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**THE MAMMY, THE MATRIARCH, AND THE JEZEBEL:**

**Beyond Controlling Images of Black Female Subjects in *Their Eyes Were Watching***

***God, Sula, and The Women of Brewster Place.***

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***God, Sula, and The Women of Brewster Place.***

By

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You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may tread me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Still I Rise – Poem by Maya Angelou

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## ABSTRACT

The present thesis aims at examining how the novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Sula* by Toni Morrison, and *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor, deconstruct long-held controlling images of black women, particularly the Mammy, the Matriarch, and the Jezebel images. In spite of the fact that these works were published in different decades – especially Hurston’s – their authors tend to dispel the controlling images created by white patriarchy, at the same time they help creating opportunities for new expressions of black womanhood.

In order to investigate the deconstruction of these controlling images in the novels, it was first necessary to re-examine Black Feminist theory, advocating that controlling images are created by a patriarchal and racist system, with the purpose of subjugating and demonizing black female bodies. Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, stress the necessity of eradicating derogatory stereotypes and constructing new images based on black women’s plural roles in society, therefore opening possibilities for a liberating experience of black womanhood.

Characters such as Nanny and Janie, Eva, Hannah and Sula, Mattie Michael and Etta Mae provide this work with powerful illustrations of black women who denied – partially or completely – the places reserved in society for them, consequently deconstructing controlling images white society imposes on them. In sum, all three novels show that, despite all oppression, black women try to live their lives the best way they can, and are not afraid of being who they really are.

## RESUMO

Essa dissertação intenciona analisar como os romances *Seus Olhos Viam Deus* de Zora Neale Hurston, *Sula* de Toni Morrison, e *As mulheres de Brewster Place* escrito por Gloria Naylor, desconstroem as antigas imagens de autoridade da mulher negra, principalmente as imagens da Mama, da Matriarca, e da Jezebel. Apesar de esses romances terem sido publicados em décadas diferentes – especialmente o romance de Hurston – suas autoras inclinam-se a descartar imagens de autoridade criadas pelo sistema patriarcal branco, ao mesmo tempo em que criam oportunidades para novas expressões da feminilidade negra.

A fim de investigar a desconstrução dessas imagens de autoridade, foi primeiramente necessário reexaminar a teoria do Feminismo Negro, defendendo que as imagens de autoridade são criadas pelo sistema patriarcal e racista, com o propósito de subjulgar e demonizar o corpo negro feminino. Feministas negras, como Patricia Hill Collins, enfatizam a importância de se extirpar estereótipos degradantes e se construir novas imagens baseadas nos múltiplos papéis das mulheres negras na sociedade, e dessa forma abrir possibilidades para uma libertadora experiência da feminilidade negra.

Personagens como Nanny e Janie, Eva, Hannah e Sula, Mattie Michael e Etta Mae provém esse trabalho de ponderosos exemplos de mulheres negras que negaram – parcialmente ou completamente – os lugares reservados a elas na sociedade, conseqüentemente desconstruindo imagens de autoridade que a sociedade impôs a elas. Desse modo, esses três romances mostram que, apesar da opressão, mulheres negras tentam viver suas vidas da melhor maneira possível, e não tem medo de mostrarem quem elas realmente são.



## INTRODUCTION

*De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see*  
(Hurston 14)

Since the first slave ship arrived in the United States of America, black women have been identified by many derogatory images. As the quote which opens this work states, – also taking into account Alice Walker’s observations in her acclaimed “In Search of Our Mothers Garden” – black women have been called “the mule of the world” (Hurston 14; Walker 405). They are regarded as mules in the sense that they carry the burdens of the world. As Nanny affirms in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks” (Hurston 14). In this sense, black women cannot help but carry white men’s, white women’s, and black men’s afflictions. They have endured the sexual assaults of white men, the domestic exploitation of white women, and the frustration of their emasculated black husbands and sons. They have been oppressed by a racist and patriarchal system, having hardly any other choice rather than bearing “the burdens that everyone else – everyone else – refused to carry” (Walker, “In Search” 405).

Their burdens are plenty, but especially the idea that they are essentially domestic, able of doing multiple chores, bad mothers, sexually promiscuous, among others. Such burdens have contributed to the creation of many controlling images, stereotypes, and myths related to the black female subject, in an attempt to categorize black women according to their roles in society, as devised by the white dominant culture due to race, gender and class discrimination. For this reason, black women are often represented as Jezebels, mammies, matriarchs, superwomen, mean and evil bitches, castrators and sapphire’s Mamas (405); such images are repeatedly observed and reinforced in books, in the arts, and especially on the social media (West 288).

Among the many controlling images of black women, it is important to highlight the images of the mammy, the matriarch, and the Jezebel. These three images have been chosen for investigation since they have had a significant impact on social media. According to Jacqueline Bobo, “representations of black women in mainstream media constitute a venerable tradition of distorted and limited imagery” (*Black Women* 33). For that matter, it is safe to say that such images have infiltrated people’s imagination (both whites’ and blacks’), creating opportunities for continuous oppression and domination.

Black women writers have shown in their works ways in which they confront these controlling images imposed on them. Controlling images such as the mammy, which was used to justify black women’s slavery-like jobs during segregation; the matriarch, which blame black women for their children’s faults; or even the Jezebel image, which sexualizes black women’s bodies, are creations of a very racist world. In regards to that, black women writers and critics have continuously highlighted in their fiction the relationship black women have had with their bodies, and their strategies to overcome controlling images.

During the 70s and 80s, throughout the so-called “Renaissance of Black Women Writers” (Washington, *Rev.* 182), black female novelists focused on the personal lives and collective histories of black women in order to reconstruct a heritage of black women writers (Bobo, Hudley, Michel 189). One of their goals was to show how black women writers confront the controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch and the Jezebels, among others, in their fictional works. In a sense, black writers themselves are the ones skilled to create new myths whilst challenging past ones. As Mary H. Washington affirms:

We all know the power that images have to shape and control our lives;

we must also begin to realize that we have the power to choose which images we will celebrate. We have myth – and image – makers of our own who have done their job well. (“Their Fiction” 18)

The novels *Sula* by Toni Morrison, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*<sup>1</sup> by Zora Neale Hurston, and *The Women of Brewster Place*<sup>2</sup> by Gloria Naylor offer us a wide corpus to analyze revisions of black female representation. These works confront in numerous ways controlling images imposed on black women, at the same time that they fashion new definitions of black womanhood – definitions which are not imprisoning, but rather liberating.

The first novel chosen for analysis is Hurston’s *Their Eyes*, one of the most important novels of African-American literature. It tells the story of Janie and her trajectory as she leaves behind the image of the obedient granddaughter and wife and sets off to find ways of redefining her reality by denying the traditionally accepted ideas of black womanhood, hence claiming her subjectivity, which had been negated to her by her grandmother and her first two husbands. Raised by a grandmother who saw black women as the “mule of the world” (Hurston 16), Janie is concerned with experiencing life, differently from some men – as for instance, her second husband Joe Starks – who desires to have a big voice in the community, acquire social status and material wealth. She refuses the images imposed on her, and tries to follow her heart and live life in accordance with her earnest feelings.

I chose *Their Eyes* to be part of the corpus of my thesis for countless reasons. *Their Eyes* has certainly contributed to shape modern and contemporary black women’s writings, and many black women authors and critics, including Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington, have at least once mentioned how important the novel is to them

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<sup>1</sup>From here on simply *Their Eyes*.

<sup>2</sup>From here on simply *Brewster Place*.

(Danticat, Foreword xii; Washington, *Black-Eyed* 4). Hazel Carby has even criticized the emphasis college courses give to Hurston's novel, since they often ignore the works written by black women towards the end of the eighteenth century ("The Politics" 24-25), mostly slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Linda Brent. I believe that one of the major factors for the importance of *Their Eyes* in college courses in the United States is the way Hurston presents a shift in the depiction of women in her novel; that is, she represents women in a variety of roles, "as subjects acting in history, as agents in their own lives" (Washington, *Black-Eyed* 6).

Another novel chosen for analysis, *Sula*, is Toni Morrison's second novel. It tells the story of Sula's and Nel's experiences growing up in a black community, and their friendship, which is challenged when Sula, after a 10-year absence, goes back to their city – Medallion – and sleeps with Nel's husband – Jude Greene. *Sula* is a tale of love and friendship, which challenges our perceptions of right and wrong, at the same time that illustrates how alienated women may become in order to try to resist stereotypes.

In *Sula*, the shift in black women's representation, which had started with Janie Crawford, continues and we are presented with unforgettable characters, among them Sula herself, Eva and Hannah Peace, Nel Wright, Shadrack and others. Moreover, *Sula*'s characters confront our pre-conceived ideas of motherhood, friendship, love, and betrayal, consequently challenging controlling images as well.

The third novel chosen for analysis is *Brewster Place*, first and widely acclaimed novel by Gloria Naylor. It presents seven interrelated stories of some dispossessed women who live and also play an important role in the making of Brewster Place. These women's stories represent what Brewster Place is all about; it is through their relationship and bonding that they endure their hardships in life. The most important characters are Mattie, who loses her house and ends up in Brewster Place, destined to

die there; Etta and her unconventional ways; the mothers Ciel and Cora Lee, among other women characters, who will show the variety of roles black women play in their lives.

I chose *Brewster Place* especially because of the diversity of women characters and roles the novel presents. Despite their differences, they are able to form a sense of community, which emerges from their consciousness of an oppressive world and from the understanding that they are stronger and a lot more able to overcome adversities if they stay together. In this community, they are trying to overcome the controlling images and stereotypes which had put them in such a lower position in society.

These and other characters from *Brewster Place*, *Their Eyes* and *Sula* provide enough evidence that black women writers are concerned with richer, more complex representations of black women; representations which are not controlled by a racist and patriarchal society. In order to better analyze how black women writers have managed to create new images of black women in their fictions, it is necessary to firstly revisit some theories concerning the Body and Gender representation.

Sociology, Psychology, History, among other fields, have been inquiring on the issue of Body; interdisciplinary fields such as Cultural Studies, have also been concerned in investigating how bodies – specially female bodies – are often “constructed through ideologies, discourses and practices” (Kowalewski-Wallace 75). According to Hélène Cixous, women bodies are objectified by men, once they are interpreted by men and subjected to patriarchy (15). However, at the same time, oppressed bodies are in a battle against such objectification and subjugation (Foucault 26).

Concerning body politics and sexuality, it is necessary to re-examine Gender theories, at which the works of Teresa De Lauretis and Anderson and Hill Collins, “The

Technology of Gender” and *Race, Class, and Gender* respectively, are extremely helpful. Therefore, this thesis relies on the idea that race, class, and gender are interconnected, once these three factors shape many of the characters’ experiences to be analyzed along this work. Besides, according to Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins in the preface of *Race, Class, and Gender*, “the structure of race, class and gender in society has significant consequences for different groups” (x) and I do not wish to disregard such fact, since I believe the novels that compose the corpus of this work contribute to the idea that race, class, and gender are interrelated, once black women most often experience these three factors concurrently (Hull, Smith 16).

According to De Lauretis, gender is representation, constructed by an assortment of “social technologies, such as cinema and of institutionalized discourses” (2). De Lauretis follows Foucault’s sexuality theory, concluding that gender is not something biologically inherent in human beings, but rather constructed socially, differentiating *gender* from *sex* – the latter referring to “one’s biological identity as male or female” (Andersen, Hills 83). Race and class are as much “grounded in social institutions and practices” as gender, resulting in the creation of patterns that guide human social relations (76; 83), which is why regarding race, class, and gender as interconnected factors is important in this thesis.

Although the concept of gender originated in Feminist theory, and for some time *gender* and *woman* were terms used interchangeably, without any regards towards their meanings (Kowalewski-Wallace 253), “institutionalized gender relations shape men’s, as well as women’s, experiences” (Andersen, Hills 86). In this sense, it is important to not exclude men from this thesis, for it is widely known how black males are also regarded through limiting controlling images. In fact, due to race – and most of time class – oppression, black males do not benefit from patriarchy as white men do, and for

each female controlling image, there is a male counterpart: where there is a mammy – willing to do anything for her white family – there is the image of the uncle Tom: the faithful servant whose life has no meaning other than serving white people; for every matriarch, there is a lazy black man, not willing to get a job and provide for his family; for every Jezebel, there is a rapist. Sustained by white patriarchy, each controlling image feeds out from one another, creating a no-win situation which seriously damage black women's and men's gender relations.

In addition, many of the authors who wrote empowering fictional works about black women's ability to rise above oppression and the patriarchal system – which is still the norm in American society concerning both whites and blacks – have been accused of endorsing black male's stereotypical images, such as the image of the violent and reckless man. This is an important issue to be analyzed during this work, since discussing black manhood shall lead to a better understanding of black womanhood.

The main male characters to be analyzed in the novels are Basil Michael, Eugene and Ben in *Brewster Place*, Janie's three husbands: Logan, Jody and Tea Cake in *Their Eyes*, and Boy-Boy, Jude and Ajax in *Sula*. Some of these male characters lack commitment, attachment to the community and to their wives, and most of them are attached to a white patriarchal idea of manhood. Due to such facts, they end up abandoning their children, or not protecting them from the racist world outside the community.

From the analysis of these female and male characters, it will be clear that at the same time these black women writers are part of African-American literary tradition, they also build a new tradition; one which is focused on preserving elements of black culture, as well as presenting ways of dealing with race, class, and gender issues, challenging a generalized ideology of domination.

Although my choice of novels enclose only African-American women writers, it is important to bear in mind that they are not the only ones concerned with challenging controlling images of black womanhood; Afro-Brazilian, black British, and West-Indian women writers – such as Conceição Evaristo, Zadie Smith, and Paule Marshall – also share the accountability of creating a tradition of black women writers, which transcends the barriers of countries and nationalities, and meets at the core of black women experiences in the world.

Moreover, redefining identities is an issue which has been discussed worldwide by many racial, gender, and cultural studies experts, and the notion of blackness has come a long way, developing different theories from place to place. The United States, for instance, has built more tangible borders between whites and blacks and follows the ‘one-drop-rule’, which states that “a black is any person with *any* known African black ancestry” (Davis, *Who* 5). In this sense, a person with fair complexion, but with African ancestry, would be considered black in the United States. In Brazil, however, skin tone determines who is black and who is not (Munanga 52). For that matter, recognizing oneself as a black person is often a painful process, once miscegenation is an irrefutable reality in this country, and many people (who are black) would prefer to be considered mixed-raced (52).

Although segregation laws were not legitimized in Brazil, we do suffer from an institutionalized racism, in which black men and women are also maintained in the margins of society, not by law, but by an institution which prevents them from acquiring qualification and recognition in the job market. In a period which the existence of races based on biological features is at stake (Appiah 73; Munanga n.p), black people’s experiences in the United States and in Brazil are quite similar, once both are marked by oppression and discrimination. Owing to the recurrence of these social



phenomena in our everyday lives, the term *racism* will be employed in this dissertation to refer to discrimination against black people.

Throughout the twentieth century, there were many political movements in the Caribbean, South Africa, and the U.S., in which a global “black identity” was asserted, identifying the word black to power, beauty, and, above all, the recognition of an African Identity (Davies 4). In fact, these movements “laid the groundwork for several modes of theoretical scholarship regarding ‘Black woman’”, some of them being Black Feminist Theory and Africana Womanism. These movements support respectively, among other things, “the enhancement of traditional “white feminism” to include the voices of women of color ... [and] understanding the experiences of Black women as part of the African Diaspora” (Eaton 7).

One should keep in mind, though, that the notion of identity in modernity is rather complicated, especially due to migration and globalization. Yet, according to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is a “production,” which “is never completed, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). That is, when a person says she is American, she is making use of a representation that is not truly essential. The concept of identity is not fixed, which makes it possible to undergo transformations at any time, or by the influence of any circumstances. By accepting their African ancestry as part of their identity, a whole generation of blacks accepted their hybridism as an element to be proud of.

A community, such as the Brazilian black community, or the American black community, once they accept their African roots as part of their identity, can hardly identify themselves in one single national identity. As Hall suggests, modern nations are all cultural hybrids – that is, a cultural identity that encloses characteristics from two or more pre-existing cultures (222). This is closely related to what Du Bois called double

consciousness; in his words, “it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (3). That is, the experience of being both American and black through the eyes of whiteness; the experience of belonging to the same nation which made blacks victims of its prejudice.

The new approach concerning the term black – which emerged during the political acts of the 60s and 70s – is a response to the oppressive whiteness that governed black people then, and it unifies the black world; such black world would no longer be specified as African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once; that is what Paul Gilroy calls “the black Atlantic” culture, whose themes transcend ethnicity and nationality. He understands Diaspora as “beyond its symbolic status as the fragmentary opposite of an imported racial essence” (15). Yet, he states that analyzing a nation-state units leads to a destructive “ethnic absolutism” rather than liberating politics (5).

Owing to such perspectives, black women writers, during the 70s, started a movement called “The Renaissance of Black Women Writers”. Such movement is characterized by the black women novelists who focused their plots on personal lives and collective histories of black women in order to reconstruct a heritage of black women’s writings (Bobo, Hudley, Michel 187). According to Jaqueline Bobo, “the predominant element of this movement is the creation and maintenance of images of black women that are based upon black women’s constructions, history, and real life experiences” (*Black Studies* 179). In this sense, they changed “the way black women are represented in literature”, showing them as mothers, daughters, college students, workers, among other roles, along with intentionally making them commit mistakes and learn from them, so as to give black women a voice (Washington *Black-Eyed* 5).

Following the standpoints above, it is not my intention to generalize black women's writings, limiting it as essentially African American. According to Carol Boyce Davies:

Black women's writing ... should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing. In cross-cultural, transnational, translocal, diasporic perspectives, this reworking of the grounds of "Black Women's Writing" redefines identity away from exclusion and marginality. (3)

Taking into account Davies' quote, and being myself an avid reader of black women's writings from different nationalities and backgrounds, I believe there are several similarities and particularities among them, worthy taking into account in future research. Thanks to this, during this study, the term black women writers will be preferred over African-American women writers, since they are connected to a tradition of black women's writings that encircles the West Indian, the South American, black British women's writings, and so forth.

Moreover, I find it amazing how black women writers are able to tell such compelling though usually distressing stories. For me, they are not mere fictional narratives; they are tales of resistance, the turning of words into swords. As Michelle Cliff comments, "you can draw a line from the slave narrative of Linda Brent ... to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*... to *Sula* ... all of these define a response to power" (21) – they show a journey to realization of the self, an attempt to break up with the controlling images and stereotypes imposed on black women.

In her essay "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker emphasizes women's struggle to preserve their creativity throughout many years of oppression, when they were perceived as mere bodies to be used as tools for work. Also, she states

that these mothers kept memory alive with their way of talking and their songs. Women, in this sense, are the ones who carry and pass on a notion of black identity. They have contributed to the maintenance of black community traditions of racial cooperation and collectivism as opposed to white culture's individualism (Marable 72).

It is important to keep such issues in mind, especially when we live in an age which is said to be the "post-racial society", despite the incidents which continue to be reported in social media, such as the one occurred with the African-American actress Danièle Watts who was handcuffed by a Los Angeles police officer for "showing affection" to her white boyfriend in a public place, implicitly saying that she had been mistaken by a prostitute<sup>3</sup>. Events such as these bring back black women's ceaseless struggle against controlling images and stereotypes, as the one of the promiscuous Jezebel. Artists such as Nicki Minaj, who has been considered by many the "Modern Sarah Baartman<sup>4</sup>," confirms that black women's bodies are only visible when they reinforce stereotypes, a high price contemporary black artists have to pay for public recognition of their talents.

All said, this work aims at making a connection between black women's representations and the patriarchal system, as it is shown in the novels, in an attempt to better understand how race, class, and gender relations are still rooted in a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, *Outlaw* 134), endorsing behaviors which may be characterized as sexist or even misogynist. Such analysis may clarify how the act of giving black women derogatory names and images is, therefore, a way of sustaining patriarchal system, while maintaining racial oppression. By doing so, this work may contribute to the areas of race, gender, and cultural studies, enhancing the knowledge of the ways black women's writers have been helping to shape new concepts of black

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<sup>3</sup> As reported by Bim Adewunmi from *The Guardian*

<sup>4</sup> According to an online article by Evette Dione.

womanhood and, consequently, manhood.

Alice Walker paints an interesting picture during her extent interview with O'Brien; what if black women had read and taken seriously Hurston's *Their Eyes*?

Would they still be dependent on material things – fine cars, furs, big houses, pots and jars of face creams – as they are today? Or would they, learning from Janie that materialism is the drag-rope of the soul, become a nation of women immune ... to the accumulation of things, and aware, to their core, that love, fulfillment as a woman, peace of mind, should logically come before, not after, selling one's soul for a golden stool on which to sit. Sit and be bored. (74)

To such an inspirational questioning, I would add up: what if black women – or white women, black men, and white men for that matter – had also read and taken to heart Morrison's *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, or Naylor's *Mama Day*, *The Women of Brewster Place*, or even Paula Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and any other work which has exalted the importance of self-awareness and the lack of attachment to material things – as far as it is possible in our capitalist world? Would not women become more emotionally involved with values such as peacefulness, love, consciousness, and other important immaterial things? It is a scenario worth imagining. What if our concepts of happiness were grounded in human relationship and self-knowledge, rather than money, status, among other destructive paternalist and capitalist values? When analyzing black women's writings, one ought to have such questions in mind, once this is the most important element in order to fully understand what they are offering us. In this sense, black women's writings are not singularly related to gender and race issues – they are, above all, fighting the imperialist culture which insists on imposing controlling images on them (Davies 25).

This thesis will be divided into three chapters, aiming at organizing the most important discussion of this work. The first chapter, “The World Was Swiftly Changing But Their Burden Had Not – The Historical Development of Female Controlling Images”, will bring a critical review of the most important theoretical material employed in this thesis. Moreover, chapter one will deal with concepts such as Black Feminist Theory, black womanhood and manhood, as well as the development of controlling images. The second chapter, “New Words Would Have to Be Made: Challenging Black Women’s Controlling Images”, will bring a descriptive analysis of black female and male characters in the three novels chosen, so as to examine how they deconstruct controlling images. The third chapter, “Something Else to Be – Individual and Community: Contesters and Sustainers of Controlling Images”, will analyze the role of the community in dispelling stereotypes, as well as the role of the individuals who help shaping new images for black womanhood in the novels.

In sum, these three novels serve as the basis for a socio-cultural analysis of the representation of female black subjects. By analyzing the roles women play in their families and in their communities, as well as their abilities to prevail over distressing experiences – as watching a son lose interest in life, raising their children by themselves, and defending their own lives – we may see how they challenge the controlling images that the patriarchal, misogynist, and racist society have imposed on them. These women are both strong and sensitive; mothers and lovers; and they are trying to overcome a very oppressive world. The black women who are going to be analyzed in this work certainly have something in common: they all challenge these stereotypes and are living proves that the world is mistaken in categorizing them, and even more mistaken in trying to silence their voices.

CHAPTER ONE:

“THE WORLD WAS SWIFTLY CHANGING BUT THEIR BURDEN HAD NOT<sup>5</sup>” – THE  
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE CONTROLLING IMAGES

The words were as ancient as the origin of their misery, but the tempo had picked up threefold in its evolution from the cotton fields. They were now sung with the frantic determination of a people who realized that the world was swiftly changing but for some mystic, complex reason their burden had not.

- Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* 63

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<sup>5</sup> (Naylor, *Brewster* 63)

## INTRODUCTION

Gloria Naylor's *Brewster Place* narrator, while describing a sermon in the Canaan's Congregation, notices that the songs the poor residents sang as loudly as they could pledged for freedom – words “as ancient as the origin of their misery” (63). The world was changing rapidly, but for some mysterious reason their suffering had no end. Racism, classism, and sexism have always troubled black people, creating the controlling images black women writers have been so keen on opposing. This chapter aims at providing the historical development of black women controlling images, as well as establishing a connection to black men's stereotypes.

With the purpose of facilitating the discussion of controlling images, this chapter will be divided into three sections, aiming at presenting the concepts that will allow the construction of the methodology of this thesis. The first section, entitled “Ain't I a woman? – The Foundations of Black Feminist Criticism”, will explore an important part of the methodology of this work, namely, the construction of Black Feminist Criticism, by closely examining some of the works which have been central for the development of this thesis. The second section of this chapter, entitled “You're not a boy, you know – Black Women Controlling Images”, will present the historical development of the Mammy, the Matriarch and the Jezebel controlling images. The third section, “We Real Cool – Black Masculinity and Controlling Images”, will discuss the production of masculinity in the light of bell hooks' thoughts on white patriarchy.

Besides providing this work with the necessary theoretical support, this chapter aims at highlighting some concepts which will be important to the development of this work; they are, for instance, the development of the Black Feminist Criticism; the difference among the concepts of Controlling Images, Stereotypes, and Myths;



Foucault's body theory; motherhood and the New World Woman; Cool Pose and, last but not least, Patriarchy and its influence in the construction of black womanhood and manhood. By doing so, chapter one will set the grounds for the analysis of the characters in the following chapters.

## 1.1. AIN'T I A WOMAN? – THE FOUNDATIONS OF BLACK FEMINIST CRITICISM

*“That man over there says that women  
need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches,  
and to have the best place everywhere.  
Nobody ever helps me into carriages,  
or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place!  
And ain't I a woman?”  
(Sojourner Truth)*

Most women at some point in life have asked themselves what it means to be a woman. An answer to such a problematical question may not often be simple to obtain. From our mother's lectures on how to walk, how to cook, how to sit down properly, among others, we begin to formulate our conceptions of womanhood, that is, the great amount of qualities and roles which make us females.

Barbara Welter has suggested that true womanhood “could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (22). In this sense, women should be religious, resist to men's urges, but at the same time be submissive to men, and understand that their major roles in life are becoming wives and mothers. In a patriarchal society, where the bond between white men made them the rulers, the cult of true womanhood was defended by women themselves, once women also incorporate sexist behavior (Smitherman 105). Even though most women would probably feel unable to live up to the ideal of true womanhood, they were supposed to at least try, otherwise, they would be considered “fallen women” (Welter 26-27). There is no in-between – they could be either angels or monsters.

Therefore, in order to write, a woman must firstly “examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which [literature] has generated for her” (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Such images are so strong that they have been incorporated by many women as well. Many may feel that it is impossible to fight the patriarchal rules in which, as men, they are also socialized. Thus, patriarchy has

contributed to the continuous oppression of women in the job market, as well as within the household, constructing and reinforcing images of women's subordination. Although it is not clear when it started, women have been suffering with images used primarily to oppress and control their behavior since ancient times.

Albeit the beliefs espoused by the cult of true womanhood were meant for all nineteenth century women to follow, it is important to notice that only white-middle-class women could hope to achieve it (Patton 30). Hazel Carby argues that black and white womanhood definitions are "two very different but interdependent codes of sexuality operated in the antebellum South ... which coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress" (*Reconstructing* 20). Qualities such as virtue, obedience and domesticity, with which white women were promised happiness and power, would not fit black women's definition of womanhood. For instance, while delicateness was a feature which indicated high status; the opposite, strength, was used to identify black women who were field workers in slave markets (25). Another example is wifehood; life within the household, the preservation of marriage, and the nurturing of children were considered the life purposes of white women (26), while the same could never be applied to black women slaves, who were often prohibited to marry, were seen as breeders rather than mothers, and therefore could never protect their children from being sold to other plantations, and were more than often victims of white men's assaults.

Hence, it is safe to say that the Euro-American concept of womanhood in the nineteenth century referred only to white women, primarily because black women were expected to do hard work and "serve" white people (Collins 14), among other reasons, as stated above. Black women were either identified as whores, or as sexual victims;

either way they would never be considered pure – and consequently would not fit the model of true womanhood (Foster 131).

Moreover, although feminist theory has given a great contribution in the reconstruction of women's place and image in society, "white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define woman in terms of their own experience alone" (Lorde 118). If the Euro-American perception of womanhood in the nineteenth century referred only to white women, once black women were expected to provide white people with workforce, during the twentieth century, this situation did not change radically, as black women were expected to attain certain jobs – the considered "lower" jobs. Controlling images connecting black women to such positions assisted in maintaining them marginalized; nowadays, it is common for black women to experience racism and sexism, even if they achieve higher class status, once they are discriminated not only because of their gender, but also because of their race; a double jeopardy that white feminism does not deal with.

The quote which opens this section explains this exceptionally well; whereas white women are supposed to be "helped into carriages and lifted over ditches", black women will never have such privilege, simply because they are not white. Nonetheless, they are still women, and once race is probably impossible to be erased from the equation, how could black women identify with white feminism? For these and other reasons, another approach to analyze the stereotypes concerning black womanhood is needed; a definition which takes into consideration a historical perception of black womanhood.

Race is an important issue in order to historically place black womanhood. In African-American families, race has been the focus of social interactions, making the question of gender, most of times, a minor priority, or no priority at all. According to

Michael Eric Dyson “black men don’t see their gender in the same way that white men don’t see they have a race” (in Guy-Sheftall 41). This happens because gender oppression is not an issue exclusively of White America. On the contrary, black communities are also places where sexism is perceived. Many black men would not support black women’s organization for fearing that their having jobs would lead to a dissipation of the black family – which needs a female character whose primarily role is to educate the children (Brown 52).

It is interesting to highlight Cole and Guy-Sheftall’s work *Gender Talk*, which brings some interesting examples on how gender relations in African American families are still struggling with the issue of male favoritism. In one of the numerous cases of sexism, I would like to draw attention to a common scene, which still may be very normal in most families these days: “my brother would say, ‘I sure would like some water’ and my grandmother would instantly say to one of his sisters, ‘Go get your brother a glass of water’” (in Guy-Sheftall 36). The idea is that women should serve men, because men have “potential power over women” (Guy-Sheftall 36).

On the other hand, gender relations are more complicated than it seems, since both men and women are affected by it. As hooks reports on her conversations with College students all over the United States, many young adult black males are trying to resist patriarchy “and yet are rejected by black females for not being masculine enough” (*Outlaw* 111). In fact, hooks confirms that black women do have ambiguous desires in relation to men, once they refute male domination over women, but also desire men who can be in control (111).

As stated earlier, black women have been barely benefited by feminist theory (Brown 47); the invisibility of black women in Feminism, as well as the complex gender issues in African-American families, has been responsible for the belief that

black women have to choose between defending the rights of their race or their gender. In a sense, they are denied full recognition of their double – sometimes triple, if we consider class – jeopardy, since they have been discriminated against for being black and for being women. “Women’s studies courses . . . focused almost exclusively upon the lives of white women. Black studies . . . also ignored black women” (Hull, Smith xx); due to racism from the part of white women and the sexism from the part of black and white men, there has been little or no room for a black female study (xxi).

Willing to change this scenario, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Carol Boyce Davies, Angela Davis, Mary Helen Washington, Jaqueline Bobo, Hazel Carby and many others, have contributed to construct a black and feminist premise. Black feminism takes into consideration mainly African American women’s experiences, whereas Africana Feminism explores various black women experiences in the African Diaspora. Both movements, though, express “an articulation of resistance and deconstruction, as well as a fierce form of advocacy or social, political, and economic equality” (Norwood 229). Furthermore, there is Alice Walker’s term “Womanism”, a concept connecting race and gender among other issues in its philosophy (Brown 48). These three movements stress the necessity of dealing with controlling images and redefining black womanhood, which is why these scholars have provided this work with the appropriated theoretical support to study the construction of controlling images, stereotypes, and myths and ways of dispelling them. Among them, it is important to highlight the role of Patricia Hill Collins’ work, which provides the standards for the analysis of black women lives. *Black Feminist Thought* is certainly one of the most relevant critical works for my analysis of the novels, and has guided this study from its very beginning, especially because it offers an exceptional look upon black women controlling images.

Incidentally, the concepts of controlling images, stereotypes, and myths are often used interchangeably without a deeper consideration of their specific meanings. Patricia Hill Collins affirms that controlling images such as the mammy, the matriarch, and the Jezebel are “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life” (69). Far from being only a racial phenomenon, controlling images are used by the dominant groups as a tool to “justify or rationalize existing power relations” (Walker, *Critical* 51).

Stereotypes, similarly, emerge from a lack of attention given to subordinated groups, which are stereotyped because they are perceived superficially by dominant groups. The consequences are the limiting of the stereotyped group’s freedom and the maintenance of the status quo (Fiske 621-24). Narrowing it down to the black women’s case, and the stereotypes which have troubled them since their arrival in America, Rasul Mowatt and Bryana French highlight that black women’s bodies are only visible through stereotypical images with the purpose of ridiculing them, as the case of the body of Sara Baartman, which was exposed naked for many decades in the nineteenth century London, and became known as Hottentot Venus (645). Moreover, according to Sander Gilman, black bodies have been connected to illicit sexual activity and “primitive” sexuality since the middle ages, and towards the nineteenth century it started to symbolize sexual transmitted diseases, such as syphilis (228).

Myths, on the other hand, are represented by a juxtaposition of reality and fiction, providing the popular culture with stories which are believed to be a representation of what the world should be like (Levi-Strauss 9). For example, the myth of Uncle Tom, the gentle, loyal, and hard-working slave from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Despite recent attempts to challenge the Uncle Tom’s myth, it is still used in extreme pejorative ways by black Americans to identify other black

Americans who act according to white American's social beliefs, as stated by Jarvis Williams.

Another example is the myth of Aunt Jemima; according to Christopher Sewell, “the popular imagery around that of Aunt Jemima comes from [the] notion of the Mammy. Due to her ability to cook and her command of the kitchen, the Mammy-like figure provided a validation for the quality of [cooking products]” (“Mammies” 312). Controlling images and myths such as these were used as entertainment for the masses by the media. They reflect what the majority thinks. Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima are acceptable symbols to white people, because they demonstrate how whites and blacks could live together in a non-conflicting way. At the same time, for blacks, these myths represent people who work for whites, and do not interfere in the status quo, which is the reason why they are negative images to the black population.

Moreover, it is important to mention that there has been other ways of identifying black women, sometimes by black women writers themselves, who are also critics, such as Alice Walker. In her interview with Mary Helen Washington, she explains her personal historical construct of the history of black women. According to Walker, there are three historical moments worth mentioning, in which black women evolved from completely victimized figures to women who have control over their lives. Women in the first cycle would be identified as Suspended women. They would be the “mules of the world”, as Hurston had identified them previously. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, black women could not move forward because there was no room in society for them. They had few choices in life, when they were given any choice at all. They did not know any different reality – just the oppression they were inserted in. They preserved their creativity by their spirituality – they were artists without artistic tools (Washington *An Essay* 89-90).



The second cycle, which contemplates women from the 40s and 50s, brings the Assimilated women, who wish to fit in society by both forgetting their roots and playing the role white society had given them. The third cycle would bring an end to this. The Emergent women from the 60s are aware of the oppression surrounding them, and wish to overcome it by searching for their roots again, reclaiming their past, and re-examining their relationship with the black community (95-100).

It is interesting to notice that such black women images – Suspended, Assimilated, and Emergent – have a straight connection to the controlling images and stereotypes which are still playing a role in the portrayal of black women. The Suspended and the Assimilated women, for instance, are quite connected to the images of the Mammy and the Matriarch, while the Jezebel is strictly connected to the sexuality of black women. It is important to keep in mind, though, that whether one decides to call them suspended and assimilated women or mummies and matriarchs, the fact is that all of them evoke black women's oppression and abuse. It shows how so much suffering and discrimination has made many black women capable of seeing themselves only through the eyes of others. This is probably why some black women played the role of mummies and matriarchs in the 50s; this may also be the reason why some black women artists play the role of Jezebel nowadays; they are responding to a culture which only accepts them in such roles.

In this work, I will make use of the concepts of controlling images and stereotypes interchangeably, since I do not believe there is a significant difference between these two terms. Nevertheless, whether one decides to address controlling images, stereotypes, or myths, it is important to bear in mind that they all endorse society's belief that black women have less individual value than other groups of people, – especially white men and women – thereby placing them down in the bottom

of all social interactions.

Apart from Collins and Walker, other writers and their works have provided this thesis with the appropriated theoretical support to study the construction of controlling images. They have assisted greatly in analyzing the impact of controlling images in contemporary representations of race within a white supremacist culture, besides pointing towards the way black women writers resist domination by deconstructing these images in their fictional works. These works are Angela Davis' *Woman, Race, Class*, Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Carole Boyce Davies' *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, and Hull, Scott and Smith's *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*<sup>6</sup>.

Davis' work, *Woman, Race, and Class* helps tracing the history behind the women's movement, and the black women's movement. Since there was no integration in women's movement, due especially to racism, black women activists such as Sojourner Truth kept white men and women informed of the fact that black women were also going to get their rights (63-65). While Davis' work deal with the historical point of view of the Black Feminist movement, Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood*, takes into account a literary perspective of Black Feminist theory, making allowances for the slavery legacy and women's narratives before and after emancipation, emphasizing that Black Feminist Criticism should not be essentialist or ahistorical (10).

Carby is critical about the existence of a tradition of black women writers, or about the existence of a black female language (17), once she considers such concepts to be based on "mainstream literary criticism" (16) – a methodology which reproduces power relations. Carby believes that Black Feminist Theory should be "historically specific and aware of the differently oriented social interests" (17). However, despite

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<sup>6</sup> From now on simply *Some of Us Are Brave*

such belief, she affirms that black women writers “would directly confront the political and economic dimensions of their subjugation” (17) in their fiction. Regardless of the fact that the statement above is itself essentialist, I believe that black women’s concern in confronting their subjugation and, consequently, redefining black womanhood, which is in fact present in many works by black women (including the three novels that compose the corpus of this thesis), helps building the foundations of a tradition of black women writers.

As mentioned, Carole Boyce Davies’ *Black Women, Writing and Identity* presents a cross-cultural perspective of black women’s writings, in which they are not only related to gender and race issues – but they are also fighting the imperialist culture which insist in defining them in stereotypical ways (25). She aims at giving more depth to the discussion of black women writings, analyzing a range of narratives and poems dealing with conflicts in the construction of plural identities.

Another important work in this thesis is Hull, Scott, and Smith’s *Some of Us Are Brave*. This 1982 piece deals with the emergence of Black women’s studies – which “can be traced to three significant political movements of the twentieth century” (xx): Black Liberation, Women’s Liberation and the Black Feminist movement. As mentioned before, the first two movements leave no space for black women’s studies, whereas the third enables the field to expand, facilitating the creation of college courses, programs, and research focusing on black women.

*Some of Us Are Brave* encloses many studies, starting with “A Black Feminist Statement”, which discusses the beginning of the movement, as well as its beliefs, problems, and practices. The question of stereotypes is presented by the articles of Patricia Bell Scott’s “Debunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science”, and Elizabeth Higginbotham’s “Two Representative Issues in Contemporary

Sociological work on Black Women”); whereas the former discusses the literature concerning the black matriarch myth in Social Science – emphasizing that most works before the 80s blames black women for black family failures (87) – and the latter brings insights on the necessity of refuting black women stereotypes and “developing a theoretical perspective (or set of perspectives) addressing the roles of Black women in the family, in peer groups, in the wider Black community and in the larger society” (96) – perspectives that give emphasis on the multiple roles black women play in their complex lives.

It is important to stress that both articles approach the field of Social Science, and although some articles included in *Some of Us Are Brave* bring some literary criticism, especially concerning *Their Eyes*<sup>7</sup>, the question of black women stereotypes has not had a significant impact in Literary Studies. Moreover, Social Science and other fields usually focus their attentions on the Matriarch controlling image, and Literary Studies also show such tendency. Due to these facts, I faced some challenges in the gathering of secondary sources for this work, since the majority of the articles do not approach the question of stereotypes systematically – they rather mention it, without much expansion into the matters. As already mentioned, most articles only bring insights on the controlling images of the matriarch and the mammy, while the image of the Jezebel usually goes unnoticed. Nonetheless, there are some articles which helped greatly in composing this work.

Literature concerning *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is quite vast and heterogenic, due probably to its importance in the African-American Women Writers scenario. It sometimes focuses on the construction of Janie Crawford’s identity, but most emphasis is given to speech and Hurston’s representation of the folk.

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<sup>7</sup> As for instance, Lorraine Bethel’s ““This Infinity of Conscious Pain”: Zora Neale Hurston and the Female Literary Tradition”, which approaches mostly the author’s life, and her importance in the formation of Black women’s literary tradition.

As for my thesis, I would like to highlight three articles which have been extremely important. Firstly, Julie Haurybeiwicz's "From Mules to Muliebrity: Speech and Silence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*", shows how Janie frees herself from the silencing imposed by Nanny and her two first husbands, and state her womanhood. This article explores the image of the mule, which is represented by black women stereotypes. It shows how black women have always suffered from these images, which legitimizes poverty and rape. Sigrid King's "Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" also brings interesting insights in how naming is used metaphorically to represent women's and men's place in the novels, premise which was useful for the analysis of the other novels as well. Lastly, Mary Helen Washington's "'I love the way Janie Crawford Left her Husbands:' Zora Neale Huston's Emergent Female", which shows a different reading of *Their Eyes*, assuring that the novel represents women exclusion from power, once Janie does not (ever) has a voice in the novel. This is certainly an interesting view, once Janie is concerned with experiencing things, rather than having a voice, which is, after all, a quite similar situation to the characters of the other novels.

Similar to *Their Eyes*, *Sula* also gathers a great body of critical works dealing with a whole lot of themes. Articles usually analyze woman-to-woman bonds, black girlhood and womanhood, and so forth. Four articles are relevant to this research. Firstly, Toni Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature", in which Morrison gives some great insights of the composition of *Sula*, offering imminence on the definition of African-American literature. Secondly, Marie Nigro's "In Search of Self: Frustration and Denial in Toni Morrison's *Sula*", which deals with the search of self as conducted by some characters in *Sula*, and their vain fight, once the system usually imposes huge obstacles on them,

unsystematically approaching the difficulty of resisting stereotypes, since they are rooted in the social order. Thirdly, Barbara Christian's "The contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison", which mentions how Hannah and Eva Peace, among other women characters in *Sula*, challenge stereotypes. Last but not least, Maggie Galehouse's "New World Woman", which shows the uniqueness of the character Sula, since she ultimately challenges stereotypical ideas of black womanhood, given that these controlling images are created in order to restrain black women's behavior and consequently their roles in American society.

The body of critical work of *Brewster Place* is constantly growing, with themes enclosing black sisterhood, class, sexuality, motherhood, and the myth of the matriarch. In order to support the analysis of *Brewster Place*, interviews, an article and a Master Thesis were specially selected, among the growing critical material concerning Naylor's first novel. They are Celeste Fraser's "B(l)ack Voices: The Myth of the Black Matriarchy and *The Women of Brewster Place*", which plays an important role in supporting some evidence of motherhood and sisterhood in the novel, as well as approaching how the character Mattie Micheal challenges the stereotype of the matriarch, and Lucie Procházková's "Motherhood and Sisterhood in Naylor's Novels", which deals with the issue of the matriarch and the myth of the Earth Mother, important concepts for the composition of this work.

I am keen on working with controlling images because I believe that several of them are still strongly inbuilt in society's beliefs, despite continuous effort to eradicate them from people's imagination, and for that matter they may be partially responsible for black women's continuous experiences of harassment today. In the next section, I shall expand on the topic of controlling images, presenting a historical overview which will give us some foundation for the analysis of the novels in Chapters two and three.

1.2. YOU ARE NOT A BOY, YOU KNOW – BLACK WOMEN BODIES AND  
CONTROLLING IMAGES

*On Sundays try to walk like a lady  
and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming...  
You mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions...  
This is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house...  
Don't squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know.  
(Kincaid 3-5)*

Michael Foucault observes that Modernity brought a severe discipline and punishment politics against the body. Such discipline and punishment are implemented by the many systems operating in society, such as the school with its timetables, or the prison. In these systems, the body is disciplined and punished accordingly. The student, for example, needs to be enclosed in a room, assigned to a desk, and leave only when he is told to do so (Foucault 143). The student also needs a timetable, so as to control the activities that she/he has got to do (149). Being non-conforming with discipline causes punishment: “a soldier commits an ‘offence’ whenever he does not reach the level required; a pupil’s ‘offence’ is not only a minor infraction, but also an inability to carry out his tasks” (179).

In our society, according to Foucault, “the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body” (25). Either by torture or confinement, it is always the body which is at stake. However, such use is only obtained by a system of subjugation, using violence, ideology, or other means (26). Although Foucault does not discriminate male and female bodies in his analysis, he does use as examples the army and the school – which are not traditionally female places, at least not until the last decades of the twentieth century. It is probable that his analysis is concerned with the white male world, which is quite distant from black women experiences.

Nonetheless, the same systems also aim at disciplining female bodies, though in different ways. According to Sandra Lee Bartky, systems impose themselves into women's bodies, making them believe they have to lose weight, exercise and be fit in order to fulfill the requirements of femininity (29). Women are also more restricted than men in what regards to body movement; Girls have to "walk like a lady" and not like a slut, as the fragment from Jamaica Kincaid's *Girl* shows. When women do not have the right body movements, they are considered sluts or loose women, seeing as they are violating rules and morals of true womanhood.

Moreover, women are supposed to remove hair from face and body, have smooth skin by applying huge quantities of skin lotion and face creams. They are also supposed to take care of their hair, watch their weight, among other things (Bartky 33-34). According to Bartky, "there is little evidence that women of color or working-class women are in general less committed to the incarnation of an ideal femininity than their more privileged sisters" (34); although I do not believe that white women's ideals of femininity are the same as black women's ideals, it is undeniable that women in general suffer pressure to have the "perfect body". Anyhow, black women's experiences with body images are crueler than white women's, once standard beauty still remains – in The US and in Brazil, at least – being tall, thin, white, having straight fair hair and, if possible, blue eyes. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* captures the cruelty of standardized white beauty and its terrible consequences on the lives of black girls as Pecola, who becomes mad, believing to possess blue eyes.

As Patricia Collins states, "portraying African-American women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression" (69). Black women's body is at the core of these controlling images, which reinforce their objectification, once their bodies are only highlighted in



stereotypical ways (Mowatt, French 649). In her essay “The Development of the Mammy Image and Mythology”, Cheryl Thurber states that:

mammy had done a better job of raising her white children than she had done with her own, who frequently disappointed her. Consistent with this viewpoint is the suggestion that, after the abolition of slavery, she chose to remain with her master’s family. Loyalty and affection were tied together. (100)

Thurber notices that memoirs from 1906 to 1912 present the peak of mentions of the mammy image (96), and considering the importance of black women in raising white children during slavery, this may have been the origin of this controlling image.

According to Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, “the earliest use of the word *mammy* in reference of slave women caring for white children occurs in 1810 in a travel narrative about the American South” (4), but by 1820 the term was widely used to refer to African American Women who raised white children. As Thurber explains:

references to mammy in the *Confederate Veteran* magazine, American popular songs, memoirs, and fiction confirm that more was written about mammy at the turn of the century than during the antebellum period, the Civil War, or Reconstruction, the New South movement, and the later phases of the Confederate Lost Cause movement. (95)

This confirms that this controlling image became popular towards the end of slavery in the United States, once it builds an acceptable relationship between whites and blacks to the dominant society; a relationship that does not interfere with the status quo. It presents whites and blacks coexisting in a non-conflicting environment.

An important point is that the mammy’s body is marked by excess, once she is often represented as tall, exceptionally overweight, strong-built, dark-skinned women

(Wallace-Sanders 6). According to Patricia Turner, this popular image of the mammy is probably a creation of the media:

those black bonds women who worked indoors were unlikely to be overweight because their food stuffs were severely rationed. They were more likely to be light as dark because household jobs were frequently assigned to mixed-race women. They were unlikely to be old because nineteenth-century black women just did not live very long; fewer than 10 percent of black women lived beyond their fiftieth birthday. (44)

As mentioned before, stereotypes are used by the entertainment industry because they reflect people's beliefs (Lemons 103). Probably, at some point, in order to promote slavery, there was the need to change the image of house slaves. They would represent the extreme opposite of Jezebels, whose unrestrained sexuality could not be acceptable in a white household, for she would be a threat to white women. In this sense, the Mammy image started to be advertised as "broad shoulders, strong arms, and firmly planted large feet to support a wide stance" women (Morgan 87).

The controlling image of the Mammy is quite related to the Assimilated black woman figure from the forties and fifties, according to Alice Walker's perspectives. However, it is extremely important to observe that such descriptions endorse society's belief that some black women are naturally submissive, a characteristic which makes them suitable for servility within white families: "the mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality and class. Regarding racial oppression, controlling images like the mammy aim to influence black maternal behavior" (Collins 73). In other words, by endowing black women with characteristics which are essential for the formation of the mammy image – such as nurturing, caretaking, and selfless servitude – the dominant white culture legitimizes the idea that

black women are naturally mother figures, and born to serve others. Besides, the mammy image seeks to exemplify a perfect relationship between blacks and whites, creating an integration symbol (West 289); framed in another way, the image of the mammy shows how to integrate former slaves into the American contemporary society, without changing issues such as white privilege and status quo (Morgan 88).

Consequently, the mammy image was strongly cultivated during post-Civil War segregation in the United States to justify black women's slave-like jobs, in which they were paid an insignificant amount of money. It also ignores the necessity these women had to take such occupations, once there were no – or very few – job opportunities available to them. Black males were also only offered meaningless jobs – if they were offered jobs at all – causing black women to become dependent on employment in white households in order to support their own families. Therefore, black women had hardly any other choice rather than becoming the main provider of their homes.

Furthermore, mammies are responsible for teaching black children their “assigned place in white power structures” (Collins 73) and carry on with white privileges by keeping racial oppression intact. The character of Nanny, for instance, may play such role in *Their Eyes*; she, however, also challenges it, once she does not wish the life of a Nanny for her granddaughter Janie.

Although white children are no longer raised by exploited black women, the mammy stereotype is still cultivated. Nowadays, although many black women have achieved academic recognition and career status, in one way or another, in society's imagination they are still expected to be nurturing and caring as a mammy. Despite the fact that in and of themselves these are by no means bad characteristics – they are actually believed to be the characteristics of women in general – they help to legitimate black women's domination. The consequences of this stereotype are seen in recent

research reports, which show how black women are undercompensated and unrecognized in their jobs, when compared to other groups of working people (Collins 73-4).

While the figure of the mammy takes into account the black women in relation to slavery and the white family, the matriarch image takes into consideration black women outside the plantation, with her family per se (Sewell, “Responding” 313). According to Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, both stereotypes bring the idea that black women are willing to sacrifice themselves for others (“Strong”114).

The image of the Matriarch was first discussed in the report “The Negro Family”, in which Daniel Moynihan argues that matriarchal families are a problem to society, imposing advances to African American people. According to him, many African American men cannot support their children because they are either not present or do not make enough money. Therefore, black women have to go to work, which “undermine the position of the father and deprive the children ... [of] attention, particularly in school matters”, leading to higher drop-out levels, early pregnancy, and crime involving black children and teenagers (United 25-27).

Many reports have revisited Moynihan’s “The Negro Family”, and concluded that although many of the problems he identified persist, the fact that more black children are raised by single parents is not the reason for them. “Even 50 years ago, black poverty and social inequity was not simply a result of single parenting” (Urban 19). In fact, many of the problems Daniel Moynihan highlighted as poverty, unemployment, and racism are the reasons for – rather than the consequences of – the growing number of female-headed households in African American families (Collins 75).

According to Christopher Sewell, the black matriarch is represented by the “strong Black woman, who, due to economic constraints that kept Black men out of the labor force, has to take charge in her home” (“Mammies” 314). In this sense, this controlling image is a reflection of financial difficulties and black male emasculation. Racial oppression and poverty has led black women to become the head of their families. Since black men were, most of the time, denied work, black women became the providers of the family, thus changing the family structure within black communities. Such a portrayal “allows White men and women to blame Black women for their children’s failures in school and with the law, as well as Black children’s subsequent poverty” (Collins 76), regardless of the economic inequality and racism which deeply affect black families. It also cultivates the idea that black women are responsible for black men’s lack of a leading role in the black family.

This unfeminine image of the strong black woman bringing up her children without the help of a man is quite persistent in society’s view. As Collins further remarks, the image of the matriarch is often associated with bad mothering skills, while the mammy image is seen as more positive in this regard. In Collins’ own words, the “overly aggressive, unfeminine women [black matriarchs] emasculate their lovers and husbands” who in turn refuse to marry them and end up abandoning them and their children (75).

This idea that black women are the main responsible for black men’s emasculation is one of the major reasons for the current crisis in African-American families (Patterson 52). It is important to keep in mind, though, that being a provider is the main western patriarchal role black men have learned to value. As Orlando Patterson affirms, “Afro-Americans ... identified with the Euro-American paternalistic male role” (52), wishing for themselves the same relationship Euro-American men had with their

wives, together with assuming the role of providers and protectors of the family. The provider role, however, suffered deep changes within the black population due especially to slavery and the years of intense oppression which followed it.

It is troubling, though, that many black women identify themselves with the image of the black matriarch – a woman who can endure anything, survive under any circumstances, despite all odds (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “Strong” 113). Not so different from the mammy – who would do anything for her white family – the black matriarch faces adversity and does anything for her family and her community.

Some may even consider that a few characteristics which compose the image of the black matriarch are positive, such as her independence and strength to bring up her children alone; however, such notions have been criticized recently. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant in her *Behind the Mask of Strong Black Woman*, for instance, discusses the use of the image of the strong black woman as means to maintain inequality. By using interviews and reports of African American women on the topic of strength, she highlights how the strength image has eroded black women’s health, turning what is supposed to be a quality into an imprisoning stereotype. Once the strength image makes all the burdens fall onto black women’s shoulders, they are taken as responsible for everything which does not go according to the white patriarchal family system, including black men’s abandonment and black children’s failures. In the novels, characters such as Eva Peace and Helene Wright (from *Sula*), and Mattie Micheal (from *Brewster Place*), incorporate some physical and psychological characteristics of the matriarch; at the same time, they also challenge this image.

The third controlling image is related to black women’s sexuality, referred as the

Jezebel – or Sexual Siren<sup>8</sup> – image. In Greek mythology, the sirens were female creatures capable of seducing men, dangerously beautiful and voracious. The term Jezebel, however, can be traced back to the Bible. Jezebel was a Phoenician Princess who worshiped the god Baal, and violently suppressed the worship of Jehovah, and due to this fact came to be known as a wicked queen<sup>9</sup>. During the slavery period in the United States, the term started to be used to categorize the opposite view upon black women – the one in which they are portrayed as extreme sexual beings, especially by white men. According to Gilman, “by the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the black, male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality” (228). That is, while the black male body was supposed to be feared and despised, the black female body was regarded as an object of consumption, either for labor or pleasure. That is the reason why the image of the Jezebel was widely used during slavery as sort of explanation for white men assaults on black women (West 294). While the mammy and the matriarch either lack sexuality or are believed to emasculate black men, Jezebels are extremely sexual, have a strong sexual desire, and care about no one except themselves, thereby making them deviants (Collins 85).

The Jezebel controlling image may be the one image which is still quite popular in society’s beliefs, including the black community. Through many rap songs and videos, as in Brazilian Funk culture, it is possible to observe a strong emphasis on the black female body as a sexual commodity. According to bell hooks, “the sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangsta rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (*Outlaw* 135). Framed another way, the black

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<sup>8</sup>Bobo (1995) identifies this category by this term as opposed to Collins (1991) who usually refers to this controlling image as Jezebel, whore or hoochie. Since both works present a negative connotation, Jezebel shall be the one mostly used within this work.

<sup>9</sup>Pilgrin, David. “Jezebel Stereotype” *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*. N.p., July 2002. Web 15 April 2016.

youth is not the one creating these misogynist and sexist images. They are reproducing a system which is “necessary for the maintenance of patriarchal social order” (135). This is the system which creates and reproduces black women depreciating images. In the novels, the black women who are seen as Jezebels are, in fact, only trying to build a different life for themselves; a life without the restraints of their mother’s and grandmothers’.

There are surely other controlling images of black womanhood which should be considered for analysis, among them the welfare mother, probably created in order to blame black women for the black family’s poverty, since they are seen as lazy, with no wish to work and are believed to procreate simply to obtain money easily from the state (Collins 77). Although this work will focus on the first three controlling images, since they are the most popular in media, the image of the welfare mother may be brought up if, during the development of the thesis, it seems relevant to do so.

Sorrowfully, many of the controlling images of black womanhood refer to the role of the mother, which is why this work shall provide an emphasis on motherhood and the depreciation of black motherhood through controlling images. Being a mother is at the core of women’s oppression, for she becomes responsible for children’s development and adjustment in the modern world. For some reason, the role of the mother has been depreciated in the black communities, once black mothers are regarded through stereotypical images such as the mammy – who was believed to love more her white rather than her black family; matriarchs – who were blamed for children’s failures, once they spend too much time away from home, working; or welfare mothers – who were believed to procreate in order to acquire governmental assistance. Why has motherhood been so distorted in black history? Why have black women been considered bad mothers?



Attempting at answering such questions is important to this work. It is also my interest to investigate mother-daughter relationships and types of love which challenge the binary thinking that there are only good or bad mothers. It is important to rethink our conceptions of what it means to be a bad or a good mother and which implications such ideas have on the characters of the novels. In order to do so, I intend to rely on the study conducted by Andrea O'Reilly, in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, in which she examines Toni Morrison's theory of motherhood as a site of empowerment of black women and black children. O'Reilly observes that Morrison's fiction presents a full range of mothers, who employ preservative love, which is defined as "nurture children so that they may survive and resist the maiming of racism and ... sexism and grow into adulthood whole and complete" (32-33). Black women, in this sense, empower themselves and their children by becoming mothers, also challenging the notion that there is only one type of motherly-love (59).

Motherhood as a tool for empowerment is not only present in Morrison's fiction, but also in Gloria Naylor's. In fact, Naylor refers to her character Mattie as an Earth Mother, while discussing the origins of the rocking scene in *Brewster Place*:

... The work began with that rocking scene. And I had written that as sort of a catharsis for myself. I was going through what I considered as being a great deal of pain. And I imagined a woman who would be feeling pain that intensely but for other reasons. And I sat down and wrote that. And what I had hoped for was a kind of earth mother to just knock down this door and come sit here on this couch and just rock. I wanted to be rocked out of my pain. And that's how I invented Mattie Michael in that scene. (Naylor, *An Interview* 55)

Naylor also comments, in another interview, that *Mamma Day* is also "an earth-mother

figure to her niece, Cocoa, a New Yorker” (Naylor, *Gloria Naylor* 72). Such image of the earth-mother is repeated in many interviews given by Naylor, and it is possible to conclude that it refers to a “healer of the soul, someone who helps other people to overcome unbearable mental but also physical pain” (Procházková 11).

In mythology, the image of the earth mother appears in different cultures; according to Joan Relke, they can be “Inana, Durga, Cybele, and Sekhmet, goddesses of ancient Mesopotamia, India, Anatolia, and Egypt”. They have in common their ambivalence towards society: they can be loving, nurturing, and protective in one hand, and fierce, destructive and violent on the other; they are, in some sense, related to nature, which can either give or take life away. Whereas some characters of the novels will present some characteristics of the Earth Mother, being able to assist people in need, even when there are no blood relationships involved, other characters will completely reject the role of motherhood, in hope to live their lives fully for their own experiences.

Characters which deny the role of motherhood are often considered Jezebels, even by their own communities; one example is Sula, who is not interested in having babies; she wants to make herself (Morrison, *Sula* 92). When analyzing her character’s behavior, Toni Morrison mentions that she has “always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black ... which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is the New World black and the New World Woman” (“Unspeakable” 153). She is a special kind of black woman; “one with choices” (153).

Moreover, the new world woman is “improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable” (“Unspeakable” 153). This means that the new world woman gets away

from any already created and oppressive notion of womanhood; she cannot be characterized by one or two controlling images. In fact, she has no characterization at all. Such concept will assist us in understanding how misinterpreted the new world woman can be; at the same time, the concept shall help us break with the controlling image of the Jezebel, which has historically influenced black women's representation.

In chapters two and three, my analysis will articulate the notions of Earth Mother, New World black and New World Woman as tools to deny controlling images and overcome oppression. The main characters of the novels – Janie and Nanny (in *Their Eyes*); Sula, Eva and Hanna Peace (in *Sula*); and Mattie Micheal, Etta Mae, and Ciel (in *Brewster Place*), among others – will be analyzed in order to achieve a better understanding of the ways these characters choose to empower themselves by refuting the images imposed on them. I will also take into consideration how the novels challenge our conceptions of right and wrong, love, friendship, motherhood, and womanhood, seeking a connection among *Sula's*, *Their Eyes's*, and *Brewster Place's* main character's attitudes towards life.

Consequently, it will become clear that these novels challenge old controlling images, and society's binary thinking. As Foucault claimed, the body is a site of resistance. "Power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy... one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one possess" (26). It is a battle, not a contract, for where there is power, there is resistance. Black women writers resist the controlling images imposed on black womanhood, and claim their bodies back, creating characters which are mothers, daughters, lovers, loners, and above all, humans.

## 1.3. “WE REAL COOL” – BLACK MASCULINITY AND CONTROLLING IMAGES

*We real cool. We  
 Left school. We  
 Lurk late. We  
 Strike straight. We  
 Sing sin. We  
 Thin gin. We  
 Jazz June. We  
 Die soon.*  
 (Gwendolyn Brooks – We Real Cool)

“Institutionalized gender relations shape men’s, as well as women’s, experiences” (Andersen, Collins 86), and for that matter it is impossible to discuss black women controlling images without mentioning black men’s stereotypes. Currently, in the United States, statistics have been especially distressing in regards to black male employment, life expectancy and education rates (Dyson 137-38). After the murders of Freddie Gray, Micheal Brown, Walter Scott and many others due to police violence, the American black community and the whole world has turned its attention once more to the race situation in the United States and in the world. More than ever, movements such as “Black Lives Matter” should be encouraged around the world, especially in places such as Brazil, where 77% of 30 thousand young people killed every year are blacks, and not much consideration is given to this fact by the media<sup>10</sup>.

How can one not relate the murder of a twelve year old, with a toy gun that resembled a real gun, as it was Michael Brown’s case, to the stereotype of the dangerous and violent black man? It is quite disturbing to notice how controlling images, stereotypes, and myths are still protagonists of violence and injustices around the world. Black men, are, in fact, dying soon – very soon – as the beautiful poem by Gwendolyn Brooks states.

Black women writers have received much criticism upon their works by black

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<sup>10</sup> Statistics provided by the Anistia organization website ([anistia.org.br](http://anistia.org.br))

male critics. Hurston's *Their Eyes*, for example, was defined as "artful", "coy", "irrational", "superficial" and "shallow" (Smith 162). Others, such as Alice Walker, have been accused of endorsing black male's stereotypical images, such as the image of the violent and reckless man.

According to Patterson, the "holocaust of slavery" had a devastated assault on "gender roles, leaving deep scars in the relations between Afro-American men and women" (25). Once slavery is based on complete denial of a person's right for property, it utterly denies the existence of the husband's and father's roles, provoking profound wounds on the African-American family structure and in the construction of manhood and womanhood, according to European patterns. The black man's inability to protect his wife and children, provide for his family, or even give them his name, has changed "the position of women in relation to men" from a paternalist perspective, in a sense that most slave girls were raised believing that there was no real difference between them and the boys, since they were obliged to perform the same tasks (Patterson 32). In fact, black women were required to perform even more roles than black men, as for instance, the "mother<sup>11</sup>" role, which was interesting for the slave owner to maintain. In this sense, being a field-worker, a "mother", and still having to be aware that no man could protect her from the slaveholder's abuses might have created the feeling of being no different from men at all, as well as impacted African-American femininity (Patterson 33), making the black women's body even more vulnerable to controlling images.

After slavery, it is possible to notice men's attempt to restore their manhood by being able to construct a family, provide for them, and have the same control Euro-American males had towards their wives and children. However, their attempts are

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to keep in mind that woman slavers were not considered mothers, but rather breeders, "machines of production" (Dyson 137).

ineffective, once “Afro-American women have refused to conform to this genteel paternalistic tradition” (Patterson 52). Moreover, the opportunities they had during the years of Post-Slavery in the US, did not offer them enough resources to provide for their families. Black men usually had only access to low quality education and menial jobs, when they were offered jobs at all. Having black women assume the provider role provokes deep feelings of emasculation on black men (hooks, *Ain't* 93). Regarding this fact, though, the aspect to take into consideration is that black women are not responsible for black men’s feeling of emasculation; such feeling is constructed by a white patriarchal system which oppresses both black men and women.

In the original sense of the word, patriarchy means “the intimate power of men over women, a power which is historically exercised within the family by the male as breadwinner, property owner, or armed defender of women and children” (Ehrenreich 284); patriarchal power is perceived in every aspect of our lives, such as Politics, Economy, or simply in the decision of whether a couple is going to make love one night or not. According to hooks, “the gender politics of slavery and white supremacist domination of free black men was the school where black men... learned... patriarchal masculinity” (*We* 2). For certain, patriarchal masculinity was not accepted by all black males – some would join Native American tribes, where women domination was not the norm; others would set in communities where African culture prevailed (4). Nonetheless, especially after the Civil Rights movement, the majority probably started supporting patriarchy more, and black women started to be seen as the ones responsible for black men’s emasculation (10).

Although supporters of patriarchy, most black men do not take as much advantages of it. In fact, patriarchy is very oppressive towards black males, once it denies them many accomplishments, without which black men are unable to feel they

are exercising their manhood. An example is money; one of the reasons why so many black men “have turned to cons and hustles as a way to make money” (hooks, *We* 23), is because white patriarchy denies them full access to labor opportunities. White patriarchy is also the system which maintains black men’s stereotypes. According to hooks, black men have been portrayed as “animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers” (*We* xii). In the nineteenth century, white men’s perspectives upon black men could be reduced to three main beliefs: firstly, black men were “a step above animals – possessing awesome physical power but lacking intellectual ability”; secondly, they represented a threat to the slavery system, and thirdly, they were a threat to white women (Marable 71). Akin to black women controlling images, such beliefs were often reproduced in the media and popular culture, provoking extremely painful experiences in African-American men’s and women’s lives.

Lynching and rape represent acts of violence related to race and gender, and are very much attached to the images of the black man as a rapist and of the black woman as a Jezebel; this is perceived by the fact that “hundreds of Black male victims of lynching were first sexually mutilated before being executed” (Marable 71). According to Gerda Lerner “the myth of the black rapist of white women is the twin of the myth of the bad black woman – both designed to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of black men and women” (193). Once the black male sexuality was a threat to white women, lynching would be legitimized; meanwhile, raping a black woman was not considered raping at all, since her image of a *whore* made it impossible for her to be raped, because she enjoyed sexual intercourse.

*Their Eyes, Sula* and *Brewster Place* present us with a wide range of black male characters. They are loving and violent husbands, caring and spoilt sons, protective and indifferent fathers, or sometimes even absent ones – although their absences are quite

substantial, in a sense that they continue to impact women's lives even when they are not there. Some of these characters are Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake, in *Their Eyes*; BoyBoy, Shadrack, Ajax and Jude in *Sula*; and Eugene, Ben, Basil and Bush in *Brewster Place*. My analysis will articulate bell hooks', Michelle Wallace's – and other critics' – thoughts on feminist politics, in order to show how some of these characters have internalized patriarchal concepts, and for that matter, they often have stormy relationships with their partners. This analysis will show how some of these black men feel isolated and cut off from their families, even though, most of time, they are loved by their mothers and/or partners.

Although the fictional works to be analyzed in this thesis more often than not bring situations of abandonment by fathers and violence towards women, which are possibly real in black and white communities, they occasionally present shallow male characters who do not have the chance within the novel to perceive how the patriarchal system is as oppressive towards black women as it is towards black men, once it is rooted in white male's interests. Most of the black characters in the novels are acting cool. That is, they are pretending to not care, so they do not need to show how much their situation hurts.

According to Richard Majors and Janet Billson, acting cool, the ability of restraining one's truly feelings of frustration, can have serious effects on personality; they suggest that “cool pose helps to explain the fact that African-American males die earlier and faster than white males from suicide, homicide, accidents, and stress-related illnesses”, as well as the great number of young black males involved in illegal and violent activities (2). Black males “use cool behavior as an expressive performance that helps them counter stress caused by social oppression and racism” (3). In this sense, pretending not to care make black males feel they have more control over an oppressive



system; it is a way of acting as if oppression cannot hurt them, which explains their indifference and detachment from their communities and their families in the novels.

Although most of the characters to be analyzed clearly exercise patriarchal masculinity towards women, they simultaneously “challenge dominant white discourses”, constructing their manhood in many directions – sometimes performing *gangsta* style, such as C.C. Baker and Basil in *Brewster Place*; other times by presenting less dominant male roles, as Ajax in *Sula* and Tea Cake in *Their Eyes*. Mark Anthony Neal, in his article “Finding Tea Cake: An Imagined Black Feminist Manhood”, suggests that the latter is connected to an imagined black feminist manhood. Such men would not accept patriarchy masculinity fully, and would be willing to live their life as best as they could. Often misinterpreted in the popular media as “menacing, thoughtless, and lazy” (258) such men are, in fact, the image of the “everyday man – willing to put in a hard day’s work, playful, thoughtful” (257), and less domineering towards women. Such an idea of masculinity is quite different from the provider role and controlling male which the white patriarchy capitalist system worships. It is actually an idea of black manhood that pools resources to the New World black concept, which according to Toni Morrison, (“Unspeakable” 33; *Galehouse* 399) consists in an internal and individual force which resists existing patriarchal social rules.

All said, this work will address men’s acceptance of patriarchal ideologies and how they may use “cool pose” in order to disregard their dissatisfactions. With the purpose of avoiding endorsing black male’s controlling images, the discussions about the black women’s situation in this work will occur in conjunction with the black male’s situation, bearing in mind that only by maintaining community values, and ceasing attempts to dominate women, black people will be capable of building stronger bounds (Dyson 139).

CHAPTER TWO

“NEW WORDS WOULD HAVE TO BE MADE”: CHALLENGING BLACK WOMEN’S

CONTROLLING IMAGES

From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom. Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them.

- Hurston, *Their Eyes* 39

## INTRODUCTION

With a heart filled with hope, Janie searches for “new words” after abandoning her exploitive first husband, Logan Killicks; she feels she is leaving behind the days of a mule in order to grasp a life which will always be like springtime. Although Janie does not yet know that Joe Starks will not be “a bee for her bloom” – in fact he will not be so different from Logan Killicks after all – she feels the necessity of redefining her words – her image – in this new chapter of her life. For too long had she been a mule, and it was up to her to change her fate.

As mentioned before, black women writers have been concerned with the redefinition of black women images, portraying characters in their fiction which challenge past controlling images created by a racist and sexist system. This chapter aims at analyzing how the novels *Their Eyes*, *Sula*, and *Brewster Place* refute the Mammy, the Matriarch, and the Jezebel images, in quest of more genuine black women’s representations.

This chapter will be divided into two sections. The first, named ““Ain’t that love?” – Neither Mammies nor Matriarchs: Rethinking Motherhood and Motherly love” will analyze the characters of Nanny from *Their Eyes*, Eva Peace from *Sula*, and Mattie Micheal from *Brewster Place* – among other characters – emphasizing their strategies to escape the oppressive system which tries to imprison them into the stereotypes of the Mammy and the Matriarch. The second, named ““She Was Just Being Herself” – The Jezebel Legacy,” will examine the characters of Janie Crawford, Sula Peace, and Etta Mae Johnson, respectively from the novels *Their Eyes*, *Sula*, and *Brewster Place*, with the purpose of showing how they challenge the Jezebel controlling image. Moreover,

this chapter will not ignore the pledge of black man, whose stories also contribute to dispel controlling images.

Hopefully, my analysis will provide evidence that fictional works such as *Their Eyes*, *Sula*, and *Brewster Place* confirm black women writers' desire to delegitimize controlling images which assault black women's and men's lives until today. By creating characters who by madness or rejection of social roles, infringe patriarchal and racist conceptions, they assist with the creation of new words – new definitions – for black womanhood and manhood (Collins 94).

2.1. “AIN’T THAT LOVE?” – NEITHER MAMMIES NOR MATRIARCHS: RETHINKING  
MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHERLY LOVE.

*I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head...?*  
(Morrison, *Sula* 69)

As Eva Peace informs her daughter Hannah, she stayed alive and overcame all adversities for her family. Surviving and keeping her children healthy is the only way Eva shows her love for them. Resembling *Sula*, the novels *Their Eyes* and *Brewster Place* also present characters who, as mothers, or other mothers – that is, women who play the part of a mother in times of need – have done everything they could for their offspring, and only carried on because of them. Characters such as Nanny, Mattie Michael, among others, dedicate their lives to their children’s survival, for they do not have anybody else. These characters are neither mammies nor matriarchs; they live their lives trying to make the most out of their distressing situations.

This section aims at analyzing the characters of Nanny (*Their Eyes*), Eva Peace, and Helene Wright (*Sula*), and Mattie Michael, Ciel and Cora Lee (*Brewster Place*), aiming at showing how these black women characters challenge the controlling images of the mammy and the matriarch, and at the same time, make us rethink our concepts of motherhood and motherly love, in view of the fact that the controlling images of the Mammy and the Matriarch depreciate black motherhood.

Janie’s grandmother, Nanny, is a contradiction to the images of the Mammy and the Matriarch; nonetheless, she still carries some of the stereotypes’ characteristics. Similarly to the stereotypical *mammy*, Nanny doesn’t have a proper name in the story; her name makes reference to her job of taking care of other people’s children, diminishing the character’s individuality. Nanny is defined by her role in the white family she works for – she is the *nanny*. “Ah never called mah Grandma nothin’ but

Nanny, 'cause dat's what everybody on de place called her" (Hurston 8), Janie admits to her friend Pheobe, when she starts telling her story. Her grandmother has nothing – not even a proper name. As Scarlet's mammy in *Gone with the wind*, black women as Nanny lose their identity and are only identified by their position in the house.

Contrary to the suggestion that *mammies* love their white master's children more than their own (Wallace-Sanders 5), Nanny dedicates her entire life for her daughter and later her granddaughter, so they may have better chances in life. As she tells Janie, "freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her" (Hurston 16). As the quote shows, Nanny does not have any other choice rather than becoming the *nanny* she has always been referred as. The lack of opportunities to black people after slavery, the denial of education to blacks, segregation, and racism would condemn black women and men to slave-like jobs in white people's homes. Although the white family helps Nanny raise her daughter and Janie, she is kept in a subordinated position, the nameless *nanny*.

It is also important to highlight that Nanny does not accept her role peacefully, as the image of the mammy implies. She clearly states that she did not want things to happen the way they did: "Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did" (16). Due to her harsh experience, being a black woman for Nanny is carrying the load of the world; for her, black women are the mules of the world: "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (16). Nanny does not know black women leaders, who are able to make a difference in the world; she has never had a podium herself, and

is not able to change the order of things. The only thing she knows well is misery; for that matter, she puts her hopes in Janie, and expects Janie not to suffer as she has.

As a slave, she had been raped by the owner of the plantation “Marse Robert” (16), and gave birth to a girl with “gray eyes and yaller hair” (17) – a situation which drove the master’s lady mad. “First thing in the mornin’ de overseer will take you to de whippin’ post and tie you down on yo’ knees and cut de hide offa yo’ yaller back. One hundred lashes wid a raw-hide on yo’ bare back” (18), the woman threatens, also intending to sell the baby to another plantation in a month’s time. As a result, Nanny flees with her daughter from that plantation, hiding until the end of slavery. “So Ah got with some good white people and come down here in West Florida to work and make de sun shine on both sides of de street for Leafy” (19), as she tells Janie.

Leafy, Janie’s mother, also suffers the consequences of being a black woman in the post-slavery America. She is raped by her school teacher when she is fifteen, giving birth to Janie right after, and losing herself with drinking and partying afterwards. No matter how hard Nanny tries to protect her, she is a victim of the sexist and racist world which surrounds her.

In sum, the Mammy image is constructed under a patriarchal and racist system that dismisses the complexity of racial and gender relations in society. When Nanny submits herself to a low-paying job in a white house after slavery, she is confirming to the system which gives her no other choice. The matriarch image is not at all different from that, although instead of taking into account black women in relation to slavery and the white family, the matriarch focuses on black women within the black community (Sewell “Mammies” 313). Either way, both images carry the idea of black women’s servitude. If Nanny and Eva Peace have any characteristics of Mammies or Matriarchs it would be that both have lived their lives to provide and keep their children

and grandchildren alive. However, much more than a matriarch, or a mammy, Eva is a complex human being, as willing to give life as to take it away.

Differently from Nanny, who chose not to marry because she did not want “[any]body mistreating [her] baby” (Hurstun 19), Eva was abandoned by her husband, BoyBoy.

After five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage BoyBoy took off. During the time they were together he was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much. He did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third. (Morrison, *Sula* 32)

Far from being a Matriarch which emasculates her husband by not allowing him to perform a traditional male role in the family, Eva was actually abused by BoyBoy. She was probably not demanding towards him also, since he did “whatever he could that he liked”. Eva is left with “\$1.65, five eggs, three beets” (32) and three children – three children with so pressing needs that she had to “postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it” (32). It is not very clear in the novel the reasons that led BoyBoy to abandon his wife and children, but we clearly see that he is not a mature man, especially due to his name choice. He is twice a boy, and because of that, he is not willing to cultivate a family with Eva.

In fact, according to hooks, fatherhood is not part of the “institutionalized patriarchal influence morality” which would make black males “feel less manly if they abandoned families” (*We* 11). BoyBoy, for instance, pays Eva a visit three years after his departure – occasion in which he shows no regrets for abandoning Eva: “BoyBoy didn’t ask to see the children, and Eva didn’t bring them into the conversation” (Morrison, *Sula* 36). BoyBoy does not feel he is responsible for Eva’s children; he



perhaps does not even feel they are his as well. Fatherhood does not have any importance to BoyBoy, once he does not feel it has any significance in the construction of his manhood. Manhood, in this sense, would be constructed by other principles, such as sexuality, violence, and so forth; for such is the place black males are inserted in society.

Eva's children, at the time she is abandoned, are very young. Hannah, the oldest, is only five "and too young to take care of the baby alone" (33). Job opportunities to black women at the time are scarce: "any housework Eva could find would keep her away from them from five thirty or earlier in the morning until dark—way past eight" (33). Other than that, there is not much she can do; additional options of jobs would probably only be prostitution (Christian 17). Initially, she survives due to her neighbors' help. Returning South is a dreadful thought to Eva: "to come home dragging three young ones would have to be a step one rung before death for Eva" (Morrison, *Sula* 33). Thus, after a night in which her youngest child, a boy she calls Plum, almost dies of constipation, and they are all nearly starving to death, Eva leaves her children with a neighbor, promising to come back on the next day. However, she only returns after eighteen months "with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg" (34). A check starts coming every month, and Eva builds a confused house full of rooms and doors, where she raises her three children, and later her granddaughter, Sula.

Eva's loss of her leg is a great mystery in the novel, but rumor has it that she puts it under a train to collect insurance:

Fewer than nine people in the town remembered when Eva had two legs... Somebody said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for \$10,000—at which Mr. Reed

opened his eyes and asked, “Nigger gal legs goin’ for \$10,000 a piece?”  
as though he could understand \$10,000 a pair—but for one? (30-31)

If any of these rumors are true, it is clear that Eva has come up with a way out of the patriarchal and racist system that denied her the means of taking proper care of her offspring. Although Eva has had to make tough decisions to keep her children alive, including leaving them with a neighbor for one year and a half, she does not seem to be in distress. She pronounces herself happy, for she nurtures a very strong feeling for BoyBoy: hate.

Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities. (Once when Hannah accused her of hating colored people, Eva said she only hated one, Hannah’s father BoyBoy, and it was hating him that kept her alive and happy). (36-37)

Contrary to the matriarch controlling image, what protects Eva from routine vulnerabilities is not her inbuilt strength, but the hate she nurtures for her ex-husband. Hate keeps her alive and happy, because it protects her from emotional and mental hurt; nothing but hate may give her the security she needs to carry on. Nonetheless, the hate Eva feels for BoyBoy does not shut her up to other men; in fact, she keeps on appreciating maleness:

Those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. (41)

Eva, even with one leg and already an elder woman, “had a regular flock of gentleman callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter” (41). Eva is particularly feminine, and in no way emasculates her callers; in fact, they liked to argue with her, once “she argued with them with such an absence of bile, such a concentration of manlove, that they felt their convictions solidified by her disagreement” (41-42); when they are defeated by her in the game of checkers, it feels like wining. Her presence strengthens their ego, which is the opposite of a matriarchs’ behavior towards men.

The fact that Eva may seem to endorse the matriarch’s image is probably her domineering position in the house, and the fact that at first she seems to be a bad mother. In fact, these two positions are related to Eva’s notion of what being a mother means – Eva believes that being a mother is raising one’s children despite all odds, and being able to empower them. There is no distinction between loving her children and not letting them perish for Eva. According to Andrea O’Reilly, Eva’s maternal love is a “preservative love” (118). In her own words, “mothering for many black women, particularly among the poor, is about ensuring the physical survival of their children and those of the larger black community” (119), but most time, preservative love “is not regarded as real, legitimate, or “good enough” mothering” (O’Reilly 120). In this sense, Eva Peace would be considered a bad mother, once she does not possess the traditional and acceptable mother way of showing affection.

For instance, when her eldest daughter, and Sula’s mother, Hannah, asks her if she had ever loved them, she reminds Hannah that she had done more than love them; she had kept them alive: “you settin’ here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head woulda been two holes full of maggots if I hadn’t” (Morrison, *Sula* 68). Hannah asks such question because she is thinking in a

particular type of mother love, which probably only exists in people's imagination. "I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?" (68), she explains. Playing, in this sense, represents an idea that motherhood only involves happiness and magical feelings – a fantasy which diminishes the hardships a mother, especially a black single mother in a racist and sexist society, endures (O'Reilly 123):

Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895...I set in that house five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets, you snake-eyed ungrateful hussy... Don't that count? Ain't that love? You want me to tinkle you under the jaw and forget 'bout them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie?...what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?

(Morrison, *Sula* 68–69)

As the quote shows, Eva's perspective of motherhood is about enduring the hardships for her children; she did not have time for playing, for she was too busy trying to survive. Consequently, Eva's children grow stealthily under her "distant eye, and prey to her idiosyncrasies" (41).

The same may be said about Janie's grandmother, who makes her marry a man she did not love, only for protection: "tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection" (Hurst 15), as she tells Janie. According to Julie Haurybiewicz, being forced to marry a man she despised is the first silencing experience Janie undergoes, and is probably one of the reasons she confesses to hate her grandmother towards the middle of the novel (53). On the other hand, Nanny does not know another way to love, except by trying to protect Janie; the only way she thinks Janie can be happy, after

seeing her sexuality blossom, is marrying a man with some land. Hence, this protective love leaves Janie limited by her grandmother's perspectives, once Nanny "does not really leave a space for alternative roles" for Janie (52).

Eva's complexity, though, goes beyond her sometimes misread motherly love. As her name evokes, she is "the mother of all living", as commented in Joan Relke's "The Archetypal Female in Mythology and Religion". In this sense, akin to the mythological Earth Mother, she grants life and takes it away (Christian 32). Just as she saves her son Plum when he was little, by shoving "the last bit of food she had in the world" (Morrison, *Sula* 34) up his buttocks and easing his pain, she kills him when he becomes an adult. Once he comes back from war addicted to heroin, with no prospects to his life, she goes to his bedroom one night, rocks him like a baby, only to set him on fire afterwards. Explaining why she killed Plum, she says he wanted to be a baby again and return to her womb: "after all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well... I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it" (71).

This metaphor implies that Plum did not grow up. War was a traumatic experience for him, and he could not bear talking about it: "everybody welcomed him and gave him a warm room next to Tar Baby's and waited for him to tell them whatever it was he wanted them to know. They waited in vain" (45). As Shaddrax, Plum is probably in shock, once war is a terrifying experience which makes him lose his mind. Going back to Medallion does not make things easier, because nothing would ever be the same for him. So he becomes a man-child, incapable of moving on with his life, because he cannot be a man either outside or inside his home. Hence, Eva kills him so he can die as a man, "not all scrunched up inside [her] womb, but like a man" (72). In a

sense, Eva's killing is an act of mercy, which made him find peace and kept "him from descending further into the stupor of drugs" (Dixon 103).

According to Carl Gustav Jung<sup>12</sup>, men need to overcome their Oedipus complex and become independent of their mothers, in order to achieve maturity. Once Plum is unable to do that, Eva feels the obligation of killing him, so he would become a man: "I done everything I could to make him leave me and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out" (Morrison, *Sula* 72). Her killing ends his dependence on her, as well as her dependence of him.

Besides being able to give life and take it away, Eva has also a close connection to nature and to the unconscious. She often relates natural and unconscious events to reality. When Sula comes back to Medallion, she relates the robin plague to her return. Besides, Eva connects the strong winds and other factors to Hannah's death. This strong connection to nature also connects Eva to the myth of the Earth Mother.

Not so different from Eva, is Nel's mother – Helene Wright, whom as her name suggests, is a righteous woman, who loves "her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband" (18). To the community, she is an "impressive woman...", conservative, willing to fight "social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority" (18). In the meantime, Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother, is "the creator and sovereign" (30) of their enormous and very confusing house. She sits in "a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders" (30). And even though adults have to look down to talk to her – due to the very low wagon in which she wheels around the house – they have the feeling that "they were looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes, up into the soft black of her nostrils and up at the crest of her chin" (31), because they all

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<sup>12</sup> in Relke n.p.

respect her. However, if on the one hand Eva is a distant mother, on the other, Helene suffocates her daughter with her constant presence.

While Eva Peace “resists the patriarchal script of motherhood that demands women mother children in a nuclear family in which the mother is subservient/inferior to the husband” (O’Reilly 81), Helene Wright’s conservative role helps to maintain women’s traditional roles in any patriarchal society. Her child’s marriage, for example, is perceived by her as the “culmination of all she had been, thought or done in this world” (Morrison, *Sula* 79); she feels she has fulfilled her role in society – she had raised a girl so well that she was getting married – and good girls get married.

Contradictorily, Eva resists patriarchy by raising her children by herself, but also cultivates traditional ideas of women’s roles in society:

She fussed interminably with the brides of the newlywed couples for not getting their men’s supper ready on time; about how to launder shirts, press them, etc. “Yo’ man be here direc’lin. Ain’t it ’bout time you got busy?”

“Aw, Miss Eva. It’ll be ready. We just having spaghetti.”

“Again?” Eva’s eyebrows fluted up and the newlywed pressed her lips together in shame. (42)

Furthermore, when Sula returns to Medallion, Eva thinks she should get married and have children, because “no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man” (92). She raises her children by herself, but not by choice. A woman choosing to be alone is improper for Eva.

Nanny, Eva Peace, and Helene Wright’s attitudes towards their daughters and granddaughters show that there is not only one way of being a mother, and that it is certainly more difficult than it seems. Nobody teaches a person how to do it, and

women may just inherit their mother's styles. Hannah Peace, for instance, asks her mother if she had ever loved them as children, because she had just confessed to her friends that she loves Sula, but does not like her, because children are "different people" (57). Mothers "can't help loving [their] own child", Hannah's friend states (Sula 57); however, according to O'Reilly, "a mother may not like a child at a particular moment, or at a particular stage, or at all, whether because of differences in personality, lifestyle, beliefs, or values" (59). Hannah's comment, in this sense, is an honest comment, and breaks the ideology that motherly love is unconditional (59).

As for *Brewster Place*, there are some characters in this novel that also challenge the images of the mammy and the matriarch, and show as well how hard mothering can be, especially if an individual has never had any directions on how to do it. Mattie Michael is one of these characters who oppose the controlling images of the Mammy and the Matriarch exceptionally well, not to mention Cora Lee, Ciel, and Kiswana's mother, who show different ways women perceive motherhood.

Except for Ben, Mattie is the oldest resident of the third generation of Brewster Place, now separated from the neighborhood by a huge wall that goes above the second floor of the apartments. As her plants, which would, in their majority, die from the absence of sun and space, she would also "have to die [there] on [that] crowded street because there just wasn't enough life left for her to do it all again" (Naylor, *Brewster* 7), once she has already "exchanged thirty years of her life" (7) to pay for a house she had just lost.

Mattie starts her journey to Brewster thirty-one years before the time of the novel, when Butch Fuller – a cinnamon-red man – calls her attention at the porch of her parent's house back in Tennessee. Her father has "repeatedly warned her against" (9) Butch Fuller, for he thought Butch was a "no-count ditch hound, and no decent woman



would be seen talkin' to him" (9). Nevertheless, Mattie is caught by Butch's sense of humor and laughter, which is like "April sunset" (9) for her. Basil, Mattie's irresponsible son is the fruit of the one afternoon she and Butch spend together in Tennessee.

As she walks up the steps into her new home in Brewster Place, Mattie smells sugar cane, which takes her into a journey through her past up to the moment when she loses the house she had spent thirty years of her life to pay for. Mattie leaves her parents' home after getting pregnant of Basil, who becomes her only window to past; she never thinks of Butch as a husband or a father for her child. In fact, she feels that Basil does not belong to Butch: "it belonged to something out there in the heat of an August day and the smell of sugar cane and mossy herbs" (22). It belongs to a feeling of freedom and desire; nothing she could explain to her father or even to herself.

That is probably one of the reasons why she goes away from her house. Partially due to her father's violent treatment towards her, when she refuses to tell him her baby's father's name – but mostly because she wants to break free from her perfect-daughter role in a strict patriarchal family: "she just wanted to lay her head on the cushioned seat and suspend time, pretend that she had been born that very moment" (25). The only thing to remember that past is her child – he brings back memories of the heat, the sugar cane and the smell of herbs – and that is why she names him Basil.

Mattie decides to raise her child by herself, but it is misleading to think that she does that because she thinks she is a superwoman, as the matriarch controlling image implies. Although Mattie stands as an important figure in the community of Brewster, Naylor seems to subvert this controlling image in Mattie Michael's character in many ways. From a start, her name entails "an incarnation of the Mat(tie)riarch deplored by Moynihan" (Fraser 98), reshaped in other to make justice to black single mothers. Her

story shows the struggles single black mothers – who are usually stereotyped as matriarchs – endure in their lives for the sake of their children.

Moreover, Naylor portrays, for instance, how stressful and painful is to Mattie to leave her child at the cares of an old woman while she is at work. She works six days a week, and “hardly ever saw the baby... It was heartbreaking when she missed his first step, and she had cried for two hours when she first heard him call Mrs. Prell “Mama”” (Naylor, *Brewster* 28). Mattie truly resents having to stay away from her child, but there is no other option for her, once she is a single mother and has to provide for her son.

Another way Naylor subverts the matriarch controlling image is by showing how Mattie is overprotective towards Basil. For instance, when a rat bites his mouth in the boarding house they live in North Carolina, she quickly packs her bags, gets the baby on her arms, and goes blindly looking for another place to live, once she feels “she could never take him back to the place that had caused him so much pain” (31). For having to stay so much time apart from Basil while working, Mattie becomes quite attached to him; she insists in sleeping in the same bed as him, with the excuse that Basil has a fear of the dark.

Consequently, Basil grows up to be a seductive and irresponsible man:

Irresponsible, his counselors had said in school. High-natured, she had replied in her heart. Hadn't he said that they were always picking on him; everyone had been against him, except her. She had been the refuge when he ran from school to school, job to job. (43)

As shown, Mattie's overindulgence towards Basil influences on his lack of responsibility, creating a man-child, “a little boy who would always need her” (52); a conflict avoider, Mattie tries hard not to get into discussions with him. Unfortunately,

her lack of attitude leads her to be completely oblivious when it comes to Basil's doings, and she learns about his mischievous activities when it is too late:

Mattie had never met any of Basil's girlfriends, and he rarely mentioned them... and it suddenly came to her that she hadn't met many of his male friends, either. Where was he going? She truly didn't know. (42)

Basil is a seductive and irresponsible man, who cannot face life's problems with dignity. When he is accused of killing someone, and is arrested, Mattie bails her house to get him free up to his trial, but he runs away and she loses the house.

Another single mother is Luciella Louise Turner – or Ciel – whose husband Eugene keeps abandoning her from time to time, due to his inability of keeping a job and supporting a family. From the beginning of Ciel's heartbreaking story, readers know that a funeral is being held for a child, and Eugene is not going, although he is the child's father. Eugene complains of being emasculated by the women who surround him: "I should be there today with my woman in the limo and all, sittin' up there, doin' it right. But how you gonna be a man with them ball-busters tellin' everybody it was my fault and I should be the one dead?" (90).

Nonetheless, Eugene's feelings of emasculation go further deep, and they make Eugene abandon Ciel. The first time, he leaves her "sick, with a month-old baby" (91). When he comes back, eleven months later, Ciel is certain he has finally straightened up: "He's got a new job on the docks that pays real good, and he was just so depressed before with the new baby and no work" (92), as Ciel tells Mattie, trying to convince Mattie and herself of Eugene's change.

Having a job that pays well means everything to Eugene; he cannot bear the idea of being unable to support his wife and children. Not surprisingly, things soon start

going wrong again, especially when he loses his job, and Ciel gets pregnant of their second child:

how in hell I'm gonna make it with no money, huh? And another brat comin' here, huh? ... I'm fuckin' sick of never getting ahead. Babies and bills, that's all you good for... With two kids and you on my back, I ain't never gonna have nothin'. (94)

As the quote shows, Eugene blames Ciel for his inability to succeed in life, when in fact he is being held by oppression and racism. Not being able to acknowledge that white imperialist capitalist society is putting him down, drifts Eugene away from the people who could really love him; consequently, he feels isolated and emasculated. He storms at Ciel, because he cannot storm at anybody else. He cannot scream at his white boss, or at the society who would never allow him to have the things he craves for. He hasn't got anybody else. The white world is against him, oppressing him, and the only way he feels he is a man is making Ciel inferior to him. His response to such feelings is abandoning Ciel and Serene, their child.

When Ciel tells Eugene he can't leave her, because she loves him, he says that her love is not enough of a reason for him to stay. Love is not enough, because Eugene feels he is losing his masculinity every second he spends around Ciel. He craves for something she cannot give him.

In regards to children's protectiveness, Mattie and Ciel are quite similar to one another. As Mattie, who did everything she could to avoid Basil's distress, Ciel is "terribly possessive of Serena... refused to leave her alone, even with Eugene" (96); she carries the girl everywhere, and is extra cautious of things that can hurt her; not surprisingly, Ciel is in shock after Serena's death. Serena meant the world for Ciel, she was "the only thing [she had] ever loved without pain" (93).

After the funeral of the child, Mattie helps Ciel deal with her pain:

Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time... She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors. And she rocked on. She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and found it – a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled – and splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (103-4)

This ritual of spiritual healing is the reason why Gloria Naylor refers to Mattie as an Earth Mother. Such healing Ciel goes through by Mattie's rocking, and later bathing, is only possible to occur due to two facts, in my opinion. Firstly, because Mattie loves Ciel as her own child, once she has known Ciel since she was a toddler, and has loved Ciel's grandmother, Eva Turner, like a mother. Secondly, because Mattie also knows how it feels to lose a child, and therefore can understand Ciel's pain and help her heal.

Violence is also a major factor in the decision of raising children without a father figure for the women in Brewster Place. Cora Lee, the eccentric young woman who keeps having children one after the other, for instance, prefers "shadows" to fathers, once there is no "trouble" with them; they "didn't give you fractured jaws or bruised eyes" (114). Cora Lee behaves oppositely to Mattie and Ciel, once she does not overprotect her children, except when they are babies and depend on her. When they grow up, she does not understand them:

wild-eyed and dumb, coming home filthy from the streets with rough corduroy, khaki, and denim that tattered faster than she could mend, and with mouthfuls of rotten teeth, and scraped limbs, and torn school books, and those damned truant notices in her mailbox – dumb, just plain dumb (112-13).

Dependent on welfare, and as described above, unable to take care of her children, Cora Lee conveys the welfare mother image. According to Collins, this controlling image “shares some important features with its mammy and matriarch counterparts” (79), once she is considered a bad mother, as the matriarch, but not too aggressive:

On the contrary, she is not aggressive enough. While the matriarch’s unavailability contributes to her children’s poor socialization, the welfare mother’s accessibility is deemed the problem. (79)

She is regarded as lazy, who keeps having children to collect welfare and does not wish to get out of this situation, “passing on her bad values to her offspring” (79).

Kiswana Browne wants to help Cora deal with her impossible children, and invites her to go to the park and see *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, her boyfriend’s production. By taking good care of her children on the day of the play, Cora Lee realizes how she had left them unprotected over the years. Their clothes were thorn, their teeth were rotten, and they were usually absent from school.

As opposed to the belief that the welfare mother do not care about her children, regarding them simply as means of acquiring money, Cora Lee is actually lost around hers, since she has never been taught what it means to be a mother; she treats her infants like dolls – the dolls she loved to play with when she was a child – and neglects the toddlers and the older children. After her children’s pleasant behavior at the play, she decides that she is going to change her attitude towards them: “school would be over in

a few weeks but all this truant nonsense had to stop. She would get up and walk them there personally if she had to” (125-26). Cora realizes at last that children grow older; they would not stay little forever and she wanted great things for them: “good jobs in insurance companies and the post office, even doctors or lawyers. Yes, that’s what would happen to her babies” (126).

Kiswana’s mother, on the other hand, brings another controlling image to light: “the black lady” – which has some similarities with the welfare mother, once it is also a class-related image (Collins 80). Kiswana’s family is a black middle class family, and Kiswana believes they have forgotten their black ancestry; she seeks freedom from this middle-class background; she drops out of college, because she believes college is counterrevolutionary, choosing to live in Brewster place; as she tells her mother: “[her] place was in the streets with [her] people, fighting for equality and a better community” (Naylor, *Brewster* 83). She changes her given name (Melanie) to Kiswana in order to feel more connected to her African roots; she tries to wear her hair afro-like, although her hair is not kinky enough – and gets mad at her brother because he refuses to wear his hair afro, although he has kinky hair.

Kiswana accuses her mother of forgetting her roots and being “a white man’s nigger who’s ashamed of being black” (85). Given that Kiswana’s family lives within the white capitalist patriarchal system, she thinks they have assimilated white’s culture and forgotten their roots. Kiswana’s mother, however, shows that just because they achieved status in society, it does not mean they are not proud of being black. Melanie, Kiswana’s given name, was chosen due to Kiswana’s great-grandmother, a woman who “bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shotgun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for ‘not knowing his place.’” Her mother

is disappointed at Kiswana for reaching “into an African dictionary to find a name to make [her] proud” (86).

What is interesting to notice in this generational conflict is that both have their reasons to justify their beliefs. Kiswana is trying to run away from her family, but at the same time she is looking for her roots, once she wants to reconnect to her heritage. However, she cannot reconnect to her African roots if she tries to disconnect from her family roots. Kiswana also learns that acquiring social status and assimilating white capitalist patriarchy does not necessarily mean being ashamed of one’s heritage. Nonetheless, her mother may also learn something from Kiswana’s wish to mingle with the black community. She may learn that one does not need a great job or a university degree to make a difference; Kiswana can make a difference wherever she is.

Controlling images, such as the matriarch – who emasculated their husbands and led their children to abysm; or the mammy – who loved her white children more than her own – disregard black women’s realities, once they are rooted in white capitalist patriarchy. These characters analyzed so far lived their lives the best way they could, trying to save their black daughters and sons from misery.

As it has been shown, Nanny wishes protection to Janie; she does not want her granddaughter to have the same destiny as her mother. Eva Peace, although quite distant from her children, does everything for their survival. Overprotective mothers Mattie and Ciel want to be sure that nothing will hurt their children, and Cora Lee wants their children to be successful and make a way out of misery. These mothers challenge the mammy and the matriarch controlling images, among others, because they are complex human beings, who are trying to survive in a patriarchal racist world, which has not offered them many choices.



2.2. “SHE WAS JUST BEING HERSELF<sup>13</sup>” – THE JEZEBEL LEGACY

*There ain't nothing I ever do  
Or nothing I ever say  
That folks don't criticize me  
But I'm going to do  
Just what I want to, anyway*  
(Billie Holiday – *Ain't Nobody's Business If I Do*)

According to Gilbert and Gubar, “it is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (53), in the sense that if a woman does not fit into the patriarchal role reserved to her, if she dares to trespass it, she becomes a monster. However, when it comes to black women, stigmatization goes further deep. Since the first ship which arrived in Jamestown, Virginia with the firsts enslaved people in 1619, black women have been suffering sexual abuse, much of that due to the Jezebel controlling image, which disseminates the idea that black women are promiscuous and always desire sex (West 294).

My intention in this section is to analyze three women characters that challenge patriarchy and desire their lives to be different from the reality which surround them: Janie Mae Crawford from *Their Eyes*, Sula Mae Peace from *Sula*, and Etta Mae Johnson from *Brewster Place*, who have more in common than their second name. They are all black women living within a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, but not willing to endure the same hardships their grandmothers and mothers did; they dare to wish for more than just surviving.

Janie Mae’s story starts when she first realizes she is colored. Living among the white children her grandmother nursed, makes her think she is just like them:

So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair ... Dat's

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<sup>13</sup>Naylor, *Brewster Place* 60

where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. (Hurstun 9)

Being colored would determine Janie's trajectory from then on; she was not as the other white children.

Sula's story, on the other hand, is quite different from Janie's, in regards to their childhood. Sula is raised in a black community, Medallion. She does not spend her childhood days playing with white children; she spends them with Nel – an obedient and polite girl. Sula and Nel “had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them” (Morrison, *Sula* 51). In this sense, they cannot do what they want to, or be whoever they want to be, only because they are black women. If they want things to be different, they have to reinvent themselves and trespass patriarchy and racism.

As Sula, Etta is born in a community that does not accept her and “she knew what they thought about her” (Naylor, *Brewster* 57). Since youth, Etta had problems fitting in: “Rock Vale had no place for a black woman who was not only unwilling to play by the rules, but whose spirit challenged the very right of the game to exist... she was just being herself” (60). As mentioned, daring to think one can do more than just playing by the rules is a crime to black women, because it means rejecting patriarchal and racist ideas regarding the place of black women in society.

Nonetheless, it is vital to bear in mind that the stigma of the Jezebel has been hunting black women for centuries, and virtually most black women characters have been treated or suffered violence or rape due to this controlling image in the novels. One example is Nanny, whose life as a slave was marked by sexual violence. Nanny is very aware of the legacy of rape black women endure, and wishes to protect Janie from it. She, for instance, perceives Janie's sexual awakening as dangerous, which is why she

makes her marry Logan Killicks right away. She regards Janie's first kiss as laceration, as if Johnny Taylor had been tearing Janie up, like meat: "she bolted upright and peered out of the window and saw Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss" (Hurst 12). That is how she perceives Janie's sexual awakening – as butchering of her flesh, whereas for Janie is something natural, as bees encounter trees.

It is possible to say that marriage is not Nanny's first idea for Janie. As she states: "Ah wanted yuh to school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry. But dat ain't yo' idea, Ah see" (13). Such statement demonstrates that Nanny considered other paths for Janie; her biggest fear is to see Janie with some "trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches (...) usin' [her] body to wipe his foots on" (13). Seeing Janie with Johnny Taylor illustrates her strongest fears, for it shows Nanny that Janie wants to be involved with a man: "so you don't want to marry off decent like, do yuh? You just wants to hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another, huh?" (13).

The Jezebel controlling image guides Nanny's choices for Janie. Nanny believes the stereotype is real; she believes black girls who do not marry and want to experience their sexualities free from the patriarchal rules are Jezebels. In this sense, Nanny fears Janie will become an easy woman, a Jezebel, if she does not marry Logan Killicks. She wants things to be different with Janie, wishing to prevent her from experiencing all the things she and Janie's mother went through. As she explains:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throwdown de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De

nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd! (14)

As the quote suggests, Nanny believes black women's choices are limited; they are mules, the ones who carry the burdens of the world, and therefore, cannot experience life without affliction.

In fact, Nanny believes that being a black woman means not being able to achieve a high position: "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (16). Black women, according to her experience, do not sit on high; in other words, there is no other way of living for a black woman, except by assimilating white patriarchy and submitting to it. That is why Nanny insists in marrying Janie to Logan Killicks and his 60 acres of land: "'Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection... Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you" (15-20).

Nanny sees herself as a "cracked plate" (20), due to so much misery in her life. For that reason as well she seems not to believe in love; she perceives love as something black women have to struggle for. Loving, to Nanny, is similar to hard-working – it just makes you sweat. When Janie, after getting married, asks why she is not in love with her husband, Nanny says:

Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night. Dat's how come de ole folks say dat bein' uh fool don't kill nobody. It jus' makes you sweat. (23)

As the quote implies, Nanny believes Janie is being innocent for believing in love. For her, the important thing is that Janie is married and has protection; in this sense, Janie

should be pleased with all the material things and status she acquired by marrying Logan Killicks. As Nanny states:

Heah you got uh prop tuh lean on all yo' bawn days, and big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis' Killicks, and you come worryin' me 'bout love." (...) Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road. (23)

As shown, what matters for Nanny is fitting in white capitalist patriarchy, which values material things and status in society; being protected involves assimilating white cultural values for Nanny, and once Janie is married, she is a level up from the other black women who are single, or married men without a piece of land. Having land, a husband, and status protects Janie from the dangerous white world outside the community.

According to King, Killicks name is quite suggestive, once it alludes to the fact that he is the one who *kills* the idea that marriage means love, in which Janie innocently believes (62). Besides, Killicks does not allow Janie to have a place in the home; her place is wherever he needs her. He calls her "LilBit", alluding to her powerless situation (62). When Killicks reveals his intentions of buying a second mule so Janie could work in the fields with him, Janie feels she has been reduced to the lowest position possible: an animal for Killicks to make use of when he needs.

Her grandmother wanted her to have Killicks and the piece of land he possessed. However, Killicks' intention is not having someone to share his possessions, but rather to have someone under his control. Janie grows restless and completely unattached to his piece of land: "Ah ain't taking dat ole land tuh heart. Ah could throw ten acres of it over de fence every day and never look back to see where it fell" (Hurstons 23-24). Since

youth, Janie shows signs of being unattached to material things. She wants experiences rather than money: “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (24).

Nanny also wants to protect Janie from sexual abuse; one of the functions of the image of the Jezebel “was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women” (Collins 81). Nanny had previously experienced white men’s violence against black women, with Janie’s mother – Leafy. As she reports:

One day she didn’t come home at de usual time and Ah waited and waited, but she never come all dat night. (...) De next mornin’ she came crawlin’ in on her hands and knees. A sight to see, dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby and run off just before day. (Hurston 19)

It is important to mention that Janie’s mother was also a child out of rape. Her mother was a slave and her baby had “gray eyes and yaller hair” (17). Such details are important, since the Jezebel image carries a great deal of beauty. In a racist society, lighter skin is considered prettier than darker skin: “institutions controlled by Whites clearly show a preference for lighter-skinned Blacks, discriminating against darker ones” (Collins 91). Janie’s mother is light-skinned, therefore she is suitable to white man; at the same time she is available because she is a colored woman (Collins 92-93). Framed in another way, Janie’s grandmother and Janie’s mother are treated as Jezebels in order to justify their availability to the white men.

As mentioned before, Nanny says that “de white man is de ruler of everything” and “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (Hurston 14); she knows that being

treated as “mules” is at the heart of black women’s oppression. They are taken as inferior; therefore, violent acts will go unpunished. It is interesting to mention that recent movements, which have had a great emphasis on media, contest the cultural myths of rape acceptance. *Slut Walk*, a transnational movement, for instance, is quite committed to end rape culture, as well any excuse for rape based on women’s appearance or choice of clothing. According to Martha Burt, rape culture cultivates the idea that women are responsible for rape, due for instance to the belief that women who dress in short skirts are asking to be raped (229).

Within the institution of marriage, however, violence takes another position for Nanny. For example, when Janie visits her grandmother shortly after her wedding, Nanny assumes that Killicks had beaten Janie “already” (22). Nanny does not show astonishment for the fact that Janie has been beaten, but for the fact that she has *already* been beaten, since she has not been married for a long time (Lowe 79). Janie denies and explains that Logan says he “never mean to lay de weight uh his hand on [her]” in malice (Hurstons 22), and that he helps her by chopping wood and filling the water buckets. After hearing that, Nanny alerts her granddaughter that she should not expect that treatment to last forever, once men are only sweet when they want sex:

Humph! don’t ’spect all dat tuh keep up. He ain’t kissin’ yo’ mouf when he carry on over yuh lak dat. He’s kissin’ yo’ foot and ’tain’t in uh man tuh kiss foot long. Mouf kissin’ is on uh equal and dat’s natural but when dey got to bow down tuh love, dey soon straightens up. (23)

This passage implies that a husband is expected to beat up his wife eventually. It reinforces Nanny’s belief that Janie should accept patriarchy, even if it means being physically and mentally oppressed by her husband. Nanny’s feelings regarding

patriarchy are contradictory, since at the same time she wishes to protect Janie from it by the institution of marriage, she expects Janie to cope with it once married.

Disregarding her grandmother's choices for her, Janie persists on her journey to new horizons and experiences. After Nanny's death, she abandons Killicks at the first opportunity; when Joe Starks passes by, telling her "he [is] going on down to the new part of Florida" (29), and that she is too pretty to be left plowing the fields: "a pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" (29). Jody – as she calls him – is an ambitious man, and Janie flees with him, following his dream, and seeing a new horizon opening to her as well.

At first, Janie admires his patriarchal attitude, "kind of portly like rich white folks" (34), she thinks, while Joe Starks is purchasing land in Eatonville. In the same way he rules the city, becomes the mayor and brings light to it by installing the lamp post (King 63), he also attempts to control Janie's behavior. His power is not meant to be shared; Janie can only have, and should be thankful for it, the reflection of such power, remaining in her *wife* position – a subordinating position.

Logan Killicks was not willing to give Janie any space, and neither is Joe Starks. For instance, when she is asked to give a speech, Starks does not even let her think of the possibility, or asks if she wants to do it: "thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (43), he says. Such imposition "took the bloom off of things" (43), Janie feels.

Besides playing the role of the mayor's wife, Janie also has to work to maintain the store Joe Starks builds. The only positive side about the store is participating in the



conversations of the townsfolk, only that is the one thing she is forbidden to do; Starks does not want her talking to the “trashy people” (54) of the city:

You’s Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie. I god, Ah can’t see what uh woman uh yo’ stability would want tuh be treasurin’ all dat gum-grease from folks dat don’t even own de house dey sleep in. ’Tain’t no earthly use. They’s jus’ some puny humans playin’ round de toes uh Time. (54)

As the quote shows, Janie cannot talk to the people of the town, under the fallacy that they are beneath her; Janie is so constrained during her relationship with Joe Starks that she is not even in charge of the hair on her head. The impositions, such as not being allowed to make a speech, or having her hair tied up, slowly makes her silent over every other business. She cannot have a voice in her own house, over her own body, or in the community. In sum, Janie sees herself as a mule behind a plow, as she also felt with her first husband. She hates the store as much as she hated Killicks’ piece of land. The store starts giving her “a sick headache” (54) and she feels as she is wasting her life there. Moreover, the mule image hunts Janie during her marriage with Joe Starks. When she overhears the story of Matt’s mule, and how they forced the poor animal to work to death, she relates her situation to the mule, and wishes she could free herself; however, as the poor mule, she cannot.

As exposed, Logan Killicks and Joe Starks share the willingness of depowering Janie and reducing her to a mule image. They use similar strategies in order to keep her under their control; whereas Killicks intends to buy a mule and make Janie become one more of his work tools, Joe Starks intends to make a “wife” out of her; that is, he wants her at a certain position, with a certain behavior, behind the counter of the store, working day and night so he would make a fortune and become a big voice in the community. Both use Janie as a mean to achieve their goals, without any consideration

for her needs and wishes. In fact, for them, she does not have any, because she is a woman, and “somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don’t think none themselves” (71), as Joe Starks states. The comparison of women to animals is not for granted; Nanny had already said to Janie that black women were the mules of the world, and she had had enough experiences as Killicks and Starks’ mule to know that Nanny’s affirmation was accurate.

Hooks states that black males have inherited from their white masters the idea that freedom is being able to exercise patriarchal masculinity; in this sense, they feel that they have to dominate women in order to achieve the status of a man (*We* 3-4). That is, “most black men recognized the powerful and necessary role black women had played as freedom fighters in the effort to abolish slavery, yet they still wanted black women to be subordinated”, so they would be recognized as “men”, according to patriarchal concepts (6). Generally speaking, patriarchal masculinity was widely accepted by black men throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and they are well represented in the figures of Killicks and Starks in Hurston’s novel.

Interestingly, Killicks and Starks’ idea of masculinity does not fulfill Janie’s womanhood; they only offer her the illusion of material things and *status*; none gives her what she is craving for: experiences. Starks does not understand Janie, in fact; in his mind, any woman would want to be in her place, for she has everything – even a pot to spit in (47); still, she is not satisfied. He resents this fact greatly:

here he was just pouring honor all over her; building a high chair for her to sit in and overlook the world and she here pouting over it! Not that he wanted anybody else, but just too many women would be glad to be in her place. (62)

Furthermore, Janie is usually silenced in conversations among the people of the town; in fact, most women are silenced in such situations, and small talk around the city is done mostly by men. Whenever she can, however, she is able to talk about her frustrations with irony; when Joe Starks buys the dying mule, for instance, she mocks his “good deed”, comparing him to Abraham Lincoln, who freed the slaves:

Jody, dat wuz uh mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. 'Tain't everybody would have thought of it, 'cause it ain't no everyday thought. Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something. (58)

Joe Starks' decision of freeing the Mule here is quite ironic; according to John Lowe, he “frees,” but only because he's a tyrant, ““uh king”, who's trying to be seen as benevolent” (85). The reader is already acquainted with Joe Starks' ways to know that he imprisons Janie, and the fact that he freed the mule does not mean anything to her.

Additionally, when Joe comments how the townsfolk are stupid for being interested over issues as the mule funeral, Janie accuses him of being dreary: “everybody can't be lak you, Jody. Somebody is bound tuh want tuh laugh and play” (61) she says. Their marriage is not nearly what Janie had dreamt. With time, after so much castration on the part of Joe, she becomes uninterested in him sexually.

The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again. So she put something in there to represent the spirit like a Virgin Mary image in a church. The

bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired. (71)

The image of the Virgin Mary may be a symbol of Janie's sexual disinterest. She becomes exactly what Starks wanted – a doll to be exposed for people in town, but not a partner. As time passes, she stops fighting, to the point of thinking fighting is no longer something her soul craves: “she learned how to talk some and leave some” (77), and as the girl of sixteen who married Logan Killicks, she starts imagining a different future, out of her reach, on the road: “now and again she thought of a country road at sun-up and considered flight. To where? To what?” (77), lacking hope that her life would in fact change.

It is important to mention that Joe Starks is able to overcome white capitalism and acquire a substantial amount of money, in a time when most black people were deprived of it; however, he reproduces the system that oppressed him before, and believes he is better than the rest. In order to keep Janie under his control, exercising patriarchy is essential to him, even if requires brutal force. For instance, after a cooking disaster, he slaps Janie “until she had a ringing sound in her ears” (22). In his attempt to dominate her, they become complete strangers towards the end of their relationship.

Not even in death Starks is humble enough to see things from Janie's perspectives: “you changes everything but nothin' don't change you—not even death” (86), as Janie tells him. “You done lived wid me for twenty years and you don't half know me at all. And you could have but you was so busy worshipping' de works of yo' own hands ... [you] didn't see uh whole heap uh things yuh could have” (86). As Janie puts it, Joe worries so much about being somebody, acquiring things, and having a big voice that he is unable to see anything else, especially the things that he does not put value on it, such as Janie's feelings. While Joe is “busy listening tuh [his] own big

voice” (87), he ignores the only person that could have ever loved him: Janie herself. In his process of making a lady out of her, as he said he would, he “squeeze[s] and crow[s]” (86) her mind and tries to frame it in his way. That is not what Janie is looking for: “all dis bowin’ down, all dis obedience under yo’ voice – dat ain’t whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you” (87). Janie wants much more than status and money; she wants much more than being a pretty doll fanning herself on the porch. She wants something she left waiting under the pear tree, through the years of imprisonment and lonesomeness. This something, however, has been smashed by Joe, Logan and her grandmother:

She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under the cloak of pity ... She had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after things ... Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon – for no matter how far a person can go, the horizon is still the way beyond you – and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. (89)

Janie blames her grandmother for taking her horizon from her; without a horizon, there are no possibilities for her. By narrowing Janie’s possibilities down, in the name of love, Nanny had taken out Janie’s shine: the light she wanted to show the world; and such light could not be found again. When she sees herself a widower, but still young and with life ahead of her, she realizes she finally has the time to redefine herself, find her light again, and be whoever she wants to be, regardless of what other people might think of her.

Janie’s third husband, Tea Cake, is the one she really chooses, considering that she saw Joe Stark as the only way of leaving Logan Killicks and the life of a mule. That

is the first time in Janie's life that she has the chance of staring at the horizon again, and going on the road in search of the thing she had lost under the pear tree. Janie is only interested in living her life; although she states she "ain't got no real head fur thinkin'" (142), she gets involved in the act of thinking quite often during the novel – usually thinking about her past, trying to find some meaning to her life. Every so often, her thinking process is connected to her emotional development. She wants desperately to experience life, and gets quite upset when she is not able to do it; meeting Tea Cake is liberating because it is the first time she can really experience the unknown.

Tea Cake is different from Killicks and Starks in many ways; he engages Janie in different activities, as for instance playing checkers, going fishing, and spending hours talking. At the age of forty, when Janie meets Tea Cake, she is much more aware of her womanhood; she experiences love in a very different way because of that. Nonetheless, at the same time Tea Cake seems to be unattached to some patriarchal roles, he is attached to others; he wants, for instance, to be the provider for Janie: "from now on, you gointuh eat whatever mah money can buy yuh and wear the same. When Ah ain't got nothin' you don't git nothin'" (128), as he tells her. Also, when Mr. Turner's brother comes to town, he slaps Janie in the face so the Turners would see he was the boss (147). Moreover, he is often bragging about Janie being under his control, and doing whatever he wanted.

After Tea Cake's death, Janie is once again free to explore her sexuality, and she welcomes her horizon with a positive light, like a fish-net, ready for more fish in its meshes (193). Such liberating feeling, as well as Janie's rejection of social roles and courage to live her life in her own terms, trespasses the objectified image of the Jezebel (West 195), since the image also aims at punishing black women who do not want to have their lives governed by patriarchy and oppression.

Another character who denies patriarchy and traditional social roles is Sula Mae Peace. Sula and her best friend Nel realize too much too soon that they have to reinvent their identities if they want to trespass the Jezebel controlling image; they know they are “neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph [is] forbidden to them, they ha[ve] set about creating something else to be” (Morrison, *Sula* 52). Sula constructs her “something else” by observing her grandmother’s and mother’s unconventional ways. She is very influenced by the Peace women’s attitudes towards life in general, but especially sexuality. They all loved men “for its own sake” (41).

As mentioned earlier, Eva Peace, even with one leg, three children, and a husband who abandoned her, is still able to attract men’s attention. Sula’s mother, Hannah Peace, is not different, and after becoming a widower “had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors” (42). Hannah possesses a natural way of flirting – funky and sweet – that men cannot possibly resist. She lives out of the community patterns, and for that she is hated by most women. Differently from Janie’s mother, who is raped by her school teacher and afterwards “took to drinkin’ likker and stayin’ out nights” (Hurston 19), Hannah enjoys sex, and after her husband’s death she desires “some touching every day” (Morrison, *Sula* 44). As the narrator states:

In her same old print wraparound, barefoot in the summer, in the winter her feet in a man’s leather slippers with the backs flattened under her heels, she made men aware of her behind, her slim ankles, the dew-smooth skin and the incredible length of neck. Then the smile-eyes, the turn of the head – all so welcoming, light and playful. Her voice trailed, dipped and bowed; she gave a chord to the simplest words. Nobody, but nobody, could say “hey sugar” like Hannah. (42-43)

As the quote suggests, Hannah's sexuality spreads through her body and naturally catches the attention of men, because it is honest: "sweet, low and guileless" (42). She exerts a pull on men "without ever a pat of the hair, a rush to change clothes or a quick application of paint, with no gesture whatsoever" (42). She is simply welcoming. As opposed to her mother, who loves arguing with men, "Hannah rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was" (43). Obviously, women in town are not at all fond of Hannah Peace; the so-called good women thought she was nasty, whereas whores thought she was too generous, and the average women – the ones who had husbands and affairs – thought she was too uncontrollable, with no "passion attached to her relationships and being wholly incapable of jealousy" (44).

Hannah is a great influence on Sula's life, although they do not have one single interaction within the novel – that is, they do not engage in one single conversation. However, they do have two very important moments in the story. The first one happens very quickly; Sula gets home from school one day and sees her mother having sex; such event builds the image "that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (44) in Sula's mind. The second interaction is when Sula overhears her mother saying that she did not like her. Although, as mentioned, Hannah's comment was an honest statement<sup>14</sup>, which only bothers us due to the belief that mother love should be unconditional, Sula does not read the comment as such. For her, it is proof that she does not have anyone to lean on.

During her childhood years, the only person Sula feels she has a connection to is Nel. While Sula comes from a distant family, Nel's mother suffocates her with her presence and her neatness. "Under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite.

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<sup>14</sup> See Page 65 for a complete analysis.



Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18). Expectedly, Nel lives up to her mother's expectations until the day she witnesses her mother's smile to a white conductor who discriminated against her in a trip back South. After that, "she wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way" (22). Back from the trip, she rediscovers her identity, and makes two decisions: firstly, that she would leave Medallion one day; secondly, that she would start talking to Sula – the girl who her mother does not let her play with, under the excuse that Sula's mother is "sooty" (19).

As the narrator affirms, Nel and Sula are "solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included ... a someone, who... shared the delight of the dream" (51). In this sense, they are looking for someone who is able to understand them. They are both only children, "daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers" (52). Hence, they rely only on each other to grow up. They find the intimacy they need in one another. Together, they do not feel the need to fit in the community and follow their patriarchal rules. They can be whatever they want to, they can find the "something else" and "concentrate on their own perceptions of things" (55).

They complete each other perfectly as well; while Sula is quite transparent, and cannot hold emotions, Nel is rational and do well in crisis. When they go to the lake and accidentally cause the drowning of the boy Chicken Little, Nel is the one who calms Sula down and persuades her not to tell anyone about what they did: "Sh, sh. Don't, don't. You didn't mean it. It ain't your fault" (63), she tells Sula.

As opposed to her childhood promise of leaving Medallion, Nel marries young to a good-looking hotel waiter named Jude Greene. He is a "well-liked man – the tenor of Mount Zion's Men's Quartet, who has an enviable reputation among the girls

and a comfortable one among men” (80). *He* chooses Nel to be his wife – calling attention to the fact that he is the agent in the arrangement.

At the time he mentions marriage for the first time, he is working as a waiter at the Hotel Medallion, which is not enough to support a wife. However, he hopes to soon start working in the construction of a new road that would “wind through Medallion on down to the river, where a great new bridge was to be built to connect Medallion to Porter’s Landing, the town on the other side” (81). Jude longs for a job that will make him proud:

Not just for the good money, more for the work itself. He wanted to swing the pick or kneel down with the string or shovel the gravel. His arms ached for something heavier than trays, for something dirtier than peelings; his feet wanted the heavy work shoes, not the thin-soled black shoes that the hotel required. More than anything he wanted the camaraderie of the road men: the lunch buckets, the hollering, the body movement that in the end produced something real, something he could point to. “I built that road,” he could say ... People would walk over his sweat for years. Perhaps a sledge hammer would come crashing down on his foot, and when people asked him how come he limped, he could say, “Got that building the New Road.” (81-82)

Not having opportunities to do other kind of work other than serving people (white people) makes Jude feel that he is less of a man; he wants a job in which he could do something that mattered. Even pain would be worthy; if only he could feel he had a real job.

It was after he stood in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-

necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over, “Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow,” that he got the message. (82)

At this point, he understands that he will not be given the chance to have a real job, because he is a black male. He is only given menial jobs, “remaining within the understood boundaries prescribed by the hostile White world” (Nigro 16). Work, in this sense, has a major importance in Jude’s construction of manhood, and not being able to perform it, offends his masculinity (17). After noticing that the system would not allow him such manlike position – because of his color – he decides to press Nel about getting married, so he could take a man-like step and feel he is becoming a man by the institution of marriage. He chooses Nel because she is a pleasant girl – the good girl – who does not seem very desperate or determined to get married, and because of such fact makes Jude feel like he is really making a decision: “he needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply” (Morrison, *Sula* 82). Without Nel, Jude feels like “a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman” (83). Married to her, he is a man stuck to “an unsatisfactory job out of necessity” (83).

During Nel’s wedding celebration, Sula takes off for a period of 10 years. When she comes back, Nel is still married and has three children. Sula comes back to Medallion accompanied by a plague of robins. “Nobody knew why or from where” (89) the birds or Sula had come; Eva Peace presumes the plague to be a sign of Sula’s return: “I might have knowed them birds meant something” (91) is the first thing she says to her granddaughter. Eva wants Sula to settle down and have babies, but Sula declares that she does not want to make another person: “I want to make myself” (92).

It is interesting to notice that Sula and Nel have more of their mothers than they would probably admit to one another. On the one hand, Sula carries out with her

mother's funky sexuality, flirting with no need of ornaments, showing her womanhood in a natural way, taking men to the pantry – as her mother used to do – and even wearing her mother's old yellow dress. On the other hand, Nel becomes a housewife, with neat children, part of a typical patriarchal family.

Their relationship does not endure much after Sula's return. Soon, Nel runs into Sula and Jude “on all fours naked... like dogs” (105). When Jude and Sula betray Nel – both wanting to fill up space in their lives (Nigro 17) – Nel loses her ground, once they are the two most important people in her life. When Nel is stripped of Sula's company, it is similar to missing an eye; Sula's return to the Bottom “was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed” (Morrison, *Sula* 95). Jude is her other good eye. When deprived of both Jude and Sula, her world collapses; her thighs have no use, cannot get her “from sunup to sundown” (111), and her life loses all meaning. Differently from Janie, who after Tea Cake's death is able to contemplate her horizon, knowing that there is still life running through her veins, Nel cannot see her life on her own; she cannot see herself as an independent woman. In a way, Nel perceives herself by Sula's and Jude's eyes; she cannot find a definition to herself without one or the other. Without both of them she feels as if she had lost her identity.

Jude moves away and never sends his children postcards, probably for the same reason BoyBoy does not ask to see his children when he pays Eva a visit, or Eugene does not go to his child funeral. Once the bond of marriage – which is important to their manhood – is broken, they break the bond with their children as well, since fatherhood is not intrinsically part of their masculinity.

Sula is not so different from Nel, and also lacks perception, especially after her friendship with Nel becomes strained. She has not got any models to follow in the community, and for being so different from them, she gets isolated. She has much of

Eva's and Hannah's independence, as well as Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence: "She lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (118).

As mentioned, Sula has two important experiences in her life as a child, which helps defining her personality. Firstly, her mother remarks about not liking her, which taught her that she could not trust anybody around her. Secondly, Chicken Little's accident, from which Nel took all the responsibility from her shoulders, teaching her that she could not trust herself either. For that matter, she never means anything – as Nel herself accuses her later in the narrative; she has no sense of responsibility over her actions, a great deal due to Nel herself.

Such experiences make Sula a woman with "no center" (119). She is also "completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments – no ego" (119). The only thing she craves for is a relationship able to fill her up, as she used to feel when she was with Nel:

Nel was one of the reasons she had drifted back to Medallion, that and the boredom she found in Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon and San Diego. All those cities held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat. (120-21)

Sula travels only to find out that the big city is a big Medallion. People are the same, and none of them are who she really needs:

She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing... She knew well enough what other women said and felt, or said they felt. But she and Nel had always seen through them. They both knew that those

women were not jealous of other women; that they were only afraid of losing their jobs. Afraid their husbands would discover that no uniqueness lay between their legs... Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. (119-20)

Marriage changes Sula and Nel's relationship because it involves possessiveness, and Sula does not understand that; she does not understand why Nel chooses to conform to the social role of the wife who is loyal to her husband and takes care of their children. Sula does not know anything about marriage, "having lived in a house with women who thought all men available, and selected from among them with a care only for their tastes" (119); for this reason, she did not expect Nel to be so possessive towards Jude.

Not being able to define herself or articulate what she so desperately wants, Sula craves for pain and sorrow, and gets it from idle love-making: "she went to bed with men as frequently as she could. It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow" (122). Except for Ajax, Sula requires nothing from her lovers. Ajax is different, because they have conversations – as she had when she was with Nel.

It is through her relationship with Ajax that Sula learns not necessarily about love, but about possessiveness. She becomes jealous and wants to be around him all the time. Ajax, however loves only two things – his mother and airplanes: "when he was not sitting enchanted listening to his mother's words, he thought of airplanes and pilots, and the deep sky that held them both" (126). It is interesting that Ajax's interest in airplanes is linked to his wish of being free, which is why he never marries. When Sula starts showing she wants to possess him, by cleaning the kitchen, laying the table for two, and creating that sense of nest, "every hackle on his body rose, and he knew that

very soon she would, like all of her sisters before her, put to him the death-knell question “Where you been?”” (133).

Ajax leaves Sula as Jude left Nel, and Sula gets to know the feeling of deeply missing someone. Possessiveness makes Sula do what she used to criticize in other women. She starts taking care of the house, wondering where Ajax was about, afraid of losing her “wife” status. In fact, during a dazzling orgasm, Sula thinks about staying with Ajax. She wants to open up his head and put her fingers in him. She wants to get inside him, and keep his soil moist and rich, until both of them make mud – becoming, then, one thing only (131). When he goes away and leaves her, “his absence [is] 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” (134).

Sula herself recognizes that she lost her head, like all the other women who wants to possess a man they know nothing about: “I did not hold my head stiff enough when I met him and so I lost it like the dolls” (136). After living the experience of wanting somebody badly and realizing possessiveness is destructive, Sula has no longer a reason to continue living: “there aren’t any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are. I have sung them all. I have sung all the songs there are” (137).

Sula literally dies shortly after this experience with Ajax. But she is fully conscious that she is dying because she has no more reasons to live in this world; she has done it all, and nothing has ever had a minimal meaning for her. It is the end of the line, but she is glad she is not dying as all the other black women she knows – she is not dying for others, as she had not lived each day for others. She is dying for herself.

“You think I don’t know what your life is like just because I ain’t living it? I know what every colored woman in this country is doing.”

“What’s that?”

“Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world.”

(143)

As the quote shows, Sula believes that women who conform and live under patriarchal roles are not actually living; they are dying slowly, oppressed each day by a system which does not accept them and crush them. Denying everything, and living only by her emotions, is the only way she thinks she may break away from oppression. Sula is similar to Janie at the point of rejecting women roles of the time, but she takes it to such a radical level, that she loses herself in the process, dying without finding what she longed for.

Etta Mae, from *Brewster Place*, is luckier than Sula, one may argue. Etta is Mattie Michael’s best friend; she is the one who helps Mattie when she leaves her parent’s house. Rock Vale, her hometown, has no place for her, since she is not willing to follow the rules of her community. She wants to be herself (Naylor, *Brewster* 60). Being herself is a crime to a black women; Janie and Sula were criticized for doing the same. No matter how their actions resembles their communities’, the fact that they do not hide them, and are not ashamed of who they are, is a problem. Similar to Sula, to whom the city was a big Medallion, Etta notices that “Rock Vale [follows] her to Memphis, Detroit, Chicago, and even to New York. [She] soon [finds] out that America [is]n’t ready for her yet – not in 1937” (60). Any black woman not willing to fit the acceptable roles, would be considered a Jezebel at this time, and for that reason Etta leaves her hometown at a young age.

Similar to Janie, Etta wants to find love. She does not know how to live alone; how to shine alone. She needs a man so she can feel she is alive. Throughout her life



she is always getting into and out of relationships that do not take her anywhere. She goes from place to place, but cannot find what she is craving for:

And so along with the countless other disillusioned, restless children of Ham with so much to give and nowhere to give it, she took her talents to the street. And she learned to get over, to hook herself to any promising rising black star, and when he burnt out, she found another (60).

As the quote shows, Etta is restless because she has a lot to give, but she does not have anyone; she does not have a place in the world where she can be herself. In a sense, moving from place to place is the only thing keeping her alive; when she goes to Brewster Place to live with Mattie, she does not have anywhere else to go.

In Brewster Place, she thinks her life is going to change when she meets Reverend Woods. She quickly thinks that she is “finally gonna get that rest” (74); she is finally going to stop being alone and settle down with a righteous man, who would make a wife out of her. She believes that by becoming the Reverend’s wife, she will obtain the respect from the Brewster community. Etta is tired of being judged as an easy woman, a Jezebel, and respect is something she craves for: “they’ll be humming a different tune when I show up there the wife of a big preacher. I’ve always known what they say about me behind my back” (70), as she tells Mattie.

When she realizes at last that Reverend Woods is not different from other men she met, she goes home to find the company and rest she was looking for in Mattie: “someone was waiting up for her. Someone who would deny fiercely that there had been any concern – just a little indigestion from them fried onions that kept me from sleeping” (74). Mattie is the one that will give her what she is looking for: love and comfort.

When Sula goes back to Medallion after a ten year absence, she is also looking for something she had not found anywhere else in the world: a friend. Differently from Etta, it is too late for Sula. Her friend is long gone. Janie, on the other hand, had to leave her community to redefine herself; and she comes back to Eatonville because as Sula and Etta, she does not have anywhere else to go.

These women possess a vision of life as something uncompromising and free. They also perceive sex as something ordinary and delightful. In fact, these characters do not present many concerns about their sexualities. It all seems very natural for them. Even Janie, who was the fruit of a rape, does not have problems with it. She only wants to desire her first husband, whom she finds unattractive. This will to desire to have sex, and not only have sex for means of procreation, is one of the attitudes that certainly put Janie, Sula and Etta in a different position from the other womenfolks of their communities. Moreover, as opposed to the Jezebel image which demonizes black women's bodies, these characters express their sexuality in a liberating way.

Consequently, they are nonstandard black women for wanting to express their sexuality freely of patriarchal rules. They are also nonstandard for their ability to take control over their lives, and because of that they are perceived as having a deviant sexuality, a foot over the line, that is, a Jezebel (Hills 83-4). They become subjects of their own lives, and "as subjects, [they] have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history" (hooks, *Talking* 42).

CHAPTER THREE

“SOMETHING ELSE TO BE<sup>15</sup>” – INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY: CONTESTERS AND  
SUSTAINERS OF CONTROLLING IMAGES

Because each had discovered years before that they were neither  
white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them,  
they had set about creating something else to be.  
- Morrison, *Sula* 52

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<sup>15</sup> Morrison, *Sula* 52

## INTRODUCTION

So far in this thesis, a great emphasis has been given to individuals and their attitudes towards contesting or maintaining controlling images and patriarchy. By witnessing these characters' struggles in order to dispel the stereotypes which cause them such distressing situations, it is clear that they are inserted in communities that by reproducing patriarchy find their behavior immoral, consequently rejecting these individuals.

As *Sula*'s narrator states, such individuals are searching for something else to be; they are searching for an image that oppose the ones by which they are categorized, due to racism and sexism. This happens because controlling images like the Jezebel, the matriarch and the mammy, among others, have become so rooted in the social imaginary, that the black communities where these characters are born also reproduce them. It is important to stress that sexism and patriarchy – the main maintainers of black women controlling images – are present everywhere, including black communities. Although the performance of patriarchy requires power and control over systems – which is not the place of black men in American society, they do, however, exercise patriarchy in their communities (Smitherman 105); in fact, sexist attitudes may be observed in women as well (105).

Accordingly, this chapter aims at connecting the three novels analyzed over the first two chapters in regards to their emphasis on black communities, and their importance for these characters' development, even when they are rejected by their communities for daring to be different. In order to do so, this chapter will be divided into two sections; the first one, entitled ““A Little Love Left Over For Me” – Black Communities and The Persistence of Controlling Images”, will show how some

communities may maintain controlling images and cast off characters who refuse to live by their principles. The second section, ““I Can Do It All”: New Definitions of Black Womanhood”, will present possibilities for new definitions of black womanhood, aiming at reaching a more harmonic relationship between individuals and black communities by the preservation of community values of mutual help, and the dispelling of controlling images created by patriarchy.

### 3.1 “A LITTLE LOVE LEFT OVER FOR ME<sup>16</sup>” – BLACK COMMUNITIES AND THE PERSISTENCE OF CONTROLLING IMAGES

*“They’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me”*  
(Morrison, *Sula* 146)

Community is both a site of survival and oppression in the novels *Their Eyes*, *Sula*, and *Brewster Place*. Framed another way, the community at times plays the role of savior, as it does when Eva Peace (in *Sula*) needs to feed her small children after being abandoned by BoyBoy; but at the same time, it can be a site for a character’s fall, when it denies him or her the right to be part of the community, such as the story of Lorraine in *Brewster Place*. Eccentric Sula sees such paradox with amusement; as she states, the community will have some love left over for her, someday:

After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers’ trim; when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs...then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like. (Morrison, *Sula* 145-6)

As the quote implies, Sula believes that her community will love her when everything that they judge grotesque become normal to them; when all the prevailing community’s rules are broken; when there is a “radical revisioning of the world” (Hunt 177), people

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<sup>16</sup> Morrison, *Sula* 146

will love Sula. She lives her life outside of the community's norms, and for that reason she is alienated. Sula contests the acceptance of the norms of her community, and they scorn her because she is "living criticism" of Medallion's people's "dreadful lives of resignation" (Nigro 20).

This section aims at discussing the way the communities in *Their Eyes*, *Sula*, and *Brewster Place* act as contesters and sustainers of patriarchy. Paradoxically, communities fight stereotypes but at the same time sustain them. Since black communities more often than not live under strict patriarchal rules, they perpetuate an unconcealed hatred for women, which is one of the causes for the maintenance of controlling images. Positively, all men, regardless of race and class, benefit from patriarchy – yet in different proportions, since white men hold power of nation's institutions which maintain men's privileges. Still, many characters from the novels are attached to the capitalist masculinity celebrated in patriarchy. Such appropriation, however, is unbeneficial to both black women and men, once the system does not allow black men full participation in the capitalist order, making them feel emasculated. Besides, patriarchy does not allow black men the possibility of having a true emotional bond with black women (hooks, *Ain't* 87-114).

Patriarchy, however, is not only perpetuated by men; as mentioned before, women have an important role in its maintenance. Within the black community of *Their Eyes*, for instance, patriarchy conducts the thoughts of the women in the porch, who are ready to judge Janie for not behaving according to the community's principles. In *Sula*, patriarchy is everywhere in the city of Medallion where Sula is condemned for not following its rules and for acting as if she is free and above the women's roles of her time. In *Brewster Place*, patriarchy is present when the community despises Etta's

attitudes, and when Lorraine is humiliated for being homosexual, and later punished for it.

Initially, it is important to highlight how Janie Mae Crawford suffers judgment from her community when they realize that she and Tea Cake are having a relationship: “it was after the picnic that the town began to notice things and got mad. Tea Cake and Mrs. Mayor Starks!” (Hurstons 110). Interestingly, the people from Eatonville do not address Janie by her name. In fact, according to Sigrid King, Janie is not even named until several pages after the beginning of the novel, which clearly states her unpowered position (60); besides, as the quote shows, she is named after her second husband, although she married a third time. For the townspeople, she is not an individual – she is the late mayor’s wife. As mentioned previously, Janie’s grandmother did not have a real name as well; she was called *nanny*, because that was “her place within the white patriarchal structure” (61). Eatonville’s folks do not grant Janie her own identity, as she does not grant her grandmother with an identity either.

Eatonville’s community also condemns Tea Cake: “all the men that she could get, and fooling with somebody like Tea Cake!” (110). Tea Cake is not good enough for Janie, in the townsfolk’s perspective, not because they admire Janie for herself, but because of Joe Starks’ previous position in town. They believe Janie could find a better suitor, for she was the late mayor’s wife. Tea Cake does not, however, have his intentions criticized by the community; his actions are manlike – and men may do whatever they want. Janie, on the other hand, is judged for taking off her funeral clothes too soon, for not waiting enough time to find a new man after Joe Starks’ death – although she starts a relationship with Tea Cake nine months after Starks’ passing – but specially for the crime of thinking and acting as if she was free, while the others lived restricted by conventions and materialism. Janie’s community expects her to act exactly



as Joe Starks wanted her to. People expect her to live her life playing the role of the quiet mayor's wife, without any considerations about her feelings; in fact, Eatonville does not know how Janie feels. They believe, however, they can dictate how she should be behaving:

...Joe Starks hadn't been dead but nine months and here she goes sashaying off to a picnic in pink linen. Done quit attending church, like she used to. Gone off to Sanford in a car with Tea Cake and her all dressed in blue! It was a shame. Done took to high heel slippers and a ten dollar hat! Looking like some young girl, always in blue because Tea Cake told her to wear it. Poor Joe Starks. Bet he turns over in his grave every day. (110)

As the quote shows, the townspeople suppose Janie has to act according to her position in town, because they are as worried about status as Joe Starks was during his life. They resent the fact that she abandons her mayor's wife position, as if it meant nothing. When, for instance, Pheoby, who is Janie's best friend, shows how worried she is about Janie being dragged to different places by Tea Cake – places she was not used to be due to her status as the mayor's wife – Janie is quite firm, affirming that Starks put her in a high position she had never asked for; a position which had imprisoned her for twenty years:

Jody classed me off. Ah didn't. Naw, Pheoby, Tea Cake ain't draggin' me off nowhere Ah don't want tuh go. Ah always did want tuh git round uh whole heap, but Jody wouldn't 'low me tuh. When Ah wasn't in de store he wanted me tuh jes sit wid folded hands and sit dere. And Ah'd sit dere wid de walls creepin' up on me and squeezin' all de life outa me. (112)

Janie makes clear that life as the mayor's wife was suffocating for her; after Starks' death, she does not need it anymore. She wishes to live on her terms. As a mature woman, she knows marriage and love are not the same, and marriage may change Tea Cake, as it changed her during her time with Starks. But it is a "love game" (114), and she is ready to take chances.

Janie had been hearing and watching people have fun and live their lives all her life. After getting married, when she and Tea Cake go to the Muck, she finally has the chance of experiencing life in a community where she could have a voice if she so desires, given that Tea Cake is not interested in changing her ways as Joe Starks was. At the Muck, men held "big arguments ... like they used to do on the store porch. Only [there], she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself" (134). Janie relinquishes all luxury and money when she goes to the Muck with Tea Cake; she lives with as much as necessary for the first time, and is not frightened, not even when they face grave danger.

Moreover, Janie feels sorry for her friends that unlike her still live attached to material things in Eatonville; for the other residents, she feels nothing but disdain. That is because she recognizes that they do not know what is to live devoid of hierarchy. Although both communities are subjugated by a white invisible world, at the Muck there is not a repetition of white capitalism; there is no better or worse: people work together and have fun together, without worries about the future: "they made good money... so they spent good money. Next month and next year were other times. No need to mix them up with the present" (132). Janie possesses nothing while at the Muck, and this is the place where she feels she is the freest. There, she is free of social rules, free of status and money, and the duties which come with them in patriarchal societies.

Indeed, Tea Cake does not seem to be so connected to patriarchal masculinity values as Janie's previous husbands. He may be seen as a "black man seeking freedom for self and loved ones, a rebel black eager to create and make his own destiny" (hooks, *We* 14), which is, according to hooks, an example of revolutionary manhood – an image of black manhood that should be restored (14). Although bell hooks is ahead of Hurston's time, it is possible to affirm that Tea Cake has some characteristics of what she entitles "revolutionary manhood", since he gives Janie space and engages her in different activities, such as playing checkers, going fishing, going hunting, and spending hours talking.

Despite Janie's feelings, however, patriarchy and hierarchy have their place in Everglades. Although Tea Cake is different from Killicks and Starks in many ways, he takes pride in being the provider for Janie, not so different as her previous husbands after all: "Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman. From now on, you gointuh eat whatever mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When Ah ain't got nothing' you don't git nothin'" (Hurston 128). At the same time, he misses her so much while working, that one afternoon he asks her to get a job like the other women, so they would be together all they long; in counterpart, "Tea Cake would help get supper afterwards" (133). One may argue that Tea Cake is not ashamed of performing considered female tasks; in fact, he shares masculine places with Janie, such as laboring at the Muck, shooting, and the sort, at the same time he is willing to participate in tasks such as cooking as well. He makes clear to her, though, that he still means to provide for her: "you don't think Ah'm tryin' tuh git outa takin' keer uh yuh, do yuh, Janie, 'cause Ah ast yuh tuh work long side uh me?" (133) while Janie prefers working along with the others, other than sitting all day long at home.

Tea Cake's patriarchal attitudes are not reduced to providing for Janie: violence is another tool he uses to express his dominant position in their relationship. For instance, when Mrs. Turner's brother arrives in town and she introduces him to Janie, hoping Janie would leave her husband for him, Tea Cake becomes awfully irritated and whips Janie: "being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss" (147). Tea Cake's attitude shows that although he allows Janie more space than her other husbands, he is still very possessive and believes Janie is his property. Nonetheless, it is interesting to mention that their relationship is violently passionate. When Janie and Tea Cake fought about Nunkie, for example, of whom Janie is extremely jealous:

they wrestled on until ... their clothes had been torn away; 'till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible; kissed her until she arched her body to meet him and they fell asleep in sweet exhaustion (137-8).

Besides, violence is there in the end to sum up their relationship in a form of a gunshot, with which Janie kills Tea Cake; he had been bitten by a rabid dog and would die any time soon.

Along with hooks' suggestion that Tea Cake represents an image of revolutionary manhood, Mark Anthony Neal has a similar approach in his "Finding Tea Cake: An Imagined Black Feminist Manhood". According to him, the fact that Hurston precedes Black Feminist perspectives gives us more reasons to identify Tea Cake as an everyday hero: "a useful vessel for us to dare imagine or dream what that Black feminist manhood might look like today" (262). Tea Cake's black feminist manhood – if we can

actually call it that – is inferred by his gestures: his occasional tenderness towards Janie and his willingness to share masculine and feminine spaces with her.

In regards to hierarchy in Everglades, it appears in the figure of Mrs. Turner. She believes that she and Janie are in a higher position from the other people at the Muck because of their “coffee-and-cream” complexion (140). She considers that their Caucasian characteristics put them in a higher position: “look at me! Ah ain’t got no flat nose and liver lips... Ah got white folk’s features in mah face. Still and all Ah got tuh be lumped in wid all de rest. It ain’t fair” (142). As the quote shows, Mrs. Turner advocates that people like her and Janie, who have Caucasian features, ought to make a new class, once they are not black.

Mrs. Turner is not alone. In *Sula*, Helene Wright, Nel’s mother, does not allow Nel to talk to Sula, due to the fact that Sula’s mother is *sooty* (Morrison, *Sula* 29). Similarly to Mrs. Turner, Helene Wright believes that having Caucasian features puts herself and Nel in a higher position. According to Carolyn West, the consequences of Colorism are still tangible in society – especially in Brazil, where the color of one’s skin has a massive impact on socialization. Darker-skinned women, in this sense, are more likely to have lower paid jobs, less education, among other factors, when compared to lighter-skinned women. As she reports, black women “who most resemble Mammy” usually have lower self-esteem as well (292).

Regardless of the fact that Mrs. Turner does not think Tea Cake is suitable for Janie because of his skin-tone and African features, her opinions do not seem to bother Janie much. In fact, nothing seems to bother Janie much, except her situation with both her previous husbands. According to Mary Helen Washington in “I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left her Husbands”, *Their Eyes* is a novel which concerns women’s lack of power, especially the power of speech. Janie does not – ever – have a voice in the

community, which is predominately ruled by male speech. Janie's voice is mainly heard when she is indoors, through her friend Pheobe: "when the voice of the black oral tradition is summoned in *Their Eyes*, it is not used to represent the collective black community, but to invoke and valorize the voice of the black male community" (10). In addition, Janie most of time resorts to silence, and is often inactive; that is, "Janie is made powerless by her three husbands and by Hurston's narrative strategies" (11).

For instance, when she is whipped by Tea Cake, the matter is only discussed from a male's perspective. Men envy Tea Cake because Janie is quiet – that is, she does not show any temper. From the way the matter is treated, it seems that Janie does not bother being beat up (Washington, "I Love" 11-12). Another important scene she should have a voice is the courtroom. However, the scene is told by the narrator, leaving Janie speechless once more (15). Washington's analysis confirms that Eatonville and Everglades have appropriated strict patriarchal rules, and women are often seen as objects within the narrative. They are often laughing about men's conversations, and are usually treated as property.

Eatonville, however, is not the only black community appropriating white patriarchal capitalism. Medallion, Sula's community, shares some similarities to Eatonville. Medallion, for instance, is a symbol of oppression, in regards to the Nigger Joke by which the community is founded:

A joke. A nigger joke. That was the way it got started. Not the town, of course, but that part of town where the Negroes lived, the part they called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills... A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was

easy... but he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom... "...See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile." (Morrison, *Sula* 4-5)

The Nigger joke establishes that African-Americans are a marginalized and tricked group in the United States; they are socially and economically at the bottom of society, although they live physically at the top (Barton 64). Survival is taken very seriously by the people in Medallion, and they usually take care of each other, "always remaining within the understood boundaries prescribed by the hostile White World" (Nigro 17).

For Sula, however, survival is not enough. She tries to live intensively, and because of that she is alone, "outside the boundaries of the community" (Nigro 19). The black people from Medallion share the community with Sula, but completely isolate her:

When the word got out about Eva being put in Sunnysdale, the people in the Bottom shook their heads and said Sula was a roach. Later, when they saw how she took Jude, then ditched him for others, and heard how he bought a bus ticket to Detroit (where he bought but never mailed birthday cards to his sons), they forgot all about Hannah's easy ways (or their own) and said she was a bitch. Everybody remembered the plague of robins that announced her return, and the tale about her watching Hannah burn was stirred up again. (Morrison, *Sula* 112)

As the quote shows, people from the Bottom despise Sula; firstly, they call her a *roach*, since she "rejects the gender role for a woman to be the caretaker of an elderly" (Ni 120); secondly, when they find out she sleeps with Jude, Nel's husband, they call her a *bitch*; by sleeping with men and after ditching them, Sula "challenges patriarchal

constraints on women [and] asserts sexual autonomy/anarchy” (123). One may argue that Sula collaborates with the system of patriarchy when she exercises her sexuality as a man would do; however, it is important to keep in mind that Sula has no models to follow in her community – she does not know how to be a woman and free, except by imitating men’s attitudes. At the same time, her sexual anarchy is not well-accepted by the community, because she is a woman; considering her a Jezebel, with an unrestrained and demoniac sexuality, they call her names – firstly *a roach* then a *bitch* – until laying their final judgment over her and assuring she is an incarnation of evil – a *witch*:

it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing – the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white man. (Morrison, *Sula* 112)

Even without being capable of proving such fact, the townspeople started laying “broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps” (113), indicating that they believed she was a *witch* – “that is, an embodiment of evil and danger” (Ni 116). Interestingly, men are the ones to give a final saying in Sula’s behavior; men who had never said a word against Sula’s mother, Hannah, are the ones to condemn Sula for committing the unforgivable sin – sleeping with white men: “she was obviously capable of it” (112); paradoxically, some of the people in the community are less or more black than one another, which is proof that someone in their families has laid with a white man before. Such fact is “no deterrent to their bile. Nor was the willingness of black men to lie in the beds of white women a consideration that might lead them toward tolerance” (113). Moreover, as the quote shows, men who call



Sula a witch for sleeping with white men, constantly sleep with white women themselves; in a sense, Sula's sins are no different from their own, but because she is a woman, she is considered a witch.

Therefore, Sula is believed to be a great evil for the community, becoming then a scapegoat to their misery. They blame her for the unemployment wave that assault them and for the plague of robins that announced her return to Medallion. Besides, people do not understand how she does not look thirty years old; how she has lost no teeth, or put on weight around her belly, or even the fact that she does not have childhood scars. Since they consider her a devil, they "laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps" (Morrison, *Sula* 113). Due to these facts, they become better mothers to their sons, better husbands to their wives, and better neighbors (115). Their fear of Sula makes them better people:

First off, Teapot knocked on her door to see if she had any bottles ...  
 When Sula said no, the boy turned around and fell down the steps... [His mother] told everybody that Sula had pushed him ... Teapot's Mamma got a lot of attention ... and immersed herself in a role she had shown no inclination for: motherhood. ... She became the most devoted mother: sober, clean and industrious ... And the fury [Sula] created in the women of the town was incredible — for she would lay their husbands once and then no more ... Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. So the women, to justify their own judgment, cherished their men more, soothed the pride and vanity Sula had bruised. (113-15)

As a scapegoat to the community, Sula's body becomes the incarnation of evil, since her social roles transgressions are alien to them. For the townspeople, for instance, is

easier to blame Sula for their unemployment instead of facing the real reasons for their dominated position in society. Moreover, “the town reacts to her disavowal of patriarchal values by becoming fanatically serious about their own family obligations, as if in this way they might counteract Sula’s radical criticism of their lives” (Smith 167).

Nel contrasts Sula in many ways, for she becomes the good girl of the story; in addition, she also becomes the victim, since she is abandoned by her husband because of Sula. In counterpart, Sula – who had returned to the Medallion because she was searching for the other part of herself – notices that she has lost Nel forever, for she has become a part of the community: “now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. She had given herself over to them” (120).

Furthermore, Sula contrasts the community in their willing to accept subjugation and just hope – in vain – that things will improve one day; she also denies living her life for others. As she states, her loneliness is hers only, not somebody else’s; “made by somebody else and handed to you... a secondhand lonely” (143). Consequently, Sula dies as red-woods, knowing she really had a life that was her own; other Medallion women, however, who live their lives for others, will die as a stump, with no experiences, only hoping for better days.

Sula’s death is followed by a heavy winter, in which black folks up in the Bottom suffer a lot in their “thin houses and thinner clothes” (152). People’s attitudes also begin to change; Teapot’s mother, for instance, beats him hard when he refuses to eat her food:

other mothers who had defended their children from Sula’s malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula’s scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against ... Daughters ... returned to a

steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity. (153-4)

According to Marie Nigro, after Sula's death, "the community's role of defining itself through acceptance and disapproval of one of its members shifts" (23). Once Evil is eradicated from their community – now that Sula is dead – they can restore their attitudes and hope that better things will come, as for instance the government using black force in the construction of the New River tunnel.

Medallion's people's rage is, as stated by Nigro, without a focus (23). Before Sula's death, they blamed her for the lack of employment, and connected her arrival with the plague of robins; after her death, they are free to hope for the best. However, things do not improve at all; in fact, Sula's death is followed by a heavy winter and Shadrack's parade to the New River tunnel, where they see "the timber, the bricks, the steel ribs and the tacky wire gate" (Morrison, *Sula* 161). That site is where their anger finally meets its target – the white world which has refused them jobs, education, better housing, and the possibility to live their lives with more dignity. They destroy the tunnel, and many lose their lives there as well, as a "final act of defiance for promises unkept" (Nigro 23). Ironically, their action reflects a refusal of their place in society, which is similar to Sula's quest for her own way of living.

In conclusion, *Sula* shows that the community is a place which may help one survive, but can also lead others to self-destruction; as mentioned, at the same time that the community helps Eva Peace survive after being abandoned by her husband with three children, they isolate Sula, whose uncompromising ways do not fit in their community. Sula Peace turns her back to the community, and lives her days alone experiencing her own desires. As the narrator explains, Sula is an artist without form,

and because of that she is dangerous; she is dangerous in a sense that she disregards the binary thinking of right or wrong; also, she does not know how to make people like her:

when she had come back home, social conversation was impossible for her because she could not lie. She could not say to those old acquaintances, “Hey, girl, you looking good,” when she saw how the years had dusted their bronze with ash, the eyes that had once opened wide to the moon bent into grimy sickles of concern ... They had looked at the world and back at their children, back at the world and back again at their children, and Sula knew that one clear young eye was all that kept the knife away from the throat’s curve. (121-22)

Sula knows that people from Medallion are not truly content with their lives, only pretending to be. Sula is living proof that Medallion’s people are not happy; her presence in the community is a constant reminder that they live lives of submission and resignation. Sula is not afraid of living according to her own desires and wishes; living restricted by social rules is completely unimaginable to her, and she prefers living alone, alienated from her community, rather than experiencing their acquiescent lives.

However, Sula dies young and alone, for her nonconformity is self-destructive.

According to hooks:

Sula’s death at an early age does not leave the reader with a sense of her “power,” instead she seems powerless to assert agency in a world that has no interest in radical black female subjectivity, one that seeks to repress, contain, and annihilate it. Sula is annihilated. The reader never knows what force is killing her, eating her from the inside out. Since her journey has been about the struggle to invent herself, the narrative implies that it is the longing for “selfhood” that leads to destruction. (48)

Sula's tale, in a sense, reveals her powerless position in society, which is not ready to deal with a woman who lives a "radical black female subjectivity" (48). Sula is concerned with inventing a new way of living – one which is unimaginable to black women of her time – reason why she is longing for selfhood, as hooks puts it; she has no center, no definition that we know of. Nel, who chooses to be part of the community, who is considered the "good girl" of the story, lingers and takes part in the construction of a new Medallion, where black people have more access to job opportunities and so forth. In addition, Nel is an everywoman, willing to live her life the best way she can (Nigro 22). Differently from Sula, who entered a path no woman in her community had ever been before, and ended up with no directions, Nel followed a path of conventions and, by realizing she was not missing Jude, but in fact Sula and their girlhood, she is able to achieve self-awareness in a way Sula has never been able to; she may have succeeded in living her life according to her own principles, but the process was painful for her and for the people who surrounded her, and she died unable to fill up the space that consumed her soul (Nigro 24).

As shown, Sula and Janie have tensions with their communities because sexism is still a powerful tool in the making of controlling images for black women, even within black communities. Etta, from *Brewster Place*, also faces tensions in every place she has ever been to; when the readers meet her, she has just finished a "1200-mile odyssey home" (Naylor, *Brewster* 56). She has spent most of her life running from place to place, trying to find where she belonged, only to learn that there was no place for her in the world. Even Brewster Place's people treat her as if she does not belong there, and such fact is observed by the way they call her: Etta Johnson.

This baffled her because she knew what they thought about her, and she'd always call them by their first names and invited them to do the

same with her. But after a few awkward attempts, they'd fall back into the pattern they were somehow comfortable with. Etta didn't know if this was to keep the distance on her side or theirs, but it was there. And she had learned to tread through these alien undercurrents so well that to a casual observer she had mastered the ancient secret of walking on water.

(57)

As the quote shows, the community shares geographical space with Etta – as they did with others such as Sula, Janie, and even Lorraine – but they refuse to consider her a part of their community.

As Janie and Sula as well, Etta is “the picture of a vibrant sexuality” (Levin 41), which is frowned upon by their communities; all she has ever desired is a man to fulfill her sexually and at the same time give her stability. She does not think about getting a job, as Mattie suggests: “a job doing what? Come on, Mattie, what kind of experience I got? Six months here, three there. I oughta find me a good man and settle down to live quiet in my old age” (61).

When Etta becomes interested in Reverend Woods, she soon imagines that he is the one who will restore her image in community and make a lady out of her<sup>17</sup>. Before Reverend Woods, Etta had been involved with a man called Simeon, who was married, and before him, apparently, many others in similar situation. Men who had dated Etta Mae were unappreciative of her liberating sexuality, treating her simply as a Jezebel, that is, an object to be used for their entertainment only. Reverend Woods is no different – for him, everything is a game: “let her win a few, and then he would win just a few more, and she would be bankrupt long before the sun was up. And then there would be only one thing left to place on the table – and she would” (71).

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<sup>17</sup> See page 98 for more information.

Deep down, Etta knows they are playing the game; soon, she stops fooling herself that Reverend Woods would be any different from the other men she had met: “it took his last foundering thrusts into her body to bring her back to reality. She arrived in enough time to feel him beating against her like a dying walrus, until he shuddered and was still” (72). Coming back to Brewster Place after having her dream of marrying the Reverend and gained respect from the community deferred, shows how Etta is as powerless as Sula and Janie. She is powerless, because as Sula, she is incapable of finding what she is looking for; also, as Janie, she does not have a voice to express the emptiness she feels; fortunately, Etta finds some love and comfort in Mattie, who is waiting for her when she arrives home.

As Janie, Etta Mae seems to find a balance and is able to connect to someone in the community. Apart from the patriarchal system which restricts them, and makes them feel like they do not belong, they are still able to share their experiences with a friend who can relate to the plight of black women. Sula and Lorraine’s situations, however, do not follow the same pattern of mutual help. Lorraine’s situation is even more complicated than Sula’s, once the question of homosexuality is at stake, and as according to Barbara Smith, “a community which has not confronted sexism ... has likewise not been challenged to examine its heterosexism” (172).

To illustrate, before the rumor that Lorraine and Theresa were homosexual, the residents of Brewster Place thought they were nice girls: “no wild music or drunken friends careened out of the corner building on weekends, and specially, no eager husbands were encourage to linger around that first floor apartment and run errands for them” (Naylor, *Brewster* 129). Once it is confirmed that Lorraine and Theresa are not Jezebels, that they are not trying to get anyone’s husbands, they are accepted in the community and treated nicely. However, from the moment that some residents –

specially a woman named Sophie – notice that their relationship resembles a married couple, they start rumoring that “the two in 312 were *that way*” (131). People start looking at them with cynical eyes, and their indifference towards men becomes an insult to their women.

People’s treatment changes and Lorraine soon realizes it. She becomes restless, afraid of losing their approval. Such attitude causes problems with her partner, Theresa, who does not care about what people think. Theresa knows that Lorraine wishes to be part of the community: “she wanted to stand out there and chat and trade makeup secrets and cake recipes. She wanted to be secretary of their block association and be asked to mind their kids while they ran to the store” (136). Besides, Lorraine is traumatized by the outcomes of her previous relationship in Detroit, which after coming to the knowledge of people caused the loss of her teaching position. Lorraine and Theresa’s relationship, before they arrive at Brewster Place, amounted to moving from place to place, due to Lorraine’s fear of being *caught*, as if she is committing a crime, attitude of which Theresa is tired, as the following quote shows:

“They, they they!” Theresa exploded. “You know, I’m not starting up with this again, Lorraine. Who in the hell are they? And where in the hell are we? Living in some dump of a building in this God-forsaken part of town around a bunch of ignorant niggers with the cotton still under their fingernails because of you and your theys. They knew something in Linden Hills, so I gave up an apartment for you that I’d been in for the last four years. And then they knew in Park Heights, and you made me so miserable there we had to leave. Now these mysterious theys are on Brewster Place. Well, look out that window, kid. There’s a big wall down that block, and this is the end of the line for me. I’m not moving



anymore, so if that's what you're working yourself up to – save it!” (134-5)

According to Claudia Drieling, Lorraine and Theresa face “a contrasting way in which each responds to the homophobic heterosexual environment” (113). While Lorraine wants to be accepted by the community as herself – despite her sexuality, Theresa is content in living safely among the walls of their apartment, befriending people who have something in common with them (a.k.a homosexuals). Theresa's outburst, in this sense, is due to the fact that she is tired of running from place to place, because other people do not accept them.

Contrary to other women in Brewster Place, Mattie Michael realizes that she has “loved some women deeper than [she had] ever loved any man” (*Brewster Place* 141). She thinks that love is not so different, even if it is between women: “maybe that's why some women get so riled up about it, 'cause they know deep down it's not so different after all” (141). Her remarks, however, do not reach Lorraine, who leaves the association humiliated and thinking she is completely alone. Unexpectedly, she finds comfort in Ben, another community alienated figure, who shares with her his only daughter's distressing story.

In regards to Lorraine's alienation, Sarah Foust Vinson argues that Lorraine has her place in the community denied due to a misogynist system which prevails in Brewster Place. Due to this fact, she must endure her life experiences alone, for her voice is silenced in the community (11). Besides, Naylor, in her interview with William Goldstein, affirms that “it was [Lorraine's] alienation from the other women that put her in that alley” (5-6). By that alley, she means the place where Lorraine is raped by C.C. Baker's gang. Conversely, it is through Lorraine's tragedy that the women of Brewster Place can finally relate to her:

Although only a few admitted it, every woman on Brewster Place had dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress. She had come to them in the midst of the cold sweat of a nightmare, or had hung around the edges of fitful sleep. Little girls woke up screaming, unable to be comforted by bewildered mothers who knew, and yet didn't know, the reasons for their daughters' stolen sleep.

(Naylor, *Brewster* 175-6)

In addition, Mattie is also troubled in her sleep and so is Ciel, who is far away from Brewster when Lorraine is raped, as she implicitly tells Mattie when she describes her dream: "there was a woman who was supposed to be me, I guess. She didn't look exactly like me, but inside I felt it was me" (179). Brewster women connect to Lorraine because what happened to her could have happened to any other women in the community. More than ever, they have to unite themselves so they can protect each other from the misogynist and racist world which surrounds them. By being able to relate to Lorraine's suffering, they show that they are finally learning how to live in community – preserving black community values of cooperation and protection.

As shown in this section, the communities of Eatonville, Everglades, Medallion, and Brewster Place have many things in common; they all, for instance, share some sexist attitudes which make many of their residents condemn people such as Janie, Sula, Etta, and Lorraine. They act under the belief that patriarchal rules must be obeyed, and unnatural things, such as lesbianism and denial of traditional women roles should be rejected under any circumstance. Another example of the community's misogynist inclination is the fact that they do not censure male characters, such as Jude, and other men who committed adultery. When Nel, for instance, asks Sula why she has taken Jude away from her, Sula's answer confirms her assumption that she is not the one to blame

for Jude's attitudes: "I didn't kill him, I just fucked him" (Morrison, *Sula* 145). His act of leaving Nel and their children is his own doing. Nonetheless, Sula is the one criticized and blamed for it. The same happens with Ajax, who has many women who sometimes fight for him on the streets, but is not considered a devil as Sula.

On the other hand, these communities do not deny sharing geographical space with the people they reject, and any violence they may suffer comes from outside the community. Even Lorraine, who was raped at Brewster's wall, becomes the person who unites all the women towards the end of the novel. She becomes a symbol that black women have something in common – and that is the willing to fight against racism and misogyny.

In spite of everything, Sula comes back to her community in search of a friend, exactly as Etta does; Janie also returns to Eatonville in the end, once there is nowhere else to go. It is a fact that these women know that, although they experience all and live all, black communities are still the place they call home – even if they remain at the margins of their communities as outcasts.

Black communities may also learn something from their own acts of oppression; they may notice in the end – except maybe for *Their Eyes* – that accepting patriarchy and following social mores as means to keep the peace is an illusion for them; it comes from acceptance of white capitalism and oppression as natural parts of life. In order to defy such ideas, the women of *Brewster Place* end up destroying the wall in Mattie's dream, because they realize there is a force keeping them trapped in that situation – and such force is oppression. In *Sula*, they destroy the tunnel they were forbidden to build due to the same feeling of frustration. In the end, the communities of *Brewster Place* and *Sula* gather together in an act of defiance over the system that oppresses them, which makes them not so different from Janie, Sula, and Etta after all.

In sum, at the same time these novels show how important life in the community is in order to dispel controlling images and overcome oppression, they also show how black communities themselves are a place where prejudice and oppression happen. Finding a balance is extremely important in order to build a new tradition: a tradition which is focused on preserving elements of black culture, without ignoring race, class, and specially gender issues, leading to a more accepting and less misogynist community.

3.2 – “I CAN DO IT ALL<sup>18</sup>”: NEW DEFINITIONS FOR BLACK WOMANHOOD

*“You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t.”*  
(Nel to Sula, *Sula* 52)

“‘Uh white man and uh nigger woman is de freest thing on earth. ’Dey do as dey please” (Hurston 189); as Hurston ironically implies, white man and black women are located at exact opposite poles of power relations – white men are at the top and due to this position they are free; black women are at the bottom of power relations and have no connection to power, which may be considered freedom. At any rate, Hurston’s choice of the word – *free* – seems quite ironic, given that being at the bottom of power relations indicates not having any saying in one’s own body image, or in one’s own subjugation. Framed another way, black women are not actually free – they are completely subjected to white men’s power. At the same time, being “free” of power also entails the ability to subvert and confront power systems.

Sula is able to perceive such paradoxical position of black women and denies acting according to the patriarchal capitalist order – since following the system will not change her powerless position. In this sense, she tells Nel she can “do it all” (*Sula* 142):

“Why? I can do it all, why can’t I have it all?”

“You *can’t* do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t.”

... “You say I’m a woman and colored. Ain’t that the same as being a man?”

“I don’t think so and you wouldn’t either if you had children.”

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<sup>18</sup> Morrison, *Sula* 142

“Then I really would act like what you call a man. Every man I ever knew left his children.” (142-3)

As Sula argues, she perceives herself as a man, and acting as a man is how she gives agency to her life – since according to Sula’s perspectives, black women are not living, they are only dying. When she sleeps with Jude, she does not expect Nel to be so possessive towards him, and act as the victim, once she thinks Nel is similar to her. After all, “they had always shared the affection of other people: compared how a boy kissed, what line he used with one and then the other” (119); marriage changes everything, because Nel does not want to share her husband<sup>19</sup>, as all the other women from the community.

“Now Nel was one of *them*” (120). She becomes part of the city and accepts the hardships black women have to endure, differently from Sula. According to Morrison herself, in her interview with Robert Stepto, Sula acts like a man, which is why she is rejected by the community:

she will do the kind of things that normally only men do, which is why she’s so strange. She really behaves like a man. She picks up a man, drops a man, the same way a man picks up a woman, drops a woman. And that’s her thing. She’s masculine in that sense. She’s adventuresome, she trusts herself, she’s not scared, she really ain’t scared. And she is curious and will leave and try anything. So that quality of masculinity—and I mean this in the pure sense—in a woman at that time is outrage, total outrage. She can’t get away with that. (26-27)

As the quote implies, Sula is rejected by her community not because of her behavior, but because she is a woman pulling a masculine attitude. As Pi-hua Ni remarks, “Sula

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<sup>19</sup> See Page 95 for more information.

and Ajax are alike in practicing sexual anarchy and defying social mores. Nevertheless, Sula's revolt threatens her community and incurs danger to herself, whereas Ajax can walk away free of trouble" (117).

Framed another way, individuals as Sula, Janie, Etta along with Tea Cake and Ajax, live their lives believing they can do everything they want. However, due to their genders, communities have different attitudes towards them. For instance, whilst the town gossip about Janie's attitudes, they almost show no surprise about Tea Cake's, as if stealing widows and cheating women were men's specialties. They do, however, expect a different behavior from Janie; she is the one who should follow conduct rules and show some self-respect. The same happens with Sula and Ajax; Ajax has many women who often fight on the streets over him: "brawling thick-thighed women with knives" (125), while Ajax stood along with others watching the fighters. Sula "would lay [her neighbors'] husbands once and then no more" (115), but since she is a woman, the community does not accept such behavior, although they make no objection to Ajax. Nevertheless, these individuals reject social mores and patriarchy, refusing the images of the Jezebel and the reckless-black-man society imposes on them.

Thus, community life is usually not enough for characters such as Janie, Sula, and Etta. They refuse to live according to their communities' perspectives, and for that they are called *bitches*, *devils*, *freak*, *low women*. Paradoxically, though, these characters still return home to their communities, once they notice the world is not big enough for them and they do not fit anywhere. They have been searching for something else to be, but such something else is yet to be found. In view of that, in this section I will examine Janie, Sula, and Etta Mae's attitudes as they set up new definitions to their womanhood, therefore offering alternatives for a more harmonic correlation between individuals and communities by challenging controlling images of the mammy, the

matriarch, and the Jezebel, as well as opening new possibilities for different expressions of black womanhood.

Black communities, as mentioned earlier, are sites for fighting oppression and racism, at the same time that they reproduce other types of repression, as for instance, sexism and patriarchy. The characters of Nanny, Eva Peace, Hannah Peace, and Mattie Michael are good examples, since they neglect some patriarchal social rules reproduced in their communities, and raise their children by themselves, either by choice or circumstances. Nanny, for instance, does not marry again out of choice: “Ah wouldn’t marry nobody, though Ah could have uh heap uh times, cause Ah didn’t want nobody mistreating mah baby” (Hurston 19). Nanny prefers raising her child by herself, even if it means to go through difficulties, for she does not wish her child to be mistreated.

Similarly to Nanny, Mattie Michael also decides to raise her child by herself. After breaking with her father’s strict patriarchal and hierarchical rules and sleeping with Butch, a man her father despises, she gives birth to Basil, whom she raises by herself. It is not clear why Mattie makes such decision, perhaps because deep down she knows Butch probably has no desire of being a father, due to his unwillingness to settle down and have a family.

Contrary to Nanny and Mattie Micheal, Eva Peace does not choose to be alone; she is abandoned by her husband, BoyBoy. She does, however, come up with ways of surviving in an oppressive environment by becoming a small entrepreneur, and also by the insurance check which comes monthly, due to the loss of her leg. Her daughter, Hannah Peace, refuses “to live without the attentions of a man” and has several lovers: “what she wanted, after Rekus died, and what she succeeded in having more often than not, was some touching every day” (Morrison, *Sula* 42). In this sense, Hannah engages



in a liberating sexuality which will later hugely influence Sula's sexuality as well; as put by Pi-hua Ni, Hannah is a "role model of female sexual autonomy for Sula" (118).

All these women, although trespassing the line of what is considered women's roles, are not completely rejected by the community (except perhaps for Hannah, although her tragic death and her child's doings eventually make the Medallion's people overlook her attitudes in life). Other characters, however, are rejected by their communities, as the case of Janie, Sula, and Etta, who have to leave their communities in order to try to define their womanhood, and find their place in the world. They all come back, incidentally, because the world is not ready for them, and they may only find refuge in the arms and ears of friends.

For instance, Janie, after Tea Cake's death, returns to Eatonville because there is no other place for her in the world. She could have gone anywhere, but she knows she belongs with her people. They are not the same, but they have similar battles; Etta is not so different from Janie. After seeing that the world is not ready for a black woman willing to have experiences and be free, she goes back and stays at Mattie's side, her closest friend, finding "the light and the love and the comfort" that she was longing for (Naylor 74). Similarly, Sula notices that the big city is in fact "a big Medallion" (Morrison, *Sula* 99); she returns home because she is looking for a friend, someone who completes her like Nel used to do:

Nel was one of the reasons she had drifted back to Medallion, that and the boredom she found in Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon and San Diego... She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman. And that no one would ever

be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. (120-1)

Interestingly, the quote shows that going away from the community only shows that a person may not find what he or she is looking for; in fact, what Janie, Sula, and Etta are looking for cannot be found outside; it is within them. They are different from the rest because they want more than just surviving. They want to live in this world, even if it means to lose people they love.

These women dispel the images of the mammy and the matriarch, which hunted their grandmothers; they dispel the image of the mule, and search for new definitions of black womanhood. Neither are they Jezebels; they simply want to have experiences; by trying to fulfill their dreams, and daring to wish for more than just existing, they embody a new kind of black woman – one who can be independent and can live her life according to her own feelings.

Sula specifically takes her independence too far. She denies all of the women's roles of her time. Sula believes she is no different from a man, because she is a colored woman. If she had children, she would abandon them as all the men she knows have done. She perceives herself outside the boundaries of the community and the world. Resembling Sula, Etta also wants to be herself; she does not wish to live suppressed by controlling images created by the patriarchal system. Since these women do not fit in their communities, given that their communities are inserted in a patriarchal misogynist system, they reveal a new black womanhood – one with choices.

Because these women are at the bottom of power relations, as mentioned, they are able to create other places to move. Morrison affirms that a woman who refuses to be defined by her color, her dedication to family, or by her community, is a new world woman; she extracts "choice from choicelessness" ("Unspokable" 153), since they

choose a path that is not considered to be their right to choose. The new world woman is also “improvisational”, “daring”, “disruptive”, “outlawed”, “unpolicing”, “uncontained and uncontainable” (153) – characteristics which were not allowed to women at the time of Sula, Janie and even Etta; in fact, these characteristics may still be used to describe the stereotypical Jezebel.

Maggie Galehouse takes the notion of New World black and New World woman into further consideration; according to her, the notion of “new world black” gathers more than skin tone, “it is jazz inspired, something individual, fundamental, and internal, manifesting itself in a resistance to existing social mores” (339). It is the consciousness of a blackness that transcends social interactions and constructs a way of existing, which affects the ways of talking, walking, singing, cooking and even writing. Furthermore, it is an awareness of a displaced culture – displaced in the sense of not being recognized sometimes, but that it is there, it is touchable and changeable.

This new world woman quality may be perceived in Janie, Sula, and Etta, many times during their stories. For instance, their liberating sexualities; Sula and Etta Mae show that black women are free to experience sexuality as men are, while Janie, who is sexuality concealed for over twenty years, is able to break free from such pattern and engage in a relationship where she felt free to experience life. Secondly, their willingness to live their lives according to their own patterns, even when trapped in a white man’s world, surrounded by patriarchal rules which aim at stereotyping their bodies. They live experimental lives; there are no models of conduct for them, for they are fashioning new ways of performing their womanhood.

Such notion coincides with Walker’s personal historical construction of the history of black women; in her interview with Mary Helen Washington, she mentions that women in the future will reach full understanding of themselves, since they will

have “made a new place to move” – that is, they will have opened new possibilities for themselves. In her own words:

My women, in the future, will not burn themselves up – that is what I mean by coming to the end of the cycle, and understanding something to the end ... now I am ready to look at women who have made the room larger for others to move in ... The Movement of the Sixties, Black Power, the Muslims, the Panthers ... have changed the options of Black people generally and of Black women in particular. So that my women characters won't all end the way they have been, because Black women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move (Washington, “An Essay” 98).

In this sense, characters such as Janie, Sula, Etta, and many others, create a new place to move; they create new images of black womanhood; images which are not related to childcare, dedication to family or to the community; even color may be secondary. Before being black, they are women with choices. New world women can be mothers, daughters, wives, cousins, sisters; they may be single, married, homosexuals, heterosexuals, old and young – as long as they are free to choose.

As for black males, they may be gamblers, workers, mayors, sons and absent or present fathers; it is important to keep in mind that black men have also been suffering with many controlling images legitimized by the media. One of them is the image of the rapist; Sula, in her idiosyncrasy, argues that a Black man is the envy of the world, in a sense that there is no reason for him to feel isolated and unloved:

I mean, everything in the world love you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own ... Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on

to your cuffs. Even little children, white and black, boys and girls – spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in the world loves a black man more than another black man ... It looks to me like you the envy of the world (Morrison, *Sula* 103-4)

As the quote suggests, Sula uses the stereotype of the black rapist and the bad black father and husband in a demystifying way, subverting the common perspective towards them with the use of the word *love*. However, according to hooks, the word *love* really means *desire*; although the whole world desires black men, for better or for worse, in reality, nobody loves them (*We* ix). In her own words, “this is a culture that does not love black males ... they are not loved by white men, white women, black women, or girls and boys” (ix). In our “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” black men are feared other than loved (ix). Negative stereotypes continue assaulting them, specially because, differently from black women, they have done few interventions in order to demystify such images, mostly because many black men still insist in appropriating patriarchal and sexist principles.

Most men in the novels are usually acting according to a white imperialist capitalist society which does not allow them any room for constructing a positive manhood. Eugene and Jude, for instance, feel emasculated for not being able to acquire status by performing consistent jobs; Ben, Brewster Place's superintendent, drinks alcohol night and day, so he does not think about the fact that he and his wife ignored when their daughter said she was being molested by their white landlord. He wants to forget that the girl disappeared and became a prostitute, his only contact with her being some letters with no address. He has to drink so he does not remember he lost his little piece

of land, his wife left him and he ended up in Brewster, full of memories he tries to keep away.

Moreover, violence is a major factor in the construction of black manhood; an example of such expression of manhood is C.C. Baker, Lorraine's rapist in *Brewster Place*. C.C. Baker feels disturbed by Lorraine's sexuality, once "he knew of only one way to deal with women other than his mother... he knew how to please or punish or extract favors from them by the execution of what lay curled behind his fly" (161). His phallus is what gives him self-respect, and the idea of a lesbian is threatening, once she would be beyond his power. He and his gang rape her to show they have power over her and to assure their manhood: "bet after we get through with you, you ain't never gonna wanna kiss no more pussy" (Naylor, *Brewster* 170).

Additionally, as mentioned before, we have characters such as Tea Cake and Ajax. Due to their uncompromising ways, their unwillingness to settle down and live life as the white supremacist capitalist masculinity dictates, they are frowned upon by their communities, and called lazy, ditch-dogs. Tea Cake himself admits that he just gets married because he truly falls in love with Janie, promising Janie she had the keys to the kingdom (Hurston 109). Butch, Mattie Michael's one time lover is another example of a man with a bad reputation; he, however, states that he lives his life and "low others to live theirs" (Naylor, *Brewster* 13). These men are actually creating a new kind of masculinity, one which is not completely rooted in white patriarchal systems. In fact, Tea Cake, Ajax, and Butch are not so different from women characters such as Janie, Sula, Kiswana, Etta, among others who also live their lives according to their own principles, rejecting traditional women roles.

Such range of characters and personalities shows that black women writers are worried in providing their fiction with a variety of women characters as well as male

characters in order to assist in the formation of new images. They provide honest portraits of hetero and homosexual relationships, showing their problems as well as their qualities; above all, they show the mechanisms black people use every day in order to live their lives, despite all oppression.

On the one hand, black communities still have to learn how to deal with new definitions of black womanhood. Concerning such fact, Aisha Francis, while examining Pearl Cleage theory on *Free Womanhood*, highlights some fundamental terms all black women should understand; they are: “sexism, sexist, feminism, feminist, racist, racism, rape and domestic violence” (35). Black women, in this sense, should recognize and understand the implications of these concepts. They should also encourage men in their lives to try to understand these concepts. *Free Womanhood* is about finding self-awareness and rites of passage in a woman’s life – such as “first haircuts, births, graduations, finding love, etc” (37). Along with other critics, such as Jaqueline Bobo and bell hooks, Cleage states the importance of “cultivating a critically literate audience” (39). They are “among the black women scholars who have developed ideologies for helping black women become conscious cultural readers” (39). Certainly, “the purpose of black women’s texts should never be reduced to combating stereotypes” (40); however, as it was stated during this thesis, black women writers such as Hurston, Morrison and Naylor are concerned with black women’s representations, and they do, among other themes, address the questions of controlling images, challenging them and creating new images of their own.

Moreover, by dealing with the construction of the self as well as with the maintenance of community values that are not oppressive, these novels assist in showing the importance of destroying the mechanisms of power which create controlling images. According to Pratto and Pitpitan, stereotypes legitimize power

dominant groups have over subordinate ones by making controlling images seem natural, deserving, and an exaggeration of subordinate groups (2165). Controlling images such as the Mammy, the Matriarch, and the Jezebel, which bring with them pre-conceived ideas concerning black women's roles in society and the demonization of their sexuality, can only be deconstructed by the creation of new myths and images which celebrate black women's and men's freedom of choosing their own roles and paths in a society which desperately has to cease oppression and segregation.

In sum, the distressing but beautiful stories of Janie, Sula and the Peace women, Nel Greene, Mattie Micheal, Ciel, Etta, and Lorraine tell us about the importance of revisiting our prejudices and our pre-conceived ideas of what is propriety, right, wrong, and everything that unconsciously lead us to judge women's behavior – especially but not specifically black women's. These novels celebrate black communities as well as their amazing individuals or, in Morrison's words, "the fantastic variety of people, and things and behavior" ("Intimate" 11). By doing so, these writers are not only dispelling controlling images, but also creating new images and opening up possibilities for new and liberating black women and men's representations.



## CONCLUSION

This work has aimed at investigating the Mammy, the Matriarch, and the Jezebel controlling images, and the ways they are dispelled by contemporary black women writers such as Hurston, Morrison, and Naylor, so as to better comprehend how race, class, and gender relations continue to impact black women's lives. This study has also examined the ways derogatory names and images have contributed to maintain a patriarchal system, thereby sustaining racism and sexism, so as to show the importance of black women writers in deconstructing these practices. As a result, I hope this work will contribute to enhance the knowledge of the ways black women's writings have been helping to reshape black womanhood – and consequently manhood.

Throughout this thesis, it has been discussed how black feminist criticism is concerned, among other things, with the deconstruction of controlling images regarding both black women and black men, in light of three important novels written by acclaimed black women writers. These novels were chosen after careful consideration about their importance and impact in the shaping of the black women writing tradition, enclosing works from the first (*Their Eyes* 1937), and second half of the twentieth century (*Sula* 1973 and *Brewster Place* 1982), so as to historically place the discussion of black women's representation. Many characters from *Their Eyes*, *Sula*, and *Brewster Place* have been analyzed with the purpose of showing how they challenge pre-conceived ideas of motherhood, womanhood, and manhood. Characters such as Nanny, Eva Peace, and Mattie Michael – among many others – challenge the mammy and the matriarch controlling images by showing that there is not only one correct way of being a mother, and the task can be even harder under unprivileged circumstances. These mothers are usually not providers by choice; neither have they loved white children

more than their own. Their situations are an outcome of power relations, and they are identified with controlling images so as to depreciate black womanhood.

By the same token, Janie, Sula, and Etta show that the controlling image of the Jezebel was created to depreciate black women's sexuality and justify sexual abuse, and women who are identified by such image are in fact only trying to live their lives free of a patriarchal system which oppresses them. More often than not, these women are rejected by their communities because their behaviors infringe traditional women roles – roles which are most of time preserved by their grandmothers and their communities.

This work was also concerned with showing that black women writers do not ignore the black male situation; in fact, they present a wide range of male characters, showing that they are trying to create new images for both black women and men. By giving black men characters depth – describing their frustrations, their dreams and so forth, black women writers are helping to deconstruct black men's controlling images at the same time that they are portraying honest characters, exposing the problems of black families, caused by oppression and by appropriation of white supremacist capitalist masculinity.

Characters such as Eugene, for instance, blamed his frustration on his wife, creating a circle of abandonment perceived many times in the novels. Jody Starks, on the other hand, was so attached to the material things he acquired he could not see anything else, and was very prejudiced against Janie, who was working until dawn everyday in his store, and helped him attain wealth. Other characters, such as C.C. Baker, to whom violence is the only form of being seen, have also appropriated the values of a commodity society which denies him the means to acquire social status. Without instruction or qualification, violence is the only form of action he is allowed in society. When they are not committing acts of violence, they are invisible. Besides, their

misogynist values are a reproduction of a culture which sustains white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, *Outlaw* 135). On the other hand, characters such as Tea Cake, Ajax, and possibly even Butch, constructed their masculinity over other values – and perhaps because of that they have less stormy relationships with women.

It is interesting to stress that black women's oppression may be noticed within political, economic, and ideological dimensions. Black women, for instance, have been denied their right to have an education, not to mention fully participation in U.S. society; they have been also maintained under strict racist and sexist rules, which kept them in subordinated jobs; moreover, they have been identified by controlling images, exemplifying then the three dimensions of oppression, many still observed today around the world (Collins 4-5; Norwood 231).

Unfortunately, such systems of oppression do not only exist in the United States. As mentioned before, the African diaspora presents similarities in regards to its subjugation and its fight to overcome racism. In Brazil, for instance, the black population has been silenced by many mechanisms of social and cultural domination; however, akin to African Americans, since slavery times, black Brazilians have been fighting to be heard so as to question Western subjugation, in which literature has played a very important role (Sena 285). For instance, the myth of the matriarch is quite strong in Brazil, where most Brazilian Candomblé communities, as well as the city of Salvador in Bahia, present great numbers of households conducted by women. Not surprisingly, these families also present the worst socio-economic situations, when compared to any other family arrangements (288), which may endorse the idea that black women are responsible for black family's poverty.

According to Tatiana Sena, "the writer Conceição Evaristo ... is aligned to other black female voices who seek to reflect on the knowledge generated from the

experience of black women<sup>20</sup>” (286); not so different from Hurston, Morrison, or Naylor, Evaristo seeks to represent black women’s perspectives, consequently questioning controlling images of black Brazilian women (299). Other black writers such as Paule Marshall, Jamaica Kincaid, Edwidge Dandicat, Gayl Jones – among others – have also done the same. In fact, according to Stelamaris Coser, there is “a sense of proximity and commonality between the Americas, particularly the shared heritage of colonialism and racism in the coasts and fields of the “extended Caribbean”” (ix). This confirms that, as Carol Boyce Davis argues, black women writers are, indeed, everywhere.

As *Africana Feminism* indicates, the African diaspora is connected by its experiences of colonialism, slavery, patriarchy, and racism (Norwood 225). *Africana Feminism* “refers to the lived experiences and shared oppression of African diasporic women. It also includes social, political, and cultural movements initiated by women (and men) that explicitly challenge sexist oppression and a range of inequalities” (225). Literature produced in the African Diaspora evidences such connections, and it is important that future research concerning controlling images takes such globally aspect into consideration, since African American women are not the only black women suffering with oppression and patriarchy around the world.

In sum, it is known that the importance given to literature produced by black women is a recent phenomenon, as it is noticed in the field of social science as well (Coser 22). Black women writers are the ones who can help reconstruct this past which has been put aside as unimportant for history. I believe that, more than ever, attention should be given to ideological oppression caused by controlling images, once it is due to such historically constructed and maintained stereotypes based on patriarchal ideologies

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<sup>20</sup> My translation. The original goes: “a escritora mineira Conceição Evaristo.... alinha-se a outras vozes femininas negras que procuram refletir sobre o saber gerado a partir da experiência da mulher negra...”

that black man and black women still face oppression and sexism nowadays. It is also imperative to seek for evidence that a tradition of black female writers exists and transcends the United States, encompassing the African Diaspora, searching for redefinitions of black womanhood, black manhood, and, consequently, the dispelling of long-held controlling images.

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