Woman-identified: women in pairs in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place

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Woman-Identified: Women in Pairs in Zora Neale Hurston's
Their Eyes Were Watching God and
Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place

by

Allison Kathleen Brimmer

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Allison Kathleen Brimmer

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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For the Graduate College
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INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, feminist critics have consistently debated the definition of the term lesbian. What does it mean to be a lesbian? Who is a lesbian? What can be identified as lesbian in literature? And furthermore, what is woman-identified? How do we determine woman-identified content in literary works? How or do we distinguish between the terms lesbian and woman-identified? What is the value of doing so?

The questions are many and the answers are few. But it seems only correct that to write a paper about woman-identified pairs in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, I must first explore some current theory and create my own definitions of what it means both to write as woman-identified and to interpret certain literature as woman-identified.

The original term “woman-identified” was created in 1970 by a group of women in New York called the Radicalesbians. The Radicalesbians insisted that the term woman-identified identifies women who relate to other women in a primary way. Based on the correct assumption that we live in a male-dominated heteropatriarchy, the Radicalesbians called for an end to women’s internalization of oppressive male strategies. They wrote:

It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of women’s liberation, and the basis for
the cultural revolution. Together we must find, reinforce and validate our authentic selves. As we do this, we confirm in each other that struggling incipient sense of pride and strength, the divisive barriers begin to melt, we feel this growing solidarity with our sisters. (emphasis mine, 5)

Since the publication of this manifesto, many feminist critics have borrowed from and revised the Radicalesbians' term woman-identified. For example, in 1983 Alice Walker entered the dialogue and created her own dictionary-style definition of the term "womanist"; her definition reads, in part:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. (In Search, xi)

Today in 1996 there are as many theories about the terms woman-identified and lesbian as there are theorists. In this paper, I will argue for a hybrid of theories which do not necessarily disagree but instead intersect to form a frame through which we may read and understand two pieces of woman-identified literature written by African American women in the United States.

In her landmark essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1979), Adrienne Rich created and defined the term "lesbian continuum":

I mean the term "lesbian continuum" to include a range - through each woman's life and throughout history - of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual
experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support. . . . (Rich, 217)

"Lesbian continuum" as defined by Rich is a broad and encompassing term exploring connections between women. Rich explains her interpretation of the term woman-identified when she writes:

If we consider the possibility that all women - from the infant suckling at her mother's breast, to... the woman dying at ninety, touched and handled by women - exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not....(Rich, 219)

Rich's lesbian continuum is a very useful concept when one encounters woman-identified content in literature that is not specifically labeled or considered by mainstream readers as lesbian.

Many theorists take issue with Rich's lesbian continuum for being too general and thus reductionist of the term lesbian. In her book *The Safe Sea of Women*, Bonnie Zimmerman creates a set of standards by which one may consider a literary text lesbian. For Zimmerman a text is lesbian only if it can be designated so through a "cluster of factors" (*Safe Sea*, 14). First, the writer must be self-identified as lesbian:

Lesbian writers, unlike those writers who incorporate a lesbian character or lesbian scene in a novel, are women who identify themselves in some way with the lesbian community. They may identify themselves as lesbians in their creative writing (by stressing autobiographical elements, for example) or in biographies or interviews.
They may do so through their choice of publisher...give readings at lesbian bookstores and centers, or attend lesbian panels at conferences. (Zimmerman, 15)

According to Zimmerman, along with having a lesbian writer, a lesbian text must also have a "central lesbian character who understands herself to be a lesbian" (15). Furthermore, the lesbian text must be "read by lesbians in order to affirm [its] lesbian existence" (15). Zimmerman considers lesbian texts to be woman-identified but does not support the opposite view, that all woman-identified texts are lesbian texts. In other words, a text that is woman-identified ("encompassing lesbians and all other women who value and bond with women" [129]) is not necessarily lesbian. Again, based on Zimmerman's parameters, a text is lesbian only if its author(s), main characters, and readers identify themselves as lesbian.

Zimmerman’s theory is much more limiting and restrictive than Rich’s continuum. It is true that the United States is a patriarchal society that has historically been threatened by and thus has worked to deny the notion of lesbianism. To qualify for Zimmerman’s definition of lesbian, writers, readers and characters must have come to terms with the society in which they live. In other words, they must be empowered to live beyond the detrimental constraints set up by a homophobic and heterosexist society - they must be self-actualized and comfortable enough to consider themselves, as well as the work that they either write or read, as lesbian. This is an
unrealistic condition to require of women reading and writing in today's heterosexist society. Thus, Zimmerman's definition of a lesbian text is not always helpful in reading different texts as woman-identified with potential lesbian content.

Another critic, Cheshire Calhoun, has also developed a stance against the term woman-identified. In her article "The Gender Closet: Lesbian Disappearance under the Sign 'Women'" Calhoun argues that woman-identified is a blanket term which all women can embrace. She notes that because all women can claim to be woman-identified (even if they have no sexual or primary relationships with women) the term lesbian vanishes. She writes, "When feminist woman loving replaces lesbian genital sexuality, lesbian identity disappears into feminist identity..." (11).

In line with Calhoun, Arlene Stein, editor of Sisters, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation, cites a "desexualization" of lesbian existence as a dangerous outcome of feminist theory which embraces more expansive terms such as woman-identified. Stein criticizes many first and second-wave feminists: "Down-and-dirty public discussions of sexual practice [a]re skirted in favor of talk of eroticism, friendship, and softer pleasantries. The specificity of lesbian existence -- as a sexual identity -- seem[s] to get lost" ("The Year" 18).

Contemporary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick recognizes the claims made by these women yet still understands the continuum
to be valid, although she defines it in a more complex way than Rich:

At this particular historical moment, an intelligible continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations links lesbianism with the other forms of women's attention to women: the bond of mother and daughter, for instance, the bond of sister and sister, women's friendship, 'networking,' and the active struggles of feminism. The continuum is crisscrossed with deep discontinuities— with much homophobia, with conflicts of race and class— but its intelligibility seems now a matter of simple common sense. However agonistic the politics, however conflicted the feelings, it seems at this moment to make an obvious kind of sense to say that women in our society who love women, women who teach, study, nurture, suckle, write about, march for, vote for, give jobs to, or otherwise promote the interests of other women, are pursuing congruent and closely related activities. ([Between Men, 2-3)

Taking issue with this is Terry Castle in her book The Apparitional Lesbian. Castle responds to Sedgwick by claiming that "the subject of lesbianism simply does not concern [Sedgwick]" (13). Castle goes on to suggest that because of the "morbid paranoia" which is homophobia in this society, lesbians in literature are "ghosted" or "made invisible" by writers, readers and critics.

Despite these theoretical differences, feminist readers must understand the homophobic restrictions with which women live and learn to work toward living beyond in white male-dominated society. By embracing Rich's definition and understanding literature as woman-identified and thus as posited on the lesbian continuum, we can understand much more about a plurality of texts - not just those whose authors, characters
and readers are self-identified as lesbian. Rich's continuum theory has been overlooked for too long. Even though many feminists have argued against it, Rich's theory provides a solid and specific framework for interpreting lesbian content in literature. Paulina Palmer, in her book *Contemporary Women's Fiction*, concurs: "...defining lesbianism in terms of woman-identified experience rather than from a narrow sexual point of view, ...foregrounds the multi-faceted nature of lesbian relations" (Palmer, 145). Thus, it may be argued that Rich's continuum is not too general and does not "desexualize" the term lesbian. Instead, it understands the woman-identified text to exist on a continuum of woman-identified/lesbian experience within a society that consistently condemns it.

Marilyn Farwell, however, raises a further interesting issue in her recent book *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*. Farwell considers Rich's lesbian continuum and wonders, given this expanded definition of what it means to be woman-identified, if any text can be considered lesbian. She questions how we define and label those texts whose characters, authors or readers are distinctly self-identified as lesbian (8–9). In this time when so many critics are in opposition over the definition of lesbian, Farwell argues for "a radical sense of lesbian identity" (19). She proposes a method of understanding woman-identified narratives by coining the terms "bodily" and "nonbodily" lesbian: "The nonbodily lesbian is the trope for female psychic autonomy and creative agency, while the
bodily figure" can be considered the sexualized or self-identified lesbian (18). Although I will not focus on this in my interpretation of Hurston and Naylor's texts, Farwell's definition is an illuminating method of understanding the lesbian as metaphor while still recognizing the more sexually defined lesbian.

It is hardly enough to stop here in the consideration of a framework for analyzing woman-identified pieces of literature. As most current feminist critics recognize, there are many complications to a generic definition of the terms lesbian and woman-identified. It is a given that women's studies and the feminist movement of the 1970s were (largely) a middle class, white women's domain. Because white women have the privilege of race in this society, they were the first to gain enough recognition to publish and join academic communities focusing on feminism and feminist interpretations of literature. As a result, bell hooks notes, "In most of their writing, the white American woman's experience is made synonymous with the American woman's experience" (Ain't, 137). It is imperative to all women when considering literature to understand the societal contexts within which authors and readers exist. What I refer to are the inherent complexities of race, sex, class, and power dynamics that exist within United States society and therefore the study of literature written both today and in the past.

Many heated debates have ensued as to concepts of difference and how those differences (of race, class, sexuality,
power positions, etc.) inform theory about woman-identification.

Again I draw from Calhoun:

[Feminist theorizing no longer makes the essentializing assumptions that "woman" signifies a set of universal commonalities, that all women share a common oppression, and, thus, that a single feminist agenda will equally address all women's needs. In an effort to combat the racism, classism, and other biases built into earlier feminist theorizing, "difference" has largely replaced "woman" as the category of analysis.(9)

One could argue (and many have) that using the term woman-identified or using the lesbian continuum erases precisely those differences (race, class, sexuality, power positions, etc.) that are so vitally in need of being recognized. Sedgwick believes that this focus on difference is, ultimately, destructive and states that today's post-modernist critics have gone too far in discussing difference: "Deconstruction... has... fetishized the idea of difference and... vaporized its possible embodiments" (3).

Sedgwick makes an interesting point. If we focus solely on differences, how do we arrive at any generalizations or frameworks useful for understanding? Perhaps we don't. Harriet Malinowitz puts forth important observations regarding this issue in her book Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities. Malinowitz is astute in pointing out that sexual identities, and the political affiliations that arise from them, are always shifting and contingent. ...we are all realizing that identities are multiple and complex. ...we need to minimize and maximize, create unities and
Instead of rejecting the concept of generalizations for differences or vice versa, we can embrace both ways of understanding when theorizing about the term woman-identified. Malinowitz points out that some generalizations are key for consciousness raising. She explains that notions of community and shared identity are important for validation. However, these generalizations are only useful until they begin to ignore those at the margins, those whose differences become lost within the generalization (18-19). When those differences begin to be ignored, we must step back, look for, acknowledge and consider them either through experience or through the attempt at understanding from the outside.

Many feminists now recognize the importance of the unique position of difference that African American women experience in white-dominated, patriarchal society. Gloria Wade-Gayles brilliantly conveys the difficulties that African American women face:

There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation, and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America. ...black women are twice burdened. Because they are black, they are denied the pedestals and petticoated privileges a racist and sexist society assumes to be appropriate "gifts" for women. Because they are women,
they are denied the power and influence men enjoy as the “natural” (or God-decreed) heads of families and leaders of nations. Black women are thus confined to both the narrow space of race and the dark enclosure of sex (No Crystal Stair, 4).

The complications are multiplied as we consider the difficulties faced by African American women who write about or are themselves woman-identified women or lesbians. Ann Allen Shockley highlights the barriers faced by African American woman-identified women. She explains, in her essay titled “The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview,” the severe homophobia often found within African American communities and asserts that “the independent woman-identified-woman—the Black Lesbian—[is] a threat” to others (85).

Thus, today’s critic, when studying African American women’s literature, must take into consideration many factors related to the experience of being an African-American woman-identified woman. This paper springs from knowledge of these issues as it explores the woman-identified content in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God and Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place.

Before I begin, it is also essential to recognize the place where I stand in relation to this thesis. My position as a white, woman-identified, bisexual woman approaching African American literature is problematic for many reasons. With the woman-identified writers about whom I write, I share, in one way, the oppression of being woman-identified in a patriarchal
society that is threatened by women who do not depend on men for their primary relationships and support. In contrast to this oppression, however, I cannot separate myself from the privilege inherent in being an educated white woman from an upper-middle class background.

Many feminist critics consider the position of the critical reader as an important influence on the reading and writing process. Jean Kennard, in her article "Ourself Behind Ourself: A Theory for Lesbian Readers", offers the concept of "polar reading." Kennard suggests that readers can learn about themselves and more fully define their own identities through the process of reading foreign aspects of themselves in any text's characters (70). For example, if a lesbian reader concentrates on the heterosexual content of a text, her lesbian sensibilities will be drawn forward in response to her (heterosexual) analysis/reading which is usually dormant or traditionally denied. According to Kennard, the result of polar reading is therapeutic in that it helps the reader define herself:

Polar reading permits the participation of any reader in any text and thus opens up the possibility of enjoying the widest range of literary experience. It does not, however, involve the reader in denying herself. The reader redefines herself in opposition to the text; if that self-definition includes lesbianism, this becomes apparent in any commentary she may make on her reading. (77)

Given this theory of reading, what are the implications of a white bisexual woman reading woman-identified content in two
examples of African American women's literature? Kennard's theory is useful in understanding the process of reading and how it might affect the reader's concept of her self-identification. However, Kennard's polar reading neglects the bisexual reader and what she might learn from or bring to the text. By focusing on heterosexual/homosexual dichotomies, Kennard adopts an either/or paradigm; there is no space for the "and" of the bisexual.

I am sure that my reading of these texts is influenced and directed by my woman-identified identity. Kennard's notion is certainly appropriate because it recognizes the significance of the reader's identity in shaping her reading experience. However, it is limited in that it does not account for a reader who is interested in a continuum of experiences that are ever-changing. There is a fluidity of experience and identifications not acknowledged by many others including Kennard. In contrast, critic Cheryl Clarke emphasizes that there has been a historical tradition of black, woman-to-woman eroticism which has included all forms of sexuality and experience: heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and other (Living the Texts, 224). Adrienne Rich acknowledges that "it is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates toward strong women, who seeks literature that will express that energy and strength" (It is the Lesbian, 200-201). The texts that this thesis analyzes are certainly representations of a range of woman-
identified experience; I call upon the lesbian in myself to read them in all of their richness.

Some of the characters discussed here identify themselves as lesbian, specifically Lorraine and Theresa in Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*. I will also examine closely other characters from Naylor’s novel who have vital, fulfilling, woman-identified identities and relationships. Characters in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are depicted and were written about in a historical context much different from that of *The Women of Brewster Place*. These women in Hurston’s fiction, most clearly Janie and Pheoby, maintained a strong and supportive “kissin’ friend” relationship in their rural southern community which gave respect only to heterosexual/opposite gender relationships. My reading of them will reveal their identities as woman-identified women existing on the lesbian continuum defined by Rich and elaborated on by many feminist critics.

“It is time to focus on presence not absence,” writes Castle (19). This paper will focus on the presence of woman-identified relationships and the value, necessity, and inevitable complications that stem from those relationships. In my reading of these relationships I borrow from Helena Michie’s text *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture*. Michie’s theory of “correctability,” first encountered in a class she took at Brandeis University, is that which
allows one to speak, to speculate, to try to formulate ideas about experiences and communities that are somehow ‘other’ in the full knowledge that one can and will be corrected and challenged. (11-12)

Like Michie and her former professor, I write this paper with the hope that I may enter a critical dialogue and potentially be challenged and corrected by others.
FEMALE FRAMEWORKING: JANIE AND PHEOBY IN THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a text which has offered itself to a multiplicity of readings over the fifty-nine years since its publication. Only recently, however, in the last fifteen years, have critics grasped hold of Hurston's work and begun to realize its importance. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel that has been, in many ways and by many critics past and present, overlooked on its most fundamental level. Through her narrative strategy and natural imagery, Hurston created in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a brilliant story so ahead of its time that it was literally ignored until, it seems, literary critics could catch up.

Hurston's tribute paid through narrative device in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Janie and Pheoby's relationship, and her development of female characters as potentially self-sustaining individuals are indicative of the woman-identification inherent in this novel. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can be interpreted much more fully and openly now, from a late twentieth-century feminist perspective, as an inspiring and revolutionary model of the woman-identified text. Moreover, Zora Neale Hurston is a model of the African American female writer breaking white, male cultural traditions and creating a woman-identified fiction representing a woman-identified reality.
from which the author was excluded during her lifetime (1891-1960).

Current criticism of Their Eyes Were Watching God is overwhelmingly centered on Janie's relationship with Tea Cake. Whereas certain critics recognize the female search for self and need for community as key issues in the novel, most still give priority to heterosexual love and experience as the sole informers of Janie's existence. For example, Claire Crabtree writes in her article "The Confluence of Folklore, Feminism and Black Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God" that "Tea Cake expands Janie's horizons both literally and figuratively" (57). Later in the article she writes, "The sense of sexuality and shared roles found in Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is another aspect of Janie's development as a person. ...It is in her life 'on the muck' of the Everglades with Tea Cake that Janie achieves equality with men" (60).

Although her conclusions are somewhat different, Maria Tai Wolff echoes Crabtree when she states, "Tea Cake gives Janie the world, from which they will make a 'dream' together. He offers her experience" (31). Crabtree's and Wolff's arguments are problematic. Crabtree states that Tea Cake expands Janie's horizons while Wolff claims Tea Cake gives Janie the world and offers her experience. In both instances we may note that Janie is a passive character, viewed by these critics as an object acted upon by Tea Cake. In my reading, Janie is the main actor
in this text, one who is on a quest for herself. Her relationship with Tea Cake is just one of three marital relationships. The fact that Tea Cake does not even appear until halfway through the novel reinforces this view that he is not the central figure in Janie's life.

While Michael Awkward understands that Janie's quest is for her own self-fulfillment separate from men, he too suggests that "Janie's transcendence begins when she finds Tea Cake, the man who most closely resembles her dream of an ideal mate" (113). Similar to Awkward, Jennifer Jordan, in her essay "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God," argues that Janie and Tea Cake's relationship is the ultimate union, one that follows closely traditional literary romances:

It is unlikely that Tea Cake's death is a punishment for his treatment of Janie. His death is instead a typical resolution of the tale of courtly love in which the young troubadour or knight engages in an all-consuming passion with a lady of high rank. ...Hurston creates [Janie and Tea Cake's relationship as] an alliance of pure romance, a life adventure and sexual union in a kind of Eden. But in the tradition of the western romance this love affair does not survive in a temporary realm. Denis de Rougemont in Love in the Western World argues that romantic love is often terminated by death but that the romancer uses death not to destroy love but to heighten its passion (emphasis mine). Love is sweeter because of the partings and obstructions, and death is the ultimate obstruction, the greatest enhancer of an epic obsession. So Tea Cake's death allows Janie to hold on to her paradise and to a dream of a perfect love. She can choose to remember the passion and the good times.... (110)

Jordan overlooks the fact that Janie kills Tea Cake. If their love is such an Eden, why does Hurston choose to end it? Does she separate the two in favor of the bittersweet tragedy? This
notion of tragedy stems, as Jordan herself points out, from a Western approach to the study of "pure" romance. We should not forget that this western tradition is not Hurston's African-inspired tradition. The western tradition represents the works of a larger white/male dominant literary tradition. By marking the significance of Pheoby and Janie's relationship and Pheoby's role as a bridge between Janie and the Eatonville porch-front community, Hurston chose to move beyond these white/male parameters to create her own form of literature representative of something other than white/male literary conventions.

Jordan diminishes Janie (and Pheoby, and women in general) as she imagines the end of Janie's relationship with Tea Cake as the end of Janie's story. Jordan states:

Janie returns to Eatonville because she cannot continue her quest for excitement without Tea Cake and has demonstrated no ability to survive alone. ...Janie is portrayed not as a self-defined, aware woman who will take charge of her own and others' destiny. Instead Hurston presents her as a woman whose life has passed, who has seized one bright moment by surrendering herself to the right man, and who will end that life commemorating that brief happiness. (113-5) (emphasis mine)

Deborah Plant agrees that Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is, in some ways, a giving up of herself to a man. Plant argues that Hurston's representation of this unequal relationship between Janie and Tea Cake is, in fact, Hurston's view of male/female relationships. Plant suggests that to Hurston, the ideal relationship between a man and a woman is one in which the male dominates and the female submits; "woman is ... man's helpmate" (162). Plant writes: "More often than not Hurston
endowed women with a weak will and cast them in the stereotypical mode of emotional or financial dependents" (163). According to Plant, Janie is a woman in constant need of men:

Janie seems to be a woman who depends on the kindness of strange men. She has experienced love as she dreamed it should be, but that kind of love casts Janie in a subordinate, dependent position. (199)

Plant writes "When Hurston has the opportunity to develop a female character of heroic stature to question conventional gender roles, she does not" (166). Plant does not recognize the critique of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship made by Hurston. She reads the text only on the surface level when she states that she believes that Hurston's ideals of relationships in literature and life are ones of subordinance and domination.

Similar to Plant, critic James Krasner writes:

The beatific ending of Their Eyes Were Watching God portrays Janie at one with her history. She has told a successful tale and can now live on, feeding on her inner visions of Tea Cake. ...Once the prophecy is fulfilled the only thing left to do is tell the story over and over again. (124)

If it was Hurston's intention that the remainder of Janie's life be spent reminiscing over her relationship with Tea Cake, why does she write the final chapters of Janie's return to Eatonville at all? It seems unlikely that the novel's major, overall framing device of the conversation between Janie and Pheoby is less significant than Janie's relationship with one of her three husbands. Hurston's female relationship-centered narrative strategy is not simply an afterthought but a device
that illustrates the new and deeper levels of self-understanding and self-fulfillment that Janie gains beyond her relationships with men.

Jordan misses the point when she writes

Janie's struggle for identity and self-direction remains stymied. She never defines herself outside the scope of her material or romantic involvements and, despite her sincere relationship with her friend Pheoby, fails to achieve a communal identification with the black women around her or with the black community as a whole. As the novel ends, Janie chooses isolation and contemplation, not solidarity and action. (108)

In direct opposition to this statement, Their Eyes Were Watching God emphasizes Janie's search for self and her final union with Pheoby. At the novel's end the reader senses that the two women have, in effect, created their own porch-front community which serves to nurture and support the two women.

However, not all depictions of community in this text are positive ones. The first scene of the novel illustrates the complexity of the author's stance toward community. On page one of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie returns to Eatonville and must walk past the judgmental eyes of her neighbors gathered on the porch-front. The author highlights the anger and despair that these individuals endure. They are portrayed as tired and hungry, affected by "the envy they [have] stored up from other times" (2). Janie is, for them, a symbol of independence and freedom that they have lost, or more accurately, have never had the opportunity to gain. So they sit with "their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope" (2). They hope that Janie can
provide them with the freshness of self-awareness she has acquired on her journey. They wait for a glimpse of the self-assurance that they themselves do not possess.

This longing in the community members is manifested in a destructive bitterness. The Eatonville porch-front community members:

chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. (2)

The words they pronounce together are harmful and dangerous. The women criticize Janie for her appearance. They are envious that she wears comfortable, non-inhibiting overalls and that she strolls with, "her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal" (2). They wonder why she is walking toward her home alone. For these women, Janie is incomplete without a man by her side and without the constricting garments and fashions that the women feel compelled to wear for acceptance.

Similarly, the men objectify Janie and notice her only as a sexual being created for their eyes with

her firm buttocks like ... grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; ...her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. (2)

We understand from this that Janie is a sexual object to them. Not only is she seen this way by the men, she is thought about and remembered as an object, as well. Hurston explains that,
collectively, the men and women of the porch-front community "hope that [Janie] might fall to their level some day" (2).

Skillfully portraying the ambiguities in just one page of text, Hurston quickly introduces the reader to the woman who is potentially a source of positive, life-affirming hope for the community members as well as for Janie. Pheoby Watts, after hearing the neighbors criticize Janie, asserts herself to support Janie as she tells the others to reserve judgment because they are not aware of Janie's specific situation. In this way, Pheoby acts as a bridge between Janie and the seething porch-front community. She is still accepted as a member qualified to sit on the porch with the others. However, Pheoby, although she has never left Eatonville to explore and find herself, does not sit in judgment of Janie as the others do. She says that she is Janie's "best friend" and that if Janie has anything to say, she will tell Pheoby. Anticipating Janie's physical needs, Pheoby promptly excuses herself and goes to the aid of her friend "to go take her some supper" (3).

Hurrying off to Janie's house with her arms full of food, Pheoby instinctively uses the back and thus more intimate entrance to Janie's house. It is in this scene between friends that we begin to understand that Pheoby is there for Janie to nourish her both physically with her cooking and emotionally as a person who will truly listen. Furthermore, we recognize the extent of the intimacy Janie and Pheoby share; the relationship
is a fundamental source of strength for the two women. No doubt, these two characters are woman-identified.

Lorraine Bethel defines the importance of relationships between African American women:

Black woman identification... is most simply the idea of Black women seeking their own identity and defining themselves through bonding on various levels — psychic, intellectual, and emotional, as well as physical — with other Black women. Choosing Black... woman-identification is... the process of identifying one's self and the selves of other Black women as inherently valuable. (17)

Obviously, Janie and Pheoby's relationship fits Bethel's model perfectly. Upon seeing each other for the first time in the novel, Pheoby immediately notices and appreciates Janie's beauty. She does not objectify Janie the way the men do. Instead she comments on Janie's beauty as part of her complete "womanhood." She exclaims, "Gal, you sho looks good. You looks like youse yo' own daughter... you shows yo' womanhood" (4). In just a few words, Hurston picks up on key generational connections between women. Janie looks young, like a potential daughter and thus an extension of her rich, woman self. Hurston's focus on women and the qualities of womanhood seems deliberate. Next, Pheoby inquires about Janie's emotional condition and Janie responds, extending her hand with a physical gesture of intimacy, knowing that Pheoby's words come "from de heart" (4).

bell hooks identifies this type of relationship between women as essential in her book Sisters of the Yam: Black Women
and Self-Recovery. hooks comments on community- and historically-based African American cultural patterns:

"Conversation and story-telling were important locations for sharing information about the self, for healing" (16). Janie and Pheoby's relationship is one which heals and helps the women to learn about themselves. This portrayal of a comfortable, mutually fulfilling, woman-identified relationship is, significantly, the introduction Hurston chooses for her novel. The novel's beginning is not a story or vivid memory of Tea Cake but a scene in which Janie's intimate female friend Pheoby settles back to listen to and validate the experiences Janie has had beyond these women's own back-porch community. Before hearing of Janie's trials, we are once again made aware of the crucial role Pheoby fulfills within and outside this relationship. As Janie's "tongue is in [her] friend's mouf," we understand that these two are intimate and that whatever experiences Janie relates may, in turn, be related by Pheoby. Pheoby is trusted to continue the oral tradition, faithfully and accurately relating to the Eatonville porch-front community the learning experiences Janie has had in her venture beyond Eatonville. Thus Pheoby will act as a bridge between the two worlds; in one world she is the woman-identified friend and companion of Janie, in the other she is (with her friend's "tongue in [her] mouf") the conveyer of information to the larger, ambiguous porch-front community. These "kissin' -
friends" make up the all-important, and continually overlooked or dismissed, framework for Janie's story (7). No matter what happens in the middle, we understand that this story is set against the backdrop of two woman-identified women, lovingly sharing the story of life-experience.

One of the most significant woman-identified symbols which appears early in the novel and runs through it is the pear tree. The tree is especially important because it is one of the symbols which remains with Janie at the end of the text after she returns to Eatonville as well. The pear tree is a part of Janie's existence during her life experiences told to Pheoby and returns at the novel's end - after Janie's other experiences have ended and she is creating new ones with Pheoby.

With the help of "Pheoby's hungry listening" on the back-porch step (10), Janie explains that the day her "conscious life" began she was sitting under a blooming pear tree in her back yard. For three days Janie had returned to the tree to luxuriate beneath its lush branches. "[E]ver since the first tiny bloom had opened[,] [i]t had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously" (10). A symbol of human life, as Kubitschek recognizes, the tree represents possibility for Janie (22). In addition, as many have pointed out, the tree and the "tremendous" stirrings it provides for Janie are symbols of Janie's sexual awakening. Significantly, Janie is alone under
the tree, possibly masturbating and providing by herself and for herself, feelings of sexual gratification and perhaps orgasm.

The pear tree as symbol returns repeatedly as Janie narrates to Pheoby her experiences with the three men in her life. With her first two husbands the pear tree blossoms remain closed. It is not until she meets Tea Cake that the possibility of a satisfying sexual relationship is introduced. In her article, "Zora Neale Hurston and the Survival of the Female Self," Mary Jane Lupton points out that although Hurston has Tea Cake represent a pear tree in blossom, Tea Cake ambiguously enters "crushing aromatic herbs with every step he [takes]" (90). Lupton understands the word crushing to indicate Tea Cake's "destructive nature" which accompanies the natural/sexual images of the blossoming tree (49). For Janie, there is an opportunity for sexual pleasure and release with Tea Cake, but there is also the very real threat of herb-crushing behaviors exhibited by Tea Cake.

In many ways, Tea Cake does act to crush Janie's natural, sexual and human spirit. In fact, Tea Cake repeatedly controls, silences, and takes advantage of Janie. First we see Janie changing her appearance to suit Tea Cake's wishes, wearing the color "blue because Tea Cake told her to wear it" (105). Next we understand that although Janie does have a voice in the relationship, Tea Cake consistently sets standards for their interactions. Janie knows that the couple "is goin' off
somewhere and start all over in Tea Cake's way" (emphasis mine).

In the beginnin' new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said. After Ah got used to dat, we gits 'long jus' fine. He done taught me de maiden language all over. Wait till you see de new blue satin Tea Cake done picked out for me to stand up wid him in. (108-10)

This passage is telling in several ways. Janie acknowledges that Tea Cake has convinced her to be his pupil and has literally created "new words" for her to speak. What was once the "maiden language" has now been reformulated to a male version created and understood by Tea Cake. Janie is unaware of the negative effects that this re-education has on her sense of self. Unknowingly, she accepts Tea Cake's prescriptions for their relationship.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston conveys the message that Janie and Tea Cake's relationship is not ideal. Through Tea Cake's theft of Janie's 200 dollars (which Pheoby urges Janie to keep hidden for protection), his unfaithful flirting and intimacy in the fields with Nunkie, and ultimately the violence he inflicts upon Janie based on (unfounded) jealous rage, Hurston gives us more than enough evidence that Janie and Tea Cake's relationship is neither healthy nor meant to last.

As Thomas Cassidy points out, Tea Cake becomes figuratively a rabid animal, transformed by his jealousy over trouble started by Mrs. Turner who thinks her brother is a potential suitor for Janie (269). Hurston neatly disposes of the marriage and Tea
Cake's cruel behavior by letting Janie kill him. In opposition, Plant states that:

The relationship [between Janie and Tea Cake] was ideal for Janie, and if Janie had not been forced to shoot this man for whom she 'felt a self-crushing love,' she would have continued living out her ideal - one that denied her complete autonomy. (169)

Ironically, Tea Cake's murder is Janie's ultimate self-defense; she saves her sense of self, in fact her own identity, by defending herself against Tea Cake's rabid and vicious attacks. She is, to use Plant's words, "forced" to kill Tea Cake because that is the action that will finally free her. After the ensuing trial, Janie may return to Eatonville (or to any other destination she chooses).

It seems only natural that Janie does choose to return to Eatonville and her lifelong friend Pheoby after Tea Cake's death. After all, Pheoby is there, waiting to support her and listen to her tell her experiences. John F. Callahan recognizes that "only Pheoby remains open both as Janie's friend and as a friend to her story, whatever its gist and whether it confirms or denies her expectations and values" (93). In addition, Janie knows that, as Kubitschek points out, because her "tongue is in [her] friend's mouf" Pheoby will instructively pass on to the community whatever Janie relates (33).

Hurston has created in Their Eyes Were Watching God a story which centers around a woman-identified couple. Janie and Pheoby's intimacy and interdependence easily can be read as a woman-identified relationship that Rich's lesbian continuum
could accommodate. It is also a relationship that embodies Lorraine Bethel’s notions of African American woman-identification.

In her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich explains that all women, whether female- or male-identified, exist on the "lesbian continuum." According to her, this continuum is "a range of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (217). Furthermore, she argues that we must "expand [the term lesbian] to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women including the sharing of a rich inner life..." (217).

Rich explains:

As the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate the lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely the body itself. (218)

Based on this definition, we may see Janie and Pheoby sitting together quietly on the back porch, sharing their own inner life experiences and thoughts, existing on the lesbian continuum and considered as lesbian.

Also instrumental in understanding the erotic in female terms is Audre Lorde’s 1979 article “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” As I will discuss later in reference to
Naylor, Lorde's concept of the erotic is an important one. To Lorde, the erotic is "a personification of love in all its aspects... [the erotic is] an assertion of the lifeforce of women" (55). Keeping Rich and Lorde's theories in mind, Pheoby and Janie's relationship as "kissin' friends" takes on whole new meanings. Obviously we may read the phrase "Mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" with significant erotic meaning. By recognizing what is lesbian and thus erotic in this unique relationship, we can better comprehend the magnitude of Hurston's ground-breaking techniques in portraying women.

Contrary to Jordan's view that "... in the long run [Hurston's] story makes light of the fate of the majority of black women in the 30s" (112), Hurston has shed light on the situations many black women lived in the 30s. Through her woman-identified narrative framing device, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reveals the fundamentally important female-to-female relationships that worked to frame the lives of many women in the past and continue to do so to the lives of contemporary women.

As Rich points out, Hurston's "survival relationships were all with women, beginning with her mother" (220). Perhaps *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a reflection of Hurston's woman-identified relationships that she could not celebrate openly in a patriarchal, homophobic society. In fact, by considering the social context in and from which Hurston was writing, we can understand the truly landmark text Hurston has created in *Their
Eyes Were Watching God. First published in the early 1930s, Hurston was a woman-identified artist at a time when being woman-identified was not acceptable. Ann Allen Shockley explains that, historically, "Publishers were not interested in books with lesbian themes; a money-making market was inconceivable" (84).

Although Hurston was living and writing in what has since been named the Harlem Renaissance, the climate for African American artists at the time was hardly one of a nurturing renaissance or re-birth. In his article "Zora Neale Hurston and the Text," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. highlights the racist society that dictated what was written by the "talented tenth" in Harlem. The effect this dictation had on African American artists and the work they produced should not be underestimated. Gates writes, "To redress their image as a negotiation of all that was white and Western, black authors published as if their collective lives depended on how their texts would be received" (171).

Accordingly, in 1929, a list of "Instructions for Contributors" was widely circulated among the then-named Negro Press. Written by George S. Schuyler and published in the Negro Fictionist, these "Instructions" listed the writing requirements necessary for African Americans of the time to be published. Among these restrictive rules for writing were the instructions:

Every manuscript submitted must be written in each-sentence-a-paragraph style. ...We will not accept any
stories that are depressing, saddening or gloomy. Our people have enough troubles without reading about any. We want them to be interested, cheered and buoyed up; comforted, gladdened, and made to laugh. (179)

Certainly it is difficult to write effectively and creatively when one is told what and how to write. Hurston occupied a position in society that was nearly impossible to negotiate. As Barbara Johnson explains, "The Black woman is both invisible and ubiquitous: never seen in her own right but forever appropriated by the others for their own ends" (216). Johnson explains the unique position African American women writers face by being both the oppressed race and gender simultaneously. Despite these restrictions, Hurston quietly wrote a woman-identified story that illustrates the deep intimacy between her characters, Janie and Pheoby. Bethel explains it well when she writes:

Hurston wrote as a Black woman-identified Black woman, valuing her experiences as a woman as well as a Black person in a society where those areas of experience are generally regarded as valueless, insignificant, and inferior to white/male culture. (11)

In this regard we might consider the fourth "instruction" on Schuyler's list: "Nothing that casts the least reflection on contemporary moral or sex standards will be allowed" (179). No doubt this instruction is a warning against explicit heterosexual content in writing. It is difficult to imagine how a novel with more explicit lesbian content would have been received in 1937. Rich states that the "...overall homophobic attitude of the black community,... the enmity toward
homosexuality has long been rampant in Black life" ("Compulsory", 184), and Barbara Christian furthers explores the notion of homophobia in the African American community:

Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining 'straightness' is our last resort. Being out [as lesbian], particularly out in print, is the final renunciation of any claim to the crumbs of 'tolerance' that... Black women are sometimes fed." (171)

That Hurston chooses to frame her novel with a woman-identified relationship despite the restriction of homophobia in the African American community as well as the restrictions of a dominant and oppressive white/male patriarchy is truly revolutionary.

The conclusions we may draw are many. Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God illustrates intimate female bonding relationships that are often overlooked, dismissed, or kept hidden. As Gregory Woods suggests, "it is high time" that readers assess the lesbian or woman-identified content in works by the many writers living and writing during a time when woman-identified texts and subtexts had to be concealed for publication purposes (128). The woman-identified narrative framework Hurston created still resounds today as we understand the struggles that women writers have to endure. As Bethel writes,

Women in this country have defied the dominant sexist society by developing a type of folk culture and oral
literature based on the use of gender solidarity and female bonding as self-affirming rituals. Black women have a long tradition of bonding together in a community that has been a source of survival information, and psychic and emotional support. (12)

Their Eyes Were Watching God exemplifies the defiance that many women have maintained despite the controlling, objectifying, patriarchal influences of our society. Hurston's text is a valuable piece of fiction which can be read into many women's realities yet today. Pheoby and Janie, although often overlooked, have created a back-porch community with which all women may identify. Perhaps even more importantly, the community they have created is one which we may all strive to join.
DREAMS OF UNITY: WOMAN-IDENTIFICATION IN THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

Zora Neale Hurston - I have used her spirit for things and her politics about the celebration of the speech of the folk. — Gloria Naylor (1993)

In a conversation with Virginia Fowler, Gloria Naylor explained the way in which she has looked to other African American women writers as sources of strength and models for her own writing. Not coincidentally, Naylor cites (as quoted above) the influence of Zora Neale Hurston's politics and celebration of "the folk" as informers of her work.

Deborah E. McDowell speaks of the deep connections over time between African American women writers in her insightful article titled "'The Changing Same:' Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists." McDowell notes:

I see literary influence, to borrow from Julia Kristeva, in the intertextual sense, each text in dialogue with all previous texts, transforming and retaining narrative patterns and strategies in endless possibility. (107)

McDowell's observations about literary influence sheds light on the reason why so many contemporary African American woman authors speak of their connections with and the influence of other African American woman writers.

Helen Fiddyment Levy writes specifically about Gloria Naylor's connection to Zora Neale Hurston in her article "Lead on With Light."

The communal voice of Hurston, her courageous defiance of both black male and white definitions, has empowered
Naylor, as well as other African American women authors, to write out of their experience of doubled marginality as woman and black, and like Hurston, Naylor reaches back to the local language, which exists at the margins of the competitive bureaucratic social order. (280)

In this short passage, Levy pinpoints the significance of Hurston's and other early African American women writers' experience and work and their impact on later African American women writers. In fact, Robert Saunders suggests that "The literary process of borrowing ideas has been going on for quite some time, but Naylor is one who has perfected the technique" (249).

Naylor's accomplishments in writing *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983) are especially significant considering her years as a devout Jehovah's witness who did not disregard the faith's proscription that she read nothing but the Bible and other works published by Jehovah's witnesses. Naylor had not even encountered a text written by an African American female author until she had left the ministry and was a 27 year-old sophomore in college in New York in 1977. Just four years later, at the time of her graduation from college, she added her name to the list of published African American women writers with her astounding work *The Women of Brewster Place* (Fowler, 13).

While Naylor has "borrowed from" and been informed by other African American women writers, many aspects of Naylor's personal life and family culture also inspire her work. According to Fowler, *The Women of Brewster Place* "contains numerous pieces of Naylor's personal and familiar past in the
form of names, places, and even stories" (22). For example, the numbers of several Brewster Place apartments are identical to those of some Harlem apartments owned by her grandparents while Naylor was growing up. Furthermore, one of the novel's main characters, Etta Mae Johnson, is modeled after Naylor's great Aunt Mae (Fowler, 22).

In addition to borrowing from others and using her life experiences to inform her work, Naylor has created in her first "novel in seven stories" a refreshingly original narrative structure which lends itself to one of the novel's major themes: women and their communities. Naylor makes great strides capturing and reclaiming intimate, lifesource bonds between women. The most exciting and well developed theme of this novel is its focus on the variety and complexity of relationships between women. Woman-identified women capture and embody the movement and inspiration of this novel. In addition to this theme, Naylor's work explores racism and its impact on young African American men in society as well as homophobia and the ensuing heterosexism which plague members of the Brewster Place community. Broad in scope, The Women of Brewster Place brings to the forefront many important insights while deftly focusing on close, satisfying, woman-identified relationships.

Before examining these relationships, it is useful to recognize some of the key narrative aspects of the novel. We are introduced to this work through a chapter titled,
significantly, "Dawn". In the "Dawn" or awakening chapter, Naylor depicts the origins of the Brewster Place community:

Brewster Place was the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Reality Company. ...[The alderman and the director] came together, propositioned, bargained, and slowly worked out the consummation of their respective desires. As an afterthought, they agreed to erect four double-housing units on some worthless land in the badly crowded district. ...[A]nd so in a damp, smoke-filled room, Brewster Place was conceived.(1)

We understand that the Brewster Place community originated from a series of power plays between men and from competition between two nameless, faceless, powerful officials working to better their own lots. Naylor continues by detailing the growth of Brewster Place as a separate and rich community that "developed a personality of its own" once city legislators decided to build a wall and make Brewster Place a dead end street (4). A diverse community filled with diverse individuals, "Brewster Place rejoiced in [its] multi-colored 'Afric' children of its old age" (4).

Naylor complicates, however, this optimistic opening description of the young Brewster Place; its ruthless and oppressive origins cannot be denied. Similar to Hurston's Eatonville porch-front community, Naylor's Brewster Place community is a complex entity which has formed, in part, in response to the harsh effects of white oppression. Thus, Brewster Place is personified as a dysfunctional child who has grown and reproduced but whose own children cannot leave home:
Brewster Place knew that unlike its other children, the few who would leave forever were to be the exception rather than the rule, since they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason. (4)

Naylor adeptly creates and juxtaposes a sensual, beautiful, diverse and growing community of people of color with the image of Brewster Place as a closed off community destined for self-destruction, trapped behind a brick wall that was masterminded, constructed, and controlled by the powerful white legislators on the outside.

Celeste Fraser writes: "Naylor materialized the closed economy in which the government would place African American[s] ... by isolating them" (75). Michael Awkward refers to Brewster Place as "a physically and legislatively isolated urban island which is, for the most part, untouched by direct white influence" (105). As in Hurston's Eatonville, instead of direct influence, we understand the oppression of the white power structure systems to be hovering outside of Brewster Place and working to keep the community members closed in behind the wall. Montgomery calls Brewster Place a tortured inverted world whose reality is determined by the rich and powerful. Nothing is quite what it should be. The community is a world apart, the product of an unscrupulous political bargain. It is designed to fail. (2)

Thus we understand the struggles and history of the closed economy that keeps Brewster Place residents exactly where they are, geographically isolated and financially limited.

Before we can begin our discussion of the woman-identified community of women in the novel, we must acknowledge the role
that patriarchy and the confines of Brewster Place have played in the lives of some of the community’s young African American men who later play a decisive role in the lives of the women of Brewster Place. C.C. Baker and his gang of friends are created by Naylor to demonstrate the dangerous effects of the white patriarchy which works to destroy the potential of young African American men living on the streets of Brewster Place. Clearly, we are meant to understand that C.C. and his friends are realistic portraits of many young, African American men, disillusioned and living in oppressed conditions.

These young men always moved in a pack, or never without two or three. They needed the others continually near to verify their existence. 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, suede sneakers, and tinted sunglasses imaged nearby proved that they were alive. (161)

Naylor creates compelling images of these minimally educated, insecure young men who look to their friends for validation and support. These young men, in the absence of dreams of a future, have created day-to-day gods in their music idols whom they hope to meet someday in heaven. The desperation these details portray is indicative of Naylor’s poignant insights into the complexities of life in Brewster Place. In such brief, descriptive scenarios she manages to convey a multitude of expansive and heartwrenching images. Using few words she creates well-developed characters as symbols of the experiences of many young African American men who grow up discriminated
against due to racism, heterosexism and other societal oppressions.

It is obvious, however, that Naylor’s interest does not lie solely in issues dealing with oppression and the men of Brewster Place. In fact, the novel’s main focus is not the men but rather on the women who live with and love each other in The Women of Brewster Place.

Most critics have recognized the great strides African American women writers have made by writing about and, in effect, resurrecting the importance of African American community as a support system for all its members, especially its female members. In her landmark essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Barbara Smith writes:

The use of Black women’s language and cultural experience in books by Black women about Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures. (164)

Barbara Christian suggests that African American women have had to bond with each other in order to survive. African Americans as a race could not have survived without the “female values” of communality, sharing and nurturing. (“No More”, 364)

Christian hails Naylor’s treatment and valuation of this principle in The Women of Brewster Place.

By creating a tapestry of nurturing women in her first novel, Naylor emphasizes how female values derived from mothering – nurturing, communality, concern with human feeling – are central to Brewster Place’s survival. (“Gloria Naylor’s Geography”, 363)
In her article "'What Shall I Give My Children?' The Role of the Mentor in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Paule Marshall's *Praisong for the Widow*" Linda Wells also acknowledges the sense of female community that Naylor conveys:

The energy of Brewster Place arises out of the women's affiliation with each other.... It is their sense of responsibility for the welfare of each other that binds them together. (42)

Awkward agrees that the women's community of Brewster Place is vital. He suggests that Brewster Place is "essentially related to its exploration of the redemptive possibilities of female coalescence" (98). The redemption that Awkward suggests is a major function of the female community of Brewster Place. The communal bonds between the women of Brewster Place are literally the force that keeps some of them alive.

Fowler notes that "The women, despite having reached what seem to be the dead ends of their lives, continue to dream and to nurture each other" (25). Due to these communal connections such as close loving friendships and, at times, maternal concern, the women of Brewster Place grow as individuals. Wells posits correctly that "Naylor creates for [the reader] a community of African American women who not only invent themselves, but also take responsibility for assisting others in the act of self-creation" (42-43).

It is friendship and love between women that are so vital to the self-creation described by Wells. Abel theorizes about
this process in her article "(E)Merging Identities; The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women":

Through the intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to another who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self. (416)

Wells argues that the women of Brewster Place act as mentors for each other:

Naylor creates a series of mentors, women whose voices reverberate throughout the novel, and each mentor carries the voices of past mentors who have healed her and bound her to the community through shared experiences. (44)

Whether the women of Brewster Place are friends, lovers, enemies, or mentors for each other, they are deeply interconnected and crucial to each other as sources of strength and inspiration for virtually all aspects of their lives.

One critic seems to go astray in his reading of women's communities in The Women of Brewster Place. Larry Andrews suggests that the women's bond derives its power from "the women's previous sense of isolation, from their mistreatment by men, and from their regenerative discovery, through suffering, of the saving grace of a shared experience" (2). By asserting that the women's community arises only as an aftermath of experience with men, Andrews overlooks the beauty and natural occurrence of woman-to-woman bonds that do not concern and are not inspired by men. The women of Brewster Place are, undoubtedly, woman-identified, not male-identified as Andrews seems to suggest. Andrews concedes further on in his essay that "the strength of [the] sisterhood can be explained partly, but
not entirely, by the men's failures in love" (9). Men's failures and men in general are extraneous to these deep and self-sufficient relationships between women. Contrary to Andrews' assertion, the strength of the sisterhood comes from a reliance on and appreciation of women alone.

The novel's subtitle (a novel in seven stories) is indicative of the unique narrative structure of Naylor's work and its focus on woman-identified themes. Instead of writing one long story, Naylor divides the book into seven separate stories. Each is titled with the name of one of the main female characters in the novel. Awkward points out that the "narratively disconnected texts of individual protagonists [read instead, women] can be forged into a unified whole" (98). The separate stories work to form a collective whole to convey, as Fraser points out, "a federation among the women of the street, headed by Mattie" (79).

Mattie Michael is definitely the central woman-identified character in this novel. Her story begins with a brief sexual encounter with a man which yields her son Basil. Mattie is beaten and ostracized by her father for being young, unwed and pregnant. Mattie's father is frustrated most not by the pregnancy but by Mattie's defiant silence about the baby's father's identity. Due to her silence and refusal to submit to his patriarchal control, Mattie is sent away from her home to wander the streets. As she seeks shelter, Mattie has her first encounter with the strong and supportive Miss Eva Turner, who
takes her in and provides her with vital support and unconditional love. Mattie’s relationship with Eva is the first of many in her rich life filled with woman-identified women.

The most popular interpretation of Mattie seems to be a maternal one. Montgomery calls Mattie the central mother figure in the novel. According to her, Mattie transcends the physical world as a mother figure and ascends to the spiritual, timeless, Edenic realm of an alternative world where she can mother all the women of Brewster Place (9). Sandra E. Bowen suggests that Mattie “is allegorically and symbolically presented as the innocent Black Eve” (53). She states that Mattie “is the Black Madonna, a child in her arms, a holy guide and teacher with the forgiving and understanding nature of a Madonna” (53-4). Bowen continues by comparing the women of Brewster Place with lost sheep and lambs following Mattie who gives them hope, love, and salvation (54). In a slightly different vein Wells reads Mattie not as a mother but as a mentor to the other women. According to Wells

Mattie becomes the sage, the mentor, who is no longer passionately troubled or troublesome. She is the calm, unifying force, who suggests proper values through actions, rather than preaching and cajoling. (45)

Mattie does act as a mentor and she is also, undoubtedly, a nurturer. Like all women, Mattie fulfills a number of different roles. Fraser suggests Mattie’s character is an “incantation of the myth of the black Mat(ti)riarch” (74). While Fraser’s play on words is creative and it is interesting to consider Mattie as
a matriarch, this character must be read as much more than a stereotypical image of the black matriarch. Mattie embodies a variety of images and yes, some stereotypes. The beauty of her character is its ability to change and grow, as evidenced in her discussion with Etta concerning Lorraine and Theresa, the lesbian couple who live together in the community. Before discussing this key moment in the novel, I will shed light on how Mattie is revealed as a woman-identified woman who engages in a plenitude of woman-identified relationships.

Fowler identifies Mattie as a "nurturer of life" (27). She reads Mattie as experiencing not only positive benefits of mothering but complications to it as well. Fowler asserts that "The Earth Mother figure that Mattie becomes for others, especially Ciel, seems to require a distortion and repression of desire and a self-denial for which Mattie ultimately pays a high price" (30). According to Fowler, the high price that Mattie pays is related to the amount that she gives to others. Mattie pays the price of being a woman who has only one sexual relationship with a man, loses her son, and ends up living alone on Brewster Place. Fowler states that Mattie does not try for another wonderful experience like the one she has with Butch - instead she lives her life through her son (29).

Andrews reads Mattie's transition to Brewster Place much like Fowler does by asserting that Mattie changes roles from lover to mother as the novel progresses and she finally comes to live in Brewster Place (5). Is Mattie really a mother because
she does not seek another sexual experience with a man? I propose that Mattie is simply most interested and involved in the relationships she has with the women living in Brewster Place. Naylor depicts the destructiveness of Mattie's overbearing focus on her son Basil. Mattie teaches him that his existence and love are all that are necessary for success in life. Sadly, Mattie enables Basil to become a selfish and irresponsible man.

However, Mattie's relationships with the women of Brewster Place are very different. I question if Mattie pays a high price in Brewster Place as Fowler suggests or rather, if she reaps the reward of the opportunity to engage in a multitude of woman-identified relationships without the complications of men and male-identified relationships. After the loss of her house and her arrival at Brewster Place, Mattie grows as a woman and discovers that her nurturing instincts are not extinguished even after the sum of the tears she's shed over Basil's behavior. Mattie grows as a woman-identified woman even though her son left her financially insecure and forced to move. On Brewster Place, Mattie does more than fulfill the role of a mother, she learns about herself and grows as a woman-identified human being as she bonds with other women.

Mattie's relationship with Ciel reflects Mattie's maternal gift as well as her gifts for loving and befriending other women in Brewster Place. Lucielia Louise Turner or Ciel is a woman who has struggled her whole life. Naylor focuses on a
destructive relationship Ciel has with her sometime companion Eugene who is the biological father of her children. Eugene pressures Ciel into having an abortion and then abruptly announces that he is leaving Ciel and their baby girl Serena for an imaginary job in Maine. Serena is victimized by the problems of her parents and in a tragic scene is left alone a moment too long while her parents fight over Eugene's announcement that he is leaving his family. Serena, playing next to a wall socket with a fork, dies by electrocution while Ciel suffers at the news that Eugene will never break from his consistent patterns of neglectful and abusive behavior (99).

Serena's death nearly destroys Ciel. The loss of her child is yet another tragedy in a long line of devastation in Ciel's life. As she withdraws from reality, Ciel exists at the funeral and afterward in a state of shock, numb to her surroundings. She will not drink or eat unless forced and seems resigned to defeat from the terrible blows dealt to her. She lies on a bed in one of the bedrooms oblivious to everything around her.

Naylor's profound scenario is worth a lengthy quotation:

Like a black Brahman cow, desperate to protect her young, [Mattie] surged into the room, pushing neighbor women and the others out of her way. She approached the bed with her lips clamped shut in such force that the muscles in her jaw and the back of her neck began to ache. She sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her huge ebony arms. And she rocked. Ciel's body was so hot it burned Mattie when she first touched her, but she held on and rocked. Back and forth, back and forth - she held Ciel so tightly she could feel her young breasts flatten against the buttons of her dress. The black mammoth gripped so firmly that the slightest increase of
pressure would have cracked the girl’s spine. But she rocked. And somewhere from the bowels of her being came a moan from Ciel, so high at first it couldn’t be heard by anyone there, but the yard dogs began an unholy howling. And Mattie rocked. And then, agonizingly slow, it broke its way through the parched lips in a spaghetti-thin column of air that could be faintly heard in the frozen room. Ciel moaned, Mattie rocked. 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 where soul-gutted 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. She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it - a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled - and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (103-4)

In this moving scene which Fowler labels the “emotional center” of the novel, Naylor depicts Mattie as a fierce black Brahman cow, motivated with the lifeforce of protecting her young. Mattie assumes extraordinary size and seemingly limitless strength as she rocks Ciel back to life. Mattie’s love seems to fill the room as the reader imagines her massive arms wrapped around Ciel. With her power, Mattie’s love can actually transport her and Ciel to “a blue vastness just underneath the sun and beyond time” (104).
In an insightful reading of this scene, Awkward cites the exchange between Mattie and Ciel as “a recognition of [Mattie’s] connection with women throughout history, a sense, in other words, of membership in a timeless community of women united by common suffering” (117). Montgomery recognizes Mattie’s strength and her ability to resurrect Ciel. She states that “Ciel undergoes a mystical rebirth ... spiritual in nature” (8).

It is vital that we read this scene as more than a moment of mother-daughter love and affection. Mattie’s strength, while it embraces maternal aspects, represents more than the strength of a mother. It is beyond human strength; it is the strength of the female bond. This strength encompasses all types of woman-identified relationships and their power to heal and invest women with new possibilities.

Naylor finishes the scene between Mattie and Ciel and the chapter titled “Lucielia Louise Turner” with a bathing scene which inspires more and different ways of understanding their woman-identified embrace:

Mattie drew a tub of hot water and undressed Ciel. She let the nightgown fall off the narrow shoulder, over the pitifully thin breasts and jutting hipbones. She slowly helped her into the water, and it was like a dried brown autumn leaf hitting the surface of a puddle. And slowly she bathed her. She took the soap, and, using only her hands, she washed Ciel’s hair and the back of her neck. She raised her arms and cleaned the armpits, soaping well the downy brown hair there. She let the soap slip between the girl’s breasts, and she washed each one separately, cupping it in her hands. She took each leg and even cleaned under her toenails. Making Ciel rise and kneel in the tub she cleaned the crack in her behind, soaped her pubic hair, and gently washed the creases in her
vagina — slowly, reverently, as if handling a newborn. (104)

To fully appreciate this passage it is appropriate to remember Adrienne Rich’s lesbian continuum as well as to look more closely at Audre Lorde’s powerful essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” from her book *Sister Outsider*.

Mattie’s nurturing of Ciel clearly can be understood as a woman-identified experience that could occur between any two women who care for each other. Rich writes in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” that if we consider the lesbian continuum of existence on which all women may exist, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself. If we consider the possibility that all women --from the infant suckling on the mother’s breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child, perhaps recalling her mother’s milk smell in her own...we can see ourselves as moving in and out of [the lesbian continuum], whether we identify as lesbian or not. (218-19)

It is helpful to understand Mattie and Ciel’s moment of rocking together, back through time, as an experience situated on the lesbian continuum. Their rhythmic rocking is not just a mother and daughter exchange, but potentially an orgasmic, rhythmic, movement that affects the women on intimate sexual levels. Mattie and Ciel’s experience takes on the most meaning if considered as the woman-identified and potentially lesbian exchange that it is.
Also instrumental in understanding this exchange between Mattie and Ciel is Lorde's definition of the erotic. Lorde calls for an expanded notion of the erotic which she defines as:

an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. ...The erotic is the nurturer and nursemaid of our deepest existence. (55-6)

Lorde's recognition of the depth and breadth of the erotic in women's lives is crucial in a reading of Mattie and Ciel's connection with new meaning and significance. As Mattie gently bathes Ciel, cupping her breasts and cleansing her vaginal folds, we understand the intimacy and beauty of these two women's connection. There is a powerful erotic connection between them that has the spiritual strength to literally rejuvenate the wounded and suffering Ciel. Mattie, with her strength and innate woman-love, brings Ciel back from her state of shock and lost hope to a place where she may grieve the loss of her daughter and eventually begin to heal that wound.

Mattie's bond with Ciel is just one of her many woman-identified relationships in the novel. Mattie's friendship and loving relationship with Etta Mae Johnson is a vital union which is a source of strength, solace, and love for both women. Although some of The Women of Brewster Place's critics come close to identifying the woman-identified bond between Mattie and Etta, none has understood the necessity and true intensity of Mattie and Etta's relationship. Etta provides for Mattie a true companion, friend, and intense, woman-identified love.
Etta is described as a woman who has spent much of her life in “the fast lane.” She is understood to have experienced trauma at the hands of men in most if not all of her male-identified relationships. Etta is a complex character, an independent and life-loving woman. Naylor depicts Etta as a woman who adds splashes of color and vibrant sensuality to all landscapes. As a young girl in the South, Etta is pictured singing a song that can be interpreted as theme for her life:

There ain’t nothing I ever do  
Or nothing I ever say  
That folks don’t criticize me  
But I’m going to do  
Just what I want to, anyway  
And don’t care just what people say  
If I should take a notion  
To jump into the ocean  
Ain’t nobody’s business if I do (57)

Etta is a woman who goes her own way and endures great criticism because of that. After abuse by many men and a long life that we can imagine must have been filled with late nights and one-night stands, Etta returns to Brewster Place to her true home in Mattie Michael.

Naylor paints a bright picture of Etta arriving at Brewster Place driving “the apple-green Cadillac with the white vinyl roof and Florida plates [that] turn[ed] in ... like a greased cobra. ...the chrome caught the rays of the high afternoon sun and flung them back into its face” (56). According to Helen Fiddyment Levy, Etta goes to Brewster Place and “realizes that she is trapped...she has no place more to go” (268). In
reality, Etta is not "trapped" in Brewster Place. She has chosen to return to her friend Mattie for love and support.

Fowler notes that Mattie and Etta have had unfulfilled lives occupied by many "male oriented dreams" (35). It is the transcendence of these unsatisfying and unrealistic dreams that is the true success for both Mattie and Etta. No longer burdened with her needy and selfish son, Mattie is free to love Etta freely and unconditionally.

Etta must first, however, rid herself of the remaining internalized heteropatriarchal influences which lead her to look one last time for a traditional marriage relationship with a single minister, Reverend Moreland Woods, at Mattie's church. Etta's brief hopes are dashed when she realizes that the Reverend Woods only plays games and uses women sexually. Lying in an unfamiliar hotel room after their meaningless sexual encounter, Etta finally understands the futility of her search for security in a man.

Naturally, she leaves the hotel and the Reverend and returns immediately to Mattie's home where Mattie awaits her, playing Etta's Billie Holiday records. The female, bisexual jazz singer's musical presence is not just a coincidence as Etta stands outside Mattie's doorstep. Etta is led by inspiration to her friend and woman-identified love in Mattie. Naylor writes: "[Etta] climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her" (74).
Fraser interprets this scene as a relationship between the two women that develops to compensate for Etta’s lack of a husband. She states that “Mattie widens the circle of permissible family. Mattie serves as a spiritual substitute for Etta’s husband” (79). Fraser is off the mark; this relationship has nothing to do with Etta’s relationships with men. It is not a coincidence that after Etta finally learns the disappointment that she can expect from her encounters with men that she goes to Mattie for an unconditional acceptance and love.

Fowler identifies Mattie and Etta as an “interlocking pair.” She states that there is a definite “love and friendship” that they offer each other (35). Fowler suggests that Mattie and Etta’s love is “of a kind with love between Lorraine and Theresa,” the novel’s lesbian couple (52). However, Fowler does not, nor do any other critics, specifically and definitively label Mattie and Etta’s relationship as being woman-identified.

Although the reader is not privy to a description of distinct sexual contact between the two women, it is not out of line to imagine sexual relations as an aspect of Mattie and Etta’s life together. Naylor does a brilliant job of conveying the erotic content of these two women’s relationship. Naylor uses distinct physical images of the two women together. When Etta arrives, she breathes deeply of the “freedom she [finds] in Mattie’s presence” (58). When they laugh together, they enter a
"conspiratorial circle" that leaves them weak from the "tears that flowed down their faces" (61). In the nourishing act of breathing and the cleansing act of crying with laughter, these two women share an intense bond. With the imagery of Etta's apple-green, shining Cadillac which adds brilliant color and, symbolically, vitality to their lives, Etta's woman-identified Billie Holliday records, and Mattie's love and concern, this relationship is a deep and meaningful woman-identified one.

Two other key moments occur between Mattie and Etta that solidify my reading of the two women as a woman-identified pair: their discussion at the Brewster Place Block Association meeting and their reaction to Ciel's announcement of wedding plans later on in the novel. At the block meeting, Mattie and Etta discuss the lesbian couple living in Brewster Place and wonder how their relationship and orientation might function. Mattie states:

'Well, I've loved women, too. There was Eva and Ciel, and even as ornery as you can get, I've loved you practically all my life.'
'Yeah, but it's different with them.'
'Different how?'
'Well...' Etta was beginning to feel uncomfortable. 'They love each other like you'd love a man or a man would love you - I guess.'
'But I've loved some women deeper than I ever loved any man,' Mattie was pondering. 'And there been some women who loved me more and did more for me than any man ever did.'
'Yeah.' Etta thought for a moment. 'I can second that, but it's still different, Mattie, I can't exactly put my finger on it, but...'
'Maybe it's not so different,' Mattie said, almost to herself. 'Maybe that's why some women get so riled up about it, 'cause they know deep down it's not so different after all.' She looked at Etta. 'It kinda gives you a funny feeling when you think about it that way...' (141)
While the words are not explicitly mentioned, the passage contains significant sexual connotations. The difference that the women discuss, the difference that they can't quite identify and that gives them "a funny feeling," is the sexual behavior that occurs between women. Mattie and Etta feel uncomfortable because they are discussing a lesbian sexuality considered taboo by society. Moreover, they are uncomfortable because they consider themselves to have deep, loving, woman-identified relationships that would be rejected (if so named) by much of their community. Naylor illustrates in this conversation the deep bond between women on the lesbian continuum and how Mattie and Etta come to understand it in their own lives.

It is telling that this conversation takes place in the aftermath of a heated debate about whether Lorraine, a lesbian who wants to be accepted by the female community of the women of Brewster Place, should be allowed to be a member of the Block Association. In this way, Naylor introduces the complications of women's communities. Not all relationships between women are necessarily woman-identified. In fact, there are several problems within the community of Brewster Place that Naylor addresses in the novel, especially in her most lengthy and developed chapter, "The Two."

Before discussing these issues, however, it is important to understand one final woman-identified moment between Mattie and Etta. Close to the novel's end in the chapter titled "The Block Party," Ciel, who moved away from Brewster Place for a time
after her rocking, healing session with Mattie, reunites at Brewster Place with Mattie and Etta to discuss the life she has led. Mattie beams at Ciel with pride and Etta embraces the young woman who says she is ready to start a new marriage to a man out of town. Mattie and Etta quiz Ciel, wondering whether her fiancé is "good to" and "for" her (178). This scene pairs Mattie and Etta together as the figurative "parents of the bride." It is understood that these women will be together and will travel to support Ciel wherever she may be. The two older women lovingly tease each other through Ciel, asking her to "tell that woman" this and that about each other and their various behaviors. Ciel laughs joyfully and says "You two will never change" (179). In this instance "the two" are not Lorraine and Theresa but instead are Mattie and Etta, who bicker like a loving couple of woman-identified women.

Obviously, another couple that lends itself to a woman-identified interpretation is Lorraine and Theresa, the lesbian pair who live and try to survive in the often homophobic Brewster Place community. Interestingly however, two critics agree that the relationship between the novel's lesbian couple is not as strong or supportive as Mattie and Etta's. Fowler writes "The most significant expression of female bonding in the story is found not in the interaction between Theresa and Lorraine but in that between Mattie and Etta" (51). Andrews asserts that Lorraine and Theresa's relationship,
because of its unresolved tensions and concern over power, ... despite its seeming intimacy, remains less successful than that between Mattie and Etta, who generously accept and nurture each other. (8)

One might ask, if Naylor is writing a woman-identified text, why would she present complications and problems in woman-identified relationships between women? The answer is clear: Naylor writes of the difficulties that Lorraine and Theresa face in order to highlight the very real problems of homophobia and heterosexism that exist within the Brewster Place community of women. Naylor renders an honest portrayal of barriers to women loving other women that exist in many communities.

Fowler points out that Lorraine and Theresa's relationship is condemned because of what the two women represent to the community (18). Levy suggests that in Brewster Place, "love between women having either emotional or sexual intensity, or both, is ignored and reviled, finally attacked as illegitimate" (266). Barbara Christian argues that through the characters of Lorraine and Theresa "Naylor demonstrates the complexity of being an outcast. [Lorraine and Theresa's] isolation is initiated by the women in the community" ("Gloria Naylor's Geography", 196). Christian is referring, of course, to elements of gossip and ill-will that the women of Brewster Place create.

Naylor seems to concur with bell hooks that "the notion that homosexuality threatens the continuation of black families seems to have gained new momentum" in some African American
communities (*Sisters*, 123). The author introduces the reader to
the cynical characters of Sophie and the other women who sniff
and speculate about Lorraine and Theresa’s relationship. Naylor
symbolizes the truth of Lorraine and Theresa’s lesbianism as a
nasty, malodorous rumor that travels through the community
originating in one of the Brewster Place women named Sophie.
Her creative language is worth quoting:

[The rumor of their lesbianism] had first spread through
the block like a sour odor that’s only faintly perceptible
and easily ignored until it starts growing in strength from
the dozen mouths it had been lying in, among clammy gums
and scum-coated teeth. And then it was everywhere - lining
the mouths and whitening the lips of everyone as they
wrinkled up their noses at its pervading smell, unable to
pinpoint the source or time of its initial arrival. Sophie
could - she had been there. ...[The women] could almost
feel the odor moving about in their mouths, and they slowly
knitted themselves together and let it out into the air
like a yellow mist that began to cling to the bricks on
Brewster. (130-1)

The symbol of Lorraine and Theresa’s lesbian identity as a foul,
disgusting odor is startling. Bearing the scent of the nasty
rumor, Lorraine and Theresa are talked about and slandered by
many homophobic women.

The issue of homophobia in African American communities has
been discussed before by important African American female
critics such as hooks, Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, and Barbara
Smith. Clarke states that

Time and again homophobia sabotages coalitions, divides
would-be comrades, and retards the mental restructuring,
essential to revolution, which black people need so
desperately. ...Homophobia divides black people as
political allies, it cuts off political growth, stifles
revolution, and perpetuates patriarchal domination. (200-7)
Lorraine and Theresa were victims of heterosexism and homophobia in other places before they moved to Brewster Place. The couple has many problems in their relationship in part because Lorraine struggles with the homophobia that prevents her from being accepted completely by the women of Brewster Place. The community's rejection of Lorraine and Theresa works to threaten the very existence of their relationship.

Audre Lorde theorizes about reasons why many African American communities are plagued by homophobia. In her essay from *Sister Outsider* titled "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving", she states that white patriarchy and heterosexism have worked to inspire "horizontal hostility" between African Americans in order to cloud the realities of white oppression. Lorde writes:

> enormous energy is being wasted in the Black community today in anti-lesbian hysteria. ...The Black lesbian has come under increasing attack from both Black men and heterosexual Black women. In the same way that the existence of the self-defined Black woman 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. ("Scratching", 48-49)

Lorde's comments provide insight to why Sophie and others hesitate and choose not to support but rather to slander Lorraine and Theresa. hooks discusses this lack of coalition between heterosexual and lesbian women when she writes "we need to better understand how black folks who feel relatively powerless to control their destiny exercise negative power over
one another in hierarchical settings" (Sisters, 36). Although the homophobic women of Brewster Place do not realize it, as Christian writes, "society's attack on lesbianism is one attack on all women, not only because lesbians are women, but also because lesbian stereotypes expose society's fear of women's independence of man" ("No More", 199).

Because Lorraine and Theresa's relationship is independent of men, many of Brewster Place's members are threatened by the lesbian couple. Ultimately, the threats they represent to others prove to be all too dangerous for them. In a gruesome and devastating scene Lorraine is gang-raped by C.C. Baker and several of his friends. These young, hopeless men gain the only power they know through sexual violence and the ultimate brutality against Lorraine, rape. In fact, the issue of male violence against women is a theme that runs through the novel beginning with the abuse of Mattie and ending with Lorraine's death. Levy believes that Naylor's rape scene "represents an attack on any woman who does not accede to subordinate status in a relationship with a man ... [and who attaches to women]" (266). Naylor's writing of the rape is vivid and horrifying.

Tanner's essay "Reading Rape: Sanctuary and The Women of Brewster Place" interprets Naylor's representation of rape as revolutionary:

In Naylor's representation of rape, the victim ceases to be an erotic object subjected to the control of the reader's gaze. Instead, that gaze, like Lorraine's, is directed
According to Tanner, the reader, through the vehicle of Naylor's haunting descriptions, is thrust into the middle of the rape scene and locked into the victim's body. Naylor brilliantly upsets traditional rape scenes which objectify the woman and give a power position to the reader. She heightens the reader's perceptions and helps him or her to understand first-hand the true, horrifying, nature of this crime against women.

With this original way of writing about rape, Naylor makes more real the terrible ramifications of homophobia and heteropatriarchy which result in violence against women. Barbara Christian suggests that not only are C.C. Baker and his friends responsible for Lorraine's rape, many of the women of Brewster Place are responsible too. "Naylor implies that Lorraine's story ends as it does because the women of Brewster Place who should have been her mothers or sisters, failed to support her" ("Gloria Naylor's Geography", 201).

Perhaps some of the women of Brewster Place are responsible for harm against Lorraine because of their ignorance and homophobia. But we must not forget the foundations of this homophobia which often stem from locations and white/male power systems outside of Brewster Place. Naylor suggests that rather than placing blame, the main concern should be about the kinds of changes that can be made to prevent this violence and abuse.
against all women including those whose sexual orientations are different from the heterosexual mainstream.

Naylor seems to speak to this assertion when she writes the novel's creative, complex, and, ultimately, hopeful final sequence. At the beginning of the chapter "The Block Party," Naylor shows a connection between all the women of Brewster Place. The women have a common and reoccurring dream the week after Lorraine's rape and murder:

> 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. Little girls woke up screaming, unable to be comforted by bewildered mothers who knew, and yet didn't know, the reason for their daughters' stolen sleep. (175-6)

Because all the women experience the dream, on a subconscious level they experience the reality and destruction of violence against all women. Naylor creates the dream to symbolize the responsibility of the rape of Lorraine felt by all the women of Brewster Place who do not and did not actively fight against the homophobia that Lorraine, Theresa, and the others endure. Naylor's device is especially effective because it makes the rape, through the vehicle of the dream, a personal experience for each woman who experiences it. Naylor sends the message that, perhaps, by making the rape more real to the women of Brewster Place on a personal level, each woman can better empathize with others and understand the devastating effects of a crime that no woman deserves.
After learning that the women collectively experience this dream, we understand that Mattie’s extended dream becomes the majority of the chapter “The Block Party.” Within the context of Mattie’s dream, even Ciel, who returns from her now faraway life just in time for the block party, has had the dream. By investing Ciel with the dream, Naylor demonstrates that violence against women is not a problem felt only by the women of Brewster Place but by all women in society. Naylor, by writing the rape scene with such explicit detail, intensifies for the reader, as well, the reality of violence against women.

Creating a party for one of the novel’s final scenes is a brilliant device for bringing the separate stories of the women together. At the block party we are meant to understand that there remains, even after the horrific crime against Lorraine, a community of the women of Brewster Place. In a profound moment, a symbolic, cleansing rain begins to fall on the women who run to the wall that blocks Brewster Place off from the larger community. In a collective effort, the women work to tear away what seems to be the blood of Lorraine — thus the blood of all women — on the wall’s bricks. Their efforts are almost frantic:

Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands; the water pouring under their chins, plastering their blouses and dresses against their breasts and into the cracks of their hips. The bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and relayed out of Brewster Place past overturned tables, scattered coins, and crushed wads of dollar bills. They came back with chairs and barbecue grills and smashed them into the wall. (186)
In this profound, uplifting moment, Naylor clearly portrays the women as woman-identified, putting aside their differences and working to erase the symbols of bloody violence committed against them all.

Naylor introduces, however, a complexity so subtle that some readers miss it in their first reading of the novel: the final communal scene of women working together is actually just the dream that Mattie has before the "real" block party is set to begin. Fowler understands that "Mattie's dream is a vision of community that's withheld" (57). Awkward argues that The Women of Brewster Place's ending can not be read as a positive one because of the dream's disjunctiveness. According to him, Naylor "intentionally undercuts [the dream's] own totalizing moment" (127) by making it a dream instead of a fictional reality created by Naylor.

It is true that the novel's dream sequence cannot be read as a clear-cut, positive assertion of a woman-identified community of women. If it could be, the novel's point would be moot. Naylor presents the complete unification of women as part of Mattie's dream because, in reality, complete unification of women probably is just a dream. Her portrayal of the women working together to protect themselves by breaking down Brewster Place's oppressive wall is a positive image that will take much change and growth before it can become a reality. Thus Naylor presents to the reader the most realistic picture she can by
writing about a dream of a woman-identified community that we might someday have.

By using the dream device, Naylor demonstrates the complexities of achieving a woman-identified community in the midst of a heteropatriarchal society. She presents a unified vision but, appropriately, the vision is nothing but a dream because it has not, in reality either outside or inside the text, yet been achieved.
CONCLUSION

An examination of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* in the light of Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum is useful for many reasons. In my reading of these two texts I have shown an understanding of the richness and necessity of woman-identified relationships that are often overlooked by readers and critics alike.

There is no question that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston created a text which celebrates woman-identified relationships above all others. The female frameworking that she used indicates the difficulties the author had writing about woman-identified experience in a homophobic and restrictive historical context. Disregarding heterosexist constraints as much as she could, Hurston celebrated the relationship between Janie and Pheoby by making their deep, woman-identified connection the first and last that the reader encounters in the novel.

Similar to Hurston, Naylor, in *The Women of Brewster Place*, makes central the same kinds of woman-identified relationships between women. Her construction of Mattie as the ultimate woman-identified woman is brilliant in its complexity and thoroughness. Throughout the novel, Mattie's experiences with Ciel, Etta, and others demonstrate the beauty and lifesaving power of woman-identification.
Countless connections exist between Hurston and Naylor and their exploration of woman-identified themes in literature. Both writers acknowledge the impact of white oppression on African American individuals and communities. Furthermore, both are interested in not only the benefits and necessity of African American community but also the complications that exist within those communities. Hurston and Naylor are honest in their portrayals of difficulties such as sexism and, in Naylor’s novel’s case, homophobia, that often plague African American communities. Perhaps the most striking and important connection between the two authors is their focus on woman-identified women. In the two texts discussed in this thesis, many pairs of strong, woman-identified women exist. Janie and Pheoby, Mattie and Etta and others are female characters that engage in vital, satisfying, woman-identified relationships.

Naylor’s work can be read as a contemporary extension of Hurston’s work. Instead of creating just one woman-identified relationship, however, Naylor illustrates many key relationships between women. Writing forty-five years after Hurston, Naylor was more free to focus on women and the varieties and complexities of their relationships.

Many literary critics have neglected the significance of Hurston and Naylor’s focus on relationships between women. As I have shown, both texts are revolutionary examples of the strength and the necessity of woman-identified connections. By highlighting what others have downplayed or left out in Janie
and Pheoby's intimate relationship, and by showing Mattie to be not just a maternal figure but a woman-identified woman destined to live in Brewster Place and love the women there, I hope I have contributed to the critical discussion surrounding these texts.

In addition, I have highlighted the important cultural work that Hurston and Naylor have done because they considered the difficulties within African American communities and between women. Hurston and Naylor's treatment of these issues is helpful in understanding what hooks calls the dilemma of "black folks who feel relatively powerless to control their destiny exercising negative power over one another in hierarchical settings" (Sisters, 36).

Hazel Carby explains another complication in African American communities that has affected women specifically. She details the origins of many difficulties that African American woman writers such as Hurston and Naylor faced when writing about African American women and sexuality:

the repression of the sensual in Afro-American fiction in response to the long history of the exploitation of black sexuality led to the repression of passion and the repression or denial of female sexuality and desire. But, of course, the representation of black female sexuality meant risking its definition as primitive and exotic within a racist society. [In addition] Racist sexual ideologies proclaimed the black woman to be a rampant sexual being, and in response black women writers either focused on defending their morality or displaced sexuality onto another terrain. (174)

It is necessary to recognize the hostile environments often surrounding the issue of African American women's sexuality.
Obviously, choosing to write about woman-identified or lesbian sexuality becomes even more problematic in heteropatriarchal society. Despite these restrictions, Hurston and Naylor made great strides by writing woman-identified texts that defied traditional, stereotypical roles often forced on African American women.

Jewelle Gomez points out that there is "a vacuum and ... a distinct gap in the picture where the Black Lesbian should be" in literature (122). hooks adds power to this argument when she states that "there are very few oral histories and autobiographies of black gay people" (Sisters, 122). hooks cites the statistic that less than three percent of the total number of faculty members on most college campuses are African American (Sisters, 60). Given this evidence, we must conclude that there is a consistent and dangerous dearth of African American presence in academia. Reading and understanding the woman-identified content in Hurston and Naylor's works is important because it sheds much-needed light on the woman-identified experiences of African American women that have been neglected by academia, critics, and society for so long.

Barbara Christian writes:

Some of the important contributions that the emergence of the lesbian theme has made to Afro-American women’s literature are: The breaking of stereotypes so that black lesbians are clearly seen as women, the exposure of homophobia in the black community, and an exploration of how that homophobia is related to the struggle of all women to be all that they can be. ("No More", 199-200)
Thus, every reading of Hurston and Naylor’s literature which recognizes the woman-identified content that these texts exhibit is a useful one making important contributions in breaking stereotypes and exposing new ways of understanding and appreciating women. By understanding the profound meanings and spiritual essence of these relationships, readers may understand their own potential for woman-identified relationships.

Recognition and naming of the woman-identified content in these works provides many new insights for consideration. By understanding the woman-identified content consistently silenced or overlooked in literature, new readers and critics can begin to understand the great impact that woman-identified experience can have on all women’s lives.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


