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I Need a Prince to Watch Over Me. Really?! Re-Visioning "Happily Ever After" in Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place*

Anita August

Sacred Heart University, augusta@sacredheart.edu

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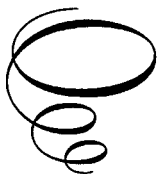
Gloria Naylor's Fiction:

Contemporary Explorations of Class and Capitalism

Edited by

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CHAPTER ONE

I NEED A PRINCE TO WATCH OVER ME.

REALLY?!

RE-VISIONING 'HAPPILY EVER AFTER'

IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S

THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

ANITA AUGUST

"Don't threaten me with love, baby. Let's just go walking in the rain."

—Billie Holiday

In the *Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor re-visions the "happily ever after" motif of literary fairy tales by reshaping it into a modern black womanist feminism¹ and uplift. In *Brewster Place*, black womanist communal relations are vital to self-authoring rather than the fairy tale narrative, which yokes feminine self-discovery and agency through masculine desire, protection, and sustenance. For example, when Mattie's best friend Etta Mae arrives at *Brewster Place*, she is penniless, emotionally broken, and without love from a man—once again. Rather than providing emotional comfort to Etta Mae, Mattie addresses Etta Mae's economic status by asking, "Ain't it time you got yourself a regular job?" (60). Etta Mae's response, "I oughta find me a good man and settle down to live quiet [and happily ever after] in my old age" (60), embodies the consciousness of fairy tales. Furthermore, her response also provides the conceptual gateway for Naylor to propose using the popular fairy tale, "Little Red Riding Hood²," in order to show that economic and political empowerment are at the center, rather than the periphery of modern black womanist agency. With this in mind, a black womanist ethos does not reject race, gender, class, or sexuality as categories for analysis and interpretation, given that they serve as discursive apparatuses to locate, define, and oppress black women by dominant narratives. Black cultural

traditions, then, to include womanism, are epistemological frames for preventing marginalizing subjectivities to contain, limit, and refuse black women's entrance into discourse that affects her and the world(s) she inhabits.

This chapter is divided into four sections with the overarching goal of examining Naylor's modern black womanist re-visioning of the 'happily ever after' theme in literary fairy tales. First, I suggest that the Bible, in the nineteenth-century, secured a daily presence in women's lives by representing its social bondage as morality. Accordingly, I describe how submission and obedience, the key behavior traits of the "cult of true womanhood" and American slavery, are situated within fairy tales, although stated differently. This examination is important to demonstrate that fairy tales appropriate the institutionalized practices and rationality of patriarchy as a hindrance to women's social and political agency. Furthermore, I will illustrate how Naylor problematizes notions of submission and obedience and the moral line on which they operate and oppress black women. In the second section, I identify Naylor's black womanist ethos as a revisionist methodology for commenting on the social script of fairy tales. In the third section, I bring into focus the complex interconnectedness of gender, race, class, and economic issues Naylor uses to illuminate the persistent oppression and subjugation black women encounter. With the fourth and concluding section, I explore Naylor's blurring of homosexual and homoerotic love as co-constituting mirrors rather than fixed opposites. In addition, I illustrate how Brewster Place is an epistemic space for politically resisting and ideologically disrupting hegemonic modes of knowledge construction by a black womanist feminism.

Fairy Tales as a Moral Code for Socializing Women's Conduct

For nineteenth-century women, the Bible was the principle explanatory framework for the moral construction of women. By ritualizing religion in every aspect of women's lives, the deepening of the Bible's symbolic meaning ensured acceptance of its rhetoric. While there is never complete consensus on any subject, historically, narratives in the Bible were tools of subjugation for the oppression of marginalized groups with patriarchy being the axis for domination. For example, Barbara Welter argues that the characteristics of the "cult of true womanhood" were comprised of four cardinal virtues "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152) and were consciously integrated into every aspect of women's daily life. In

Welter's view, the fundamental reason for using the Bible as the central moral instrument to govern women's daily life was, "it did not take a woman away from her 'proper sphere,' her home" (153).

Interestingly, like Welter, historian Nell Irvin Painter in her description of slavery tactics writes, "Submission and obedience, the core values of slavery, are also the key words of patriarchy" (9). This is important to know since the mechanisms of slavery share the same composite picture of maintaining order, boundary, and control for nineteenth-century women. Painter also argues that the language to subjugate nineteenth-century women and slaves are not that different since both imposed a regime of thought to create order. Painter goes on to insist, "Piety is another word for submission and obedience," because they are "words that also figure prominently in the language of the family" (24). Welter concurs, and writes, "Submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue of women" (158). With this in mind, I argue, within fairy tales, submission and obedience also lurk as moral handmaidens of patriarchy to remind modern women, as they did for nineteenth-century women and slaves, of their private and public space. To be sure, fairy tales are neither overtly prescriptive as the four cardinal virtues of "true womanhood" ideology, nor do they apply the brutal method of whipping as in slavery. However, by preserving and superimposing their model of "happily ever after" in literature, films, and books, fairy tales continue to strengthen the foundations of their cultural tradition into the visual, verbal, and written ideation of a society. Thus, their circulation in the social order is often unconscious and thus considered rational despite the wresting of women's agency.

For example, *In Why Fairy Tales Stick*, Jack Zipes argues that fairy tales are memes. To be precise, they are tacit forms of cultural transmission symbolically converted into a value system by both their structural and conceptual formalization. For Zipes, fairy tales are "reshaped and retold during this [modern] time to reinforce the dominant patriarchal ideology throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (1). Fairy tales, then, according to Zipes, when "made relevant and stabilized through cultural institutions" (6) emerge not only as part of conscious thought, but also as actively constructing conscious thought by giving it meaning through referencing. He writes, "when the fairy tale is articulated in a communication of some kind, it is made relevant through the brain that operates efficiently and effectively to draw attentions of the listener/reader to the inferred meaning of the communication" (7). Zipes' theory is useful because it demonstrates that when a familiar cultural apparatus is present, such as black womanist feminism by Naylor, the audience can traffic³ through the

meaning by using familiar cultural practices to mediate the narrative. For instance, Zipes uses the popular "Little Red Riding Hood," fairy tale as critical assessment to illustrate his meme theory. In Zipes' view, "as the [Little Red Riding Hood] tale acquired cultural significance and was repeatedly told, printed, and reproduced in other artistic forms, the brain was stimulated through a particular innate module or even through two or three innate modules working together to recognize the memetic quality of the tale through an acquired module" (12). In short, Zipes' point is that modern iterations of fairy tales persist in a culture's consciousness because as a meme, they are only "concerned with its own perpetuation" and he argues, "will adapt to changes and conflicts" (15). For Zipes, this means that fairy tales remain symbolically alive by progressing and adapting their narratives "through conventionalized language and codes" (15) of the historical and cultural moment. After all, Naylor destabilizes and objectifies the fairy tale storyline by inserting descriptions of black womanist cultural practices in Brewster Place while simultaneously retaining the fairy tale's formulaic structure. With the fairy tale storyline conversion, then, Naylor is able to politically explore and problematize her black womanist feminism views without the artificial fairy tale storyline as a contextual restraint.

Black Womanist Ethos as Radical Practice

Like a fairy tale storyteller, Naylor's omniscient narrator carefully sets the opening scene—Dawn—at Brewster Place and foreshadows the anti-fairy tale that will progress in a script that could only be written by those perpetually on the margins and outside the center. However, before the omniscient narrator introduces any of the women characters, Brewster Place, as an embodied space and susceptible to all of the political and social consequences as its inhabitants, is presented first to readers. This structure is remarkable since by historicizing Brewster Place in place and time, Naylor is tacitly making an argument that the oppression of black women is not accidental, but institutional and structured in dominance (Hall). Therefore, Brewster Place is a political space with social and economic costs—a point addressed in the next two sections. By listing the tenant history of Brewster Place, which Naylor mirrors to American history, especially the Great Migration⁴ of southern blacks, Naylor's omniscient narrator acknowledges Brewster's desire⁵ for black women over its former ethnic tenants.

For instance, despite the "dark-haired and mellow-skinned—Mediterranean's" (2) who lived in Brewster Place for years, like the feral

wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" who preferred young naïve girls wandering alone in the forest, Brewster Place was "especially fond of its colored daughters" (4). As an illustration, Brewster's "colored daughters" are described in various exotic spices and body parts, such as "nutmeg arms, ebony legs, and saffron hands" (4) to show the racial color range due to the sexual exploitation of slave women. They are also interpreted through an overtly sexual lens by a voyeuristic gaze that describes them as women with "hands on hips, straight-backed" and as "round-bellied, high-behinded" (4). For sure, the verbal and visual sensual allusions are both provocative and seductive given they are only known by one who sits in the tower and watches with compelling and perhaps fetishistic analysis. Furthermore, this is where Naylor's revisioning of "happily ever after" begins to shift its vision from a utopian to a political dystopian world to engage her black womanist feminism. In short, by endowing the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place with distinct physical traits of black women's bodies, Naylor is creating a tacit but explicit argument against any alternative and all-inclusive feminist reading, except one that places black womanism at the center, rather than the margins of interpretation.

Furthermore, Naylor's omniscient narrator describes Brewster's "colored daughters" as a raucous and complex collective of "hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased" (5) group of women. There is a softening of rhetoric as Naylor's omniscient narrator solemnly proclaims, "each had a story" (5) and there is no "happily ever after" for any of them, which harkens back to the voyeuristic gaze. For instance, how are the individual stories of Brewster's "colored daughters" known unless secretly consumed, like Red Riding Hood's behavior by a predatory wolf, who is familiar with the most private and painful details of their story? For Naylor, then, the politics of space individualize the "colored daughters" of Brewster from each other. For it is within the severed space of their separate apartments that they engage their profound uprootedness as well as the spatial and mental splitting of a "happily ever after." As Simone Weil notes, "uprootedness is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed, for it is a self-propagating one" (47). Therefore, it is fitting that Naylor's omniscient narrator begins with Mattie Michaels—matriarch and moral center of Brewster Place, who is familiar with the alienation of uprootedness. Now, after many years as a sojourn, Mattie is finally but not fatally rooted within and to Brewster Place. Therefore, Mattie is able to share the wisdom of her uprootedness, which ironically was the threshold for her rootedness. This is why unlike the other "colored daughters" of Brewster Place Mattie

does not act out the repressive structures that dominate her with anger, sex with random men, and jealousy. Weil informs:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future (43).

Mattie's uprootedness and rootedness both add to her black womanist ethos. This is not to say that her autonomy did not come without the cost of troubled times and unfulfilled desires of her own. Like Red Riding Hood, Mattie encountered the wolf in the forest many times through Butch, her lover, and Basil, her son. For example, Butch abandons Mattie after she is pregnant with Basil, and thus, she is shamed and forced away from her parents' home. Basil, on the other hand, abandons Mattie after he murders a man and jumps bail, causing Mattie to lose her home, which she used to bond him out of jail. However, it is through the rootedness of Miss Eva that Mattie is able to endure the mental uprootedness that Butch and Basil create, and her acceptance of Brewster Place as home. As Naylor's omniscient narrator remarks, "Miss Eva unfolded her own life and secret exploits to Mattie, and without realizing she was being questioned, Mattie found herself talking about things that she had buried within her" (34). By sharing her experiences and emotions with the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place, Mattie passes down the folk wisdom of Miss Eva through the black oral tradition of testifying. By framing Miss Eva's and Mattie's conversation in this African American cultural context, Naylor, once again, tacitly refuses interpretation of her novel as being anything other than black womanist centered. Geneva Smitherman argues that "to testify is to tell the truth through "'story'" (150). With this view, Naylor traffics her readers through African American and womanist cultural characteristics known and understood by those culturally bound to the traditions. Therefore, Naylor's focus on the core of a black womanist feminism as communitarian and spiritual is no accident. Most importantly, I believe, in Naylor's black womanist uplift is the recognition that surrender to the wolf—willingly or easily—is not an option. Individual stories, then, become part of the collective narrative and their interconnectedness strengthens and furthers a black womanist feminism. As Naylor's omniscient narrator observes, "The young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable" (34). Smitherman evidences why the testifier recites past incidences:

The retelling of these occurrences in lifelike fashion recreates the spiritual reality for others who at that moment vicariously experience what the testifier has gone through. The content of testifying, then, is not plain and simple commentary but a dramatic narration and a communal reenactment of one's feelings and experiences. Thus one's humanity is reaffirmed by the group and his or her sense of isolation diminished. (130)

Testifying, then, is more than just swapping tales; it is about black women's survival and exercising agency over every component of their lives. For Naylor, then, the coherence of self for the black woman is not just ontological—it is also political and economic. For example, when Miss Eva dies, she does not leave Mattie typical feminine heirlooms like jewelry and china—she leaves Mattie in a financial position to buy her home after her children had “stripped it of all that was valuable” (40). Although Mattie then realizes why “the old yellow woman had made her save her money” (40), she does not understand that for a black woman to own real estate is political and economic agency because Mattie muses, “it would all be for [Basil]” (40). This is critical since both spheres of power [political and economic] deny black women entrance into and participation within their systems and Naylor seems to remind her readers that owning property was a patriarchal tool of empowerment, historically denied women. Allowing Mattie to own real estate—although temporarily—Naylor implies that closing the political and economic gap that mitigates the oppression and subjugation of black women's lives is more important than any relationship with men. After Mattie purchases Miss Eva's home, she muses, “it would all be for [Basil]” (40) and “those to come from the long, muscular thighs of him” (40) which suggests that Mattie believes she does not deserve the property she labored for. Moreover, it harkens back to the nineteenth-century view when owning property as a woman was not only illegal, but also incongruous to “women's sphere” as noted earlier in the essay by Welter. With this in mind, Naylor infers in her re-visioning of the fairy tale that “happily ever after” does not involve marriage to a prince for a black woman. Rather, it involves tearing down the political and economic barriers that keeps them enclosed, isolated, and alienated behind a wall constructed by a regime of thought that oppresses and subjugates them not in spite of being black and woman—but because they are black and woman. This is why in response to such a limited view of them in the social order, Naylor demonstrates how “Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African-American institutions” (Collins 101), like the black church, which is explored later in the essay. Just as the “proper sphere” for nineteenth-century women was the home and the plantation was for slaves,

behind the wall and in Brewster Place, is the "proper sphere" for black women. In short, Naylor seems to imply that the wolf is not just a human embodiment; the wolf is also a patriarchal embodiment of political and economic structures of domination as well. Taking this view, Naylor cleverly reveals the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class as embedded oppressions into the everyday subjugation of black women's lives by illustrating that where one form exists, the other two are also there as structural impediments to black women's agency. Therefore, unlike Perrault and the Brothers Grimm's version of "Little Red Riding Hood"⁶ who "saw to it that the victim [Red Riding Hood] was not without blame" (Tartar 38) in her outcome with the wolf, Naylor re-visions the fairy tale by making race, gender, and class "always already" responsible for black women's societal inequities, rather than her sexual carelessness.

'Unshouted Courage' and the Matrix of Domination⁷

The brick wall that separates Brewster Place from the city is an impenetrable physical and mental barrier that not only obstructs the view of the rest of the city from its "colored daughters," it also prevents them from exiting and outsiders from entering. Hence, the wall symbolizes domination, oppression, and isolation. Furthermore, the wall is the physical embodiment of paternalistic law⁸, since the wall was erected on the premise that it was protecting both the citizens outside and inside Brewster Place from each other and more paternalistically from the harm that they may do to themselves—especially the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place. The presence of the wall, then, is a constant visual reminder that this is the end of the road and there is no 'happily ever after' for the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place. Regardless, Naylor seems to suggest, alienation does not mean absence of communal relations. Nor does it necessarily imply that confinement is void of literacy and creativity. In fact, it can be a stage for fashioning oneself despite the rigid structuring of their lives by paternalistic political systems functioning in the name of social reform. Katie Cannon has explored the process of survival in such paternalistic environments for black women. She writes that, "this quality allows one to stand over against critical dilution of their personhood" (143). The weakening and strengthening of self is a persistent refrain for the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place, which Naylor views as collective survival rather than individual triumph. Cannon describes this condition as "unshouted courage" and describes it as:

the quality of steadfastness, in the face of formidable oppression. The communal attitude is far more than "grin and bear it." Rather, it involves

the ability to "hold on to life" against major oppositions. It is the incentive to facilitate change, to chip away at the oppressive structures bit by bit, to celebrate and rename their experiences in empowering ways (144).

Kiswana Browne, then, is a compelling example of "unshouted courage" in the face of tacit paternalistic orchestration. As the only resident to choose Brewster Place, one may assume that Kiswana is exempt from Cannon's notion of "unshouted courage." However, with a closer look, Kiswana's middle class privilege blinds her to the paternalist *ethos* in her discourse when she interacts with Cora Lee. For instance, as the antithesis of Cora Lee, and thus, the other women at Brewster Place, Kiswana has political and economic choices—agency, a fact that increases rather than decreases her inadequacy among the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place. Moreover, Kiswana has romantically conjured up Brewster Place not so much as a space to practice her social activism, but as dissent from the black bourgeois comfort of Linden Hills. Feeling embattled as a privileged black person places Kiswana at odds with her Black Nationalist rhetoric since she feels as though she is not the "real thing." Kiswana's aim, then, is one of performance.

In fact, even her name change from Melanie to Kiswana is emblematic of her production for black authenticity. Kiswana's mother provides a powerful critique to her performance by exclaiming if Kiswana knew her family history, she would not have "to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud" (86). By looking for an imagined and thus "authentic" black cultural experience in Brewster Place, Kiswana is seeking to restore what she believes the black bourgeois comfort of Linden Hills has driven out of her—black brokenness. Therefore, although Kiswana can touch black brokenness through the 'colored daughters' of Brewster Place she can never identify or own their private pains because if they could they would "make Brewster Place a distant memory" (77). Therefore, when Kiswana tries to stir a rebellion by "staging a rent strike and taking the landlord to court" (139), this is nothing more than blind self-interest since she is an exile—an estrangement that she can never erase the visible and invisible traces of her middle-class difference. Therefore, Kiswana can only spatially embody an "authentic" black womanist experience in Brewster Place, but she can never reproduce the consciousness that comes with living in such a world despite her desire to grasp the black brokenness that Brewster's "colored daughters" symbolize "in her gray apartment" (79). In this way, Kiswana's oppression is also rooted in her race, gender, and class. Although racialized and gendered the same as Brewster's "colored daughters," given her agency Kiswana is only in costume—rehearsing for a role that she can never genuinely own.

Therefore, Kiswana is often improvising to function in a space where she views and measures events and people through a paternalistic lens. Kiswana's paternalistic gaze is zealously focalized upon Cora Lee's obsession with babies that she [Cora Lee] cannot adequately care for as an unemployed single mother living in public housing. Not only does this demonstrate the unequal social, economic, and moral power structure between them, Kiswana's subjugation of Cora Lee both empowers and justifies Kiswana's constant parental tips to Cora Lee. For example, although Kiswana is childless, when Cora Lee's children are misbehaving Kiswana tells Cora Lee it is because the children are "cramped up in this apartment all the time" (118). While this may be true, Kiswana's parental tip is reflective of her middle-class parenting in Linden Hills, rather than her knowledge of parenting in a public housing project. Kiswana's "unshouted courage," then, is persistence—illuminated through her objective to politically revolutionize the 'colored daughters' of Brewster Place and by reforming Cora Lee who is representative of both black and white middle-class society's most morally reviled woman—the Black welfare queen.

It is important to note that Naylor focuses on Kiswana's black bourgeois comfort to analyze how outsiders, even African American outsiders, easily recognized by their taken-for-granted privilege are viewed as a paternalistic trope for the wolf. By inviting Cora Lee and her children to see a Shakespeare play in the park, Kiswana conveys the social, cultural, and educational divide between herself and Cora Lee. Cora Lee immediately perceives both verbally and visually that Kiswana is the elite Other by her social and economic status. For example, to Cora Lee, Kiswana's voice was "musical" with a "clipped accent" and when she "looked at [Kiswana's] designer jeans, and striped silk blouse," Cora Lee "was surprised [Kiswana] had said that she lived in" Brewster Place (116). However, Kiswana's social power is used unconsciously to point out the sociopolitical inequities between her and Cora Lee. As an illustration, while Cora Lee watches Kiswana play with one of her children, Cora Lee comments, "It's a shame you ain't got none of your own. You're good with kids" (120). Kiswana replies in a manner that not only socially separates them in values and morals, she also speaks from both a middle-class and paternalistic viewpoint saying, "I don't have a husband, yet" (120). Cora Lee is both defensive and cognizant that Kiswana implies that her behavior is immoral and deviant when she nonchalantly replies, "So, neither do I" (120). Cora Lee, in this instance, has to "grin and bear it" as Cannon argues—the "it" being her unshouted courage in the face of

Kiswana's tacit indictment of Cora Lee's sexual immorality and thus, the illegitimate births of her children.

Whereas Kiswana and Cora Lee exemplify Cannon's notion of "grin and bear it," Miss Eva's granddaughter Ciel, is a fitting example of Cannon's "hold on to life" premise. Ciel's fairy tale is perhaps more emblematic of "Little Red Riding Hood" than the other women since after her encounter with Eugene, the wolf, Ciel literally needs to "hold on to life" or she would die. Yet, despite Mattie's words that cautioned her about Eugene "with the grinding precision of a diamond cutter's drill" (91), like Red Riding Hood, Ciel was consumed by her wolf, Eugene. Ciel's story is another sustained sociopolitical project for Naylor to explore the intertwining of race, gender, and class issues relative to the oppression and subjugation of black women. However, with Ciel, Naylor explores how black men hold black women responsible for controlling and denying both their economic ambition and masculine freedom. For example, after Eugene loses his job he blames Ciel "as if she had been the cause" (94) for him being a perennial failure as both a provider for his family and a compassionate partner to Ciel. "Babies and bills, that's all you good for" (95), he yells at Ciel which prompts her to have a secret abortion, although it does not solve their problems. In fact, it drives Ciel into an extended existential struggle because she "found it difficult to connect herself up again with her own world" (95). In this instance, Naylor suggests that black women often foreclose on their happiness despite the harm it does to them by "creatively and often improvisationally [building] a family life consistent with the dictates of survival" (Davis 75). Naylor also makes a tacit argument that black women's reproductive choices are "blamed for perpetuating social problems" (Roberts 3), which is illustrated by Eugene holding Ciel responsible for her pregnancies without ever considering his sexual complicity in her pregnancies. In short, Naylor implies that for black women the battleground for survival often starts with the politics of patriarchy in their home and with their bodies.

Using her recognition of black womanist feminism, then, Naylor emphasizes that the larger and more profound disconnection is from self rather than the "happily ever after" ending with a male prince. It is your sisters and othermothers (Collins 178) Naylor suggests—the women—who will remain steadfast during the triumphs and tears. For Ciel, this black womanist difference is Mattie, her othermother. For instance, after Serafina, Ciel's daughter, dies from electrocution while Ciel fights with Eugene over leaving for a fictitious job in Maine—Ciel also wants to die and as Mattie exclaims, "right in front of our faces" (102). Rather than gloss over Ciel's "hold on to life," Naylor represents this scene through a

baptismal awakening where Mattie gently bathes Ciel "slowly, [and] reverently, as if handling a newborn" (104). Consequently, Ciel surrenders to her othermother, Mattie, who knew from experience—her testimony—that Ciel's "tears would end. And she would sleep. And morning would come" (105).

This last refrain is reminiscent of a blues song, which Naylor uses to illustrate that for the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place, love is trouble. Therefore, by using the blues as the musical backdrop for Brewster Place, Naylor is characterizing both the mood of Brewster Place and the internal conflict of its "colored daughters." As Kelly Brown Douglas notes, the blues body is an embodied testimony of the "non-bourgeois, sensuous, and rejected" (115) who experience profound loss on a continuum. Returning to Kiswana, this explains why, despite her performance, Kiswana would always have a limited definition of what an "authentic" black woman experience is and why she would never embody it. This is not to say that black middle-class bodies cannot exemplify the blues experience, since they have socially moved from the underclass to their new status, and have memory of the indignities. However, unlike Kiswana's mother, Mrs. Browne who knew her history, Kiswana has no memory of the love and trouble that shape the blues body. Instead, Kiswana wants to perform the "experiences, values, and struggles that characterize the realities of blues people and blues existence" (Douglas 116), rather than interiorize the *pathos* that would ontologically transform her from the black bourgeois comfort of Linden Hills, to one of the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place. Consequently, Kiswana never feels fully anchored, and rightfully so, in the blues ideology of Brewster Place, a point the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place tacitly (and in good taste) point out by choosing to ignore her Black Nationalist rhetoric. For example, at the tenement meeting in her apartment, Kiswana becomes exasperated after a series of false steps. That is, "the one-step-forward-two-steps-backwards progression of the meeting was beginning to show on her face" because Kiswana "looked as if she wanted to cry" (143). Kiswana feels her estrangement most profoundly from the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place at the block party because it was there that she realized her middle-class status and their black economic brokenness were fundamentally shaped by different sociopolitical discourses.

When Cora Lee and a few nameless "colored daughters" make light-hearted jokes about the intensity of Africa's heat, "Everybody laughed but Kiswana" (182). What's more, Kiswana sets herself apart by giving a principled explanation to the joke and as Naylor's omniscient narrator says, "The women stopped laughing and looked at her as you would at

someone who had totally missed the point of a joke that should need no explanation" (182). That Kiswana "totally missed the point" is crucial because the statement characterizes her idealistic enchantment with the black brokenness of the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place. It is in this moment that Kiswana needs to restore her brokenness rather than what she perceived as black brokenness in the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place. Much more importantly, Kiswana takes the release and returns to Linden Hills, which was intimated earlier when Mrs. Browne visits her and Naylor's omniscient narrator states Kiswana "stared at the woman she had been and was to become" (87). Moreover, Kiswana is now able to feel the blues that she mistakenly labels as black brokenness in the "colored daughters" of Brewster Place.

Love and Trouble in the Blue of the Evening at Brewster Place

Etta Mae Johnson has the exemplar blues body: wild and sexually remorseless. As Mattie's best friend from the south, Etta Mae "was not only unwilling to play by the rules" she also "challenged the very right of the game to exist" (59). For as Douglas notes, "Blues does not begin with ideas in the head, but with the experiences of the body" (117). Etta Mae, then, according to Douglas, understands the capabilities of her sexuality, and uses her body more as a tool for economic gain, rather than sexual pleasure. Mattie recognizes that Etta Mae's chances for a secure financial future using her body are diminishing and says to Etta Mae, "These last few years them business opportunities been fewer and farther between" (61).

Instead of avoiding the historical tension between blues music and the black church, Naylor deliberately examines the hypocrisy that has locked the black church in conservative stasis rather than the roots of its black liberation theology. As Douglas explains, "blues confronts the black church about its behavior in a manner reflective of its biblically based faith, and then challenges this church to transform its behavior in a way consistent with faith" (118). For example, by having Etta Mae seek her "happily ever after" in a quick and lewd sexual encounter with Reverend Woods, Naylor implies that the predatory wolf comes even as a divinely inspired agent to consume the black woman. Therefore, Etta Mae, like Red Riding Hood is fixed on her agenda, and thus, blind to the danger ahead of her. For instance, while Reverend Woods preaches from the pulpit Etta Mae is not "listening to the message" (66); instead, she is "watching the man" (66) for a possible financial suitor. Realizing Reverend Woods is

"well-off" (66), and feeling confident of her sexual charms, Etta Mae has already conjured being "the wife of a big preacher" and the "custom-made future" (72) she will have. However, the wolf, Reverend Woods, is a gambler just as much as Etta Mae and knows after their sexual encounter, which he decides on from the pulpit, that she "would be bankrupt long before the sun was up" (71). As Naylor's omniscient narrator notes, by Reverend Woods' "last floundering thrusts into her body" Etta Mae's "happily ever after" fades and she is "back to reality" (72), which is penniless and as she says "so very tired" (73) of playing a losing hand as Mattie points out. By using economic terms to describe the sexual encounter between Etta Mae and Reverend Woods, Naylor insinuates that the black woman's body viewed as a consumable good and service holds little value for society and particularly black males. To demonstrate her thesis, Naylor morally indicts the black church as a historical and culturally paternalistic system that has exploited the black woman's body and labor for its own capitalist purposes. For instance, Reverend Woods as the wolf devalues Mattie's labor in the church and Etta Mae's sexuality—both which he feels entitled to because as Naylor's omniscient narrator muses, Mattie and Etta Mae "would willingly give over half of their little to keep this man in comfort" (66). That Reverend Woods would ask for their "little" half is the larger question that Naylor raises since most paternalistic systems, like the black church Naylor implies, is an "important social location for manufacturing ideologies needed to maintain oppression" (Collins 284). Therefore, when Naylor suggests through Mattie that if Etta Mae were to get "a regular job" (61), she would not have to use her blues body as currency for a future, Naylor implies that the black church as a capitalist exploiter of the black woman's labor and body, is also a paternalistic system of oppression. However, Naylor makes a stronger claim for black women's sense of belonging, which will always fall short if they seek it anywhere other than black women—the sisterhood. This realization for Etta Mae is most poignant when after being dropped off by Reverend Woods "at the corner" (72), she looks up and "noticed there was a light under the shade at Mattie's window" (74). Moreover, Etta Mae hears Mattie "playing her records" (74), and realizes "it wasn't important what song it was" that she was straining to make out, but that "someone was waiting up for her" (74). For Etta Mae, having Mattie wait up for her was rejuvenating and empowering, and so "she laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her" (74). This moment is also important for Mattie as well since other than Basil and God's love, it was Etta Mae's love where Mattie found "a place where she was free" (64).

Therefore, by calling into question the nature of marriage, Naylor constructs a new notion of its conventional structure by an inversion of the man/woman dynamic to a woman/woman dynamic. Naylor rejects the man coming home after a long day at work to a faithful and dutiful wife by having Mattie, while listening to music, wait for Etta Mae despite not knowing when she would return. Most importantly, Naylor does not engage the good woman/bad woman trope either. These oppositions are part of the blues and black church dichotomy which creates a moral hierarchy and ultimately divides the sisterhood of black womanism.

Naylor also contextualizes blues music, I believe, to blur the boundaries of homosexual and homoerotic⁹ love and to illustrate that they are dynamically if not socially acceptable interconnected forms of human expression. For Naylor, then, homosexual and homoerotic love are a matter of form rather than radical difference. To create continuity between homosexual and homoerotic love, Naylor uses Theresa and Lorraine—"The Two"—to expose the prejudice of homosexuality in black communities, especially the black church. This is also a strategy to illustrate that Mattie and Etta Mae's homoerotic love, though socially acceptable, is not entirely different from Theresa and Lorraine's lesbian love. It is a matter of the nature of sexual and emotional desire, Naylor seems to suggest, rather than where the desire is directed. In short, Naylor's black womanist feminism is *all-inclusive and communal* rather than *splintered and individual*. Moreover, she uses these disconnected concepts to deconstruct her radical interpretations of homosexual and homoerotic love; and, to show that love and trouble—the blues—is at the heart of all relationships.

For example, Lorraine, one of "The Two" is perhaps the most striking example of a modern throwback to Welter's nineteenth-century description of the "cult of true womanhood," as a schoolteacher and a submissive and obedient wife to Theresa—a woman. Theresa, on the other hand, is representative of Naylor's modern black womanist feminism—independent, expressive, empowered, and protective of her home. Ironically, both Lorraine and Theresa embody all of the characteristics of middle-class values. However, in Brewster Place, Lorraine's and Theresa's tropes of middle-class conformity have no social currency which is why Theresa resents "living in a dump of a building in [a] God-forsaken part of town around a bunch of ignorant niggers" (134). Therefore, when Lorraine "was the first to notice the change" (132) she becomes worried that they have been outed as lesbians and Theresa tells her that she was not "moving anymore" (135). Here is an important foreshowing of Lorraine's gang rape at "the Wall" because Theresa

knows, more than Lorraine, that Brewster Place and the "big wall [was] the end of the line" (135) for their relationship. However, neither Theresa nor Lorraine could know how tragically "the Wall" would play a role in the rupture of their "happily ever after." Furthermore, Theresa has grown to despise Lorraine's passivity during their fights and muses, "she wanted someone who could stand toe to toe with her and be willing to slug it out at times" (136). Lorraine, on the other hand, still covets "approval" (136), and like a nineteenth-century woman in her proper sphere, she wants nothing more than to "chat and trade makeup secrets and cake recipes" (136). However, Theresa is quick to remind Lorraine that being a lesbian "makes you damned different!" (165). Lorraine's modern nineteenth-century "true womanhood" *ethos* is important on two fronts. First, it symbolizes, through a modern lens, that the oppression and subjugation of black women includes sexuality. Second, it is a foreshadowing of lost sexual innocence, like Red Riding Hood, when a woman strays too far in the forest—or, outside her "proper sphere."

As "The Two," Lorraine and Theresa's lesbian love precedes their inclusion as sister-members of the Brewster Place community. Sophie, Brewster's gossip, refers to them as a "bad element" (139) which has infiltrated "this block amongst decent people" (139). Unaware that Sophie refers to Theresa and Lorraine, Mattie innocently responds, "I done called the police at least a dozen times about C. C. Baker and them boys" (140). Mattie's response is significant because it never occurs to her that black women—even black lesbian women—are a threat. As noted earlier in this essay, Mattie's life has been dominated by many iterations of the wolf, and not one of them has taken the form of a woman. Therefore, Naylor uses this moment to illustrate the community *ethos* of a black womanist feminism and the emotional and sexual dimensions of black women's love.

In characterizing a plurality of black women's love, Naylor gives voice to the marginalization of black lesbians in black women's communities. In doing so, Naylor suggests that like the heterosexual black woman, the black lesbian also embodies a black womanist feminism, which is a sisterhood community. Therefore, to "mark" black lesbians as not part of the sisterhood community empties black womanist feminism of its holistic nature. Audre Lorde, for example, provides an insightful critique of the tension between black heterosexual and lesbian women explaining that, 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. For so long, we have been encouraged to view each other with

suspicion, as eternal competitors, or as the visible face of our own self-rejection (49).

In contrast to Theresa and Lorraine's taboo lesbian relationship, Mattie and Etta Mae's lifelong friendship has homoerotic triggers that are neither socially taboo nor visible. By focusing on Theresa and Lorraine's lesbian relationship, Sophie overlooks the deeper, richer, and enduring homoerotic relationship between Mattie and Etta Mae, which neither of them tries to conceal because it lacks the sexual intimacy of Theresa and Lorraine's. Therefore, it is during the examination of their homoerotic bond that Mattie and Etta Mae both realize their relationship is more intense, honest, and complicated by its enduring intimacy than Theresa and Lorraine's could ever be.

For instance, in deep reflection, Mattie confesses to Etta Mae: "I've loved you practically all my life" (141) and that "[. . .] I have loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man" (141). Mattie continues surveying her love with women and goes on to admit with the new revelation to Etta Mae that "there been some women who loved me more and did more than any man ever did" (141). Despite Mattie's reflective stance, Etta Mae seems reluctant to admit the similarities in Theresa and Lorraine's lesbian relationship to her lifelong "marriage" to Mattie: "I can second that," she says "but it's still different" (141). Mattie quickly counters, "Maybe it's not so different" (141). Although Etta Mae is unsettled by the coupling of their heterosexual partnership into the same homosexual space as Theresa and Lorraine's, she admits it "[. . .] kinda gives you a funny feeling when you think about it that way, though" (141). Yet, there are subtle hints that Etta Mae has considered her feelings for Mattie as more than platonic when she is "unable to meet Mattie's eyes" (141). For Naylor, then, female representation and expression of love, both homosexual and homoerotic often intersect—and invisibly.

However, Naylor seems to imply where homosexual and homoerotic relations differ, and most profoundly, is when lesbian women encounter "dwarfed warrior-kings" (169), or young black males rendered useless by American society. In short, because Lorraine—Red Riding Hood—strayed too far into the wolf's territory, "the thin strip of earth [. . .] claimed as their own" (169), she would be devoured (raped) by the wolf, C.C. Baker—and his pack. With this view, Naylor is both criticizing how America has devalued the contribution of young black males to American society, and most importantly, how black women bear the consequences of their [young black males'] uselessness. As Naylor's omniscient narrator contends, young black males "wouldn't be called upon" (169) to defend America or to participate in any of the rites of passage where boys

transition to men "and they knew it" (170). Therefore, sexual violence against black women, and specifically black lesbian women, is the ultimate alternative rite of passage for young black males to manhood. This is why Naylor's omniscient narrator declares that "the most dangerous species in existence" for black [lesbian] women [are] "human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide" (170). Naylor's use of the word "validate" reflects the intense Otherness that black lesbians experience within both the larger black culture and black women's culture. We also see a hardening of Naylor's revisioning of "happily ever after" because black lesbian women will never foreground their sexual happiness in a male. Therefore, for Naylor to have one of Brewster Place's heterosexual women raped, would belie the point of disrupting the fairy tale motif. In showing no deference to C.C. Baker—the wolf and his pack—either by expressing her sexual preference for women over men or when "laughing at [C.C.] in the streets" (169), Lorraine's laugh is interpreted as another offense to the emasculation of C.C.'s manhood, which America had already insisted as unusable. Although Lorraine strikes back, all she kills is Ben, the only male in Brewster Place who is also a harmless, declawed, and sexually neutered wolf. The implication in this gesture is that although black women can attack paternalism, it will yield momentary but no lasting results.

Further still, by hurling bricks pulled from the wall into the city, Naylor is also ostensibly reenacting the riots of the seventies which is central to Brewster Place's being "condemned" (191) while its "colored daughters" once again "packed up the remnants of their dreams" (191) and moved somewhere else. Although Dusk descends on Brewster Place and its "colored daughters" are leaving, Naylor's omniscient narrator declares they will "inherit another aging street" (191). With this statement, Naylor suggests that the paternalistic boundaries for the black woman is "always already" waiting for her, no matter where or what space she inhabits.

Conclusion

Naylor's larger claim is for a black womanist feminism which is inclusive of all black women—heterosexual, homosexual, old, young, poor, bourgeois, blues, etc. Therefore, it is the collective sisterhood, rather than the individual, that can challenge, and destroy the paternalistic sanctions of authority. Thus, Naylor addresses and reiterates that it is only with and through the sisterhood contract, rather than the social contract, that black women can radically alter their ontology. In short, Naylor suggests our differences will not divide us because our black womanism

roots us in a shared black collective cultural experience. With this view, Naylor's radical re-visioning of "happily ever after" invalidates all the taxonomies that support a politics of difference in black culture and the larger American society, which divide the sisterhood kinship of black women. What needs restoration, then, is not the erasure of black women's individual distinctiveness, but the social fiction that radical independence is a limitation to a collective black womanist feminism. Here, then, is the importance of "the Wall" broken-down because it symbolically illustrates the epic historical transformations that have occurred by a collective black womanist feminism and uplift, in the face of patriarchal and economic injustice. Therefore, Naylor's conceptualization of a black womanist feminism as a counterargument to the "happily ever after" motif in literary fairy tales is indeed "happy."

Notes

1. "Womanist" is Alice Walker's specific conception of African American women's feminism to include race and class issues, which she distinguishes from the generic "feminist" term. Refer to *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*.
2. I am using the version of "Little Red Riding Hood" in *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Angela Carter, ed.
3. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that cultural symbols are "control mechanisms" which produce types of behavior depending on the culture's "significant symbols" i.e. gestures, drawings, musical sounds, etc.
4. See Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*.
5. I am not referring to desire in the exclusive Lacanian conception. Desire, in this context, refers to a longing, both human and sexual, of a fantasy placed on another without reciprocity.
6. In most scholarly circles, Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm (Wilhelm and Jacob) are the architects of the literary fairy tale genre.
7. See *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.
8. Gerald Dworkin defines paternalism as "the interference with a person's liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests or values of the person being coerced."
9. By homoerotic I mean emotions focused on a person of the same sex, though not sexually performed. Unlike homosexuality where sexual emotions are sexually performed and explicit, homoeroticism is tacit and nuanced.

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