

«TAKING-NO-SHIT?:» BLACK WOMEN'S
GHETTO IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S THE
WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE (1982),
AND IN NTOZAKE SHANGE'S FOR
COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE
CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN THE
RAINBOW IS IN THE SKY (1977)

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In *Streets of Desire* (1993), Liz Heron «looks at the city as the site of women's most transgressive and subversive fictions,» and she adds that «rootlessness and displacement are at the heart of the city novel» (Heron 2 and 3). The purpose of this paper is to look at Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is in the sky* (1977), to show that two city ghettos—one imaginary, Brewster Place, and the other real, Harlem—are the ones to blame for these black women's fragmentation and displacement of their womanhood. John Jeffries emphasizes that «the city is hip,» to later add that «the city is dope 'cause it still got the juice» (Jeffries 159 and 160). However, the heartbreaking biographies of the women living in Brewster Place and in Harlem tell us that for black women the so-called *city juice* is hard to swallow. If I have chosen to focus on both Naylor's and Shange's works it is precisely because we can hear echoes of the city ghetto nightmare experienced by the women of Brewster Place, in the sometimes paranoid existences of the rainbow ladies in Shange's novel. Not surprisingly, all these black women suffer in their sexuality, and their womanhood is torn to pieces. Historically, the city has had a special appeal for Afro-Americans living in the rural South. Blacks started going North as a way out of the dehumanizing slavery system,

and as an escape from brutal racial prejudice—as a running away from cruel beatings, painful torturing, and savage lynchings. If it is true that life in the city was hard both for black men and women, the city was tougher on black women since they were also attacked in their womanhood. Gloria Naylor's novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), deals with the lives of seven black women who happen to meet at Brewster Place—significantly enough, a dead-end street. Naylor emphasizes the peculiarities of these women's stories by naming the sections of the book after each particular woman. Thus, we have Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana, Ciel, Cora Lee, and The Two—a couple of lesbians, Lorraine and Theresa. The setting of the novel is this imaginary ghetto-like settlement, Brewster Place, close to the exclusive black high class community of Linden Hills, but separated from both the white neighborhood, and the black bourgeoisie neighborhood by a high red-brick wall. It is important to highlight here that the brick wall obviously serves to alienate black ghetto life from white city life and, as James Baldwin argues, it illustrates the point that «the motion of the white people in the USA has been . . . a furious attempt to get away from the niggers» (Baldwin 135). By both physically and psychologically separating whites from blacks the city ghetto-like figure in Brewster Place only helps to further suffocate the lives of black women and, borrowing again from Baldwin's words, to turn them into «a captive population» (Baldwin 135). It is ironic, though, that these black women's flight North towards freedom ends up victimizing them, and even at times making them wish they were back South. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the female narrator venerates the black women coming from the southern towns to Lorain (Ohio) in these terms:

They come from Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian. And the sound of these places in their mouths make you think of love. When you ask them where they are from, they tilt their heads and say «Mobile» and you think you've been kissed . . . you don't know what these towns are like, but you love what happens to the air when they open their lips and let the names ease out. (Morrison, *Bluest* 63).

Unfortunately, the women of Brewster Place do not associate the names of their home towns with Morrison's narrator's sensuality, but rather with the horror of strict fathers, starvation, racial prejudice, and threatening white men. Therefore, the women of Brewster Place

clung to the street with a desperate acceptance that whatever was here was better than the starving southern climates they had fled from . . . they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason. (Naylor, *Women* 4).

From a more optimistic view, Carolyn Mitchell points out that Shange's *for colored girls* «presents the paradox of the modern American city as a place where black

women experience the trauma of urban life, yet find the strength to transcend the pain» (Mitchell 230). I differ, though. As with Naylor's novel, Shange's *choreopoem* gives voice to seven women who, contrary to Naylor's, have no names but are identified by the colors of the rainbow: the lady in brown (who acts as a kind of chairwoman), the lady in yellow, the lady in purple, the lady in red, the lady in green, the lady in blue, and the lady in orange. The story takes place in Harlem (at least, as far as the lady in blue, and the lady in purple are concerned), an environment that does not allow them for personal growth because, as Toni Morrison argues, «black people are generally viewed as pathologies in urban settings» (Morrison, *City* 137). Contrary to Naylor's black southern and rural women, it is hard to tell about Shange's black women's origins since there are no hints whatsoever. It is significant, however, that at the beginning of the play the rainbow ladies introduce themselves as being *outside* representative cities of the USA such as Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Baltimore, Houston, San Francisco, and Manhattan. Therefore, Naylor's Brewster Place and Shange's Harlem may very well stand for the personification of other *outside cities*. For these black women, black ghettos like Brewster Place or Harlem, and as Barbara Christian argues, are «the last stop on the road to the bottom in the American Society, where you live when you can't live anywhere else» (Christian 106). For some black women, though, the appeal for the city provokes a love-hate relationship. Just to give an example, in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981), Jadine is crazy about the city, and associates black womanhood with New York when she states that «if ever there was a black woman's town, New York was it» (37). Commenting on *Tar Baby*, Liz Heron emphasizes that for Jadine «New York represents the sexiest and most exhilarating of cities, the ultimate challenge to the would-be city dweller, and therefore the ultimate place to be for non-taker-of-shit» (Heron 15). In my reading, though, neither the women of Brewster Place, nor the rainbow ladies would share their sister Jadine's optimistic view. Not surprisingly, for Naylor and Shange, New York is not *just* Fifth Avenue since these black women are taking shit on a daily basis.

Let's start with Naylor's novel and take, for example, Mattie Johnson. Teenaged, pregnant, single mother, and running from her father's violent reaction which almost kills her and the baby. Once in Brewster Place, after devoting thirty years of her life to her only son, he gets in trouble with the police, and runs away taking Mattie's money. Mattie does not listen to her friend Miss Eva when she scolds her about her non-existent sexual life: «Children get raised overnight, Mattie. Then what you got? . . . Ain't you ever had no needs in that direction? No young woman wants an empty bed, year in and year out» (Naylor 37). But Mattie's life is a one-way street, concentrating all her tenderness and femaleness on her only son who becomes a criminal in the streets of a black ghetto.

Mattie's antagonist is her long-life friend Etta Mae Johnson; also a southern rural woman, but single, beautiful, a fan of scandalous blues singers like Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith, «who took her talents to the streets» of Memphis, Detroit, Chicago,

New York, and who ended up in Brewster Place. Contrary to her friend Mattie, Etta does not know what an empty bed means, but she is aging, wants to settle down, and is sick and tired of that hectic city life:

Don't you think I got a mirror? Each year there's a new line to cover. I lay down with this body and get up with it every morning, and each morning it cries for just a little more rest than it did the day before. Well, I, I'm finally gonna get that rest, and it's going to be with a man like Reverend Woods. And you and the rest of those slack-mouthed gossips on Brewster be damned . . . They'll be humming a different tune when I show up there the wife of a big preacher. (Naylor 69 and 70)

Unfortunately for Etta, and after reaching his climax, Reverend Woods does not respond accordingly; he considers Etta an experienced woman, and he is relieved at seeing Etta's sexual *ease*: «Well. . . that's the nice part about these wordly women. They understand the temporary weakness of the flesh and don't make it out to be something bigger than it is. They can have a good time without pawning and hanging all onto a man» (Naylor 73). After this frustrating sexual encounter, Etta comes back to Brewster Place in the early hours of the day, just to feel that the brick wall that surrounds this dead-end street is swallowing her: «The wall that closed off Brewster . . . crouched there in the thin predawn light, like a pulsating mouth awaiting her arrival» (Naylor 73). Another black woman from Brewster Place who seems to be swallowed by the threatening presence of the wall is Ciel. Married to a black man who is undoubtedly irresponsible, temporarily unemployed, systematically absent from home, and occasionally a drug dealer, Ciel's case epitomizes the paranoia of a city black ghetto. First, a frightened husband forces Ciel to have an abortion done: «And another brat comin' here, huh? . . . I'm fuckin' sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that's all you good for . . . with two kids and you on my back, I ain't never gonna have nothin'» (Naylor 94 and 95). Then, Ciel's eldest child, Serena, electrocutes herself while chasing a black roach with a knife, and dies. Ciel's husband, Eugene, does not even attend Serena's funeral and fades away, adding an extra burden onto Ciel's already nightmarish existence. Not surprisingly, Ciel silently disappears from Naylor's text, and she apparently leaves Brewster Place for good. In contrast with Ciel's stubbornness to defend her right to be both a mother and a wife, against the hell of a black ghetto, Cora Lee adopts a more childish attitude. Apparently at least. Since she was a little girl, Cora Lee adored baby dolls. For her thirteenth birthday, though, Cora Lee was pregnant «after doing nasty with the Murphy boy behind the basement steps.» and she had her first baby. A still too innocent Cora Lee apologizes to her mother that «it wasn't nasty, mother, he had just promised to show [me] the thing that felt good in the dark—and it had felt good, Mother» (Naylor 109). It is obvious that it felt *really* good, for Cora is now twenty two and has seven children, all except two from different men. Behind Cora Lee's supposedly irresponsible attitude there are some dramatic veiled reasons for her

non-stop pregnancies. Men's systematic physical violence makes her choose a baby over a lover:

A pot of burnt rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth . . . And then only the shadow—who came in the night and showed her the thing that felt good in the dark, and often left before the children awakened, which was so much better . . . the thing that felt good in the dark would sometimes bring the new babies, and that's all she cared to know, since the shadows would often lie about their last names or their jobs or about not having babies . . . And shadow didn't give you fractured jaws or bruised eyes, there was no time for all that—in the dark—before the children awakened. (Naylor 114)

It is interesting to point out here that Cora Lee's response towards motherhood subverts Theresa Benedek's theory, discussed in Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Motherhood*. According to Benedek, «the infant's need for the mother is absolute whereas the mother's for the infant is only relative» (Chodorow 23). However, due to men's indiscriminate violence, Cora Lee transgresses the rule by placing her children above her lovers.

Whereas Cora Lee *makes love to the shadows of men*, and lets them go, Lorraine and Theresa—the lesbian couple—don't even let them enter their lives because they have each other. It is sad that the rejection is twofold; apart from having to cope with the rage of the outside white world, Theresa and Lorraine face the hatred of both the black men and the black women in their black community. As if these black women's psychological balance wouldn't be already falling apart and, and as a way to react against a threatening sexuality, a black macho gang of the ghetto brutally rape Lorraine, and she dies.

As with Naylor's imaginary black ghetto, the real city of the ladies in colours has also such disturbing effects on them, that these black women have even considered suicide. Shange's women are more citified than the women of Brewster Place, though, and they act accordingly. Just to provide an example, while rural Mattie lost her virginity in a cane field, the woman in yellow had her first sexual intercourse in a Buick:

it was graduation nite & I waz the only virgin in the crowd . . . he started looking at me real strange like i waz a woman or somethin/started talkin real soft/in the backseat of that ol buick/WOW/ by daybreak i just cdnt stop grinnin. (Shange 10)

Contrary to the woman in yellow's, Mattie's experience was not so full of WOW'S and «yeah, honey it was wonderful» (Shange 10), and Mattie got pregnant to later lose her only son in the streets of the black ghetto. The lady in blue, however, shares with Ciel the agony of suffering an abortion done: «legs spread/anxious/eyes crawlin up on

me/eyes rollin in my thighs/metal horses gnawin my womb» (Shange 22). Both women, Ciel and the lady in blue, share a physical and psychological pain, and although it is the woman in blue who whispers «this hurts/this hurts me» (Shange 22), those might very well be Ciel's words. In Naylor's work, Etta is a free spirit who sleeps around but who never gets pregnant. She openly enjoys her sexuality, though. Shange's lady in red shares things in common both with Etta and Cora Lee. Like Etta, the lady in red is portrayed as a sensuous, beautiful, and passionate woman—no wonder she is dressed in red—who has also taken her talents to the street:

She waz hot/a deliberate coquette/who never did without/what she wanted/& and she wanted to be unforgettable/she wanted to be a memory/a wound to every man/arrogant enough to want her/she waz the wrath/of women in windows/fingerin shades/ol lace curtains/camoflagin despair and stretch marks (Shange 33)

Unlike Etta, the woman in red does not want a permanent liaison. After making love with the first available lover, and likewise Cora Lee, the woman in red does not want to have a man around the house either, but rather addresses her guest in not very diplomatic terms: «you'll have to go now/i've a lot of work to do/& i cant with a man around/here are yr pants/there's coffee on the stove/its been very nice/but i cant see you again/you got what you came for/ didn't you» (Shange 34).

Undoubtedly, the woman in red is much more liberated and outspoken than Etta is, and she also seems to be in total control of her own sexuality. There is no doubt that she enjoys a more ludic existence than Cora because, unlike Cora Lee, she has no children, and her lovers do not brutalize her.

Shockingly painful and violent as Ciel's and Eugene's story is, in Shange's work we find a parallel heartbreaking choreopoem told by the woman in red: that of Crystal and Beau. In explaining the peculiar neuroses of violence to which black men like Eugene and Beau are heir, critics like Ishmael Reed have pointed to black women writers' obsession with «airing the dirty laundry.» It is symptomatic that this type of men exists both in Naylor's and Shange's works. Like Eugene and Ciel, Beau and Crystal have two children. After learning that Crystal was pregnant «Beau most beat her to death when she tol him/she still gotta scar under her right tit where he cut her up» (Shange 56). Unlike Ciel, «Crystal went right on and had the baby» (Shange 56). Unemployed as Eugene is, and with a total lack of self-esteem, Beau is on drugs and gets high more often than not:

There waz no air/the sheets made ripples under his body like crumpled paper napkins in a summer park . . . like he wz an ol frozen bundle of chicken/& he'd get up to make coffee, drink wine, drink water/he wished one of his friend who knew where he waz wd come by with some blow or some shit/anythin/there waz no air. (Shange 55)

Caught in this cyclical and suffocating nightmare, Beau precipitates his own destruction together with that of his family's when he holds his two children hanging from a fifth floor to force Crystal to marry him: «say to all the neighbors/you gonna marry me/i stood by beau in the window/with naomi reachin for me/& kwane screaming mommy mommy from the fifth story/but i cd only whisper/ & he dropped em» (Shange 60)

The black men in Naylor's and Shange's works are not marginal footnotes quoted in passing, since they inflict on these black women's battered lives an extra agony. Understanding the way Gloria Naylor slashes black maleness, Jill L. Matus, far from excusing them, blames black men for breaking women's lives apart, and she adds that

their aggression, part-time presence, avoidance of commitment, and sense of dislocation renders them alien and other in the community of Brewster Place Mostly marginal and spectral in Brewster Place, the men reflect the nightmarish world they inhabit by appearing as if they were characters in a dream. (Matus 137)

Both Naylor's and Shange's works challenge the icon of the black city as *the land of milk and honey*, and defy the conventional idea of the black ghetto as a nurturing environment, by presenting a group of black women who are most vulnerable in their womanhood. A claustrophobic urban setting, like the black ghettos portrayed in Naylor's and Shange's works, kills unwanted babies, separates couples and lovers, turns nice kids into criminals, suffocates women's open sexuality, stigmatizes lesbian lovers, brutalizes women's bodies, and gang rapes women's sex. It is not untravelled terrain in Afro American literature that black women are most vulnerable in their sexuality, and Naylor's and Shange's subversive and transgressive works epitomize black women's rootlessness and displacement in the cities precisely because of the vulnerability of their bodies. It is only through female bonding that these black women confront the terrors of the black ghetto and, although deeply and systematically hurt in their womanhood, they somehow stay alive. No. For urban black women, the enemy is not just the black man or the white man, but those dead-end streets of a city black ghetto. After analyzing Naylor's and Shange's texts on ghetto life in USA, who can deny that these city black women are taking shit on a daily basis?

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