



MA in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities

**Love thy Heterosexual Neighbor as Thyself: Othermothering,
Responsibility, and the Traumatic Intrusion of the Lesbian in the
Community of Brewster Place.**

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a teacher taught me
more than she knew
patting me on the head
putting words in my hand
-“pretty little *Indian* girl!”
saving them-
going to give them
back to her one day...

(Walters 1980: 109; her
italics)

To

Dr. Carme Manuel i Cuenca

and

Dr. Rodrigo Andrés González

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Abstract

The female characters in Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983) live in a marginal space, an American ghetto, where they struggle to overcome poverty, sexism, racism and, some of them, lesbophobia. In the midst of this desperate situation of subjugation and discrimination, they find strategies for survival which contribute to heal their pain and sorrow. With no access to political domains or spheres of influence, they can only mitigate, but not change, their plight through their relationships with their immediate neighbors. The relationships among these female neighbors go beyond friendship, as they othermother each other assuming ethical and parental responsibilities. Yet, this community excludes those viewed as the Other, namely, a lesbian couple, rejecting thus the plurality that, according to Hannah Arendt, is necessary for the community to be political. In doing so, they demonstrate their individualism, their exclusionary ethics, and how they have been conquered by hegemonic discourses. In this dissertation, I explore how individuals form homogenous communities where they shelter from the menace that others pose to their identities and security, and refuse to take on responsibilities toward the Other in the name of self-defense. This M.A. thesis re-interrogates Gloria Naylor's 1983 text within the current academic debate about who the Neighbor is, and what human responsibility towards the Neighbor involves. The dissertation both acknowledges and problematizes Patricia Hill Collins's and bell hooks's celebrations of black sisterhood and othermothering in the late twentieth century, and reexamines Naylor's novel through the ethical approximations of Emmanuel Lévinas, Hannah Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman, and Slavoj Žižek to the crucial theoretical articulations of the concepts of Neighborhood and Community.

“Writing and reading is always a risk because you have to risk your intimacy and rebel against yourself”.

Azar Nafisi ¹

Introduction

The Women of Brewster Place, published by Gloria Naylor in 1983, presents the story of a group of black women oppressed on account of their race, their class, their sex and their sexuality, who live in a ghetto of an unspecified city of the North of the United States, where freedom is still a utopia for blacks.

In this dissertation I explore how Naylor, in accordance with the political and social circumstances of the eighties when sisterhood and female values were particularly fostered and celebrated by women all over America, portrays the relationships among women as a mechanism for them to endure oppression and to empower themselves. As a matter of fact, the women of Brewster Place can indeed only count on other females to survive; the beautiful relationships among these women go beyond friendship as they accept parental and ethical responsibilities in othermothering each other. Yet, I argue that Naylor departs from depicting a merry and romantic vision of womanhood and sisterhood since the relationships among these women do not bring any radical transformation to their lives. Moreover, Naylor also presents the horrors and cruelties of this female community which becomes oppressive for others: she problematizes crucial concepts in African American female working class culture, such as othermothering, in including the story of two lesbians who have moved in Brewster but are not accepted by this female community. The presence of these two women is

¹ Azar Nafisi in a conference delivered on 22nd February 2010 at Universitat de Barcelona.

considered by their neighbors as a traumatic intrusion and the female community of Brewster Place rejects “The Two” on the basis of their sexuality. Naylor compels thus the reader to realize how subjugating binaries and labels are and how they are deployed to establish boundaries between individuals. I also discuss how Naylor does not absolve the heterosexual women of Brewster Place from their responsibility toward the two lesbians, and criticizes how homogenous communities oftentimes understand others as a threat to their identities and their physical and psychological security as well. In view of this impossibility to avert the presence of others, individuals alienate themselves from the presence of those who can be considered “intruders” and choose to neither accept ethical responsibilities nor establish social relations with them. Thus, individuals cling to those who are similar and familiar to them so as to form an even closer community where they can feel protected and secure from the threats outside this safe space. *The Women of Brewster Place* can be read as an invitation to reconsider our ethical limits and to accept ethical responsibilities with those who are not like us. In an interview between Alain Finkielkraut and Emmanuel Lévinas, the former asked Lévinas if Jews, who have been oppressed and persecuted historically, are also ethically responsible for the other. In his response, Lévinas made it clear that there are no limits to responsibility, and that ethics cannot be transgressed for the sake of self-defense. Naylor’s text coincides with the Lévinasian message that responsibility transgresses any cultural or social barrier.

To analyze these questions, I have divided my dissertation into three chapters. In chapter one, I analyze how racial, sexual and class issues shape the different oppressions to which the women of Brewster Place are submitted. I rely on the work of bell hooks and Michael Kimmel among others to explore how sexism and racism interlock determining the nature of the relationships among black women and black

men. Chapter two is devoted to the relationships among the heterosexual women of Brewster and to the parental and ethical responsibilities they accept toward each other. I apply "othermothering" rather than sisterhood, as in the former concept motherhood and community overlap; "othermothering" becomes a "safe space" where women establish connections with other human beings which help them survive, empower themselves and manage to restore to their female neighbors and to themselves the dignity and self-love that patriarchy denies them. I also look into the "double life" of these women as they turn to other females for affection, yet they come back to men once and again despite the destructive relationships both sexes maintain. Patricia Hill Collin's *Black Feminist Thought* and Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality" provided me with important insights into the dynamics of othermothering and the political importance of the relationships among women under subjugating circumstances. Finally, in chapter three, I explore how and why these women reject to extend the solidarity, the bonds and ethical responsibilities which characterize their female community to their two lesbian neighbors. In this section I have relied on Monique Wittig, Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler to argue that the women of Brewster see the two lesbians as the Other because they cannot escape from the symbolic dimension assigned to the word 'lesbian'; for them, the couple embodies a threat to their heterosexual identities, the only privilege the heterosexual women of Brewster Place have. I have also drawn upon Slavoj Žižek's notion of a Neighbor as a "traumatic intruder" (2009: 50) and Zygmunt Bauman's idea of community as a homogenous shelter from the other, to explain how these women confront the lesbians by alienating themselves from them. Thus, the presence of "The Two" in Brewster, viewed by their neighbors as an invasion of their physical space, is minimized by using "the art of mismeeting" (Bauman 2009: 154), namely, disassociating themselves from the couple.

This indifference toward the couple implies the loss of the Lévinasian face, hence, the women of Brewster fail to respect the otherness of the two women and to accept their ethical responsibilities toward the other. In this sense, Naylor connects with Lévinas in the philosopher's postulation that there are no limits to responsibility and that ethics cannot be transgressed on account of safety. Since plurality is a precondition of our existence, as Hannah Arendt defends, a truly political community can only be established if otherness is acknowledged and respected.

"Many black women feel that black male abuse of women is a reflection of frustrated masculinity - such thoughts lead them to see that abuse is understandable, even justified."

bell hooks (2000: 76)

1. Classism, Racism and Sexism: The Burden of The Women of Brewster Place

The Women of Brewster Place is the story of a group of African-American women who are daily subjugated on the basis of their race, their class, and their sex. These women have been mistreated both psychologically and physically by capitalism, by white supremacy, by their fathers, their husbands or partners and some of them, by their sons. Deprived of economic means and any possible choice, they established themselves in Brewster, a black neighborhood in an unspecified city of the North of the United States, dreaming of a better future. However, racism in America is a yoke for blacks and the women of Brewster learn soon there are few chances to abandon the ghetto.

Racism is cruel for both African-American women and men, it is a burden they cannot escape from as it determines their present and future possibilities. As Stuart Hall put it: "racism, of course, operates by constructing impassable symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories, and its typically binary system of representation constantly marks and attempts to fix and naturalize the difference between belongingness and otherness" (1992: 255). Consequently, racism prevents blacks from moving beyond the boundaries of the ghetto and ascending the social ladder; I will explain in chapter three that true ghettos cannot be left as Zygmunt Bauman asserts, since they have been constructed by those outside to isolate the Other and to build a

community where they can be sure that the Other is absent, so they can feel safe and protected. Racism marks the nature of blacks' personal relationships within the ghetto, which become destructive and oppressive for both men and women. However, African-American men and women suffer sex-specific forms of oppression. While both black men and women are subjugated by racism and classism, the latter also endure the burden of sexism which, according to bell hooks, is the basis of all other oppressions (2000: 36). Sexist oppression was the first oppression that humans suffered, a systematized oppression which resulted to be profitable for men as it enabled them to exploit women both sexually and economically dominating society and oftentimes rendering women powerlessness within a system which bestows privileges on men over women and validates male domination over women.

African American male control of "their" women was challenged by white men's obsession with dominion over other male groups in order to maintain their white male supremacy. White men feared losing their privileged position, and in order to countervail the peril that those male groups posed and to assert white superiority, a narrative which defined not only blacks but also Native Americans as an inferior category was constructed: "whites were civilized and rational, while members of other races were savage, irrational, and sensual" (D'Emilio and Freedman 1997: 86). Furthermore, in his seminal text *Manhood in America* (1996), Michael Kimmel pinpoints that Social Darwinian theories developed by philosophers and sociologists Herbert Spencer in England and William Graham Sumner in the United States in the nineteenth century provided the basis and the arguments to legitimize the natural superiority of whites from a biological perspective. In the case of blacks, those hierarchies placed them on the same scale as primitive beasts since their anatomy was considered to be similar to that of apes; moreover, blacks' brains were said to weigh less

than those of white men, hence their mental inferiority (Kimmel 1996: 92). The final purpose of these claims which allowed whites to dispossess blacks of their humanity and to treat them like animals was to justify their control. On the one hand, this treatment of blacks as animals rationalized their economic exploitation, as Patricia Hill Collins explains: "under capitalist class relations, animals can be worked, sold, killed, and consumed, all for profit" (2009: 149). On the other hand, and always, according to those Social Darwinian hierarchies, "some groups were more manly than others" (Kimmel 1996: 91), that is to say, the supremacy of whites was justified by the inferior masculinity of blacks since, in Michael Kimmel's words, "doctrines of racial superiority were cloaked as comparative levels of masculinity" (1996: 92). These hierarchies were also used to define manliness from a white perspective, which implied the representation of those men who were not white as faulty. What these theories – in the same discursive strategies as the justification of slavery, colonialism and imperialism (Mercer 1994: 137) - put forward was a definition of hegemonic masculinity which allowed white males to exclude black males and other masculinities from it, and, as a result, to subordinate those racialized men and put them in a lower step of the social ladder, while white men positioned themselves at the top.

In addition, the subjugation of blacks was also legitimized by the myth of the black penis size; Dr. William English declared that black men's "instinctual composition was toward "bestiality and gratification", and that their "innate tendency to sex appetite" (qtd. in Kimmel 1996: 93) corroborated their lack of morality. Accordingly, blacks were scientifically dehumanized and reduced to their bodies. Socially subordinated to whites on the basis of their threatening anatomy, their bodies became "the repository of all that America fears, hates, and loves" (Brown and Clark 2003: 733) and the source of their otherness. The production and presentation of this

caricature or stereotype of blacks, whose main axis is fixity, established the basis for their subordination. As Homi Bhabha explains, fixity "connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" (1983: 18). This fixity justifies a strategy that permits the persistent control and discrimination of the Other. At the same time, if identity, that is, the process of becoming, is fluid and a process never completed, the fixed reality assigned to the stereotype denies the individual the possibility of transformation and therefore, becoming. In this manner, African Americans have historically found it almost impossible to undo their ontological categorization as beasts, their otherness and thus, their subjugation. As we have seen, according to these theories put forward by whites, whereas whiteness was thus identified with culture and civilization, blackness became synonym for brutality.

Not only sex, but also sexuality and the sexuality of white women specifically became crucial in the justification of the domination of black men by whites. The "excessive" sexuality and the bestiality of blacks were terrifying, so the control of this group was justified since white males were afraid of losing their privileged position, a position which has historically relied on the subordination of white women. Other male groups were threatening because they could take white women from white male control and this would mean the white man's loss of his traditional subordinate, which "would debase them to the status of other races" (d'Emilio and Freedman 1988: 86). Thus sexism and racism become intertwined systems of oppression. As Arthur Flannigan states: "one of the motivations behind European-American racism - as discerned for example in certain racial myths and stereotypes (...) - is a fear of black male sexuality and a need to control black masculinity" (1994: 1057). Hence, white males have been traditionally terrified not only at the idea of losing their supremacy but also of being dominated by black men, as Michael Kimmel affirms: "manhood is less about the drive

for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us" (1996: 6). Thus, the category of race was therefore used to rationalize the ascendancy of one group of men over other groups on account of their biological superiority and to promote the establishment of a hegemonic white masculinity, to which black manhood has been subjugated for centuries.

Consequently, the fact that racial difference is argued from a sexual perspective determines also the type of objectification and oppression that women will face (Collins 2009: 150). If racism is a problem of masculinity and the nub of the matter was proving masculinity and expressing male power through the ability of controlling others, the control of women and their sexuality was pivotal since for men to be men, they had to control "their" women (Kenneth 1991: 505). The mastery of women became a symbol of power, "a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking with other men" (Kimmel 1996: 7). The masculine ideal prescribed by white supremacist patriarchy involved controlling the sexual terrain and embracing phallocentrism as a logic in which, according to bell hooks, "what the male does with his penis becomes a greater and certainly a more accessible way to assert masculine status" (1999: 94), that is to say, a man confirms his manhood by using successfully his penis in the sexual arena. Furthermore, this battle to assert one's masculine status must be disputed in the public terrain as "what men need is men's approval" in David Mamet's words (qtd. in Kimmel 1996: 7). Thus, manhood is verified in the presence of other men.

Nevertheless, in this struggle between men it is not enough to possess the women of one's own group: the most significant expression of male power is the conquest and exploitation of the women of another race (Alexander 1996: 157). On the one hand, white males fortified "their" property, namely, white women, putting them on

a pedestal and extolling virginity and purity. Anti-miscegenation laws were also passed to prohibit relations between a white woman and a black man as interracial sex would have been an outrage to white man's power. On the other hand, the white man had already managed to control black women's bodies and sexuality through violence and coercion during slavery, thus, "interracial sex became a prerogative of the white man, a symbol of his authority and power" (Staples 1999: 130). This appropriation of black women's bodies involved the "emasculatation" of black men as they were dispossessed of that property which constructed them as men. As Angela Davis wrote:

in its political contours the rape of the Black woman was not exclusively an attack upon her. Indirectly, its target was also the slave community as a whole. In launching the sexual war on women, the master would not only assert his sovereignty over a critically important figure of the slave community, he would also be aiming a blow against the black man. The latter's instinct to protect his female relations and comrades (now stripped of its male supremacist implications) would be frustrated and violated in the extreme. (1972: 97)

White males' dominion of both "their" white women and black women reinforced their supremacy and their patriarchal privilege and at the same time, deprived blacks of it. Specific attributes which were considered quintessentially masculine were also denied to black males, for instance, independence, authority, control, and the performance of the role of protector and main provider within the family. Curiously enough, the language used to describe black males' lack of power was sexualized and associated with emasculation, impotency and castration. This language has presupposed

that black male liberation has been understood in sexual terms and in the acquisition of patriarchal advantages (hooks 1990: 76).

Since the times of slavery, black men have been colonized by patriarchal discourse and have always tried to position themselves in relation to the ideal masculinity advanced by white patriarchy in order to reverse the myth that whites created about black's inferiority. Racism contributed to the development of the 'black macho', an attitude adopted by many black men, including those of *The Women of Brewster Place*, in a discursive practice to perform their masculinity and both as a challenge to white hegemony and as a response to black subordination. In Claire Alexander's words: "black masculinity is then perhaps best understood as an articulated response to structural inequality, enacting and subverting dominant definitions of power and control, rather than substituting for them" (1996: 137). Those black men who perform the black macho code would define their masculinity "in terms of superficial masculine characteristics - demonstrable sexuality; physical prowess; the capacity for warlike behavior" (Wallace 1999: 19-20).

The internalization of the masculine ideal established by white patriarchy and the imposition of black macho behavior has not brought equality and power to blacks. It has proved to be oppressive for both men and women and has entailed the destruction of their relationships as *The Women of Brewster Place* demonstrates. The women of Brewster are oppressed and subjugated as a consequence of that macho attitude of their husbands, fathers and sons: they are left alone after getting pregnant, they are made responsible for caring for their babies alone while men are busy proving their manliness on the street; some of them are obliged to abort, and they are physically and spiritually mistreated. The men of Brewster desire to overcome their inferior status in the United

States of America and to obtain recognition of their right to behave as *real men* within patriarchal system "by demonstrating that they were the dominant figure in the black family" (hooks 1981: 94). In this sense, the men of Brewster do not hesitate to use violence as a means to evidence that they are the heads of their families and that they can dominate their women as white men use(d) to do. This fact shows that though sexism has existed for centuries, the attitudes of the men of Brewster Place, which are common in both black and white societies, have taken the form of undisguised woman-hating (hooks 1981: 102) and evolved into misogynist attitudes. However, this attitude only brings frustration to their lives and those of their women as in the case of Ciel and Eugene; that reality cannot be changed easily as the men of Brewster cannot admit the pain that racism and patriarchy inflict on them because "the psychology of masculinity in sexist societies teaches men that to acknowledge and express pain negates masculinity and is a symbolic castration, causing pain rather than expressing it restores men's sense of completeness, of wholeness, of masculinity" (hooks 2000: 122).

The Women of Brewster Place articulates women's frustration in characters such as Ciel, who feels disappointed at her life and at a husband who is around for some periods of time only to leave later. Her expectations and dreams of a happy family have not come true:

It was all there: the frustration of being left alone, sick, with a month-old baby; her humiliation reflected in the caseworker's blue eyes for the unanswerable "you can find him to have it, but can't find him to take care of it" smile; the raw urges that crept, uninvited, between her thighs on countless nights; the eternal whys all meshed with the explainable hate and unexplainable love. (Naylor 1983: 91)

In spite of that stark reality, Ciel still tries to convince herself that there may be a chance for change and hope, and she constantly forgives Eugene's aggressions and oppression because she has accepted conventional gender norms, she is therefore colonized by the discourse of hegemonic masculinity which entrusts men with family responsibility. Ciel has interiorized the narrative which affirms that racism is more oppressive to men than to women because men need to feel superior, and she participates in the ideology which states that women should contribute to male ascendance since their ascendance would entail race uplift (hooks 1990: 75). At the same time, her partner Eugene is dissatisfied at his inability to perform the role of provider within the family because he is unemployed, and blames Ciel and the children instead for his situation and lack of opportunities:

"I'm fucking sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that's all you good for"

(...)

"With two kids and you on my back, I ain't never gonna have nothing"

He came and grabbed her by the shoulders and was shouting into her face. "Nothin', do you hear me, nothin'!" (Naylor 1983: 94-95)

Eugene is oppressed by the patriarchal myth he tries to fulfill and which is subjugating for both himself and Ciel. He considers himself "emasculated" since his lack of economic means prevents him from exerting patriarchal authority.

On the other hand, Eugene also thinks that his authority as head of the family may be undermined by Mattie Michael, a kind of surrogate mother for Ciel who lives alone in her apartment of Brewster. For Eugene, Mattie represents a threat to black male

power given that she is not directly dominated by any man; Eugene adopts a rude and defensive attitude in front of her to demonstrate he can control his life and his family and he often deploys verbal violence and words such as 'fat bitch' or 'frig' to refer to Mattie: "Ciel don't need me today. I bet that frig, Mattie, rides in the head limo, wearing the pants." (Naylor 1983: 90).

Ciel is not the only woman who is oppressed by 'macho' code. The very Mattie Michael herself got pregnant at a very early age by Butch Fuller, a man who embodied in her community the stereotype of the black sexual beast of which whites were afraid. He was badly reputed among the black community because he was very much concerned about his sexual performance which seemed to threaten every woman; accordingly, Sam, Mattie's father, had tried to control the peril that Butch Fuller represented for a "decent woman" like her daughter and he had warned Mattie once and again against him. However, Mattie was seduced by Butch Fuller's peculiar ways, his strong body and laugh, and she got pregnant in their first encounter. As a woman, Mattie was ruined by her having engaged in a destructive romance which would mark her future and her arrival in Brewster Place. Mattie had to flee from her parental house in order to protect her baby after she refused to reveal to Sam the identity of the man she got pregnant by, an attitude that supposed an affront to Sam's patriarchal authority. Finally, after spoiling Basil, her son, during all her life, Basil betrays her when he is imprisoned as his freedom costs Mattie her home, and consequently, she has to set up in Brewster.

Other two female characters whose lives are conditioned by men are Etta Mae Johnson and Cora Lee. Etta Mae cannot live her own life, she needs men to feel valuable as she has been conquered by sexist value: "even if someone had bothered to

stop and tell her that her universe had expanded for her, just an inch, she wouldn't have known how to shine alone" (1983: 60). Cora Lee is another example of the consequences of the black male's acceptance of patriarchal values. She is also a mother, she has got seven children of different fathers and lives on welfare. The fathers of her children never stayed for long and she was physically mistreated by one of them:

She had really liked him. His gold-capped teeth and glass eye had fascinated her, and she had almost learned to cope with his peculiar ways. A pot of burnt rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth, but that had been their fault for keeping her so tied up she couldn't keep the house straight. (Naylor 1983: 114)

As we can see in their stories, all these women have accepted violence, be it physical or psychological, since society and culture have encouraged them to believe that violence is a sign of masculinity, thus, violence has become normalized. Love and violence are then intertwined and many women consent that violence as part of their relationships, "they see enduring abuse as the price they pay" (hooks 2000: 125). Ciel Turner and Cora Lee are samples of those women who are afraid of rejecting physical violence as that would lead to the loss of love.

Finally, we find the stories of Kiswana, and Lorraine and Theresa, a couple. While Mattie, Etta, Ciel and Cora live in Brewster because they are poor and cannot leave the ghetto, these three women moved in Brewster voluntarily. Kiswana wanted to connect with her African-American roots which she thought to be threatened in the high-class neighborhood of Linden Hills. Unlike Kiswana, Lorraine and Theresa, as a couple of lesbians tired of being discriminated against in mainstream society, believed they might be free in the ghetto by siding with those who are also subjugated.

Therefore, the nature of the oppression of the couple is different to that of the women of Brewster: they are black, they are women and they are lesbians, so they are also sexually oppressed on account of their sexuality, which escapes the dynamics of patriarchy and for which, as we will see later, they will be severely punished.

The stories and the situation of the women of Brewster Place are the evidence that racism and poverty may not be the only forms of oppression they suffer since racism has culminated in bringing also sexual oppression to their lives because of the attitude that black men have adopted to fight against racism. These men of Brewster Place intend to demonstrate through violence that they can keep "their" women under control and they can act as real machos. Patriarchal sexist values have taught them that women are inferior and worthless beings, and that women are the enemy who needs to be repressed so that men may exhibit male dominance and thus, assert their masculine status. As a result, this ideology of male supremacy does not only support male violence, both physical and psychological, but it also condones it since its main axis is the right of men to dominate women (hooks 2000: 117, hooks 1990: 102). Black men have forgotten to fight against racism as they have been more worried about having access to those patriarchal privileges that have been denied them for centuries. Yet, racial subordination cannot justify the oppression to which black men have subjected black women since these women also suffer the consequences of racism. However, the men of Brewster Place cannot be held the only responsible for the oppressive situation that the women of Brewster Place suffer: the novel reveals that ultimately they are also the victims of a racist and patriarchal system and society which teach them that they must dominate others in order to be real men. As bell hooks states, when only black men are blamed for the plight of black women "white society is free from the burden of

responsibility; they can easily ignore the painful and brutal impact of racism" (1990: 72).

Both black men and women suffer the consequences of interlocking systems of oppression, those of racism and classism in America as they are denied the right to ascend in the social ladder, find jobs and opportunities which help them abandon the ghetto. Nevertheless, unlike men, women suffer also the burden of sexism which brings pain and sorrow to their lives and the destruction of the relationships between black women and men as *The Women of Brewster Place* evidences.

"Knowing love or the hope of knowing love is the anchor that keeps us from falling into that sea of despair."

bell hooks (2001: 78)

2. Toward a sense of community: othermothering as the base of the female community of Brewster Place

The women of Brewster Place live a nightmare as a consequence of being poor, female and black. Patriarchal society has constructed African-American women as inferior and worthless beings, they have been dehumanized to become “the mule of the world”, phrase first coined by Zora Neale Hurston in 1937 in her text *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to express the hardships black women have gone through since they have carried the burdens no one else would carry, and they have been inflicted sexual and physical abuses throughout History. Subjugated by both white society and black men, and also by political institutions which have never catered for their needs, black women have turned to other women who are going through the same experiences as them in order to soothe their spiritual wounds, since only those women who are familiar with the suffering produced by interlocking systems of oppression have been able to identify with them. Gloria Naylor stated in an interview with Àngels Carabí, "our survival today has depended upon our nurturing each other, finding our resources from within ourselves" (1991: 26).

The women of Brewster Place are not an exception as they can only find protection and comfort in other females inside the ghetto. Their relationships go beyond friendship or quintessential sisterhood as in order to overcome their isolation, they forge strong bonds among themselves which take them to mother one another; they transcend

from themselves as individuals to become members of a community which helps them endure the situation of oppression they face. Community and motherhood overlap in Brewster Place and in acquiring parental responsibilities² with each other, namely, caring for others, helping and showing human concern, the female community of Brewster Place - formed by Mattie Michael, Ciel Turner, Etta Mae Johnson, Cora Lee and Kiswana Browne - are expressing their commitment to each other and giving one another the strength and support needed to resist oppression and dehumanization. All these women, except for Lorraine and Theresa, mother and are mothered (Christian 1990: 357). Despite the fact they need the help of their female neighbors, Lorraine and Theresa are not an integral part of this female community because they are lesbians and the heterosexual women of Brewster do not identify with them. In order to be able to eventually analyze the dynamics of exclusion of "The Two", I shall proceed, in the next section, to explore the nature of othermothering within the heterosexual female community in the novel.

2.1 Othermothering: an African-American tradition

The allegiance and commitments among the women of Brewster Place evoke the "chitlin circuit", an expression coined by bell hooks to define a traditional network among black people in which relational love, care and friendship were the main values (1990: 36). The "chitlin circuit" helped blacks during the most oppressive moments of their History in America as it provided reciprocated comfort and aid, and it was a form of acknowledging one another and survive dehumanization. It is by forging bonds with others that the women of Brewster can endure the brutal oppression they suffer as well. In their case, the "chitlin circuit" becomes an exclusive "female chitlin circuit" which

² I prefer the term 'parental responsibilities' to 'maternal responsibilities' as the latter seems to assign these duties only to women.

allows them to escape from their isolation as individuals in society to become interconnected and to form a community. This interconnectedness is best described by Linell Cady in her essay "A Feminist Christian Vision":

Love is a mode of relating that seeks to establish bonds between the self and the other, creating a unity out of formerly detached individuals. It is a process of integration where the isolation of individuals is overcome through the forging of connections between persons. These connections constitute the emergence of a wider life including yet transcending the separate individuals. This wider life that emerges through the loving relationship between selves does not swallow up individuals, blurring their identities and concerns. It is not an undifferentiated whole that obliterates individuality. On the contrary, the wider life created by love constitutes a community of persons. In a community, persons retain their identity, and they also share a commitment to the continued well-being of the relational life uniting them (qtd. in hooks 1990: 35).

In the female chitlin circuit of Brewster Place, its members are responsible for the physical and spiritual well-being of the others. The commitment they share translates into accepting responsibilities for each other that have traditionally considered as parental duties. Thus, *The Women of Brewster Place* confronts us with a different perspective on motherhood, one which extends beyond biological children and embraces non-biologically related individuals. As Patricia Hill Collins stated, "the institution of black motherhood consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships that African-American women experience with one another, with black children, with the larger African-American community, and with self" (2009: 190).

Then, motherhood is not reduced to the mother-children relationship; rather, motherhood is related to the specific relationship women establish with others. Though some of the women in the novel such as Miss Eva, Fannie (Mattie's mother), Mattie, Ciel, Mrs. Browne (Kiswana's mother) and Cora birth their own children, the novel focuses on 'othermothers', a term used by Patricia H. Collins to refer to those women who accept parental responsibilities toward non-biological children:

In many African-American communities, fluid and changing boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who care for children. Biological mothers, or bloodmothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers - women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities - traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (2009: 192)

Hence, othermothering obliges us to revise the archetypal idea of mothering understood as giving birth and to define 'mother' as 'the person who assumes responsibilities', a definition which would embrace those grandmothers, sisters, aunts or cousins who acquire parental responsibilities for non-biological children (Collins 2009: 193). Furthermore, othermothering invites *border-crossings* by challenging oppositional binaries such as blood/non-blood relationships as the role of othermother may also be performed by other individuals beyond the boundaries of relatives, that is, "fictive kin", a phrase coined by Carol Stack to define those individuals who are not biologically related but become part of the family (1997: 60). Therefore, those women who are

fictive kin and take on parental responsibilities toward non-biological children would also be considered as othermothers. This concept of othermothering is present along the novel in the relationship that the women of Brewster Place have with each other as they care for and nurture their neighbors, who are not biologically related.

By introducing the idea of 'othermothering', black motherhood acquires a different dimension if compared with standards of white middle class mothering which assign the role of mother to a single person. In addition, unlike black motherhood, white motherhood is restricted to the boundaries child-mother and does not involve relationships with other women. Therefore, as Nancy Naples explained, as a result of distinct backgrounds and also cultural, class and social differences, the term 'mothering' is transformed and given new meanings (1992: 442). 'Othermothering' is a unique standpoint on motherhood advanced by the African-American tradition, and it is profoundly linked to the History of black people and its communal values. In fact, the community formed by the women of Brewster Place evokes those communal values which are a heritage of African societies and which were adapted by black slaves to the period of slavery in order to survive as a group.

In many traditional African cultures in which African Americans have their historical ancestry, as maintained by John Mbiti, reproduction was highly regarded and became associated with creativity and continuity, one of the means of ensuring the survival of life (qtd. in James 1993: 45). Societies were established as communal entities where it was believed that individual self-development and personal fulfillment relied on the well-being of the whole community, so individuals depended on each other (James 1993: 46); communal values were promoted so as to challenge individualism, viewed as a failure of the pillars on which the community was based. Thus, ensuring life

was understood as a collective responsibility: parental responsibilities were not restricted to the private and personal realm, that is to say, to biological children, but they were extended to children in general in order to ensure their survival and emotional well-being (Collins 1999: 161). On the other hand, ‘othermothering’ was also a common practice in polygamous societies where a woman would normally live with the other children of her husband and would take fostering responsibilities toward them. This context provided the basis for the creation of “woman-centered ‘mothering’ networks” (Collins 1999: 159), a practice which was retained among blacks when enslaved and taken to the United States.

As Herbert G. Gutman affirms, although slaves could not establish their African communal patterns and traditional family, in order to cope with slavery and its brutal oppression they kept some traditions, values and that interdependence which characterized their African societies (qtd. in James 1993: 46). During slavery, slaves became commodified, they were bought and sold in an economic system which considered those black bodies as a property of the master. Slaves were prohibited from having nuclear families and they were separated from their children, who often were orphaned at an early age. Because of this situation, blacks in America adapted African communal values to their lives in bondage and relying on other slaves turned to be crucial in order to survive, as Rodrigo Andrés explains: “the community can turn into a shelter from biologizing discourses which are characteristic of racism and nationalism, thus, offering interpersonal support through *familiar* bonds which are not determined by blood” (2012: 132; author's italics)³.

³My translation. Original text in Spanish: “La comunidad puede convertirse en un refugio frente a los discursos biologizantes propios del racismo y del nacionalismo ofreciendo apoyos interpersonales en vínculos *familiares* no determinados por la sangre”.

Values derived from mothering such as nurturing, communality and human concern (Christian 1990: 363) were paramount for the survival of blacks as a group. Herbert H. Gutman and Niara Sudarkasa defend that othermothering became a practice through which black adults, particularly women, took responsibility for the needs of the enslaved children and also of the whole community (qtd. in James 1993: 46). While slavery was equally and undoubtedly terrible for both black women and men, it is also true that it was more brutalizing for women, who were constantly raped and abused by their masters and separated from their children. Due to their situation, black women could easily identify with each other's suffering and it became common for black female slaves in plantations to attend black orphan children in their basic needs as well as to adopt them whenever possible; this feeling of responsibility for nurturing other children stimulated a strong ethics of care, whose pillars are the defense of feeling and sharing (Gallego 2006: 84). Slavery also helped foster a perspective on motherhood which was totally distinctive from that of white women: while white women could traditionally have found motherhood as the most oppressive institution and an obstacle to freedom since their role was limited to the family, for black women, motherhood, the right to exercise and enjoy parental responsibilities over their children, meant freedom and humanity, rather than subjugation. Stripped of their womanhood to be treated as animals in the fields and in the plantations, motherhood was a space where they could experience dignity, self-worth and love: work in the context of the family was "humanizing labor" (hooks 2000: 133). Motherhood became, hence, a subversive political gesture as by taking care of other slaves, loving and respecting them, othermothers were behaving responsibly and fighting for the endurance of the community and also for their racial uplift, in Audre Lorde's words: "in order to

perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change” (Lorde 1993: 339).

2.2 Othermothering in *The Women of Brewster Place*

The women of Brewster Place retain this tradition and form a community in which they mother each other as a response to the situation of oppression that they live. As Barbara Christian states, “the culture of sharing and nurturing in Brewster Place is based on a black tradition in this country that heartens back to slavery” (1990: 365). Since these women cannot exert any political power to change their lives, they resort to the only capacity that women have always had in their hands: their abilities as caregivers who take responsibility for other’s physical and spiritual well-being. However, Naylor does not depict motherhood as a romantic space where these women manage to be free, rather she portrays motherhood in its contradictory nature, with its beauties and its horrors. As Adrienne Rich argues, motherhood as an institution under male control proves to be oppressive for women as patriarchy incarcerates women in their roles as mothers (1976: 13) and limits other potential possibilities outside the private and personal realm; yet, the experience of mothering and othermothering saves these women from isolation as it connects them with other human beings and ultimately, with themselves. The women of Brewster Place engage in “a quest beyond the society’s narrow meaning of the word *mother* as a physical state and expand its meaning to those who create, nurture and save life in social and psychological as well as physical terms” (Christian 1997: 242). The relationship that these women establish among themselves aims at saving their lives by othermothering each other.

In the novel, Miss Eva Turner is the epicenter of this tradition of othermothers, a heritage and responsibility that Mattie Michael will inherit after Eva's death, what suggests that those who have already benefited from it are responsible for keeping this tradition alive. Eva first othermothers her own grand-daughter, Ciel, who is abandoned by her parents when she is only six months old. From the first moment of Ciel's abandonment and until Eva's death, Eva will mother Ciel and will be responsible for her nurture. The story of Eva and Ciel indicates the centrality of African-American grandmothers in black families. Afro-American grandmothers have a long history of nurturing and taking care of their grandchildren in those situations where their sons and daughters have not been able to do it because of those social and economic problems which originate from their plight as blacks in the United States. Moreover, this African-American perspective demonstrates on the one hand, as E. Franklin Frazier wrote, that "birthing a baby does not automatically make a woman the "mother" " (qtd. in Scott and Black 1999: 236), and on the other hand, that motherhood rights are social agreements (Scott and Black 1989: 236) since they can be shared or transferred to other individuals (Stack 1997: 63).

However, Miss Eva is also an othermother for Mattie when after getting pregnant, Mattie goes away from her parents and relocates to Asheville so as to start a new life. Thus, Miss Eva also represents those othermothers mentioned above which transcend blood boundaries by behaving as an othermother with a non-related individual. Mattie is alone living in a boardinghouse room, works six days a week in an assembly-line job in a book bindery and pays half of her salary to an old woman who keeps Basil during the day. One of the nights, a rat bites Basil and Mattie leaves the boarding house looking for a more decent place to live. While she roams the streets in Asheville, she learns that a single woman with a child is not welcomed if she is not

accompanied by a husband. It is in this moment of despair that Miss Eva appears to open the door of her house for Mattie and her son. This act of generosity and solidarity recalls the ethics of caring and commitment developed among blacks during slavery which are now adapted to the moment of questionable freedom that they live in the America between the 1940s and 1970s, when blacks were still subjugated and discriminated against; as Naylor puts it in one of the chapters, "the world was swiftly changing but for some mystic, complex reason their burden had not" (1983: 63).

Furthermore, this is an act of communion between Eva and Mattie which comes from their being black but, more importantly, from their being women. Miss Eva understands the hell Mattie is going through as she also nurtured her son alone. From that very moment and during the next thirty years, Miss Eva will become an othermother for Mattie and also for her son. Their relationship mirrors that between a mother and a daughter, Eva, who calls Mattie 'child', advises her and looks after Basil while Mattie is working. She can even scold Mattie because Mattie has buried herself and sacrificed her life to her son. Miss Eva's personal experience and wisdom allow her to foresee Mattie's future to a time when she will be alone when Basil grows up and Eva herself dies; therefore, in order to protect Mattie from loneliness, Miss Eva recommends Mattie to enjoy her youth and look for a man with whom she can share the rest of her life. The idea of Eva's death shakes the foundations of Mattie's life and she realizes that her bonds with Eva have become so strong that Eva means more than a friend to her: "Mattie looked at Miss Eva's stooped back and the wrinkled yellow neck with grizzled wisps of hair lying on it, and small needles of repentance began to stab at her heart. She would be gone soon. Mattie didn't want to imagine facing the loss of another mother" (Naylor 1983: 39).

Mattie realizes that she can only use the word ‘mother’ to refer to Eva because this woman has behaved as a mother taking responsibility toward her when Mattie was rejected for being a black single mother in a racist and sexist society. Eva has protected, helped and loved Mattie saving her from falling into despair and offering her support to endure. Finally, Eva’s death leaves Mattie in solitude, as Eva herself had foreseen: Ciel’s parents return to take her with them and Basil grows up into a man. After being spoiled during all his life by Mattie, Basil is imprisoned due to his involvement in a manslaughter, so Mattie uses her house, the house which Miss Eva had bequeathed to her, as a bail for Basil’s freedom. Finally, Mattie loses her house as Basil does not appear for trial. Her son disappears from Mattie’s life depriving her of enjoying her parental responsibilities and rights as a biological mother. Nevertheless, the same fate which expropriates Mattie her house and takes her to Brewster Place will bring her together with her friend Etta Mae and Ciel again.

Brewster Place is a dead-end street and the place where dreams seem never to come true, but it is in Brewster Place where Mattie will follow Eva's footsteps and will exercise as an othermother for Ciel and also for Etta to a lesser extent. The relationship between Mattie and Ciel replicates that of Mattie and Eva, yet now it is Mattie who helps, protects and cares for Ciel in her emotional and physical needs, othermothering also Serena, Ciel’s daughter, as she oftentimes looks after the child. This relationship which links Miss Eva, Mattie, Ciel and Serena represents that peculiarity which has characterized black family, best analyzed in terms of a kin network rather than a nuclear family (Scott and Black 1989: 232). These women can consider themselves ‘fictive kin’ as they have become a family of non-biological individuals. As a family, these women support one another and perform those duties associated normally with the role of mother and daughter. At a kitchen table Mattie listens to Ciel detailing her problems

with Eugene, while she takes care of Serena, who calls her “Auntie Mattie”. The attitude of Mattie is reciprocated by Ciel, who finds a surrogate mother in Mattie; not only Mattie took care of her along with Miss Eva when she was a child, but, now in Brewster Place, Mattie is the only person to whom Ciel can turn. Ciel constantly needs the support of Mattie to endure her situation and the problems caused by her relationship with Eugene. In fact, when Eugene decides to leave Ciel and Serena, Ciel takes refuge in Mattie: “Ciel began to feel the overpowering need to be near someone who loved her. I’ll get Serena and we’ll go to visit Mattie now, she thought in a daze” (Naylor 1983: 100-101).

The unlimited responsibilities that as an othermother Mattie accepts toward Ciel are demonstrated in the most powerful, moving and tender scene of the book when Serena, Ciel’s daughter, dies electrocuted. Serena was the only reason Ciel had to struggle for in her life after she had an abortion done encouraged by Eugene, a traumatic experience that changes her life for she “found it difficult to connect herself up again with her own world. Everything seemed to have taken on new textures and colors” (Naylor 1983: 95). One more time, thus, motherhood is represented as an institution under male control which subjugates and hurts these women. Following this incident, Mattie becomes possessive of Serena, her daughter is a kind of redemption to her, for when Ciel looks at her daughter, she brings her peace and wholeness: “she looked down on the peaceful face of her daughter and softly caressed her small cheek. Her heart became full as she realized, this is the only thing I have ever loved without pain” (Naylor 1983: 93). Accordingly, Ciel is about to die of grief when she loses Serena. It is in this critical moment of her life when Mattie is there to bring her back to life; the paths of these two women converge as Ciel has lost her daughter and Mattie is also about to lose Ciel. The only words that Mattie can bellow when she realizes that Ciel is

dying are “Merciful Father, no!”, she is not ready for another loss which would mean the loss of her daughter, her words were “a blasphemous fireball that shot forth and went smashing against the gates of heaven, raging and kicking, demanding to be heard” (Naylor 1983: 102). Then she starts a ritual to rescue Ciel and “exorcise the evilness of pain” (Naylor 1983: 105):

She sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her huge arms. And she rocked. (...) Back and forth, back and forth – she had Ciel so tightly she could feel her young breasts flatten against the buttons of her dress. The black mammoth gripped so firmly that slightest increase of pressure would have crackled the girl’s spine. (...) Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. (...) 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 (...) They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (Naylor 1983: 105)

This cathartic moment is the climax of the relationship between Mattie and Ciel as it allows Mattie to release her emotions and feelings toward Ciel, to recognize her as a daughter and to play her mother role. Mattie is accompanying Ciel in that critical juncture of her life and as a mother, she holds Ciel’s body tight and nurses it, helps her daughter to endure, and although she cannot remove her daughter’s pain, she can heal it. Through her relationship with Ciel, Mattie also manages to exorcise her own pain as a biological mother who has lost her son: Mattie rocks Ciel with all the passion she is able

to and while she rocks, it seems to me as if she wanted to exonerate her own burden as a biological mother who could not save her own child. Mattie had always wished having a son who would need her for the rest of his life, and accordingly, she had sacrificed herself and her future for Basil. However, though her dream seemed to be frustrated when Basil chose the path of evil, it was only deferred, as Ciel allows Mattie to fulfill her dreams as a mother (Gallego 2001: 97).

Othermothering rewards and compensates both Eva and Mattie and allows them to enjoy the experience of mothering which was frustrated by the fates of their biological children.

These strong bonds are not circumscribed to Ciel, Eva and Mattie but they are extended to Etta Mae, Mattie's antagonist, as well. Both Etta Mae and Mattie are alone but they have encountered their loneliness in different ways. While Mattie is the abnegated mother without desire, Etta Mae has devoted her life to herself and to her limited career as a singer of blues in smoky and greasy rooms. Tired of wandering around the streets of different cities, she stops at Brewster Place where Mattie Michael awaits her and where she hopes to find "a good man and settle down to live quietly in my old age" (Naylor 1983: 11). Notwithstanding, in Brewster Place Etta only obtains the comfort and love which Mattie irradiates. In Mattie's presence Etta undresses her secrets and herself:

She breathed deeply of the freedom she found in Mattie's presence. Here she had no choice but to be herself. (...) Etta and Mattie went way back, as singular term that claimed co-knowledge of all the important events in their lives and almost all of the unimportant ones. And by right of this possession, it tolerated no secrets. (Naylor 1983: 58)

Etta moves to Brewster Place for the same reason that she will stay: Mattie Michael. Mattie is the refuge where Etta can shelter from her failures. One of those frustrations is her affair with Reverend Mooreland T. Woods. Etta sees in this shepherd a promise of a more comfortable life as the wife of a big preacher. Yet Mattie, who sees Etta as a vulnerable child, warns her about the mere sexual intentions of the reverend as she foresees that Etta will be hurt. As Etta is still settled to try her luck, then Mattie lets Etta hurl herself into her own destiny. After the sexual affair, the shepherd does not need excuses to explain to Etta that they would not meet again: “that’s the nice part about these worldly women. They understand the temporary weakness of the flesh and don’t make it out to be something bigger than it is. They can have a good time without pawning and hanging all onto a man” (Naylor 1983: 73). Etta is obliged again to face her reality and to learn that the Reverend has reduced her only to a body which can be used by a man so as to satisfy his sexual desires. Her frustration takes her back to Brewster, the only place where somebody is awaiting her and is prepared to pick up the pieces of her life:

When Etta got to the stoop, she noticed there was a light under the shade at Mattie’s window, and she strained to hear what actually sounded like music coming from behind the screen. Mattie was playing her records! (...) She stopped straining when it suddenly came to her that it wasn’t important what song it was – someone was waiting up for her. (...) Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and comfort that awaited her (Naylor 1983: 74).

As María del Mar Gallego states, Mattie plays the role of a mother who waits awake for her daughter to come back home (2001: 97). Since Mattie had foreseen that

Etta would be hurt by the reverend, she is waiting for Etta to offer her comfort and love as a mother. Mattie is a refuge for Etta; she is shrouded in a magical aura which is the product of a life full of incidents, her experiences have provided Mattie with wisdom so she has become an “earth-mother”, according to Naylor (Carabí 1991: 28). Mattie sustains those lives around her and acts as a liaison between the past and the present as she brings together women of different generations; in addition, Mattie evokes memories and traditions from the rural South where she grew up and, as Àngels Carabí stated, “it is that sense that encourages her to live the idea of community” (1991: 28).

The female community of Brewster Place is completed with Cora Lee and Kiswana Browne. Kiswana illustrates that the othermother figure coexists with that of the ‘community othermother’. The role of community othermothers could be interpreted as an evolution from that of othermother. The term was coined by Cheryl T. Gilkes to refer to those community workers who became actively involved in the black community and saw it “as a group of relatives and other friends whose interests should be advanced and promoted at all times, under all conditions, and by almost any means” (1983: 117), the actions of these workers were addressed to foster social change and group survival. It should be clarified that the word ‘work’ here is not understood as waged labor; rather, it is deployed to refer to the tasks developed by the people involved in the community. Kiswana can be considered a community othermother as she is a social activist using her personal power, namely, her education, her economic means and her effort, to advance the interests of Brewster Place neighborhood. She is involved in the black community of Brewster Place because she sees them as a “group of friends or relatives”, and in fact she moved to Brewster Place from the well-off Linden Hills because she wanted to side with her people, thus, becoming a social activist in order to struggle for the racial uplift of her people. As Kiswana says to her mother when the

latter affirms that her daughter does not need to live in such a place as Brewster, “my place was in the streets with my people, fighting for equality and a better community” (Naylor 1983: 83).

Furthermore, her commitment to the community is symbolized in her personal involvement with Cora Lee and her children. In the African-American community it was common for neighbors to care for each other’s children (Collins 1999: 161), a sense that is retained by Kiswana Browne in her commitment to Cora Lee. Cora Lee, who birthed her first baby when she was fourteen years old, had been obsessed with being a mother since a child. Now she is a welfare mother who has seven children from different fathers. Cora maybe best symbolizes that contradictory nature of motherhood: she enjoys getting pregnant, the experience of mothering and being connected to somebody else: “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 about their actions” (Naylor 1983: 112). However, the institution oppresses Cora as she has been abandoned by all her partners so she is alone taking care of them without means. Cora is alone overwhelmed by the demands and needs of her children, a situation that moves Kiswana to act. When Kiswana first meets one of Cora’s children who is screaming because he has hurt his head, she takes him home illustrating her allegiance since the first moment: "there's a big knot coming up on the side of his head; maybe *we* should take him..." (Naylor 1983: 117; my emphasis). She does not take the child to Cora’s home and leaves; rather, she uses the pronoun ‘we’ accepting her responsibility toward the child and her mother. Not only is Kiswana willing to help Cora in her domestic work but she also gets involved in the education of the children by inviting Cora and the children to the play *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream by Shakespeare. Their evening at the theater proves to be a revulsive for Cora, as she recovers the strength necessary to meet her situation, turn off TV and soap operas and play a more active role in the nurture of her children.

As a community othermother, her struggle and personal compromise with the black community takes Kiswana to found “The Brewster Place Block Association” in order to demand better housing conditions. The foundation of the association symbolizes a decisive act of communion among the women of Brewster Place as they are brought together in order to fight for decent housing conditions. Somehow all the women who form the association turn into “community othermothers” as they are vindicating the rights of the black community of Brewster Place. Nancy Naples prefers the term “activist mothering” (1992: 446) to “community othermothers” because in her view it communicates more accurately how politics and mothering are intertwined. Either ‘community othermothering’ or ‘activist mothering’, both describe the work which is carried out by those women who constitute “The Brewster Place Block Association” so as to improve the lives of their families and that of the neighbors of their block. At the core of the concept we see the ethics of caring and community values prevail over individualism:

Community othermothers' participation in activist mothering demonstrates a clear rejection of separateness and individual interest as the basis of either community organization or individual self-actualization. Instead, the connectedness with others and common interest expressed by community othermothers model a very different value system, one whereby ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward (Collins 2009: 207).

Thus, the female community of Brewster Place combine their efforts both to avoid their isolation and endure their oppression together but also to advance their interests and those of their families. As it was argued in the previous chapter, the women of Brewster Place face three systems of oppression, namely, classism, racism and sexism. First of all, they need to resist their daily reality: they live in a ghetto and this becomes dehumanizing, destructive and disempowering. The ghetto encourages self-hatred in those inhabiting Brewster since it is the reminder of their inadequacy, their inferiority and their victimization; they are living under such miserable conditions because hegemonic white society and racism block their opportunities. The holes in the walls of their blocks and their apartments, the lack of heat in the winter and the congested lungs of their children do not help those living in Brewster Place to create a positive image of themselves. However, the women of Brewster fight to create a home in the ghetto: “Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home” (Naylor 1983: 4). Naylor emphasizes that it is the daughters of Brewster Place who strive to turn the ghetto into a home. The key events of the lives of the women of Brewster take place at home, a space which has traditionally belonged to women. The private domain has been the only sphere where patriarchy has let women exercise some influence, consequently, the women of Brewster take the responsibility of creating a home in the discouraging ghetto. Throughout the History of African-Americans, a home has meant more than a house or a property where one can live: the home acquired a subversive political meaning as it was in this private realm that they had the right to be, the right to feel and regain the humanity and the integrity which white society took from them. As bell hooks explains:

Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination. Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (...), had a radical political dimension. (...) one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization (1990: 42).

Accordingly, the foundation of The Brewster Place Block Association becomes a political gesture of resistance. Through this organization the women are determined to defend their rights, to demand better housing conditions and to fight against the low self-esteem which arises from living in the ghetto. Their symbolic battle goes beyond repairing the block or fixing the heat, their struggle aims at avoiding internalizing racism and self-hatred. The women of Brewster Place try to stop the dominant discourse that white supremacy puts forward and the advance of the "imperial gaze", "the look that seeks to dominate, to subjugate, and colonize" (hooks 1992: 7). To fight for a decent home where they can nurture their families means to define themselves in opposition to the colonizing image that the prevailing culture puts forward.

Both as othermothers and community othermothers, the women of Brewster Place manage to form a community in which the quintessential communal values of African societies and the commitment developed among black women during the holocaust of slavery are its pillars. There are no imposed obligations in those relationships, rather their personal commitment arises from their will to help and their spontaneous choice, both features being reminiscent of mothering as Arlene Edwards

points out (2000: 94). If during slavery othermothering was addressed to empower the black community by preventing their dehumanization and it was committed to racial uplift, in the context of the women of Brewster Place, othermothering comes to stand for a commitment with other females and a strategy to resist the brutal oppression they suffer. Probably, the women of Brewster Place are the kind of women Alice Walker describes in her *In Search of Our Mother Gardens* as they are genius in the only realm in which patriarchy has allowed them to shine: they are artists in looking after others every day, after their bodies and souls. The mark of these artists is forever printed on the integrity and dignity recovered by the women of Brewster Place.

2.3 The female community of Brewster Place as a catalyst for empowerment

The women of Brewster Place fit into the African-American literary tradition which insists on deconstructing binaries such as victim/agent and demonstrating that these are not mutually exclusive categories. These women do not accept their roles as victims passively, rather, their alliance with other women and their care for other women prove their will to struggle against the systems of oppression which render them powerless and the devalued image of womanhood that patriarchy puts forward. The loneliness and subjugation of the women of Brewster Place demand from them “wisdom, experience and some passion”, as Karla Holloway points out (qtd. in Collins 2009: 174). These women need to find “safe spaces”, spaces where they can confront their objectification and their otherness (Collins 2009: 111) because it is in those safe spaces “free of surveillance by more powerful groups” (Collins 2009: 121-122), namely, men, where women are allowed to assert their uniqueness and construct a self-definition. One of these safe spaces according to Collins is “women’s relations with one another” (2009: 112). For these women, the female community of their block in

Brewster Place turns to be that safe space where they find protection, affection and solidarity; the community anchors these women to life. As their female ancestors, the women of Brewster Place learn that they need to work together, look each other into their eyes so as to form a community in which they may unsheathe their soul and express and be themselves. Thus, these women transcend their victimization and isolation by forming a community and, in doing so, they become agents of their lives and agents who can affect the lives of others (Nnaemeka 1997: 2).

Bonding with each other is the only strategy they possess in order to struggle everyday not to fall into despair and endure their oppression; moreover, as it was argued in the previous section, those bonds have gone beyond empathy to othermother one another. The structure of the novel already suggests that these women can only make sense of their lives through their bonds with other women. Naylor presents the novel divided into seven different stories which are entitled with the name of each of these women, except for that of Lorraine and Theresa whose story is entitled "The Two". The seven stories, as their protagonists, depend on each other for the book to make sense. The women live in the same block of apartments, a strategy deployed by Gloria Naylor to emphasize their interdependency and connectedness. As the columns which sustain the whole building, the women who live inside prevent their individual collapse by supporting each other.

As bell hooks states, even the weak can exert some form of power which enables them to resist oppression (2000: 92). In the context of these oppressed women who have no access to any sphere of social or political influence, their power relies on rejecting their victimization and the image of black women that society and patriarchy have put forward by allying with one another. In hooks's words: "in patriarchal white

supremacist context, this gesture, whether it be black women dealing with one another with respect, or women of color in general, is an act of political resistance. It is an indication that we reject and oppose the internalized racism that would have us work against one another" (1990: 94). These women can neither create a self-positive definition nor overcome nihilism by themselves since isolation only generates self-hatred. As Zygmunt Bauman wrote in *Liquid Love*, "in order to have self-love, we need to be loved. Refusal of love - denial of the status of a love-worthy object - breeds self-hatred. Self-love is built out of the love offered to us by others. (...) Others must love us first, so that we can begin to love ourselves" (2003: 80). Accordingly, the women of Brewster affirm and acknowledge one another when they show care and respect for each other. Only their female neighbors can provide them with the love necessary to feel themselves valuable and to recover their self-esteem as Bauman affirms. They become empowered as they are talked to and listened to, in Bauman's words: "When we are listened to attentively, with an interest that betrays/signals a readiness to respond. We gather then that we are *respected*. We suppose, that is, that what we think, do, or intend to do - counts" (2003: 80; author's emphasis). To establish a conversation with another human being assumes to establish a connection (Collins 2009: 114) as dialoguing requires at least one person to talk and one person to listen to, therefore, it is an empowering strategy which connects these women and releases them from their isolation.

Then when Miss Eva finds Mattie alone in the street and asks her "where are you headin' with that pretty red baby? You lost, child?" (Naylor 1983: 30), she is recognizing Mattie's humanity and establishing a connection with her. Every time Mattie listens to Ciel's problems with Eugene, she is acknowledging her value; or when Mattie, who had foreseen that Etta would be hurt by the reverend, waits for Etta awake

to offer her comfort and love, she is affirming that value which patriarchy denies. Furthermore, Kiswana restores her self-esteem to Cora Lee when she takes part in the education of Cora's children and demonstrates her will to help her with domestic tasks. Cora Lee's case is even more special than the rest as she is completely alone with seven children and depends on welfare, therefore Kiswana does not only contribute to restoring Cora Lee's self-esteem as a person but also as a mother (Khaleghi 2011: 133). Through their actions, in othermothering each other, these women affirm their "humanity, their specialness and their right to exist" (Collins 2009: 113). Only in community, the women of Brewster Place attain the self-reliance and self-esteem which are essential to resist the burden of sexism, racism and classism in America. By talking to each other and recognizing each other's value and uniqueness, they are refusing the definition of the reality that others have constructed for them. Thus, the community poses a direct challenge to patriarchy and allows these women to develop a self-positive image.

Hence, love derived from their othermothers, (or in the case of Kiswana, from her biological mother) empowers them as individuals and becomes political as it manages to give them back the dignity and humanity that patriarchy has taken from them. In *Yearning* bell hooks quotes Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, who offers a definition of resistance which well deserves to be quoted:

resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly... I think that communities of resistance should be places where people (...) can heal themselves and recover their wholeness (1990: 43).

The community of Brewster Place is that safe space where these women recover their self: the community becomes a catalyst for empowerment and self-affirmation. Nevertheless, Gloria Naylor does not offer a romantic depiction of community as this does not bring “radical transformations” (Matus 1990: 62) to the lives of these women. 'Ngambika' is a Tshiluba phrase which means “help me balance this load”, a definition which has been expanded by Obioma Nnaemeka so that it actually means “I can carry this load only if you can balance it for me” (1997: 3): the community of Brewster Place helps its members carry the burden and mitigate the pain but cannot take it off.

2.4 The ‘double life’ of the heterosexual women of Brewster Place

Woman-to-woman relationships seem to be the antithesis to women-to-men relations, as the former are presented in the novel as an alternative to the sick and destructive relationships that the heterosexual women of Brewster Place maintain with men; all that their lovers neglect them is to be found in their relations with other women. These women escape from the psychological annihilation that their relations with men represent seeking affection in women. Thus, these heterosexual women engage in a “double life” as Adrienne Rich calls it (2003: 32): they marry men and share their lives with men but they need to turn to other females to find love. Men provide sex and the sperm necessary to engender children but they cannot supply the love and the affection these women need. Rather, men cause pain, women ally to other women to endure and heal the wounds caused by those relations with men, and in doing so, woman identification becomes a source of power. The intensity of the affections among women and the experiences they have shared throughout history form part of a “lesbian continuum” (Rich 2003: 27). This phrase was coined by Adrienne Rich in order to describe women-identified experience. The term, however, does not necessarily imply

sexual contact or desire, but its meaning is expanded to “embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (2003: 27). That intensity also includes the most specific and intimate scenes in the life of a woman, from:

the infant suckling at her mother's breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child, perhaps recalling her mother's milk smell in her own, to two women like Virginia Wolf's Chloe and Olivia, who share a laboratory, to the woman dying at ninety, touched and handled by women - exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not (2003: 29).

Furthermore, Rich turns to black women both in Africa and the United States as samples of the “lesbian continuum” as they could not have survived without connecting with other women. Hence, the moments of female communion that the women of Brewster go through, the experiences and intimacy they share make them move in this continuum. Part of this continuum is the most powerful, vivid and tender scene of the novel which is shared by Mattie and Ciel in that cathartic moment when Mattie nurses Ciel's body after Ciel's daughter dies:

Mattie cupped her hands under the faucet and motioned for Ciel to drink and clean her mouth. (...) Mattie drew a tub of hot water and undressed Ciel. (...) And slowly she bathed her. She took the soap, and, using only her hands, she washed Ciel's hair and the back of her neck. She raised her arms and cleaned the armpits, soaping well the downy brown hair

there. She let the soap slip between the girl's breasts, and she washed each one separately, cupping it in her hands. She took each leg and even cleaned under the toenails. Making Ciel rise and kneel in the tub, she cleaned the crack in her behind, soaped her public hair, and gently washed the creases in her vagina – slowly, reverently, as if handling a newborn. She took her from the tub and towed her in the same manner she had been bathed – as it too much friction would break the skin tissue. All of this had been done without either woman saying a word. (...) Mattie took away the crumpled linen and made the bed, stretching the sheets tight and fresh. (...) She then led her freshly wet, glistening body, baptized now, to the bed. She covered her with one sheet and laid a towel across the pillow – it would help for a while. (Naylor 1983: 104-5)

The love which this scene exudes demonstrates the power of those moments shared by women. It is because of their identification as women that Mattie can literally doctor Ciel and take care of her body. The women of Brewster share their inner lives, a context which fosters the intensity of their bonds and sustains them alive. Paradoxically, Lorraine and Theresa are the only women of Brewster Place who are left outside the community and who are not allowed to move in this lesbian continuum. Although the heterosexual women of Brewster share moments of secrets, confidence and closeness, they reject Lorraine and Theresa for they are lesbians and the intimacy between this couple is not viewed as natural as theirs, rather as deviant and dangerous for their identities as heterosexual women.

"Heritage. How have we come from our savage past, how no longer to be savages - this to teach. To look back and learn what humanizes - this to teach. To smash all ghettos that divide man - not to go back, not to go back - this to teach."

(Olsen 2008: 94)

3. The Two: neither women nor sisters

As it has been analyzed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, the women of Brewster come to form a community in which they stick by each other for affection and protection because that community is the only "safe space" where they are acknowledged and are free to undress their thoughts and their soul. Yet, not all the women who live in Brewster Place are part of this female community since Lorraine and Theresa are excluded from it. If the heterosexual women of Brewster Place are discriminated against on the basis of their race, their gender and their class, the couple formed by Theresa and Lorraine are also subjugated because of their sexuality. Paradoxically, as lesbians, they have fled from the city to the ghetto yearning to find a place where they may live and express their love without fear and where they may be comprehended by those who are oppressed like them. The ghetto is for them a possible haven where their dreams of freedom might come true, but they soon learn that for those living in the ghetto, lesbianism is taboo.

When Lorraine and Theresa claim Brewster Place their home, their neighbors accept them as part of the ghetto since there is nothing in the routine and behavior of the two women that "betrays" their lesbian identity, as the neighbors' opinion makes clear: "at first they seemed like such nice girls" (Naylor 1983: 129). Both Lorraine and

Theresa are treated with respect and considered part of the neighborhood. Furthermore, the women of Brewster like them when they realize that the two pretty single girls are oblivious to male comments. Naylor does not depict Lorraine and Theresa following the stereotype of the mannish lesbians, that is why at the beginning of their arrival the women of Brewster Place are worried about the intentions of Lorraine and Theresa toward their husbands. Yet, there is an incident which raises the neighbors' suspicions: Lorraine trips on a ball and is grabbed by Theresa who looks into Lorraine's eyes while she utters "careful, don't wanna lose you now" (Naylor 1983: 130). This behavior is not seen as "natural" by the other women of the community, who ask themselves:

where had they seen that before? They had often laughed and touched each other – held each other in joy or its dark twin – but where had they seen *that* before? (...) They had seen that- done that- with their men. (...) So it got around that the two in 312 were *that* way. And they had seemed like such nice girls (Naylor 1983: 131; original emphasis).

Although the neighbors of Brewster Place have not seen anything which indicates that the two women are lesbians, they quickly label them as such. They use 'that', a neuter and generic pronoun so as to refer to that moment of intimate communion and connection between a couple, it seems as it was opprobrious for them to call it 'love' or 'intimacy' when applied to a couple of the same sex. This event provokes a turning point in the community's opinion of Lorraine and Theresa as well as in their attitude toward them; from that moment on, they scrutinize the couple's behavior looking for a clue which proves their "stain", and they turn bitter and aggressive toward them.

Thus, when the rumor of their potential lesbianism starts circulating, the relation between the neighbors of Brewster Place, especially the women, and 'The Two' changes radically. At first, the women of this ghetto had felt relieved to realize that Lorraine and Theresa were not fond of their husbands, yet now their lack of interest is viewed as a sign of scorn: "their friendly indifference to the men on the street was an insult to the women as a brazen flaunting of unnatural ways" (Naylor 1983: 131). The hint of their lesbianism opens a breach which separates the heterosexual women of Brewster Place and Lorraine and Theresa, and it also prevents any possibility of identification and of bonding.

The women of Brewster do not consider the couple as their Sisters, and they do not extend their bonds to Lorraine and Theresa, who become marginalized and excluded from the community. The women of Brewster believe the couple's ways are unnatural and deviant since their sexuality does not coincide with the "normal" pattern which is that a woman must have sex with a man. Yet, the only thing that makes Lorraine and Theresa different from the other women of Brewster is their choice of a female lover. The fact that Lorraine and Theresa are accepted at first because they are *seen* as women, but are rejected later by the female community evidences that what defines a woman and brings women together is not their biological sex. Furthermore, the position that the women of Brewster Place adopt toward the two lesbians makes it clear that a lesbian is not a woman, as Monique Wittig claimed, since what defines a woman is a social relation with a man (1993: 108). Lorraine and Theresa are not women as they are sexually, economically and socially independent of men, and therefore, they "call into question society's definition of woman as its deepest level" (Christian 1997: 199). Simone de Beauvoir affirmed: "One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in

society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (1997: 295). The attitude of the heterosexual women of Brewster Place illustrates the truth of both Beauvoir’s and Wittig’s statements since to look like a woman is not enough in Brewster Place to be a member of the female community. Thus, the subject is a body born with a sex which does not mean anything by itself; that sex is at first a neutral organ which society interprets and attributes a specific sexual meaning, that is to say, society and culture, not Nature, construct a set of norms and ideals around sex which defines what a woman and a man should be like. In Wittig’s words: “what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an 'imaginary formation', which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived” (1993: 104).

The interpretation of a physical difference provokes an artificial and political division of human beings into two gendered-species, ‘man’ or ‘woman’ as Monique Wittig argues (1993: 106). This categorization is political rather than biological and it inaugurates the birth of the "social contract", analyzed and defined by Wittig as a "heterosexual contract" (1992: 34), “for to live in society is to live in heterosexuality” (1992: 40). This social contract links gender and sexuality and presents the relation between 'man' and 'woman' as the *authentic* and "natural" as it allows human reproduction, thus from this heterosexual perspective the ultimate objective of sexuality is reproduction; accordingly, it imposes on the human body the obligation of reproduction. As a result, it can be affirmed that gender has been created from a heterosexual point of view and that the identity of the individual is regulated through a heterosexual interpretation of its corporeal reality and sexual organs, thus, the body

turns to be a dictatorship for the self who sees its essence constrained and submitted to enact the identity set by its gender. Therefore, homosexual and lesbian realities have been constructed as deviant and perverted because they do not obey their gender obligations: a female body is not supposed to be sexually oriented toward another female body.

Having said this, it can be stated that sex *is* but gender is something that one *becomes*. The category “woman” is only a myth as Beauvoir put it, an artificial idea fabricated around sex. The differentiation between the sexual organs and the fact of giving a name, “man” or “woman”, to it has naturalized humans’ division and has put sexuality at the centre of humanity and society. According to Judith Butler: “The ‘naming’ of sex is an act of domination and compulsion, an institutionalized performative that both creates and legislates social reality” (2006: 157). Butler uses the term “performative” which was first introduced by J.L. Austin to refer to “a new category of utterance that has no truth value since it does not describe the world, but acts upon it – a way of “doing things with words” ” (qtd. in K. Hall 2000: 184). For Austin, there are declarations that are performative since by being uttered, an act is performed, that is to say, utterances are actions. Following this idea, Butler argues that gender is produced through discourse and acts as a performative, “that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler 2006: 13). For Butler there is no prediscursive identity since identity is formed through discourse; the subject starts a process of becoming from its birth which is determined by culture and society. By being named “girl” or “boy” the subject becomes sexed and gendered, the subject is being therefore constituted and made through discourse. In being uttered ‘girl’, the individual is produced, acted on and expected to perform that set of rules and ideals which culture has established. Hence, gender is an act and a performance “as in other

ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Butler 2006: 191; original emphasis).

Historically, this performative, this cultural narrative, has been uttered by men since humanity is male according to Beauvoir: “man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. (...) She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (1997: 16). By designating women as the Other and establishing a relation of opposition with that Other, men constitute themselves, as Beauvoir claims: “the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object” (1997: 17). Women as disempowered individuals cannot define themselves; rather, as objects, they have their reality constructed by others, namely, men. Men have constructed “woman” as a social category which entails servitude and obligations toward men since as it was explained in the first chapter, men assert their power and their supremacy by dominating women. Thus, the primary definition of women establishes that they are only allowed to be with reference to men. Hence, for a woman to be considered a “real woman”, she must perform those norms assigned to her gender, being one of those norms to have a social and sexual relation with a man.

Lorraine and Theresa are not “real women”, they do not fit into the myth of “the woman”. They are drifted apart from the heterosexual women of Brewster Place and become stigmatized because they define themselves in relation with another female

rather than with a man and, in doing so, they fail to *perform* their womanhood which demands from them to be sexually related to a man. As the group of Radicalesbians put it at the beginnings of the 1970s:

For a lesbian is not considered a “real woman.” And yet, in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation – which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a “woman” is to get fucked by men (Radicalesbians 1992: 173).

The marginalization of Lorraine and Theresa proves that the fact of being *seen* as women does not make them women, a woman is something that one becomes in *performing* gender and being sexually driven toward men. The “failure” to perform their gender creates an insurmountable abyss between the couple and the heterosexual women of Brewster Place which tortures the two women. The caring bonds which the female community has developed among themselves do not extend to Lorraine and Theresa as they are neither considered women nor sisters. Thus, the myth or the label “woman” is oppressive for lesbians as Wittig reasoned (1993: 104) since it negates the existence of multiple identities within the social and cultural category “woman” which compels those subjects *seen* as female bodies to have sex with a man.

3.1 Words that enslave

Both words “woman” and “lesbian” turn into the reason for the oppression of Lorraine and Theresa, which demonstrates the violence of language that Slavoj Žižek refers to in his work *Violence*. The artificial division of human beings into “men” and “women” which was mentioned above illustrates that violence of language since by

being named one of these two categories, the subject becomes dominated and oppressed under the term. The word “woman” subjugates Lorraine and Theresa and turns into the very source of their oppression because as Wittig explains, they are discriminated against because they do not perform the duties which culture has established for this category (1993: 106). On the other hand, these women cannot escape from being considered as ‘lesbians’, they are reduced to their sexuality and what the word ‘lesbian’ evokes. They are subjugated by the “fantasmatic dimension” (Žižek 2009: 57) of their relation in the imagination of the community of Brewster Place. Žižek explains how reality in itself is not threatening, yet it is the symbolic order, the meanings and images which culture attributes to reality through language, which becomes perilous:

There is something violent in the very symbolisation of a thing (...) Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it (2009: 52).

Through language, society has imposed a set of images on the word ‘lesbian’ which echoes and symbolizes the unspeakable in the minds of this community of neighbors of Brewster Place. Barbara Christian explains that before 1908, the year when the Oxford English Dictionary cited the word “lesbian” for the first time, the love or desire between two females was subsumed under terms such as “masturbation” or “the secret sin”. The word “lesbian” appeared at a time when women were questioning sexual taboos and vindicating birth control, so the new term was used to stigmatize these women and “a strategy for retarding women’s drive toward social independence” (1997: 189). Accordingly, the word has been used as a weapon which seeks to maintain

social order in threatening those who challenge it. The existence of lesbians or our world itself are innocent, it is language which changes that innocence and determines “the being and social existence of the interpreted subjects” (Žižek 2009: 62). Hence, society deploys language to create a web of symbols and images which alters reality itself and manages to dominate those who are named as “lesbians”. Then, the image behind that label is a stigma which others imposed on Lorraine and Theresa, a stigmatized identity, which as Bauman affirms, is stereotyping, humiliating and dehumanizing because those who are burdened with it are not allowed to get rid of it (2004: 38).

The title of Lorraine and Theresa’s story, “The Two”, entails also some violence as it erases Lorraine's and Theresa's individuality and reduces them to their romance. Unlike the rest of the stories in the collection, this is the only story which is not entitled after the actual name of *one* of its protagonists, which contributes to emphasizing their marginalization. Lorraine and Theresa are seldom called by their names, rather their neighbors refer to them as “the lighter, skinny one” or “the short dark one” (Naylor 1983: 129). Moreover, Lorraine and Theresa are directly insulted by C.C Baker’s gang in order to show both its contempt for their presence in Brewster Place and also its power. This gang of men uses pejorative words such as “dyke” or “butch” so as to injure Lorraine and Theresa and to remind them who dominates and who is dominated in Brewster Place. These insults or “hate speech”, as Judith Butler terms it, does not only represent a social hierarchy but also establishes it, as it is the speaker who enacts domination over the listener: “What hate speech does, then, is to constitute the subject in a subordinate position” (1997:18). The violent language uttered by the C.C Baker’s gang symbolizes their hatred and affirms their domination as heterosexual men;

furthermore, their insults act as a threat for the two women who escape from male control and foresee Lorraine's terrible rape.

The power of language to injure is shown in Lorraine's reaction to insults such as those mentioned above. Although she is oblivious to the gang's insults, she cannot tolerate that Theresa calls themselves "dykes", she feels they demean themselves by using the word: " 'And we are a couple of dykes.' She spit the words into the air. Lorraine started as if she'd been slapped. 'That's a filthy thing to say, Tee. You can call yourself that if you want to, but I'm not like that. Do you hear me? I'm not!' " (Naylor 1983: 164). Lorraine knows that that word operates as a boundary between them and the rest of society, the word is a mark of the ostracism they are condemned to and their difference in society's eyes. Theresa states lesbians are different, so Lorraine must come to terms with that; yet, Lorraine refuses the idea of being distinct since she can only think of herself as a human being and, as she argues, the fact of being a lesbian "doesn't make me any *different* from anyone else in the world" (Naylor 1983: 165; original emphasis). Lorraine understands that the image associated with the word is what constitutes them as the other and separates them from mainstream society, and then she cannot concede that Theresa uses it so as to refer to themselves. It is that label that keeps them apart from their community of neighbors and the female community, a community to which Lorraine longs to belong, as we will see later.

Monique Wittig explains that language is the very first social contract among human beings (1992: 34) and what distinguishes them from animals and makes them both human and social beings. The entry into language means to renounce violence and adopt morality and responsibility through dialogue. However, as we have seen,

language has also the power to divide and to injure, and may turn into a weapon of human violence, in Žižek's words:

Language, not primitive egotistic interest, is the first and greatest divider, it is because of language that we and our neighbours (can) 'live in different worlds' even when we live on the same street. What this means is that verbal violence is not a secondary distortion, but the ultimate resort of every specifically human violence (2009: 57).

The neighbors of Brewster Place inhabit the same street, even the same block, but they live in different worlds, as Žižek states. The word “lesbian” creates a wall between Lorraine and Theresa and those living in Brewster Place. Both the community of neighbors of Brewster Place in general and the female community in particular - formed by Mattie Michael, Ciel Turner, Etta Mae, Kiswana Browne and Cora Lee- are closed to this couple. All of them are women, but society has designed a different reality for them through language, a fact that prevents them from bonding.

3.2 Fear thy lesbian Neighbor as thyself: the threat of “The Two”

The inhabitants of Brewster Place cannot see Lorraine and Theresa as the neighbor who lives next door, but as two lesbians whose presence in Brewster becomes disquieting. Both Lorraine and Theresa become that Neighbor that in his chapter “Fear thy Neighbor as thyself”, Žižek, following Freud, describes as:

a traumatic intruder, someone whose different way of life (or, rather, way of *jouissance* materialised in its social practices and rituals) disturbs us, throws the balance of our way of life off the rails, when it

comes too close, this can also give rise to an aggressive reaction aimed at getting rid of this disturbing intruder (2009: 50; original emphasis).

The two lesbians are that Neighbor, that intruder who has unbalanced the community in "intruding" in it. The couple is watched from the windows and behind the shades; the community is permanently vigilant of the couple so as to discover a clue which confirms the lesbian identity of the two women. Moreover, a state of psychosis seizes the community, which is afraid of suffering any potential harassment from the couple. Thus, when Theresa meets a girl who is bleeding because she has scraped her knee and tries to help her, she is rebuked by a woman: " 'What are you doing to her?' The voice pierced the air between the child and Theresa. She looked up and saw a woman rushing toward them. The woman grabbed the child to her side. 'What's going on here?' Her voice was just half an octave too high" (Naylor 1983: 157). This moment illustrates the community's homophobia which views the couple as two perverts who may be a peril to their lives and may pollute the moral order of Brewster Place. It is the female community of Brewster Place who feels especially threatened by the two women's presence and refuses to let the couple be part of the community. Their community is totally closed for Lorraine and Theresa just because they are suspected to be lesbians.

As was explained in the first chapter, black women's sexuality was categorized by white culture as hypersexual and unnatural to justify the sexual abuse they were submitted to by white males. This stigma shaped their subsequent response to sexuality, hence, public expressions of black female sexuality were regarded as something unacceptable since they might be dangerous for the image of black women as a collectivity in contributing to enforcing the stereotype. Yet, for some heterosexual black

women, both overt sexuality and also lesbianism were to be censored and viewed as a betrayal to the collectivity because black women's sexuality is supposed to be silenced and dissembled (Collins 2009: 183). From this point of view, black lesbians are considered traitors since lesbianism, already defined as abnormal, may help promote that image of black female sexuality as deviant sexuality.

Notwithstanding, this, the fact that the heterosexual females of Brewster Place do not only censor Lorraine and Theresa but they also build an invisible wall between them and the two lesbians so as to keep them at a safe distance reveals their fear of their proximity. These black women who have always been considered the other because of their race and their gender are frightened of being stigmatized as lesbians for they know this label would condemn them to the most cruel and terrible outsiderhood. Furthermore, lesbianism is puzzling for the women of Brewster Place because of their close relations: they keep on moving in a "lesbian continuum" (Rich 2003: 27) which makes their lives endurable, therefore, they fear to see the relation they have among them mirrored in that between Lorraine and Theresa. The women of Brewster Place know the love and relations among them could bear some resemblance to that between The Two as all of them have clung to another female for support and protection. This is the reason why Mattie and Etta, who live together, find it difficult to come to terms with what they feel for each other; in a conversation, they compare their love of other women to that between Lorraine and Theresa:

"I can't help feelin' that what they're doing ain't quite right. How do you get that way? Is it from birth?"

"I couldn't tell you, Mattie. (...) They say they just love each other – who knows?"

Mattie was thinking deeply. “Well, I’ve loved women, too. There was Miss Eva and Ciel, and even as ornery you can get, I’ve loved you practically all my life.”

“Yeah, but it’s different with them.”

“Different how?”

“Well...” Etta was beginning to feel uncomfortable. “They love each other like you’d love a man or a man would love you- I guess.”

“But I’ve loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man, (...) and there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did.” (...) “Maybe it’s not so different,” Mattie said, almost to herself. “Maybe that’s why some women get so riled up about it, ‘cause they know deep down it’s not so different after all.” She looked at Etta. “It kinda gives you a funny feeling when you think about it that way, though.”

“Yeah, it does,” Etta said, unable to meet Mattie’s eyes” (Naylor 1983: 141).

This conversation manifests the doubts that Mattie and Etta confront in comparing their relation with that of the two lesbians. The love of Lorraine and Theresa is threatening as it may be not so different from the love Mattie and Etta, and the women of Brewster in general, feel for each other. The two lesbians embody a threat for the heterosexual female community of Brewster who is afraid of finding any erotic emotion in the love they have for each other, as Audre Lorde pointed out: “the Black lesbian is an emotional threat only to those Black women whose feelings of kinship and love for other Black women are problematic in some way” (qtd. in Collins 2009: 181). The boundary line between the loving and caring friendship among these women and

The Two's love is so thin that the presence of the two lesbians becomes uncomfortable because the women feel their heterosexuality questioned. In her essay "Homophobia, Why Bring It Up?", Barbara Smith affirms that one of the major reasons for homophobia is the fact that people fear to confront their sexual identity and their potential homosexuality. The fact that heterosexuality has been established as the innate and compulsory sexuality of individuals may delay in the individual the recognition of a gay or lesbian identity, therefore, in order to protect one's heterosexual privileges many individuals "put down lesbians and gay men at every turn, to make as large a gulf as possible between 'we' and 'they' " (1993: 100).

In the novel this gulf is made by excluding Lorraine and Theresa from the female community of Brewster. First, the caring bonds which characterize the community do not embrace the couple, in fact, they are the only ones who are not given maternal history (Christian 1997: 201), thus they neither mother their female neighbors nor are othermothered by the community. They are alone and vulnerable in Brewster Place. Second, the two lesbians are *ghettoized* and confined outside the power of that "lesbian continuum" in which the women of Brewster move. Lorraine and Theresa are not allowed to share that intense and emotional connection that the women of Brewster Place feel in going through the same experiences. While that "lesbian continuum" is a vital emotional support for black women and acts a space of resistance which empowers the women of Brewster, it becomes particularly oppressive for Lorraine, who is trapped by the "myth of the woman", as she is not let in. Lorraine desires to belong to the female community of Brewster Place and share those bonds which characterize it, but that community has turned into a fortified female universe which is closed to her:

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 (Naylor 1983: 136).

That community is an exclusive space that only “real women” can penetrate, the heterosexual women of Brewster seclude Lorraine and Theresa to a space ‘other’ so as to control the threat they pose to their heterosexual identities. That exclusion is the only weapon the women of Brewster have to dominate the couple who are inside the community of Brewster Place geographically but socially outside of it. The women of Brewster Place seek safety in disassociating themselves from those who are different to them. They block direct contact and communication with the couple in an attempt to avoid the “disintegration” of their heterosexual identities since they view Lorraine and Theresa as that Neighbor who Žižek refers to as a “traumatic intruder” and who needs to be controlled and isolated. The women of Brewster Place long to live in a space where the other, the two lesbians, is absent. In closing the gates of their community to Lorraine and Theresa, they are building that space where they can be secure and where their fears are mitigated. For those inside, the community means safety and security from the perils outside that space. As Bauman argues it is “a vision of heaven: of tranquility, of bodily safety and spiritual peace” (2004: 61). The idea of community is only imaginary, “a vision of heaven”, since the women cannot eliminate the physical presence of the couple. Community conveys a good feeling, in Bauman’s words:

Community is a 'warm' place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we

warm our hands on a frosty day. Out there, in the street, all sorts of dangers lie in ambush; we have to be alert when we go out, watch whom we are talking to and who talks to us, be on the look-out every minute. In here, in the community, we can relax - we are safe, there are no dangers looming in dark corners (to be sure, hardly any 'corner' here is 'dark'). In a community, we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback. We are never strangers to each other (2001: 1-2).

According to Bauman, community means absence of strangers, of the other. Community implies “sameness” and “homogeneity” (2001: 13) so as to be that shelter where its members can be effectively protected from any challenge to their ways. For the women of Brewster Place, community is meant to be a safe space where the Neighbor, “the traumatic intruder”, cannot go in, therefore, the community aims at separating those who pose a threat because of their difference and at being a shelter from those inside. Moreover, Bauman draws on Robert Redfield for whom a true community is “distinctive”, “small” and “self-sufficient” (Bauman 2001: 12). The female community of Brewster possesses these three attributes as it is distinctive in the sense that it is clear who belongs to the community and who does not, who is ‘one of us’ and who is rare, strange, that is, ‘one of them’. It is small as the members of the community are within view and it is self-sufficient since the insiders are almost isolated from ‘them’. Thus, the understanding among the members of the female community of Brewster is born of their homogeneity, namely, their heterosexuality; moreover, the solidarity which emanates from the relationship among these women is the result of that community of which they feel to be an integral part and which is closed to others; as Bauman explains, to feel oneself to be a member of a community implies solidarity

(2008: 57). Therefore, what keeps them together is their rejection of different ways. This repudiation parallels the situation of the neighbors who have been confined to Brewster Place in order to countervail the threat they pose to white supremacy. In isolating Lorraine and Theresa, the female community builds a symbolic space outside their community which Lorraine and Theresa are obliged to occupy. In her *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks stated: "Black women with no institutionalized "other" that we may discriminate against, exploit, or oppress often have a lived experience that directly challenges the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology" (2000:16). Nevertheless, that space 'other' where Lorraine and Theresa are secluded demonstrates that even if the heterosexual females of Brewster Place are oppressed, they still have power to subjugate others and then, they are contributing to maintaining the status quo and patriarchal dominion.

By establishing distance, the women of Brewster Place aim at affirming themselves in opposition to the two lesbians since they know that in patriarchal society lesbian identities are punished for they pose a threat to male domination. The women of Brewster Place pursue avoiding a label which will bring marginalization and violence to their lives drawing a visible line between them and the two lesbians. They position themselves against Lorraine and Theresa in the meetings of the Brewster Place Association, which turn into a pulpit where these women speak out their detachment from lesbianism and display their heterosexuality. In one of the first meetings that Lorraine attends, she shows her concern for the community and her support to the association volunteering to take the minutes of the meeting. Lorraine is closely examined by her neighbors, particularly by Sophie, one of the most critical voices against the couple, who rejects Lorraine's presence in the Association because she does "filthy, unnatural things" (Naylor 1983: 145). Etta, who constantly clashes with Sophie

because the latter enjoys gossiping, takes Sophie's accusation as an opportunity to get involved in a row with Sophie. Though Etta does not attempt to back Lorraine but to manifest her dislike for Sophie, her position is interpreted as a defense of The Two, which raises Sophie's suspicions:

“And any woman – any woman who defends that kind of thing just better be watched. That's all I gotta say- where there's smoke, there's fire, Etta Johnson!” (...) Etta stopped struggling against the arms that were holding her, and her chest was heaving in rapid spasms as she threw Sophie a look of wilting hate, but she remained silent. And no other woman in the room dared to speak as they moved an extra breath away from each other. (...) Lorraine (...) stood like a fading spirit before the ebony statue that Sophie pointed at her like a crucifix. “Movin' into our block causin' a disturbance with your nasty ways. You ain't wanted here!” (Naylor 1983: 145).

The threat of being labeled a lesbian deters Etta and the rest of the women from supporting Lorraine. They distance themselves from Lorraine so as to make it clear they do not identify with this woman, they attempt to affirm their heterosexual identity by demonstrating publically what they are not. Stuart Hall states that identification is a process which demands to establish boundaries so as to leave outside what one is not: “Identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not (...) that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be constructed” (2000: 17). In the context of the women of Brewster Place, the two lesbians operate as the “constitutive outside” of the heterosexual women (Hall 2000:

17), only in excluding them, the heterosexual women can affirm their heterosexual identity.

3.3 The art of mismeeting as a response to the lesbians' presence

The presence of Lorraine and Theresa in Brewster Place becomes then especially uncomfortable for their neighbors and poses a challenge precisely because they can neither avoid the lesbians' proximity nor get out of the ghetto. They are compelled to tolerate the couple's presence; yet, tolerance does not mean to understand each other, but to get out of each other's way as Žižek argues, that is, the over-proximity of the other, in this case, that of the lesbians, is fine as long as it does not intrude on one's personal space and remains at a safe distance; alienation becomes a solution for peaceful coexistence (2009: 35, 50-51). Distance is not the only strategy that humans can use in order to cope with otherness. Zygmunt Bauman explains that humans strive to eliminate otherness in two different forms: "physically, by separation and confinement; or psychologically, by inattention" (2009: 160). Those living in Brewster cannot separate themselves from the couple because white society has already confined them physically to Brewster. For most of the inhabitants in Brewster, the spatial location they occupy is not the result of any personal failure but it is a political space which reproduces power relations and allows the hegemon, whites, to exclude them since they are blacks and, therefore, the Other. As Edward Soja underlines: "We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology" (qtd. in Keith and Pile 1993: 4). Brewster is a space 'Other' for the white city, which is center and origin, a marked space deployed as a signifier of the political and social power of

white society. The ghetto is an “institutional form” (Wacquant 1998: 143) which serves the needs of whites, it is a place for the spatial and social confinement of blacks, as Zygmunt Bauman states: "ghettos and prisons are two varieties of the strategy of 'tying the undesirables to the ground', of *confinement* and *immobilization*" (2001: 120; author's emphasis). By limiting blacks to the ghetto, their presence is minimized in the main city and the potential peril they pose to white supremacy is countervailed. Brewster becomes disempowering since its inhabitants have neither choice nor freedom to get out, they are excluded and controlled because they share a common condition: they are black and poor. Therefore, the women of Brewster Place have been immobilized as they cannot leave the ghetto, thus, they have been rendered powerless to escape from Theresa's and Lorraine's presence, who curiously enough have decided to move voluntarily in Brewster.

While Brewster stands for oppression for most of its inhabitants, for Kiswana, Lorraine and Theresa it incarnates a world of expectations. Kiswana has *chosen* to move in Brewster to side with her people, that is, blacks; she is neither poor nor lesbian, therefore, she is privileged if compared with her female neighbors, in fact, she lives at the top of the block being the only one who can see over the wall of Brewster Place. On the other hand, Lorraine and Theresa fled from the core of the city and the well-off neighborhood they used to reside in because they were blacks and lesbians. In Brewster they hoped to find comprehension and form a community with those like them, namely, blacks. Lorraine thinks “Black people were all in the same boat – she'd come to realize even more since they had moved to Brewster – and if they didn't row together, they would sink together” (Naylor 1983: 142). Brewster represents for Lorraine and Theresa the chance to ally themselves with their own race, Brewster is, then, not a ghetto in its

quintessential meaning since they can go in and out at their will, but a “voluntary ghetto”, as Bauman states:

voluntary ghettos are not true ghettos (...) The real ghettos are places from which their insiders cannot get out (...); the prime purpose of voluntary ghettos, on the contrary, is to bar outsiders from going in - the insiders are free to go out at will. (...) The real ghettos mean denial of freedom. Voluntary ghettos are meant to serve the cause of freedom (2001: 116-117).

Lorraine and Theresa have become refugees as they expect Brewster will be the geographical space where whites will not dare to go in. As a result, Brewster presents itself as the place where they might find freedom and safety, a free territory for their love. Although they define themselves mainly as blacks, and thus they consider themselves like those living in Brewster, their neighbours cannot help reducing them to their sexual identity; for their neighbours, Lorraine and Theresa are *different* because they are lesbians.

Accordingly, social and political circumstances compel these neighbors to live side by side and share the same physical space but not the social one, that is to say, although they are obliged to tolerate the two women's presence and their otherness, they cannot be forced to share their inner worlds; as Bauman explains the correlation between physical and social proximity is broken (2009: 152). Consequently, the women of Brewster Place strive to eliminate the lesbians' otherness by inattention, the second mechanism Bauman mentions. The women of Brewster Place *ignore* Lorraine and Theresa building an invisible wall between themselves and the two lesbians in order to cope with their presence. The fear of the physical proximity of the two lesbians and the potential threat they represent to the heterosexual community's integrity is counteracted

by keeping relational distance rather than spatial distance. The women of Brewster Place alienate themselves from the two lesbians' presence in order to neutralize their threat. They pursue to eliminate the threat of the two lesbian practicing "the art of mismeeting", a technique by which according to Bauman, "the stranger is allocated to the sphere of disattention, the sphere within which all conscious contact, and above all a conduct which may be recognized by him as a conscious contact, is studiously avoided. This is the realm of non-engagement, of emotional void" (2009: 154). Thus, the neighbors of Brewster force Lorraine and Theresa into the background where they can be easily ignored and they disassociate themselves from the couple as a mechanism of self-defense. Furthermore, Bauman argues that "In the set of techniques that combine into the art of mismeeting, the most prominent perhaps is the avoidance of eye contact. (...) The point is to see while pretending that one is not looking (...) What is required is scrutiny disguised as indifference" (2009: 154-155). In this sense, the neighbors of Brewster scrutinize the couple's movements from their windows, corners, and behind the shades. When they meet either Lorraine or Theresa in the street or the block they avoid looking at her as Lorraine herself notices:

she noticed that some of the people who had spoken to her before made a point of having something else to do with their eyes when she passed, although she could almost feel them staring at her back as she moved on. The ones who still spoke only did so after an uncomfortable pause, in which they seemed to be peering through her before they begrudged her a good morning or evening. (...) The group of women on her stop parted silently and let her pass (1983: 133).

Lorraine and Theresa's presence and existence is non-admitted by their neighbors and therefore, they are not recognized as beings (Bauman 2009: 154). The women of Brewster Place attempt to purify their environment in order to restrict the potential threat that those who are different pose to their safety and their identities. Thus, the indifference of the women of Brewster implies the "loss of their face" by their neighbors.

3.4 The loss of the face

According to Emmanuel Lévinas, when the other person becomes faceless in the crowd, someone whose life or death is an indifferent matter, the worst could happen. He gives the example of the Shoah as one of the disasters where individuals became faceless and their humanity failed to be recognized. Lévinas argues that the best way of encountering the other in order to establish a social relation is by looking him or her as a face and not as a person. In doing so, one is avoiding confronting the other as a character (the mask or the role performed by individuals) and is dispossessing the individual of context (2011: 86). Lévinas describes the face as follows:

There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; (...) The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill. (2011: 86)

The face is the first image, the way the other presents herself, it speaks and begins a discourse. It is the very exposure of the face, its nakedness and vulnerability of

the face which commands justice and orders me to serve her, Lévinas claims. The phrase “Thou shalt not kill”, which is present in the other’s face, is “pregnant with responsiveness and responsibility”; it is this commandment that provokes human responsibility (Critchley and Bernasconi 2002: 75-76). Therefore, the face is where the ethical relation is originated (2011: 87) since it opposes my violence. By recognizing the other’s face, her or his right to exist is then being acknowledged. This commandment inaugurates “an original responsibility” (Lévinas 1989: 290) toward the other prior to any contact which has nothing to do with guilt or any act committed. One is responsible for the other’s death and has to respond for it, thus, the other must be protected and defended. Hence, Lévinas postulates that one is devoted to the other man before being devoted to oneself (1989: 83-4) and then, can never escape from that responsibility toward the other. Lévinas rejects ontology as philosophy decentering the self from her or his ego to locate the signification of human existence in responsibility for the other: “I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. (...) the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other” (2011: 95).

Therefore, ethics is the existential base for Lévinas and responsibility is what constitutes subjectivity: the individual ‘I’ is called into question since the true signification of being means being for the very Other. At the core of his philosophy, the Judeo-Christian precept “love thy neighbor as thyself” (Leviticus 19, 9-18) is to be found, a commandment which incites us to love our neighbor. Whereas for Hebrews, this neighbor was not every human being, but stood for a relative, a friend or a fellow countryman or countrywoman, for Lévinas, that neighbor is *every* human being. Lévinas defies individualism given that responsibility goes beyond those with whom we may

have entered into an agreement, namely, those akin, our friends and our most immediate world; he transgresses any racial or national limit for fraternity should embrace every human being. The real task of being “consists in making the other become the Same”, Lévinas states (2011: 91). Making the other the Same does not stand for assimilation but for respect of otherness, that is to say, in her or his otherness the other deserves our respect. Lévinas argues: “The Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question” (1989: 83). This precept guides Lévinas’s ethics, the fact of accepting this command and taking responsibility for the Other poses a challenge to self-love, as Bauman put it: “loving your neighbor may require a leap of faith; the result though, is the birth act of humanity. It is also the fateful passage from the instinct of survival to morality” (2003: 78). The precept defies natural instincts and constitutes individuals as moral beings for morality is nothing else but “a transcendence of being” (Bauman 2009: 72).

Thus, even if one feels vulnerable or threatened by the other, one is still responsible for that other because safeguarding her or his life is an ethical obligation. The Other’s face addresses me and calls me, Lévinas explains, so we cannot contradict that unvoiced call. The obligation to respond to this call is not a conscious procedure since for Lévinas the individual is not a conscious subject but a sensible one. It is because the subject is sensible and is *exposed* to the Other, that is to say, exposed to its vulnerability and “open to the pangs of both hunger and eros” (Critchley and Bernasconi 2002: 21), that it can enter into an ethical relation with the other and can accept its obligation toward the Other without going through a conscious procedure. For Lévinas, it is sensibility and not reason that allows to find the Other and to establish a social relation; moreover, he uses the term “totalization” to explain the violence

involved in limiting the other to rational categories, be they racial or sexual, since “totalization” is a denial of the Other’s difference (Beavers 1990: 3).

In an interview between Alain Finkielkraut and Lévinas, the former raises a problematic question when he mentions the persecution of Jews so as to ask Lévinas if Jews, as victims and the insulted of History, are also responsible for those who are non-Jews since they are compelled to exert their own defense. Lévinas’s answer is clear: “That in no way justifies closing our ears to the voice of men. I don’t at all believe that there are limits to responsibility (...) My *self*, I repeat, is never absolved from responsibility towards the Other” (1989: 291; original emphasis). This situation parallels that of Brewster Place: black women as victims of racism, classism and sexism, “the mules of the world”, in Zora Neale Hurston's phrase, find it difficult to tackle the presence of the two lesbians. Far from extending the ethics of caring which characterize their relationship to Lorraine and Theresa, they avoid assuming responsibility toward them. Lorraine and Theresa have become faceless because their neighbors have confronted them from a conscious perspective rather than from a sensible one, as Lévinas advises. Consequently, the couple has been “totalized” and their beings reduced to their sexual identity. In totalizing the couple, the women of Brewster Place have rejected to take Lorraine’s and Theresa’s call and are refuting their otherness; moreover, their avoidance to look at the two women’s faces and their indifference toward the couple implies they are denying their humanity. Hence, the women are violating their responsibility toward the Other in the interests of their own safety, that is to say, they are prioritizing self-defense over responsibility.

They have accepted responsibilities toward the Same in othermothering each other but they have not been able to transcend their being and acknowledge the two

women. As Žižek affirmed: “Refusing the same basic ethical rights to those outside our community as to those inside it is something that does not come naturally to a human being. It is a violation of our spontaneous ethical proclivity” (2009: 41). The ethics of the women of Brewster Place are exclusionary and communitarian since they are only committed to those inside their community. From their perspective, a neighbor is somebody already familiar, someone similar or related; therefore, they delimit their solidarity and ethical obligations to those inside the borders of their community.

Moreover, they are breaching the commandment “love thy neighbor as thyself”, as through their attitude they are fixing Lorraine and Theresa in the role of Žižek’s Neighbor as “traumatic intruder”. The women of Brewster Place cannot reach over the differences which separate them from Lorraine and Theresa, and then they are distancing themselves from the task of accepting the Other become the Same. Furthermore, the separation between them will never disappear as long as they do not accept the challenge to interact with Lorraine and Theresa so that "The Two" can be released from their status of strangers to become two neighbors. If the women of Brewster Place cannot love their neighbor as themselves, they are rejecting also the two women’s otherness, since “loving our neighbors as we love ourselves would mean then *respecting each other's uniqueness* - the value of our differences that enrich the world we jointly inhabit and so make it more fascinating and enjoyable a place and add further to the cornucopia of its promises" (Bauman 2003: 80-81).

The women of Brewster Place reject plurality for they view Lorraine and Theresa’s difference as a problem which takes them to construct a homogeneous community. Theirs is a community of sameness, namely, an exclusionary community. A true community involves valuing and respecting otherness as Fina Birulés explains in

her article “La distancia como figura de la comunidad, Hannah Arendt”. Arendt believes distance, rather than homogeneity, is the essential attribute of a political community (Birulés 2012: 29):

Cohabiting in the world means, in essence, that a world of things is among those who have it in common, just like the table which is located between those who are sitting at it. As everything which is in the middle, what is “in-between” the world unites and separates those who share it. (...) It is a human world in which there is *space* to move around and share different perspectives (2012: 30; original emphasis)⁴.

The distance which separates individuals is an essential political figure, that is to say, a space “in-between” individuals where community situates itself; the elimination of that space would mean the annihilation of community. Moreover, plurality and heterogeneity are the only alternatives as “unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are preconditions of our political existence” (Butler 2012: 15). Accordingly, given that individuals can neither choose with whom they would like to co-habitate nor decide on the heterogeneous character of the earth - and Brewster Place is an example - the very principle of cohabitation must guide any community, nation or neighborhood, Arendt claims (Butler 2012: 13). No *modus convivendi* can be achieved in a society which rejects difference since privileging the other’s uniqueness is paramount.

⁴My translation. Original text in Spanish: "Convivir en el mundo significa, en esencia, que un mundo de cosas está entre quienes lo tienen en común, al igual que la mesa está localizada entre los que se sientan a su alrededor. Y, como todo lo que está en medio, lo que está "entre" (*in-between*) el mundo une y separa a quienes lo comparten. (...) Se trata de un mundo humano en cuyo seno hay *espacio* para desplazarse y compartir perspectivas distintas" (Birulés 2012: 30; author’s emphasis).

The distance which separates the heterosexual women of Brewster Place and Lorraine and Theresa is a potential space where communitarian bonds may be forged. Yet, political cohabitation has become impossible. This “in-between” has been occupied by that indifference and disattention explained in the previous chapter, annihilating the possibility of a truly political community. However, the women of Brewster Place see themselves obliged to reconsider their communitarianism and their ethical judgments after Lorraine is raped. Only when they perceived this injustice, they feel themselves exposed to Lorraine’s and Theresa’s vulnerability, and certain bonds of solidarity emerge.

3.5. The burden of heterosexism

For Lorraine and Theresa, especially for the former, Brewster Place had symbolized an idyllic territory for their love where they would be finally comprehended and supported. These women moved away from the core of the city to escape from the psychic annihilation that to live there implied: they could not express their feelings publically as they constantly feared being discovered as Lorraine had been dismissed from her previous job and consequently, she was afraid of losing her job as a teacher. Moreover both of them have lost their families for their sexual identity is not approved. Nevertheless, Brewster does not result to be the paradise expected and it turns into a dystopia not only because of the community’s lack of comprehension, but because of the brutal sexual aggression Lorraine suffers.

The story of this couple evidences how oppressive the stigmatization of lesbianism is. Both the treatment of lesbianism as a disease throughout history and lesbians’ marginalization helped patriarchy promote heterosexuality as the *authentic* sexuality and discourage potential lesbianism in women. Thus, heterosexuality was

normalized and inaugurated a sexual hierarchy where this sexual identity was established as the hegemonic ideology in contrast to “unnatural” sexualities. Moreover, normative heterosexuality became a system of power which in labeling other sexual identities as different has historically managed to objectify and dominate them. In denying categorically the possibility of a natural gay or lesbian existence, heteronormativity, as an essentialist discourse, has become a subjugating system of power similar to racism or sexism which discriminates against those individuals whose sexual identity is other than heterosexual (Collins 2009: 139). In the introduction to *No turning Back: Lesbian and Gay Liberation of the '80s*, Gerre Goodman et al. define heterosexism as follows:

the suppression and denial of homosexuality with the assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual and, second, a belief in the inherent superiority of the dominant-male/passive-female role pattern. Heterosexism results in compulsory heterosexuality which cripples the free expression and mutually supportive relationships of heterosexuals as well as of lesbians and gay men (qtd. in hooks 2000: 152)

Compulsory heterosexuality is enforced not only through the denial of the naturalness of lesbianism and other sexual identities, but also through violence, as Lorraine's rape illustrates. One night on her way home, Lorraine is ambushed by C. C. Baker and his friends. These gang members are a vivid portrait of patriarchy as their drive for power and control over women indicates; they always move together as “they needed the others continually to verify their existence” (Naylor 1983: 161), in other words, they need other men so as to prove publically their manhood and their abilities to use their penises. One of their overt demonstrations of male power is Lorraine's rape.

The young men had been hiding up on the wall waiting for the moment the “dyke” was alone and more vulnerable, suddenly

Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence – human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide. “I’m gonna show you somethin’ I bet you never seen before. (...) Bet after we get through with you, you ain’t never gonna wanna kiss no more pussy.” He slammed his kneecap into her spine and her body arched up, causing his nails to cut into the side of her mouth to stifle her cry. He pushed her arched body down onto the cement. Two of the boys pinned her arms, two wrenched open her legs, while C.C knelt between them and pushed up her dress and tore at the top of her pantyhose. Lorraine’s body was twisting in convulsions of fear that they mistook for resistance, and C.C brought his fist down into her stomach. (...) The sixth boy took a dirty paper bag lying on the ground and stuffed it into her mouth. She felt a weight drop on her spread body. (...) Lorraine was not conscious of the pain in her spine or stomach. (...) She couldn’t tell when they changed places and the second weight, then the third and fourth, dropped on her – it was all one continuous hacksawing of torment that kept her eyes screaming the only word she was fated to utter again and again for the rest of her life. *Please* (Naylor 1983: 170-171; my italics).

The violence these six men use displays their hatred for Lorraine, who is completely dispossessed of her humanity as she is reduced to a female body which must be conquered in order for these men to enact their dominion. The gang had never

tolerated the couple's presence in Brewster as their lesbian identity represented an affront to their male supremacy. From their heterosexist standpoint, a woman is a slave who serves their male needs and an object deployed to demonstrate and maintain their dominion, therefore, lesbians shake the founding base of society and violate its norms for they do not fit into the reality assigned to women and their sexuality is not linked to reproduction; moreover, lesbians embody a challenge to patriarchy in defining themselves with reference to other women rather than to men. In Cheryl Clarke's words: "The Black man may view the lesbian - who cannot be manipulated or seduced sexually by him - in much the same way the white slave master once viewed the black male slave, viz. as some perverse caricature of manhood threatening his position of dominance over the female body" (Clarke 1981: 131-132). Consequently, the black man may feel "emasculated" by the black lesbian as she is out of male reach: those women who can neither be controlled nor possessed are the enemy, as C. C. Baker himself thinks: "the thought of any woman who lay beyond the length of its power [his fly] was a threat" (Naylor 1983: 162). The black lesbian undermines black male power in two ways: first, by refusing to become heterosexual and thus, related to men, second, in posing themselves as direct competitors of men since they could "usurp" women's bodies, traditionally viewed as a male property.

In order to "correct" the affront lesbians pose to male supremacy and to enforce heterosexuality on them, both physical and psychological violence have traditionally been deployed as Adrienne Rich put it (2003: 21) and Lorraine's rape proves it. Lorraine's rape is one of the violent mechanisms used by patriarchy to express its power and its right to dominate women, a fact that also evidences that male supremacy supports and encourages violence against women (hooks 200: 117). Hence, compulsory heterosexuality is as a political institution (Rich 2003: 17) and its enforcement has been

utilized as “a means of assuring male right of physical, economic, and emotional access” to women (Rich 2003: 26). Ultimately, these men are afraid of losing the control of "their" women for as it was explained in the first chapter of this dissertation masculinity is asserted through the control of others; they aim at detaching themselves from the inferior status that white supremacy gave to blacks and controlling women sexually is the only means available to challenge white domination and to proclaim their masculinity and their equality with the white man. Compulsory heterosexuality and Lorraine’s rape illustrate that men “are taught to assume they should have access to the bodies of *all* women” (hooks 2000: 157; my italics). In fact, C. C. Baker wants to teach Lorraine a lesson as he menaces her: “bet after we get through with you, you ain’t never gonna wanna kiss no more pussy” (Naylor 1983: 170). The gang uses rape as a punishment on lesbians in general for escaping from men control and calling into question their supremacy. However, the destroying effects of the dynamics of male supremacy over women still has some final effect in Brewster Place in the tragedy of Ben's murder. An old wino, Ben had been the only neighbor in Brewster who had supported Lorraine as he saw her as the daughter he lost in the past. After Lorraine is raped, he finds her on the wall so he approaches her to help; she, who cannot distinguish Ben but can only see another man, hits him with a brick until killing him.

The rape destroys Lorraine both physically and psychologically as she will remain insane forever. Yet, the rape is also a message, a “weapon of terror” (hooks 1990: 62) directed against the other women of Brewster Place. The rape disquiets the women of Brewster Place who cannot help thinking about it and feeling uncomfortable: “although only a few admitted it, every woman on Brewster Place had dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress. She had come to them in the midst of the cold sweat of a nightmare, or had hung around the edges of

fitful sleep” (Naylor 1983: 175-76). The rainy days which follow Lorraine’s rape mirror the mood of these women, who remain confined to their homes and their own thoughts. According to Barbara Christian, Lorraine’s fatidic end is the result of the failure of the women of Brewster Place to support and protect her (1997: 201). Christian is stating that these women are guilty of Lorraine’s rape; again “the mules of the world” are declared responsible and obliged to carry a burden which is not theirs. Christian forgets these women are also oppressed by their partners and men in general. It is true that they fail to comprehend Lorraine and Theresa and to extend their bonds to them, but they cannot be said to be responsible.

Furthermore, the aggression moves these women and shakes the foundations of their community as they finally understand Lorraine and Theresa are oppressed too and are going through the same universe as them. Yet, powerless as they are, they can do nothing to change their situation except to dream. Mattie Michael, the woman who embodies the feeling of community, dreams of freedom for all the women living on Brewster Place. The reader is unaware that Mattie is dreaming as the dream seems to be the narration of the block party the neighbors are having that day; it is only at the end of the dream that Mattie suddenly wakes up and we learn that it was a fantasy or maybe a vision of this party since Gloria Naylor leaves the end open. In Mattie’s dream, her neighbors are having a party to collect money to sue their landlord for the conditions of the block they live in. It is at the party that Cora Lee sees Lorraine’s blood is still on the wall so she starts digging around the mortar to extract the brick. Cora informs Mattie that there is blood on the wall and then, the brick which Cora has extracted is passed by the women from hand to hand until all of them, even Theresa, who is about to leave Brewster Place in a cab, run to the wall so as to struggle with the tools they have, that is, knives, forks, heels and their own hands to eventually demolish the wall. The wall is

that “dead-end” which frustrates their future and stigmatizes them, so it must be destroyed. Mattie’s dream is the symbol of the anger these women feel. In Mattie's dream, and in the dreams and nightmares of the women of Brewster Place which follow Lorraine's rape, all these women feel connected and united, a connection which also appears to demonstrate their claustrophobia and frustration.

The aggression Lorraine suffers serves to connect these women as they are finally moved by her suffering. The rape breaks the barriers of the female community of Brewster and they are obliged to reconsider their indifference toward the couple and also their ethical judgments. These women are obliged to imagine themselves bleeding on the wall and to think “that person could be me”, a phrase uttered by Walt Whitman in the 1840s when he was walking in New York at the time when masses of immigrants and different people from all over the world were arriving. New York was a city of strangers who brushed by each other every day but never met again; Whitman vibrated and could not stop asking himself: "how do you come to care for people that you have never seen before and that you may never see again?", "what is that separates any of us?" (Zwonitzer 2008). And then, observing those strangers full of life and hope doing their daily activities, Whitman realized "that person could be me". According to Ed Folsom, Whitman may have uttered this phrase after attending a slave auction as well. The very Walt Whitman himself recognized that he did not find slavery morally abhorrent until he witnessed a slave auction in New Orleans. It was there that he witnessed how black bodies were being sold as commodities, the brutality of this experience hit Whitman and raised his awareness on slavery as he could imagine himself on the auction block; Whitman thought, “that person could be me” (Zwonitzer 2008). So as to care for those we see as strangers and to break that distance which separates individuals, something must happen: it is only when one is affected by the

suffering of others that we are moved to act and we can recognize our interconnection with them no matter how far they are (2011: 3-4), Judith Butler explains. This distance, either social or physical, must be reversed so that we see ourselves compelled “to give up our more narrow communitarian ties, and to respond (...) to a perceived injustice” (Butler 2011: 21). An imposition from the outside, an ethical demand, provokes that identification which acts upon us. Furthermore, this imposition, which does not need our consent, presupposes that ethical obligations and responsibility do not understand limits, and that ethical obligations cross any frontier (Butler 2011: 3-4). As Lévinas stated, there are no limits to responsibility as responsibility transgresses any boundary. Although Lorraine’s rape does not produce any metamorphoses in the brutal reality of Brewster Place, the women particularly manage to identify themselves with Lorraine. Thus, there is an ethical encounter and an ethical response to that suffering.

"With awe and wonder you look around, recognizing the preciousness of earth, the sanctity of every human being on the planet, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings - somos todos un paíz [sic]. Love swells in your chest and shoots out of your heart chakra, linking you to everyone/everything (...) You share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label."

(Anzaldúa 2002: 558)

Conclusion

Subjugated because of race, class and sex and with no institutional protection to turn to, the heterosexual women of Brewster Place can only stick by other women to endure their plight in the ghetto and resist dehumanization. Their commitment to each other takes them to accept responsibilities and othermother each other; yet, they exclude from this ethical and personal commitment those who are different.

The Women of Brewster Place thus evidences how oppressive and aggressive hegemonic discourses are and how our positioning in the world can both affect and even determine the lives of others. The novel illustrates the violence of labels and denounces egoistic interests in forming homogenous communities which seek to countervail the menace that other identities seem to embody, as these communities are used to ghettoize and isolate others. Furthermore, it also demonstrates the risks which alienation, as a mechanism to keep the other at a distance, entails. The failure to acknowledge the presence of others *and* their faces implies that their existences are not admitted. Indifference does not only contribute to fixing the other in her or his role as Other, but it also aims at eliminating otherness altogether.

Since plurality and heterogeneity are preconditions of our existence, a true political community may only be achieved through respect for each individual's uniqueness. Alienation frustrates any chance to establish a social relation and cannot be overcome if we do not foster a face-to-face encounter where dialogue helps renegotiate pre-conceived notions of the Other.

In criticizing individualism and the consequences of social disassociation from others, the novel urges readers to ask themselves towards whom they accept ethical responsibilities. It encourages human beings to *care* for those who are different too and to take responsibility for others' sufferings. *The Women of Brewster Place* highlights the beauty of human interdependence and of establishing bonds; it invites readers to transcend themselves so as to form alliances with those who are different as well. Naylor's text raises the reader's moral consciousness about the truth that differences are neither beautiful nor ugly, differences *are*, so otherness and individual's uniqueness must be respected.

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