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Trabajo Fin de Grado

Disestablishing Patriarchy and Racism through Intersectionality and Sorority: A Feminist Analysis of *The House on Mango Street* and *The Women of Brewster Place*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present a study of the literary works *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros, and *The Women of Brewster Place*, by Gloria Naylor, with a focus on intersectionality and sorority as social strategies to overcome male dominance and social conventions in the Chicano and African-American cultures. With the intention of representing a female version of the facts, Cisneros and Naylor show in their books the precarious social situations, such as racism or male chauvinism, two female communities from different barrios/ghettos of the USA (Chicano and African-American respectively) have to face daily. Although *The House on Mango Street* and *The Women of Brewster Place* have resilient individual women, the support of a collective and diverse womanhood is what allows these female characters to confront social structures. Thus, this study is an attempt to explore how Chicana and African-American repression and oppression are depicted throughout different symbols in both works and how intersectionality and sorority permit these women to get rid of their marginalization or at least, to dream about it.

KEY WORDS: intersectionality, sorority, barrio/ghetto, oppression and marginalization.

Resumen

El propósito de este trabajo es presentar un estudio de las obras literarias de *The House on Mango Street*, de Sandra Cisneros, y de *The Women of Brewster Place*, de Gloria Naylor, con especial hincapié en la interseccionalidad y la sororidad como estrategias sociales para combatir el dominio masculino y las convenciones culturales y sociales de ambas obras. Con la intención de representar una versión femenina de los hechos, Cisneros y Naylor muestran en sus libros las situaciones sociales precarias, como el racismo o el machismo, que dos grupos de mujeres de distintos barrios/guetos de EE.UU. tienen que afrontar en su día a día. A pesar de que ambas obras presentan de manera individual mujeres resilientes, el apoyo de una comunidad femenina es lo que permite a estas personajes enfrentarse a las estructuras sociales. Por tanto, este estudio es un intento de explorar cómo la represión y opresión que sufren las Chicanas y las

Afroamericanas se representan a través de diferentes símbolos y cómo la interseccionalidad y el sentido de comunidad permiten a estas mujeres liberarse de la marginalización o, al menos, soñar con ello.

PALABRAS CLAVE: interseccionalidad, sororidad, barrio/gueto, opresión y marginalización.

1. Introduction

The 1980s were known as a decade when ideological, political and economic conservatism prevailed. During this period of time, conservative forces wished to "preserve the existing canons of white male, Euro-centric privilege and thus attack multiculturalism in cultural wars" (Kellner 3). However, in spite of traditionalism and the rejection of the idea of the United States as a multicultural nation, many previously silenced voices started to come out from the conspiracy of silence the mainstream American population had laid down. Diverse groups, such as women, LGTB community and people from different races and ethnicities, started to use literature as a denouncing weapon against the social repression and inequality imposed by heteronormative white men and women.

A key strategy these societies used to make a place for themselves in the American nation was intersectionality. Explicitly oriented towards transformation, intersectionality built up coalitions among different gender and racial groups to challenge inequities and to work towards social justice (Hankivsky 3). Among other social groups, women of different races and ethnicities have been directly affected by inequality and oppression. Nevertheless, since the first formulation of the theory of intersectionality, Black and Latina activists and feminists have all proliferated works which reveal "the complex factors and processes that shape human lives" (2). Two pioneers that introduced this innovative conception in the 1980s in their works were the Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros and the African-American novelist Gloria Naylor. Concerned with the social constructs of race, ethnicity, class and gender, Cisneros and Naylor published *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983), respectively, as urgent outcries to disestablish and dismantle the traditional patriarchal and racist ideology that mostly affected the women of their communities inside the United States.

In the form of a collection of vignettes, *The House on Mango Street* is an eccentric rewriting of the traditional bildungsroman, placing a Latino girl in the role of the classical narrator. Esperanza Cordero, the book's narrator, presents an autobiographical coming-of-age story inside a Chicano barrio in Chicago. Although Esperanza is also the protagonist, she

mentions a continuous cast of characters, mainly Latino women, who allow her to denounce the struggle with strict gender roles within the Chicano barrio.

In a similar way, Gloria Naylor's attempt to represent the experience of African-American women in the United States is captured in her debut novel *The Women of Brewster Place*. Divided into six chapters, *The Women of Brewster Place* narrates the lives of seven black women. From the beginning, Brewster Place is a microcosm marked by a physical wall that marginalizes its inhabitants from the rest of the fictitious American city. Nevertheless, the unifying theme of *The Women of Brewster Place* is sorority, as it becomes a powerful strategy that highlights individual and collective empowerment.

Against this background, the purpose of this undergraduate dissertation is to demonstrate that intersectionality and sorority work as two powerful strategies in *The House on Mango Street* and in *The Women of Brewster Place* that allow women of different social conditions (race, ethnicity and sexuality among others) to challenge patriarchy and the established conventions their barrio/ghetto have imposed on them since immemorial times. In the pursuit of this aim, I will analyze some essential symbols of gender inequality, racism, repression and oppression that constitute both literary works and how intersectionality and sorority restrain the effects of these symbols and patriarchy, empowering women of these barrios/ghettos.

2. Theoretical Framework

From the 1960s, the United States has experienced a generalized attention to multiculturalism, a phenomenon reflected by the literary movement of Postmodernism. The Postmodern literary movement questioned the Western canon and its traditional "truths." According to it, "traditional definitions and standards … do not capture the truth of experience but merely further the power of historically dominant elites" (Raeder 68). Thus, the term "multiculturalism" rejected the traditional dominant culture as the only source of valid knowledge and rejoiced in the diversity of the previous silenced voices. As Linda Hutcheon defines in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2002), the main concern of Postmodernism is *"*to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us*"* (2).

Moved by the urgent need to question the forces of history (e.g. slavery, immigration, assimilation and colonization), Postmodernism focused on the figure of "the Other." "The Other," or commonly known as the marginalized part of society, are featured by their "otherness", which "is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ('Us', 'The Self') constructs one or many dominated out-groups ('Them', 'the Other') by stigmatizing real or imagined differences" (Staszak 25). As a result of this hierarchical grouping, "the Other" has been projected historically as a coherent group by opposition with the in-group. Moreover, this out-group has been mainly characterized by its imposed identity, promoted by the stereotypes established by the dominant group. Nevertheless, the label of otherness started to be questioned in the United States when the out-groups managed to escape the discrimination and oppression exacted by in-groups.

In addition to this issue, ethnic studies started to pay attention to the labels and the metaphoric definitions of U.S. nationhood. Traditionally, the United States was described as a "melting pot" where different heterogeneous groups became homogenized and assimilated to the hegemonic group. "In a sense, it was a political symbol used to strengthen and legitimize the

ideology of America as a land of opportunity where race, religion, and national origin should not be barriers to social mobility" (Hirschman 398). This process of "anglo-conformity" met with the rejection of some ethnic spokesmen, who considered such assimilation and homogeneity "an attack on ethnic diversity" (398). During the 1960s, American pluralism started to be reinterpreted under the metaphor of the "salad bowl," known also as "multiculturalism." In contrast with the melting pot, the theory of the salad bowl recognized the independent nature of different ethnic classes but without interrelation among them, "like the ingredients in a salad, bound together only by the 'dressing' of law and the market" (Thornton 2). Despite the recognition of the different American cultures, this term nullified the possibility of living in a united nationhood that celebrated all the values of its people. Along this controversy, the cultural isolation entailed the ghettoization of some ethnicities and cultures inside the United States.

From a Venetian island called "Ghetto Nuovo", the term "ghetto" refers to "the spatial representation of the sociopolitical process of involuntary segregation" of people and places (Haynes and Hutchison 355). Although not all the ghettos are alike, there are stereotypes which are typically connected to this notion, such as their supposedly homogeneous demography or the reflection of "the varieties of marginalization, harassment, injustice, and stigma imposed on the involuntarily segregated" (356). Inside the U.S.A., there are several established ghettos, like the African-American or the Puerto-Rican ones among others. This process of ghettoization has also affected Chicano communities (Mexicans living in the United States), or also referred to as "barrios." Although cultural and historical differences are unavoidable, the terms "ghetto" and "barrio" can be used interchangeably, and Chicano inhabitants "gravitated to communities that reflected their own customs and patterns, for this lessened the effects of culture shock and gave them a sense of community and security" (Vigil 367). Traditionally, one of the groups most affected by these social ills inside the ghettos and barrios are women. The intersection of gender, class and race further complicates the situation of these women, who had to fight constantly against gender inequality and the ingrained social expectations and customs of their culture, as well as the social and cultural discrimination and alienation by the hegemonic

culture. Nevertheless, the situation of these women started to improve during the 1980s, when the theory of intersectionality spread among women of color.

Rejecting the traditional idea of feminism based primarily on gender, "intersectionality proposes that gender cannot be used as a single analytic frame without also exploring how issues of race, migration status, history, and social class, in particular, come to bear on one's experience as a woman" (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff 2008). One of the pioneers of this concept was the African-American author and theorist bell hooks, who considered the first and second feminist waves as movements exclusively for heteronormative, white, middle-class women, ignoring the situations of colored, poor, and/or lesbian women. According to her, "well-educated white women from working-class backgrounds where more visible than black females of all classes in feminist movement. They were a minority within the movement, but theirs was the voice of the experience" (62). Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa was a Chicana author who contributed to the intersectional experience with the idea of borderlands as social spaces where the marginalized Chicanas can voice their identities. In her book *Borderlands, La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa exposes "various components of her oppression, identity, and agency as Chicana, lesbian, and a part of opposing races, nations, and cultures divided by invisible borders" (Baca Zinn and Zambrana 683). Thanks to this theoretical development, women of non-hegemonic ethnicities who had previously been rejected by the mainstream culture started to use literature to denounce the precarious situations they had to live in. On the basis of this theory, this paper will analyze the intersectional and female perspective of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*'s barrio and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*'s ghetto. Both of them present their barrio/ghetto as oppressive places for women, and the analysis of the two novels attempts to demonstrate that intersectionality and sorority work as fundamental strategies to fight against the established patriarchy and social conventions.

3. The Symbolic Depiction of the Ghetto/Barrio as an Oppressive Place

Leaving my sisters for another city
the club-car smells of old velvet
rails whisper relief mantras
round steel upon steel
every fourth thud breaks the hum
not enough
"Stand and fight" I said
leaving my words for ransom
"that is the only way out."
–Audre Lorde, "Women on Trains"

This fragment of the poem "Women on Trains" (1993) by Audre Lorde perfectly describes the dream women most wanted to achieve during the 1980s: the complete independence and feeling of freedom from patriarchal society. The only way to get rid of the gender conventions and stereotypes was leaving behind passivity and starting to stand and fight. Women like Audre Lorde or Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Naylor struggled even more due to double-discrimination (being non-white and women at the same time). Intersectionality emerged as an analytical tool that allowed these women to fight against this. In the words of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality was "a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking" (149). *The House on Mango Street* and *The Women of Brewster Place* present strong women characters whose lives' expectations and wishes clash with Latino and African-American societies. Inside barrios/ghettos, "the girls'

lives seemed to be defined by this everyday struggle to balance the need to protect themselves with the pressure to meet normative expectations associated with their gender, race and class positions" (Jones 11). With the intention of presenting women's perspective of the barrio/ghetto experience, the two novels at hand reflect the repression and violence women suffer in this environment. In an interview with writer Martha Satz, Sandras Cisneros stated:

> I have lived in the barrio, but I discovered later on in looking at works by my contemporaries that they write about the barrio as a colorful, Sesame Street-like, funky neighborhood. To me the barrio was a repressive community. I found it frightening and very terrifying for a woman. …
>
> You stay at home. If you do have to get somewhere, you take your life in your hands. So I wanted to counter those colorful viewpoints, which I'm sure are true to an extent but were not true for me. (Satz 168)

By representing the barrio/ghetto from the female perspective, Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Naylor meticulously use some rhetorical figures which allow them to present the oppression, repression and violence women from the barrio/ghetto experience daily.

a. Symbolism in *The House on Mango Street*

Repression and oppression are portrayed in *The House on Mango Street* through the symbol and personification of the house. Because of their ethnicity, Latinos are one of the social groups which most suffer from social stratification. In the chapter "Those Who Don't," little Esperanza reinforces the social prejudices and racism her community faces constantly: "Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives" (28). Ironically enough, Esperanza acknowledges that when a person from her community enters a different neighborhood, they are also afraid: "All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight" (28). Social preconceptions are not exclusive to Esperanza's ghetto, as other coloured neighborhoods

have undergone the mainstream labeling as well. However, violence, danger and social marginalization seem to be the essential social conventions that surround the Mango Street barrio from an outsider (i.e. white) perspective. As Haynes and Hutchison emphasize, a barrio becomes an ethnic enclave by assimilating the mores of the larger society (349), i.e. by accepting the stereotypes imposed by the average white society as part of the barrio's identity. Racism is also highlighted in the chapter called "Cathy Queen of Cats." Cathy, a white girl who owns a lot of cats, confesses to Esperanza that they will stop being friends as she and their family will move because "the neighborhood is getting bad" (13). The negative homogenization of this barrio highlights the white racism Cathy's family feels towards the Chicano community. Although Cathy's family's solution is "to move a little farther north from Mango Street" (13), Esperanza realizes that they move "a little further away every time people like us keep moving in" (13), implying Mango Street is becoming a Chicano barrio marginalized by white Americans. As Vigil acknowledges, the imposition of social barriers between the mainstream neighborhoods and the barrios results in the development of the barrio's sense of inferiority (369), and from an early age, Esperanza is subject to racial and cultural discrimination.

As the intersectional theory maintains, oppression cannot be defined as a singular process where the social constructs (race, social class and gender) are analyzed individually or in a binary way, "but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems" (Carasthasis 304) that affect people of diverse social conditions differently. Latino female migrants are doubly or even triply marginalized because of their ethnicity, gender and sexuality. In the first chapter of the novel, Esperanza envisions a model of life which clashes with the Latino society's expectations. As Esperanza acknowledges: "The house on Mango Street is ours … [b]ut even so, it's not the house we'd thought we'd get" (Cisneros 3). In spite of being theirs, the house is not a place Esperanza can really call "home." Her discontent also clashes with the description of her idyllic model of a house inspired by the American Dream. As Wang Fangyuan et al. recognize, "[h]er dissatisfaction with the house on Mango Street represents that she is ashamed of the shabby house and low status of Latino migrants" (83). Her

wish for a dignified house in a safe environment symbolizes her desire to escape poverty emphasized by a consumerist ideology, which will also lead to the rejection of the morals of Mango Street.

As is to be expected, Latino female migrants are also excluded in terms of gender, being victims of male oppression, which is symbolized in this collection of vignettes by the house motif as well as by the windows and doors. The "[h]ouse mentioned in *The House on Mango Street* … also [works] to show the tragedy of double marginalized Latino women" (81). The house is depicted as the space where women live bound to patriarchal dominance. Throughout the novella, the images of trapped women inside the house are repeated. Esperanza's great-grandmother is one of the characters that suffers domestic repression. Early in *The House on Mango Street*, the great-grandmother's figure allows Esperanza to notice the social reclusion Latino women bear inside her barrio. Although her great-grandmother used to be a "wild horse woman" (Cisneros 11), her freedom was thwarted when she got married. Since then, she inherited the place by the window, which shows "the worlds their husbands have created for them" (Cañero Serrano 104). Despite the fact that windows are the only way with which women are in contact with the outside world, these windows also personify repression. Thus, the windows of the house on Mango Street are "so small you'd think they were holding their breath" (Cisneros 4). This feeling of living inside a prison is even more stressed in the chapter "Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays." Rafaela is trapped inside her house because her husband fears that she can run away. She is compared with Rapunzel, the famous princess who was also locked indoors. Similar to Rapunzel's tale, Rafaela's dream is to become free from her imprisonment before she wastes her youth. "Rafaela who drinks and drinks coconut and papaya juice on Tuesdays [and] wishes there were sweeter drinks" (80). These "sweeter drinks" can be interpreted as a metaphor for freedom, as she is thirsty for getting out of her house and, therefore, of the patriarchal conventions.

Moreover, Esperanza is also the object of repression inside the house. Until she has not found a friend of her own, Esperanza compares herself with "a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor" (Cisneros 9); a balloon repressed inside the house and who should fit the barrio's

stereotypes. Since birth, Esperanza has been destined to live following the Chicanos' expectations because of her name: Esperanza Cordero. As she explains "[i]n English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting" (Cisneros 10). By rejecting the Spanish meaning of her name, Esperanza is refusing the low social position Chicanas would have adopted. Although she shares her name with her great-grandmother, she clarifies she does not want to adopt her relative's place. On the contrary, Esperanza is fond of the English meaning of her name—"hope"—implying that a bigger opportunity and an encouraging future outside the Chicanos' regulations is coming. As Regina M. Betz corroborates, "Esperanza identifies herself as an English-speaking American because she seeks to thrive outside of the Chicago Hispanic community that destroys women" (19). Referring to her surname, "Cordero" is a Spanish term which means "lamb" in English, a symbol of the naïvety, sacrifice, obedience and passivity Chicano women embody. However, Esperanza does not identify herself as a little sheep because she does not follow the flock; she wants to rebel against her culture's prejudices. In this way, "the protagonist's confrontation with her name implies both an act of subversion against society's prescriptions and a redefinition of her own concept of womanhood" (Molina 48). This liberation from impositions is difficult for one person to achieve, so another solution is needed.

b. Symbolism in *The Women of Brewster Place*

In the case of Naylor's novel, the repression and marginalization African-American women suffer is illustrated through the symbol of the wall. Coinciding with W. E. B. Du Bois' image of the veil, the wall started to be a recurrent motif in African-American literature since the Harlem Renaissance, highlighting the racial division of American society. As the famous activist writes: "I have called my tiny community a world, and so its isolation made it; … and, above all, from the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity" (Du Bois, ch.IV). As Langton Hughes demonstrated in his poem "As I Grew Older" (1926), the wall was a metaphor of white

oppression and discrimination towards black people which hamper the communication between both groups:

It was a long time ago.

I have almost forgotten my dream.

…

And then the wall rose,

Rose slowly,

Slowly,

Between me and my dream. (lines 1-2, 7-10)

The first chapter of the novel, entitled "Dawn," explains that when the fictitious boulevard grew, new neighbors from different races and ethnicities, mainly Mediterraneans, started to arrive. As a consequence, the auxiliary streets, including the street where Brewster Place is located, were walled off so as to control traffic of both kinds: physical and social. These Mediterranean people had no political influence, so it ended up being a marginalized dead-end street which separated them from the mainstream white-American population. Since then, Brewster Place "developed a personality of its own" (2) and it also became a diverse ghetto when the first African-American appeared: Ben.

Throughout the novel, Brewster Place's physical wall "takes on a life of its own that will preside over the events in the lives of other characters" (Pérez Cabrera and Tally 87). This extended metaphor affects the lives of the seven main women of this collection of vignettes differently. In Mattie's case, the wall signifies a physical struggle as well as a psychological one. When she moves to her new apartment in Brewster Place, she realizes that the wall in front of her building will prevent light from entering her garden. "All the beautiful plants that once had an entire sun porch for themselves … would now have to fight for light on a crowded windowsill" (Naylor 7). The image of physical struggle projected through the plants represents the African-American women's endeavor to survive inside a repressed and male-dominant ghetto. Also, this image stands for Mattie's psychological fight, as she does not see a future nor

a chance to start her life from scratch in Brewster Place unless the physical and psychological wall gets demolished.

Additionally, sexuality is also conditioned by this symbol. Although queer theory conceptualizes sexuality and gender (and also race and ethnicity) as analytically distinct, both of them "intersect by mutually constituting, reinforcing and naturalizing each other" (Schippers 748). Nonetheless, the symbol of the wall in this novel consolidates the sexual repression heterosexual as well as lesbian women in Brewster Place's ghetto have to deal with. In the chapter "The Two," Lorraine and Theresa are presented as a couple of lesbians who have to cope with an heteronormative community. After a run-in with C.C. Barker, the leader of a men's gang, Lorraine is raped by them. As Luiza De Oliveira Lanari has observed, "[t]he fact that she is raped against the wall evokes the feeling of helplessness in relation to black women, who have to face rape, the ultimate form of violence to a woman, in silence, as they have literally nowhere to run to; it is the end of the line, a dead end" (55). The wall, apart from marginalizing this African-American community, also acts as a triple or even as a quadruple boundary for these African-American lesbian women. Lorraine and Theresa live more excluded from their ghetto due to the "threat" their sexual orientation poses to the traditional heteronormative canon instilled by patriarchy. Moreover, the wall symbolizes the male violence and dominance over these women. When Lorraine approaches the wall while she is being hounded by the male gang, the narrator emphasizes Lorraine's arrival on male territory: "She had stepped into the thin strip of earth that they claimed as their own. Bound by the last building on Brewster and a brick wall, they reigned in that unlit alley like dwarfed warrior-kings" (Naylor 169). The connotations given to the brick wall (oppression, violence, subjugation) are closely related to those embodied by traditional patriarchy. However, despite this ghetto being led by patriarchy, the fact that these men are treated as "dwarfed warrior-kings" implies some kind of irony, as men and patriarchy are small in comparison with other forces that inhabit Brewster Place: women and intersectionality.

Related to the previous idea, walls or any kind of high elevation usually create two different zones: the light one and the dark one. This contrast of light against dark can also be

applied to the case of the Brewster Place wall. Brewster Place is in the dark zone of the wall, so even this contrast between light and dark remarks the alienation the ghetto of Brewster Place lives in from the rest of the American population of that imaginary city. Since there is only one way out, as Diome Faye states, the women of Brewster Place have little chance to become totally free, so they have to live literally under the African-American and white gender and social expectations of both groups (92).

This opposition is even more remarkable thanks to the weather, which from the very beginning creates a dark atmosphere that will have an impact on the development of the characters' lives and which will endure until the epilogue, "end[ing] with the same want for brightness to enlighten the darkness that prevails in Brewster Place" (Faye 95). The lack of light is emphasized through the use of different meteorological phenomena: the novel starts with a heavy snowfall which depicts the dead and dark world the Brewster Place's inhabitants live in. Despite the fact that there are instances of sunny moments, clouds—another type of natural barrier—remain throughout the novel, representing the constant struggle and psychological darkness the women have to face daily. In the last chapter, after Ben's death and Lorraine's rape, Brewster Place is soaked up by a relentless rain that lasts for seven days. The symbolic rain has a positive meaning, as it is an opportunity to clean all this darkness and to be born again as a united female African-American community, making their most wanted dream come true.

4. Intersectionality and Sorority: Powerful Strategies against Repression, Oppression and Patriarchy

With the intention of conceptualizing social relations, intersectionality "aims to address the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other systems of discrimination create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women" (AWID 2). Moreover, it promotes the idea that social structures such as gender or race intersect to confirm that social categories live through different experiences from one another, but interact with and co-constitute one another "to create unique social locations that vary according to time and place" (Hankivsky 9). For instance, a Latino woman living in the US is different to an African-American woman also living in the US because they belong to a different social structure (both of them are women, but they are from different races/ethnicities) and consequently, their life's experiences and the discrimination they suffer may be different as well. However, this interaction among different social categories has led to a rooted sense of community whose main purpose is to identify and suppress together and equally every form of oppression and repression they experience. From Latin, the word "sorority" is defined as the equal and complex alliance between women whose main purpose is diversity. Sorority "implies sharing resources, tasks, actions, successes… recognising equal worth is based on the acceptance of the human condition of all women, from a theoretical conceptualization of the meaning" (Lagarde 3). In broader terms, sorority affords both collective and individual empowerment, as it is a process also based on selfhood and self recognition.

Despite their different cultural backgrounds, *The House on Mango Street* and *The Women of Brewster Place* present a woman-based vision of the racism, male chauvinism and class oppression experienced by Chicano and African-American women within their barrio and ghetto respectively. As Gloria Naylor stated in a conversation with Toni Morrison, "[m]y emotional energy was spent in creating a woman's world, telling her side of it because I knew it hadn't been done enough in literature" (Naylor 202). However, these women are able to survive or even defy the social constructs that make them "inferior" thanks to an attempt of sorority.

The creation of a supportive and safe environment among the women of Mango Street and the women of Brewster Place becomes one of their biggest dreams. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza rejects her culture; her Chicano community, as she wants to become free from the inferior social and economic position her female relatives have adopted. But at the end, Esperanza can be considered as the one who "has been elected to rebel against Mango Street" (Cañero Serrano 104) because she is the individualistic "heroine" who represents and fights for the longing for freedom of a whole female community who supports her. On the other hand, Naylor's novel introduces seven African-American women craving for the eradication of the social structures men and the rest of the society has imposed on them. Mattie, Etta, Luciela, Kiswana, Cora Lee, Theresa and Lorraine's biggest desire is to become free from social expectations and oppression. Despite their lives' experiences being similar and different at the same time, "[p]eople know each other in Brewster Place, and as imperfect and damaging as their involvement with each other may be, they still represent a community" (Matus 63). All of these women know that this collective fight for liberty and equality will become a reality in the future generations of African-American girls, but for them it is a deferred reality: a dream.

a. *The House on Mango Street*: A "Community of One"

A "community of one" is what Gerardo Rodríguez Salas defines as the transcendence of "organicist communitarian perceptions in an attempt to create a fluid, utopian community [based on] the link between individual and communitarian drives" (51). According to him, the Chicano barrio represented by Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street* is an inoperative one because its main character, Esperanza, and the rest of the barrio "occupy different levels that end up detaching her from the community she stands for" (53). In contrast with the rest of the Chicano women, Esperanza does not settle for the patriarchal gender and racial roles imposed on the other women of her barrio. Throughout this coming-of-age story, Esperanza is reluctant to inherit the excluded and repressed position next to the window many women of her cultural

community occupy. Indubitably, she becomes the guiding voice of many Chicanas who find themselves unable to start a revolution against male dominance and gender and race conventions. Although Esperanza becomes the "figurehead" of her female community, it is thanks to other women that she can adapt that "privileged" position because "she is actively encouraged by other women figures in the novel" (54).

Along the novel, it is recurrent to see the experiences of many Chicanas who inhabit Mango Street. Being an homodiegetic narrator, Esperanza constantly uses the stories of other Chicano women in order to develop herself and her own story. Thus, Cisnero makes use of a repertoire of Chicano women who will nurture and support Esperanza until she reaches her individual dream: to get a house of her own away from Mango Street. Since her youth, one of the most influential figures for Esperanza is her great-grandmother. Apart from sharing names, Esperanza and her great-grandmother were born both in the Chinese year of the horse, which symbolizes power and freedom, but it "is supposed to be bad luck if you're born a female" (Cisneros 10) because Chicanos "don't like their women strong" (10). Although Esperanza's namesake used to be a strong woman, she "became passive because of male subjugation" (Zuercher). In contrast with her relative, Esperanza rejects "the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow" (Cisneros 11), as well as the Spanish counterpart of her name, which forbids her to become free from her community's cultural and gender standards. Undoubtedly, the figure of the great-grandmother works for Esperanza as a model to follow and not to follow at the same time because Esperanza "opposes the life route that places her in a subject position that does not resonate with her self-image" (Ekström 10).

Esperanza's great-grandmother's story is not the only one which represents the suffering of the constant gender and racial subjugation of Mango Street women. Another repressed woman is Sally, a friend of Esperanza's who is abused by her father and, later, by her husband and who ends up imprisoned inside the house. The story of Sally serves Cisneros as a demonstration that gender discrimination and female marginalization is not only found among adult women. For Esperanza, Sally is another source of inspiration because Sally demonstrates what Esperanza does not want to aspire to: to hold on to the sexist neighborhood culture.

According to Ekström, "[b]y outlining the representation she has of the experiences of individuals in her vicinity, Esperanza is indirectly demarcating her own position in the social sphere. . . . She does not want to 'inherit' the expectations that come with the categorization of her subjectivity as a woman" (10). In this way, Esperanza's community of one uses the experiences of these battered women to denounce the appalling gender conditions Chicanas suffer on a daily basis, as well as to reinforce her dream of owning a house of her own out of Mango Street and its social and cultural barriers.

Esperanza's community of one is also influenced by those Chicanas who have inspired Esperanza's passion for writing. In the chapter "Born Bad," Esperanza narrates her experience with her aunt Lupe, who got sick and blind. Despite her blindness, Aunt Lupe listens to Esperanza's stories carefully, and one day Esperanza decides to read one of her own poems. After reading it, Aunt Lupe asserts "[t]hat's nice. That's very good. . . . You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant" (Cisneros 61). The figure of Aunt Lupe demonstrates the sense of sorority that exists among the Chicanas of Mango Street. And although Aunt Lupe has not managed to succeed in her ideal life, "the life that Aunt Lupe encourages Esperanza to follow is not one of passivity and self-sacrifice . . .; instead Lupe gives Esperanza a push towards independence much like the one that the adolescent girl receives from her own mother" (Petty 124). The same happens with Minerva who also writes poems. Minerva, a girl a little older than Esperanza and whose husband abandoned her with their children, uses writing and poetry as a way of escape from her routine "when the kids are asleep after she's fed them their pancake dinner" (Cisneros 84). Esperanza and Minerva share their poems, their literary passion, but on the other hand, Minerva, as the rest of the women of Mango Street, lives subjugated to her husband and, consequently, to the repressive community. So her dream of becoming an acclaimed poet is thwarted by her unlucky fate. "As a young, frustrated writer, Minerva's story represents the probable path of Esperanza's life if she were to become inscribed in one of the typical roles for Mexican-American women" (Petty 125). Hence, Minerva's life experience serves Esperanza and her "community of one" to fight for one of the dreams of Mango Street's

artistic geniuses: to become a well-known poet able to buy a house of her own, able to flee from Chicano repression and oppression.

b. Womanhood and Intersectionality: A Dream Coming True in *The Women of Brewster Place*?

Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home. … They came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years. Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story.

—Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place*

From the beginning of the novel, Brewster Place is represented as a decayed ghetto whose African-American women have the moral obligation to make it a home for all. These women are portrayed as sensitive and permissive females who have been adopting an imposed inferiority throughout their lives. However, despite their different individual life's experiences and the different ways of discrimination they have endured, they are also characterized by their resilience to overcome their traumatic pasts and presents. "Like ebony phoenixes" (Naylor 5) rising from the ashes, Mattie, Etta, Luciela, Kiswana, Cora Lee, Theresa and Lorraine join together to fight for their freedom and challenge the social conventions and patriarchy in order to make Brewster Place an egalitarian neighborhood for the future generations. As De Oliveira Laniri explains, "these women go to Brewster Place basically to nurture each other, something very much connected to the idea of building a home" (14). This idea of trying to build a familiar female community is what makes this short story cycle a connected novel formed by seven different stories of seven different African-American women who join together in the same ghetto.

According to Marwa Benteboula and Selma Hamlaoui, "[b]lack females, in the novel, combine their efforts to defend themselves not only against their men's abuse, but also to avoid their isolation and silence" (45). As Naylor highlights in different points of her novel, women's solidarity is the key to overcoming discrimination and male domination: "They stood together—hands on hips, straight-backed, round bellied, high-behinded women who threw their heads back when they laughed and exposed strong teeth and dark gums" (Naylor 4-5). Along the novel, womanhood and intersectionality are present in the different relationships each of the seven women has with each other: mother-daughter relations (Miss Eva and Mattie), sisterhoods (Mattie and Etta), friendships (Kiswana and Cora Lee) or even love relationships (Theresa and Lorraine). The representation of these female bonds and the acceptance of their different social structures (race, gender, sexuality and social class) allow Naylor to "create a female community where each one of the inhabitants wants not only to assert her own identity but with the relation that connect them, they help each other to do so" (Benteboula and Hamlaoui 47). The epitome of creating a womanhood based on sorority in this novel happens after Lorraine is raped by C.C. Barker's gang against Brewster Place's wall. This obscene occurrence culminates in the creation of the seventh chapter of the book titled "The Block Party," which is in the words of Matus "a vision of community effort, everyone's story" (49).

The penultimate chapter, called "The Block Party," narrates Mattie's dream, which begins with a heavy rain that began the day Lorraine was raped and has lasted for an entire week. Although the day was cloudy, the female community of Brewster Place decided to throw a party to raise money. But suddenly, one of the women notices that there is blood on one of the bricks of the wall: "Blood—there is still blood on this wall" (Naylor 185), and it starts raining again. When word spread, all these women together began to remove all of its bricks, creating a revolution. However, after waking up, Mattie realizes that it has been a dream and Etta tells her that there is an ongoing party. In Mattie's dream, rain is a very significant symbol which changes its meaning along "The Block Party." At the beginning of the chapter, "rain" is a symbol that stands for sadness, as well as separation and repression. Rain is seen as an impediment for gathering together in order to face the community's tragedy. As Matus states,

"[s]tultifying and confining, the rain prevents the inhabitants of Brewster's community from meeting to talk about the tragedy" (52). However, that rainy week made every woman of Brewster Place share the same dream: the image of a bloody woman (Lorraine) dressed in a yellow and green dress against the wall. Her rape creates a shared trauma among these African-American women. This collective dream "expresses the communal guilt, complicity, and anger that the women of Brewster Place feel about Lorraine" (52). Even Ciel, who lives in San Francisco, had the same dream: "one night I had a dream about this street… Something about that wall and Ben. And there was a woman who was supposed to be me, I guess" (Naylor 179). Ciel felt compassion towards Lorraine without knowing each other: "she didn't look exactly like me, but inside I felt it was mine" (179). Thus, as De Oliveira Laniri acknowledges, rain promotes "self-reflection by the women of the community" (56); it promotes sorority.

Apart from raising money, the block party itself represents a plausible effort of unifying this African-American womanhood. This unification strengthens when Cora spots blood on one of the bricks of the wall and all of them decide to get rid of all of its bricks. This bloody brick, as well as the sudden rain, triggers a female revolution against the symbolism of the wall. From Cora to the rest of this womanhood, the brick causes a huge female chain moving for the same goal: to put an end together to the male dominance and the social discrimination the wall symbolizes. Thus, the act of tearing off the bricks can be considered as an act of rebellion and rejection of the conditions that it represents. "And it was passed by the women from hand to hand, table to table, until the brick flew out of Brewster Place and went spinning out onto the avenue" (Naylor 186). Despite the wall having different connotations for each of these women, the wall also works as a linking symbol "in which these women are able to recollect, share and overcome memories of a traumatic past" (De Oliveira Lanari 15), breaking down boundaries. It is also significant that at the climax of this chapter, rain starts pouring down again. Rain can be considered as one of the factors of this female riot, as it serves as a cleansing symbol which allows the Brewster Place women to see that it is time to rebel against the rest of the society that is suppressing them. At the end, rain becomes a symbol of internal female rebellion which pours

down in order to show that the female collective is able to defy the community's tragedies, as well as the individual, together as a womanhood.

However, as is implied at the end of "The Block Party," this womanhood is a figment of Mattie's imagination, as it has been a dream. This dream can be considered as a deferred one, since the epilogue titled "Dusk" displays the postponement of the "death of Brewster Place and the failure of the women's attempt to strive in the community" (De Oliveira Laniri 45). Therefore, this female collective dream fails in its mission of becoming a reality because Brewster Place "still waits to die" (Naylor 192), as its African-American women still dream of putting an end together to this repressing ghetto from a passive position and consequently, their dreams are broken again and again.

5. Conclusion

The 1980s celebrated the diversity of the previously silenced voices, bringing with them innovative concepts and other points of view of the traditional narratives. Members of the LGBTI movement, women or people of different ethnicities and races appeared in the literary works of many authors as their main characters. Moreover, intersectionality combined gender, sexual and class differences of those characters, taking pride in multiculturalism. Among these writers, the Chicano writer Sandra Cisneros and the African-American author Gloria Naylor gave voice to two different communities that had been traditionally alienated from the mainstream American society: the Chicano and the African-American women. From a female perspective, *The House on Mango Street* and *The Women of Brewster Place* presented the repression and oppression women from a Chicano barrio in Chicago and an imaginary African-American ghetto suffer because of gender, class and race prejudices.

Throughout *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros reflects how Chicanas of her barrio are subjugated to male dominance and social restrictions. The forty four snapshots the collection of vignettes covers are linked by Esperanza's maturation, who realizes that her dream is to try to find her own place; to long for a dignified house in a safe environment. Nevertheless, she really notices at the end that the stories of the discriminated women of her barrio have allowed her to create an identity of her own and consequently, achieve her dream. The life experiences of those women together create a unified womanhood in the novel that projects their aspirations of reaching freedom through Esperanza. Thus, the community of one that Esperanza forms is a rejection of male dominance and the cultural stereotypes that are denying the rights of their women. In other words, sorority and intersectionality can be considered as fundamental strategies that the Chicanas of Esperanza's barrio use to diminish the oppressive patriarchy and which support and encourage those women who defy the established barrio's conventions.

On the other hand, from the outset of *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor aims to honor the African-American female community that inhabits the imaginary ghetto of Brewster Place. Despite these women having separated life experiences in the past and are also different

in terms of social structures, they are able to create a sorority based on respect inside a male dominated ghetto. The stories of Mattie, Etta, Luciela, Kiswana, Cora Lee, Theresa and Lorraine become unified in the last chapter called “Party Block.” In the form of a dream, this chapter shows how the existent racist and male chauvinistic symbols can be destroyed if these African-American women cooperate for reaching their communal dream: free themselves from oppressive and repressive social forces. Nevertheless, although this novel ends with a deferred dream, it also inspires an optimistic future, as it gives rise to an attempt to defy patriarchism through intersectionality and sorority.

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