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**Defining a Metaphorical Space to Speak From : Exploring the
Relationship Between Women and Place Within Gloria Naylor's
The Women of Brewster Place and Toni Morrison's Sula**

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DEFINING A METAPHORICAL SPACE TO SPEAK FROM: EXPLORING THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN AND PLACE WITHIN
GLORIA NAYLOR'S *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

AND TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

BY

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A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of


Master of Arts in English

May 2010

College of Humanities and Social Sciences


English

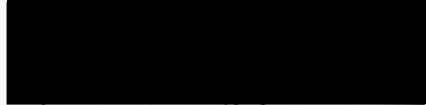
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the complex yet indispensable relationship that exists between the Black female character and place in Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place* and Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. The representation of place, both landscape and homeplace, are examined through a close reading of language, particularly through metaphorical elements. Naylor and Morrison employ metaphorical elements to not only emphasize each woman's intimate engagement with her sense of place, but also to acknowledge the transformative powers that place wields over each woman's identity. For each woman that has been suppressed and silenced within a patriarchal society, the home becomes a sanctuary that incites both self-expression and resistance. This thesis analyzes specific moments where each woman has both the desire and the agency to transform her home into a sanctum that accepts her, heals her, and fosters an awakening within her spirit. Additionally, this thesis unearths paradoxes and investigates their role within each scene. Naylor and Morrison skillfully incorporate several paradoxical images and contrasting emotions that add depth to each woman's evolving identity. Since each woman claims her *own* space within the home, the paradoxes become even more alluring as they become integral components of the domestic atmosphere that enables each woman to experience a catharsis. This thesis also uncovers the historicity that embodies the Black woman's relationship with the homeplace. This thesis will investigate various spaces of the home that highlight the symbiotic relationship that exists between women and their sense of place, such as the porch, the bathroom, and the pantry. Additionally, the representation of the kitchen is a crucial setting for the Black women as it is transformed into a space of transcendence. Historically, the kitchen space has been

imbedded in Black female culture; this thesis explores the way in which the kitchen space enables subconscious desires to emerge and encourages self-expression in the forms of domestic ritual. Most importantly, this thesis recognizes the way in which Naylor and Morrison shatter the mores of domestic oppression. Naylor and Morrison recast the homeplace into a sphere that not only promotes self-empowerment, but that also equips each woman with the tools to locate her authentic voice.

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

by

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Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

May 2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to thank Dr. Monika Elbert for her encouragement during the early stages of my Thesis and helping me compile my Thesis Committee.

I would like to thank Dr. Sharon Lewis for always inspiring me to become a better student and for introducing me to Gloria Naylor—for that I will be forever grateful.

And most of all, I would like to thank Dr. Laura Nicosia for without her genuine enthusiasm, her bountiful wisdom, and her unyielding patience and guidance this Thesis would not have been possible.

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“Defining a Metaphorical Space to Speak From”¹: Exploring the Relationship between
 Women and Place within Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and
 Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

“I felt a very strong sense of place, not in terms of the country or the state, but in terms of the details, the feeling, the mood of the community...I think some of it is just a woman’s strong sense of being in a room, a place, or in a house. Sometimes my relationship to things in a house would be a little different from, say my brother’s or my father’s or my sons’. I clean them and I move them and I do very intimate things ‘in place.’ ...living in a small definite place, is probably very common among most women anyway”

(From “Intimate things in place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison” by Robert Stepto)

While there is value in examining the relationship that exists between two characters in a text, the relationship—the indispensable connection—that exists between a character and place is far more telling. The Black female characters presented in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* share the inextricable bond of identity and place. This thesis will explore not only the representation of place, but it will also examine *how* the female character engages with her immediate surroundings and *why* she allows herself to become enveloped by the place in which she occupies. Most importantly, this thesis will explore the transcendent powers that place wields over identity thus allowing the female characters’ hidden and subconscious emotions and desires to emerge.

¹ Margot Anne Kelley’s term as articulated in Elizabeth T. Hayes essay, “The Named and the Nameless: Morrison’s 124 and Naylor’s ‘the Other Place’ as Semiotic Chorae.”

The juxtaposition of character and place highlights integral aspects of identity and affirms the value of occupying a place; and because the Black female characters in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Sula* strive to exist within their society, inhabiting a place and engaging with their immediate surroundings affirms their existence. What is more, once securing an individual place, these women are then summoned with the task of, as Patricia McKee elucidates, “Controlling, or even patrolling, boundaries in order to control the definition of their own selves” (McKee 11). The women gain agency when they “patrol” a place and their desire to occupy a place is fulfilled.

The placement of particular metaphors, the detail of imagery, and the use of reoccurring images and literary schemata that both Naylor and Morrison employ call for a close examination of the language used in these texts. The interaction between character and place and the direct effect that surroundings exert over identity surface because of the arrangement of language. Whether it is the decaying façade of Brewster Place, or the purifying components of a bathroom, a close reading of Morrison’s and Naylor’s text is essential in locating the way that language highlights emotions and enables the homeplace to come alive. Deborah E. McDowell recalls Lillian Robinson’s emphasis on the validity of textual analysis in Black feminist literary criticism: “A radical kind of textual criticism...could usefully study the way the texture of sentences, choice of metaphors, patterns of exposition and narrative relate to [feminist] ideology” (156). The architectural components of the home, such as: pantries, attics, bedrooms, and kitchens enable the female protagonist to occupy certain spaces, move freely within them, and accept them as a growing sense of self. There are also metaphorical elements present in both texts that enhance the emotional components of place in which the women occupy,

such as: water, leaves, decay, and sunlight. The women maintain an individual existence within both the landscape and the homeplace that mold her emotions and desires and, most importantly, define various aspects of her identity.

In addition, this thesis will also unearth the paradoxes present within the descriptions of place. What are the implications behind the juxtaposing images of: beauty/decay, peace/disorder, and freedom/entrapment? Many of the localities depicted are engrossed with paradoxes, and each paradox provides the women with a varying perspective of her surroundings which, thus, contribute to a complex perception of self. The paradoxes presented both strengthen and hinder the women's existence within the place they occupy. It is through these dueling forces that exist within a place that can both challenge and empower each woman.

There are specific moments where the elements of place intertwine with the Black female's identity. What the women in both texts have in common is a deep yearning to lose oneself and become immersed within a place. All of the women yearn for sanctuary—a place to experience enlightenment and a space to heal. Both Ciel (*The Women of Brewster Place*) and Nel (*Sula*) utilize the space of the bathroom to foster a space where they can experience a controlled sense of release. Because the women maintain a “patrolled” place, they in turn create spaces that will enable them to experience cathartic moments which are integral for their rehabilitation.

Morrison and Naylor also command a revisionist perception of the homeplace, particularly in the kitchen space, as typically a space for domestic oppression, they transform the kitchen into a space of transcendent possibility. The homeplace does not suffocate self-expression, yet it becomes the domain of self-expression. The homeplace

provides them with not only refuge, but also as a space to unite with identity-building desires and emotions that have been suppressed for so long. Morrison and Naylor's Black female characters engage with the homeplace in a much more intimate way than their White female counterparts ever could; Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd and Evelyn M. Simien assert that "While Virginia Woolf called for a separate space, ideally away from home, to support and nature female creativity, the Black woman has had no such luxury. Despite this fact, however, she has been adaptable or resilient enough to be creative and proactive" (71). The women in both texts utilize the space of the kitchen as not only an escape, but also as resistance against male oppression. The women become so enveloped in the kitchen space that their fears inevitably dissolve, their strengths inevitably burgeon, and the space ultimately transforms into *their* place of spiritual awakening.

Naylor and Morrison both employ strong imagery and metaphor to dictate emotions and desires that contribute to the symbiotic relationship that the women have with place. It is within this thesis's exploration of the enduring bond between Black female characters and place that one can attempt to both *uncover* and *investigate* the moments that allow a character to become so defined and yet so challenged by their surroundings that their perception of self can only authentically be reflected through their sense of place.

Part I: The Relationship between the Black Female Character and Landscape:

In the opening pages of Toni Morrison's *Sula* we are presented with a literal eradication of the town, or as the narrator states—the “neighborhood”—of the Bottom. A place so sacred that it appears the inhabitants interact with the land as a means of obtaining an identity and as a means of guidance. The Bottom is a place where “beeches, oaks, maples, and chestnuts” seem to protect residents’ path and when their “bare feet would raise the saffron dust” they are reminded of the power of their presence in *that* spot on earth (Morrison 3-4). What’s more, the opening pages of the novel begin with a paradoxical tone—a celebration of land only in the shadow of its demise: “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood” (3). The opening passage of the novel is a multi-layered examination of the bond that exists between people and place. The illustrating images of the “nightshade” and “blackberry” and the action of being “torn” from “roots” evoke a metaphorical image of the African American people who have been historically displaced and dispossessed and it also recalls the failed attempts of not only securing a small space on American soil, but also allowing the space to achieve fruition both culturally and geographically. The image of defeat through the eradication of land is what we will encounter in a novel that attempts to make sense of the tumultuous relationship between character and place.

Karen F. Stein asserts that “This destruction, which sets the book’s tone of hovering doom, is both example and symbol of the steady erosion that the black community and its members suffer,” but what if the opening images of “destruction” are purposefully crafted by Morrison as not a means to focus on hopeless doom, but yet as a

means to celebrate the beauty and fortitude of both town and a Black people (146)?

Perhaps amidst this opening paradox in the uprooting of “blackberry patches” and valiant oaks lays not the acceptance of destruction but yet the evolution of a people through place. Perhaps Morrison purposefully *begins* with the Bottom’s *end* not as a statement of the characters’ hopelessness yet of their hopefulness.

The Bottom provides the residents with the nurturing that they desire, similar to “those heavy trees that sheltered the shacks” and offers a space in time that, like a memory, can be “tucked up there in the Bottom” (Morrison 6). Memories are powerful, particularly for the inhabitants of the Bottom, because it is within a memory that a place, and the connection to the place, comes alive. Moreover, it is with the memory of the “uprooting” that a people are forced to reconnect with their past and acknowledge the place that enabled them to examine “what they themselves were all about” (6). In both Morrison’s *Sula* and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, claiming a space means more than purchasing and inhabiting a home, because they are claiming much more than a piece of land—they are claiming a sanctuary—a place that an identity can cling to and become a part of despite how transient their time in their space may be.

In this way, is Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* similar to the opening passage of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*? Like Morrison, Naylor employs contrasting images as a method to celebrate beauty and fortitude despite existing amidst decay and neglect. Ironically, both novels begin with a similar construct, highlighting the physical depletion of Black communities; however, *Sula* begins with the ultimate physical destruction of the Bottom, whereas *The Women of Brewster Place* begins with the despondent inception of the Black community. But like Morrison, Naylor purposefully

presents a series of paradoxical images in the description of place that surrounds the inhabitants and accents the way in which they engage with their immediate surroundings. The women still manage to radiate amidst the decay and despite the fact that “the gray bricks of the buildings were the color of dull silver” (Naylor 2). Unlike the Bottom’s pastoral depictions that contrast with the inhabitants, Naylor’s description of the urban landscape of Brewster Place still attempts to capture the essence of interaction between character and place. Like the Bottom’s “heavy trees that sheltered” and hovered over its inhabitants “the nutmeg arms [that] leaned over windowsills” and the “saffron hands [that] strung out wet laundry on back-yard lines” become, like the “trees,” an omnipotent, protective presence that hover over the inhabitants of Brewster Place (4). And like the pastoral depictions of the Bottom, the inhabitants of the urban landscape of Brewster Place interact with their immediate surroundings—they interact with the scents and architecture that envelops their space and disallows each character to traverse within their urban landscape without acknowledging their personal imprint. Perhaps the purpose in Morrison and Naylor positioning their Black female protagonists amidst and within such harsh landscapes is not to highlight the stereotype of what Cheryl A. Wall describes as the “powerless, vulnerable poor black girl,” yet it is to depict “the fierce young female characters who are survivors rather than victims” (3). The Black female characters represented in these texts are not defined by the bleak landscape that surrounds them, for that assumption would perpetuate their marginalization; yet, Morrison’s and Naylor’s landscape emphasize the female characters’ fortitude and their ardent desires that will not falter in the face of racism and sexism.

Gloria Naylor infuses the “decay” of the building and the individual apartment spaces to emphasize their “determined spirits” (Naylor 4) and, like the reflection of the Bottom “to see what they themselves were all about” (Morrison 6). The women achieve agency through their engagement with Brewster Place despite the “decay,” “double flights of steps,” and the wall that has created a dead-end street, because they manage to turn their struggle into a warrior-like existence. They own their struggles on Brewster Place, and contrary to what Maxine Lawn Montgomery claims as “Brewster Place [being] an inverted world...designed to fail” (“Fathomless Dream” 42), the women have an opportunity to reclaim their roots and their dreams in a way that only a *place* can dictate; moreover, Brewster Place allows them to reclaim a home, as a space in the world that, for once, is authentic and raw like their own personalities. Similar to the Bottom, there remains something transcendent in Brewster Place that enables the memory of this place to be so potent in the lives of each character that each woman appears to both imprint and become imprinted by their sense of place.

Brewster Place serves as more than just an urban backdrop to Mattie and Etta’s existence, yet Brewster Place becomes the site of resistance, rehabilitation, and “as a sanctum for the rebuilding and restructuring of their ‘womanist’² sensibilities” (Henderson 3)³. Both Mattie and Etta travel a weary path that lands them in the clutches of Brewster Place, but despite the decay and cracked façade, Brewster accepts them, nurtures them, and equips them with emotional armor. Brewster Place offers them a sanctuary free from masculine oppression and domestic mores. Mattie and Etta look to

² Here, Carol E. Henderson is referring to a term coined by Alice Walker in her seminal work *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*.

³ Due to page irregularity, Carol E. Henderson’s article, “In the Shadow of Streetlights: Loss, Restoration and the Performance of Identity in Black Women’s Literature of the City,” will be manually numbered 1-7.

Brewster Place as a mechanism for comfort and rehabilitation, but they are also challenged with the task to face their fear of rejection and disappointment. Brewster Place forces the women to examine aspects of their identity that may not be disclosed in another setting. It is here, in this sanctum, that the women receive a true, unsullied perspective of self and it is here where these women can unpack their emotional baggage and celebrate their triumphs.

Much can be determined of Mattie's psyche in the way she perceives Brewster Place upon her arrival. There is both a hesitancy and an attraction to enter Brewster's domain and the paradoxical images of the building in the opening passage lay the emotional framework that Mattie will soon be forced to excavate:

The ashen buildings were beginning to fade against the gentle blanketing of the furry gray snow coming from the darkening sky. The sun's dying rays could be felt rather than seen behind the leaden evening sky, and snow began to cling to the cracks in the wall that stood only six feet from her building. (Naylor 7)

Naylor purposefully depicts Brewster Place as a fortress-like structure to emphasize the magnitude of emotions (i.e. fears, desires, and pains) that surround Mattie's arrival. In Naylor's first depiction of Brewster Place, through the eyes of Mattie, we receive an omniscient depiction of the building—everything that the building *is* and everything that the building will *become*. Enveloped in this description lies strong paradoxes and intense metaphorical language, as it will be “the locus of so much desire, human pain, and human hope” (Fowler 25). The juxtaposition of the atmospheric condition and the building emphasizes the transcendent qualities that Brewster Place will yield over Mattie's

identity. The building, in a sense, is beckoning for her arrival, as if all roads have led her here. Time appears to melt away for Mattie in this moment, as there is no sense of urgency. The way in which the “ashen building” melts into the “gentle blanketing furry gray snow” indicates the building’s ability to become encapsulated by an unthreatening, quieting force. Because Mattie “feel[s]” rather than “see[s]” the “sun’s dying rays,” her heightened ability to feel and exist in this moment become highlighted.

The overwhelming silence of the snowfall on the building enables Mattie to interact with Brewster Place in a very intimate way. As her eyes follow the way in which the “snow began to cling to the cracks in the wall,” perhaps she is reminded of her desperate desire to cling to a place that will accept her and not allow for her to melt away. Mattie *feels* the cracks as her own; this place is as real as it gets—there is no superficiality present here. The cracks that Mattie perceives on the wall of the building serve as a mirror to her own existence; although the cracks may represent decay and neglect to passersby, to Mattie as well as the other inhabitants, they represent inevitable imperfections—proof of experience and resistance. Brewster Place’s cracks, then, are comparable to the lines on a woman’s aging face—the beauty is in their authenticity.

The juxtaposition of “cracks” and “snow” also appear in the closing description of Brewster Place through Mattie’s eyes. There is an aura of complicated beauty present in the image of “cracked stoops and snow filled gutters” that capture Mattie’s gaze (Naylor 54). Because Mattie is betwixt and between her past and present consciousness, the intimate connection with the space of Brewster Place, in this moment, is critical. Space is more than an area for one to traverse, nor is it a crevice to escape, yet space exists because of who exists within it. Mattie can no longer exist in her memories, nor can she

exist in an uncertain future; she can only exist in her present place. Brewster Place challenges Mattie's perception of self and her expectations of place and forces her to *feel* both emotionally and physically. Her initial interaction with Brewster Place is raucous, but it forces Mattie to acknowledge her inner strength in the face of adversity. Brewster Place demands Mattie to engage with her current space as she "put[s] the other [hand] on the iron railing and climbed to the stoop to the front entrance..." and as she "entered the dingy hallway, a snowflake caught in her collar, melted, and rolled down her back like a frozen tear" (54). The tangibility in this moment, similar to the opening scene, reminds Mattie of one very critical revelation—that she exists in this time and in this place. Gaston Bachelard's explanation of existing in a space emphasizes this integral moment for Mattie:

At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability—a being who does not want to melt away, and who, even in the past, when he sets out in search of things past, wants time to 'suspend' its flight. In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for. (8)

So Mattie "does not want to melt away" effortlessly like the snowflake on her back. Mattie's greatest desire in life is to matter. Mattie did not truly exist in her childhood home in Rockvale, nor did she truly exist in Miss Eva's house alongside her self-absorbed son, Basil. Those places did not authentically belong to Mattie. But in Brewster Place, Mattie's personal fears, disappointments, triumphs, and desires matter and it is in Brewster Place where Mattie's words and actions have valuable consequences

for other inhabitants. Brewster Place merits Mattie's existence as the building nurtures Mattie, and consequently, Mattie becomes Brewster's nurturer.

Etta's arrival to Brewster Place evokes a contrasting mood to that of Mattie's arrival. Etta, who has just completed a "hot, dusty 1200-mile odyssey home," is not so much concerned with the decaying façade of Brewster Place as she is with her grandiose entrance (Naylor 56). Unlike Mattie's arrival, which was modest, Etta's arrival is so brazen that she transforms Brewster Place into a majestic realm for the inhabitants to experience: "...the chrome caught the rays of the high afternoon sun and flung them back into its face. She had chosen her time well" (56). The sun's rays seem to pave Etta's entrance evoking a sensation of gallantry. Unlike Mattie who was forced to enter Brewster Place, Etta chose her arrival. However, although Etta has come to Brewster Place on her own accord, what she is faced to encounter emotionally is beyond her control. Similar to what Stein suggests for Sula and Nel, Etta experiences a "juxtaposition [of] heroic expectation with mundane reality" (146). She must surrender all the emotional baggage at the door—literally—in order to be both accepted and rehabilitated. Etta's "heroic expectation" is possible at Brewster Place; similar to Mattie's greatest desire, Etta wants to matter in a significant way and only this place can offer her this gift. Etta has come to Brewster Place to heal a wounded spirit and succumb to a greater purpose, or what Henderson states as "a restructuring of [her] 'womanist' sensibilities," or a rebuilding of inherent desires and strength that have been diminished in a patriarchal society (3).

Comparable to the fortress-like depiction of Brewster Place that Mattie experienced, Etta is equally moved. The "heroic expectation" is not a feat to surpass, yet

it is what stirs within the women. Etta's only concern in this charged moment is entering a domain that will freely accept, nurture, and heal her; her first gaze onto the building incites a feeling of transcendence: "...head high and eyes fixed unwaveringly on her destination" (Naylor 57). Etta's placement below Brewster Place is not an illustration of timidity or weak surrender, yet it inspires a moment of possibility. McDowell asserts that if we are to closely examine the way in which Black women writers "employ literary devices in a distinct way" we will acknowledge their desire to recast the down-trodden Black female protagonist into a dialogue that follows their own "mythic structure" (158). Although Etta has arrived to Brewster Place broken, Naylor, through her use of imagery and metaphor, incites in both Etta and Brewster Place a sensation of heroism. Etta is not concerned with the cracks and decay, yet she is only concerned with entering the building and crossing over into a new realm. In this moment, Etta is not preoccupied with her past nor her future but only her *present*—she yearns for Brewster to enter her being.

It is the compilation of Mattie and the building that incites a purpose in Etta's life, and it is in Mattie's apartment where Etta receives clarity. For Etta, Mattie and Brewster have united to form a significant sense of place and, as one, it becomes a true sanctuary for Etta. Brewster Place is more to Etta than just shelter, yet it serves as a space to re-locate her sense of self that has been lost for so long. The space that has accepted and nurtured Mattie will now exist even more significantly for Etta: "She dumped her load on the sofa and swept off her sunglasses. She breathed deeply of the freedom she found in Mattie's presence. Here she had no choice but to be herself" (Naylor 58). Etta's true self can only effectively emerge in this protected space and it does more than house and name

them yet it defines them (Matus 63). The space breathes into Etta offering her a vitality that was thought to have vanished.

It is within the protected space of Mattie's apartment that Etta feels most uninhibited. The women fall effortlessly into the space they occupy, and laughter becomes a relevant aspect of the healing process for which each woman yearns. Laughter not only emphasizes the eternal bond that both Mattie and Etta share, also it highlights their resiliency to the pain that both have experienced: "The laughter lost its weak hold on their mouths and went bouncing crazily against the walls of the living room" (Naylor 59). Laughter becomes a form of purging in this moment; it is a release that can only occur within each other's company and within this space. But even more than a release, the laughter also becomes a metaphor of the Black female voice. Through their united laughter they are, in a sense, "claiming the right to speak [which] is a requisite part of claiming a self" (Wall 11). The space fosters a feeling of expression through laughter, which undoubtedly wields a sensation of liberation. The image of the "laughter bouncing crazily" evokes an aura of self-expression and the crucial aspects of their identity are unleashed, in this moment, in this space. As the laughter bounces off the walls, the walls absorb the spirited sound and inevitably the walls become part of them.

Later, "Their laughter now drew them into a conspiratorial circle against all Simeones outside of the dead-end street" (Naylor 61) and their "womanist" ideals are fueled by the growing force of their laughter. The "circle" image that forms through their laughter becomes a symbol of female unity that shields the women from the oppressive society (characterized by Etta's dishonest beau, Simeon) that lingers outside their walls.

The circle of laughter that forms and strengthens within Brewster's walls emphasizes the rehabilitative powers that both the building and the actual home place provoke. The laughter within Brewster "is expressive of the need to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality" (hooks 147). The "conspiratorial" aspect of their laughter reaffirms the uninhibited aspect of their identity that can only emerge within each other's company. It is within this space that Etta begins to acknowledge her inner strength and what she is able to endure and perhaps become.

The strength of Etta's spirit is deeply challenged after her sexual encounter with Reverend Moreland Woods. As he drops her off on the corner of Brewster Place, her "slumped profile" is left stranded amidst the deprecated landscape of Brewster Place, and it is in this moment that Naylor's use of paradox is most distinctively employed:

Etta stood looking at the wall that closed off Brewster from the avenues farther north...It had looked so different then, with the August sun highlighting the browns and reds of the bricks...Now it crouched there in the thin predawn light, like a pulsating mouth awaiting her arrival...an uncanny fear gripped her...If I walk into this street, she thought, I'll never come back... (73)

Brewster, which appeared so alluring to her earlier, now appears dreary and frightening; with the disappearance of the sun's rays, it becomes difficult for Etta to view the beauty amidst this place. Brewster becomes more of a domain of fear that "grip[s] her" mercilessly. Her own personal fears—those of hopelessness, rejection, and insignificance—take hold of her and her perception of her *self* is projected upon the

building that awaits her. In this moment, Brewster becomes not a place of comfort, but a trap. Brewster forces Etta to acknowledge both inadequacies and desires and, in this way, it coaxes paradoxical awareness. Etta is at a crossroad—to leave Brewster Place and continue on her unfulfilling, physical journey that offers superficial escape, or to enter Brewster's domain that will emotionally challenge her yet provide a sense of soothing stability. The fear that resides in both Etta and Mattie expresses a paradoxical captivity; the “uncanny” way that fear grips her forces her to acknowledge the transformative powers of Brewster Place, and there is something in that fear that awakens her: “Brewster Place is an anchor as well as a confinement and a burden...like a web, both sustains and entraps” (Matus 53). Perhaps the only way for Etta to feel nurtured is to confine her to a place that will prevent her from escaping. As much as Etta fears confinement, she fears abandonment that much more and Brewster Place, along with Mattie, will not abandon her.

A significant shift occurs as Etta approaches the building and, as the image of the building changes, so does the image of her self. Light, music, and companionship allure Etta in this transcendent moment as she approaches Brewster's stoop and it is the compilation of these significant factors that transform her perception of what Brewster Place means to her: “When Etta got to the stoop, she noticed there was a light under the shade at Mattie's window...someone was waiting up for her...Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her” (Naylor 74). Etta makes a literal ascent from the street onto the porch and in this ascent she sees the light. Mattie's healing presence in Etta's life can only exist within the walls of Brewster; this place not only forces the women to acknowledge the pain and

suffering that they have endured, but it also reminds them of redemption. Something stirs within Etta as she exits the oppressive domain of Reverend Woods' and unwaveringly approaches Brewster's porch. The healing powers that Mattie exhibits cannot exist without Brewster and because Etta yearns for Mattie's presence in her life, she inadvertently yearns for Brewster. Etta's rehabilitation begins as she enters Brewster's threshold.

Part II: The Relationship between the Black Female Character and the Homeplace

Perhaps the most striking paradox that both Morrison and Naylor emphasize within the description of both landscape and homeplace, that seems to both challenge and nurture the individual, is the isolating factor that both localities have in common. In the construct of isolation, the juxtaposition of being inhibited yet protected by a sense of place becomes the impetus behind the tumultuous, yet *necessary* relationship that exists between characters and place.

bell hooks makes the claim that:

...it was there on the inside, in that 'homeplace,' most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. This task of making a homeplace, of making a home a community of resistance, has been shared by black women globally. (42)

However, what becomes a stigma attached to the plight of Black women, Morrison and Naylor actually represent as moments that empower their female characters. In both *Sula* and *The Women of Brewster Place* scenes that depict the oppressive allegory of the household and domestic ritual are actually inverted as scenes of enlightenment for the

women; moreover, the women connect with their homeplace, like their domestic surroundings and domestic chores, in such a meaningful way that their awareness, engagement, and tactility in the home become literal mechanisms for *both* a control and a release of emotions.

Hannah Peace, Sula's mother, utilizes the food pantry as a sacred place to fulfill her sexual desires with various men: "...they would step into the pantry and stand up against the shelves she had filled with canned goods, or lie on the flour sack just under the rows of tiny green peppers" (Morrison 43). Hannah participates in an evident role reversal in this scene. The pantry stocked with "canned goods," "flour," and "peppers," which generally depict women's devotion to domestic ritual, is used as a place for sexual freedom and self-expression; Hannah actually engages with the domestic items present in the pantry—a place of confinement becomes a place of escape. What's more, Hannah deliberately enters and exits the pantry as her own intimate, personal space—a space that Sula acknowledges as her mother emerging "happier" than before. The pantry thus becomes a symbol for her daughter Sula and not as a symbol of female hardship, rather of sexual empowerment. As Sula grows to be a woman, she follows in the steps of her mother as she too, "...pulled him [Ajax] into the pantry" (125). However, this time the pantry was "void..of canned goods...empty of flour sacks...free forever of strings of tiny peppers" and although those remnants of the pantry no longer exist, the memory of the pantry items still exist in Sula's memory (125). Sula's memory of her mother entering and emerging from the pantry largely contributes to Sula's desire for control and self-fulfillment, thus allowing the space of the pantry to remain as a place of empowerment.

The kitchen, particularly the engagement with the kitchen sink, is another metaphorical element of domestic detail that is evidenced in both novels. The space of the kitchen, historically for Black women, has been a site for “domesticity and silence” (Davis 366). However, as Morrison and Naylor propose a revisionist perspective regarding the space of the kitchen, the women no longer become victims of the home yet locate their voices within it. The domain of the kitchen, and its impact on the women in both texts, can be articulated by what Olga Idriss Davis refers to as the “kitchen legacy” that derives from the Antebellum period where “Black women invented the cultural space of the kitchen to recover their dignity...and to develop creative strategies for self-empowerment through transformation” (365;368). The kitchen, then, becomes imbedded not only in their heritage, but also as an intricate part of their identity. The safe space of the kitchen does not only enclose their individual tragedies and triumphs, but it is a communal space that has been shared by their sisters and foremothers.

When Hannah learns of her mother’s intentional involvement in Plum’s death, the tragic reality becomes too much to bear, so she visits the kitchen sink and turns the water on over the “tight knots of Kentucky Wonders;” it is in her sense of place, residing over the kitchen sink, that Hannah experiences a meditative release as she employs the running water as an agent of liberation. It is through the domestic ritual of preparing and “washing” that “each time the green tubes rose to the surface she felt elated” (Morrison 72). The sink, particularly the domestic ritual in which she engages, enables Hannah to experience a moment of transcendence, and it is within the space of the kitchen that seems to act like a harbor her emotions.

However, this moment for Hannah is multi-layered and packed with fleeting paradoxical moments that remind her simultaneously of freedom and limitation. As she is experiencing the “elation” of the water running through the beans, her eyes wander over the sink, through the window, to the Dewey’s playing, and just as she attempts to lose herself in a daydream, “hens strutted by with a suspicious eye...on the brick fireplace where sheets and mason jars were boiled” and reminds her of her domestic role. She continues to “straight[en] the shawl that draped the couch and lay[ed] down. She dreamed of a wedding in a red bridal gown” (73). However, she is quickly interrupted once again by the arrival of her daughter, Sula.

What is particularly insightful in this scene is the rapidity of burdens and desires that simultaneously occur within the setting of the kitchen and the front room. There appears to be the dueling forces that exist within the home place, specifically amidst the domestic ritual that occurs within the homeplace. As Elizabeth T. Hayes suggests: “housekeeping [is] a visible and concrete means of defining and articulating self” (670); Hannah attempts to tightly clench the moments of freedom within her place, because they appear to be the only moments that allow her to gain a sense of self-definition.

Like Hannah, both Mattie and Ciel, in the novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, experience self-defining moments within their domestic space while engaging in domestic ritual. The kitchen, particularly the kitchen sink, remains to exist as a domain that instigates introspection. Mattie searches for a place in her home that will both nurture her overwrought feelings and provide her with a sanctuary that enables her to, as Hayes suggests, “defin[ing] a metaphorical space to speak from” (670). Moreover, the kitchen sink, then, is not the conventional trope of domestic oppression, but it becomes

an agent in the release of suppressed fears and emotions. This revisionist quality of the home place that both Naylor and Morrison elucidate emphasizes the transcendent power that place wields over identity. The women do not seek the kitchen as their gendered domain, yet they seek the kitchen because it is a place that allows them to control and own their emotions—and it is in this redefining role of the kitchen *place* that we acknowledge the valuable reciprocity that exists between Black women and place.

Mattie experiences both heartache and clarity while hovering over the kitchen sink, waiting for her son, Basil's, return. Like Hannah, while reflecting in the disappointments of her life and the uncertain outcome of Basil, Mattie completely loses herself, both emotionally and physically, within the kitchen sink, and the items that loiter within the sink strictly become the catalysts of her escape:

Mattie pondered this as her hands plunged into the soapy dishwater, and she mechanically washed the bowl and silverware. She tried to recapture the years and hold them up for inspection, so she could pinpoint the transformation, but they slipped through her fingers and slid down the dishes, hidden under the iridescent bubbles that broke with the slightest movement of her hand. She quickly saw that it was an impossible task and abandoned the effort. (Naylor 42)

It is through the employment of Naylor's metaphorical language that we learn of Mattie's suppressed regrets. The kitchen sink and the domestic ritual that occur within this space provide Mattie with a sense of action; in this moment, she has the ability to: "ponder," "recapture," "inspect," and "pinpoint" moments in her life that contribute to the formation of identity, and just as she is able to experience moments of control through

action, she succumbs to a loss of control, as well, as these thoughts “slipped through her fingers” and “slid down the dishes” and soon “abandoned the effort.” It is the culmination of these paradoxical emotions that we acknowledge the intensity of what it must mean for these women to be enlightened by the surfacing of subconscious emotions and desires. Also similar to Hannah, Mattie’s deliberate dual escape (through the sink and through the kitchen window) reaffirms not only the deep desire for introspection, but also the reciprocating relationship that exists between identity and place: “She looked up from the sink and gasped as she caught her reflection in the window pane” (42)—it is through the clashing of the subconscious and conscious, similar to Hannah’s gaze, that we acknowledge just how critical interaction with place becomes in their search of “defining a metaphorical space to speak from” (Hayes 670). Therefore, the linguistic choices that both Morrison and Naylor utilize are not arbitrary, yet they are contributing to a dialogue among Black women writers where audiences should “isolate[e] as many thematic, stylistic, and linguistic commonalities...as possible” (McDowell 156). The commonalities of reoccurring images and metaphors that both authors employ emphasize the inherent desire to create a space that fosters self-expression and resistance in the face of racial and sexist adversity. Furthermore, the women are contributing to the “kitchen legacy” trope that is an essential aspect of Black women’s heritage (Davis 365).

Also similar to Hannah, Mattie’s self-immersion continues beyond the domestic ritual at the kitchen sink as she moves more fervently from room to room: “chang[ing] the freshly starched kitchen curtains,” “rewax[ing] the tiles,” “vacuuming clean carpets,” and “dusting spotless tables” (Naylor 42); the desire to engage in domestic activity provides Mattie with a sense of dominion. The actions of “cleaning” and “dusting” and

“washing” are more than that of maintaining a proper home, yet these interactions with their home place funnel energies that have been suppressed and the exchange that occurs between Mattie and her home place contain healing powers. Similar to what artists may experience through their creations within their studio space, these women experience through their domestic ritual within their home place. Like artistic expression, the women experience moments of intense introspection, purging, and self-expression, and also like artists, the women indulge their emotions and desires within their immediate surroundings and encounter a visceral reaction.

The emotional awakening at the kitchen sink incites both a physical and mental movement around the house, and as Mattie engages in the delicate and rough interaction with her home, it is not until then that an ultimate emotional manifestation occurs: “There was a need to touch and smell and see that it was all in place” (Naylor 42). It is within these occupied spaces that Patricia McKee asserts that “then, with controlling, or even patrolling, boundaries in order to control the definition of their own selves” a genuine duality of acceptance and release can occur (10). By reclaiming the home place and “redefin[ing] traditional notions of ‘home,’” as Montgomery suggests, women reclaim their own identity in the process (“Good Housekeeping” 57). In the intimate and purposeful engagement that Mattie experiences within her home, she inevitably becomes transformed by it—even strengthened by it—“It would always be there to comfort and affirm when she would have nothing else” (Naylor 42). The home, then, becomes a constant in Mattie’s life. The home is her assured refuge when the comfort in her life becomes threatened.

Ciel, in the novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, also experiences an emotional transformation within the space of the kitchen, particularly at the kitchen sink. However, unlike Hannah and Mattie who utilize the kitchen space as a personal retreat to reclaim and heal their identity in the face of an ominous reality, Ciel must face her reality directly. Ciel's oppressive husband, Eugene, is the root of Ciel's anguish. His presence is the materialization of her deepest insecurities, fears, and disappointments and although her continued relationship with him appears to be masochistic, we learn that her greatest joy in life, her daughter, Serena, is ironically the product of this tragic relationship. It is the clashing of such contrasting realities that lures Ciel into the kitchen—the only place in her home where she feels emotionally equipped to combat such pain. Ciel is visibly ill-equipped when Eugene enters the home place. Her emergence into “his” space in the living room instigates a feeling within Ciel similar to a “...swimmer entering a cold lake” (Naylor 93). However, instead of remaining in the oppressive space of the living room, Ciel retreats to the kitchen which inevitably forces Eugene to follow and as Eugene, “stood in the kitchen door,” we witness a clear, divisive claim in space (Naylor 93). The space of the kitchen offers Ciel the tools to “claim self-definition...[and] where [she] could begin the struggle to transform oppression into resistance and to challenge the conditions of Black women's subjugation” (Davis 370). The kitchen becomes more than a place of protection, yet it manifests into a domain that fosters both a brave and complex identity untarnished by male oppression.

Whether it is subconscious or purposeful, Ciel's retreat to the kitchen space is a deliberate motion to utilize the strengthening qualities that the home place wields. Montgomery argues that “In the fiction of Gloria Naylor, the home is not a neutral space

but is relevant to the struggle for freedom from oppression” (“Good Housekeeping” 67). Moreover, similar to Hannah and Mattie, the sink provides a sanctuary within the domain of the kitchen and like Hannah and Mattie, the running water and the objects in the sink are treated as the physical manifestations of suppressed emotions. Ciel’s escape to the sink is problematic. Although she turns to this space as a retreat from Eugene’s oppression (because the kitchen sink is a confined area), she is equally forced to analyze agonizing personal emotions and confront unfulfilled desires. The domestic ritual in which Ciel engages at the sink acts as a metaphor of the contamination that Eugene has caused in Ciel’s psyche:

The water was turning cloudy in the rice pot, and the force of the stream from the faucet caused scummy bubbles to rise to the surface. These broke and sprayed tiny starchy particles onto the dirty surface. Each bubble that broke seemed to increase the volume of the dogged whispers she had been ignoring for the last few months. She poured the dirty water off the rice to destroy and silence them. (Naylor 94)

In this moment, Ciel’s attempt to cleanse the rice is an allegorical attempt to cleanse her contaminated spirit. The “cloud[iness],” the “dirty,” and the “scummy” attributes given to the rice can be seen as the embodiment of Eugene’s influence on her spirit. What’s more, the bubbles that burst in the rice represent the emerging subconscious of “dogged whispers” that Ciel has been “ignoring.” However, what is unfortunate is the deliberate task of “silenc[ing] the dogged whispers” rather than claiming them. Ciel acknowledges the “dirt” and “scum” that rises to the surface, yet she is not willing to acknowledge her own fortitude. Ciel, like Hannah and Mattie, seems to only go so far in her quest for

emotional freedom—she is not willing, nor able, to accept her own strength. It is during the “second change of water” that Ciel is forced to acknowledge her reality:

The second change of water was slightly clearer, but the starch-speckled bubbles were still there, and this time there was no way to pretend deafness to their message. She had stood at the sink countless times before, washing rice, and she knew the water was never going to be totally clear. She couldn't stand there forever—. (94)

What is most tragic in this moment is that although the sink shields Ciel from the direct onslaught of pain that Eugene wreaks, because she is unable to seize her own strength indefinitely, the sink becomes only a fleeting haven. Like Hannah and Mattie, Ciel retreats to the kitchen sink as a sanctuary to reclaim a wounded spirit and salvage aspects of an identity that has been suppressed. Ciel engages with her home and domestic ritual which instigates self-introspection beyond the domain of the kitchen sink, but unlike Hannah and Mattie, the tragic circumstance that surrounds Ciel is what encourages her to escape into domestic ritual.

Ciel's pregnancy with her second child, along with the clashing of Eugene's unemployment, forces Ciel into the devastating decision to have an abortion. The culmination of Ciel's suppressed anguish and emotional devastation are funneled through her interaction with the household chores within the rooms of her home. Like Mattie, Ciel encounters a heightened sense of interaction with the home through the tactility of domestic ritual: “The next few days Ciel found it difficult to connect herself up again with her own world. Everything seemed to have taken on new textures and colors. When she washed the dishes, the plates felt peculiar in her hands, and she was more conscious

of their smoothness and the heat of the water” (Naylor 95). Ciel’s inability to “connect” is synonymous with her inability to experience a visceral reaction, thus she deliberately *feels* through the items in her home. The home place is significant for Ciel because it provides her with emotional protection, as the home also provides her with domestic tasks that are employed as agents of empowerment.

For all of the women, the running water serves as a spiritual cleansing activity that attempts, at least, to rid the self of contaminants that have been inflicted by harsh realities. The women attain agency at the kitchen sink as they are equipped to purge the “dirt” that has been desecrating their spirit; moreover, the kitchen space also enables the women to accept/claim their desires and emotions that they have been forced to neglect. All three women desire to “stand there forever,” because they are at their strongest and shielded from the oppressive forces that hover outside the kitchen door. However, realistically, they acknowledge that “stand[ing] there forever” is not an option in an attempt for genuine rehabilitation—the question remains then, will this introspective, self-expressive moment sustain their fortitude and equip them to reenter the world that exists outside the borders of the kitchen?

Morrison and Naylor express the inextricable bond that these three characters share with their place and both of their texts emphasize the need and desire to interact with the immediate surroundings of place, because they cannot face the world and succeed with a broken, inadequate identity. Therefore, their engagement with the kitchen sink incites an authentic awakening within their spirits. They are finally able to acknowledge pain and fear, own their emotions, and accept the healing process.

Elizabeth T. Hayes makes this assertion regarding identity and the home place: “Houses have long been viewed as representing the people who inhabit them, whose domestic space they constitute. That one’s house—one’s most intimate personal space, aside from one’s body—is implicated in identity formation” (670). The construct of home and identity formation is evident in the relationship that both Nel and Sula have with their individual homes. Aspects of their identity, particularly desires and fears, are formed, cultivated, and fostered within their home place as children. Their perception of the world and the way in which they engage with the world is the creation of their childhood home place. Both Nel and Sula’s perception of their home as children and their engagement with their home molds their deepest emotional identities. What is lacking in their home is a direct contributor to what is lacking in their identities as adults. What’s more, the vacant quality present in their identity is emphasized as each girl observes and soon desires what the other girl’s home contains and represents.

In the manner of keeping a home, Helene Wright and Eva and Hannah Peace gravely differ; Nel “dread[ed] her home’s oppressive neatness” and preferred “Sula’s woolly house...where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink” where as Sula “loved” Nel’s home and “would sit on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time” (Morrison 29). Both Nel and Sula desired the opposite home-atmosphere because of the extreme contrasting mood that each home evoked. Where Nel found the order and neatness in her home to be “oppressive” and basked in the unpredictable excitement of the Peace house, Sula found comfort in the quiet and calm environment in the Wright’s home to escape from the chaos within her own home. The juxtaposition of order and disorder present in the construct of the Wright

and Peace home contributes largely not only to the identity formation of Nel and Sula, but also to their suppressed desires and fears that can only emerge upon the resignation of what is lacking in their own home. Thus, the kindred aspect of the girls' friendship emerges *only* when the paradox of their individual home place is examined because it is the fulfilling of each other's weaknesses and empty desires that mold their true friendship. The home, then, becomes an influential factor in both their identity formation and in their relationships, particularly to each other.

Sula's home can be described as "a house of many rooms" whose owner "kept adding things: more stairways...more rooms, doors and stoops" (Morrison 30). The continuous need to expand and enlarge alludes to the desire of what Patricia McKee states as "control over ingress and egress" or more aptly, creating the illusion of controlling, patrolling despite the world that exists outside the borders of the Peace home (10). The need to expand rather than minimize, or at least improve what already exists, implies the fervent feelings of denial in the face of vulnerability. The Peace home encourages the inhabitants to escape their realities, both literally (through the rooms) and emotionally, and live in a chaotic environment where everyone has their own cluttered, conflicted relationship with the home place. Sula, as both a child and an adult, does not receive the same type of comfort from the home as Nel (Nel does have a more positive interaction with her home as a child); because Sula does not have a positive experience with in her home as a child, McKee claims that Sula, like her mother Hannah "find[s] relief in discharging fears rather than containing them" (10). An eternal emptiness will emerge when a void in one's spirit is endlessly marginalized with valueless distractions—for Sula, her childhood home becomes the catalyst of a life devoid of fulfillment.

Both Nel and Sula yearn for spaces that can validate their conflicting emotions; they experience overwhelming feelings of emptiness and desire that can only be combated in a safe space. Instead of dismissing their desires as being the products of naivety, they allow these desires to take form and emerge as part of their identity. These hidden desires—that emphasize an integral aspect of their identity—can only manifest in a space in the home where the girls can feel uninhibited. The home, then, serves as an extension of an imagined self. Each girl enters a specific space of the home to encounter a revelation of what is lacking and what is desired and, without the bond of character and place, both Nel and Sula would never attain self-actualization. The girls yearn to “create a space they need” and in their case, the homeplace must serve as the template for their expression: “The Africana woman, with ingenuity, provides herself with whatever is necessary for her creative energies to soar” (Alexander-Floyd and Simien 72). Both the back porch for Nel and the attic for Sula become the spaces of the home that offer each girl a sanctuary for self-expression. The back porch and the attic, like the kitchen, allow Nel and Sula to “defin[e] a metaphorical space to speak from” (Hayes 670). The space of the back porch and the attic presents a clashing of reality and imagination that grips each girl in a way that forces them to acknowledge aspects of their identity that have been silenced by either family members or the community.

The potentiality of the girls’ daydreams can only attain validation in a space that incites transcendence:

When Nel, an only child, sat on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother’s incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back, she studied the poplars and fell easily into a

picture of herself lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince. (Morrison 51)

Nel takes the comfort of the back porch to entertain her desires and also to acknowledge her realities. The back porch becomes an agent of Nel's quest for self-expression; it is on her back porch where she feels free to wander in a daydream. Trudier Harris argues that, historically in the African American community, the porch "became some of the primary stages for interactive storytelling" (xii). In Nel's case, she becomes *both* storyteller and observer—creating her own story in which she is the heroine. For Nel, the porch becomes the portal to the imagination and through the excavation of her daydream we recognize Nel's inherent desire to feel liberated. Her daydream enables her to "f[all] easily into a picture of herself lying on a flowered bed." Nel's willingness to "f[all]" is a testament to a deeper yearning that Nel has suppressed while living under the constraints of her mother's household. Only in Nel's daydream, on the porch, can she truly acknowledge inherent aspects of the self and only on the porch can she indulge them. Nel attains agency through her daydreaming, because it allows her to observe, participate, and claim an essential layer of her identity—a layer that is filled with passion and possibility. Because Nel "becomes both the 'porch sitter' and the 'porch watcher' [she] contribute[s] to the story" that she imagines for herself (Harris xiii).

Her placement on the steps is also telling. Although she is "surrounded" by the oppressive neatness of her mother's home, her back is facing the home. Her gaze is outward, past the home, all the while "feeling the neatness pointing at her back." Nel is caught between two worlds—her mother's expectations and her own. The home's presence in Nel's psyche is very tangible, because in this moment she must juggle the

conflicted relationship that she experiences with the home place. She is conflicted; the home becomes both a hindrance and a comfort. Her daydream is congruent to her desire of separating herself from her mother's world. As her gaze turns to the surrounding trees, she "[falls] easily" into a daydream of self-expression as she visualizes being "tangled in her own hair." Her daydream demonstrates her desire to free herself from the propriety that her mother demands. The image of being "tangled" offers a feeling of messiness, but it is welcomed, similar to the messiness that is exemplified in the Peace home. The sensation of being "tangled" in her daydream offers Nel a sense of excitement that her existence lacks.

What is equally illuminated in Nel's daydream is her inability to interact with the "fiery prince" who, although, may offer her the passion that she desires, she can only passively "wait" for him. Perhaps it is her inextricable bond to the orderliness of her home that does not fully enable Nel to delve into the indulgences of her daydream, or more aptly, her life. The home place, or more particularly the porch, similar to the kitchen sink, appears to offer fleeting moments of both inner strength and insecurities. But despite the complexity of this moment, Nel is transformed in this place on the porch; bell hooks says that "Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference" (148). For Nel, the porch becomes a nurturing atmosphere that offers her a palette for self-expression. Only in the structure of the home, is she able to indulge in the possibility of her deepest desires but also recognize her greatest fears.

Like Nel, Sula also seeks a place within the home to physically and emotionally escape: "...wedged into a household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things,

people, voices and the slamming of doors, [Sula] spent hours in the attic behind a roll of linoleum galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses (Morrison 52). Sula finds the attic to be a comforting space to escape the “throbbing disorder” that tramples her, and like Nel, Sula utilizes this space as an agent of self-expression. Just as the silence is tangible in the Wright home, the chaos is just as tangible in the Peace home. The silence and the chaos of the home place are deafening to the girls in similar ways—and similarly, both girls seek places in the home that shield their fears and foster their desires.

Sula is encouraged to envision a life full of possibilities as she enters the attic, and unlike Nel’s daydream, Sula is actively involved in her daydream. Sula does not wait for any “fiery prince,” yet she becomes her own rescuer “galloping through her own mind...tasting sugar and smelling roses” (Morrison 52). Sula’s trust in her own capabilities is evident, and she acknowledges her desire to control her own destiny. Ironically, as free as Sula feels in this moment, it seems to only be possible in this particular space in the attic; Sula may not have achieved this self-revelation outside the borders of the home. It can be surmised that Sula sought the ideal location, space, in the home to encourage her hidden desires to emerge safely and wildly. It is within the home that Sula feels empowered, but also aware of her own limitations. It is Morrison’s attempt to “develop a rich irony by juxtaposing heroic expectation with mundane reality” (Stein 146) that we see the significant role place claims in the psyche of both Nel and Sula. Nel and Sula are able to experience transcendent, imaginative moments because they feel safe in their space and allow the spaces of the home to wield power over their identity.

What is also telling, but perhaps even contradictory, is in examining the actual structure of the places that both Nel and Sula sought in order to foster their daydreams. Nel, the reserved and meeker girl, claims the porch, where as Sula, the bolder and rebellious girl, claims the attic. The porch would seemingly be an appropriate location for Sula's daydreams as she is the one who embarks upon a self-indulgent, ten year journey outside of Medallion, yet she chooses the confining, domestic space of the attic to daydream. Nel, on the other hand, leads a life of tradition as she stays in Medallion and raises a family, and she chooses the open, limitless space of the porch to foster her daydreams. Why does Morrison create such a distinct paradox regarding the location of their daydreaming? Perhaps the irony lies *not* in their chosen space of daydreaming, yet the true irony lies in their life's outcome—that as young girls they felt more alive and free than as adults; as children, they recognized true possibility, but as adults they became jaded and fearful which ultimately hinders their quest for fulfillment.

Bachelard argues that "The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depth (6). Nel and Sula's unwavering bond with place becomes more than just the backdrop of their daydreams, yet place becomes the catalyst for hope and possibility.

Even as an adult, Sula yearns for a space in her home that can validate her conflicted emotions toward Ajax. Once again, her home becomes more than a setting that she can passively traverse, yet her engagement with her surroundings and her movement in and out of the rooms forces her to experience the anguish of betrayal and

abandonment. What is more, the domestic objects that constitute the rooms in her home represent Ajax in a tangible form; she allows the objects to not only become extensions of Ajax's identity, but she also employs the objects of her home as signifiers of her own deficient identity.

Upon Ajax's departure, it is as if Sula becomes a ghost in her own home. She navigates through the rooms of her home with both a sense of nostalgia and awe: "...for he had left nothing but his stunning absence. An absence so decorative, so ornate, it was difficult for her to understand how she had ever endured, without falling dead or being consumed, his magnificent presence" (Morrison 134). Sula does not feel worthy to fill the spaces of her home, because of the god-like persona that she has created in Ajax. What is Morrison suggesting when through Sula's eyes Ajax's *absence* is described as, "stunning," "decorative," and "ornate"? It is as if his presence is so imbedded in the aura of Sula's home that even in his absence his imprint can still be seen and perhaps even felt. Sula views her own presence to be so insignificant that she must project her own identity onto Ajax's presence, thus, the tragic reality occurs for Sula, because once Ajax abandons her, she is ill-equipped to reposition her *self* back into her home construct. The void that Sula experiences within her spirit now manifests into the shape of her home; the home place becomes the metaphor of her identity. She allowed Ajax's "magnificent presence" to take ample space in her home—her identity—and when he leaves her, his absence is almost too much to bear.

Morrison continues to articulate the impact of Ajax's presence within Sula's home place through the description of domestic objects arranged in Sula's home; the objects signify Ajax's potent presence in Sula's life: "The mirror by the door was not a

mirror by the door, it was an altar where he stood for only a moment to put on his cap before going out. The red rocking chair was a rocking of his own hips as he sat in the kitchen” (134). The mirror in Sula’s home, recreated as an “altar” in Ajax’s presence, serves as not only testimony to his divinity, but also of his compelling command over Sula. Even though the mirror belongs to Sula, once Ajax inhabits her space the sole purpose of the mirror is redesigned as an “altar” to honor Ajax, not Sula. The mirror that once reflected her image, now only pays homage to *his* image—further proving his command over what was once her personal space. Ajax even invades the space of the kitchen as he carelessly claims Sula’s red rocking chair; the chair no longer belongs to Sula, yet it becomes an extension of Ajax as it “rock[s] of his own hips.” Sula no longer recalls these objects in her home as her own, yet as adornments to Ajax’s existence. Because Sula projects the identity of Ajax onto the objects of her home, she prohibits her own identity to emerge.

Sula also experiences a heightened awareness of her senses upon Ajax’s departure. Once again, almost as if she were a ghost navigating through her home, she is re-experiencing rooms and objects as never encountered before: “His absence was everywhere, stinging everything, giving the furnishings primary colors, sharp outlines to the corners of rooms and gold light to the dust collecting on table tops” (Morrison 134). Even in his absence Ajax is able to penetrate Sula’s home/identity. Sula experiences her home in a very tactile way through her senses; she observes “primary colors” and “gold light to the dust” and she makes contact with “sharp outlines”—she engages with her home in a very intimate way; however, what is complex about this scene is her ability to *feel* in his absence. Although there is an intense mood of desolation depicted in this

scene, there is also a mood of possibility or even revelation. The remnants of her home seem only to exist for Ajax and it is only upon his departure from her home place that she attempts to reclaim the domestic remnants as her own. Patricia McKee argues that “What is missing is any relation between these objects, which were seen as Ajax’s presence relative to him, as ‘backdrops to his presence;’” therefore, Sula must reassert the objects in her home to then become the “backdrops of *her* presence” and disallow the objects of her home—her identity—to be projected onto another (19). Sula’s vulnerability is highlighted through Ajax’s annexation of her home place. It is no wonder that Sula’s sense of place becomes distorted upon Ajax’s departure—she allowed him to claim and re-define her sense of place. What Sula must acknowledge is the sacredness of her home place because without the acknowledgement of the home being “woman’s most intimate personal space,” the spirit loses its sense of identity and becomes displaced (Hayes 670).

Bearing witness to the sexual affair between Sula and Jude attacks Nel at the core of her being. Everything that Nel believed of love and loyalty disintegrated in this very moment, and her only hope for an emotional survival is to locate a space in her home that will nurture, protect, and “contain her grief” (Morrison 107). The space of the bathroom becomes more than just an agent of coping, yet it becomes an agent of restoration. After the devastation of bearing witness to the affair between her best friend and her husband, Nel seeks a refuge that will encapsulate her body physically and her spirit metaphorically. Paradoxically, she desires a space that will both confine and comfort, and she yearns for a space that will expose the “dark things” in her life through illumination: “She looked around for a place to be. A small place....The bathroom. It was both small and bright,

and she wanted to be in a very small, very bright place. Small enough to contain her grief. Bright enough to throw into relief the dark things that cluttered her (107).

Through the contrasting images that Morrison employs in this scene, we can acknowledge the complex level of emotions that both define and badger Nel; the paradoxes represent the components that define Nel's relationship with Jude and Nel's relationship with Sula. Nel wants to be contained in a small, tight place; she does not seek freedom, because the physical compression of the small space will comfort her grief. There is also a contrast between the "dark" that contaminates her spirit and the "bright[ness]" in which she yearns. The light will not only dispel the darkness, but it will also cleanse.

All of the joys and pains ever experienced are confined in this one, small space. This corner or this space allows for what Bachelard calls "a negation of the Universe" (136). Here, in this space, she is equipped to combat betrayal of a best friend and a husband and the consequential heartache that follows. Nel's resiliency is heightened because she is able to feel powerful in this small space—her thoughts and "the dark things" transcend her mind and become a powerful entity in that space. Although she cannot control what occurs outside the bathroom walls, what occurs inside that bathroom is up to her own device. According to Bachelard, the soul desires "immobility;" the soul desires to exist in a space, peacefully, thus allowing this space to become one's greatest haven (137). Nel did not arbitrarily journey to the bathroom out of convenience, yet she "looked around for a place to *be*" and sought to possess a space and allow the space to possess her. Her anguish can only exist when in solitude—in a protected space—

otherwise her pain will only become insignificant and it will become lost in the greater sphere beyond the bathroom.

Something spiritual occurs in the bathroom for Nel. She experiences a controlled sense of release, and she begins to experience a heightened sense of awareness: "Once inside, she sank to the tile floor next to the toilet. On her knees, her hand on the cold rim of the bathtub, she waited for something to happen...inside. There was stirring, a movement of mud and dead leaves" (Morrison 107). The image of Nel collapsing down "on her knees" summons an act of reverence. Here Nel has the opportunity to not only bow and acknowledge the external forces that impact her life, but she also bows to herself and to her own fortitude. Nel also encounters an internal, spiritual awakening within this space. Nel is patiently "wait[ing] for something to happen" inside that small space, and she experiences what is similar to the moment of both revelation and redemption that occurs in a church confessional. Because of what she witnesses, and because the reality that exists outside the bathroom walls are so excruciating, what she creates within this space becomes her very own sanctuary.

Because Nel is unable to release "her very own howl," she resides to actively participate in a heightened sense of awareness through tactile expression with her surroundings. The "tile floor...[and]...the cold rim of the bathtub" allows for Nel to *feel* her way through emotions, similar in the way that Ciel, Hannah, and Mattie employ domestic rituals to both feel and resist. The outcome of Nel's emotional tactility in the bathroom does provoke an internal "stirring, a movement of mud and dead leaves." Despite the image of decaying leaves and mud, the action of "stirring" what is decayed allows for the image of rebirth. In order for Nel to move forward and heal, she must

acknowledge and claim the “dark things that cluttered her” life. Nel utilizes the space of the bathroom as not an escape, yet quite the opposite—she uses the space to experience a catharsis. And like all of the female characters in both *Sula* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, she “defined a metaphorical space to speak from” (Hayes 670). Nel’s greatest challenge is not gaining the courage to enter the space of the bathroom and coping with the pain, yet it will be exiting the bathroom, as “[she] would be happy...if [she] could be sure that [she] could stay here in this small white room...(Morrison 108). Perhaps, then, the task of exiting a small space, unscathed, becomes the crux of engrossing a small space to heal.

The death of Ciel’s daughter propels her into a state of absolute numbness. Like Nel, Ciel must be transported into a space that will comfort her and attempt to heal her without the scrutiny of others. Although it may appear that Ciel’s pain is too vast to contain, Mattie has the ability to locate the space, in the home, that will be converted into a sanctuary and where Ciel will be “able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that [will] transform reality” (hooks 147). Since holding on to an un-healed past will only hinder her rehabilitation, she must not allow the pain to possess her, yet she must set the pain free.

Mattie first offers her physical body as a space for Ciel to exist within: “[Mattie] sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her huge ebony arms. And she rocked” (Naylor 103). Mattie’s first attempt to transport Ciel into a space that transcends the pain is effective, and through her body and arms, Mattie is able to encapsulate Ciel both physically and spiritually. In this moment, both women recreate the mother-child role. The role-playing becomes significant for both Ciel and Mattie

because they are able to exist in a space that allows them to reconnect with the beloved memories of the past that have become crucial aspects of their identity. The “rocking” motion not only seems as a maternal comforting mechanism, but it also serves as a spatial mark that both women yearn to create. Mattie has the ability to transport Ciel into a spiritual, metaphorical space that no longer becomes the bedroom: “Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time” (103). Although the actual space of the bedroom is uninspiring, the connection of the women and the desire for a catharsis is so great that they are able to transform the actual space into a space of sanctity.

Mattie’s “rocking” incites Ciel to *feel* once again which causes her to violently purge as she was “rushed...to the toilet...Ciel retched yellowish-green phlegm...the body did not want to seem to stop” (Naylor 104). The purging is necessary for Ciel because not only does it allow Ciel to rid herself of the toxins that have enveloped her spirit, but it also allows for an emotional release that was not feasible outside of this space. The bathroom will now provide Ciel with the space to cleanse and also a chance for redemption. In this space, like so many of the spaces shared by the other Black female characters discussed, time freezes for Ciel. Ciel and her pain exist and cannot be marginalized. Her pain cannot exceed the size of the room; therefore, it is both contained and managed. In this space, her pain can be acknowledged, yet it does not consume her being beyond repair, because it takes a form and then “exorcis[ed]” of her being. And once she faces the pain, it leaves her body both physically and emotionally and a rebirth can effectively transpire:

Ciel undergoes a mystical rebirth, not a repetition of the first, physical birth, but one that is spiritual in nature. Significantly that rebirth takes place in private, outside the watchful gaze of white, male society and is oriented toward allowing her access to a new mode of existence in which she is no longer subject to limitations imposed by time and space.

(Montgomery, "Fathomless Dream" 45)

The moment in the bathroom allows for Ciel's pain to exist and together both women are equipped to construct a space that is not at the mercy of time.

The domestic ritual of cleansing and bathing that follows between Ciel and Mattie becomes reminiscent of the actions taken by all of the women as they encounter awakenings. More importantly, this scene highlights the bond that Black women share by recalling "common-sensical wisdom [that] links her to the tradition of Black women who have nursed their sisters through grief and suffering" (Matus 50). The metaphorical images that take form in the space of the bathroom are both maternal and spiritual. The cleansing of Ciel's body as Mattie "slowly bathed her" reminds us of the women's inherent desire to not only reenter spheres of maternal protection (as either mother or child) but also to accept the transformative powers that that the space will wield on their wounded spirit. Moreover, the images of spirituality, particularly that of the Christian ritual of purification, similar to that of a baptism, are also portrayed in this scene between Mattie and Ciel. Mattie's desire to rid Ciel of the "evilness of pain" is sanctioned through a spiritual cleansing. Similar to Nel's actions in her bathroom, Ciel also succumbs to the "rise[s] and kneels[s]" which assist her in a cathartic journey. Like Nel, her actions in the bathroom are reverent and she too yearns for redemption.

The juxtaposing images of decay and purification are also present for Ciel. Ciel's body is compared to a "dried brown autumn leaf hitting the surface of a puddle" (Naylor 104). The deterioration of spirit manifests into the image of a decayed leaf, a reminder of how frail Ciel's spirit is; however, similar to the "stirring of dead leaves" that Nel encountered, Ciel also encounters a sense of stirring in her space. Ciel's stirring begins as a physical movement as Mattie cleanses her body in the tub, and soon the physical movement retreats and incites an internal movement as "Ciel began to cry—there, naked in the center of the bathroom floor" (105). Ciel yearns for a physical reaction (i.e. tears, moaning) to both validate and release the pain. Ciel, too, struggles to *feel* her pain emotionally, so she utilizes tactility as an agent of expression. The moment that Ciel stands "naked, and felt the cool air play against the clean surface of her skin" (104) is the moment that she reaches her awakening—for she re-enters the space as not a shattered woman, yet as a woman who has felt her way through the pain and emerged uplifted. For Ciel, the most "special domain [where] the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls" occurs in the home place (hooks 41-42). The bathroom becomes Ciel's most defined sanctuary, because her faith in her self has authentically burgeoned.

Conclusion

Being intimate with a space and allowing the space to envelop the spirit is an act of self-preservation. More than the desire to be accepted by society, all of the women share the common desire to accept the *self*. The only effective way that each woman can authentically acknowledge and claim self is to locate a space that affords them the power

to evolve their private space into a personal sanctuary. It is through their subtle gestures within the space, their intimate tactility with the space, and their response to the silence of the space where each woman claims the essential elements of her identity. The symbiotic relationship that exists between the Black female characters and place is the most vital proof of their survival. The space that each woman enters not only validates pain, incites desires, and fuels resistance, but it also allows each woman to self-commemorate the spirit. Since the women recognize and embrace their incessant desire to become enlightened, each woman transforms a domestic space into a sphere that honors their “‘womanist’ sensibilities” (Henderson 3).

Because the women depicted in both texts are not unsullied, their flaws incite moments of paradox. The contrasting elements of the womens’ actions and emotions contribute to the complexity of their identity, but the fact that they are *not* willing to surrender to the dueling forces that combat them is testimonial to the transformative powers of the place that they create. The paradoxes in both texts do not only illustrate the complexity of each woman’s identity, yet they also exemplify the legitimacy of their pain. Their pain is felt both physically and emotionally through the bodily acts of purging, such as crying and vomiting and through the metaphorical elements of dead leaves and mud. However, what combats the enormity of their pain is the glimpse of hope—a hope depicted through the elements of renewal, such as sunlight, water, and laughter. The hope and the possibility of survival becomes the greatest adversary to their suffering. Thus, Naylor and Morrison construct moments of paradox that stimulate an awakening within the character.

It is through the metaphorical space that each woman creates, and not through the physically and structurally confining space, where she exceeds all boundaries and borders. Each woman becomes the epic heroine of her own odyssey—an odyssey that can only genuinely begin at home.

Although Morrison and Naylor's primary characters are female, we cannot ignore their race, which is a central piece of the self. The Black female characters engage with their surroundings—the homeplace—in a way that may be implicit to all women, but is intrinsic to Black women. Mattie, Ciel, Etta, Hannah, Nel, and Sula, each in their individual way, contribute to a collective Black female voice—one that speaks of marginalization, oppression, and silencing. The common thread that keeps the women from being totally broken is both their desire and their acknowledgement of possibility. Their desire to attain an emotional freedom, an existence of fulfillment and peace untarnished by a patriarchal and racist society, is their collective vision. Their collective desires can only authentically emerge in a safe space—in a space that fosters an awakening. The house becomes the structure that nourishes the spirit and offers the only true space of resistance. Their definition of resistance lies within the claiming of their suppressed suffering and through the emerging of their subconscious desires. The women are aware of the transformative powers that the homeplace wields, proven through their incessant desire to locate a space in the home and to utilize the aspects of the home to acquire self-actualization: "In fact, the houses of African American women's literature are often palimpsests of all four kinds of space—architectural, geographic, psychic, and communal—and thus they are multilayered signifiers" (Hayes 670). For these Black women, the home becomes a metaphor of identity. The women attain agency

by employing all the spaces of the home in a constructive way. We observe the architectural elements through the use of the attic and stairs; the geographical elements through the use of landscape; the psychic elements through the use of the body and water; and the communal elements through the use of Mattie's apartment and the Peace home. To emphasize, once again, what Hayes argues as a necessity for identity formation is that in order for survival these women must "define a metaphorical space to speak from" (670). But in order to successfully define their space, they must first self-define. Which means, then, they must un-learn what the patriarchal and racist society has attempted to define of them.

The homeplace becomes more than just a refuge, yet it becomes the bridge to incite resistance and welcome transformation. Cheryl A. Wall asserts, "The fierce young female characters who are survivors rather than victims are trenchant social critics; [they] define themselves and position themselves respectively as potential and active agents of social change" (3). The Black female characters utilize the homeplace in a meaningful way to attain both an individual and collective identity formation. The women in *Sula* and *The Women of Brewster Place* are contributing to a larger dialogue that transcends their own kitchen and bathroom space. Although it may appear that each space is unique to each woman, the spaces are in fact shared spiritually by many of their Black foremothers and sisters. Perhaps, then, we must call for a further examination of the way in which Black female characters employ the homeplace in search of identity. There would be merit in unearthing the ways in which the homeplace incites creative inspiration, such as through domestic ritual, within specific spaces of the home. Olga Idriss Davis argues for the transcendent qualities that manifest within the kitchen in what

she terms as the “kitchen legacy” that has been passed down through Black women since the antebellum period. Morrison and Naylor’s characters utilize the kitchen as a means of resistance and as a domain that fosters an emotional awakening. But historically, the kitchen has been a place of cultural empowerment for Black women. Further examination into the kitchen space could highlight the elements and agents of the kitchen that fuel creativity and self-expression which inevitably also serve as essential aspects of identity.

Another perspective into further research could examine the differences and commonalities in the way that Black female characters of different social and financial classes engage with the homeplace. Black slaves and servants may interact with spaces of the home differently than those of middle and upper class upbringings. However, both classes of Black women may equally look to the spaces of the home for refuge and perhaps even to entertain suppressed dreams and desires.

Despite an ever-changing world, despite a prevalent patriarchal force, despite the effects of racial oppression, what still remains is the unconquerable, uncompromising sanctum of the homeplace. For Black women, the space of the home has been and continues to be the dominant sphere that heals pain, cultivates desires, highlights strengths, and validates existence. The structure of the home becomes not only the site of possibility, but because the homeplace is so imbedded in identity, the home offers the Black woman an eternal voice.

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