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RACE, HOME AND RELATIONSHIPS IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

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The Women of Brewster Place established Gloria Naylor on the literary map in the 1980s. Written in the continual black female tradition, the novel explores black women's inner and outer being as they navigate their lives and relationships in the urban environment. The work's narrative structure has been of particular interest to many scholars and ordinary readers. This paper will step in a different direction and try to analyze the connection that exists between the characters' race and the opportunities they have for a home and, going further, how that affects their romantic prospects. The various relationships, times and spaces chart the invisible thread which connects all African Americans throughout history.

Key words: home, love, black women, Africa, urbanity, folk traditions, feminist reading, movement, belonging

Gloria Naylor's debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place* was published in 1982 – almost a decade after the new generation of African American women writers began their literary careers. The novel situates itself in an existing tradition that the author has taken into consideration and chooses to either embrace or question. At the time of its publication, *The Women of Brewster Place* was favorably received by both critics and ordinary readers; its success increased when it was adapted for the screen a few years later. The structure of the novel puzzled and inspired critical readings that dealt with the way Ms. Naylor manages to locate commonality in disunity. Each of the seven stories captures a different aspect of the black female experience and identity and their manifestations in different times and spaces. The aim of this paper is to examine the interconnectedness between the categories of home (understood as an actual place and a state of mind), race and human relationships (mostly of the romantic variety). We can argue that the fact that the characters are defined by their race and gender has an immediate effect on the spatial distribution and the potential

for self-affirming emotions. The existing critical readings provide some information about these categories but they have not been the sole focus of a reading of the novel as critics were more interested in the structure, the narrative decisions and the sound of the female voices.

The 1980s were a very dynamic time in terms of literary production by African American women writers. Some the greatest and most expansive works were produced during that decade. Writers who had started writing during the 1970s reached new heights in their careers and found many new readers and admirers. It would not be a far stretch to say that the flourishing of many authors during this period led to Toni Morrison being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1993. Having said all this, it is very hard to generalize and pinpoint dominant modes of writing, themes or motifs. The writers draw inspiration from a variety of fields: history, current political affairs, the folk tradition, personal experiences and points of view. Barbara Christian has managed to provide one of the most comprehensible treatments of the African American female literary tradition. According to her, writers who emerged at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s were aware of the development of the ideas concerning black women's place in the community. She strays from generalizing statements about them, but still argues that many of them wanted to ascertain to which community their female characters should belong "in order to understand themselves most effectively in their totality as *blacks* and women" (Christian 1985: 242). Belonging to a community is one of the factors that unifies African American women writers. Even though they focus on it from a different perspective over the centuries, they understand it as deeply rooted in their own being. Searching for a home, community and belonging then reflects black women's most profound inner pursuits. Due to its structure and blending of many stories and female characters, *The Women of Brewster Place* turns into an insightful work that displays the particularities of the author and of the time, but also manages to insert itself into the intertextual tradition of black women writers. In this paper, we shall try to uncover Naylor's revised vision of the intersection between home, race and romantic relationships.

Historically the idea of home has entailed complex and conflicting opinions and experiences. Since the African American people were transported against their will from Africa to the US, they have struggled with feelings of loss of belonging and lack of solid ground to establish their communities. The fact of their racial identity defines their understanding of home. The question of Africa as an original homeland has influenced many literary and critical texts as well as music and other

artistic endeavors. During the civil rights movement in the 1960s, many African Americans went to Africa to search for their roots. Even if it might have fluctuated over the centuries, Africa's influence continues to be dominant and to show itself in black women's works.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* the African connection becomes most evident in the unfolding of Kiswana's story. She is a young activist full of ambitious ideas and goals. Seduced by the idea of Africa as a home and motherland, she changes her name and starts wearing an Afro in order to get in touch with her African heritage. The styling of her hair proves unsuccessful, as her natural hair is not thick or curly enough. Her brother even tells her that she looks like "an electrocuted chicken" (Naylor 1983: 81). Hair has been very important to the African American community because it has always been placed in opposition to the dominant American models of long straight (mostly blonde) hair. Generations of black women have had to press it to make it look more appealing and closer to the existing norm. Even today, this trend continues and many young girls learn at an early age that if they want to be selected for a certain job position they have to become *presentable*. Ingrid Banks has conducted one of the most elaborate surveys concerning African American women's hair. She suggests that black women's alteration of hair texture is "an expression of their cultural consciousness"; the intersection of cultural, political constructions of hair and gender and race leads to black women being considered not beautiful (Banks 2000: 38). In other words, cultural understandings of beauty and propriety determine the appearance but most importantly women's identity. Naylor has decided not to spend time on the obvious problem concerning the notion of hair and beauty[1], but to subvert the expectations and to show what happens when people try to mold themselves after another model – the African one. Once again, the result is not natural beauty or going to one's roots but just one more closed avenue of belonging and another mask. Symbolically Africa is negated as a place, where black women can find their home and wholesome identity. Kiswana's mother addresses it by saying:

> I am alive because of the blood of proud people who never scraped or begged or apologized for what they were. They lived asking only one thing of this world–to be allowed to be. And I learned through the blood of these people that black isn't beautiful and it isn't ugly–black is!
>
> (Naylor 1983: 86)

[1] Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* present the destructive consequences of accepting and following the dominant white model of beauty.

Kiswana's mother gets to the heart of the problem by explaining that subscribing to certain models, be they strictly American or African, black people are opting for false identities that do not manage to account for the centuries of pain and struggle. To understand what black is individuals just need to be themselves and gather strength from the previous generations. Home then is not exemplified by the American or the African land but by the people who lived, survived and left their legacy for the children of the future. The characters are made to search within themselves and in their community for answers about their belonging to a certain race or home.

Africa is not the only space that African Americans consider a *lost* home. The South also became a dominant conceptual space after the publication of W.B. Dubois' *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. The collection of essays shows key characteristics of Southern life and, in a way, transforms the geographical space into the "real" home of black culture. Josie Brown-Rose suggests that Dubois' work had a "great literary impact as it [the South] has been incorporated into much of the literary work that has been written during and since the Harlem Renaissance" (Brown-Rose 2006: 426). *The Women of Brewster Place* presents a group of characters from the older generation who have left the South for one reason or another and who still consider it a type of home. The novel's most recurrent character, Mattie Michael, decides to relocate after a fleeting affair with a local man that leaves her pregnant and disgraces her. A flashback to the past reveals her quick meeting with Butch in the cane fields. They walk in the "sneaky heat" and inhale the dry and invigorating air surrounding them. This picture later transforms into a cool afternoon. "The temperature dropped at least ten degrees on the edge of the thick, tangled dogwood, and the deep green basil and wild thyme formed a fragrant blanket on the mossy earth" (Naylor 1983: 15). Both of these images represent an idea of the South as an untamed, wild and natural place that strains and soothes the human body. The characters are able to become one with nature and experience freedom to move and explore their desires.

These idyllic pictures are replaced further into the story by the coldness of the Northern urban regions, where Mattie is forced to reside. In her first accommodation, she gains the following impression: "Mattie looked around at the cramped boardinghouse room with its cheap furniture and dingy walls that no amount of scrubbing seemed to lighten, and she thought of the organdy curtains and the large front yard in her parents' home–the clean air and fresh food" (Naylor 1983: 27). In her mind, everything in the South signifies self-contentment and belonging. Her parents and their house are her understanding of an expansive, regenerative

and welcoming home. Her attempts to reconstruct this lost haven and find communality in the city prove not quite successful even though she manages to achieve a semblance of home in Eva's house. Later, when she uses her knowledge of folk traditions to heal Ciel, this makes apparent the immovable nature of the South in her *self*. Michael Awkward even claims that Mattie's unsuccessful efforts to establish unity and communalism suggest that Gloria Naylor believes "that folk spirit has met its demise in the urban desert of modernity" (Awkward 1993: 68). We can agree that the "urban homes" do not offer warmth and the same communal spirit the rural South does, but it can be argued that the folk spirit and sense of belonging continue to exist until people remember and pass them on, as Mattie does to Ciel. The South itself cannot only be ascribed with positive connotations. If we look at Etta Mae's story – the woman who fled from it because "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" (Naylor 1983: 59) – we learn that not all women found a home there. Etta Mae, a character following in the footsteps of Sula Peace, is too independent and self-assured to be accepted into the Southern community. The idyllic picture in Mattie's story is replaced by a vision of prejudice and unwanted sexual advances due to her gender and race. Etta Mae spends the remainder of her life trying to escape the symbolic chains people wanted to impose on her. Therefore, with all its picturesqueness and stability the South cannot offer complete freedom and independence to black women, although its traditions and folklore would continue to connect and heal them.

The last place African Americans populate and experience is the urban North. The first big movement happened at the time of the Great Migration at the beginning of the 20th century, when many black people left the agricultural South to pursue other ventures. After the Second World War, this relocation to the North increased. W. Lawrence Hogue claims that after 1950 "economic modernization in the South and industrial expansion in the North" led to a mass migration and the appearance of a large urban black population (Hogue 1986: 49). In that same period, Ben becomes the first African American to join the community in Brewster. Brewster Place is almost lifelike throughout the whole story due to the detailed description of its inception, generations and continual change. It transforms into a silent character that reflects the experience of the people who inhabit it and the current racial and political situation in the US. African Americans become the third generation that finds a home in Brewster, taking after the Mediterraneans. "Brewster Place rejoiced in

these multi-colored "Afric" children of its old age. […] They clung to the street with a desperate acceptance that whatever was here was better than the starving southern climates they had fled from." (Naylor 1983: 4). What differentiates the people who have chosen Brewster is the fact that they have no other place to go to, and that fact is tightly related to their race and gender identity. Kiswana is the only one who has decided to live there intentionally and to learn about lower class people's desires and failures, as many real activists did during the 60s. She has opted against a more privileged life in Linden Hills – a place defined by its middle-class residents. There is a striking difference between the two neighborhoods that, according to Barbara Christian, becomes obvious to both of them precisely because they are both black [places] (Christian 1993: 108). The two spaces offer diverse views of what homes and havens are available to black people in the 20th century, which are defined by race and class. Women are made to reconcile their position in them and/or to escape them. Brewster is a home to those who have had a loss of subjectivity. Most of the female inhabitants have put their trust in the wrong man – be it a husband, a lover, a son or father – and now are forced to survive in the best way they can with or without them.

The Women of Brewster Place is filled with romantic relationships. Each of the seven stories not only introduces the innermost problems and aspirations of the heroine, but pays a closer look into their (un)successful search for love and mutuality. Women's lives in the novel are defined by lacks, abuse and abandonment which have led to many of them moving from one place to another. Patricia Hill Collins has differentiated two dominant traditions in music and literature in terms of love and relationships – "black women's trouble with black men" and "the great love black women feel for black men" (Collins 2000: 152). This interconnectedness of love and trouble has influenced many works by black women – in music through the blues tradition and in literature through a double exploration of the life-affirming and the debilitating side of relationships. Men in *The Women of Brewster Place* appear as a plot device; many of them are not fully realized as characters and do not possess any redeeming qualities. They serve a purpose to uncover the capacity women have for survival and struggle. Either as shadows or names mentioned in passing they never take a central position or evoke positive change. Mary O'Connor, who traces the ferreting out of female voices in the novel, adds that "the male voices are heard, but contended, in these books" (O'Connor 1998: 35). Men do have lines of dialogue here and there but most of it reveals their fleeting and unreliable nature: an

immediate example is Butch's description of eating cane, a reflection of his own attitude toward life – know how to leave when you have made the most of a given situation. Therefore, we will pay more attention to how women experience the *trouble* created by their lovers.

The focus of Mattie and Etta Mae's stories are two one-night stands: one happening during the period of coming of age, while the other takes place during maturity. Mattie, innocent and inexperienced, gets pregnant and is later beaten up by her father, while Etta Mae, fully lost in her dreams of becoming the wife of a priest, misunderstands Reverend Woods' motives and later despairs. Mattie overcomes adversity but never attempts to find love again; she redirects all her emotions toward her son, which would later turn into her downfall. Eva gets candid with her early in the story and tells her "no young woman wants an empty bed, year in and year out" (Naylor 1983: 37), suggesting that children cannot replace romantic relationships. Stripped of the desire to connect and experienced enough, in her later years Mattie transforms into the wise (almost asexual) leader of the community, who accepts diversity and offers guidance. Etta Mae, on the other hand, after the abovementioned episode, reconsiders her life in the empty and bleak hotel room. "They were all the same, all meshed together into one lump that rested like an iron ball on her chest" (72). All the men in her life, and by extension in black women's lives, are unified in a single unnamed entity that suppresses their abilities and desires like a heavy ball. It seems Gloria Naylor thinks that men rob women of their souls and regenerative powers. In the aftermath, Etta Mae finds shelter in Mattie's apartment, an act signifying black women's real homes – their communities with other women.

From the younger generation we find more examples of abandonment and mistreatment in Ciel and Cora Lee's story. Ciel is forced by her husband Eugene to have an abortion in between his many comings and goings. The reason she cannot let go of him is her boundless love. This emotion is described in the novel: "When she laid her head in the hollow of his neck there was a deep musky scent to his body that brought back the ghosts of the Tennessee soil of her childhood" (92). He reminds her of home, freedom and childhood and this makes his actions excusable. Further in the story, during one of their fights about him leaving, their daughter dies. It looks as though abandonment can have even more serious consequences – the death of the youngest generation or of the future. Mattie again acts as the spiritual healer of their *home* and brings Ciel back to her feet by "laying of the hands" and a type of baptizing. Cora Lee, on the other hand, goes through life and men without a second thought. She does not get attached and considers her lovers shadows who are there to serve their purpose, to give

her pleasure and to supply her with more children. Even in her story, we find evidence of violence – "a pot of burnt rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth" (113). We are to understand that lack of men is better than their presence in most cases. As a whole, romantic relationships between men and women do not have a positive effect on women's identities. They oscillate between literal and metaphorical lacks of love, belonging and understanding. Mae G. Henderson suggests that there are two important aspects to black women's writing; they manage to express "polyphony, multivocality and plurality of voices" as well as "intimate, private, inspired utterances" (Henderson 2000: 353). Gloria Naylor's use of such a narrative structure gives her the opportunity to express a variety of female points of view but still to give them enough space for private thoughts on loss and lack of positive relationships. From diversity to specificity the novel replicates a world of orphans who gather at Brewster to share pain, heal and maybe find a home.

In the 1980s, many African American women writers started to introduce lesbian characters into their works and to explore their issues and lives. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, one of the longest stories, "The Two", examines the relationship between Lorraine and Theresa – women who have moved a lot due to prejudice, sexism and an inability to locate a place where they can fit in. Brewster also, as it turns out, is a place full of people who want to pry into the lives and relationships of others; this causes many arguments between the two women since Lorraine is keen on becoming an accepted member of the building, while Theresa does not care as long as she has a home to go to. Ben, one of the staples of the neighborhood, becomes friendly with Lorraine and raises her confidence. Events escalate at the end of the novel when a group of teenagers rapes Lorraine at night in one of the most painful and explicit episodes ever put to paper. In the morning, crawling on the street, she takes a brick and kills Ben. One of the most discussed scenes is the one of Ben's murder – why did she kill her only friend? Jill Matus thinks that hurt and betrayal lead to violence "which erupts on displaced targets" (Matus 1990: 56). Michael Awkward reasons that this is just a reflection of Lorraine's disturbed psyche (Awkward 1993: 58). They both look for an answer that explains unjustified violence and does not attach intentionality to Lorraine. However, the act may not have been as unintentional as they believe. Ben helps Lorraine become one of those people who stand up for themselves and are not afraid to keep their head high. As a result, she lets go of the caution she has previously had. In the past, she would not have gone out alone, let alone passed through the dark alley. So killing Ben can be a way

to punish him for making her spread her wings and become a new person. Even though the change is positive it is stifled by violence at the hands of men. As we have seen so far, almost nobody has happy and fulfilling relationships or a permanent positive identity.

Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* exemplifies many of the themes and issues typical of the 1980s as a period of literary production by black women. As the characters, defined by their race, look for homes and belonging both near and far away – in Africa, the South and the North – elements of the black female experience are revealed,the way they understand beauty, identity, love and freedom. Relationships unfold and reveal the author's intention to centralize female characters and transform the male ones in shadow figures. Heroines struggle with lacks, abuse and abandonment, and at the same time attempt to preserve the folk traditions of their Southern ancestors by healing and sheltering one another. The novel follows in an established tradition with which it enters into a conversation and supplies with a new point of view.

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