope that applies to white women of the middle and upper classes, excluding the vast range of colored women and their different experiences, challenges, and issues.

The word 'womanist' is deep-rooted in African American tradition: Southern black folks used to ascribe the adjective 'womanish' to girls who "acted in outrageous, courageous, and willful ways, attributes that freed them from the conventions long limiting white women. Womanish girls wanted to know more and in greater depth than what was considered good for them. They were responsible, in charge, and serious" (Collins). This sense of the term gives womanism superiority over feminism, due to that tradition. Hence the womanish is seen as serious, independent, and decisive compared to the frivolousness and irresponsibility of white feminists.

Bell Hooks introduces a similar framework for black feminism which is directed to de-victimizing and hence empowering black woman. Hooks argues that "women [in general] are enriched" when bonding with one another. However, the bourgeois women's liberationist model of 'sisterhood' is based on commonness of

victimization; that is, women bonding can be conceived among women who are mainly defined as victims. Consequently, that “created a situation in which assertive, self-affirming women are often seen as having no place in feminist movement ... Sexist ideology teaches women that to be female is to be a victim”. That kind of logic led white feminists and black men to believe that black women are strong enough (i.e. not victims) not to be included within feminist movements. Hooks suggests that bonding on the basis of shared strengths and resources is the essence of sisterhood, not victimization, or shared oppression (128). Thus, Hooks gives one more reason why black feminists are excluded from mainstream feminism, and hence they should (and do) develop frameworks that appeal to their experiences and histories that immensely differ from that of the feminists.

Another main difference between womanism/black feminism and feminism is the way it addresses the issue of relationships with males. “Many black women view feminism as a movement that at best, is exclusively for women and, at worst, dedicated to attacking or eliminating men” (Collins), while womanism or black feminism is seen as a framework that aims at integrating black women’s struggle towards equality and liberation within a broader and more general framework of achieving equality and liberation to the black race collectively. Womanists are "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker xi). Black womanism is not simply a theory of criticism, or just a way of defending African American women’s agenda against the oppression African American male forces, rather it is

a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place

structure that subjugates blacks. Its ideals for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a "brother" or a "sister" or a "father" or a "mother" to the other. This philosophy has a mandalic core: its aim is dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels. (Ogunyemi 72).

This way, Black Womanism is directed to the unity of the black community as a whole not just black women; it is concerned with the representation of black women and the dialectic relationships between black men and women, not with dominating men. It is oriented towards the empowerment of the black race as a whole against subjugation. In this sense, Black Womanism is far different from white Feminism directed towards elevating the position of women only (mainly white women), and hence a more powerful tool of empowering the black community as a whole.

Gloria Naylor is not a feminist writer though; rather she is 'a womanist writer'. "More often than not, where a white woman writer may be a feminist, a black woman writer is likely to be a 'womanist'. That is she will recognize that along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy" (Ogunyemi 64). Black women writers do not identify with radical feminism; rather they identify with the commonness of their experiences, defying categorization and subjugation to the white alien culture. Gloria Naylor is one of those writers.

Kinship is one form of women mutual support, and bonding. It has existed among black women since times of slavery and throughout emancipation; it existed among woman of all classes (slaves, tenant farm wives, middle-

class women, and higher): “the slave community functioned as an extended kinship system. Black women carried these concepts of mutual assistance with them from bondage to freedom” (Cash 31). The form of kinship is the basic and most logical relationship that existed among black women. Similar to kinship relations is sisterhood “generally understood as a nurturant, supportive feeling of attachment and loyalty to other women which grows out of shared experience of oppression” (Dill 132), rather than shared blood. Kinship and sisterhood can be said to be two sides of the same values: loyalty to the group, mutual support, nurturing, love, and other supportive relationships, which are “the cornerstone of strong Black families and Communities” (Lawrence-Webb, Littlfield, and Okundaye 634).

Naylor presents different models of women bonding and supporting one another, in her novels: “in each novel, a community of women emerges—sustaining, enabling and enriching the lives of one another” (Whitt 1). Her women characters are kins, neighbors, or friends. In other words, they are mothers, and/or sisters, whether by the way of blood or common conditions. One way or another, Naylor’s women are models for women supporting and nurturing one another.

Katheleen M. Puhr suggests that Naylor’s women turn to one another, because they are mainly “cut off from mainstream culture” (519). In a sense, this is true; Naylor creates black communities, without the interference of the dominant white culture: “Naylor’s text [*The Women of Brewster Place*] depicts an Afro-American community virtually free from the presence and direct influence of whites” (Awkward 42). The other thing is that, those women are not only cut off from the mainstream culture, but also ghettoized, and oppressed due to social and economic discriminatory forces. Naylor gives voice to these

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

women, puts them in the center, and shows them bonding and empowering one another, as a way out for them to depend on themselves rather than seeking solace in such a hostile mainstream culture: “The preoccupation with female bonding shows Naylor’s idealization of African-American women’s resilience and capacity to survive social oppression” (Uwakweh 125).

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor represents a community of poor women, who are cornered in a dead-end street, because none of them has any other options in life. Once those women are brought together, through different routes of life, they have nothing but one another. Mattie Michael emerges as the surrogate mother for the women of Brewster Place, who heals, cures, and supports her wounded mates. Mother-daughter relationships are recurrent throughout the novel, as well as sisterhood bonds. “Not only is the bond of friendship among the women in the community liberating and redemptive, but the mother-daughter bond is rejuvenating as well” (Montgomery, 1992, 7). *The Women of Brewster Place* is a novel about women, and how they handle their lives, in the absence of outside discriminatory forces that may interfere with their lives. Outside forces are there all the time, but the point is how to keep them *outside* their community, and start working from the inside to fix what those forces might have spoiled. Resisting outside social forces starts right from the inside of the black community.

The theme of women supporting other women takes many shapes, but its clearest occurrence takes place in *The Women of Brewster Place*, where Naylor “focuses almost entirely on women” (Andrews 2), and where she “creates a sassiness in her women who claim their space in Brewster Place with an assurance that does not depend on male approval, that functions confidently on its own terms ... These women are prepared to help one another” (Whitt

15). *The Women of Brewster* is a community free from outside influences: the men of Brewster Place though they affect the lives of their women, do not interfere with their choices or orientations. They do not decide for the community; it is women who are on the scene: “Brewster Place is largely a community of women; men are mostly absent or itinerant, drifting in and out of their women’s lives ... Naylor was concerned that her work would be seen as deliberately slighting of men” (Matus 61).

Women’s bonding with other women proves to be a means of survival. In a community where men cannot meet economic requirements, and abandon women to “double burdens of work and domestic life without support ... the friendship of other women is not only a saving grace but a political necessity” (Andrews 10). Maxine Lavon Montgomery suggests that the women of Brewster Place “turn inward, look to each other, and find strength” within their community, mainly because the patriarchal legitimized system failed to offer them other options” (1996; 96). That supports Puhr’s point of view that Naylor’s women turn to one another because they have no other options. All residents of Brewster Place are brought together out of common conditions, not common consciousness:

They clung to the street with a desperate acceptance that whatever was here was better than the starving southern climates they had fled from. Brewster Place knew that ... the few who would leave forever were to be the exception rather than the rule, since they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason.

Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make a home [Italics original] (WBP 4).

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

However, adopting values of mutual support and bonding, eventually they are capable of empowering one another, and hence empowering their own community collectively.

The first bond is established between Mattie Michael and Miss Eva: Mattie Michael was seduced by Butch Fuller and became pregnant; unable to face her southern community, or her father with the identity of the father of her unborn child, who is a notorious womanizer about whom her father warned her repeatedly, she flees north where she meets Miss Eva. Miss Eva receives Mattie and her son Basil for the next thirty years. The bond between them was such a powerful one: “the young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable” (WBP 34). It is Mattie’s relationship with Miss Eva which prepares Mattie to play the role of the matriarch in the community of Brewster Place. “The encounter with Miss Eva ... could be viewed as a necessary rite of passage in Mattie’s journey toward matriarchy” (Chapleau 22), for it is Miss Eva who teaches Mattie the essence of sisterhood and the value of a female-centered community. She teaches her through example, by taking her into her house, even though she is a stranger, and accepts no money from her for thirty years. Mothering her, Miss Eva teaches her how to mother other women.

Mattie buys the house from Miss Eva’s heirs, and later on bails it for Basil when he commits an accidental man-slaughter. Basil does not show up at the court and Mattie loses her house and “a life time of work lying in the bricks of her home” (WBP 53). Up to that point in Mattie’s life, she mothered nobody but Basil; she lived for nobody but him, not for even herself. She works hard to keep Miss Eva’s house so “her son could have room to grow in, a yard

to run in, a decent place to bring friends ... It would all be for him” (WBP 40). Mattie knew no man after her first relationship with Butch, and she has “got [her] hands full raising [her] son” (WBP 37). It is when she stumbles into Brewster Place that she extends her mothering abilities to the rest of the community. Mattie Michael serves in the novel “as matriarch, surrogate mother, and mentor to the other women on Brewster place” (Whitt 17).

Marie-Josée Chapleau defines a matriarch as a “woman who rules a family, clan or tribe; for her to rule effectively, she must be loving and caring in nature, as well as authoritative, pious and respected” (15), and Mattie Michael is all that. Mattie Michael is the surrogate mother of Brewster Place who is loved by everyone; even those who cannot love her (like Eugene) feel obliged to respect her. She is there ready to help or even rescue any woman who is in need. She never interferes with matters that do not belong to her, though. Mattie Michael stands out like a unifying spirit of a mother or a sister, who with strong Southern roots is able to tie the community of women in Brewster Place together. So, she is qualified to serve the community as the able matriarch.

Mother-daughter relationships are crucial to the community of Brewster place. Relationships between Mattie Michael and Lucielia Louise Turner (Ciel), and Kiswana Browne and her mother Mrs. Brown give shape to the community: such bonds enable Ciel to overcome her grief for her dead child, and make Kiswana realize her place in the community, and realize that zeal for her nation is not enough to elevate the community. These two relationships involve spiritual motherhood on the part of Mattie, and kin motherhood on the part of Mrs. Brown; both serve to help the daughters, who in turn help the rest of the community.

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

Montgomery argues that "among the many bonds the women establish, it is the mother daughter relationship that proves to be crucial to restoring the social cohesion lost with the trek north" (1996, 90). That is, the women of Brewster Place, in a sense lost the connection with their community, and it is strong mother-daughter relationships that enable them to restore that link in the harsh life they lead in the north. Montgomery also suggests that "Naylor creates a community of women among whom the life-giving maternal bond has been ruptured and Mattie's presence allows a restoration of that bond. Nowhere is this more evident than in the relationship between Mattie and Ciel" (1990; 91). The mother-daughter relationship is seen at its best between Mattie and Ciel.

Ciel is a mother; her husband Eugene is the absent-man type, who disappears and reappears with no justifying reason. He does not share her responsibilities towards the child or the house. In her attempt to please Eugene, and release him from more financial burdens, Ciel aborts a coming birth. Days later she loses her only child in an accidental electrocution, in the midst of a quarrel with Eugene. Ciel loses the strength to live, or even to grieve. She gives up on life; she refuses to eat, drink, or bathe. She is overwhelmed by an unspoken grief the pain of which she had long deferred. However, she is not grieving the loss of her children, but "she was simply tired of hurting. And she was forced to slowly give up the life that God had refused to take from her" (WBP 101).

Ciel undergoes no easy experience, losing her child, aborting another, and losing her life mate Eugene all at once. She suffers unspoken pain, and unrealized dreams. She lost the ability to go on, and lost the strength even of belief: "Ciel's whole universe existed in the seven feet of space between herself and her child's narrow coffin. There was not even room for this comforting God whose

melodious virtues floated around her sphere, attempting to get in. Obviously, he had deserted or damned her, it didn't matter which." (WBP 101). Nothing really mattered for Ciel, at that moment, when she lost all, and had nothing more to give, and nobody really knew what she needed to restore her unfelt self.

Something was missing and she did not even know what that missing thing was; or how to get it back, if possible. "Eugene thought the tears that began to crowd into her eyes were for him. But she was allowing herself this one last luxury of brief mourning for the loss of something denied to her. It troubled her that she wasn't sure exactly what that something was, or which one of them was to blame for taking it a way" (Naylor; WBP 100). That missing something could be anything; but, it is obvious that her sense of loss is not the outcome of just losing her family, because it was not strong enough to last long enough. Her pain is much deeper than mourning, and thicker than what grief could be. That missing something is presumably the link with herself, her mate, and her community; and nobody is there to blame but the society itself. It is her society which rendered Eugene economically and psychologically disempowered, and it is at home where he looked for his nonexistent manhood, and it is upon Ciel where he poured his rage, when his lost masculinity could not be recovered at that home. But it is not him to blame; it is the society (later on, in *The Men of Brewster Place* Eugene is given voice to defend himself).

Her women community members (presumably neighbors) cannot comprehend the complex nature of her pain. Trying to fulfill their responsibilities towards the community, many women try to help Ciel, in vain. They provide her with food she cannot eat; they show her pity she cannot appreciate. They cannot understand her unspoken grief. But Ciel's needs are not material at all; nor

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

is her grief of a type that can be healed by words—what is not spoken cannot be healed with words: "her visitors' impotent words flew against the steel edge of her pain, bled slowly, and returned to die in the senders' throats. No one came too near ... they unconsciously pushed themselves back against the wall as if her hurt was contagious" (WBP). That is the core of the thing, nobody did and nobody could '*come too near*' if near at all. Everyone was afraid of approaching; in other words, nobody cared enough, or dared to care.

Only one person steps forward to save Ciel; only one person can understand and heal Ciel: Mattie Michael, the surrogate mother of Brewster place. Mattie realizes that she needs to hear a moan first; Ciel's sadness is to be outspoken first in order to be relieved. Mattie "like a black Brahman cow, desperate to protect her young ... surged into the room, pushing the neighbor women and the others out of her way" (WBP 103). In one of the most moving scenes in the novel, Mattie Michael bathes Ciel who is sitting between her knees, in a purely traditional African way of a mother bathing her child: Mattie rocked Ciel,

Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, 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 mothers' 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 entails 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 slight 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. (Naylor; WBP 103-4)

This scene stands for Ciel's spiritual resurrection from the dead-alive status to enlightenment, comfort, and relief. Montgomery suggests that "Ciel undergoes a mystical rebirth ... that is spiritual in nature". a rebirth which takes place "outside the watchful gaze" of the white patriarchal society, "and is oriented toward allowing her access to a new mode of existence in which she is no longer subject to the limitations imposed by time and space" (1992, 92). Ciel is rocked 'back into the womb', and 'back to her childhood'. That is, at that point of Ciel's wretched life, she is a newborn, with fresh feelings, and can speak pains and grieve.

The very realistic bath she [Mattie] gives Ciel is clearly, for Naylor, a baptism, a sacramental act of love that resurrects her goddaughter from physic death ... The baptism ritual emerging from the relationship between Ciel and Mattie begins Ciel's recovery from the death both of her child and of he romantic dreams about marriage. It signals real, not symbolic change (Pace 31).

Pace suggests that the scene is established as an act of survival. Ciel survives and is spiritually healed because Mattie is on the scene. It is Mattie's support that restores Ciel back to life again: Mattie "then led her freshly wet, glistening body, *baptized* now, to the bed" [*Italics mine*]

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

(WBP 105). Kathleen M. Puhr too supports the idea that Mattie does not just heal Ciel, rather she offers her a 'new life', and that Ciel does undergo a 'symbolic baptism' (520).

On the other hand, the mention of Greek mythological mothers who had to sacrifice their children to gods, poor captured Jewish mothers in the Nazi's concentration camps of Dachau parting with their children to gas chambers and crematoriums, and enslaved Senegalese mothers leaving their children behind in slave ships unite Ciel with a vast community of hurt mothers who were denied the luxury of grief. The scene renders Ciel a symbolic figure to all silenced women throughout history, not only the history of the race or the community but human history. Ciel belongs to this realm of women, who were silenced for so long, women who have been oppressed, and suffered the loss of their children, and were denied the right to grieve. Chapleau points out that "Naylor suggests that these women must recognize their bonds to the larger female community in order to exorcise and contextualize their pain" (29), while Montgomery argues that "only by forming bonds among themselves do the women overcome life's difficulties and find the necessary strength to survive in a changing world" (1996, 89).

Puhr comments that the splinter that Mattie, "the leading healer" of the novel, finds is symbolic. The splinter that Mattie extracts is "rooted in slavery and sexual oppression" (520). That supports the idea that what Ciel suffers is not grief, or loss. It is oppression, denial, deferred dreams, and unattained dreams of so many women of the race. The splinter is 'the nadir' of Ciel's hurt, for which Mattie had to look beyond her life, and even before her birth. On the other hand, that splinter is just embedded below the skin, and it is the skin which has to do with the

thing, or it is the color of the skin. One part of Ciel's suffering is being black. The splinter was not Ciel's own. It had gigantic, deep, and ragged roots, which tore up flesh: it is rooted in the long history of black women's oppression. Once more, this unites Ciel with another community of women—of her race this time.

Though the relationship between Mattie and Ciel is possibly understood as a mother-daughter bond, Larry R. Andrews argues that “since their suffering is similar, they are equal, and hence a woman-to-woman bond [is established]” (6). They are both isolated, burdened mothers and both lost their children. This point of view sounds quite radical. It is true that Ciel is a grown up woman, and Mattie lost a child like her, but it is not everything. They have not experienced the same thing. Though they live within the same community, and under the same circumstances, each experiences life in a different way, and responds to life differently as well. Mattie is a Southerner whose Southern roots enriched her life with the values that differ from what Ciel learnt in the North. Mattie even participated in bringing Ciel up, with her grandmother Miss Eva. Besides, losing her grown-up son Basil, Mattie is really hurt, but does not give up. She loses her house and have to move to Brewster, but she is solid. Mattie enjoys powers and abilities that Ciel does not show any tendency to have. So, Mattie is well qualified to serve, not only Ciel, but the rest of the community, as a surrogate mother and a matriarch, while Ciel cannot even support herself. It is about being strong enough, not woman enough.

Another mother-daughter bond renders “the maternal role ... a key one on Brewster” (Montgomery, 1996, 92). As Mattie served Ciel as a mother and helped her overcome her unspoken pains, Mrs. Brown helps her daughter Kiswana realize her true identity, and re-orient

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place

her activities for a better community, rather than just 'wearing an Afro'. Kiswana's problem stems from a misunderstanding of her identity, and a blind support to the Civil Rights Movement. Kiswana is "so concerned about ethnic specificity and the recovery of her African roots that she fails to recognize her commonality with her mother" (Matus 57). Mrs. Brown shows up to lead her naïve daughter to the right path, which later on proves to be promising for the better of the community. Kiswana Brown is a young woman who drops out of college, leaves her rich family home in Linden Hills, wears an Afro, adopts an African name, and moves to live in Brewster Place. Kiswana asserts that she moves to Brewster Place to live among her people, and drops out of college because "those bourgeois schools were counterrevolutionary. [Her] place was in the streets with [her] people, fighting for equality and a better community" (WBP 83).

Kiswana starts with a hostile orientation towards her mother, that her mother is middle-class, rich, lives in classy Linden Hills, and above all treats her like a child. Once Mrs. Brown is in Brewster Place, Kiswana is aware of all the defects of the place and the people living there, through the eyes of her mother:

the brightness of the unclouded sky seemed to join forces with her mother as it highlighted every broken stoop railing and missing brick. The afternoon sun glittered and cascaded across even the tiniest fragments of broken bottle, and at the very moment the wind chose to rise up again, sending unswept grime flying into the air, as a stray tin can left by careless garbage collectors went rolling

noisily down the center of the street (WBP 76).

Kiswana also feels relieved, finding out that drunken Ben is not at his usual place. “He was just a harmless wino, but Kiswana knew her mother only needed one wino or one teenager with a reefer within a twenty-block radius to decide that her daughter was living in a building seething with dope factories and hang-outs for derelicts” (WBP 76-7). All these worries come across Kiswana’s mind as she sees her mother from her sixth floor apartment at Brewster Place. However, the only comment Mrs. Brown makes is about the broken elevator.

Kiswana is keen to remove every trace of her boyfriend’s Abshu. She is determined to veil her sexuality away from her mother’s sight. However, her mother notices “a small wooden reproduction of a Yoruba goddess with large protruding breasts” (WBP 82), and directs Kiswana’s attention that the statue could be suggestive to her male friends. Issues of sexuality between the two women are not quite set. That is one of the main reasons the two women cannot unite together on the basis of their womanhood. When that line is crossed, Kiswana finds one common thing she can share with her mother.

Then, they immediately indulge into an argument over the revolution or the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Brown is worried, as a mother, about her daughter living in Brewster Place: “anything could happen—especially living among these people”; Kiswana rages at her mother at the pronouncement of “these people”, arguing that: “They’re my people and yours, too, Mama--we’re all black. But maybe you’ve forgotten that over in Linden Hills” (WBP 83). Mrs. Brown responds that it wasn’t what she meant. It is clear from that short interaction that Kiswana has presupposed ideas about her mother, as a Linden

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place

Hiller, middle-class, and rich; she really thinks that her mother forgot the essence of her identity and racial belonging up there in Linden Hills. "Kiswana regards her mother as a bourgeois reactionary whose material prosperity has cut her off spiritually as well as geographically from the majority of her people" (Korenman 151). It is ironic, however, that it is that very mother who brings Kiswana back to her mind, teaching her that being black does not necessitate being poor, but requires being active and powerful enough to be effective, for the sake of the community. "Ultimately ... it is the mother's outlook, not the daughter's that prevail" (Korenman 152).

Mrs. Brown's point of view is that the revolution was nothing, and achieved nothing except for those revolutionaries who are "sitting in wood-paneled offices with their degrees in mahogany frames, and they won't even drive their cars past this street because the city doesn't fix potholes in this part of town" (WBP 84). Kiswana is, on the other hand, convinced that what they fought for is worthy, and that because some people sold out, it does not mean that the revolution was meaningless. Mrs. Brown, as wise as she may be, tells her that "there was no revolution", and lectures Kiswana

You don't have to sell out, as you say, and work for some corporation, but you could become an assemblywoman or a civil liberties lawyer or open a freedom school in this very neighborhood. That way you could really help the community. But what help are you going to be to these people on Brewster while you're living hand-to-mouth on file-clerk jobs waiting for a revolution? You're wasting your talents, child (WBP 84).

It is such an enlightening view which offers Kiswana more options to be effective, and not just being revolutionary, or wearing a 'Fro'. It is from this pool of options that Kiswana, later on, picks something meaningful for her, and useful for her community: starting a tenant's association to put pressure on the white owner to fix the place up. Later still, she herself is capable of helping other women in need, namely Cora Lee.

One problem of Kiswana's is that she reduces her identity to a matter of appearance, not essence. She even resents her brother Wilson for refusing to wear an Afro: "when everyone at school was discovering their blackness and protesting on campus, Wilson never took part; he had even refused to wear an Afro. This had outraged Kiswana because, unlike her, he was dark-skinned and had the type of hair that was thick and kinky enough for a good 'Fro'" (WBP 80). For Kiswana, wearing an Afro, and answering to an African name is all that she has to do to preserve her identity, and hold the community together; forgetting that she is not an Afro, but Afro-American which are two different things, by virtue of experience and definition.

"Kiswana had still insisted on cutting her own hair, but it was so thin and fine-textured, it refused to thicken even after she washed it. So she had to brush it up and spray it with lacquer to keep it from lying flat. She never forgave Wilson for telling her that she didn't look African, she looked like an electrocuted chicken" (WBP 80-1). Kiswana cares much about the way she looks rather than caring for her true identity; she is busy wearing black rather than being really black. The result is 'an electrocuted chicken' not a black young woman. And when Mrs. Brown teases her that she thought she were going to get lung cancer trying to be what she is not, Kiswana bursts out that she is keen to preserve and proud of her African descent, and she'd rather be dead than being like

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

her own mother, “a white man’s nigger who’s ashamed of being black!” (WBP 85). In her rage, Kiswana misjudges her mother who takes the floor to teach Kiswana one more lesson.

Mrs. Brown insists that she is alive because of the blood of the so many proud people of the race who died trying to be; people who did not enjoy the luxury of being and died striving for that. “Proud people who never scraped or begged or apologized for what they were. They lived asking for only one thing of this world –to be allowed to be.” (WBP 86). The lesson that Mrs. Brown has learnt from those people, and which she intends to teach Kiswana is that “black isn’t beautiful and it isn’t ugly –black is! It’s not kinky hair and it’s not straight hair—it just is” (WBP 86). Mrs. Brown with very few words teaches her rash daughter that she has to keep being rather than trying; that is she should keep trying to be what she is instead of wasting her time trying to look like what she could be, but isn’t.

It is up to Mrs. Brown to correct her daughter’s misunderstanding about her identity, mistaken by Kiswana as adopting an African name, when the name that her mother offered her can be as valuable as any African name could be. Mrs. Brown alerts Kiswana that it broke her heart when she changed her name from Melanie to Kiswana. Kiswana willingly abandons the name that her mother has always liked, because it is her grandmother’s name. Joan S. Korenman argues that for Mrs. Brown, naming her daughter after her great grandmother is a way of honoring her maternal ancestor, and to perpetuate her legacy; the name change that the girl regards as a gesture of racial affirmation is presented by Naylor as “an effacing of African-American women’s history” (153).

Mrs. Brown defines her grandmother as “a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off

six white men with a shotgun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for ‘not knowing his place’” (WBP 86). This act of reminding Kiswana with her ancestor, on the part of Mrs. Brown, is intended to deepen Kiswana’s sense of belonging to such a great woman who didn’t have to “reach into an African dictionary to find a name” to make her proud like Kiswana. Mrs. Brown’s point is that it is not about naming, it is about being. At that moment Kiswana is at loss for words and cannot really face her mother any more: “Oh, God, just let me die. How can I face her now?” (WBP 87). The two women hug and call each other ‘Mama’ and ‘baby’. Korenman suggests that Kiswana’s story celebrates the maternal, which is deepened by the affirmation of mother-daughter closeness (157-8). Kiswana is healed and taught the lesson well and is finally enlightened. She needed somebody like her mother to jolt the false and mistaken understandings out of her mind.

By the end of the series of lessons carried out by Mrs. Brown, Kiswana is offered the very thing that she is longing for: her womanhood. From the very beginning, Kiswana bleeds to make her mother realize that she is ‘a woman now’, and not a ‘kid’, and not just day-dreaming: “Oh, God, Mama! I haven’t done that in years [day-dreaming] –it’s for kids. When are you going to realize that I’m a woman now?” (WBP 79). Before Mrs. Brown mission is over, not only the two women are established as mother and daughter, but also they are unified as women.

Peeping into her mother stockings, “bright red nail polish glared at Kiswana” (WBP 87), reminding her of her own nail polish she applies, because “Abshu [her boyfriend] was a foot man, and he always started his lovemaking from the bottom up” (WBP 77). Kiswana wonders if her daddy is a foot man too, and before her amazement is over

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

She looked at the blushing woman on her couch and suddenly realized that her mother had trod through the same universe that she herself was now traveling. Kiswana was breaking no new trails and would eventually end up just two feet away on that couch. She stared at *the woman she had been and was to become* [Italics mine] (WBP 87).

And insisting on being her ownself, apart from her mother, Kiswana catches herself saying “But I’ll never be a Republican”. Her womanhood is established now, she can think about politics. “By the end of Kiswana’s story, she and her middle-class mother share a spiritual oneness by virtue of their sexuality” (Montgomery 93). Kiswana finally discovers that she is not much different from her mother, and maybe she will not differ in the future; they are identical, from Kiswana’s point of view.

Andrews suggests that Kiswana identifies with her mother as a woman sexually, “when she notices for the first time her mother’s bright red toenail polish, like her own” (6). Their bond is not established on the basis of pride in their great grandmother, forbears, ideology, or color, but on the basis of womanhood. It is such a bond which proves powerful enough to relieve Kiswana, and instead of her worries about her mother picking her on, she feels comfortable inviting her to visit her again: “Mama. It’s really nice of you to come by. You should do it more often” (WBP 88). Kiswana is enlightened and is aware of her place within the race and the community. She comes to a better understanding of her communal role, re-orientes her revolutionary beliefs, and eventually she is established as a grown-up mature woman. She is even ready to accept financial help left in an envelop by her mother, something she was determined to refuse before. But now that she is a

woman, not just a Fro, she can accept herself and can let other women help her, and she is ready to help other women herself. Later on, Kiswana informs Lorraine that she enrolls in the community college influenced by her old lady's requests. Mrs. Brown's roles as a mother and a woman are crucial to the development and maturity of Kiswana's character. "Kiswana's deepened knowledge and acceptance of her mother and of her own need for education make her much more effective over the rest of the novel" (Lynch 188). That is, Kiswana restores the link with her community, when the link between her and her mother is restored.

Sisterhood is no less evident in the community of Brewster Place. Such sisterhood bonds empower female community members, so that they can get along better for a better community. Barbara Christian argues that friendship between women is crucial to the empowerment of Afro-American community (1993, 124). Two sisterhood bonds are established throughout the novel: Mattie Michael and Etta Mae Johnson, and Kiswana Brown and Cora Lee. In both of these relationships, a sister helps her community mate to overcome illusions and rediscover herself. Mattie Michael and Kiswana Brown serve Etta Mae and Cora Lee, respectively, as benevolent sisters who can help others.

The first striking sisterhood bond is established between Mattie Michael and Etta Mae Johnson. Since their first beginnings in Southern Rock Vale, they have been intimate friends. Both flee north, for different reasons: Mattie escapes fatal confrontation with her father, and Etta evades confrontation with her black community and white society. They start together, and end up together in Brewster Place, though leading different paths of life. Mattie has lost her son and a life-time of hard work, and Etta Mae lost herself. They find solace and guidance in

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

each other, though it is Mattie who sounds wiser and stronger. "It is in each other's company that they acquire the strength they both need" (Montgomery 1996, 95).

Etta's strife to be herself ends up with her rejected by both her black community and the white society.

Etta spent her teenage years in constant trouble. 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 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 nigger, as talk had it; she was just being herself ... But Rutherford County wasn't ready for Etta's blooming independence, and so she left (WBP 60).

Her community was not ready for her, and so she leaves not knowing where. Later on, she finds that

Rock Vale had followed her to Memphis, Detroit, Chicago, and even to New York. Etta soon found out that America wasn't ready for her yet—not in 1937. And so along with the countless other disillusioned, restless children of Ham with so much to give and nowhere to give it, she took her talents to the street. And she learned to get over, *to hook herself to any promising rising black star, and when he burnt out, she found another ... she*

wouldn't have known how to shine alone
[Italics mine] (WBP 60).

Etta's life is a model of an African American woman who just wants to be herself, but never can. Not allowed to be herself, she is left dependable. She is in a constant need for a man to take her up the social and financial ladder. "Her shortcomings lie in her inability to channel her artistic flair toward independence. Strongly influenced by society's gender bias and prescriptions, she believes that a woman's self-definition lies in marriage" (Uwakweh 132). She gets older, but never finds that man, and men around her get fewer and fewer. It is the community which twists Etta into what she has become. Her community offers her no chance of self-definition; she cannot be herself but she is what others want her to be. Since she has to behave according to norms she cannot accept, she decides that she will have her own rules so that no one will use her. At the end of the day, Etta Mae Johnson still cannot be herself. Only when Mattie is there, Etta can be herself: "She 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" (WBP 58). It is Mattie Michael who offers her the thing she is denied: herself.

Etta Mae has no intention of going back: "I oughta find me a good man and settle down to live quiet in my old age" (WBP 61). Later on she finds such a man in Reverend Mooreland T. Woods who was not very different from talents "she'd encountered ... in poolrooms, nightclubs, grimy second-floor insurance offices, numbers dens, and on a dozen street corners" (WBP 66); he is just another black star, but this time with a 'different sort of power', she thinks. A man like this could elevate her from the

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place

bottom of Brewster Place, and bring her to “the front of the church, ahead of the deacon’s wives and Ladies’ Auxiliary, off of Brewster Place for Good. She would find not only luxury but a place that complemented the type of woman she had fought all these years to become” (WBP 66).

She finds in Reverend Woods the power she is longing for; and he finds in her the wild woman who is “still dripping with the juices of a full fleshed life—the kind of life he was soon to get up and damn into hell for the rest of the congregation” (WBP 67). Both of them are aware of each other, and both of them pretend. They both maneuver to have each other introduced. The only mistake Etta commits is counting on Mooreland not knowing that a game exists, when it is him who controls the game, enjoys the game, and tricks Etta in thinking that he is not in the game. “She 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” (WBP 72).

Amid the game, Mattie tries to get Etta conscious that Mooreland is not really that serious man who can settle down with her. So enthusiastic about her new promising star, and her way out of Brewster Place, Etta totally miscomprehends Mattie’s message, while Mattie wonders “what had happened back there to stuff up her senses to the point that she had missed the obvious?” (WBP 70). Etta has known dozens of men, however Mooreland’s ways distort her steps, and blind her.

When the whole thing is over, Etta finds out that Mattie was right, she was a fool, and it was about nothing but sex and having a ‘good time’. Once ‘the weakness of the flesh’ is over, the game is over. Mooreland is glad that Etta is one of those women who plays it right, and does not make it out to be something bigger, and can have a good

time without hanging all onto a man. She even makes things easier for him and he does not have to use any beforehand prepared excuses for not seeing her again soon, and relieves him by getting out of the car outside Brewster.

Etta is finally defeated and enlightened. “Etta stood looking at the wall that closed off Brewster from the avenues farther north and found it hard to believe that it had been just this afternoon when she had seen it” (WBP 73). It is at that moment that Etta realizes her situation, and that she is defeated with a ‘broken spirit’. But nothing matters, as long as “someone was waiting up for her. Someone who would deny fiercely that there had been any concern” (WBP 74); and that someone is Mattie Michael, who lets her be herself. Etta “finds temporary comfort in the sustaining friendship of Mattie ... [for] it is Mattie who has always been the constant and the comfort” (Whitt 25-32). Disempowered, defeated, and enlightened Etta climbs “toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her” (WBP 74); the love and comfort that Mattie Michael affords giving to her friend, who belongs nowhere but at her presence. “Etta is saved from despair by Mattie’s loving support” (Lynch 188).

The other sisterhood bond is established between Kiswana Brown and Cora Lee. In such a relationship, Kiswana tries her hands at helping other women or community members and Cora Lee undergoes crucial change that alters her and her children’s lives. Since her childhood Cora Lee is obsessed with having baby dolls, and then real babies. Her parents failed at distracting her attention from that idea of having new baby dolls all through her childhood. She kept having them, till she learnt that ‘the thing that felt good in the dark’ could give her ‘real babies.

She kept having babies. She had two problems: she did not and does not seem like she is going to stop having

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

children, and once her babies grow up into children she dislikes them. She likes babies and nothing but babies, but her sense of motherhood stops at the point of having them and having them babies.

Why couldn't they just stay like this –so soft and easy to care for? How she had loved them this way ... Oh, for them to stay like this, when they could be fed from her body so there were no welfare offices to sit in all day or food stamp lines to stand on, when she alone could be their substance and their world, when there were no neighbors or teachers or social workers to answer to about their actions ... [When there was no one to] complain about the linty, gnarled hair of the babies who had grown beyond the world of her lap, growing wild-eyed and dumb, coming home filthy from the streets with rough corduroy, khaki, and denim that tattered faster than she could mend, and with mouthfuls of rotten teeth, and scraped limbs, and torn school books, and those damned truant notices in her mailbox—dumb, just plain dumb ... *babies just seemed to keep coming—always welcome until they changed, and then she just didn't understand them* [Italics mine] (WBP 111-3).

No man was there for Cora Lee, or for her children. Not that Cora Lee needed one beside her, but they did not stay anyway. Men, in Cora Lee's life are just “shadows—who came in the night and showed her the thing that felt good in the dark”; she preferred shadows because “they didn't give you fractured jaws or bruised eyes” (WBP 113). It is that invisibility of African American man and her obsession with kids that renders her in loss, out of funds,

and unable to 'be at one hundred places at one time' for her children. Before meeting Kiswana, Cora Lee is a negative mother who pays no attention to her children and a negative mother who does not care for community: she is negative for not taking action to improve her life or her children's; she is content with what she affords and her soap operas are the borders of her world.

Kiswana takes Sammy home after catching him looking in garbage cans for candies, but she is stunned when Cora Lee reports that she knows about it, but she just 'can't be everywhere at once', and cannot stop it. Also, when Kiswana informs her about the intended tenant's association, supposed to force the white owner to fix up the place, Cora Lee is completely uninterested, very negative if not hostile: she thinks that Kiswana "couldn't have been here very long or she would know there was nothing you could do about the way things were. That white man didn't care what a bunch of black folks had to say, and these people weren't gonna stick together no way" (WBP 116). She is hopeless about her future, her children's, and the future of her community. Besides getting babies to life, she is obsessed with soap operas, and she is completely nervous and would do anything that would make Kiswana leave and let her in peace with her soap operas. "Why didn't this girl just go home and stop minding her business" (WBP 118). Not only is she ungrateful to the help that Kiswana offers, but she is also hostile to that kind of offer, and does not appreciate her efforts. In short, Cora Lee is disoriented, disempowered, out of time and place. Deep inside she is empty and has nothing to offer to her children or community, and does not expect anybody to offer her any help. She is a model of the single mother who has to act the roles she is not ready for: motherhood, fatherhood, provider, and protector.

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

Although Cora Lee was in a hurry to catch a TV soap opera, she loses interest after Kiswana leaves, and then finds out that Kiswana is there, somehow: “Kiswana’s perfume, lingering in the air mixed with the odor of stale food and old dust, left her unsettled and she couldn’t pinpoint exactly why” (WBP 120). Kiswana is affecting Cora Lee. Also, it is Kiswana who reminds Cora Lee “but babies grow up”, which goes on and on in Cora Lee’s mind. She also manages to convince Cora Lee into taking the children to a puppet black version of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* carried out by her boyfriend Abshu. “Kiswana is going to change Cora’s life and open her eyes” (Matus 57), and Abshu’s show is just the beginning.

Cora Lee finds out that her motherhood is insulted by the coming of Kiswana and by her instructions on how to bring up and treat her children. When that thought comes to her, she gets up to prove something to Kiswana and herself: she can be a good mother after all.

That girl probably thought she didn’t want to take her children to that play. Why shouldn’t they go? It would be good for them. They needed things like Shakespeare and all that. *They would do better in school and stop being so bad. They’d grow up to be like her sister and brother.* Her brother had a good job in the post office and her sister lived in Linden Hills. She should have told that girl that—her sister was married to a man with his own business and a big house in Linden Hills. That would have shown *her*—coming in here with her fancy jeans and silk blouse, saying she was a *bad mother. Yeah, she’d have her babies ready tomorrow.* [Italics mine] (WBP 121).

Not only does Cora Lee think about Kiswana and how she sees her and her children, but also she starts for the first time to think about her children themselves; she starts having dreams for them. She finds in Kiswana what she cannot find in herself or for her children, and is anxious to show her that her children too can and will be better. The firmness of her tone is clear that ‘she’d have her babies ready tomorrow’, maybe for the theatrical show, for Kiswana, and maybe for the world. They are going to be ready.

Cora Lee and her family undergo immediate change after Kiswana’s first visit. Cora Lee does her best to show her children at their best: she bathed them, and “sorted feverishly through their clothes—washing, pressing, and mending”; and the children “had never seen their mother so active” (WBP 122). She had to mend what long years of negligence and carelessness decayed, to meet the standards of her model. Soon she is rewarded: “When she opened the door for Kiswana, the girl was touched as she sensed the amount of effort that must have gone into the array of roughly patched trousers, ill-fitting shirts, and unevenly hemmed dresses that the woman proudly presented to her” (WBP 122-3). Cora Lee is proud; she learns to be proud of her children, and proud of what she has done for them. They are no more ‘wild and disgusting’ and it isn’t true that ‘there’s nothing you can do’ about it, because they can change when she is ready to change. Cora Lee is beginning to play her role as a mother.

They are successfully there; Cora Lee comes to the park prepared with a leather strap folded in her bag:

They weren’t going to cut up and
embarrass her in front of these people.
They would sit still and get this
Shakespeare thing if she had to break

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

their backs ... There would be no fidgeting and jumping up—show these people that they were used to things like this ... She looked to see if she would have to sneak her strap out of her bag, but the children were surprisingly still (WBP 124).

For the first time, Cora Lee can be 'everywhere at once' for her children; she is aware of their behavior and is aware of etiquettes and is keen to make her children behave accordingly. Her children too reward her and stay still, without even being asked to. The whole family practices change. Cora Lee's way of seeing her children changes; her dreams change; the way she treats her children, the way she thinks, and the way she looks after her grown up children—not just babies—all change. Even the children themselves change too, from crazy monkeys into calm angels. She finds out that Maybelline looks like the fairy queen, and that one day she may act on a stage too, and go to college like the actress; also, she wouldn't let Brucie grow up like a dumb ass. Simply, she cares for her children from that night on.

That 'had been a night of wonders'. For the first time, Cora Lee realizes that there are possibilities for her children, she can dream for them, she can help them accomplish their dreams, and after all 'babies grow up':

all this truant nonsense had to stop. She would get up and walk them there personally if she had to—summer school. How long had the teachers been saying that they needed summer school? And she would check homework—every night. And P.T.A. [Parent Teacher Association] Sonya wouldn't be little forever—she'd have no more excuses for missing those meetings in the evening.

Junior high; high school; college—*none of them stayed little forever*. And then on to good jobs or layers. *Yes, that's would happen to her babies.*[Italics mine] (WBP 126).

The firmness of her tone ‘Yes’, suggests that she is determined to do this for her children who are no more a burden, hated, or neglected. Since ‘none of them stayed little forever’, then schools, colleges, and good jobs are the places where they would be.

By the end of the play, Cora Lee is grateful to Kiswana Brown who led her through that. ‘Thanks so much—it was wonderful’, Cora Lee admits gratefully. It is Kiswana’s act of sisterhood which heals not only Cora Lee, but the whole family. Such sisterhood leads Cora Lee from the realm of dreams and into the world of reality, and brings her back to earth. Cora Lee learns how to be a mother. Before the encounter with Kiswana, Cora Lee is obsessed with the idea of having babies, no matter how, or what is going to happen to them. But, their sisterhood makes her aware of herself, her children, and the world around them. Without Kiswana’s help Cora Lee wouldn’t realize, or be.

The community is shown at its worst in “The Two”. The lesbian relationship between Lorraine and Theresa is the impetus of the most offensive and striking incidents of the community of Brewster Place. Nobody could, nor cared to remember when they moved into Brewster until the rumor started. That rumor finds a willing carrier in Sophie. Once the rumor is working, every normal behavior of the two is considered a sign against them: they pull their shades down, they consume a lot of chocolate chip cookies, and why would they need to use so much water that their faucet is broken. Everything turns against them; people stop speaking to them; and the whole neighborhood

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

dislikes them because of their sexual orientation. Chapleau suggests that the people of Brewster, suffering from sex and color discriminations which aggravate their anger and sense of insecurity, “feel the need to lash out and seek revenge for their suffering, to find scapegoats; The Two are the designated targets” (37). She further argues that men reject them because they do not need them for anything, and women envy them for their independence from men they would like to have (41). Both parties deny their existence and their humanity, and refer to them as ‘the lighter skinny one’ and ‘the short dark one’. They are defined by their appearance rather than their names; “not until the two move inside their apartment and speak to each other do they become Lorraine and Theresa, distinctive persons with names” (Christian, 1989, 191). In a sense, the community practices against The Two the kind of discrimination practiced against it by the white society.

It is Lorraine who cares for what people think of her and starts worrying when neighbors stop greeting her. She finds out that some people who spoke to her before pretend to be busy when she passes by, and even the ones who speak to her do so after an uncomfortable pause. On the other hand, Theresa pays no attention to what people think or say about her: “I personally don’t give a shit what they’re thinking. And their good evenings don’t put any bread on my table” (WBP 134). She even accuses Lorraine of being so sensitive about others and that it is her who made her move from Linden Hills to live “in some dump of a building in this God-forsaken part of town around a bunch of ignorant niggers with the cotton still under their fingernails” (WBP 134). Theresa is aware of herself and of the community’s attitude towards her as a lesbian. So, she reacts negatively; she is not accepted, she knows that, and does not look for what seems an impossible acceptance.

But Lorraine does: she is longing for their approval and acceptance, and she wants to feel like a part, or a working member of the community, so that she can feel normal;

she wanted to stand out there and chat and trade makeup secrets and cake recipes. She wanted to be secretary of their block association and be asked to mind their kids while they ran to the store. And none of that was going to happen if they couldn't even bring themselves to accept her good evenings" (WBP 136).

Lorraine needs a community to define herself. She even needs Theresa to feel safe and normal. She "would be constantly seeking to surround herself with the comfort of everyone's goodwill, and would shrivel up at the least touch of disapproval" (WBP 135). Theresa does not understand Lorraine's need to be involved with the community, or her fears of people talking about her. "Lorraine wanted to be liked by the people around her ... [while] Tee [Theresa] didn't seem to need anyone" (WBP 142), not even her partner. From Lorraine's point of view, she has the right not to feel different from people around her when she is a black woman living among black people who are supposed to be in the same boat rowing together, or they would sink together. Whitt sums the contrast between them: "while Theresa is self-defined, Lorraine is other defined" (46).

But Theresa's disapproval of Lorraine's sensitivity, and her contempt for the people whose acceptance she lacks, makes Lorraine aware of her dependence on Theresa. Theresa knows that Lorraine is dependent on her, and the idea that she never fights her back and that she is

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

excessively soft irritates her. She cannot comprehend Lorraine's continual need for nurturing and support; her hopes of Lorraine's hardening proves impossible and she is able no more to provide such supportive care. "Theresa was growing tired of being clung to—of being the one who was leaned on. She didn't want a child—she wanted someone who could stand toe to toe with her and be willing to slug it out at times. If they practiced that way with each other, then they could turn back to back and beat the hell out of the world for trying to invade their territory" (WBP 136). But Lorraine does not. It is ironic however, that when Lorraine fights back, Theresa does not feel comfortable at all. It is ironic too, that at a point Theresa is extremely angry with their peeping neighbor Sophie, she throws things against Sophie's window pane, loses control over her feelings, and then it is for Lorraine to comfort her.

Shortly after Lorraine starts her regular meetings with Ben—who found in her the image of his lost daughter, and she found in him kindness nobody else offered—she notices the change. "Lorraine was changing ... Theresa sensed a firmness in her spirit that hadn't been there before ... Lorraine wasn't deferring to her anymore. And she wasn't apologizing for seeing things differently from Theresa" (WBP 155). Lorraine's relationship with Ben enabled her to recover herself. Although lesbian, her female mate could not provide her with what Ben, a defeated man could; Ben endowed her with acceptance, and let her feel like a normal person: "when I'm with Ben, I don't feel any different from anybody else in the world" (WBP 165). That's one of the things that worried Theresa: "she had tried—she truly had—to get Lorraine to show some backbone. And now some ignorant country winehead was doing in a few weeks what she couldn't do for the last five years" (WBP 165); but, at the same time she worked hard to convince her that she is not a normal human being

and that she is different from the rest of the community. Theresa realizes, at that point, that she is no longer in control, and that Lorraine is not hers anymore. Lorraine got her independence.

It is further ironic that it is Lorraine who kills Ben. Lorraine is attacked and raped by the C. C. Baker gang. Unconscious, Lorraine kills Ben, in revenge of the rapists, and then goes mad. Lorraine is raped severely to a point that she took revenge from the first moving object in her way, Ben (the only fully realized male character in the novel; in a way the representative of the emasculated invisible black manhood).

Lorraine's rape is symbolic of the oppression of black femininity, and the community's sexual homophobia at its worst; her rape is an act of silencing. Martha J. Cutter argues that Lorraine's rape is one of the instances in African American women's fiction which alludes to, and in a sense echoes the mythic narrative of Ovid's Philomela—a princess of Athens who, after being raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, was avenged by her sister, Procne, and was later turned into a swallow or nightingale while fleeing Tereus— where rape, silencing and destruction of feminine subjectivity are explicitly intertwined (161). Like Philomela, Lorraine is raped, silenced by her rapists (a boy stuffs a dirty paper into her mouth to silence her screams), and leaving her to madness, defeat, and final destruction. Thus, Lorraine serves the community as a “purgative scapegoat and brutalized martyr whose demise apparently serves to unify a (female) community” (Awkward 56).

On the other hand, the rape is a projection of power practiced by boys who have just a six-foot world to prove they are men. Lorraine is their means to prove such a thing. However, Barbara Christian suggests that “the

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

attack on Lorraine is not only done by these men, but by the entire community that had created an environment in which she could be seen as an accessible scapegoat, and beyond that by a society whose racism exacerbates the fear and anger powerless men feel against women who reject their ... manhood" (1989, 196). This is not a justification for the rapists, but rather a blame for the community.

The tragic death of Ben and Lorraine's madness serves as a prelude to *The Block Party* (the closing section of the novel). The community of Brewster Place is shown at its worst, just to be seen at its best. The block party, planned by Kiswana Brown to raise funds to get a lawyer and '*haul the butt*' of the landlord to court, takes place in a dream of Mattie Michael's. It occurs after a week of non-stop rain that pours down after Ben's and Lorraine's death as if cleansing the community, offering it a fresh start, or at least a chance to overcome pain. Lorraine's death unifies the women of Brewster and brings them together. All the women share a dream about Lorraine, wearing her bloody green and black death-dress. Matus suggests that "the dreams unite them and provide a context of sharing and connection" (53). She further opines that "Mattie's dream expresses the communal guilt, complicity, and anger that the women of Brewster Place feel about Lorraine" (52). Lynch agrees that "Ben and Lorraine become victims of the ugliest impulses on this street, but his death and her madness are sacrificial because they hold up a mirror to the community and force a general, tacit of complicity in their fates" (188).

The block party is a communal act where people are brought together by the virtue of the commonness of their interests, and their consciousness of their own problem. It "is a vision of community effort, everyone's story" (Matus 49). "The Block Party" is an attempt to bring the community together (Whitt 16). It is a chance for the

community to recover the loss of Ben and Lorraine, and to re-order itself. Although the block party is just a dream, but it is significant; it does not really take place, but the possibility is there. “‘The Block Party’ is a crucial chapter of the book because it explores the attempts to experience a version of community and neighborhood. People know each other in Brewster Place, and as imperfect and demanding as their involvement with each other maybe, *they still represent a community*” [Italics mine] (Matus 63). Nowhere else in the novel are the women of Brewster Place seen together and meant to do something they all need, believe in, and work to achieve (i.e. force the landlord to carry out his duties toward the housing complex, and then tear down the wall). “Naylor establishes Brewster Place as a community inspite of its history of transients—a community with its own mores, strengths, and weaknesses” (Christian, 1993, 110).

Amidst the festive airs of the block party, it starts to rain, and Cora Lee finds her Sonya scraping against the wall—that blocks Brewster from the rest of the world—for what Cora takes as a blood shed: “Cora pulled Sonya’s hand away from the wall and uncovered a dark stain on the edge of the brick that the child had been scraping. The stain began to widen and deepen” (WBP 185). She is stunned by the sight of the blood, and begins to scrape it off the wall herself, and finally manages to pull out the whole brick out, and hand it to Etta,

and it was passed by the women from hand to hand, table to table until the brick flew out of Brewster Place and went spinning out onto the avenue ... They ran back to the wall and started prying at another stained brick, Mattie digging into the crumbling mortar with her barbecue fork. She finally got it out and threw it behind her. Etta Picked it

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

up and began passing it down the street ... Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands ... The bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and relayed out of Brewster Place (WBP 186).

Michael F. Lynch states that “the resident’s heightened consciousness of and anger about the wall contribute to their gradually increasing belief in the efficacy of their united action ... Mattie Michaels’s dream of the destruction of the wall prophesies the resident’s temporary victory over the environment” (187). Tearing the wall down, the women experience “an inner regeneration, a sense of community and solidarity, and a rebirth of hope” (McDowell).

The women of Brewster Place undergo a mania, tearing the wall down. They know that it is not blood on the wall, but they do not care. Kiswana realizes that it is not blood, and directs their attention to that fact, and instead of listening to her, Ciel presses a brick in her hand and wonders if it matters. Even Theresa, uninvited to the block party and ready to leave Brewster, participates with the other women; she unifies with the rest of the community. Theresa realizes that the women of her community are her mates, that they are her equals, and that their fight is her own (Whitt 55). She is finally accepted, and Cora Lee’s request to help with the bricks is her way of accepting Theresa in the sisterhood. Pauline Ada Uwakweh comments, “Naylor demonstrates how group conflicts and intolerance can be overcome through a common objective” (135).

Their target, however, is not the blood, but the wall itself. “Tearing at the very bricks of Brewster’s walls is an act of resistance against the conditions that prevail within

it” (Matus 54). It is that wall at the end of Brewster that walls them in, walls the rest of the world with all possibilities out, and renders them cornered in a dead-end street. Montgomery opines that “the brick wall separating Brewster Place from the larger society is symbolic of the marginalized space women are forced to occupy” (1996, 94). Lynch suggests that “the wall that makes Brewster Place a dead end functions as the novel’s central symbol of containment and frustrated possibility ... As they [the women of Brewster] spontaneously remove the horrid structure brick by brick, they defy and transcend the severe limitations the city imposes on them” (186-9); James Robert Saunders agrees that dismantling the wall of seclusion, the women just open the way for possibility (23). However, it is the very wall which arouses their communal spirit:

it is the same brick-barrier separating the residents of Brewster Place from the outside world that is crucial to the emergence of a communal spirit among the women. Their concerted effort to bring down the wall demonstrates that solidarity is possible from a common experience of suffering. Whereas the women may lack power as individuals, their confinement creates the potential for the emergence of a collective force (Uwakweh 130).

“All the women contribute to tearing down the wall, smashing through the barrier that cut them off from possibilities” (Whitt 55-6). However, no man is on the scene. While the women are tearing down the wall, the men stand “huddled in the doorways” out of the rain, watching. No man helps in the process of destroying the wall and freeing the community. “The men are noticeably absent in

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

the reality Naylor inscribes; only women are present during what seems to be a ritual cleansing of the universe from the guilt over Lorraine's rape and Ben's murder" (Montgomery, 1996, 99). The scene establishes the women of Brewster Place as the ones who lead the initiative towards change, while the men are content with being spectators, along with the children. "This scene underscores how much the women must rely on themselves in this patriarchal society" (Chapleau 53). It is a women's fight, and it is women who have to fight it on their own; they cannot rely on men to free them. So, they do not even bother to ask the audience of men any kind of help; they just do it their own way.

The block party is a potential answer to the novel's epigraph; Langston Hughes's poem questions "*What happens to a dream deferred?*", and the last of the possibilities suggested by the poem "*or does it explode?*" is what happens in the block party. The deferred dreams of those women do explode; even if the whole thing is just dream. "Even if the women are bitter and the wall at the end of the street alienates them from the rest of the city, they still find it in themselves to dream and hope for a better life" (Chapleau 11). The novel, however, closes with Mattie Michael opening her windows to receive the morning sun, and "the sun was shining on everything" (WBP 188); a significant end without doubt. One day, the sisters will be able to escape the entrapment of sexuality, and color.

The novel ends with 'Dusk', and the death of Brewster Place. People are moved away by force, and the street is condemned to death. "*No one cries when a street dies. There's no line of mourners to walk behind the coffin wheeled on the axis of the earth and lidded by the sky ... Brewster dies*" (WBP 191). So, Brewster dies alone, watching its last generation torn away from it by force.

“Brewster had given what it could—all it could—to its ‘Afric’ children, and there was just no more” (WBP 191). Although the street is dead/dying, *“the colored daughters of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up ...They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear ”* (WBP 192). “Dusk” just echoes “Dawn”; the last words of the novel are reminiscent of the image of the ‘ebony phoenix’ established in “Dusk”. That is, the women of Brewster Place are just like a phoenix, which once dead, resurrects once more. Just like that, “they move elsewhere and continue the rituals and practices that have long been a sustaining influence in black America” (Montgomery, 1996, 96). They take their deferred dreams elsewhere just to dream them once more. Only “the empty Brewster Place can die” (Whitt 16), but not these women who will rise again. Barbara Christian, however, counter-argues that Brewster “stands for both itself and other places like it”, and hence is not really dying; it is always there (1993, 110).

The Women of Brewster Place is a novel about women; it represents African American women and their role in sustaining their community. Seven protagonists manifest different ways of women supporting other women. Maternal and sisterly relationships are crucial to the survival of those women. Bonding together is a means of empowering themselves and their community. On the other hand, it is a means of survival. Throughout the novel, women collaborate in pairs to attain a better understanding of themselves and their community, and to strengthen each other in the face of hostile social and cultural barriers. Finally they are capable of, or there is a possibility of being together, collectively; even if in a dream. They can be realized as a community because, “what unifies the ... disparate urban community of Brewster Place ... is a shared sense of solidarity based on the challenges each faces in a white, patriarchal world”

Women Bonding as Means of Survival in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*

(Montgomery, 1996, 94). The novel closes with hope for a better community and better possibilities for 'the restless daughters of Ham'.

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