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Psychological Trauma, Memory and Female Subjectivity in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place

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Abstract
Benzimidazole The Women of Brewster Place (1982), by Gloria Naylor, is a composite of seven interconnected stories, where psychological trauma, broken memory and the quest for a separate female identity intersect on a single dead-end street where the almost all-black population is made up primarily of women. The novel's portrayal of trauma as an individual experience versus a generational trauma raised by the multiple forces of racism, patriarchy and poverty in conjunction with communal silence is explored in this paper. Using trauma theory (Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman), psychoanalytic theory (the belated understanding of Cathy's Nachträglichkeit) and Black feminist criticism (Patricia Hill Collins and Barbara Christian), the paper suggests that Naylor's narrative structure is broken, non-linear and formally processes the traumatic memory itself. The study examines how Mattie Michael, Lucielia Louise Turner, Cora Lee and the images of Lorraine and Theresa are simultaneously wounding and reparative, in the process of erasing and reconstituting subjectivity in the work. The study demonstrates that remembering, forgetting, and communal storytelling through the work are simultaneously wounding and reparative practices in which Naylor's women resist erasure and reconstitute subjectivity. The paper concludes that memory, ultimately, is a two-faced tool: it repeats and re-wounds injury, as well as the foundation on which black female subjectivity, precariously, is re-constructed.
This paper uses the terms trauma, memory, Black feminism, and female subjectivity as key concepts. Trauma, memory, Black feminism and female subjectivity are the key concepts used in this paper.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Black feminism, Female subjectivity, Gloria Naylor; The Women of Brewster Place, Narrative fragmentation

INTRODUCTION

Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place, first published in 1982, has a unique place in the African American women's fiction canon as it challenges the single, narrative-driven woman-centred story in favour of multiple interlocking tales united by both a physical and symbolic focal point. The space of Brewster Place, itself a crumbling block surrounded by a brick barricade built as a result of a political compromise, can less be considered a setting than a character in its own right, a repository of the collective disappointment, displacement and endurance of the Black women left behind by circumstances, and who in turn make it into a fragile community. The seven sections of the book focus on different women, but it's not just that the stories are connected chronologically, they are also connected in space, in what their neighbors hear, and, even more obviously, in memory: what is remembered is only part of a story, and the street's history is only legible in the cumulative and unevenly painful memories of its inhabitants.

This paper focuses on the connection between three terms that are linked together in Naylor's work—the emotional wounding, memory, and femininity of the subject. Trauma, as described by Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, is not just a singular, injurious event, but a trauma that at the time of its occurrence cannot be fully processed and that comes back, delayed and sometimes unwillingly, in the form of intrusive memory, repetition, silence or somatization. Naylor's women all have these kinds of wounds: Mattie Michael's ejection from her father's house and the deprivation of her son; Lucielia Louise Turner's premature and unwelcome motherhood; Cora Lee's early exposure to motherhood; and the brutal rape at the hands of a gang of neighbourhood youths of one half of the novel's lesbian couple, Lorraine. In both instances, the trauma event is told only in part at first, only its full force comes later, in a series of flashbacks, associations, the broken rhythms of memory which echo the psychic form of trauma itself, and so each woman's understanding of the trauma itself is pieced out by the reader as the reader builds it out, formally echoing the psychic form of trauma itself.

Meanwhile, Naylor is adamant that these aren't just individual, privately-defined issues. Traumas that shape her characters are manufactured and maintained by recognisable social mechanisms: the economic precarity that pushes poor Black women to Brewster Place, for one; the sexual and domestic violence from men in and outside the community; for another, the state of the racial order that makes black womanhood perpetually vulnerable to dispossession. Trauma theory, therefore, cannot be separated from Black feminist theory because as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins have pointed out, any theory of Black women's subjectivity must include a theory of trauma, as the experiences of Black women have been marked by a history of race, gender and class oppression.

The argument of this paper is that Naylor's narrative seems to be a formal choice of a type that reflects a fragmented memory of trauma rather than a mere structural preference. The use of multiple non-continuous narratives, only

partially overlapping, and to be constructed by the reader, further evokes the experience of traumatic memory, which is not linear, non-chronological, and relies on a building up of the fragments over time. The ending “block party” dream sequence, where the women living on Brewster Place come together to break down the wall that surrounds their street, also points towards the possibility of communal memory and collective narration – and the suppression of trauma – as the way through which trauma could be made a shared, and therefore survivable, history.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This work is literary and cultural criticism, which in the traditional scientific sense does not use an empirical or experimental approach. This study is more of a literary and cultural critical approach, supported by a theoretical framework from trauma studies and black feminist criticism, which is used to analyses the primary source, the novel written by Gloria Naylor titled The Women of Brewster Place. The main source for analysis will be the novel itself, read entirely in 1982 with special attention to the novel's treatment of the violence, loss, and psychic effects of the violence in the story of Mattie Michael, the story of Lucielia Louise Turner ("Ciel"), the story of Cora Lee, and the stories of Lorraine and Theresa ("The Two").

The analytical method uses a close reading approach and a comparative theoretical approach. The paper borrows from trauma studies, particularly the account of trauma as being a wound that is not fully known at the time of its occurrence and therefore returns belatedly to the survivor's memory (Cathy Caruth) and from Judith Herman's clinical and cultural model of trauma and recovery which outlines stages of safety, of remembrance and mourning, and of reconnection as necessary to the recovery process. The terms "acting out" (compulsory repetition of trauma) and "working through" (a more integrated and narrativized relationship to the traumatic past) are used to distinguish between characters who are stuck in repetition and those who move, albeit in an incomplete manner, towards a re-constituted selfhood.

The paper, inspired by Black feminist criticism, takes as its starting point bell hooks' analysis of the historical devaluation of Black womanhood, Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the "matrix of domination" as an understanding of the simultaneous operation of race, gender and class oppression, and Barbara Christian's and Barbara Smith's foundational arguments for reading Black women's fiction on its own aesthetic and political terms, rather than through frameworks derived solely from white feminist or male-centred African American literary traditions. The frameworks are not used in sequence, but together, as the idea in Naylor's novel is that an adequate understanding of trauma can only be had if it is understood in its racialized and gendered social context, and that Black feminist criticism, in turn, has analytical precision when read in the light of a theory of memory and traumatic repetition.

The analysis is narrative by narrative, examining in each case: (a) the type of traumatic event or condition; (b) the formal and rhetorical strategies that Naylor uses to dramatize its impact on memory and on day-to-day consciousness; and (c) how the character either approaches or is frustrated in his/her attempt to create a new subjectivity. From there, the paper brings the various analyses together in a discussion of the novel's collective and formal aspects: its fragmented structure, its communal dream sequence at the close of the novel. Concluding observations on Naylor's overall vision of the wound of memory as resource are then offered.

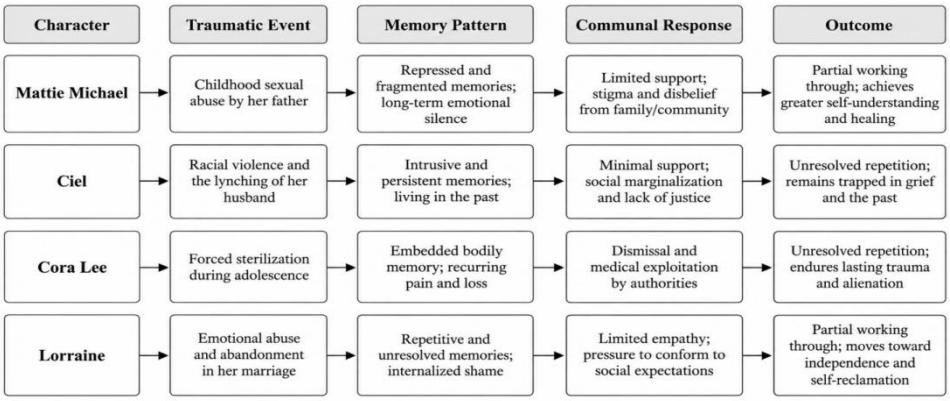


Figure 1. Trauma, Memory, Community, and Outcome across Four Character Experiences

Conceptual representation of how traumatic experiences shape memory patterns, interact with communal responses, and lead toward either processes of working through or continued unresolved repetition.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mattie Michael: Displacement, Guilt and the Long Memory of Loss

The opening story, Mattie Michael's, serves as a pattern for the other stories, and as a model of delayed traumatic disclosure, it also implies the rest of the book's pattern of structure. The first story of the novel, Mattie Michael's, sets the pattern for the others and as a model of delayed traumatic disclosure, also suggests the pattern of the rest of the book. She arrives on Brewster Place at the end of a long line of dispossessions: unexpectedly pregnant, violently rejected by her father, most shocking of all, she loses her grown-up son Basil who runs away after putting up her house as his bail bond. The events do not unfold in a linear fashion, and, like Mattie's history itself, are

presented to the reader as a series of 'afterthoughts' that are also woven into Mattie's present life on the street. The very meaning of "belatedness" in Caruth's insight into the traumatic experience's condition, in which the "full meaning" of an injurious event is not present at the moment of its occurrence, but is experienced over and over again in memory. These haunting memories of Mattie's father's violence and Basil's abandonment are precisely such intrusive returns, and the survivor's guilt over Basil's abandonment in particular, suggests how trauma can become bound up with self-blame, creating a wound that remains as much the survivor's own doing as the initial trauma.

But Mattie's arc is also a demonstration of the "working through" instead of "acting out" that Mattie exemplifies, as described by LaCapra. But instead of being alone in her grief, Mattie helps younger women who are coming into the world, including the troubled Etta Mae Johnson and, importantly, Lucielia Louise Turner, after Ciel's own catastrophic loss. By turning her private sorrow into the potential for public generosity, Mattie exemplifies a way of living that is shearing away denial and destructive memory, and making room for a different way to live: a way that is relational, that is, tending towards others. It means for Naylor that recovery from trauma goes hand in hand with community; that it does not happen in isolation, in loneliness, or in introspection, but only when community is restored through the recreation of relational bonds of care that were lost through trauma.

Lucielia Louise Turner: The Body's Memory and the Rite of Mourning

Ciel's recount of the events of traumatic loss in the novel is the worst, when her young daughter, Serena, crawls into a live wall socket during a domestic altercation between Ciel and her partner. Naylor's prose in this sequence is remarkable in being unnarrated; the sentences break down and become almost pre-verbal, describing, mimicking, the breakdown of Ciel's consciousness under the impact of an intolerable event. As she becomes unable to say in the succeeding scenes, and in the following food scenes, unable to say and unable to eat, the body is the place where a tellable grief is not told, a keep-at-a-distance-place, as Herman says, a defence against overwhelming pain. The grieving practice of this corporeal, mostly non-verbal register of trauma is one that is lived in and through, in patterns of eating, sleeping, silence and physical collapse, in the manner of Naylor's fiction.

It is Mattie who steps in and physically bathes Ciel's body while performing a ritual scene that, according to some critics, represents communal, almost sacramental, grieving. It's important for the staging of recovery not as a purely cognitive/verbal process but as a embodied/relational one as seen in how Mattie doesn't talk Ciel back to speech so much as she washes her, rocks her, and holds her, letting the grief out of her body so she can be reorganized into story. Play through Herman's stages of trauma recovery – from dissociative to re-establishing bodily safety – this sequence helps enact the transition from unsafety to safety that is required for the next stages of trauma recovery – remembrance, mourning and reconnection. In proposing this model of healing, which is essentially feminist and communal, Naylor is challenging a more traditional, individualist, and trauma-therapy-based approach that looks to the hands, or to the other woman: literally, to another.

Cora Lee: Repetition, Arrested Memory and the Question of Agency

Cora Lee's story is anything but straightforward, and she is no longer paralyzed, nor is she back in control. The repetition compulsion can be interpreted as an unconscious repetition of an original scene, in psychoanalytical terms, and as Cora Lee's own short and confused passage out of childhood, in the sense that the infantile construction of the infantile scene, her own and that of her family, is under-resourced and overactive. In contrast to Mattie and Ciel, Cora Lee's traumatic past is not fully explained in the text, but rather is left unspoken and repeated, circling on the stages of infancy and dependency without ever sparing a glance back at its origin itself. This narrative omission matters: Naylor proposes that not all of the wounds that Black women encounter can be "narrated" from a post-war perspective, and that trauma can be felt as a blank space, a silent structuring absence, as well as a fully recovered story.

Cora Lee's moment of hope, when Kiswana Browne escorts her and her kids to a community rendition of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, suggests a new relationship to memory/desire, one that is imagined and futural instead of repeated. That this moment is fragile and not sustained throughout the novel draws attention to Naylor's refusal of easy redemption: recovery in Brewster Place is partial, uneven and often thwarted by the conditions that gave rise to the original trauma itself – poverty, isolation, lack of institutional support.

Lorraine and Theresa: Sexual Violence, Silencing and the Limits of Communal Memory

Memory' brings together the experiences of two women to examine the nature of communal memory and the ways in which individuals and communities are silenced.

The most overt instance of communal and patriarchal violence in the novel is the violence itself, as witnessed in the story of Lorraine and Theresa, the lesbian couple who is revealed on Brewster Place, who are directly targeted by violence. In showing how the homophobia of all the other residents ostracizes and demonizes the couple, Naylor is not afraid to show the brutal gang rape of Lorraine by a group of youth from the neighbourhood in the alleyway at the back of the block. This is a trauma that is most socially violent: It's not just a personal tragedy, but the immediate expression of a communal fault; prejudice is transformed into violence and the very community that could have protected him or her now becomes the community that creates an environment for assault.

What is important is that Naylor denies any recovery for Lorraine; she is never to be a woman who has recovered. The story ends after the rape, in a dissociated shock and Lorraine shoots down the elderly, kind Ben in an unending sequence of events, without resolution, redemption or reintegration into the community. It is a refusal of narrative closure, and an important formal decision that Mattie's and Ciel's stories are moving towards some kind of communal holding, though not without painful effort; but Lorraine's story resists the community's ability to heal, to make up for some of its hurts, especially when the community has been complicit in creating those hurts. In this way, Lorraine's story is a formal and moral test case in the novel, and within it, she challenges the others and the

reader to consider the possibility of there being something in the novel that can never be made meaningful, that communal memory might also serve as a tool of exclusion as well as of unification.

Fragmented Form and the Collective Dream: Memory as Communal Ground

Naylor's choice to tell the novel in seven disjointed stories/sections instead of as one continuous story is a formal aspect of the book that is central to its concepts of trauma and memory. Formally, the seven only loosely connected stories/sections of the novel are a pivotal part of the novel's treatment of trauma and memory. Each woman's tale is enclosed and specific; stories melt into each other through common room, gossip, and the ubiquitous theme of collective looking, with no woman's history being completely isolated from the others'. The formal refusal of the idea that trauma is private property, this street, a brick and stoop, is not the sole property of anyone but of many, perhaps all griefs. This mosaic's readerly process of connecting incomplete snapshots of women's lives is reminiscent at the level of form of the belatedness and fragmentation that trauma theorists point to as hallmarks of traumatic memory.

This formal logic culminates in the novel's final dream sequence, when Mattie sees the women of Brewster Place, who are all in the dream, as they all break the wall between their street and the rest of the city with the bricks, making a barricade against police before the dream ends and everything goes back to the way it was before. The sequence has generated different critical readings, in some cases the final undoing is read as an admission of the impossibility of such a utopia in a material world that does not change, in others, it is a “real” act of collective agency that is a utopia, albeit imaginary. When read through this lens of trauma and memory, however, the dream can be interpreted as the most literal enactment of what healing from the wall—and from each woman's trauma and cumulative grievance—might entail: its active and collective reworking. In the dream, the bricks of the wall, which is a symbol of enclosure/exclusion, are the very substance of a communal yet tenuous act of resistance. That this dream is not realized when it meets the reality of waking up is not as much a disclaimer as a statement, in keeping with the rest of the novel's refusal of easy resolution, that communal healing is a continuous and unfinished project—not an event.

Toward a Theory of Female Subjectivity in Brewster Place

Combined these stories point to the fact that Naylor's concept of female subjectivity is not a fixed and given identity that is just disrupted by trauma, nor a fully formed consequence of victimization, but a fluid and always incomplete product of the negotiation between traumatic memory and the relational, communal, not always perfect, contexts in which that memory is stored. The various ways that Mattie cares for her friend, Ciel returns to embodied life at a glacial pace, Cora Lee’s fragile spark of imaginative potential, and even the unhealed tragedy of Lorraine’s silence create a range of responses to trauma that cannot be summed up in a single, universalizing story of victimhood or triumphant survival. Here, Naylor's novel is a form of intersectional consciousness, a consciousness that Black feminist critics like Collins and hooks demand because Black women's subjectivity is always embedded in the particular historical and material conditions, in which poverty, racism, intra-communal patriarchy and homophobia bear on both the experience and the means through which trauma is inflicted, and the possibilities for working through it.

CONCLUSION

Unlike psychological trauma as it's typically experienced in isolated instances of disruption among ordinary people, in *The Women of Brewster Place,* Gloria Naylor's psychological trauma is ubiquitous: the experience of Black women living in the context of a triple assault of race, economics and patriarchy. In its fragmented, communal form, the novel formally replicates the belated, non-linear structure of traumatic memory as found by Caruth and Herman, and its emphasis on the social and relational aspects of trauma and healing makes it closely align with the cross-cutting critique of black feminists. What Mattie Michael's altered grief, Ciel's embodied grieving, Cora Lee's stunted repetition, Lorraine's unprocessed devastation all combine to create is a nuanced geography of trauma's aftermath not one that reduces the trauma of Black women to a single facet: either as victim or as resilient. Finally, memory in Naylor's novel is a tool that both perpetuates and reenacts trauma, but simultaneously it is also the means by which imperfect solidarities, provisional subjectivities, and collective subjectivities are reconstructed, rebuilt, and re-created in Brewster Place. Finally, the novel's unfinished conclusion of a broken-down wall implies that for Naylor remembering after trauma is a process rather than an end, a process that cannot be done individually, but socially, as a work in progress.

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