

**REWRITING THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE: MALE VOICES / RÉÉCRITURE DU SÉRIAL THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE: LES VOIX MASCULINS / RESCRIEREA SERIALULUI FEMEILE DIN BREWSTER: VOCILE MASCULINE<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** Gloria Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place* (1994) relates the saga of black men in the urban environment of the same name. Coming from different horizons, each with a different and individual story, these men arrive at Brewster Place hoping to cope with their ill-fated past and to build a better future. Unfortunately, their ambition and dreams turn out as a continuation of their former experience that precipitated them to the Ghetto of Brewster. Once at Brewster, rather than uniting to face their common plight, they develop an egocentric attitude that contributes to destroy their community. However, through her representation of the male community, Naylor recreates the atmosphere of *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and complements the one-side black female point of view in the interpretation of the African Americans' experience. Thus, to the female voice, she opposes a male one to offer her audience a comprehensive view of the Blacks' problem. In addition, through this male/female opposition, Naylor suggests addressing the Blacks' problem not only as an interracial issue but also from the gender perspective.

**Key words:** Female, gender issues, black, white, identity, language, male, rewrite, self-assertion, voice.

At the beginning of *The Men of Brewster Place*, the narrator states: "I don't know a man who would be anywhere without a woman. And don't know a woman who'd be anywhere without a man." (7)<sup>2</sup> This assertion constitutes a link between this novel and *The Women of Brewster Place*. It highlights Gloria Naylor's commitment to give the floor to male characters to make up for the "lack" of male voices in her first Brewster Place novel. It also evacuates the feminist vision of her writing that permeated *The Women of Brewster Place*. Leaning on the same block of Brewster, Naylor focuses on men of the struggling black community with a spirited sensitivity tempered by a penchant for sociological realism. Through Brewster, Naylor builds two types of stories which apparently seem to be different in terms of gender issues but yet merge into one another when the two plots are put together. The narratives then offer a global space of Brewster Place where each male character is given a female mirror-image and vice versa. Knowing that both sexes are interdependent, in *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor gives to the female discourse of *The Women of Brewster Place*, a male opposing view to balance the male/female linguistic dialogism. The one-side dialogue that feeds patriarchal gender discourse is therefore given a new inspection. When *The Women of Brewster Place* was first published, many critics of gender studies deemed it a feminist novel due to its portrayal of female experience. *The Men of Brewster Place* therefore comes out as a complement. More accurately, it is a continuation of the African

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<sup>1</sup> Kouadio Germain N'Guessan, University Felix Houphouët-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire, kouadiogermain@yahoo.fr.

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Americans' struggle for a better life in urban ghettos. This paper examines this struggle from male perspective which, in fact, is like a rewriting of *The Women of Brewster Place*.

In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor breathes new life into the residents who once destroyed the lives of black women. Mere shadows and marginal in *The Women of Brewster Place*, men assume a central role in *The Men of Brewster Place*. Also, because everyone deserves a second chance, Naylor gives these men a chance to correct their once wrecked life that made them brutal and good-for-nothing characters in *The Women of Brewster Place*. She skillfully articulates the story of different men whose experience taken individually adds to or constitutes part of the whole plight of African Americans as they strive to face their daily trials. She creates a range of unique characters, each of whom has a story to tell. Naylor's work is woven in such a way as to turn her artistic and political attention to the plight of the African American male and to render a fictional exposé of his dilemma of whether to surrender or fight for his manliness. Obviously, this dilemma calls for a voice as an expression of identity and self-assertion. The absence of the male voice, indeed, deprived the African American community of wholeness. Naylor then chooses to introduce it in her second novel to render the community of Brewster as a complete representation of the African American community. She built a totally heterogeneous space of Brewster Place with a variation of voices and made it an appropriation of the male voice.

Strategically, passages from *The Women of Brewster Place* are placed in *The Men of Brewster Place*, telling not only of the intertextual relationship between the two novels but demonstrating Naylor's intention to make of Brewster Place a fictional representation of the Blacks' urban experience. This strategy, on the other hand, makes of the two novels a couplet and informs about the author's artistry. Like in a chorus, Ben, an alcoholic janitor is the leading voice of the Brewster men's saga. He intervenes in each story, establishing the time and place and introducing the characters. He is, as Gérard Genette (1972) postulates, an extra-diegetic and an intra-diegetic character at the same time. He is a detached observer and a participant in the complex struggle that men face. Though he introduces himself as a drunk (3), he is in full possession of his mental capabilities. He knows the story of Brewster Place and its inhabitants as he relates it all along the narrative, demonstrating that he is the living memory of this ghetto. In this context, he appears as someone for whom Brewster Place has no secret. He has seen so many things on this block; folks coming and going, with various ways of dressing, of behaving, and of speaking (5) that it all happens to him as an ordinary event: "I saw it over and over here on Brewster Place." (4)

In his double role of observer and participant, Ben introduces all the other characters to the reader at the beginning of each story. This form of representation is very interesting in terms of the writer's narrative technique. It provides the book with an apparent fragmentation which, in fact, constitutes one comprehensive and artistic structure. Contrary to *The Women of Brewster Place* where the narrator relates the different stories separately to give a global view of the multifaceted aspects of the black women's burden, in *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor chooses a different narrative strategy to account for men's experience. She leans on Ben as the expression of a male voice, this voice that calls for male authoritative personality. Through Ben's presentation of each male protagonist, Naylor points out the difference between male and female experience. Her strategy in *The Men of Brewster Place* brings to her fictional geography of Brewster, fragmentation as it opposes unity in *The Women of*

*Brewster Place*. Indeed, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, the black woman's experience, though recounted as isolated pieces – each story gives an aspect of the black woman's experience – constitutes part of the whole plight of a social class seeking cohesion and personality in a racist and sexist world. But in *The Men of Brewster Place*, the black male's experience is portrayed first by Ben, the detached observer and participant. He acts as a spokesman. As such, we can say that Naylor's technique makes the individual protagonists' stories merge. As a spokesman, Ben stands as the pivotal male voice from which the other men's voices originate to express the black male's search for manliness.

By making men's individual voices merge into one comprehensive voice as embodied by Ben as their spokesman, Naylor artistically puts in *The Men of Brewster Place* what is missing in *The Women of Brewster Place* and defines language as a means of expression of identity and of protest. Indeed, through language, the individual can account for his/her victimization and thereby protest against this situation and work for his/her social recognition. Language posits the individual as a social agent who has his/her say in the construction of his/her community. It provides the dominated subject, the subaltern, with the capability to transcend his/her subaltern condition and speak as an independent subject. Creatively, in *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor gives the individual selves of her protagonists, a collective self to produce a work of art. What is implicit and literally hidden is, therefore, explicitly explored and revealed to the reader for the benefit of art and literature. Ben's undertaking to make the black male's scattered voices come together as in a chorus is in some way, a proxy struggle. It is an interesting strategy for the writer to demonstrate that through disunity and disorder, there is order and unity. Naylor invests Ben with the mission to reinstate the solidarity and personality of which the white dominant and racist culture has deprived the black man. Moreover, this strategy serves to protest against the black male's emasculation by this dominant culture. As a creation, Naylor's strategy is artistically and aesthetically a success and remarkable in terms of literary imagination about the Blacks' urban experience.

Another important point in Naylor's strategy lies in her choice of Ben as a central protagonist of her novel. A gathering character, Ben serves to anticipate the lack of brotherhood the men demonstrate by the end of the novel, which prompts Greasy to commit suicide, and the necessity for them to find a unique voice. Besides, this search for a male voice also expresses male desire to dominate. For by uniting their different voices, the men create one strong group. In so doing, they can impose their viewpoint when it comes to discuss about issues related to their race or gender, putting forward their group interests. Since they no longer speak as disparate and isolated subjects, the voice they create through their union, therefore, transcends their individual identities to construct a collective one. And Naylor is clever and skillful enough to build this environment to cast away the feminist perception critics deemed *The Women of Brewster Place*.

In both novels, the individual stories, taken alone, articulate the experience of African American sub-groups faced with the dilemma of whether to surrender or oppose the dominant culture. While the women in *The Women of Brewster Place* are faced with the double oppression of racism and sexism, men in *The Men of Brewster Place* are victim of a racist world that emasculates them. But when put together, all these stories scrutinize a comprehensive experience of the African American supra-group caught in the turmoil of

oppression. Through this stylistic display, Naylor offers to the reader a geography wherein the individual voices dilute in that of the supra-group. The choice of black female and male characters respectively in her two novels – here we consider the chronology of publication of the two books – is also important in apprehending Naylor's intention and strategy. Metaphorically, both groups represent the two faces of the same coin. If one wants to remove one of these faces, one incidentally damages the other face. This metaphor is a clear indication that these faces are interdependent. Without one, the other one has, so to speak, no value. Similarly, the Blacks' problem in Naylor's Brewster novels cannot be analyzed separately as black male and female experiences. Such an approach would implicitly demonstrate that African American community is rather divided into two separate and antagonistic groups, which would limit any attempt to apprehend it as an autonomous and homogenous entity struggling for a common cause. These experiences, though sometimes different and distinct, must be explored as a block for a good understanding of what it means to be black in America.

Surely, Naylor knows that as a writer, one of her essential roles is to uncover what is covered, reveal what is hidden. As a matter of fact, she thinks that exploring the Blacks' problem from black female perspective only is to leave some work undone. This is why she decides to examine it from a male perspective to compensate for the lack of male voice in her debut novel and produce a comprehensive view of the African American problem. In addition, the fact that Naylor inspects this problem in different books but with the same setting recreates not only the atmosphere of the African American society faced with racial problem as a common plight, but it also indicates that this society is faced with internal gender issues.

Paradoxically, like most of the other characters, Ben has lost his male identity. At about sixty-eight, he has never been called "sir." (11) His struggle is an elusive quest for the self despite prescriptive notions of manhood and sexual identity. Resurrecting Ben's spirit in *The Men of Brewster Place* is for Naylor a clever narrative strategy that helps to establish the intertextual continuity with her first novel.

Ben's situation, traceable to slavery and its emasculation of the black male, is every Brewster male's dilemma. Historically, Ben's story serves to contextualize those of the other men. The situation of injustice that Ben experiences, his anger, powerlessness, and despair shed light on the black male's plight generated by the socio-political and historical context in which he lives. Each character's experience is particular in itself but put together, these individual experiences tell of the whole misfortune of the black male. One of Naylor's major goals is to elevate the men's personal experience from an individual to a collective one. Like his grandfather, an ex-slave turned sharecropper who was unable to protect his sister from the sexual abuse black women often experienced under slavery (14), Ben fails to save his daughter from the sexual exploitation she falls victim to at the hands of Mr. Clyde (22). Interestingly, Ben's story links the past, the present and the future and informs about the timelessness of the black male's tragedy. Here, Naylor carries her analysis further to encompass in the story the repressed anger that prompts Ben to retreat into alcoholism and which *The Women of Brewster Place* does not relate:

I feel a slight dampness in my hands because my fingernails have broken through the skin of my palms and the blood is seeping down my fingers. I look at Elvira's dark, braided head and wonder why I don't just take my hands out of my pockets and stop the bleeding by pressing

them around it. Just lock my elbows on her shoulders and place one hand on each side of her temples and then in toward each other until the blood stops. (26)

Contrary to *The Women of Brewster Place* where women seek to assert their female self, in *The Men of Brewster Place*, male identity is often contested. Thus, when Ben shows inaction and passivity after he suspects Mr. Clyde of sexually exploiting their daughter, Elvira challenges his manliness: “Man, what is wrong with you? Ain’t you heard Mr. Clyde talkin’ to you, and you just standin’ there like a bunk of stone. You better get some sense in your head ‘fore I knock some in you.” (24) Later on, when Ben complains about Elvira’s being too harsh with their daughter, Elvira gets ill-tempered and denies his sexual identity even his sexual authority: “If you was half a man, you coulda given me more babies and we woulda had some help workin’ this land instead of a half-grown woman we gotta carry the load for. And if you was even a quarter of a man, we wouldn’t be a bunch of miserable sharecroppers on someone else’s land – but we is, Ben.” (26) To Elvira, being a man means conceiving several children. Her contention with Ben also points out the assumption that having several children is a source of manpower to help the parents work in the farm and avoid their being definitely absorbed in a squandering sharecropping system. In fact, historically, the sharecropping system in which many Blacks were involved at the end of slavery to earn some livelihood perpetuated their exploitation since it generally kept them indebted and under white domination. Thus, through their work alongside their parents, children constituted a productive force intended to help their parents pay back their debt. In so doing, they drove their parents out of dependency while assuring their humanity.

In the novel, Elvira’s complaint regarding Ben’s laxity and his failure to demonstrate his manliness is an interesting rebuke to his refusal to partake in the struggle against the black male’s continuous belittling by the white man. But really, the black male cannot do otherwise since the socio-political environment does not offer him any alternative than passively accept his plight. Elvira’s complaint also raises the question of identity construction. Indeed, faced with white oppression which presumably precipitates Ben and his family into the sharecropping system, Ben, like many black males, cannot construct his individual and independent self but wear the identity imposed on him by white dominant culture. His laxity and inaction which put Elvira beside herself are the result of this oppressive and crushing environment.

On the other hand, Elvira’s complaint brings to light language as a place of contestation. It helps the subject, sometimes when he/she is silenced and dehumanized by an external and oppressing force, to rise up and claim his/her recognition. At this point, language reveals itself as an identity marker that serves to distinguish oneself from what one is thought of or to show one’s specificity. From an existentialist perspective, language here helps the individual to demonstrate his/her existence as a human being. Through her criticism regarding Ben’s behavior, Elvira not only contests the silence in which the racist world has confined the Blacks, she also claims a racial identity that she does not want to be trodden underfoot.

The black male’s emasculation to which Naylor’s text consistently refers is also furthered by religion which fails to address the Blacks’ problem and in fact, rather increases their oppression by encouraging them into what we call “Uncle Tomism,” that is to say accept to suffer in silence while waiting for divine salvation. The second epigraph of *The Men of Brewster Place* clearly stresses this situation:

God slumbers in a black alley  
With a gin bottle in His hand.  
Come on, God, get up and fight  
Like a man.

The epigraph is relevant in terms of the black male's relationship with God. It contains interesting references. For example, the term "black" is undoubtedly an allusion to darkness and hardship. Its association with "alley" indicates the obstacles on the black male's way to self-expression and determination. And the fact that God slumbers in this black alley demonstrates the difficulty to comprehend Him in times of difficulty. In addition, the bottle of gin that God carries with Him alludes to the alcoholism in which the black male often sinks as a refuge to drown his worries. The end of the epigraph invites God to get up and fight like a man. This surely expresses the black male's call to His mercy so as to help him overcome his hardships as the stories of the protagonists would reveal throughout the narrative.

The allusion to God in Naylor's text highlights the importance of religion in the African Americans' lives. In fact, faced with their difficulties, Blacks most often turn to God as the ultimate recourse, a supreme redemptive being. But in many cases, their hope never becomes true as they do not achieve their objective. Thus, probably disappointed with the white god, Ben's grandfather expects another God to come to rescue him from his hardship. He is described as a "silent old man who shunned the church, holding a closed Bible, while he searched for another kind of God in another kind of world than the one who told black men that the only way to be a man was to suffer and be still." (15-16) Indeed, the suggestion that compensatory religion with heavenly ethos cannot help achieve true manhood is not new in the tradition of the black novel. For instance, James Baldwin in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) examined the role of the Christian Church in the lives of African-Americans both as a source of repression and moral hypocrisy. Through John Grimes, the main protagonist, he demonstrated that a heavenly God who considers human beings regardless of their race does not exist. Therefore, the black community must turn to another god who is not hypocritical. In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Ben's grandfather's hope for another God reproduces this tradition. Through the old man's hope, one might say that Naylor has suggested an alternative religion that can save the Blacks from their plight; perhaps, Black Islam.

That Ben's grandfather shuns the church with a closed Bible in his hand might indicate his search for another God and another Gospel that are different from the ones he is used to. For, how can a Christian shun the house of the Supreme Being in whom he/she believes if not to show that he/she has not gained salvation or that this Supreme Being has not responded to his/her need? By the same token, how can a Christian close his/her Bible, the very symbol of his/her faith if not to demonstrate that he/she disagrees with the way the Gospel it contains is taught to him/her? But everything considered, the Bible the old man drags with him expresses his conviction that religion can ease all his suffering, his wandering in search of another God and another Gospel exemplifying the unsteady nature of human faith faced with persistent difficulties. It also implicitly alludes to the multiplicity of revealed religions, each with its way of teaching the Gospel. However, seen from another angle, the grandfather's attitude might explain his illiteracy, a defect that was prevalent within African American communities. Reasonably, we might presume that it is because the grandfather does not know how to read that he always keeps his Bible closed. Unfortunately, the narrative



is totally mute on this point. Therefore, we would only consider the assumption that if he holds his Bible closed, it is because he is looking for another God and a new way in which the Gospel is taught.

Interestingly, Naylor does not forget to include in her text the fact that in the Blacks' collective consciousness there is always redemption after affliction and as such they should wait for it. This attitude that often characterized the Blacks during slavery also recurs in the narrative. Ben's grandfather exemplifies it during the funeral of his sister who dies of a rape from an overseer: "They hold the Sister's funeral in silent. Grandpa doesn't hear the minister as he talks about the better world waiting for Sister. About a true and loving God opening up his arms to receive those pure in heart." (15) For the old man, indeed, his sister will resurrect and seat on God's right in the heavens after He has forgiven her all her earthly sins. Her death then is just a physical disappearance, a passage from the world of the living to that of holiness where God will open His arms to receive her and listen to her with a tendered ear.

As Ben states, the Brewster men, like their women, come from different horizons: "Like me, some came from sharecropping in Tennessee; others Mississippi, South Carolina. And others from just somewhere else around the city, hoping like checkers on a board; when there's no moving up, you just move around." (7) The diversity of the men's origins brings to light the omnipresence of the Blacks' problem. Naylor then posits Brewster Place as a refuge for these men to cope with their sad experience. On arriving at Brewster, all of these men have something in common: they have nowhere to go after being disillusioned by the social reality that makes them irresponsible and incapable. In the same way as to their women, Brewster Place offers its men a chance to reconstruct their selves. It symbolizes a stepping stone to redirect their life. Ben himself tried several jobs after the death of his grandparents and left alone before ending up in Brewster Place. First hired as a spittoons cleaner (17) then a shoeshine boy at a railroad depot (19), he left Tennessee for the North "taking one odd job after another, until [he] stumbled upon Brewster Place; [he's] been here ever since." (27) Ben's nomadic quest for social stability indicates his difficulty to find a meaning to his life as a responsible male character. Finally, when Ben arrives at Brewster Place totally an alcoholic, his self-addressed question about the meaning of that male identity he has never been able to assume also addresses the other black male protagonists:

So what does it mean to be a man? Sometimes when I'm sweeping outside of Brother Jerome's door and he's in there playing the blues, I think I know. But when I carry that blues with me back to my basement apartment to look around and see not an apartment really; just one large room with a light-bulb hanging from the ceiling, a bed, a few cabinets, and a hot place with grease collecting on the edges. And when getting down to the last of my wine is to find myself scraping around for a few pennies to get another bottle, I pray I've finally found the answer o what it means to be a man, 'cause I'm doing the best I can with what I've got left. (28)

Many of the men of Brewster Place generally experience the same situation as Ben. They do not sink into alcohol but like him, they do the best they can with what they have got left. Like Ben, they are in a constant search of their male identity. Through their individual stories, Naylor relates the black male's undertaking to give a meaning to his repressed life. Her skillful weaving of the plot from multiple voices puts forward the notion of polyvocality as a narrative strategy to encourage diverse readings. As the novel progresses with Ben introducing the characters, each of the stories calls for a specific reading. Indeed, polyvocality as a narrative device to account for the Blacks' problem from multiple voices is already

present in *The Women of Brewster Place*. It serves to explore the black woman's experience in urban environment. This narrative device is reproduced in *The Men of Brewster Place* to account for the black man's experience in the same urban environment. In this regard, we might say that Naylor recreates in *The Men of Brewster Place* the socio-political climate of *The Women of Brewster Place* from a male perspective, creating thus a continuation between the two novels.

In *The Men of Brewster Place*, male characters exist as mirrors of male self-inspection. While trying to compensate for male irresponsibility and wickedness in *The Women of Brewster Place*, some of them permit the black male to have a retrospective examination of his attitude and adjust it. There is, for instance Eugene, Ceil's brutal and careless husband in *The Women of Brewster Place*. He redeems himself for his failure to be the good husband and father he has never been for his wife and his daughter. As a matter of fact, he tries to behave as a well-intentioned and tender husband and father. He tries to show it to his wife:

You must believe that I did love you and Serena. I was so proud the day she was born; it was like a miracle watching you give birth. Can you remember that about me, with all the other crap that went on between us, can you at least remember that I was in the delivery room that day? Yeah, I know, crying and laughing at the same time. Acting like a stone fool, but proud, sweetheart, so proud of the daughter you gave me. It made me believe that we could really make it together after all. (68-69)

However, if Eugene was very proud the day his daughter was born, he failed to assume his responsibility as the head of his family. His male identity has been overshadowed by the social context of oppression and emasculation that forces the black male to be constantly out of the household.

In addition, Eugene's laxity and his frequent disputes with his wife, which led to the electrocution of their daughter in *The Women of Brewster Place*, and his several goings and comings from the household that also permeate *The Men of Brewster Place* cause the disintegration of his family and make them "give up the dream that [they]'d have [their] own house, be able to leave Brewster Place one day." (*The Men of Brewster Place*, 85) In the end, Eugene appears as a sinful person who acknowledges his former misdeed and tries to repent. He shows his regret for progressively ruining his wife's life (71). After neglecting his family and partaking in their daughter's death, he is discredited and loses his humanity within his community: "I hid behind two masks to get through the next few days with neighbors and your friends. If they tried to console me, it was the strong-black-man-mask. And if they came too late to blame me for what I'd already blamed myself for, it was the fuck-you-all-who-gives-me-a-shit mask." (91) Behind two masks at the same time and unable to wear one, Eugene decides to leave Brewster Place as an ultimate attempt to cope with his social censorship and isolation. But while in a hotel where he retreats, he feels an inside pain that he cannot ignore and which slowly but surely consumes him:

I know the pain was circling and moving around me; making the air so thick I moved from place to place in that hotel room as if I were underwater. Everything slowed down: the way I moved my head, shuffled my feet. Letting nothing inside, the pain could only be worn outside. It bent my back; it sagged my shoulders; weighed down my arms and bowed my head. If I wasn't careful, if I let down my guard just a little, it would get inside and force me to kill myself. You don't wait for pain like this to go away; because it only gets worse with time. I



had either to ignore it – ignore that overnight my hair was turning gray – or replace it with something else. Could there be a greater pain than this? I didn't know but I was going to try and find out. (92)

There is also Reverend Moreland T. Woods, a true embodiment of the American dream. He develops the idea that “if anything was possible, it could be done in America.” (103) Thus, arrived from his native Jamaica, he wants to realize in Brewster Place his life-long dream of being at the head of “a church of at least two thousand to form the base for his bid for public office.” (100) Moreland, in fact, has never been a pious religious until one day, while in the cane fields in Jamaica, a whispering calls him to the Lord's service (101). But like the prophets, he did not respond to this call easily. Because he could not easily give up his immoral and deviationist habits, he bargained with God to know what he would receive in return (102). Through Reverend Moreland's hesitation, Naylor recreates the biblical story of Christ's call to his apostles to abandon everything and follow him in his pastoral crusades. In America, Moreland is convinced that with a great trust in himself, “God would take care of the minor details” (102) and he will be able to reach the top level of his community. This ultimate goal increases his faith and induces him to accept to start from the bottom: “He was willing to start off slow and just get elected to the community board, but after that, it was all the way to the mayor's mansion. Then he could truly serve his people – all the people of the city – from that perch.” (100)

Moreland's strong desire to lead a large church and his plans to achieve this goal make of him a man who is ready to sacrifice even his soul, a wolf in a sheep's clothing. One of his tools lies in his preaching which is thought to be able to make the most skeptical to God's words change: “The man with a silver tongue. The man who could make heaven feel high and hell low. But above all, a man who could give them respite from lives that were overworked and underpaid; lives that no one seemed to care about except them and the Lord.” (104) Truly, Moreland is a wolf in sheep's clothing. He has sex with several women of his congregation but his discretion always succeeds in turning his deviation into allegation, leaving the church board in search of proof to dismiss him perplexed. When he asks for the building of a larger church but meets the opposition of the church board which convenes a meeting to ask him to defend his project, he tactically leans on the bylaws of their church to claim a full referendum, with the ulterior motive of using the same allegation the board wanted to use to dismiss him to turn things to his advantage. In this regard, during a sermon, he leans on the misfortune of a young girl who is pregnant but does not know the father to put pressure on the church board and incidentally oblige them to support his project. This tactic proves efficient as it creates rumor within the assembly: “The congregation began to whisper and a few leaned over in their chair to get a look at the faces on the deacons' board. Woods went back to his pulpit, satisfied with his performance. All he needed was that whisper, because it was on its way to growing into a roar. And that roar would become a wave of anger against the faceless man without the guts to ask God – and the church – for repentance.” (117) Finally, Moreland obtains the approval for the building of a new and larger church as a realization of his dream: “A year later the day was cloudy and chill when a handful of parishioners assembled to witness the ceremony for laying the cornerstone of a new Sinai Baptist.” (118)

Like Moreland T. Woods, the other men develop an effort to achieve conscious manhood in a society that denies equal access to the tokens of manhood: money, power, respect. C. C. Baker, the street brute is here driven by anger and rebellion which turn him into a character inciting fear. He has never gone out of Brewster Place but he too has a dream that he seeks to fulfill: "In those thirty square blocks he has a place to sleep; finds food to eat; beer to drink; and a movie theater to handle his dreams. He makes his money from petty hustling: snatching a bag or two; running messages between a lady and her pimp; dropping off dime bags for mid-level drug dealers. But he dreams of so much more." (122) Brother Jerome, the autistic blues singer, is somehow everyone's sadness and suffering. He is a retarded child. Of him the narrator says that "at seventeen, he couldn't write his own name; couldn't count money or go to the store by himself." But paradoxically, he "could make [his piano] tell any story that he wanted. And it was *your* story if you listened real hard." (32) The blues he diffuses anytime he plays helps Brewster men overcome their difficult living conditions and hope for a better tomorrow.

Purposely, perhaps, Naylor uses Brother Jerome as an allusion to Ray Charles (1930-2004), a black blues singer known for his talent despite his blindness. Also, the capacity of Brother Jerome's blues to soothe the sorrow of the men of Brewster Place and help them withstand their hardship shows the importance of this music for African Americans. Indeed, during the twenties, the ghetto of Harlem welcomed folks of Blacks who emigrated from southern plantations in search of a better life. But very soon, they would be disillusioned; their dream turned into a nightmare and they ended up in this ghetto that finally became the center of black art and culture as musicians, painters, poets, artists, etc., daily came to entertain visitors with their artistry. Among these arts, the blues occupied a key position due to its capability to make these folks relive their experience while continuing to hope for a better future. By listening to the blues, Blacks got the feeling that their dream was not frustrated but just deferred. Naylor's incorporation of this music into her narrative and her representation of Brewster Place, the ghetto where the plot takes place, perfectly reflect that period of the twenties in Harlem when the blues was in vogue. And as an African American, she artistically perpetuates the tradition of the blues within her community, giving it all its authenticity, scenario, and cultural context: the men of Brewster Place come from different origins. They are brought by fate into this ghetto and they live in poor conditions. In the end, Brother Jerome, the gifted blues singer, is there to soothe their pain and make them carry on their individual as well as their collective dream.

Basil, for his part, atones to marry an irresponsible and immoral mother of two kids. His decision to marry this woman has a great social significance. At first, we might say that he intends to compensate for his infertility evidenced later by his medical tests (50). But in a final analysis, we can say that Basil acts out of a desire to keep a promise he made to himself at his mother's grave: he wants to find a woman and make her life happy, be the father he has never been and act like a man (46). Thus, when he meets Keisha and marries her, he decides to be that father for her two kids. He devotes major part of his time and self to them, taking them to circuses, baseball games, and indoor rodeos and buying them toys as often as he can (55-56). In so doing, Basil gives the male identity its most sacred dimension, not that which emphasizes the capacity of getting a woman pregnant but that which elevates man to his role of head of family and bread winner.

On the other hand, Basil's decision to father Keisha's kids exemplifies a racial concern. He wants to contribute to the progress of his race. Ill-fated and all confronted to the racist world, Basil thinks that the haves amongst the black community must help for the uplift of the have-nots. This is what he tries to explain to Helen, Keisha's cousin whom he first wanted to marry but did not because she did not want to mother other children than her own: "You know, Helen, we keep talking and talking about the situation with young black men. They're an endangered species; they're a lost generation; on and on... I can't solve the problems of a whole generation; but there are two little kids right here who I can help. So why not? Why couldn't I stay in their lives forever – why couldn't we both?" (57)

Basil's commitment to the advancement of the black community brings to light that of Abshu, another male character caught in the turmoil of Brewster men's search for identity. Abshu is the prototype of people for whom the social welfare of the black youth is of paramount importance. A community activist and a playwright, he uses his effort, relations, and influence to save the ill-fated youth of Brewster Place from inevitable demise:

As head of the community center he went after every existing grant on the city and state level to bring them puppet shows with the message to avoid drugs and stay in school; and plays in the park such as actors rapping their way through Shakespeare's *A Mid-summer Night's Dream*. Abshu believed that there is something in Shakespeare for everyone, even the young of Brewster Place, and if he broadened their horizons just a little bit, there might be enough room for some of them to slip through and see what the world had waiting. No, it would not be a perfect world, but definitely one with more room than they had now. (135-136)

Naylor's allusion to Shakespeare in the above quotation is crucial here as, in most of her writing, there is something of that English literary icon. In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Ben's humor while telling his own story or introducing those of the other characters replicates in some ways the Shakespearean technique. Like Shakespeare's fool in *King Lear* or his bard in *A Mid-summer Night's Dream*, Ben skillfully and astoundingly drags the audience to follow the stories of the men of Brewster Place one after the other with a change in tone, atmosphere and intensity. In so doing, Ben makes the audience dream together with these men as they too have dreams that are deferred or mourn with them for their desperate lives. When Abshu invites the young boys of Brewster Place to attend the presentation of Shakespeare's play, he does not simply intend to withdraw them or prevent them from engaging in street dangers as drug addiction and gangsterism. He mostly seeks to show them that they are not totally lost despite their difficult living conditions that tell of the situation of the community of Brewster Place as a whole and the disadvantaged black community. Like the characters in the play, Abshu wants to entice the hope for a better future in these young people. On the overall, Naylor displays dream as a quintessence element of human life. It is something that can prevent people from sinking into despair and immoral behavior. In other words, Abshu wants the play to "do them a good thing" in the same way as Kriswana wants the same play to be great for Cora Lee's children in *The Women of Brewster Place* (119).

In matching the comedy of *A Mid-summer Night's Dream* with her own comic mood in the two books as she does in most of her writing, Naylor not only creates an intertextual connection between them, but she shows her appreciation of Shakespeare and her determination to rewrite him. Peter Erickson points out that "Naylor's attention to Shakespeare then serves to raise the question of Shakespeare's changed status when seen from the vantage point of the emergent tradition in which Naylor is a participant." (Gates and

Appiah, 1993, 232-233) Interestingly, Naylor captures Shakespeare's comedy and recreates it, making the black male's situation not so mournful or pitiful. Her comedy, though serving to draw attention to the Blacks' plight, intends to produce in them the idea that they can overcome their situation. Similarly, this comedy teaches the men of Brewster Place that they can give a meaning to their life. This commitment to steer the Blacks out of their despair and social disparagement characterizes the new tradition of black writing to which Naylor herself belongs. For this new generation, indeed, time is no longer for Blacks to feel sorry for their past. Rather, they must turn to the future even if their past can serve as a stepping stone.

Basil's commitment to the progress of the black community and Abshu's endeavor to steer the young children of Brewster Place from the street dangers painstakingly tell of William Du Bois' "Talented Tenth." In fact, for Du Bois, a tenth of the Blacks who acquired the skills and/or education that enabled them to succeed in the larger society must use their tools and talents to build a bridge between the Black "haves" and the "have-nots." In so doing, they would drive the whole race toward social progress.<sup>1</sup>

If Basil's engagement for the cause of his race does not efficiently illustrate this idea because he is not one of such educated Black elite Du Bois referred to – he is not so educated and talented as to emulate black youth – Abshu, on the contrary, perfectly fits this ideology. He is a community activist and a playwright. As such, he uses his influence, efforts, and relations to help the ill-fated youth of Brewster Place from inevitable downfall. He finds scholarships to encourage them to stay in school; he organizes puppet shows to make them realize the dangers of drugs and other social ills likely to destroy them, and plays to teach them that they can overcome their misfortune. On the whole, Abshu greatly partakes in the social uplift of his community, performing what Du Bois suggested to the Black elite.

From Ben's introduction to each story, we can guess in advance what is awaiting the characters. This stylistic way of writing recalls Cora Lee's statement in *The Women of Brewster Place* when Kiswana suggests sending her children to attend a presentation of *A Mid-summer Night's Dream*: "It would be good for them. They needed things like Shakespeare and all that. They would do better in school and stop being so bad." (121) To Cora Lee and Kiswana, the play will positively impact on the children while enticing in them a desire to become something and therefore a spirit of self-transcendence through hard work. Thus, in the same way Cora Lee becomes determined to reform her lifestyle as she watches the play which casts on her a dream-like spell of revitalization and rejuvenation, Kiswana wants the play to create a similar influence on Cora Lee's children. They are invited to dream, to believe that they too can become somebody if they have confidence in themselves.

Larry R. Andrews in his article "Black Sisterhood in Naylor's Novels" insists on the solidarity that fosters Naylor's female community in *The Women of Brewster Place*. Generally, the women of Brewster Place suffer at the hands of wicked and irresponsible men. However, they assist each other and often achieve to make their way through. Conversely, we discover a total lack of such solidarity amongst men in *The Men of Brewster Place* though their shared experience requires them to support each other. By the end of the novel, Ben well points this out after Greasy commits suicide: "If for all the times we had called him brother,

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<sup>1</sup> I discussed this at length in my book *The Dynamics of Politics and Didacticism in Frances E. W. Harper's Writing* (2011), p. 110.

if we had really meant it, somehow Greasy should be alive today. But we let him down and let ourselves down as we used him for the garbage can to hold all our fears.” (166-67) The verbs “call” and “mean” are important here. “Call” refers to language as an expression of identity that we developed earlier. In fact, if the other men had shown Greasy that he was their “brother” through their different discourses toward him, they would have helped him construct his identity. In turn, Greasy would have felt a sense of belonging and togetherness, which would probably have helped avoid his psychological breakdown. But oral demonstration of brotherhood is not sufficient to prevent Greasy’s downfall. It must be associated with action embodied by the verb “mean.” To save Greasy from demise, all of the other men’s speeches and actions should have created self-confidence in him. Finally, for Ben, the other men’s attitude, including himself, toward Greasy has made the latter live as an isolated character, in a sort of social reclusion. As such, he appears as a character having no social identity. His suicide can therefore be understood as a search for this identity that is denied to him.

The word “brother” in Ben’s declaration has an important semantic value. Socially and communally, it fosters the relationship among the members of a community. Seen from a racial perspective, it articulates the solidarity among black males to face their common plight. Unfortunately, it is crucially missing within the male community of Brewster Place because of their individualism and selfishness as Ben criticizes it. At Brewster, men’s egotism stands for a destructive force that excruciates Greasy to death. But at the same time, it destroys them as a group. For, while rejecting Greasy, while refusing to befriend him and avoid his collapse, they indirectly and unknowingly partake in destabilizing the social cohesion of their community and consequently their group solidarity. By confronting women’s solidarity to men’s selfishness, even their hatred among themselves, Naylor undoubtedly wants to insist on the fact that the African American community, like any other human community, is not totally perfect. It also has its internal contradictions. The Blacks’ problem, then, must not be addressed solely from the perspective of race relation but as an intra-group conflict.

The confrontation of Brewster men’s individualistic attitude to their women’s solidarity questions gender issues as a central theme in Naylor’s literature. As stated elsewhere, while the women in the Brewster ghetto assist each other, their men develop a completely destructive atmosphere of which Greasy has been a major victim. Naylor, then, leans on this confrontation to draw attention to the roles of black male and female characters in the social welfare of their family and in the black community at large. From her representation, we might say that Naylor posits the woman as a pivotal element of the family unit and claims the return to the family as central to any human activity. Through the black male’s incapability to care for his family, Naylor transfers the family responsibility to the woman. This assignment confirms her feminist perspective many critics underlined when her first Brewster novel was published. But Naylor was clever and imaginative enough to overturn this view about her work by publishing her second Brewster saga. In *The Men of Brewster Place*, indeed, she presents male characters under darker images as she did in her first novel. Generally, these men are portrayed as anti-heroes: Ben’s errand and alcoholism in *The Women of Brewster Place* is reproduced in *The Men of Brewster Place*. Eugene tries to correct his irresponsibility and carelessness toward his family but he does it in a very awkward way. Basil, after failing to be a good son for his mother and to build a family, tries

to redeem himself in *The Men of Brewster Place* but he also fails. C.C. Baker, the brute and rapist tries to redirect his sad life but he cannot get rid of his past. Only Brother Jerome is somewhat a successful character if we consider his musical talent and mainly the power of his blues that help ease the other men's pain. However, his handicap can be interpreted as another aspect of the black male's failure. But through him, the writer makes failure and success or achievement cohabit to teach the reader that the black male is not definitely condemned. Despite the apparent incapability and irresponsibility to which the social environment seems to have doomed him, there is a sort of hope and a latent success in him.

By rewriting *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor does more than bring male voices to her fictional geography of Brewster. She recreates or reinvents this geography from a male perspective to demonstrate that Blacks' problem in America cannot be fully apprehended from a female standpoint or a racial approach only. *The Men of Brewster Place*, therefore, appears as a mirror to inspect the one-side appreciation of the Blacks' dilemma. Whether critics are white, black, male or female, there has often been a sort of misreading of Naylor's Brewster novels unless they are put side by side for a global and comprehensive analysis. As such, it can be said that both novels are interdependent or complement each other. Reading only one of them gives a single and superficial view of Blacks' problem. Besides, Naylor's choice of a black ghetto with mostly black characters is perfectly artistic and is made on purpose. It places the Blacks' problem in the tradition of African American literature while inviting to appreciate this problem outside the racial antagonisms in which it is thought to be caused by white racist world. In a final analysis, for Naylor, the Blacks' predicament also needs to be inspected as an intra-racial issue, within the black community.

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