GAUDEAMUS
Journal of the Association of Young Researchers of Anglophone Studies
2 (Spring 2022): 125-143.

OPPRESSION IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*: A READING THROUGH THE LENS OF BLACK FEMINISM AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Mónica García Morgado
Universidad de Valladolid

This article seeks to demonstrate the importance of reading contemporary African American women's fiction through the lens of Black Feminism in order to understand the undeniable reciprocal relationship between both. Hence, I analyze Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) under the light of Black Feminism and Intersectionality, following the works of acclaimed Black Feminists, to show Naylor's concern and portrait of the multiple oppressions Black women were subjected to in the United States in the second half the twentieth century, while fighting against those in her fiction. I conclude *The Women of Brewster Place* is a literary masterpiece both for the study and for the identification of the influences of Black Feminism in contemporary African American women's literature to this day.

Keywords: Gloria Naylor; *The Women of Brewster Place*; Black Feminism; Intersectionality; Oppression

This paper argues that Gloria Naylor's debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) can be interpreted as a fictionalized account of the multiple conflicts and traumas of contemporary African American women that arouse from their oppression and which are prime issues of concern of Black feminism and Intersectionality. After a brief introduction to Black Feminism to fight Black women's oppression, this paper reads and analyses the different forms of oppression Naylor's characters are subjected to, which go from oppression through race, to oppression through class, to oppression through controlling images, and, last but not least, oppression through sexual violence. This paper defends that Naylor created *The Women of Brewster Place* to fight all types of sexist and racist oppression while rejecting negative stereotypes about Black women, which she undoubtedly achieved with the final female liberation from the claws of Brewster Place. Hence, Naylor's novel is a literary masterpiece for the study of Black Feminism and Intersectionality, as well as for the identification of the influences of the movement in contemporary African American women's fiction.

Black women in the United States have suffered the oppression and consequent trauma inflicted by a country that has historically despised, marginalized, and exploited them as white supremacy created "a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to Black men, who are ranked third, and black women last" (hooks [1981] 2015, 78). Black women writers in the 1970s started a novelistic tradition of women-centered narratives that dwell deeply in Black womanhood, among which we encounter the works written by the Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Gloria Naylor, to name but a few. These authors soaked their fiction work with Black women's experiences of alienation and oppression, first of all, due to their race and gender, while enhanced through the intersection with other categories, such as class and sexuality. In order to offer a global examination of the emergence of contemporary Black women's literary tradition, in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987), Bernard W. Bell notices a repetition of patterns in the novels Black women have written since 1970, which include a representation of "motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist

oppression," "centrality of female bonding," and "a sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community," among other patterns (1987, 242-43), all of which are at the core of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*.

1. Black Feminism and Intersectionality: Fighting Black Women's Oppression

> Let me state here and now that the Black woman in America can justly be described as a "slave of a slave."
>
> Frances Beal, *Double Jeopardy*

Despite the connection Bell signals between the women's liberation movement of the 1960s in the United States and the resurgence of African American fiction written by Black women (1987, 240), the lack of inclusion of Black women in mainstream—white—feminism is a fact because "*white* women speak for and as *women*" (Crenshaw 1989, 154). Frances Beal claimed that Black women are victims of a double subordination—that she denominated "double jeopardy" ([1970] 2005, 109)—determined by their gender and race. The duality of factors that determines Black women's oppression also connects to postcolonial theory and feminism, in particular with the idea of "double colonization" (Spivak 1988, Carby 1997) which means that women are "doubly colonized by imperial/patriarchal power" (Ashcroft et al. 2000, 66). Yet Beal's "double jeopardy" is also linked to W.E.B Du Bois' "double consciousness" ([1903] 2007, 8) that addresses the ambiguity of Black consciousness found in the identity doubleness of being Black and American. Thus, with Americanness implied, the idea of "double jeopardy" specifically refers to what is meant, felt, and experienced as a Black (American) woman. In 1977, the Combahee River Collective's Statement claimed Black women are victims by "interlocking oppressions" (Taylor 2017, 15), not just their gender and race, but also class and sexuality. Later, Deborah King assured that the majority of previous visions of Black women's oppression were faulty and simplistic, as they took oppressive factors as "merely additive" (1988, 47), and developed the following theory:

> Such assertions ignore the fact that racism, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems. An interactive model, which I have termed multiple jeopardy, better captures those processes. / The modifier 'multiple' refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well. In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism.(1988, 47)

To solve this misunderstanding, King proposed instead to use the term "multiple consciousnesses" (1988) to address and study Black women's experiences appropriately, which could be argued to be a gendered—Black feminist—evolution of Du Bois' "double consciousness." The multiple and multiplicative discrimination of Black women is also the main concern of critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," who alleged that the discriminatory experience of Black women is found in the no-man's-land of race and gender:

> Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination [Beal's "double jeopardy"]—the combined effects of practices that discriminate based on race, and the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (1989, 149)

To accurately analyze the discrimination of Black women, Crenshaw proposed the study of "intersectionality," which is the rejection of a "single-issue framework" (1989, 152). In other words, intersectionality is the joint study of race, gender, class, and sex as interconnected factors of discrimination. From that point onwards, Intersectionality became foundational for Black feminism.

Despite the turn of the century and an apparent social evolution, Black women experience a unique type of discrimination in the United States and are still excluded from white feminism (Jerkins 2018, McMillan Cottom 2019, Kendall 2020). Recently, Moya Bailey coined the term "misogynoir" to address "the specific hatred, dislike, distrust, and prejudice directed towards Black

women," which not only takes their life experiences as irrelevant but also silences them (Gassam Asare 2020). As for the connection between Black womanhood and fiction, Hill Collins contends that African American women's literature has been a useful weapon to unmask Black women's experiences, functioning as the "legitimate voice for African American women's [political] thought" (qtd in. Bragg 2015, 69). Works of fiction capable are of performing a counter-process of de-silencing their experiences by putting them in the spotlight, which this paper performs in the following section through the analysis of the multiple oppression the female characters face in *The Women of Brewster Place*.

2. Brewster Place: Oppression through Class and Race

Black women's class oppression needs to be understood from a historical perspective. The enslaved state of Black women in the United States since 1619 and their ulterior discriminatory treatment as African Americans, explain why Gina Wisker notes that [Black] women are "in a double or triple position of colonial subordination through gender, race and economic position" (2000, 10), which resembles Hazel V. Carby "triple oppression" (1997, 45). According to Beal, economic inferiority reduces Black women to a "state of enslavement" ([1970] 2005, 114) even in modern times.

With the creation of several independent yet interconnected narratives and multiple protagonists, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor offers a fictional portrait of the anti-essentialism sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom claims in *Thick* when discussing the Black women's situation in the United States: "… there is not just one black woman experience, no matter how thick one black woman may be" (2019, 12). In the novel, the polyphony of Black women's lives is achieved through the parallel storylines of Mattie Michael, Cora Lee, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Luciella Louise Turner, Lorraine and Theresa—also known as "the two" for their romantic relationship—who are fictional echoes of lower-class African American women in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States. Hence, Naylor chronicles the lives of seven Black women from different ages, families, and

backgrounds because "… *each in her own time and with her own season had a story*" (*TWBP* 5)[1] and who only share their place of residence, Brewster, which is determined by the intersection of their class and race.

Brewster is the physical representation of oppression in the combination of class and race, highlighting their "enslaved state" as poor Black women. Being an all-Black impoverished community, Brewster is a place with a narrative and consciousness of its own, *"Brewster place knew that unlike its other children, the few who would leave forever were to be the exception rather than the rule, since they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason*" (*TWBP* 4). Brewster is delimited by a wall that isolates its inhabitants, representing their inability to escape it, while contrasted to another place of liberation, Linden Hills, the community to which African Americans only have access if from a higher socioeconomic status. In this sense, Brewster is a cage for these women and has constructed its own identity through the cocktail of individual narratives of African American women that made that space a place during their imprisonment. As the title of the novel indicates, Mattie, Cora, Etta Mae, Kiswana, Luciella, Lorraine, and Theresa are *the women of a place*, and that changes everything.

3. Oppression through Controlling Images

Following the basis of intersectionality, Hill Collins alleges that African American women have been reduced to a set of negative stereotypes—*controlling images*—to justify their oppression ([1990] 2000, 69). In the complex picture of the intersecting oppressions of African American women in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor included some of the negative stereotypes about Black women connected to motherhood to defy them. The most

[1]The abbreviation "*TWBP"* has been used throughout this paper in in-text citation when quoting directly from *The Women of Brewster Place.*

pervasive stereotypical image that haunts Black women to this day is that of the "superstrong Black woman," which forces them to "be strong and be solely responsible" for the well-being of their families (Elliott and Reid 2016, 50). Mattie Michael is the best representative of the superstrong Black woman stereotype among all the protagonists and secondary female characters. She is a single parent that has no support from her family or the father of her child. She devotes her life to her son, Basil, and adopts a motherly identity forgetting her individuality. Basil becomes her entire world and the only man in her life, and she is finally transformed into an asexual mother. Another example of a superstrong Black mother in *The Women of Brewster Place* is Eva Turner, who is so by helping Mattie when they first meet and gives her a place to stay, but she is also a "superstrong Black woman" as she raises alone her orphan granddaughter.

Moreover, Hill Collins highlights two controlling images that have existed since slavery times and which are related to Black motherhood: the mammy and the matriarch. The mammy is the ideal Black woman in a white supremacist context because she has accepted her racial and gendered inferiority. She works for whites and teaches her children their inferior place in the world ([1990] 2000, 73-74). A literary example of the mammy is Pauline Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* ([1970] 2019), who only finds satisfaction at the white home. Opposite to the mammy is the matriarch, a Black woman who rejects her subordination to white supremacy and patriarchy alike and who is often depicted as unfeminine and emasculating (Hill Collins [1990] 2000, 75), like Sofia in Walker's *The Color Purple* ([1982] 2017). Unlike the mammy, who neglects her biological children, matriarchs take care of their children to their best (Sewell 2013, 314). *The Women of Brewster Place* lacks a character that might fully fall into the stereotype of the mammy or the matriarch, yet Naylor merged both into one character that adopts each role depending on whether she is in the public—white—sphere or the private—Black—sphere. This is the case of Elvira, Ben's wife. Elvira acts like the traditional mammy in the public sphere by accepting her subordination to whites and neglecting her daughter's well-being. She is not the servant to the white family, but her handicapped daughter, whom

she encourages to sleep—or rather subject to sexual coercion—with Mr. Clyde, their white boss—a relationship that signifies "double colonization" (Spivak 1988, Carby 1997). Elvira performs "the mammy role" indirectly through her daughter, as she is teaching her to accept her inferiority in the white-dominated patriarchal world because, unlike Ben, she normalizes the fact that her daughter spends nights, alone, at the white widowed man's house. Once in the private (Black) sphere, she is a matriarch who emasculates her husband. She insults Ben, "And if you was even quarter a man" (*TWBP*, 178), and deliberately harms his masculinity by insulting him and constantly blaming him for their economic situation. The height of Ben's emasculation comes when she abandons him for a lover, making Ben fall into a life of self-loathing, loneliness, and alcoholism. Hence, in the mixture of these two stereotypes into one single character, Naylor refuses to reduce Black women to pejorative simpleton images that deny the complexity of their personalities.

Additionally, Hill Collins contends that with the emergence of contemporary African American women, another controlling image emerged: "the welfare mother" ([1990] 2000, 78). This image is that of a social parasite because the woman in question is categorized as a "sexually promiscuous single African American mother who scams taxpayers by having babies then demanding public support" (Foster 2008, 163). For instance, Sapphire overtly explored in *Push* ([1996] 1998) this idea of African American women as suckers of welfare through the figure of Precious' mother. *The Women of Brewster Place* has its own perfect stereotypical welfare mother: Cora Lee. Cora is obsessed with having babies haunted by the reality that "*babies grow up*" (*TWBP* 140), while she neglects her older children. As each of her children has a different father, she is also seen by others as sexually promiscuous—which connects with the controlling image of the Jezebel that condemns Black women as sexually insatiable (Davis [1981] 2019, 163)—as she is visited at night by lovers who are reduced to unknown shadows. Cora Lee struggles to sustain her family for she does not work and survives thanks to welfare and yet, despite her economy, she keeps having babies. However, her constant pregnancies seem to be connected to an emotional search for love and personal

fulfillment, rather than the ambition of being economically aided month by month.

The only controlling image Hill Collins identifies outside of motherhood—and sexuality—is that of the Black Lady. These are diligent, educated, and professional Black women that "allegedly take jobs that should go to more worthy White, especially U.S. White men" ([1990] 2000, 81). In other words, Black women who have accessed a higher class, and who represent a collapse of the hierarchy of power based on race, gender, and class. Nevertheless, there is no representative of the stereotypical Back Lady in the novel, which fits with the impoverished context of Brewster Place, but also because the novel lacks the white male gaze. The picture is that no woman living in Brewster Place would fulfill the requirement of higher class to be a Black Lady.

4. Oppression through Sexual Politics and Heterosexism

"She ain't nothing but a woman"

Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place*

Nothingness, the level to which C.C. Baker and his gang reduce Kiswana to for her (Black) womanhood, but also because she is not afraid to confront them, which causes in them a feeling of emasculation. As a consequence, they perceive her as the inferior to be dominated—the shrew to be tamed. Like many African American novels written by Black women in the last decades of the twentieth century, gender violence is overtly present in *The Women of Brewster Place* and rules the dialectics of Black women-and-Black men interpersonal relationships. Naylor explored in depth Black sexual politics in her novel, by looking at how her protagonists interact with the men of their community and families. While lovers are anonymous and secondary—as in Cora Lee's storyline—the remainder of the men have names, like Ben. They are husbands, fathers, neighbors, young gangsters, and even the Pastor of the community. In doing so, Naylor reinforces the idea that, as members of the African American community, they are insiders to Brewster's reality and central to Black women's experiences.

The sexual politics of Black heterosexism and its connection to violence are other of the predominant forms of oppression that subjugate Black women, and a key issue of Black feminism. As highlighted in the Combahee River Collective's Statement, apart from racism, Black women also experience the added jeopardy of sexism inside their own communities (Taylor 2017, 19) due to patriarchy. While Hill Collins alleges that a great percentage of Black women are victims of domestic violence in their homes ([1990] 2000, 159), hooks posits Black women have long-accepted male subjugation understanding it as a reflection of frustrated masculinity ([1984] 2015, 76). In *The Women of Brewster* Place, for instance, a young and pregnant Mattie Michael is brutally beaten by her own father, who wants to discover the identity of the baby's father. As Mattie's "patriarchal owner" (Connell [1995] 2005, 83), he uses violence to reinforce and demonstrate his power as the head of the family. Naylor depicts the brutality of the attack in a mesmerizing manner by reducing the body of Mattie to a moaning "pile of torn clothes and bruised flesh on the floor" (*TWBP* 27). Already, in the first storyline, Naylor is pointing to gender violence masked as father-to-daughter abuse. In the same narrative, when Butch Fuller—Mattie's lover and the father of the baby—proudly says that his other female lovers fancy him when other men "are ignorin' 'em or beatin' and cheatin' on 'em" (*TWBP* 17) he is normalizing the presence of gender violence against Black women in romantic and private relationships.

Among all the possible forms of gender violence—physical, verbal, psychological, and sexual—rape is the most exploited in African American fiction. *I Know Why the Caged Bird* Sings ([1969] 2007), *The Color Purple* ([1982] 2017), *The Bluest Eye* ([1970] 2019), and *Push* ([1996] 1998) are examples of it as they expose the rapes of their protagonists within their homes and communities, attacked by Black men from their own families—ironically, those who should protect them—which stresses Black women's sexual vulnerability inside the Black private sphere (McMillan Cottom 2019, 193). This, following Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinities ([1995] 2005), could be an instance of protest masculinity. Marginalized masculinity—which is at the bottom of the hierarchy of power concerning other masculinities and

is determined by factors external to gender, such as race, class, ethnicity, and age (Connell [1995] 2005, 80; Messerschmidt 2019, 87)—might evolve into protest masculinity, "which picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of poverty" (Connell [1995] 2005, 114). This stresses the interlocking oppression of race, gender, sexuality, and class and clarifies that Black men are not naturally violent, but their oppression might simultaneously result in more violence to claim hegemony, as hooks posit ([1984] 2015, 76). Consequently, Black male violence might be projected towards those who are their inferior beings: Black women.

Opposed to the historical rape of Black women by white men during slavery—as white slaveowners used sexual coercion over their female slaves to reinforce their power and domination (Davis [1981] 2019, 19-20)—denominated "racial-sexual oppression" by the Combahee River Collective (Taylor 2017, 19)—Hill Collins claims that now Black women are often victims of intra-racial sexual violence and that they rarely report their attacks ([1990] 2000, 147-48). Once again, Black sexual violence may mirror the historical control of Black women's bodies in white supremacy. However, the silence that Hill Collins points to might not be that of shame, but an attempt to protect Black men from the Black-rapist narrative, a myth born about Black men during slavery, which complemented the myth of Black women's sexual deviance (Davis [1981] 2019, 163; 163; Hill Collins [1990] 2000, 81), having the "burden" of protecting Black men's reputation and respectability (McMillan Cottom 2019, 193). In *The Women of Brewster Place,* the first instance of sexual violence within the Black family sphere is the case of Luciella Louise Turner—also known as Ciel. Her husband blames her for their economic situation when she gets pregnant for a second time—"'I'm fuckin' sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills that's all you good for" (*TWBP* 110)—and forces her to get an abortion—another violent act that reaffirms her subordination to her husband as her "patriarchal owner" (Connell [1995] 2005, 83)—plus she is also a victim of marital rape. Not only is she obliged to go through an unwanted abortion that causes her to dissociate from her body to alleviate psychological pain, but also the pregnancy is—in between the lines implied—the result of "the raw urges that crept,

uninvited, between her thighs on countless nights" (*TWBP* 106). Ciel's silence roots in her social status as a wife, as she feels she must commit to her husband's sexual demands at all times, lacking the right to express both her sexual and non-sexual desires. Inevitably, Ciel falls victim to sexual victimization and domination in her own home and marriage.

Besides, Black lesbians might suffer the added hazard of heterosexual oppression, as signaled by the Combahee River Collective's Statement already in 1977 (Taylor 2017, 15) and Hill Collins ([1990] 2000, 128). Following Barbara Smith's words, "homophobic people of color are oppressive not just to white people, but to members of their own groups" as they view homosexuality as a "white disease" (1998, 114) and, particularly, within the Black community, same-sex attraction is alienated from Blackness (1998, 124). In addition, Smith refers to "The Black Church Position Statement on Homosexuality" that attacked and censored same-sex activity for departing from the Bible (1998, 128). Although heterosexuality rules the majority of the stories, among her female characters, in *The Women of Brewster Place* Naylor included a lesbian couple that would experience rejection from their same gender as well as the brutal attack of patriarchy. The homophonic attitude of the Black community is portrayed in the aversion Sophie feels towards Lorraine and Theresa. First, Lorraine is confronted by Sophia who openly despises them for what she calls their "nasty ways" (*TWBP* 168) as they are sexually deviant for her and even declares them *personae non gratae* in Brewster. Nonetheless, Sophie's homophobia, more than personal values and morals, symbolizes Black homophobia in the entire African American community as her abhorrence has roots in religious belief:

> What they [Lorraine and Theresa] are doin' – living there like that – is wrong, and you [Etta] know it. … The Good Book say that them things is an abomination against the Lord. We shouldn't be havin' that here on Brewster and the association should do something about it. (*TWBP* 162)

In contrast to Sophie's homophobia, Naylor follows the previous scene with a conversation between Mattie and Etta. Mattie tells Etta—the latter doubts the "correctness" of Lorraine and Theresa's

relationship—that she has (non-sexually) loved other women even more than she ever (sexually) loved her male romantic partners and insinuates that this sense of sisterhood or bonding between Black women might not be as far-fetched as it seems from their lesbian neighbors' love (*TWBP* 163), which resembles Alice Walker's "womanism" ([1981] 2014, 81) and stands for the union Black feminism encourages.

Even if bell hooks alleges that Black women might use a declaration of homosexuality—in particular, lesbianism masking other sexual preferences—to escape the claws of heterosexism ([1984] 2015, 153), Lorraine and Theresa become the greatest victims of the intersection of their gender, race, and sexuality, for they embody the absolute "other." In the novel, their lesbianism is not enough to protect them from the harmful side of heterosexism. From the beginning, Lorraine is exposed to a generalized male gaze that objectifies and sexualizes her, "she was used to being stared at – by men at least – because of her body" (*TWBP* 154). Later, the male gaze is transformed into a physical invasion of her body when Lorraine, who has never had sexual intercourse with a man, is brutally raped by a group of six young African American men from Brewster—the already mentioned C.C. Baker and his gang. Naylor depicts the rape in detail, the shifting of men over her body and the killing pain, even including a straight-arrow against patriarchy with the statement, "So 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" (*TWBP* 197). Lorraine does not have the chance to report her rape, as both her body and mind are in total decay after the brutal attack, which metaphorically represents the silence mentioned earlier in this paper (Hill Collins [1990] 2000, 147-48). She is left to die at night on the street, which highlights the murderous nature of Brewster, and when she wakes up the only word she will utter for the rest of her life is "please." When she partly recovers her conscience, she drags herself around confused, with a brick in hand, and kills the first man she encounters, her neighbor Ben and who was the only person she considered a friend in Brewster because he never judged her for her sexual preferences. Consequently, the other neighbors take Ben as responsible for Lorraine's attack, finding triggers both in his mental

state and alcoholism. Furthermore, Lorraine's rape, apart from standing for a sexual act of domination, is used to criticize the domination of Black women in patriarchal society and phallocentrism:

> "Hey, C.C., what if she remembers that it was us?"
> "Man, how she gonna prove it? Your dick ain't got no fingerprints."
> They laughed and stepped over her and ran out of the alley. (*TWBP* 199)

The "dicks" with no fingerprints might be understood as a globalization of all men, who are reduced to their genitalia as their primary form of identity, while also exposing masculine privilege in patriarchy and the threat this symbolizes for women. Then, Lorraine's rape symbolizes the murderous result of the intersectionality of class, race, gender, and sexuality.

5. Overcoming Oppression Together: Female Bonding and the Triumph of Black Feminism

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

The flight of the Phoenix; the historical flight of resilience of Black women who have spread their wings out of their cages, like the poetic voice in Angelou's poem. This flight of overcoming oppression—or the first step towards it—is the finale of *The Women of Brewster Place*. The protagonists plan a block party that is suddenly interrupted by rainy weather. The envisioning of blood in the bricks of the wall of Brewster—being first, a remainder of Lorraine's rape; and secondly of their oppression—prompts these women to destroy it fiercely and desperately, "Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hand" (*TWBP* 215) projecting their unstoppable fury onto the wall. A scene that stands for a metaphorical battle against everything that oppresses them and

paralleling the fight of Black feminism. When Kiswana alerts Ciel there is no blood on the bricks but rainwater, the reply of the latter is "'Does it matter? Does it really matter?'" (*TWBP* 216). Indirectly, Ciel is clarifying to Kiswana that even if they are aware that what they see is not blood, the wall has a meaning of its own and its mere presence is a reaffirmation of their subordination and multiple oppressions. Therefore, as long as it stands on its foundations, their situation will remain the same. With the destruction of the wall, Naylor's protagonists take off a flight of self-liberation.

Besides, their fight against their intersectional oppressions is accompanied by the death of Ben. Despite the innocence of this man for Lorraine's rape, his death is a *deus ex machina* against patriarchy and the culmination needed to destroy Brewster Place. At the beginning of the novel the narrator exposes that both Ben and the wall are the only two natural things to Brewster, "*Ben and his drinking became a fixture on Brewster Place, just like the wall. It soon appeared foolish to question the existence of – they just were*" (*TWBP* 4). Hence, only when both are eliminated from their reality, these women do have the chance to change and improve their lives. The importance of these ultimate acts of liberation is that, despite the tense relations among some of the characters, they all come together at the end, paralleling the unitary fight of Black Feminism. Only then, like air, they rise.

6. Conclusion

As a polyphonous women-centered novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* has an undeniable richness in its representation of the endless experiences of Black women. Overall, Naylor highlights the networks of Black women in their communities, exploring how they support and help each other with its hopeful and activist ending. As this paper has shown, the oppressions through class and race are covered in the construction of Brewster as a cage for lower-class Black women, who are metaphorically chained to it. In this sense, their race and gender are the crucial factors that determine their life experiences and possibilities. Gloria Naylor surpassed the oppressive pictures of African American women by giving each *controlling image* a narrative that provides context to explain the

protagonists' lives. Even if Mattie is an incredibly strong—resilient—woman, even if Cora Lee is a mother that needs the Government's support to raise and feed her children, and even if Elvira is a mammy-matriarch cocktail, they are more than a static image. They have a name, an identity, and a story of their own. Through the reappropriation of traditional stereotypical images, Naylor reinforced the polyphony of the Black women's experience, while celebrating them as well as their strength. In this way, Naylor defied racial and sexist stereotypes of Black women demonstrating that they are victims of a system of racial and sexist subjugation while proposing a change for future generations through other characters like Kiswana. Also, gender violence appears in all its forms and could be argued to be Naylor's greatest contribution. The representation of violence appears *in crescendo* in the novel, starting with Mattie's beating by her biological father, and ending up with Lorraine's public rape on the streets of Brewster. In this manner, Naylor exposes the harmful side of heterosexism and Black sexual politics at all levels, showing that there is no safe place for Black women, neither in the private nor in the public sphere when it comes to their interaction with Black men, who exert the domination of patriarchy over them.

To conclude, Gloria Naylor offers an encouraging message to her contemporary and future readers with her novel. Her characters are the perfect example that union makes strength. Despite their differences, they all fight together for the same goal: their liberation. Briefly, *The Women of Brewster Place* is a literary masterpiece for the study of Black Feminism and Intersectionality through fiction, as well as for the identification of the influences of the movement in contemporary African American women's fiction. The novel is a recollection of the different forms of Black women's oppression while reinforcing the importance of Black feminism and Intersectionality for the study of those, unveiling the multiple experiences of Black women. It is not only race and gender that matters, but also class and sexuality, and how they inflect each other.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (MICINN) for the research project "Critical History of Ethnic American Literature" (reference PID2019-108754GB-I00).

References

Angelou, Maya. [1969] 2007. *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. London: Virago.

---. 1978. "Still I Rise." *Poetry Foundation*. Web. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise> [Accessed on October 15, 2021].

Ashcroft, Bill, et al, ed. 2000. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge.

Beal, Frances, ed. [1970] 2005. "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Edited by Toni Cade Bambara. New York, London, Toronto, and Sydney: Washington Square Press: 109-22.

Bell, Bernard W. 1987. "The Contemporary Afro-American Novel, 1: Neorealism." *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 235-280.

Bragg, Beauty. 2015. *Reading Contemporary African American Literature: Black Women's Popular Fiction, Post-Civil Rights Experience and the African American Canon*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, and London: Lexington Books.

Carby, Hazel V. 1997. "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood." *Black British Feminism: A Reader*. Eds. Heidi Safia Mirza. London and New York: Routledge.

Connell, Raewyn W. [1995] 2005. *Masculinities*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1.8: 139-167.

Davis, Angela. [1981] 2019. *Women, Race, and Class.* London: Penguin.

Du Bois, W.E.B. [1903] 2007. *The Souls of Black Folks.* Edited by Brent Hayes Edwards. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Elliott, Sinikka, and Megan Reid. 2016. "The Superstrong Black Mother." *Contexts*, 15.1: 48-53.

Foster, Carly Hayden. 2008. "The Welfare Queen: Race, Gender, Class, and Public Opinion." *Race, Gender & Class*, 15.3-4: 162-179.

Gassam Asare, Janice. 2020. "Misogynoir: the Unique Discrimination that Black women Face." *Forbes*, <www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2020/09/22/misogynoir-the-unique-discrimination-that-black-women-face/?sh=46a2ff9356ef> [Accessed 20 November, 2021].

Hill Collins, Patricia. [1990] 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York and London: Routledge.

hooks, bell. [1981] 2015. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. New York and London: Routledge.

hooks, bell. [1984] 2015. *Feminist Theory*: *from Margin to Center*. New York and London: Routledge.

Jerkins, Morgan. 2018. *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Kendall, Mikki. 2020. *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women White Feminists Forgot.* London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, and Sydney: Bloomsbury.

King, Deborah H. 1988. "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology." *Signs*, 14.1: 42-72.

McMillan Cottom, Tressie. 2019. *Thick and Other Essays*. New York and London: The New Press.

Messerschmidt, James W. 2019. "The Salience of 'Hegemonic Masculinity'." *Men and Masculinities*, 22.1: 85-91.

Morrison, Toni. [1970] 2019. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage.

Naylor, Gloria. [1982] 2019. *The Women of Brester Place*. Bath: Fox, Finch & Tepper.

Sapphire. *Push*. [1996] 1998. London: Vintage.

Sewell, Christopher J.P. 2013. "Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present." *Journal of African American Studies*, 17.3: 308-326.

Smith, Barbara. 1998. *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*. New Brunswick.: Rutgers University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and London: MacMillan Education: 273-313.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta, editor. 2017. "The Combahee River Collective Statement." *How We Get Free. Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago and Illinois: Haymarket: 15-27.

Walker, Alice. [1981] 2014. "Gifts of Power: The Writing of Rebecca Jackson." *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Harcourt: 71-82.

---. [1982] 2017. *The Color Purple*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Wisker, Gina. 2000. *Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Received: December 1, 2021
Revised version accepted: March 28, 2022