

THE WALLED WORLD OF BREWSTER PLACE

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The awarding of the American Book Award for Best First Novel to Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*¹ was one more cornerstone in the building of the Black Women Writers' Renaissance of the 1980s, and a sturdy one at that. Structured as a series of loosely linked vignettes, the novel is made up of compelling stories of individual women, richly woven together with the "down-home" Black language Naylor uses so well. The major themes of the dead-end street that is low-class Black life and the stamina of the women who live there, their mutual support and sisterhood, echo other writers present and past who share a major concern: the continuing divorce between the relatively new black middle class (Linden Hills here and in Naylor's second book) and the futility of life when the American Dream has slipped out of reach. Indeed Naylor's use of Langston Hughes' "a dreamed deferred" is meant to underline the contrast with the hopefulness found in Lorraine Hansbury's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959) as "Mama" moves her plants to a sunnier place in middle-class America. Mattie is first found moving with her plants as well, but she is quick to notice that her dark new dwelling on Brewster Place dooms them right from the beginning. Cutting off the sunlight, the wall also shuts out any possibility that either plants or human beings can flourish.

It is precisely the wall, together with the use of blood and the dream as symbols throughout, that gives the novel its cohesion, and indeed the presence of this sinister structure takes on a life of its own that will preside over the events in the lives of other characters. It is in fact the wall that created Brewster Place, a character in itself whose "birth" is personified in "Dawn", the first section of the novel: it was "conceived as an afterthought"; its "true parentage was hidden"; many people "turned out for the baptism" (p. 1). Once established as a protagonist in the novel, Brewster Place is confronted with the three unifying factors mentioned above. Its *dream* of becoming "part of a main artery of town" is irremediably squelched by the construction of the *wall*, the ever present symbol of evil, put up

for traffic control, turning Brewster into a cul-de-sac. To baptize this new birth, only a drunk ran into the wall, "*bloodied* his nose... vomited against the new bricks" (emphasis added). As a result social class steadily deteriorated: the second generation of inhabitants were immigrants whose children eventually left while Brewster Place "mourned and grew old". The remaining chapters will describe the lives of the third generation, Brewster's "Afric" children who "came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason" (p. 4).

Each of these "Afric" children has arrived on Brewster because of her own personal trial, her own "wall", as it were. Mattie Michael, a unifying character in the book as she appears at least briefly in all of the stories, was extremely over-protected as a young girl, succumbing to the sexual overtures of the young man her father most detested. Her personal history repeats itself, however, as she tries to protect the son of this illicit relationship, Basil, with an excessive "smother-love". Spoiling the child, she is blind to his weakness and dependence on her to solve every problem in his life, to the point of total irresponsibility. Because of Basil, Mattie loses her dream of living in her own house, whose mortgage she has worked years to pay off, together with her son and future wife and family.

On arriving at Brewster Place, Mattie's psychological state is clearly illustrated in her awareness of the physical presence of the wall. It will block out the northern light, and her plants, the main link with her previously happy life and normally a symbol of black women's resilience ², will die. Mattie has no illusions about what awaits her in Brewster Place and she lacks the will to start over.

The blood image appears twice in Mattie's story: once in her violent relationship with her father to whom she refuses to reveal the name of her baby's father, and once in her relationship with her son. Unable and unwilling to bear her husband's ruthless beating of her daughter, Mrs. Michael shoots him with a shotgun to bring him to his senses: "and he looked toward his wife with sweat and blood dripping down his face" (p. 24). After the child is born, one morning Mattie awakens to his cry to discover that a rat has bitten him and "the blood dripping down his cheek from the two small punctures" (p. 29). These episodes motivate Mattie first to abandon the protection of her home to bear her child alone, and later to leave her rented room impetuously with no place to go until she is finally taken in by Miss Eva.

It is the nurturing that she receives here that will enable her to carry on and return the love and support that she has received, especially in her relationship with Ciel, Miss Eva's granddaughter.

Etta Mae Johnson's life is actually recounted through several blues songs. Unable to bear life in the small southern town she was born in, she leaves early and latches on to any man who can give her what she wants. Arriving later in life on Brewster Place, she still dreams of marrying a man who can give her security and social position and immediately sets her sights on Reverend Moreland (also of

Linden Hills). But Etta Mae's psychological barrier is her dependence on males and her gullibility, leaving her completely blind to the fact that men take advantage of her. Just how devastating a mistake this can be is emphasized in her awareness of the physical wall, once Moreland has dumped her a block from home: she stands there looking at it, "crouched... like a pulsating mouth awaiting her arrival"..., thinking, "I'll never get out" (p. 73).

The reference to blood/violence in Etta Mae's life conveyed through poetry is at once a reference to Black life in southern towns and a testimony to the violence of the relationship between Black and white:

Southern trees bear strange fruit
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
 Black bodies swinging
 In the southern breeze
 Strange fruit hanging
 From the poplar trees
 (excerpt from Lewis Allan, quoted on p. 60)

Yet just as Black music/ poetry is used to describe Etta Mae's life and mood, it is also used as a vehicle to understanding and acceptance as she confronts her fate on Brewster Place. Mattie has waited up for her listening to Etta's "loose-life music"; "Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her" (p. 74).

The third woman described in the novel is typical in that she does not belong to the world of Brewster Place, yet serves once again as an echo of Hansbury's Beneatha Younger and the conflict between Black upward mobility and solidarity with the lower class. Kiswana is chided by her mother for giving up not only her social status in Linden Hills, but also her given name, Melanie, a name which in Mrs. Browne's eyes links her more firmly to her heritage than any African name ever could (and links this vignette to Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"³). Like all the other women on Brewster, Kiswana has a dream, or perhaps it would be more correct to say that she is a dreamer, and the discrepancy between her dream and her difficulty in relating to precisely the people she wants to help constitutes the major obstruction in her young life.

A pigeon swept across her window, and she marvelled at its liquid movements in the air waves. She placed her dreams on the back of the bird and fantasized that it would glide forever in transparent silver circles until it ascended to the center of the universe and was swallowed up. But the wind died down, and she watched with a sigh as the bird beat its wings in awkward, frantic movements to land on the corroded top of a fire escape on the opposite building. This brought her back to earth.

Humph, it's probably sitting over there crapping on those folks' fire escape, she thought... (p. 75).

Kiswana's frustration is born of her inability to understand "her people", of how they function, and of her real heritage, even as she rejects her middle-class up-bringing. Yet this character is not trapped as Naylor makes clear from her relationship to the presence of the wall. Kiswana lives on the sixth floor of the housing project and from there "could see over the wall" (p. 75). Even her mother points out that she can always return to the safety of the middle class saying, "you can see the trees in Linden Hills from here" (p. 79). Given the possibility of a protected environment, there is no blood or violence in Kiswana's life. In fact, Kiswana is the only character who can see that the stains on the bricks at "The Block Party" are from the rain and not blood stains as the other women insist.

Perhaps the most poignant chapter in this novel deals with Lucielia Louise Turner, "Ciel", as she learns too late that her own private wall, Eugene, has cut her off from the most important dream in her life: forming a normal family with him and Serena and her unborn baby. That Eugene is identified with the wall is clear in the opening passage of this section: Ben is sitting on the garbage can "pushed up against the sagging brick wall that turned Brewster into a dead-end street" (p. 89) when Eugene appears on the scene. Eugene is in fact a "dead-end" street for Ciel.

That she chooses to abort ⁴ in a misguided attempt to hang on to her man in fact turns Ciel into "some other woman" (p. 95), and when she pleads with Eugene not to leave her and Serena, she finds she cannot respond to his unfeeling "why?" To answer she would have to "uncurl that week of her life, pushed safely up into her head, when she had done all those terrible things for that other woman who had wanted an abortion" (p. 100). Losing Serena pushes her towards madness: she feels that God "had deserted or damned her, it didn't matter which" (p. 101) and initiates a journey towards death. It is Mattie, battling what seems to be the inevitable, who refuses to let her die, who "rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams" (p. 103).

In spite of the nurse's assurance to Ciel that there "won't even be much bleeding" (p. 95) from her D&C, images of blood and the violence they represent occur repeatedly in this chapter. At Serena's funeral the flowers are "oversized arrangements of red-carnationed *bleeding hearts*" (p. 101). Later in her apartment "her visitors' impotent words flew against the steel edges of her pain, *bled* slowly, and returned to die in the senders' throats" (p. 102). And on her journey back to sanity, Ciel travels through the violence and private hell of mothers gone before:

Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh *blood* of

sacrificed babies torn from their mother's arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soulguttled Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on... (p. 105). (All emphases added)

It is Mattie, the constant, consistent figure of the Black mother, who pulls Ciel from the edge of insanity and death, who "rocked and pulled (until) the splinter gave way, ... its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh..." (p. 103) The vomiting, the "exorcising the evilness of pain", and after the cleansing of the body and soul, the images of baptism, ablutions, virginity and renewal, all substantiate the hopefulness found in the last line of Ciel's story: "And morning would come" (p. 105).

Dream images reinforce the characterization of Cora Lee as an immature "child-woman" who is obsessed with keeping her babies small and doll-like. The section in fact opens with the lines:

True, I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy
(p. 107)

As a child Cora Lee revelled in her new baby-dolls at Christmas long past the age of normal development until she discovered that she could make "baby-dolls" of her own. As an adult she lives in the dream-world of fantasy and television. The possibility that Cora Lee will at last mature and take responsibility for her five children when Kiswana persuades her to take them to an all-Black production of Shakespeare is belied precisely by the author's choice of the play —"A Midsummer Night's Dream". Even as she ponders Kiswana's admonition that "babies grow up", she recalls "The Tempest" which she had seen in junior high school: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep" (p. 121). As she and her children watch the play the image is reinforced time and again: "I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was..." ... "And this weak and idle theme, No more yielding but a dream..." (p. 126). The reader is left with no illusions as to Cora Lee's determination to make a better life for her children. Arriving home tired and happy after their excursion to the park, Cora Lee finds one of her "shadows" already in bed: "Then she turned and firmly folded her evening like gold and lavender gauze deep within the creases of her dreams, and let her clothes drop to the floor" (p. 127).

While Cora Lee protects herself from others' criticism within her "wall" of immaturity (during Kiswana's visit she rocked her baby "as if the motions of her

body could build up a wall against the girl's silent condemnation", p. 117), the relationship of her children to the physical wall serves to reinforce this psychological handicap. Both times it is mentioned with respect to her sons: Sammy is reported to be "eating out of the garbage cans" placed next to the wall (p. 114) and "little Brucie was going to climb the wall... and fall and break his neck" (p. 110). Even Mattie's small "cameo" in the text concerns her not wanting Sammy to walk down the alley between her building and the wall (p. 123).

Moreover, Cora Lee irrationally blames her children for the violence in her life as well:

A pot of burnt rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth, but that had been their fault for keeping her so tied up she couldn't keep the house straight... (p. 113).

The author relates the children with images of blood more explicitly when, on losing Sonya at the Block Party, Cora finds her daughter at the wall and sees the spots on it which she immediately interprets as blood stains (p. 185).

The dream as metaphor also opens the chapter entitled "The Two":

People often came and went on Brewster Place like a restless night's dream (p. 129).

and it returns as the inhabitants of Brewster begin to suspect something "different" about these two newcomers:

Where had they seen *that* before... in the days before babies, miscarriages, and other broken dreams (p. 131).

Yet dreams are not sole property of their neighbors; Lorraine dreams of being accepted by her fellows as a "normal person" as well as being reunited with her father. But these dreams are just as futile as the rest. There is a wall of difference between these two and their neighbors because of their sexuality and a wall of misunderstanding even threatens their own relationship because Lorraine is overly worried about what "they" think. Tee's angry response to her fear not only relates the Two to the physical wall but also proves to be tragically prophetic:

There's a big wall down that block, and this is the end of the line for me (p. 135).

It is in fact the end of the line for Lorraine as well: not only is she raped there, but also afterwards she props herself up by sliding against the wall on her way

toward something moving rhythmically from side to side, on her way to murdering the only person to whom she had felt really close.

Lorraine's tragic, violent rape is saturated with blood images:

...thighs and stomach had become so slimy from her blood and their semen that the last two boys didn't want to touch her...

...her mouth crammed with paper bag, her dress pushed up under her breasts, her bloody pantyhose hanging from her thighs... (p. 171).

as is Ben's death:

...(Lorraine) brought the brick down again to stop the moving head, and blood shot out of his ears splattering against the can and the bottom of the wall,

the evil embodied in the wall "baptized" once again by the blood of violence. Lorraine's sanity is shattered: "A tall, yellow woman in a bloody green and black dress, scraping at the air, crying, 'Please, Please'" (p. 173).

Although the novel ostensibly deals with the lives of the *women* of Brewster Place, Naylor takes advantage of this chapter to include the story of male lives: first, Ben and then C.C. Baker and his gang. The cohesion in these sketches, however, continues to rest upon the images under consideration here, although in Ben's case the dream is in fact a nightmare. Memories of his daughter and his impotence, both sexual and psychological, to protect her from the abuse of Mr. Clyde drive him to drink himself into oblivion (pp. 150-154); as a tenant farmer he had no say in his life nor that of his wife nor of his daughter. Ben has literally walled himself away from the hurt of the past; in the present he lives next to the wall and when drunk, sits on a garbage can and sings by the wall. There, too, he is murdered.

Yet even before this tragic end, Ben wrestles with images of blood and violence as he imagines his murdering his own wife:

Ben felt a slight dampness in his hands because his finger-nails had broken through the skin of his palms and the blood was seeping around his cuticles. He looked at Elvira's dark braided head and wondered why he didn't take his hands out of his pockets and stop the bleeding by pressing them around it... in toward each other until the blood stopped (p. 153).

Naylor presents the total lack of individuality and personality of C.C. Baker by treating him and his gang as if they were only one character. In fact there is no "self" without "the others continually near to verify their existence"; even their dreams are collective:

When they stood with their black skin, ninth-grade diplomas, and fifty word vocabularies in front of the mirror that the world had erected and saw nothing, those other pairs of tight jeans, swede sneakers, and tinted sunglasses imaged nearby proved that they were alive. And if there was life, there could be *dreams* of that miracle that would one day propel them into the heaven populated by their gods —Shaft and Superfly (emphasis added, p. 161).

Yet the author employs this collective nonentity to explicate a wider meaning and to relate the violence of this cornered, hopeless, yet vicious specimen of humanity to the degradation and that imposed by white Western male culture on the rest of humankind:

Bound by the last building on Brewster and a brick wall, they reigned in that unit alley like dwarfed warrior-kings. Born with the appendages of power, circumcised by a guillotine, and baptized with the steam from a million non-reflective mirrors, these young men wouldn't be called upon to thrust a bayonet into an Asian farmer, target a torpedo, scatter their iron seed from a B-52 into the wound of the earth, point a finger to move a nation, or stick a pole into the moon —and they knew it. They only had that three-hundred-foot alley to serve them as stateroom, armoured tank, and executioner's chamber. So Lorraine found herself surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence —human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide (p. 169).

The same wall that has cut them off from any possibility of personal development or achievement has determined the depth and breadth of their existence, and the force of their violence. Yet Naylor makes clear that the violence engendered by the wall is simply an extension of the concept of power and subordination rampant in the rest of our society.

These three unifying metaphors of life in Brewster Place —the dream, the wall, and the blood— come together inextricably in the last chapter of the book, “The Block Party”: Because of the unrelenting rain, “Brewster Place wasn't able to congregate around the wall and keep up a requiem of the whys and hows of (Ben's) dying” (p. 175). And the physical discomfort of the penetrating damp and the psychological unease over Lorraine's violent death permeates the psyches of the women:

Although only a few admitted it, every woman on Brewster Place had dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress. She had come to them in the midst of the cold sweat of a nightmare, or had hung around the edges of fitful sleep... Even Mattie's sleep was fitful, her dreams troubling (p. 175-176).

... (Cora) When you pregnant you can't sleep good at night —kept having all kind of weird dreams (p. 181).

The description of the Block Party is of itself a dream sequence in which Ciel reappears after having escaped from Brewster to a new job and new love in San Francisco. Yet Ciel herself credits her unexpected presence at the party to the dream she had about the street:

Something about that wall and Ben. And there was a woman who was supposed to be me, I guess. She didn't look exactly like me, but inside I felt it was me. You know how silly dreams are (p. 179).

Through this dream within a dream Naylor relates Lorraine's tragedy with the tragedy of all Black women who live on the fringes of society: "And something bad had happened to me by the wall —I mean to her..." (p. 179). Twice in just a few lines the wall appears within the dream, and though Etta tries to hide their distress with light-hearted joking about the numbers game ("...but I gotta look in my book to see what a wall is. What do ya play off a wall, Mattie?" p. 180), the image continues to represent the menace, the ugliness and violence in all their lives, the one factor that has cut them off from a chance at meaningful, happy life. When Theresa appears and the women fall quiet, Kiswana stares at the wall, "as if trying to remember something important that had escaped her" (p. 182). Here, too, is the wall of sexism, racism and homophobia that has defined and confined the lives of these women. So when Cora imagines the stains on the bricks to be the blood of one of the victims, it serves as a catalyst, and all their pent-up anger and resentment is channeled toward tearing down this visible reification of their frustration. "Blood —there's still blood on this wall... Blood ain't got to right still being here" (p. 185).

No matter that the stains are just rain. Kiswana, then Theresa, hurl the bricks into the avenue, finally directing their indignation exactly where it should go —toward the society that has abandoned them to their fate. And it is in this communal effort that their sisterhood is defined: "the cold waters beat on the top of their heads —almost in perfect unison with their hearts" (p. 188).

Even though Naylor leaves the ending unresolved —Mattie wakes to a sunny day even as storm clouds move silently toward Brewster Place—it is the resilience of the women that endures. In the epilogue, entitled "Dusk", Brewster Place once again is personified as a main character, waiting to die, observing its inhabitants:

... But the colored daughters of Brewster, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up with their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn. They get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they're mixed with a pinch of salt and thrown into pots of soup, and they're diapered around babies. They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear (p. 192).

Of the three images, it is the dream that prevails throughout the violence and frustration of the walled-world of Brewster Place, not the American Dream sought by Mama in Hansbury's play, but the Afro-american Dream of mutual understanding and support and the continuity of a community that has suffered too long the abuses of a system that has failed them.

Notes

¹ (London: Methuen London Ltd, 1987). All subsequent references to the text will refer to this edition.

² Cf. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), and Mary Helen Washington, *Black Eyed Susans* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), for example.

³ *In Love and Trouble* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1973.)

⁴ Again the underlying reference to another character in Hansbury's *Raisin*, Ruth Younger, who considers abortion because of economic difficulties.