Chapter V

Antidote to Alienation

African-American literature speaks to the deeper meaning of the African-American presence in this nation. This presence has always been a test case of the nation’s claims to freedom, democracy, equality, the inclusiveness of all. As such it can be said that African-American literature explores the very issues of freedom and equality which were long denied to colored people in the United States. As said by Angela Y Davis in emancipation of African-American as the progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensity of social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social liberation.

Gloria Naylor’s fourth novel, Bailey’s Café, is a collection of tales that the nameless proprietor of the magical café sets up. This woman-centered novel begins with Bailey, as his customers have named him. He is the conductor, or maestro, of this novel and one of two men that have the opportunity to tell their stories. Although each of the characters make their way to Bailey’s Café—whose location is described as being “. . . right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility the back door opens to a void.” (BC 76) from different regions, the café serves as the focal point for this community of people. With no place else to go each of the characters in the novel comes to Bailey’s Café at a point in their life where the only alternative is quite possibly death. From a wino and ten cent whore to a pimp and a cross dressing man each member of this ensemble finds the café when they have reached their lowest point, if for no other reason but to take a break and explore other possibilities. The café then embodies Baker Houston’s in Race, Writing, and Difference (1986) at the junction embodies his notion of “a meditational site where familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office
of adequate cultural understanding” (386). Through a series of linguistic elements, characteristic of the blues, Naylor formulates an unhappy tale that thematically illustrates the many phases of the hopelessness while drawing attention to the café as the way station of the wretchedness, the force that links all of the stories.

Naylor continues the traditions she has established in her earlier works a mocking yet quiet criticism of American racial discrimination, figurative explanation, combination of the epic and natural and postponement of reality. Yet in Bailey’s Café, Naylor adds a new dimension to her work, using African-American harmony as a unifying image. To read this book is to listen to the epigraph which tells us:

hush now can you hear it can’t be far away
needing the blues to get there
look and you can hear it
look and you can hear
the blues open
a place never
closing:
Bailey’s
Cafe.

Although literal place is Bailey’s, the metaphoric places are in the hearts and lives of the characters. Served in Bailey Café is a bill of fare of last souls for whom life has dipped out more than they can accept.

*Bailey’s Café* is Naylor’s finest novel to date. Her rendering of life in a New York pathway reveal the city’s magic, its ballet, its brutal stories; its street-lamp sparks of trust. It
examines a broad variety of colored women’s lives while dealing with the convolution of an international American society still caught up in preventive ideas of color, gender and culture. It is more literary than polemical, bridging ancient stories and modern problems to create a background for the mutilations women have suffered and a space for curing their souls.

The novel is a shady little dive on the edge of nowhere, run by a guy who answers to the name of Bailey’s wife, Nadine. They specialize in bad food and lost hopes, catering to a series of vividly drawn characters, all of whom have come to the end of a bitter road. Each spins out his or her story. Some almost gothic in their disgust, some with disappointment in a compelling blues structure narrative. There is Sadie, who tried to win her abusive mother’s love by being the best, cleanest girl in the world. Eve is another character who runs a bordello that provides a home for lost women and consolation for the desperate men. Next, Naylor introduces Jesse Bell, who pays a horrible price for stepping out of her class. And then Miss Maple, who, in the book’s most darkly humorous vignette, tells his unnerving tale of trying to make it as a colored man in corporate America.

_Bailey's Cafe_ does not have a conventional plot, moving instead from tale to tale just as one might hear them while sitting in the Cafe. Each voice rings separate and distinct, from Miss Maple's intellectual, educated tones to Jesse Bell's tough-girl colloquialisms. The novel’s least successful section deals with the disgust of clitoral command, the same surgery that scars the protagonist of Alice Walker’s recent _Possessing the Secret of Joy_. The young Mariam has suffered this wicked operation and become pregnant afterwards. The birth of her child offers the faintest hope of liberation for the denizens of Bailey’s. Unfortunately, Mariam remains a symbol, never becoming as vivid as the other habitués. Mariam’s slenderness as a character is a minor
flaw in this impressive novel. In this novel, one cannot depart without being touched by the wonder and horror that lie there or fail to be impressed by Naylor's ability to show it simple.

As Archetypal criticism argues that archetypes determine the form and function of literary works that a text's meaning is shaped by cultural and psychological myths. Archetypes are the unknowable basic forms personified or concretized in recurring images, symbols, or patterns which may include motifs such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, recognizable character types such as the trickster or the hero, symbols such as the apple or snake, or images all laden with meaning already when employed in a particular work.

Archetypal criticism gets its impetus from psychologist Carl Jung, who postulated that humankind has a collective unconscious, a kind of universal psyche, which is manifested in dreams and myths and which harbors themes and images that we all inherit. Literature, therefore, imitates not the world but rather the total dream of humankind. Jung called mythology the textbook of the archetypes.

Here, in this novel suffering becomes an environment, which is identified as the collective fate of the community, while pride inspired her individual characters to pursue their separate dreams. Bailey's Café address to the issue of human relations, in a cultural context and in an advanced capitalism. In Bailey's Café, Naylor constructed her characters in such a way that they are on a pilgrimage. She sends her character to self – redemption. These are the whole premise behind the café that many patrons accidently or purposefully arrive to the boarding or whore house of Eve’s. Naylor’s characters are desperately seeking salvation or they will perish by their own evils that they have experienced in their lives. In the first few lines, Bailey tells us that he was distraught at the horrors of combat and the destitution of war, and when he reached the point of giving in, he found this mysterious café, and began anew.
Bailey’s experience is not unlike the other characters in the play. They all reach Bailey’s Café in the hope of not being served a hot meal, but to regain something that was lost to them. Similar to the café, Eve’s boarding or whore house is also a safe haven for the characters. For all the characters, suffering becomes an environment which is identified with the collective fate of the community while pride inspires her individual characters to pursue their separate dreams. By placing her individual characters in such graphically defined geographic settings, Naylor has been able to bring out the dialectic of contradiction that operates between the separate dreams pursued by the members of the community and its collective destiny, which is in the hands of historical forces. The very factors which contribute towards the economic progress of the colored challenge their identity.

The epigraph is pivotal to the novel because it clues the reader into how each character finds Bailey’s Café. Naylor suggests the blues is not only a vehicle that takes her characters from one form of existence to another, but it is a physical entity that creates a space for itself. By revealing the sadness, and its subsequent power prior to introducing the characters of the novel, Naylor makes it possible for the reader to leap beyond the immediate realm of possibility and into the infinite possibility that the blues can, and oftentimes does, create. Naylor places the reader at the beginning of a blues number by introducing “Maestro, If You Please . . .” or the conductor of the number. Although, the depression typically does not have a conductor, the maestro is integral to the story in that he sets the stage and tone for the rest of the characters. “There’s a whole set to be played here if you want to stick around and listen to the music. And since I’m standing at center stage, I’m sure you’d enjoy it if I first set the tempo with a few fascinating tidbits about myself” (BC 4).
The next section that follows The Vamp is “The Jam,” which describes the main section of the novel. Each character in “The Jam” is given an opportunity to improvise and tell her/his story. At the beginning of each chapter in the Jam, Bailey continues to set the tempo by introducing each character prior to his stories being told. By setting the stage and beginning each character’s story, Naylor continues to reinforce the idea of the café being the junction for the depressed minds.

The café then becomes the place, where each of these characters makes the conscious decision to leave the reality as they knew it in an effort to become one with the blues. The first tale in “The Jam,” titled “Mood: Indigo,” is a reference to Duke Ellington’s 1931 song of the same title. In “The Wrap” Bailey tells us, “I don’t believe that life is supposed to make you feel good, or to make you feel miserable either. Life is just supposed to make you feel” (219). Likewise, as Naylor leaves each character and the novel as a whole without closure she leaves the reader/listener with the same words to live by.

Fowler in *Chicago Tribune Books* (1992) comments “Geographically, Bailey’s Café is everywhere. It can be entered from the real world at any point; it deals with is despair” (6). The author tells us the stories of some of the people who find the café. Memorable and pleasing, harsh and funny, strange and familiar, these stories are narrated, for most of the book, by the café’s cook and a manager. Bailey is not his name, but he lets others to call him that. He is a wonderful character, full of humor and insight, and his voice sings us through the painful parts of his own story. Yet Naylor’s finest achievement remains the café itself.

In Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*, remedial places are as noteworthy as curing people. Relying on metaphor as she did in *Linden Hills*, but adding a mythic constituent as powerful as any in recent African-American literature, Naylor in Bailey’s features two sites: the café itself, still
known by the name of its long–gone former owner, and Eve’s garden, refuge for the afflicted of both genders but primarily for women who have been sexually ill-treated or are drug–dependent or victims of their own beauty. For those seeking consolation, Bailey’s Café, and Eve’s place, is their goal. One of the seekers learns that “I was circling back towards the east again and realized I’d come to the end of the line. That’s when I heard of a place where women like me could go. Just get off at that next stop, I was told; you can find Bailey’s Café, in any town. They turned out to be right” (BC 112).

Baileys Café is an intermediate house. It is halfway between the finite and the infinite, halfway between the belief that the universe cares for us as individuals and the evidence that it does not. Because these two positions would seem to be mutually trendy, it is delightful to watch as Naylor manages not only to argue on both sides, but also to represent the opposition as an actual restaurant. The edge of the world is at the front door of Bailey’s Café, and the void at the back. A person finds Bailey’s when he or more often, she reaches a certain level of depression, the café offers its customers, a menu of indifferent food except for the weekends, when anything desired is available and a period of time in which no time passes. The owner himself observes:

I guess whoever Bailey was – if there was a Bailey – he knew this place had to be real real mobile. Even though this planet is round, there are just too many spots where you can find yourself hanging on to the edge just like I was; and unless there’s some space, some place, to take a breather for a while, the edge of the world - frightening as it is - could be the end of the world, which would be quite a pity. (28)

says Bailey.
Bailey’s Café is episodic, but it requires the unifying commitment, which kept that book so tightly structured, under its apparently loose and smooth appearance. The customers are not especially unambiguous diner, somewhere in Urban America, tell their stories, or have them told by the husband and wife, who run the diner. Sadie, anxious to please her drunken mother, becomes first a whore, then the beaten wife of a drunk, then a homeless drunk and whore, who turn down one chance of happiness in order to save a man, who shares her misery; Peaches wounded her face to liberate herself of a brutally jealous lover. The lives hardly interrupt each other, yet they share the same grief.

The novel begins with the café owner, Bailey telling us that his customer’s don’t come for the food and they don’t come for the atmosphere. The stories of the café customers, Sister Carrie, Sugar man, Sadie, Daniel, and Iceman, expose the great effort of colored living in an intimidating environment during the dejection; many are of love gone crooked. Of this, Sadie’s story is the most distressing.

Bailey, begins his tale by giving the reader a glimpse into his early childhood. Rather than talking about schoolyard bullies, or a first crush, he centers on his family life—in particular, his mother and father and their interaction with their employers, the Van Morrisons, a well-to-do colored family in Brooklyn. This form of storytelling is oftentimes found in the blues as the blues singer will set up her/his story by telling the audience about something that “Mama” or “Papa” used to say. One thing that Bailey is careful to point out is that, “While most of what happens in life is below the surface, other people do come up for air and translate their feelings for the general population now and then” (19). Bailey’s tale then can be translated as his coming up for air.
Throughout his childhood years, Bailey becomes somewhat of an expert at reading below the surface simply by observing his parents, their interaction with one another, and listening in on their many conversations regarding his brother:

‘If my older brother hadn’t been so much older than me, he probably could have explained things to me a little sooner than I learned them myself. But with a twelve-year difference in our ages, he was already on the road before I started kindergarten

- To discover his fortune: my mother

- A shiftless bum: my father” (5).

This division was only the beginning of how his parents didn’t see eye to eye on many things and the beginning of his education on reading below the surface. Through his mother Bailey learned of a hate that is “My mother hated Mrs. Van Morrison with a quiet passion that’s peculiar to women: it burns low, slow, and long” (5). This secret hatred was often directed at Mrs. Van Morrison “I used to think my mother didn’t just up and poison Mrs. Van Morrison because we ate whatever they had left over from supper, but now I know that she relished hating that woman and would have done anything to keep her alive and well so the whole thing could go on and on” (5).

Through this demonstration of how the outward self and inward self sometimes differed it would stand to reason that Bailey would develop the knack for reading below the surface in order to anticipate the wants, needs, and desires of others. However, once he comes of age and the dawn of the Second World War approaches, his notion of reading below the surface is challenged, when the things that sometimes linger below the surface become one with reality. This retelling of Bailey’s Second World War experiences is preceded by the recurring phrase,
“We weren’t getting into Tokyo” (21). This repeated phrase is one of a few examples of repetition. Through this repetition, Naylor draws attention not only to the repeated phrase, but to the action that follows the repeated phrase.

However, at first glance to the reader Bailey’s phrase means exactly that they were not getting into Tokyo, primarily because Bailey, like many other African-American’s during Second World War, occupied service positions that kept him far away from combat. But under the surface of, ‘We weren’t getting into Tokyo’, the reader later finds out that not getting into Tokyo means getting into ‘Guadalcanal, New Guinea, Okinawa, Saipan, Pikadon, Manila, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.’ Consequently, at these points in Bailey’s past, he learned not only what he was capable of under the surface, but that oftentimes for those he encountered, friend or foe, there was no “surface” at all; everything was exposed for all to see:

“They ate their own dead in New Guinea. And I stepped over clumps of jungle ants finishing what they left” (24). “I was saved. Hiroshima in exchange for my soul. Count the bodies. I’d left more bodies in the streets of Manila. On the hillsides of Okinawa. Pika-don. Just count the bodies. But then Nagasaki - where it turned to claim out children. The unborn children” (26).

It wasn’t until the war was over, and Bailey finds himself in San Francisco that the reader becomes aware that the things he experienced during the war have sent him to the edge and he is in need of a place, where he can simply exist and not be consumed by his depression. In the following passage, the state of being on the brink is one of the paramount themes found in the dejection songs and Naylor effectively sets the stage for Bailey’s pessimistic tale to be told:

What do we do when the party is over? I knew life was going to be very different (A different prayer, could there have been a different prayer), and I felt it just
wasn’t worth it. Before Hiroshima it had definitely been worth it. I still believe this country had even been worth Hiroshima happening, but at the very moment of Hiroshima happening, it all stopped being worth it. You get a man like that, with thoughts like that, staring out over the edge . . . The only world worth existing for me in that white shroud was the sound of the surf, and I already knew what the surf was bringing . . . susshing . . . susshing . . . A hand reached through the fog and touched my shoulder. (27)

By telling Bailey’s story from boyhood to manhood Naylor sets Bailey’s tale up to resemble many blues songs. Rather than simply telling their audience that they have the blues, singers would sometimes take their audience on a trip down memory lane so the full scope of their blues could be understood.

Bailey tells us about his courtship of her. He saw her at a baseball game, followed her and then, afraid to attract her attention in any way that would make him seem a masher, dumped a sherbet cone down her dress:

My throat was clogged up I wouldn’t have made it through all of that any way and she was about to walk off from the peddler’s cart. One run behind at the bottom of the ninth, so you make and all – or – nothing play for the home team. When this girl walked out of my life, what on earth was I going to do with this melting raspberry ice? Since I knew the answer was Absolutely nothing, I dumped it right down her back. She spun around and called me a clumsy fool. I smiled broadly and agreed with her. Then she smacked me in the head with her straw purse. The courtship was on. (15 - 16)

Bailey loves his wife, but has a tough time liking her, yet they are:
We’re the right kind of fit, me and my woman. I can take a blue streak and I believe that she hasn’t strung more than six sentences together in her whole life. Nadine doesn’t have to go and on about anything. She times what she has to say and makes those one or two words count. I’d get plenty of care packages while I was overseas but short short letters. (13)

Bailey remembers the letters which was sent to his friends when he was a warrior in World War II:

Some of the guys got mail from their girlfriends and wives that it would take ‘em whole heart to read telling them everything Aunt Tessie, Aunt Murial, Cousin Joe was saying, describing how the snow looked outside the window, what the dog was doing – that kind of stuff – along with the usual how – much – I – miss – and – love – you’s. And even those women who weren’t too flowery with the words would fill up the page with X’s and hearts. I dreaded mail call cause it meant I was going to get ribbed. (13)

He clearly describes about the reserved nature of his beloved Nadine:

Deenie doesn’t waste words and so she wasn’t gonnna waste paper. My letters came in these little thumbnail envelops that weren’t much bigger than the stamp. How the guys would laugh. But like I said, she has perfect timing. And going into the third year of my stint in the navy, when I didn’t think none of us were gonna survive now that were winning the war against the Japanese and my nerves were wound so tight I feared popping lose like a lot of good men around me, I got this one – line letter: If you don’t make it home, I’m marrying the butcher. Love, Nadine. (13)
Bailey is talkative, Nadine supernaturally reserved. Her silence has such a powerful, magical feel that one of the books few disappointments is the chapter in which, she begins to talk. She gives us the story of Mariam, a story, she inform us is so dreadfully female, and Bailey has sneaked off rather than tell it to us. The story is a moving one, but Nadine’s voice is unsatisfactorily distinguished from the other women’s and too average to belong to Nadine.

The coffee here is bad and the food is of poorer quality, but the place has a mystical pull that attracts people with long histories and invites them to remember:

Like this place their personal discovery and only for them and their kind. I know more about some of them than they know about themselves, and they all boil down to only one type, or they wouldn’t be in here in the first place. You can’t tell them that, though. And when things get too heated, I just turn my back and lean over the grill like I’m doing something miraculous with a chicken Monday, or a hamburger, Tuesday. But I can recognize their voices with my eyes closed.

(32)

It reminds a little bit of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is supposed to Chaucer’s host at the Tabard Inn was Harry. Bailey and Naylor’s responsibilities of anecdote impressive voices echo, the fourteenth century antecedent. It is author’s achievement at giving world literature an African-American spin.

In addition, by placing Bailey in various situations, Naylor creates a maestro for her pessimistic composition that is able to empathize with the plight of his customers without judgment. His unique sensibility of seeing below the surface aids him in orchestrating the number that is about to unfold. Through this awareness, Bailey is able to direct each character in the right direction usually to Eve’s and ultimately creates a melody that speaks of each unique
experience. However, once the maestro tells his story, he moves the number right along to “The Vamp.” In a disparity the vamp is a minor section where a brief solo, or some kind of creativity, takes place.

In fact, two of the most flourishing stories are the two about men. Bailey's own and the one told by Miss Maple, the thoroughly male, cross-dressing bouncer at Eve's boarding house. It is not that these stories are any less or any more hurting than the women’s, but the men’s voices have a lighter touch. The book is clearly spiritual, filled with Biblical references and retorts to Biblical stories and, just as clearly magical. It points the destructive power of real events and argues that fiction is equally powerful. It includes history, myth, imagination and quotidian element. So much is overcrowded into a comparatively short book, so little left out, that it spills into the imagination of the reader and travels in a hundred different directions.

This profusion plays against the particular pains enclosed in the various characters of the story. Pain is one thing the world contains in excessive amounts. Naylor does not hesitate to show us this. But the world contains everything else in unbalanced amounts, but the world contains everything else in excessive amounts as well. Through her beautiful prose and by way of an inattentive enclosure, Naylor achieves an excitement that prevents Bailey's Café, pain filled as it is, from being a miserable book.

Bailey and, at times, his wife Nadine coordinate the story as a whole, introducing each character in turn. But the focus of the novel is the first person blues narrations of the café’s clients, mostly women, always in same way maltreated. Eve tells us, she is at least in a thousand years old. She describes being raised and abused by Godfather. He threw her out of his “paradise” in Louisiana because of her awakening sexuality, but not before leaving her kneeling in a pool of vomit and shit’ from a monumental purge:
And then he made me strip off the one I was wearing – and he burned that, too, along with the cotton underpants and cotton wraps I used to bind down my breasts. Those underpants been ruined anyway, because then he purged me with jars of warm water and Epsom salts. To remove, he said, every ounce of food his hard work had put into my stomach.” (88)

Eve then finds her garden on this New York City Block and sets about serving others lost and abused women. The women end up at her boarding house chooses their own men and find sanctuary from their disgusting past. Some of their lives are stories, now cast from a women’s perception.

It is only a way station, Eve tells us, with no assurance. Eve runs the equally phantasmagorical boarding house, unless it is a brothel, down the street. Eve’s brownstone is surrounded by a garden of wildflowers; each of the women, who stay there has her own totemic bloom. To see a particular woman, a man must buy her particular flower from Eve and take it as an offering. One can hear several stories about the women in Eve’s boarding house, and Eve’s is one of them. Thrown out of her home by her godfather for a display of sexuality, she makes a terrifying journey to New Orleans. This trial destroys and remakes her. “If I could get through all I’d gotten through, then I was overqualified to be the mayor of New Orleans. And much too overqualified to be the governor of Louisiana. And when I kept thinking on up the line, the comparisons were beneath contempt” (91).

Eve is a customer in the café, but as administrator of the boarding house, she holds more supremacy within this world than anyone else seems to. She makes actual decisions about who may stay, and who will go. She is not moved by charitable trust. One can see her decline in the saddest cases, and Bailey, in whose opinion one can place a certain amount of trust on such
matters, which declares us that Eve is not a generous woman. Her powers and intentions remain restrained and inexplicable.

Bailey’s Café also is a way station for those searching for Eve’s place. Excluded from her Godfather’s home for her sensualist, Eve walks from the Louisiana delta to New Orleans, a walk that took:

And the only road that lay open to me was the one ahead, and the only way I could walk it was then I was. I had no choice but to walk into New Orleans neither male nor female – mud but I could right then and there choose what I was going to be and when walked back out. About a thousand years. Caked by delta dust, she arrives neither male nor female – mud. But I could right then there choose what I was going to be when I walked back out. (91)

Travelling eastward, she ends her march on a dead end New York Street. On this street, Bailey’s is:

And thinking on up the line was to come to the end of the line about what I could do with my potential. It seemed there was nowhere on earth for a woman like me. That’s how I ended up here, taking over this brown stone and starting my garden. And over the last twenty five years the only drawback has been that, sometimes, in this business you could use your sense of humor. (91)

Godfather, an approach for male authority, is omnipresent in his influence within the delta community. Perhaps the most definitive change in the Eve’s developing awareness occurs when she comes to recognize his Church as a social assemble reflecting the hierarchies of a society, which downgrade women to the undesirable position of submissive:
To be thrown out his church was to be thrown out of the world. The town had only three buildings that qualified as such: the school, the cotton exchange, and the church. He was the preacher in one, the scale foreman and bookkeeper in another, and no one attended that drafty school past the ninth grade. And since he had thrown me out, there was nobody who would dare to take me in. (85)

Eve’s departure occurs as Godfather sends her out without any second thought. Naked and hungry, she is forced to provide for herself amidst terrible economic circumstances. Eve successfully recreates herself, however, in preparation for her role among a community of outcast women. That she has no clear-cut parental ties suggest that she is at once natural and supernatural, more than a mere woman and her song are replete with indication to organic matter, especially the wealthy delta soil. Godfather claims to have found her “The very day he said he found me in a patch of ragweed, so knew I was still tied to the birth sac and he had to bite off the unbiblical cord with his teeth and spit it out to save me from being poisoned: And going through all that for any – she creature earns me the right to decide when it was born” (83). As she grows into womanhood, her budding sexuality, given fullest experience during her earth – stomping with Billy Boy, regenerate her awareness of a fundamental oneness with a rich earth. One of her many meeting with Billy Boy takes place under a juniper bush while Eve is “Low to the ground, trying to blend in, with my brown hair, brown-skin, and brown sack dress. And Ape it would have been early evening because Godfather led a prayer meeting at church then, and if he were home he would have found some excuse to get me ever from the other children.” (86).

At one point, Eve requests the essence of the Louisiana delta:

The delta dust exists to be wet. And the delta dust exists to grow things, anything, in soil so fertile its tomatoes, beans, and cotton are obscene in their richness. And
since that was one of the driest winters in living memory, the dust sought out what wetness it could and clung to the tiny drops of perspiration in my pores. It used that thin film of moisture to creep its way up toward the saliva in my mouth, the mucus in my nose. Mud forming and caking around the tear ducts in my eyes, gluing my lashes together. (90)

She feels the transformation in her physical health:

There was even enough moisture deep within my earwax to draw it; my head becoming stuffed up and all sounds a deep hum. It found the hidden dampness under my fingernails, between my toes. The moist space between my hips was easy, but then even into the crevices around the anus, drawing itself up into the slick walls of my intestines. Up my thighs and deep into my vagina, so much mud that it finally stilled my menstrual blood. Layers and layers of it were forming, forming, doing what it existed to do, growing the only thing it could find in one of the driest winters in living memory. Godfather always said that he made me, but I was born of the delta. (90)

Eve uses her experience—lost love, lost innocence, and displacement—to teach and nurture those who are willing to listen, and leaves those alone who turn a deaf ear. True to form, however, the two minor characters that were introduced in “The Vamp” Sugar Man and Sister Carrie make an appearance in Eve’s story “—Come on and admit it, Bailey. She’s got a good game going, and the nerve to badmouth me. Every pimp don’t need to wear pants. — A house full of nothing but sluts and whores and tramps” (80). Through their improvised solo of insults, Naylor appears to be making an attempt at adding a strange harmonious mix in Eve’s story as a way of drawing attention to her character’s importance, to the individual women and the entire
community. Eve’s lost love comes as a result of those in her community passing judgment on the relationship she has with Godfather.

Since Godfather was a man of few words, the only affection she experienced was on Saturday nights when he bathed her; as a result of the looks and questions of the women in the community, the baths stopped: “Did those women understand what they had done with their slanted eyes and evil questions? I was now forced to go through months and months with no one and nothing to touch me” (83). The questions posed by the women in the community and subsequently the end of the only intimacy that Eve had caused a chain reaction, whose end result led Eve to Bailey’s Café. Eve’s lost innocence happens during a game of hide-and-seek. Eager for touch, Eve is pressed against the earth, feeling the warmth of the soil and the smell of the grass when Billy Boy comes stomping by “And I hurl myself onto my stomach to press as tight as I can into the earth and the tremors, the tremors on my arms, legs, thighs. I part my thighs ever so slightly and arch my pelvis hard into the soil—there, yes, now I can feel it even down there. So close to the earth—the tremors. Stomp, Billy (87).

When Godfather finds her in the throes of this illicit game, the third and final stage of this chain reaction is set in motion. Eve is then stripped of her clothes, and purged of any food that Godfather may have provided for her and cast out. With nowhere to go Eve takes a thousand year journey from Pilottown to Arabi whereupon she becomes one with the delta dust. By making Eve’s character well traveled and essentially a self-made woman, Naylor cements Eve’s role as the cornerstone for the women that find her boarding house. Because of Eve’s life experience, she is able to give in abundance without expecting anything in return. Eve, steps in to be the mother figure to a motherless child, Mariam whose only words are: “No man has ever touched me” (143).
Eve, whose name means 'mother of all living,' is basically self-generated. She is what Karla Holloway describes as the ancestor, and it is her narrative in particular, whose distinct patterns pertaining to structure present in colored women's writing - a structure repeated in the other narratives, which encompass the text. Not only does Eve's song, with its references to the Louisiana delta soil, suggest a dissolving of traditional historiography, it exposes a freedom from imposed gender-specific labels. “I had no choice but to walk into New Orleans neither male nor female – mud.” she informs the reader, “But I could right then and there choose what I was going to be when I walked back out” (91).

Unfortunately, the other men, who populate the novel’s fictional landscape do not fare as well as Bailey does. They are largely responsible for perpetuating domination that the women face. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Eve’s song. One in a long line of larger than life central mother recognize in Naylor’s principle. Eve is the first customer to arrive at Bailey’s Café. Sexual exploitation with Godfather, the strict, authoritarian preacher, who nurtures her and with a childish prankster Billy Boy, results in her expulsion from her small Louisiane delta home. But it is in her highly symbolic march from Pilot town to Arabi and atlas to Bailey’s Café that Eva, who emerges as a strong yet responsive woman with an acute business sense and a love for well kept gardens, manages somehow to escape the tragic fate towards which she planned.

One cannot help but to correlate Naylor’s fictionalized Eve with her biblical antecedent, who uses her feminine charms to attract a naive Adam to eat the forbidden fruit and thus disobey divine law. In a similar sense, Naylor's Eve encourages a creative envisioning of the spaces that traditionally defined woman’s lives. Eve walks, she tells us, a thousand years before reaching Bailey's, is an important reference linking her role among a community of women to the millennial reign of Christ.
One of Eve’s board houses, Esther, was put up for sale by her brother at the age of twelve to a man who practiced S&M. She was locked in a cellar until her husband came to engage in recreation with her:

Play with your toys, he whispers as the spiders scratch and spin, scratch and spin their webs in the dark. My hands reach into the wooden chest and feel the shades of the leather – and – metal things. No jumping ropes. No rubber balls. The edges of the metal things are small and sharp. The leather things coil around my fingers like snakes. They are greasy and smell funny. No, they are not toys. I do not know what they are, but I will soon learn what they are for. And I will learn that in the dark, words have a different meaning. Having fun. Playing games. Being a good girl. (97)

Another boarder, Sadie, trying to do good works to make her mother love her, allowed herself to be pushed into prostitution, disfigured by illegitimate abortion hacks, and finally emotionally abused by a husband, who never spoke to her and hated to look in her eyes. Yet another boarder, Mary, redolent of Mary Magdalene, blamed her own beauty for the whore men took her to be. She would always see the whore in their eyes, but eventually, she came to see herself in their image “I knew she was a whore. Had always been a whore. Was probably born a whore. For as long as I could remember, I could see her in their eyes. But now as I looked in the mirror – thinking of how my own body had betrayed me with him - I could see her in mine” (107). To penalize herself for actually enjoying a sexual experience, Mary aggressively mutilates her face with a beer – bottle opener:

Before, I had only hated her. Now I wanted to hate myself. And I started thinking that I should always have hated myself, I was probably always enjoying those
back rooms and back stairs. I was probably always tempting the coir master. I was probably always making men in the streets look at me that way, father’s friends look at me. I was probably always asking for it, asking for it. I was probably always dirt. Yes, I was sick. Sicker than the angry man in front of me know. Last night I warmed inside when he caressed my neck and touched me. (107)

Jesse Bell is another of self-mutilation. Her husband’s class conscious uncle Eli was so sickened by her working – class, unsophisticated family that he shattered her marriage. She turned to drugs and somehow made her way to Bailey’s door for cold-turkey treatment.

On one level, she is a redemptive figure for women such as the spirited Jesse Bell, who turns to heroin and female lovers, when her marriage into the wealthy Sugar Hill King Family ends in a bitter divorce. The newspaper misrepresents Jesse in its sensationalized account of her divorce. Her lament that she:

I carried a good name. And I was a good wife. I mean a good wife. But I didn't have no friends putting out the Herald Tribune. And it’s all about who’s in charge of keeping the records, ain’t it?

Yeah, I’m from the dicks. My people always made their living from the waters around Manhattan Island. And it was a honest living. I grew up around rough men who worked as hard as they cussed and drank. You know what it means to be a longshoreman in the wintertime? It means my uncles and brothers having the skin between their fingers split open from the cold. (118)

suggests the elimination of the experiences of women of color from the written word and the printed text, yet in the retelling of her story Jesse reads her own life-story in such a manner as to demoralize the voice of Bailey, who sets up her narrative.
According to Jesse, Eve's role in Jesse's improvement is questionable at best. Eve relies upon magic, or the power of conjure in curing Jesse's addiction to heroin by engineering a series of well-crafted daydreams, which allow Jesse to have unlimited access to the binding drug. During Eve's eccentric treatment of Jesse, in a moment of irritation, Jesse tells Eve to go to hell. Eve's rather pointed response directs attention to the irresolute fictional world that informs the novel:

‘Jesse could see Eve standing in the doorway of the bathroom as she began that mellow climb, higher and higher. Eve’s face was blurred, but was it possible she was smiling? ‘

– You can just go to hell, Jesse mumbled through the sweet relief of it all.

– I think you have forgotten that’s where we are” (141)

Naylor's Eve is thus a character that can be placed within the antithetic boundary as Daryl Dance uses to define the mother-figure in African-American writing. Neither an Eve, in the biblical sense, nor strictly a Madonna, she dwells somewhere between the two extremes. Her ability to influence reality and her close fellow feeling with the supernatural are qualities that invite a comparison with folk figures such as the revered conjure woman. Despite the many ambiguities adjoining Eve's character, her role in the narrative action is to be considered in terms of her effect on her female wards.

The latter day pilgrims with exchange stories at Baileys are Sadie, a Wino and two-bit prostitute, who lives on the street but is perfecting a flawless dream house in her thoughts. There is a peach, whose self-hatred drives her to injure her beautiful face, and Jess Bell, who is preoccupied by a disgrace ridden marriage and a heroin habit she cannot shake. For the most part, Naylor steps aside and lets her characters tell their own tales of hopes discarded and dreams
deferred and some of the stories, most notably Sadie’s are extraordinarily poignant. But here and there the author falters, as in the tale of Mariam. A fourteen year old colored Ethiopian Jewess who was ostracized from her village because she is pregnant. Somehow her wandering through the continents has brought her to Brooklyn and Bailey’s, where the café owner that is narrator delivers some distinctly un fictional opinions about the state of Israel:

All of the Jewish schools that the Fascists didn’t close, they burned to the ground. And when the rightful government came back into power, they decided to leave matters just that way. The Jewish boarding school she sought was a heap of rubble. And the names she had written on her note were the names of dead men.

exhorts Bailey.

When the reader first encounters Sadie, she is in the café speaking the words, “—A little tea, please” (39). Because of her polite nature and the way her touch makes “. . . the thick mug had lost its cracks and stains, hitting the tabletop with the ring of china, while the bent tin spoon and paper napkin became monogrammed silver and linen. Kind of an amazing thing to watch” (40). Sadie becomes much more tragic as Bailey reveals that “. . . Sadie was a wino. And Sadie was a twenty-five-cent whore” (40).

Born by accident, Sadie’s mother hates her; in response to that hate, Sadie tries to be the best daughter she can be in order to win her mother’s approval. She cleans meticulously, speaks, walks and eats softly—all in an effort to be good enough to hear the words she hears her mother speak only in her dreams “‘Yes, I’m so proud of you. You’re a good girl, Sadie’” (44). Despite Sadie’s efforts at being good enough, her mother’s hatred grows until finally she forces Sadie into selling her body to pay their bills and support her mother’s absinthe habit. During two such
encounters, Sadie’s mother engages in a call-and-response dialogue where Sadie’s mother as the respondent. On the occasion, where Sadie loses her virginity to a John, and he finally realizes that Sadie was indeed a virgin, he calls violently asking: “—What kind of woman are you?” (45) However, her response is silence. Six months later the same call is given, when Sadie’s mother enlists a doctor to sterilize Sadie, however, this time a different response is given: “The kind with double the money to pay you” (45).

Ironically, Sadie’s mother, seems to view this forced sterilization as an act of kindness “Your life woulda been pure hell ever having to take care of a child” (45). As repayment Sadie proceeds to take care of her mother until she dies, and Sadie is left to fend for herself. Sadie’s mother’s death paved the way for Daniel, Sadie’s husband and thirty years her senior. Naylor uses Sadie’s life to resemble the refrain in a blues song. This element of redundancy illustrates how Sadie traded one loveless relationship for another: “She went off with a man older than enough to be her father, and she ended up living with her mother for the next twenty-five years” (51). Just as she’d done before, Sadie cleaned and remained silent; trying to earn Daniel’s affection and to prove that she was good enough to be loved. Consequently, the very things that Sadie did to try and prove she was worthy of Daniel’s love were the very things that made him think he wasn’t good enough for her “Her cleaning irritated him, her way of saying that where he’d brought her to live wasn’t good enough. The prim way of eating. The prim way of wiping her mouth. All of it saying that nothing around her was good enough” (54).

It is not until Sadie’s illness that Sadie begins to see that she truly is good enough and refuses to be treated otherwise. Upon her recovery, Daniel attempts to throw away her red geraniums the one thing that exists in both her dreams and her reality. In an effort to save her
flowers, her dreams, Sadie breaks her silence and engages Daniel in a call-and response that
displays strength of character:

—They leave, I leave, she said.

He jumped up, took a pot, and smashed it in the yard.

—Woman, this is my damn house.

—They leave, I leave, she said . . .

Then he picked up one of the Mason jars and threw it against the house to be sure
she would hear it. He tiptoed over to the window to peek in and see if she was
packing. He saw through the grimy windowpane that she was. He made a bad
show of hurrying into the house without seeming to hurry. He took the beaten –
up satchel away from Sadie.

—They stay, he said. (55-56)

Although Daniel comes to acknowledge Sadie’s worth, this victory is short lived. Daniel
dies and Sadie loses the house to his daughters, paving the way for Sadie’s worth to be summed
up in exact change and a bag full of stars. Sadie’s melancholy experience mirrors, what is sung
in many blues songs, not just in Ellington’s “Mood Indigo.” Her experience is of someone, who
starts off at the bottom—as an unwanted child, “The One The Coat Hanger Missed”(41) and
keeps falling lower and lower until she is a wino, selling her body for the exact change needed to
buy liquor. Taking the events of Sadie’s life leading up to her appearance at the café into
consideration, it is no wonder that Naylor places Sadie’s story at the beginning of “The Jam.”
Her story is the place, where Naylor further solidifies Baker’s notion in *Race, Writing, and
Difference* of the blues at the junction, and the junction—Bailey’s Café—being “The way-
station of the blues where endless antinomies are mediated and understanding and explanation
find conditions of possibility” (387).

Although the café affords Sadie one or more “possibilities” for her situation, her story
finds no resolution. Even though Sadie keeps Iceman Jones at arm’s length it appears that Sadie
may have finally found the love she worked so hard to deserve. Despite her distance and
frequent indifference Iceman still offered her his world “What I have, you’ll have. What I eat,
you’ll eat. Wherever I lay my head, there’s a place for you. . . . - And I want you to know, I
ain’t talking nothing improper. You get my name, such as it is, along with the whole bargain”
(BC 77), Sadie couldn’t accept, leaving Iceman standing on the pier at the rear of the café,
leaving her story, like many blues songs, with no closure. Despite the lack of closure in Sadie’s
story, one other thing sets this tale apart from all the others told by women in the novel. Sadie is
the only woman in the novel, who does not make her way to Eve’s.

Sadie comes into the world unwanted and unloved. Her father leaves because his wife is
pregnant, and her mother’s misery and aggravation is declared on Sadie. Her life becomes one of
trying to please. Forced into prostitution at a young age, Sadie begins to dream of her supreme
home, neither the one she has in childhood, nor the one she attains when she becomes Daniel’s
wife. That house is taken from her at Daniel’s death, and Sadie’s dream become lighter until she
is introduced to the stars inscribed on a liquor bottle. Liquor becomes Sadie’s recovery. The
aged, alcoholic Sadie meets Iceman, who wants to marry her and take her off the streets. “She
knew this dear sweet man was offering her the moon, but she could give him these stars” (78).

Finally, in Naylor’s porch of panic stories, appear Mariam, a pregnant, fourteen – year –
old Jew from Ethiopia, a castrated female and the Virgin Mary revisited, who claims, that no
man has ever touched her. Eve invites Mariam to her self-proclaimed way station and helps to
deliver her son. Eve and Bailey’s proprietor, a World War II veteran, provide healing places and perform healing deeds in this novel. Mariam’s story determines, the outcome of the novel, yet it is not the final one. The last fourth of the novel is devoted to the story of Stanley Beckwourth Booker T. Washington Carver, the only male at Eve’s. Unable to find a job for which his education, but not his race qualifies him, he seeks refuge at Eve’s and accepts the name Eve confers on him: Miss Maple. He wears cotton dresses, does the house keeping, and occasionally acts as a bouncer. His character strains credibility, even in a work where actuality is suspended, and like the café owner, never attains the difficulty and depth of the female characters.

Naylor does not quite convince the Bailey statement. The views suffer from the ruggedness of observation. They sound much more like those of a novelist in the 1990s than the café owner in the 1940s. The fictional drama has been interrupted unexpectedly by an argument that is supposed to be a petition for forbearance but in fact comes treacherously close to sounding like a soapbox condemnation from the author’s own mouth. At one point, she even writes that Mariam would not have been allowed into Israel under the Law of Return because she is unfamiliar with Talmud, an allegation that is completely incorrect:

Besides my mail, I had brought in the afternoon papers and saw that two of the forms I’d initially approached in Chicago were now due for return visits; the positions were still being advertised. I knew these were renewed advertisements because the third company had taken additional space to print, Only White Need Apply. (198)

Eve’s is a haven for women fallen from grace. The stories of these women are archetypal: the voices of Esther, Mary, Jesse, and Mariam join together into a litany of the sexual abuses mounded upon women especially colored. With the arrival of Mariam, the obvious Christian
imagery is fully realized: Mariam, brought to Eve’s by Gabriel, is a virgin and pregnant. The mutilation that Mariam has qualified is described with poignancy and understatement:

EVE WALKED IN HERE with that plum and placed it in the middle of the counter. I have a new border she said. The fruit looked tender and soft. The reddish black skin was so thin you could already smell that the flesh would be sweet. Nadine, please, bring me a knife. I didn’t want to move. I didn’t want to be any part of what was about to go on. God knows, I didn’t. And there wasn’t a man in the place, not a man to be found. This was women’s business. (145)

The succeeding discussion of female circumcision is in a language quite different from Walker’s in Possessing the secret of Joy: symbolic, exhilarating, and full of tragedy.

Naylor, sets out to recuperate the stories of women by giving voice to those individuals, whose familiarity is often excluded from written history. By dedicating her novel to the two Luecelias for instance, she reveals the novel's vague impression of traditional origination of time, space, and individuality. Her heavy reliance upon scripture, particularly that from the Old Testament canon relevant to female sexuality, as an inter text sheds light on her attempts to redeem her female characters from the places assigned to them by a male-authored text and to restore their status and dignity. Notions of morality, which the Bible sanctions are held up for scrutiny. When Sister Carrie of the Temple of Perpetual Redemption quotes the Bible in condemning Jesse Bell because of her succession of female lovers, Eve, who was reared by a preacher, quotes the book as well “ - Thou also, which hast judged thy sisters, bear thine own shame for thy sins that thou hast committed more abominable than they: they are more righteous than thou: yea, be thou confounded also and bear thy shame, in that thou hast justified thy sisters” (135).
The stories of these characters vividly demonstrate the variety of bodily and psychic mutilation African-American women have experienced. The central point of the novel is the introduction of Mary, a fourteen year old circumcised Ethiopian Jew named Mariam. Her story serves both to picture genital mutilation and to highlight relations between colored and Jews. Young and slow witted, Mariam has undergone infibulations and though no man has touched her, is pregnant. She has magically moved from Addis Ababa to New York after being excluded from her village for declining to disclose the identity of her unborn child’s father. Gabe, the Jewish pawnshop owner, announces her arrival to the rest of the street. He brings her to Eve to figure out how to help her. Eve learns her story and later replicates it in Bailey’s café. The story of Mariam’s circumcision is so shocking that Bailey and the other men have to leave. Eve, in telling the tale, allegorically describes it by cutting open a succulent plum.

Although she has been maltreated, Mariam, carrying new life, brings life and hope to the dead-end street. Naylor ends Bailey’s café as she did her first novel, The Women of Brewster Place, with a kind of vision; readers familiar with her most recent novel, Mama Day, will find a special surprise.

In her citation of this Old Testament passage from Ezekiel, Naylor schematizes the importance of global unity among all women regardless of race, religion, civilization, or even sexual preference. Eve turns Sister Carrie's narrow legalistic and homophobic perception on its ear by stressing the essential oneness between Jews and Gentiles and encouraging a non-judgmental attitude toward issues of morality set forth in divine law. In her theory of Scripture, Naylor thus ushers in a new era for women, whose lives were once constrained by a discourse that is male-authored, and therefore, paves the way for a more sensitive reading of the texts of African-American women.
In order to reach a different description of manhood, Miss Maple, then Stanley, has had to overcome the same anxiety: “Manhood is a pervasive preoccupation when you’re an adolescent boy, and you tend to see a fairy under every bush” (175). This fear is determined on his father, whom the son regards according to convention as:

Papa was their last child and never really suited to be a farmer. In another time and place, my father would have been a philosopher or perhaps a poet. His brothers just thought him spoiled and lazy. And sadly, I thought him a coward. He ‘d had engraved on my mother’s tombstone: Flower of the Desert. Daughter of the wind. Wife of My Heart. Mother of Our Future. I guess he would have kept going on, but he ran out of space, needing something leftover for her name and the date. She was murdered young. My mother was the youngest child of the fugitive Texon slave and a Mexican ranchero. (170 - 171)

for his denial to fight back against white racist discrimination:

But I didn’t see him as a man at all. I was the only one of the boys who didn’t get a cowboy’s suit and a pair of cap pistols for Christmas – I got books. And I was the only one who couldn’t go to the pictures When a Tom Mix feature was showing we don’t applaud a genocide in this house, he’d say. But kids are still going to play cowboys – and - Indians and with we never having a holster and pistols, I was tagged for the Indian. Even my cousin Tomaso, whose mother was a full – blooded Yuma. And have named him after a famous chief, even he got a cowboy suit. But there I was, the one always having to climb up into the cottonwoods and give a blood – curdling cry before I was shot down and made to eat dust. A loser. And the son of a loser, the way my uncles told it. (173 - 174)
Eventually the boy’s view is upturned he breaks out of the impasse in which his resentment toward his father has trapped him and comes to realize that his father is instead the model for an alternative manhood:

Aunt Hazel was the only mother I knew, she having raised me and taken care of our home after my real mother was killed. Everything I’d learned about my grandparents, she’d passed on to me. And she said that one day I would understand that my father was also teaching me something very special: how to be my own man. (173)

Naylor brings about this transformation is testimony to the brilliance of her comic imagination.

In the funniest moment in the book, Naylor has father and son stripped naked and locked in a storeroom by four uncouth white brothers, whereupon the two colored men put on female clothing, break out of their prison, and take revenge by summarily dispatching each of the four whites in turn. The scene could not be more cartoonish, pleasantry, and ridiculous, yet the secret of Naylor’s comic originality is that its effects are both entertaining and deeply moving at the same time, as though the joviality gave access to deeper levels of feeling. Under the pressure of their imprisonment, Stanley’s angry outburst, against his father suddenly gives way to the physical contact he had earlier ignored:

Papa reached out to me in the darkness and I jerked my shoulder away from his hands. Don’t you touch me? My teeth were clenched. Just don’t touch me. My eyes were adjusting to the dark and I could make out the shadowy silhouettes of packing crates and of his bare feet as he stood beside me. The air was close and stale; a trickle of sweat ran down the side of my nose and pooled in the crevice on my upper lip. (180)
He was much depressed and upset and starts babbling:

You don’t even amount to the ape they called you – you’re nothing. And you’ve always been nothing. Nothing . . . nothing . . . noth . . . My whole body started vibrating, my teeth chattering, my hands and leg muscles moving with a will of their own. He caught me in his arms before I fell to the floor. And then he placed me down gently to hold me as I cried like the child I was. (181 – 182)

He understands the comfort of the physical touch:

My flesh against his flesh: his chest was lean and hard, the arms around me strong and firm. His hand rested on the back of my head as I buried my weeping face deep into his shoulders. All of these years, he said, I kept hoping you’d understand. I should have just come out and explained why I’ve lived the way I have. (182)

Forced by the occasion, the father for the first time expresses his hopes that his son:

Babble – as you learned your own language, set your own standards, began to identify yourself as a man. You see, to accept even a single image in their language as your truth is to be led into accepting them all. Do you think that I’m afraid of the Gatlins? Do you think that what they say means anything to me? I don’t hear them, Stanley. Most of the time, I don’t even see them. But in my self-absorption, I’d forgotten that it wasn’t the same with you. I lost sight of how much still you have to learn. Forgive me for pressing you so hard and so quickly to become a man; I shudder to think of how close I’ve almost come to losing you as my child. (182)
and the son begins to have a new understanding of what from his father’s perspective it means to become a man.

Of course, this resolution of father and son is long-established by the father’s desertion of passive resistance and his recourse to violent retaliation. Ironically, it provokes his heroic attack, the white men’s violation. The father has purchased as a ‘legacy’ for his son “They had gotten to the books. The silk cover was gouged with holes, the spine busted and bent over double. They’d torn out handfuls of pages, crushed what was left between their fists, and then urinated on the whole thing. The stench of The Tempest was quickly filling that close room” (183).

Naylor has given a touching portrait of a Stanford graduate, a PhD in statistics who cannot get employed anywhere in America, because he is colored and somehow not at all unbelievably takes to wearing women’s clothing:

The welts ran across my back in diagonal lines; they ringed my neck and wrists where the collar band and shirt cuffs fastened. They were red and puffy, and I didn’t keep my body temperature down, they kept swelling until they burst. I had resorted to a pocket watch at the beginning of the heat wave because it wasn’t possible to tell when the blisters from the wristwatch would break and the drainage become visible. I could cover the other blisters on my body with a fresh shirt between appointments, or if there was enough time, cool baths in the middle of the day held them down to a fine rash. I couldn’t afford to sit out the entire summer waiting for the weather to change; I needed to know if I could factor in another type of wardrobe without disrupting my future search for my
employment. And this is where the concept of statistical independence comes in.

(198 - 199)

Through the statistician’s own credible voice, Naylor manages to make an authentic demand for tolerance. There are many such appeals throughout her fiction and one that make the criticisms of Israel all the more incompatible.

Fortunately, grating authorial disruptions in the novel are few, and are more than unbiased by many beautifully realized set pieces. The lyricism in this passage as Bailey watches the statistician, known as Miss Maple:

The bells outside begin to toll for midnight, 1949. He takes his full champagne glass to the rear of the café. As I watch from the doorway, he steps off boldly into the midst of nothing and is suspended midair by a gentle wind that starts to swirl his cape around his knees. It’s hot, dry wind that could easily have been born in a desert, but it’s bringing, of all things snow. Soft and silent it falls, coating his shoulders his upturned face. Snow. He holds his glass up and turns to me as a single flake catches on the rim before melting down the side into an amber world where bubbles burst and are born, burst and are born. (216)

This is not an ordinary writing, it leaves one with the impression that, while she has already distinguished herself as a formidable novelist.

Favorable review emphasizing Naylor’s effective balancing of political and aesthetic considerations. Without being overly critical of racism, Naylor’s rich language renders the experience of the women in a way that reveals how the economic and social situations of colored life become one with personal experience. She makes it clear that socio-economic forces create colored men’s tendency to abandon their families. Patterns of attraction and abandonment by
men, too much caring for children, and the solace of relationships between women are repeated throughout the novel (Branzburge 116-119).

The final section of the novel that follows Miss Maple’s story continues the focus on male identity and enters what might be considered non–Shakespearean territory: the relationship between colored and Jews. The problems of colored anti–Semitism and Jewish racism have recently acknowledged new concentration. Naylor’s involvement to this discussion is profoundly distressing because she is able to use the intermediate of fiction to convey the possibility of cooperation. The colored male manager of Bailey’s Café and Gabe, the Jewish owner of the pawnshop, are brought together distinctively to bless the baby boy to whom Mariam, an Ethiopian Jew, has given birth. The cheerful response by the novel’s three key male figures “Then we heard the baby’s first thin cry – and the place went wild.” is stirring:

Then Gabe grabbed me, whirled me around, and we started to dance. He could kick pretty high for an old goat. Miss Maple took his other hand and the three of us were out in the middle of the floor, hands raised and feet stomping. People were up on tables and cheering. Someone tore open a sack of rice and was throwing it into the air. I didn’t give a damn. Jesse had her skirt raised in the throes of a mean flamenco. And, wonder of wonders, Esther smiled. But I think it was Peaches who started to sing. (225)

The same three men preside over the formal ceremony of circumcision “I had to stand in as the honorary sandek, the godfather. And Miss Maple took the role of the other male guests to help me respond to the blessing. Don’t worry, Gabe said; god will forgive you for not being Jews” (226).
The various songs of the characters mix together to create a blues masterpiece that terminates in the good news:

Anybody ask you who I am?
Who I am?
Who I am?
Anybody ask you who I am?
Tell him - I’m a child of God.
Soon we were all singing, A bit ragged and off – key. But all singing
Peace on earth, Mary rocked the cradle.
Mary rocked the cradle and Mary rocked the cradle.
Peace on earth, Mary rocked the cradle.
Tell him – was with the child of God. (226)

Naylor’s expansive vision of humanity moves beyond racial, gender, and ethnic boundaries as she affirms miracles, life, survival, wholeness, and redemption.

Through this cross – cultural nurturing concern, the novel provides a final submission of a new male identity. At the risk of sounding unappreciative in the face of the genuine gratitude, Naylor register the negative side of the positive outcome. Political and ceremonial discourse is made to seem a largely male affair. The one explicit protest against this state – that of Mariam’s mother is not fully or clearly stated.

Naylor adds is a specifically female need for such an asylum. Tattered, harmed, ignored, and subjugated, women like Peaches, Sweet Esther, Jesse Bell, and Mariam wend their way to Bailey’s Café and ultimately to Eve’s, whereas Bailey’s can provide an end to it all through its back porch offering painless depart and painful potential, Eve’s boarding house can offer a
reason to go on living, a refuge and a place for corporeal and emotional healing. Bailey’s is the first stop: a place for direction, for getting one’s compartment; Eve’s identification is for many the target itself. As the administrator Bailey’s states “A women is either ready for Eve’s or she’s not. And if she’s ready, she’ll ask where to find it on her own” (80). In the proprietor’s view, Eve herself is particular about her sojourners:

I do know that charity has nothing to do with it. Eve is not a charitable person.

You can look into her eyes and you can see that. She wears small rimless glasses that magnify the brown eyes. And it’s a plain brown face that doesn’t scowl but doesn’t appear pleasant either it appears, well, just there. Cut and dried. I’ve never heard her laugh, never even seen her laugh inside the way Nadine taught me it can be done. I’d go so far as to say she’s a woman without a sense of humor. She’s a stylish women, though tailored silk suits Oxford heels. But if you look real close, there’s always a faint line of dirt just under her manicured nails. (80 - 81)

The mythic component of the text is most obvious in the character of Eve. Eve, the mother of all victims, is a well-dressed woman with dirt under her nails ‘delta dust’ – the dirt of a thousand years. She helps other physically abused persons to regain themselves. Like Sweet Esther, sold into sadomasochistic service to her brother’s master, and Peaches, who rather than continue to be just another pretty, and therefore oppressed, face uses a container opening to scratch her cheek. When Peaches’s father arrives at Eve’s to take back his daughter, Eve gives surety to him of her power to heal “Leave your daughter here, Eve says, and I’ll return her to you whole” (113). Another reformed character is Jesse Bell, who loses everything including her husband, son, and self-respect and turns to heroin for relief. She is rushed from the Woman’s
Detention Center by the ever vigilant Eve, subjected to Eve’s own trademark of hell, and re-establish health.

Her constant search for an authorial voice with which to tell or rather retell the experiences of women of color, Naylor chooses to locate her fourth novel within an exclusively cultured and gendered framework. Influence and all of its associations are aimed towards threatening the numerous forms of authoritative patriarchy which constitute and create a new world order among moderately expelled women worldwide. The novel itself is encompassed of a series of loosely connected stories. Each one from a different woman’s point of view and it culminates with a magically real, collective celebration of the birth of Mariam’s son George during the Christmas season. For the first time, there is oneness among a racially various group, whose traditions and customs extent the globe, but the voices of women also unite the ritualization of George’s arrival. George’s long-awaited birth, like that of the Messiah, could signal either an end or, optimistically, new beginnings for the pluralistic group present. But in this climactic scene, after conjuring an image of global harmony, Naylor contradict the reader the opportunity of knowing the destiny of the young mother and son.

The novel’s uncertain finality serves to encourage a participatory involvement from the reader and is an approach to present in much of African-American writing. Bailey, the fatherly world war II expert and administrator of the café, is unable to offer a satisfactory ending to the moving stories that speak about. Instead, he merely provokes the reader to sympathize with the women, whose tragic tales consist of the written text ‘The wrap’:

If this was like that sappy violin music on Make Believe Ballroom, we could wrap it all up with a lot of happy endings to leave you feeling real good that you took
the time to listen. But I don’t believe that life is supposed to make you feel good, or to make you feel miserable either. Life is just supposed to make you feel. (219)

Naylor uses Bailey’s voice in establishing the time, place, mood and character for each women’s story except that of Mariam, a peculiarly virginal unwed mother, whose touching account of anti-Semitism and Sexism it recreates a vital sisterhood among women of color across the Diaspora who often find themselves at probability with ideas of female sexuality prescribed by patriarchy. Ultimately, Naylor’s goal as creator and supreme ruler of the distinctly new fictive cosmology which appear in the novel’s confusing climatic scene is to affect some sort of Unity among the widely contrasting voices of women, not just within but outside the text. Hollow Way, Karla, in her discussion of the responsive strategy of colored women’s narratives in Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of culture and Gender in Black Woman’s Literature (1992), refers to the method as “... a collective ‘speaking out’ by all the voices gathered within the text, authorial, narrative, and even the implicated reader” (11). Thus, in retelling Mariam’s tale, Eve and Bailey are not restrained to help and meet. Nadine forms a duet, for the male voice is severely limited in its ability to interpret the very private experiences the women narrate. Bailey can offer compassion but not nearness between Mariam, the speaking subject, and the reader.

Naylor’s scrupulous completion as a contemporary African - American Women writer has much to do with her accomplishment at moving beyond the one dimensional portrayal of male figures that brought her criticism with the publication of The Women of Brewster Place, Bailey unlike his fictional antecedent reside at the rotting Brewster, is no mere shadow of a man. He is gifted with the certain psychological depth and complication of character despite the uncertainty associated with his unspecified name. It is Bailey whose indirect comments offer
insight into the close relationship between the written text and the specifically colored oral forms of expression from which it progresses: “Anything really worth hearing in this greasy spoon happens under the surface. You need to know that if you plan to stick around here and listen while we play it all out” (BC 35).

A creative coincidence of chapter titles drawn from the dominion of music and drama with individual narratives, reminds the reader of the secure relationship between the written text and the presentation mode likely serving as motivation for the novel. The title of Sadie's touching narrative, Mood: Indigo, for instance, is taken from Duke Ellington's popular 1931 jazz composition, and Naylor admits that Sadie and suitor Iceman Jones floated into her consciousness on the strains of that tune. More than any other musical form, it is the blues, with its characteristic repetition-with-a-variation scheme, that anticipate the distinct linguistic patterns of the text.

The narrative moves toward the creation of a reality deeply rooted in the colored terminology that more closely reflects the particular knowledge of marginalized women across the globe. The unusual location of Bailey's Cafe, which exists everywhere and nowhere, points to its symbolic implication. The cafe is situated between the edge of the world and infinite possibility and represents the unexplored boundaries of a creative consciousness that is at once both colored and female. Echoed throughout the stories the women communicate is female subjectivity to male aspiration. Such is the case with Sweet Esther, whose persistent hatred for men stems from the commoditization of colored women within the context of a rural economic system. Esther suffers exploitation as her elder brother negotiates her to an older, propertied farmer in exchange for higher sharecropping income. Passively, Esther gives up to the farmer's whims while he chooses to be friendly with her only in the basement of his home. The pink and
lace-trimmed bed where she must sleep alone exposes her confinement to a socially approved femininity role. Her monologues point to a profound self-hatred in a world that change no terms for her survival “I like the white roses because they show up in the dark.

I don't.
The black gal. Monkey face.
Coal. Ugly. Soot. Unspeakable” (95).

By demanding white Christmas roses from her male callers at Eve's, who are permitted to visit her only in a dark, secluded basement, Esther, means to relive her painful past. She also adds her solitary influence to those of the other women, whose stories are, included in ‘The Vamp,’ and therefore cracks the troubling discursive stillness adjoining her tragic life. It is an original revision of the classic Christmas story, which culminates with a portrait of a radically transformed society where all externally imposed limitations and labels are blurred. Prefigured in The Women of Brewster Place by Mattie Michael's dream/nightmare of the women's communal efforts to dismantle the restrictive brick wall at the novel's ambiguous end, the utopian postwar new world order that emerges in Bailey's Cafe is one constructed around Mariam, a type of Madonna, who gives birth to the future, figured by young George. Eve, whose act of scoring the plum is a conscious ritual reversal of the genital mutilation that Mariam has endured, assumes the role of midwife at George's birth. Consistent with the woman-centered cosmology that Naylor is bent on recreating; a new social order appears with a family of choice replacing the traditional nuclear family. Moreover, there is harmony between opposing rituals and traditions drawn from a multi-cultural community. Gabriel, a Russian Jew, presides at the naming ceremony. Like the messenger angel who visits the biblical Mary and announces the birth of
Christ, his role in the text is that of guide or foreteller, who offers Mariam directions to Bailey's Cafe. It is Peaches, who at first, intones the gospel song inscribing the identities of Mariam and George.

However, Naylor highlights that Miss Maple symbolizes a case neither of sexual indistinctness nor gender indeterminacy. Sugar men, the epitome of traditional manhood, make obvious the false awareness created by nervousness:

Sugar Man is telling me that, tonight of all nights, I should keep Miss Maple out:
It's bad luck to ring in the new year with a faggot near a salt shaker. Now, I don't think he pulled that superstition out of anything but his own mind. And it does no good to tell him for the thousandth time that Miss Maple isn't homosexual. Sugar Man has had to cling onto that or he would just about lose his senses when Miss Maple is around. (163)

The systems privileged at the novel's end - oral, female, and collective - not only bear a recursive relation to those present in the unwritten modes serving as the text's beginnings, they also suggest an end to the old dispensation of a male dialectic. In this regard, Bailey's Cafe, a culmination of the concerns that Naylor explores in her earlier novels, represents a maturity of voice and vision for the talented writer, even as it reveals her attempts to revise codes of power, dominance, and assertion present in a male text. Rather than being an end, the novel heralds what is an auspicious new beginning. In her efforts to define herself as a writer on a contemporary literary landscape, Naylor dares to engage important issues affecting women of color world-wide and thus rescues the stories of women from silence and unconsciousness. At a time when women across the globe are experiencing unprecedented oppression, Naylor's voice is a clarion that demands to be heard.
Observation on her first novel in *Contemporary Authors* (2014), Naylor characterizes the healers who appear in all four works “What they share is a spiritual strength and a sense of female communion that I believe all women have employed historically for their psychic health and survival” (361). Naylor’s works, like those of other female African-American writers, are filled with communicants, appreciated by the bread they themselves have produced bread that sustains their bodies and sparks their souls.

Naylor addresses female circumcision in Africa as part of a larger examination of the sexual mutilations inflicted on women in contemporary society. Naylor’s characters are based on archetypes – mostly from the Bible – but they are not universalized. The novel takes place in a blues café down a dead end street at the end of New York City. On this city block are Bailey’s Café, Eve’s garden and boarding house and Gabe’s pawnshop. The novel’s fluid time-sequence terminates in New Years Eve, 1949. As in her other novels, Naylor infuses day-to-day living with an alternate magical certainty.

*Bailey’s Café* is a hauntingly lyrical text steeped in biblical allusion. With this fourth novel, this completes a series including *The Women of Brewster Place, Linden Hills* and *Mama Day*; Naylor acquired the self-reliance necessary to define herself as writer. *Bailey’s Café* took Naylor through the final step as remarked during a recent book tour step, “I had envisioned four novels that would lay the foundation for a career. This one finishes that up” (Due F2).

*Bailey’s Café* is the fourth in a sequence of novels that Naylor has visualized as a quartet. She has used two devices to create a sense of linkage from one novel to the next. The first is to develop a character or situation referred to in a previous novel; the second is to continue a pattern of implications to Shakespeare. In this final novel of the quartet, however, Naylor teases as by differing fulfillment of these expectations for so long that we have just about
forgotten or given up. For example *Mama Day*, the third novel, has sowed George’s reference to his birth at Bailey’s Café. Yet Naylor formulate the last three pages of the novel *Bailey’s Café* before mentioning George and revealing his mother and fits into the overall scheme. The comment of one of the characters “. . . in this business you could use a sense of humor” (BC 91) applies to Naylor’s role as novelist.