

Beyond Sisterhood: Alterity, Internal Exclusion, and the Politics of Belonging in Morrison and Naylor

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Received: 21 Sep 2026; Received in revised form: 17 Oct 2026; Accepted: 21 Oct 2026; Available online: 25 Oct 2026
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Abstract— This article examines alterity, marginalization, and community fracture in African American women's writing through two novels: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). Black female solidarity is often celebrated as a site of resistance, and rightly so. Yet both novels also show how marginalized communities can reproduce, among themselves, the hierarchies that oppress them. On the one hand, the article sets out the theoretical and spatial framework. It distinguishes two senses of alterity (the Levinasian ethical Other and the Other produced by domination), and it draws on Black feminist and intersectional thought, spatial theory, and the philosophy of epistemic injustice. On the other hand, it offers a comparative reading. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows how internalized racism destroys Pecola Breedlove, how the demand to be respectable divides the Black community, and how that community, by refusing to see or acknowledge Pecola's suffering, becomes part of her ruin. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor shows how a walled-in street of mutual aid turns on Lorraine and Theresa, a lesbian couple, and exposes the limits of conditional sisterhood. The article argues that both authors refuse a romanticized vision of community: liberation requires confronting the otherness that exists outside marginalized spaces and also within them.



Keywords— alterity, African American literature, intersectionality, sisterhood, respectability politics.

Résumé— Cet article examine l'altérité, la marginalisation et la fracture communautaire dans l'écriture des femmes afro-américaines à travers deux romans : *The Bluest Eye* (1970) de Toni Morrison et *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) de Gloria Naylor. La solidarité féminine noire est souvent célébrée comme un espace de résistance, et à juste titre. Pourtant, les deux romans montrent aussi comment des communautés marginalisées peuvent reproduire entre elles les hiérarchies qui les oppriment. D'une part, cet article pose le cadre théorique et spatial. Il distingue deux sens de l'altérité (l'Autre éthique de Levinas et l'Autre produit par la domination) et s'appuie sur la pensée féministe noire et intersectionnelle, la théorie de l'espace et la philosophie de l'injustice épistémique. D'autre part, il propose une lecture comparative. Dans *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison montre comment le racisme intériorisé détruit Pecola Breedlove, comment l'exigence de respectabilité divise la communauté noire, et comment cette communauté, en refusant de voir la douleur de Pecola ou de reconnaître sa souffrance, devient en partie responsable de sa perte. Dans *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor montre comment une rue murée, lieu d'entraide, se retourne contre Lorraine et Theresa, un couple de femmes, et met à nu les limites d'une sororité conditionnelle. L'article soutient que les deux autrices refusent une vision idéalisée de la communauté : la libération exige d'affronter l'altérité qui existe à l'extérieur des espaces marginalisés, mais aussi en leur sein.

Mots-clés— altérité, littérature afro-américaine, intersectionnalité, sororité, politique de respectabilité.

I. INTRODUCTION

In African American literary studies, community and sisterhood are often read as the foundations of survival. Black neighborhoods, from crowded tenement hallways to the dead-end street, appear as places of mutual care in the face of white supremacy. This reading is well founded, but it risks hiding a harder question: how does a group that is systematically othered by the dominant culture treat the "Other" in its own midst? Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* both document the resilience born of shared hardship. Both also expose a paradox: the oppressed may replicate systems of exclusion and punish those who deviate from rigid racial, gendered, or sexual norms.

Criticism has not ignored this paradox. Black feminist critics have long insisted that Black women's writing must be read for its internal critique as well as its protest against the outside world (B. Smith 1977; Christian 1985; Carby 1987), and a considerable body of scholarship addresses communal complicity in Pecola's destruction, and the treatment of Lorraine and Theresa, as well as the homophobia Cheryl Clarke (1983) named in Black communities. What the article offers is a different angle of approach: a comparative reading of the two novels through a single analytical vocabulary, that of internal alterity, which links the psychological, the spatial, and the ethical dimensions of exclusion.

The framework draws on several traditions. Stuart Hall (1990) describes identity as a "production" that is never complete and is always shaped by history, culture, and power. Emmanuel Levinas (1969) grounds ethics in the face-to-face encounter with the vulnerable Other. Doreen Massey (1994) shows that space is made of social relations and is never a neutral container. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) names the matrix of domination in which race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect. Brought together, these perspectives allow us to ask what happens when structures of exclusion, compressed into a confined geography, are turned inward.

The argument has two parts. Part I establishes the concepts: two senses of alterity, intersectional oppression, spatial confinement, and epistemic injustice. Part II reads the novels together. It studies, in Morrison, the internalization of white standards of beauty, the role of class respectability, and the community's failure of witness. It studies, in Naylor, the architecture of Brewster Place and the exclusion of Lorraine and Theresa. A final comparative section confronts the two novels' accounts of sisterhood. The article concludes that Morrison and Naylor refuse an uncritical celebration of community: they demand an ethics of

belonging that embraces the Other even when the Other lives next door.

1. Theoretical Foundations and the Mechanics of Marginalization

Marginalization is rarely a one-dimensional force exerted by a dominant culture on an outsider group. It combines structural, spatial, and psychological mechanisms. This part lays the groundwork by examining alterity and intersectional oppression (1.1), then urban confinement, voice, and epistemic injustice (1.2). Its aim is to show how external structures of exclusion penetrate the inner life of communities and selves.

1.1 Conceptualizing Alterity and Intersectional Oppression

The word *alterity* derives from the Latin *alter*, "other." It names more than difference. It names a condition in which an individual or group is placed outside the norms of a dominant culture. Two distinct senses of the term need to be kept apart, because they are often confused.

The first is ethical. For Levinas (1969), the Other is absolutely irreducible to the self, and the face of the Other issues a command that interrupts the ego's self-sufficiency: I am responsible for the Other before any reciprocity or contract. The second sense is political and historical. Here the Other is produced by domination. In the tradition running from Hegel's master-slave dialectic through Simone de Beauvoir (1949) to Edward Said (1978), the Other is constructed as a subordinate mirror against which the dominant subject defines its own autonomy and universality. Levinas's Other is the one before whom the self must yield; the Other of Beauvoir and Said is the one whom the self has made inferior in order to remain sovereign. This article uses both senses, but it does not conflate them. The first supplies the ethical standard against which communities may be judged; the second describes the mechanisms through which exclusion is produced.

Levinas's philosophy, however, tends to abstract the human encounter, and its universal subject is implicitly unmarked by race or gender. To bring it into contact with the lived realities of Black Americans, it must be anchored in W. E. B. Du Bois's (1903) account of "double consciousness": the split experienced by a racialized subject who must see herself through the eyes of a hostile world. Frantz Fanon (1967 [1952]) described the same alienation as an "epidermal" inferiority imposed from outside and then lived from within. For the African American subject, alterity is therefore not only a metaphysical condition; it is an imposed condition of hypervisibility and erasure at once, in which she is scrutinized yet denied recognition as a full participant in the social contract.

This alienation cannot be grasped through a single axis. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) showed that race and gender do not operate as mutually exclusive categories: they combine to produce distinct forms of exclusion that single-axis analyses fail to see. Collins (2000) widened the point into a "matrix of domination" in which race, class, gender, and sexuality are organized together. For Black women, alterity is therefore inscribed several times over: in relation to white America, to male privilege outside and inside the community, and, for some, to heterosexual norms. Hall's (1990) emphasis on identity as a historically contingent "production" adds that these mechanisms change over time, from chattel slavery to redlining, segregated housing, and the disenfranchisement of the post-migration city.

From these premises we draw a working distinction that organizes the rest of the article. *External alterity* is imposed by the dominant white supremacist order. *Internal alterity* arises when marginalized communities themselves police boundaries, enforce conformity, and exclude those who do not fit a rigid communal mold. The two are not independent: internal alterity is very often the internalization and redirection of external alterity. This is where Morrison and Naylor intervene most pointedly. By showing how characters absorb social rejection and redirect it toward the most vulnerable among them, whether Pecola Breedlove or Lorraine and Theresa, the novels compel us to ask what ethical recognition the vulnerable Other is owed, and by whom.

1.2 The Politics of Voice and Spatial Confinement

Alterity is never merely a state of mind. It is etched into geography and reinforced through the politics of voice. Space and voice are the two terrains on which marginalized people either assert their humanity or are silenced.

On the spatial side, Edward Soja (2010) uses the term *spatial justice* to name the fair distribution of the resources and opportunities that space organizes, a concern with roots in Henri Lefebvre's (1991 [1974]) analysis of the production of space and David Harvey's (1973) work on social justice and the city. In post-migration America, segregation did not vanish with the end of legal segregation; it was reinscribed by redlining, discriminatory housing markets, and urban renewal that confined Black populations to decaying enclaves. The industrial town of Lorain, Ohio, in Morrison's novel and the walled street of Naylor's are both such containers. Following Massey (1994), we treat these places not as static backdrops but as dynamic networks of social relations. A community that is economically starved, socially isolated, and under constant external pressure sees that pressure circulate within it. Confinement restricts the horizon of its inhabitants, and survival depends on continual negotiation with it.

On the side of voice, Miranda Fricker (2007) defines *epistemic injustice* as a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. It takes two forms: *testimonial injustice*, in which a speaker's credibility is deflated by prejudice, and *hermeneutical injustice*, in which structural prejudice denies a person's experience the shared concepts needed to make it intelligible. Fricker's account concerns society at large, yet its logic extends to communities under pressure: a group that depends on a fragile collective respectability may refuse to hear what threatens it. Marginalized subjects are then denied epistemic authority twice, by the dominant culture that does not listen and by an insular community that demands silence to protect itself. bell hooks (1989) makes a related point about "talking back": for Black women, speaking is not a given but a hard-won act that is often punished.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) question, whether the subaltern can speak, belongs to a specific context, the analysis of colonial and postcolonial India, and it should not be transposed to African American fiction without qualification. We borrow only its central insight: that the speech of those at the lowest point of a hierarchy is often mediated, distorted, or unheard. Pecola's testimony about her rape, for instance, is not heard by her mother; this is better described through Fricker's categories than through Spivak's, and the article uses them accordingly.

Language is also a site of both exclusion and retention. Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) ethnography of language in working-class Black and white communities in the Carolina Piedmont shows how the verbal practices of Black children, valued within their community, were misrecognized by school institutions as deficient. Within Black communities, vernacular traditions are instruments of cultural retention and resistance. But they can also be turned to exclusionary use, as when gossip, euphemism, and silence police those who deviate from accepted scripts of behavior.

Together, spatial theory and the theory of epistemic justice show how physical and communicative confinement operate as twin engines of alterity. The ghetto street and the tenement are not merely settings; they are active agents in the drama of marginalization, determining who is heard, who is rendered invisible, and who is cast beyond the reach of communal care. Part II turns to the novels with these tools in hand.

II. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: INTERNAL EXCLUSION IN MORRISON AND NAYLOR

Moving from theoretical foundations to textual application, this section examines how Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor translate these mechanics of marginalization into powerful narrative realities. By placing *The Bluest Eye* and *The*

Women of Brewster Place in direct dialogue, we uncover how both authors dismantle romanticized notions of community. They expose the painful paradox of internal exclusion, revealing how systemic pressures compel vulnerable groups to police, marginalize, and fracture their own from within.

2.1 Internalized Racism, Class, and Patriarchy in *The Bluest Eye*

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows what happens when white standards of beauty and worth are internalized. External racism, expressed through redlining, poverty, and institutional neglect, supplies the pressure; the novel's attention is directed to how that pressure infects homes, schoolyards, and neighborhoods. The Black community is not depicted as a utopia of uncritical solidarity. White supremacist ideology is absorbed so deeply that community members take part, often unknowingly, in the silencing and destruction of the most vulnerable of their own, above all Pecola Breedlove.

Beauty is the first mechanism. The culture that surrounds the characters (the Dick-and-Jane primer that opens the novel, the Shirley Temple films and blue-eyed dolls, the cinema in which Pauline Breedlove learns to measure herself against Hollywood glamour) offers a single standard that defines Blackness as lack. Frantz Fanon's (1967 [1952]) analysis of racial inferiority, as a split in the self imposed from outside, illuminates what happens to Pecola. Her prayer for blue eyes is not a childish whim; it is the logical conclusion of a world that teaches her that visibility, safety, and love are reserved for those who mirror the dominant culture. Because white America sees her as other, the people around her, and finally Pecola herself, treat her as an emblem of ugliness and pollution.

Second, the novel does not treat the community as uniform. It dramatizes class respectability as an internal dividing line, and it does so through two figures. Geraldine, a middle-class woman who has trained herself and her son to maintain the distinction between "colored people" and "niggers," drives Pecola from her house in a scene of cold contempt. Maureen Peal, light-skinned, wealthy, and admired, taunts Pecola on the way home from school. Both enforce, within Black life, the hierarchy of color and class that outside forces have imposed on all of them. This is the "class snobbery" this article's introduction identifies as one form of internal alterity, and it shows that exclusion within the community is not only moral or sexual; it is also stratified by color and class.

Third, the novel is organized so as to resist a simple morality tale. Claudia McTeer narrates, as a child in the present of the events and as an adult looking back on them. An omniscient narrator takes over to give us the backstories of

Pauline and Cholly, and Pauline's own consciousness is partly voiced in her section. This multiple narration refuses to present the oppressed as faultless victims. Claudia's early revulsion at the blue-eyed baby doll represents a healthy rage against the commodification of beauty, a rage most adult characters have been forced to abandon. Yet the adult narrator also confesses her own implication in the community's failure, a point developed in 2.2.

Fourth, the novel makes Pauline Breedlove essential to understanding internalized racism in adults. Pauline absorbs the lessons of the cinema, comes to see herself as ugly, and finds in her employers' home, and in the pretty blond child there, a world of order and approval that her own household lacks. She gives the Fisher girl the tenderness she withholds from Pecola. Internalized racism here is not an abstraction; it is a mother's inability to see her daughter.

Finally, patriarchal violence compounds this fracture. Cholly Breedlove's formative humiliation, forced by white men to continue a sexual encounter with Darlene under their gaze, teaches him to direct his rage at someone weaker than himself, not at the men who humiliated him. The result is the rape of Pecola, committed in an act the novel renders as a perverse mixture of tenderness and violence. This is not an excuse for Cholly; it shows what Collins (2000) means when she describes interlocking systems of domination that reach Black women and girls from several directions at once. Pecola is othered twice: first by a racist society that renders her subhuman, and then by an impoverished patriarchal structure within her own home that devours its most defenseless member.

Morrison thus demonstrates that the most devastating consequence of alterity is that the marginalized learn to police, devalue, and other one another. Oppression does not stop at the color line or the boundary of the neighborhood; it bleeds inward.

2.2 Collective Complicity, Failed Witness, and the Limits of Sisterhood in *The Bluest Eye*

Morrison widens her critique from the family to the whole community of Lorain. The townsfolk are not passive onlookers. They watch Pecola's collapse with a mix of morbid curiosity, detachment, and self-protective denial. When she becomes pregnant by her father, the community's response is gossip and condemnation, not help, and the novel's adult narrator admits that the town drew a sense of its own worth from the contrast with Pecola's supposed ugliness.

This collective failure illustrates a neglected dimension of alterity: the refusal of an oppressed group to recognize the humanity of its most vulnerable member when doing so would threaten its own fragile standing. In Levinasian terms, the community looks at Pecola's face and does not

hear the command it carries. In the terms of Part I, her testimony is also not heard: when Pecola tells her mother of the rape, Pauline does not believe her and beats her. This is a textbook case of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007), compounded by the hermeneutical gap that leaves a child without the words to make her violation understood.

The community's behavior can be read through bell hooks's (1992) account of the gaze. For hooks, Black spectators have historically developed an "oppositional gaze" that refuses to accept the images of Blackness produced by white representation. In *The Bluest Eye*, the reverse occurs for most characters: they do not oppose the dominant gaze but adopt it and turn it on one another. Du Bois's double consciousness and Fanon's analysis of the self seen through white eyes explain how that adoption becomes policing. Mae Henderson's (1989) work on Black women writers' "speaking in tongues," the capacity to speak in multiple, competing voices at once, helps account for the novel's form: the voices of Claudia, the omniscient narrator, Pauline, and the community do not harmonize, and their friction exposes how marginalized communities absorb dominant hierarchies.

The novel is not without counter-examples, and they are important for a comparative reading of sisterhood. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, children, try to protect Pecola; they plant marigold seeds in the hope that their care will save her baby, and the seeds do not bloom. The prostitutes Poland, China, and Miss Marie are the only adults who treat Pecola with unselfconscious kindness, and they are the community's own outcasts. Sisterhood in Morrison's novel therefore exists, but it is fragile, disproportionately located among children and society's outcasts, and powerless against the structures that surround it. The failure of witness is thus the novel's deepest tragedy: the moment when a community turns its back on its own child to preserve its own survival.

2.3 The Politics of Space: Architectural Geographies and the Limits of Sanctuary in *The Women of Brewster Place*

To understand Naylor's critique of community, we must begin with the physical setting. Brewster Place is a dead-end street cut off from the rest of the city by a brick wall. The novel's prologue explains that the wall was built as the result of municipal politics and the interests of those in power, in order to separate the street, and the people who live there, from the city around it. The wall is therefore not a neutral backdrop. It is an active participant in the neighborhood's confinement, and, in the sense given by Massey (1994) and Soja (2010), a material expression of spatial injustice.

Within this enclosed space, the residents build networks of support. Mattie Michael takes in and shelters others, Etta

Mae Johnson visits and moves on, Kiswana Browne organizes tenants against negligent landlords, and Cora Lee and Ciel each carry their own stories of loss and survival. Their solidarity is real. Yet the physical confinement of a dead-end street also creates a claustrophobic social atmosphere. Because the residents cannot direct their anger at the municipal forces and systemic racism that trapped them, anger and anxiety circulate inward. The brick wall thus materializes a containment that is at once physical and ideological: it traps the residents inside narrow definitions of respectability and survival.

Naylor does not treat all residents alike, however, and an honest reading must not either. The hostility toward Lorraine and Theresa is not unanimous. Mattie, Etta Mae, and Kiswana show varying degrees of openness or at least ambivalence, whereas other neighbors, such as the gossiping Sophie, turn suspicion into a public weapon. The novel is thus a study of a divided community, and it asks what makes some of its members capable of hospitality while others cannot extend it.

When conflict erupts, it occurs within a closed circuit from which there is no escape. The wall prevents anyone from leaving the street, and also prevents the street from being seen. The assault that closes Lorraine's story takes place in the alley beside the wall, in the one place the neighborhood has agreed not to look. Spatial containment, in other words, fosters a communal toxicity in which what is hidden may be done without consequence.

2.4 Queering the Margin: Anti-Lesbian Prejudice and the Limits of Sisterhood

The chapter "The Two" is the novel's most searching examination of internal exclusion. Lorraine and Theresa, a lesbian couple, move to Brewster Place hoping for a quiet life away from hostility elsewhere. They meet fear and judgment instead. The term *homophobia* is more usual in English than *lesbophobia*, but the particular form of rejection they meet is directed at two women whose bond excludes men, and it is useful to keep this specificity in view. Cheryl Clarke (1983) argued, in an essay that belongs to the same Black feminist anthology as Barbara Smith's editorial work, that Black communities' homophobia amounts to a "failure to transform": a refusal to apply to sexuality the critique of oppression that those communities direct at racism. Naylor's chapter dramatizes exactly this failure.

The literature often celebrates women's support of women as an unqualified good. That ideal, however, tacitly assumes that all those involved conform to heterosexual norms. The residents of Brewster Place, already vulnerable to discrimination from the outside world, project their own fears on the couple. They rely on respectability, the strategy

that Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) analyzed in the history of Black Baptist women: a politics of moral uprightness through which a group under attack attempts to prove its worth to those who stigmatize it. As Cathy Cohen (1997) argued, however, this kind of politics tends to leave behind those members of Black communities whose lives do not conform, whom it treats as liabilities for the whole. Lorraine and Theresa's openness triggers a deep anxiety about contamination, and the residents turn that anxiety against them, not against the unfair standards of the outer world.

The rejection is also connected to traditional ideas about motherhood and men. Hortense Spillers (1987) has shown how Black women's relation to the family, kinship, and gender has been shaped by the history of slavery and the patriarchal norms imposed on Black families; under such conditions, Black women have often been valued primarily through the roles of mother, caretaker, or partner of men. Because Lorraine and Theresa's relationship exists entirely outside male approval, some neighbors see it as a challenge to how things have always been done. Judith Butler's (1990) analysis of the heterosexual matrix, in which gender, sex, and desire are made to cohere in a single normative pattern, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1990) work on the closet as a structure of enforced knowledge and silence, both help to describe the neighborhood's response: it relies on gossip, suspicion, and the demand that the couple be either invisible or accountable, rather than on any inquiry into who they are.

This, too, is a failure of voice and hearing in the terms of Part I. No one in the street speaks with the couple to understand their lives; the residents rely on silence, whispering, and the circulation of old prejudices. The community refuses to listen to their story, which Fricker (2007) would call a case of hermeneutical injustice, since the shared concepts that could make a lesbian couple's life intelligible to their neighbors are missing or withheld. In Levinasian terms, the neighbors refuse the face-to-face.

The novel's central argument about exclusion is carried by its violent climax. Lorraine is assaulted in the alley by a group of young men from the neighborhood, led by C. C. Baker, who are driven by the same attitudes, in coarser form, as the adult residents. The assault is not committed by outsiders; it is the extreme of a hostility that the community has made thinkable. In the novel's aftermath, Lorraine's encounter with Ben, the old, alcoholic building superintendent who had befriended her, ends in his death, a tragedy that deepens the sense of a community in which the vulnerable destroy one another. The novel shows with painful clarity what becomes of sisterhood when it is conditional on conformity.

Naylor does not leave her readers with this verdict alone. The final chapter, "The Block Party," brings the residents together in an event in which Mattie's dream of the wall coming down becomes a shared, communal vision, and the women begin, literally, to tear at the bricks. The sequence does not erase what has happened, but it suggests that the community's capacity for self-criticism and repair is the condition of its survival. Naylor insists that sisterhood can only be freeing if it is made unconditional.

2.5 Comparing the Two Novels: Sisterhood, Space, and Witness

The two novels can now be confronted on three points that the foregoing analysis has isolated.

Sisterhood. In *The Bluest Eye*, solidarity among women exists, but it is displaced to the margins: the child friends and the outcast prostitutes. The women who hold social authority, Geraldine and Pauline, enforce the dominant hierarchy. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, sisterhood is at the center of the narrative, as a lived practice of mutual aid, but it is tested by the arrival of a couple who do not conform. Morrison shows its near absence; Naylor shows its limits. Together they suggest that sisterhood cannot be assumed as a given. It must be built, and it must be extended to those who threaten the group's self-image.

Space. Both novels make the spatial setting an agent. Lorain, in Morrison's novel, is a town in which poverty and racial hierarchy structure every household, and in which homes are the sites of the harm. Brewster Place is a street literally walled in. In both, confinement turns pressure inward. The difference is that Morrison's space is diffuse and Naylor's is architectural, which allows Naylor to end with the image of its demolition.

Witness. In *The Bluest Eye*, the failure of witness is complete: no one hears Pecola, and the adult narrator is left to carry the memory. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, witness is partial and belated: some residents see what is done to Lorraine, and the community's gathering in the final chapter acts as a kind of retrospective acknowledgment. In both, the question is the same: who is heard, and who is allowed to be seen?

The two novels also differ in the kind of otherness that is excluded. Pecola is othered chiefly through race, color, class, and gender; Lorraine and Theresa through sexuality, in a community that is for the most part aligned with them on race. Read together, the novels show that the logic of exclusion is the same across these different axes, which is the contribution of an intersectional reading (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000).

III. CONCLUSION

This article has traced how alterity operates in two novels of African American women's writing, not only as an external force of oppression but as an internal fracture within the spaces meant to offer sanctuary. By distinguishing the Levinasian ethical Other from the Other produced by domination, and by distinguishing external from internal alterity, it has proposed a vocabulary for what both authors show.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison exposes the devastation wrought by white supremacist standards of beauty, by class respectability, and by patriarchal violence. Through the child's and adult's voices of Claudia McTeer, the omniscient narrator, and the backstories of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, the novel shows how structural violence colonizes the inner life, and how a community, by failing to bear witness, completes the destruction of its most defenseless member. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor turns from the psychological interior to the architectural and social boundaries of a walled enclave. She honors the networks of survival the women create, and she refuses to sentimentalize them: when belonging is made conditional on conformity, a community manufactures its own internal exiles. Her ending, however, allows for repair.

Reading the two authors together yields an ethical imperative for contemporary criticism. Liberation cannot be achieved through selective empathy or through the simple inversion of power relations. True belonging requires an unsparing reckoning with the alterity that exists across society's large fault lines and also within homes, streets, and neighborhoods. By bringing these hidden fractures to light, Morrison and Naylor turn literature into an instrument of social critique and urge us to build spaces of solidarity that are open to the Other.

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