“It’s memory, you see,” said Anathema. “It works backwards as well as forwards. Racial memory, I mean... What I’m trying to say,” she said patiently, “is that Agnes didn’t see the future. That’s just a metaphor. She remembered it. Not very well, of course, and by the time it’d been filtered through her own understanding it’s often a bit confused. We think she’s best at remembering things that were going to happen to her descendents.”


**CHAPTER 2**

**THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MULTIETHNIC NARRATIVE - GLORIA NAYLOR’S FICTIONAL SPACES**

2. 1. Gloria Naylor’s Fictional Spaces: Ethnicity and Home

In a literary narrative, fictional, autobiographical or even otherwise, the act of recall when articulated becomes often a site of merger for diverse modes of mnemonic signification. The past is recalled, ‘re-constructed’ even, within the structures of the text in question through interconnected strands of narration which may or may not occur within the same frame of chronological time. This act of recall may be personal (through a first
person mode of recollection) or collective (through the articulation of a pluralistic ‘we’) and is generally inclined towards a multi-tiered codification of cultural remembrance (with different cultures and cultural paradigms being iterated and re-iterated within that mnemonic schema).

The past is incorporated, and woven, as it is, into the body of the text in a way that the text becomes, in its entirety, an embodiment of the past, and of different cultural versions of the past. With intertextual references from “the previous and surrounding culture” (Barthes 39: 1981) embellishing the ground for the narrative strategy within the text in question and the embedded rhetoric of cultural memory, such narratives become ‘memory texts’, or memory narratives that narrate and provide for the reconstruction of the past in the present through what has been previously identified as ‘acts of memory’. These ‘acts of memory’ within the literary narrative are ‘commemorative actions’ as Renate Lachmann defines them. She says:

> When literature is considered in the light of memory, it appears as the mnemonic art par excellence. Literature is culture’s memory, not as a simple recording device but as a body of commemorative actions that include the knowledge stored by a culture, and virtually all texts that a culture has produced and by which a culture is constituted. (2010: 301)

The cultural memory of the literary text thus re-presents itself as a complex layering of signs and codes within the literary text like the ‘mosaic’ of quotes from existing texts as suggested by Julia Kristeva. It achieves naturally the state and structure of a palimpsest which conceals
previous absorptions and layers within it. And yet reveals at points of narration, a justifiable plethora of unseen texts, subtle traces of semi-visible texts and the presence of extra-literary objects and figures which aid in the mnemonic configuration of the literary narrative, or the memory narrative as we can call it. The narrative act of memory operates through a selection of differing versions of the past, a conglomeration of those selected versions of the past into condensed memory figures and a careful and strategic mediation of textual genre and generic patterns of narrative. In this, the literary text that becomes a memory narrative through a literary-mnemonic configuration, as Astrid Erll has suggested using structuralist narratological theories of reading in her book *Memory in Culture*, is shaped and pre-figured by those immediate arenas of preconceived or premeditated understanding that concern the cultural memory which the literary narrative acts as a medium for.

As the quotation (at the beginning of this chapter) from Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett’s book *Good Omens* has been intended to suggest, these acts of memory do not occur in the same way within the literary narrative as they occur in the more physical arenas of cultural or social existence. It may well be that the future is remembered, as a re-inscription of the past, by a character in the narrative. Here remembrance does not become the act of recall that memory and time facilitate in terms of chronological existence. Remembrance in this case is more the
act of recognition that the past instills in the individual character in question so as to provide a preemptive notion of what will be. The ‘what has been’ of the past may thus well continue to become the ‘what will be’ of the future within the ambit of that ‘which is’ in the present. Though the quotation from *Good Omens* here does not really connote that sort of a mnemonic-cognitive occurrence in its own narrative context, it has been used here to specifically articulate and substantiate the manner and means in which such narrative strategies may occur within a memory text in order that the past may be reconstructed in the edifice of the present without distancing any of the three aspects of time from each other. Such ‘narrative acts of memory’ (which do not occur only in this one given way) are responsible for the formation and perpetuation of literature’s role as a potent harbinger of cultural transfer and a powerful medium of cultural memory, or memory culture, as the case may be.

This chapter uses the models and methods outlined in the preceding ‘Introduction’ and relating to the examination of the intersection between literature and cultural memory in order to closely read three novels by Gloria Naylor, who, it would not be too irrelevant to conclude, is one of the most significant voices in contemporary African American writing, and in post 1980’s American literature as a whole as well. These three novels selected are *The Women of Brewster Place* (cited hereafter as
TWBP, published in 1982), *Mama Day* (cited hereafter as MD and published in 1988) and *Bailey’s Café* (cited hereafter as BC and published in 1992). The novel *Linden Hills* which Naylor wrote in between *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Mama Day* has not been selected among these for the present analysis to be able to proceed keeping in mind the “linkages” that have been suggested to permeate Naylor’s work. *Linden Hills* is a bit different in its location from the other three novels since it deals with a different, however relatable, class of African American society entirely, one which has acquired, even at that early era portrayed in the novel, a considerable measure of achievement, upward social mobility and financial prosperity unlike the worlds portrayed in the other three novels which span mostly a homogenised class structure by depicting individuals and situations occurring within a span that ranges from impoverished and welfare beneficiary American to upper middle class American. Naylor, who has been widely applauded for her graphic portrayal of the socio-cultural experiences of African-American women in the later decades of the twentieth century vis-à-vis the wider backdrop of a monocultural American nation, writes about a world of “‘Afric’ children’ (Naylor 1983: 191) and generations within familial spaces in her novels (The word “‘Afric’” means ‘African’ and has been used here by Naylor in a colloquial sense in all probability). Her primary characters in these three mentioned novels are women, mostly; mothers, grandmothers, great-
aunts, daughters, and even, in one instance, a “great, great, grand, Mother” (this is Sapphira Wade, the Conjure ancestress of the Days in Naylor’s *Mama Day*) (Naylor 1988: 218).

However, it cannot be concluded that Naylor’s fictional writing represents only the African American woman’s experience. It is rather an entirety of the African American experience that is found reconstructed in her novels; Naylor traces a trajectory of narrative elements from the ancestral origins for a community (with the story of Sapphira Wade and Bascombe Wade in *Mama Day*) to a locating of an educated, liberated Leftist African American woman in the post Civil Rights era (with the story of Kiswana Browne in *The Women of Brewster Place*). Besides her many prominent female characters, Naylor also creates a significant number of male African Americans in her narratives; these characters range from the urban coloured American entrepreneur with humble origins (George Andrews in *Bailey’s Café* and *Mama Day*) to the riffraff gangs and the punk teenager in the ghetto of Brewster Place whom she describes sweepingly as “dwarfed warrior-kings…born with the appendages of power, circumcised by a guillotine, and baptized with the steam from a million nonreflective mirrors” (Naylor 1983: 169) and their masculinist presence vis-à-vis the non-normativity of Lorraine and Theresa as “the most dangerous species in existence - human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide.” (Naylor
1983: 170) Naylor’s fictional narrating of lives does not therefore constitute a space that is restricted only to the representation of the African American woman. It is a space where the individual, regardless of their gender, and their sexuality finds an aptly figured expression devoid of bias and the influence of any extreme political ideology. It is a space that hosts the presence of an entire community, an ethnie, to be exact. A space that beyond everything else is an intersection of paths leading away from diverse forms of racial and social inequality towards a dream of ethnic empowerment, or an achievement of empowerment and is fairly described as so. As Mark Simpson-Vos notes issues of self-exploration, empowerment and community are central to each of her novels. A variety of pressures within the fabric of a given text may limit the extent to which Naylor’s characters construct a positive sense of self. But Naylor is clearly committed to exploring paths toward empowerment, for both her female and male characters. (2001: 17)

It would be important to note here that Naylor does not present a singular variety of locations for these representations of the African American man or woman in varying epochs and eras. The locations that Naylor uses in her stories and novels are again as diverse as the cast of her fictional characters and range from an orphanage on Staten Island in urban New York to an marginally recognised island habitation that actually does not seem to exist anywhere on the map, and at the same time does exist in reality, Willow Springs - “No, it’s actually in no place. But that’s a long story.” (Naylor 1988:29), and “part of Willow Springs
problems was that it got put on some maps right after the War of the States.” (Naylor 1988:7) Posited against such varying locales, Naylor’s characters also evince cultural associations that are as variegated, and not to say a little complex, which makes for a deeper level of mnemonic signification, of course and facilitates the performance of cultural memory within the narrative ambit in a more historically situated manner. From the blues’ music of Billie Holliday and American Gospel music to the Shakespearean play, Gloria Naylor stretches her plethora of cultural spaces and codes in which she embeds her stories (or which she embeds in her stories) far beyond a singular uni-temporal, mono-spatial level of intertextual referencing to a mythic time in the past (Saphira Wade’s magical journey across the sea in Mama Day) and even in contemporary practices of the Hoodoo cult (Miranda Day’s retribution against Ruby, or even Dr. Buzzard’s fake Conjure magic in Mama Day).

With all such variegations in narrative technique, symbolism, emplotment and characterisation, Gloria Naylor’s narratives of and about the African American people from the ghetto in Brewster Place to the grotto in Willow Springs (if the Other Place in Mama Day can be called a grotto at all) seem to manifest, in their apparent ‘linkages’, like an archive that contains the entire history of a community, an epic that records the past and present of a nation, or to put it more specifically, like a narrative cycle about a particular ethnic or class-oriented
community. Rooted firmly in “the formal history of (the African-American literary tradition)” (Gates 1993: ix), as Henry Louis Gates Jr. says about her, Gloria Naylor’s novels represent the African American ethnic experience (post Civil Rights era) within the contemporary American multiethnic mosaic in a way that is both critical and self-reflexive, and at the same time, bears a deep mark of the personal and confessional mode of narration. The experience of ethnicity Naylor speaks of and works with in her narratives and through her characters is one that owes deeply to its past heritage and to the present of its existence. It has traversed beyond the self crisis of identity and has become, as Kiswana Browne, one of the characters in *The Women of Brewster Place* calls it, *revolutionary*.

Undaunted by preexisting cultures of racist segregation, gender inequality and sexual moralising, it is the voice of the ethnic American individual who, like Kiswana Browne, speaks of not “trying to be something I’m not” but rather is moving towards “trying to be proud of my heritage and the fact that I was of African descent” (Naylor 1983: 85). Kiswana Browne, the independent Leftist African American woman trying to make a mark for herself away from her parents’ up-class prosperity is descended from “a full blooded Iroquois…a free black from a long line of journeymen who had lived in Connecticut since the establishment of the colonies…and…a Bajan who came into this country
as a cabin boy on a merchant mariner” (Naylor 1983: 86). She is in no doubt about her roots and her heritage, and is in no way deterred by her mother’s exhortations to adapt to a meliorated lifestyle among the racist rich who are, for all she feels, nothing short of being “middle-in-the-road” (Naylor 1983: 85). Hers is an ethnic identity as she has chosen to embody and adhere to. The fact that she is coloured (and not completely Black African since her ancestry is vastly mixed) is not something that leads her on to question her self-identity but on a path of self empowerment in which she dreams of a nation that is beyond such racist ideas of citizenship and belonging. Such identities like Kiswana Browne’s, or even Ophelia Day who is named Cocoa because of her light complexion - “So a child with skin the color of buttered cream gets called Cocoa” (Naylor 1988:29) and regrets the fact that her skin is not dark enough, dot the landscape of Naylor’s oeuvre like natural landmarks across a wide expanse of hitherto uninhabited but widely explored terrain. These, along with other codes of state-citizen and state-ethnie intercourse (like the absence of Willow Springs from all ‘official’ records like maps, and the bridge that spans the difference) form important constituents of the memory dispositif of the African American ethnie, if it can be seen that way, as it is represented in Naylor’s narratives.
What dominates the general narrative layout in most of Naylor’s work is this addressing of ethnic identity and its history from the past when racism segregated the American population. This quest for an understanding of the metamorphosis of ethnic identity, in this case African American ethnic identity in the twentieth century, becomes veritably a quest for home, and a desire to belong somewhere, both on a personal and collective level as Valerie Sweeney Prince defines it: “The search for justice, opportunity, and liberty that characterized the twentieth century for African Americans can be described as a quest for home… home is ubiquitous and nowhere at the same time.” (2005: unnumbered - 2) This desire for a home manifests itself in Naylor’s work in many different ways. Sometimes it takes the form of the blues’ expression, much of which is visible in Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place where she uses the blues’ matrix to narrate her characters’ lives as well as embeds many of her seven narratives in the novel with lines from Billie Holliday and other famous blues artistes of the era depicted therein. The home that we speak of here is also manifested in static physical sites or spaces like Willow Springs and Brewster Place which become the locus centralis for many of her characters’ lives and stories. What can be read in this troping of home in her work is that a trajectory of arrival and departure, or non-departure is drawn out throughout the narrative; for example, George Andrews, who is moved by the love and togetherness, and the sense of community that he finds in Willow
Springs, never leaves after, while Theresa, in losing her lover Lorraine to Brewster Place’s masculinist, heteronormative aggression, leaves Brewster Place alone, her life having been forever altered in ways more than one.

In the light of these contexts, what this chapter aims to do is to read the mentioned selected novels of Gloria Naylor from the perspective of cultural memory; to examine how these narratives by a contemporary ethnic American writer addresses the reconstruction of the ethnic past(s) of the nation in contemporary literary production. In doing this, it would be necessary to proceed with the reading of the texts from different levels of textual figuration and interpretation, of course. The primary strategy of reading that will be adopted in this deliberation would include close readings of what has been called ‘the rhetoric of memory’ within these texts with specific references to narrative time frames and their interpositions alongside symbolic representations of an emblematic African American ethnicity (akin to Anthony Smith’s ethno-symbolism referred to previously in the preceding “Introduction”). It would also include the examination of intertextual practices in these narratives, both as reiteration of textual elements used by the author in her other work and shared between the novels in question, as well as the references and citations from existing cultural and literary texts which she uses in her narratives. Besides these, this chapter will also attempt a semiotic
reading of spaces, objects, and sites within the narratives in focus, both fictional and real locations which Gloria Naylor uses in the emplotment of the stories in question, and thereby present an analysis of how these narratives become, in effect, significant media of cultural memory in the context of the experience of an African American ethnicity against the backdrop of a ‘monocultural’, predominantly white American nation.

2.2. The Rhetoric of Memory: “New and old all rolled into one”

The rhetoric of memory in a literary narrative, a memory text, operates primarily on these levels; semantic, symbolic, and historic. There are other sub-strata of course, since it is not really possible to subsume all such categories of rhetoric within these predictable labels here. How an author accomplishes the emplotment of the language of remembering and recall within the narrative structure is something that cannot be predicted entirely too close to the mark. There are distinct factors that go into such a cultural prefiguration, and literary configuration, as Astrid Erll points it out in Memory in Culture (Erll 2011). However, it needs to be remembered that the register of literary language in its intersection with narrative memory revolves primarily around the acts, and processes of forgetting and remembering, by the omniscient third person narrator, by the characters within the fictional space speaking from a first person
perspective, and by the descriptive fictionality that perpetuates the complication of emplotment through the creation and furbishing of locales and sites and spaces within the narrative. Most of this is achieved through dialogue, description, recounting and/or a temporal rendering of locales and objects, or characters even, across time frames and past(s) and present(s). Thus, broadly speaking, in case of most memory narratives, it can be concluded that the primary levels in which the rhetoric of memory operates are these three, alongside other rhetorical strategies that the author in question may employ within these levels or in conjunction with these. And so it is also with Gloria Naylor’s narratives; the language she adopts in most of her stories about female characters is of a particular variety that primarily verges on the re-embodiment of the past in the present within the narrative in question. And not only does the past infiltrate the present, but the present also gives way, sometimes, to a future that is remembered in the present, or a future that will remember the given present when it is in the past, albeit through the narrator’s intervention. For example; in the section “The Two” in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor describes how Theresa, after losing her lover Lorraine in Brewster Place

would live to be a very old woman and would replay those words in her mind a thousand times and then invent a thousand different things she could have said or done to keep the tall yellow woman in the green and black dress from walking out of the door for the last time in her life. (Naylor 1983: 167)
The negotiation between the past and the present (in this case, the past and the present in the future) that Naylor describes here is something that is not unique or extraordinary in the body of her fiction. Such narrative junctures where the temporal frame of the narrative moves, sometimes a bit abruptly, though always seamlessly into a different time altogether. For example, in *Mama Day*, there is a point where Miranda ‘Mama’ Day visits the “Other Place” and the narrative shifts into a different linearity altogether with John Paul, her long dead father, waiting for her and Ophelia ‘Cocoa’ Day. Mama Day and Miranda, who are visiting the Other Place,

…near the graveyard within the circle of live oaks and move down into time. A bit of hanging moss to cushion each foot and they’re among the beginning of the Days.

John Paul waits to guide them back as they thin out the foxglove at the head of his stone. I had six brothers born before me, five that lived…I was the last boy and the last to marry…All of them was born in slavery time, but they lived as free men ‘cause their mama willed it so. She became such a legend that black folks, white folks, and even red folks in my time would only whisper the name Sapphira…and it’s what I got to pass on to you. (Naylor 1988:151)

The ‘legend’ that John Paul speaks of in these lines is the legend of their ancestress Sapphira Wade, the almost mythical slave woman who engendered the Days’ line. The ‘Other Place’ that Mama Day and Cocoa are visiting is the place where the graves of John Paul, Mama Day’s father, and his ancestors before them, and all descended from Sapphira Wade, lie protected by the ‘otherness’ of the original residence
of the Days, a place which brings to the old women’s (Abigail’s and Miranda’s) mind a sense of the forbidden, the pains and the tribulations of past memories. The physical act of the women’s (Cocoa’s and Mama Day’s) “nearing” the graveyard and a seamless shift “down into time…among the beginning of the Days” (Naylor 1988:151) occurs simultaneously with the narrative shift in time that is evident here. It is as if the act of walking into the graveyard signifies an act of narrative reiteration, a recall of the past which does not exist except as memory, even if it is embodied memory, like the grave of John Paul which the Days clear away the foxglove from. John Paul’s grave, even the absence of his father Jonah Day’s headstone [(Jonah Day is there in his grave. “They know he’s there ‘cause they listen” (Naylor 1988:151))] become, for the Days, a generational remembering in many ways, the legend of Sapphira Wade, and the family name of the Days being all that is ‘passed on to’ them through the presence of their ancestors in their memory. Mama Day becomes, in a way, the “bearer (of memory) and cultural experience, even if it is more of an ethnic familial culture. Let us consider what Lachmann says about this aspect of transmission in cultural memory: “forgetting and remembering (as mechanisms that establish a culture); the storing of knowledge (as a tradition’s strategy for survival); the need for cultural experience to be preserved by a bearer (of memory) as witness or as text.” (2010: 302)
The novel begins with the story of Sapphira Wade and a
chronicle-like retelling of it by a third person narrator. Sapphira Wade,
as the first account in the novel begins, was

a true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as
Georgia clay...(who) could walk through a lightning storm
without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of
her hand; use the heat of the lightning to start the kindling
going under her medicine pot...turned the moon into salve, the
stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every
creature walking up on twos or down on four...a slave woman
who brought a whole new meaning to both them words...
(Naylor 1988:3)

_Mama Day_ narrates the lives of the title character, Miranda Day, and her
great-niece, Cocoa (Ophelia). With parts of the narrative set in New
York City and on Willow Springs (alternately) which is, as Naylor tells
us, a barrier island that lies east of the border between South Carolina
and Georgia and is actually not located in either state. In this novel,
Naylor creates a magical world set against a background of generational
remembering of familial pasts. Following an elaborate map of Willow
Springs, a family tree of the Day lineage and a bill of sale for the
mythical ancestress of the Days, Sapphira Wade, _Mama Day_ begins with
a prolegomena detailing the origin of the island community from as far
back as the year 1799. From its current temporal location of August
1999, the prologue reaches back to 1823 (there is a connection to the
year with the “18&23” phrase that most islanders seem to use, as
suggested in the prolegomena) which was the time that Sapphira Wade took her freedom from the white landowner, Bascombe Wade.

The entire narrative reverberates with a silent, and sometimes not so silent, presence of this “slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words…” (Naylor 1988:3) This is of course generational memory making its presence felt in the narrative as it progresses through the life of Cocoa and Mama Day, and Abigail, all of them the descendants of this magical ancestress. But, it is important to note how, this woman, who is at the heart of the narrative, at least in spirit, becomes an important symbol for what can be called a concretisation of identity, an identity that is ‘pure black’, as Mama Day notes about Cocoa, an identity that is purely that of a woman within a matrilineal genealogy that begins with Sapphira Wade. This first part of the novel (unnamed and inserted before Part I) narrates how the legend about Sapphira Wade speaks of her murder of Bascombe Wade [in contradicting, different ways, as the account mentions, which range from putting “a dagger through his kidney” to murder by asphyxiation in Bascombe Wade’s “very bed” (Naylor 1988:3)] As the narrative goes,

Mixing it all together and keeping everything that done shifted down through the holes of time, you end up with the death of Bascombe Wade (there’s his tombstone right out by Chevy’s Pass), the deeds to our land (all marked back to the very year, and seven sons (ain’t Miss Abigail and Mama Day the granddaughters of that seventh boy?)…Sapphira Wade don’t
live in that part of our memory we can use to form words.
(Naylor 1988:3)

Sapphira Wade is a symbol of a mythic past, a time before recorded
time, even if the story about her dates back to the era of slavery in the
Americas. The reportage about her that happens, wherever it happens in
the novel, is one that bespeaks a mythic presence of a “great, great,
grand, Mother” (Naylor 1988:3) in a mythic time which has translated
into legend and has become part of the cultural memory of Willow
Springs. Even Bascombe Wade, the earliest forbear of the Days, is
represented in the beginning of the novel as “Norway born or something,
and the land had been sitting in his family over there in Europe since it
got explored and claimed by the Vikings.” (Naylor 1988: 5) The origin
account about Willow Springs reads almost like a creation myth with a
dormant, distant ‘father-divinity’ like Bascombe Wade and a dominant,
powerful ‘mother-divinity’ like Sapphira Wade; akin to the Egyptian
creation myth of Isis, the powerful mother goddess who ‘kills’ the father
god Ra in order to achieve her powers of magic with which she creates
the rest of the world after Ra’s departure to the heavens as the sun god.
Miranda Day, Mama Day, as she is called bears the mark of that mythic
ancestress upon her along with all those purportedly magical abilities. At
the end of the novel, Mama Day visits vengeance upon Miss Ruby for
practicing black magic on Cocoa. She summons lightning and destroys
Ruby’s home, in nearly the same manner how the very first paragraph in
the novel speaks of Sapphira Wade being able to wield lightning and use it for kindling the fire beneath her medicine pot. This is a connection within the narrative that must be borne in mind when one thinks about the sort of mnemonic interconnection that Naylor builds within her novels. This interconnection reflects, very briefly saying so, a deep significance on the semiotic level of the text with each Miranda Day and Sapphira Wade subsuming within themselves the role of a ‘great’ mother who is capable of changing destinies and punish evil doers, even if Miranda Day is not a mother herself; her role is almost materteral. Her father called her “Little Mama” when she was a child. She also does not evince any seeming interest in the supernatural, but practices all that she has garnered over the years as her womanly knowledge, or maybe her Conjure woman-ly knowledge? For even Dr. Buzzard, the Hoodoo man in the novel is apparently wary of her abilities and does not seek any confrontation with her.

The narrative of *Mama Day* opens with an account of Willow Springs, and Sapphira Wade, and after that, in Part I, shifts to a time eighteen years in the past, and begins there with a narration of the story of Ophelia ‘Cocoa’ Day, the granddaughter of Abigail and great niece to Abigail’s sister Mama Day. Throughout the narrative, Naylor presents three different narrator-voices - Cocoa and George speaking in passages that occur after his death and within their separate and shared
consciousness, and the omniscient narrator-voice which lays a distinct emphasis on narrating the life of Mama Day, the matriarch of the Day family. In this part of the narrative, Mama Day is portrayed as a wise and prescient woman whose premonitions and attempts to ‘listen’ to the many messages sent to her, by nature, by the ‘spirit’ of the island form a major part of that bit of the narrative which is about her alone. Naylor depicts Cocoa as an obdurate twenty seven year-old African-American woman who has relocated “beyond the bridge” to New York City. Cocoa who is hell bent on making a life for herself out there in New York, meets and falls in love with an engineer whom she had first encountered at an interview for a job, the enterprising George Andrews, the African-American man she will ultimately marry later in the novel. Cocoa as a woman who must realize and embrace the legacy symbolized by Sapphira, passed down to Cocoa through her matrilineal genealogy. The novel thus revolves around the gradual process of Cocoa’s identity formation as an African-American female set against the backdrop of a new American nation, and as the heiress of a mystical legacy handed down to her through generations. As Mama Day muses in the novel about Cocoa:

The lean thighs, tight hips, the long strides flashing light between the blur of strong legs—pure black. . . . the Baby Girl brings back the great, grand Mother. We ain’t seen 18 & 23 black from that time till now. The black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun” (Naylor 1988:48)
This image of the ‘black’ that is being spoken of here is not only a racial complexion, the colour of the skin signifying a racial strain, but more of an ethnic, ideological blackness that must be acquired by Cocoa as she grows into the woman that she is, that her grandmother Abigail is, that Mama Day herself is, and that Sapphira Wade herself was. It is the colour of her home which is all that remains to stand testimony to her, and before that her ancestors’, struggle with the vicissitudes of a racial nation, an ethnicity that is not easily negotiated with, [Consider “the image-producing activity of memory that incorporates poetic imagination” (Lachmann 2010: 303)] and a physical schema of belonging and departing that coalesces into an emblematic home for Cocoa, just as the Other Place is a part of Miranda ‘Mama’ Day’s own home. As Naylor says in the novel: Home. It’s being new and old all rolled into one. Measuring your new against old friends, old ways, old places. Knowing that as long as the old survives, you can keep changing as much as you want without the nightmare of waking up to a total stranger.” (Naylor 1988:49) The mnemonic aspect of this cannot be ignored but; how ‘pure black’ becomes a signifying phrase for the cultural transfer that is caused through the generational remembering that Willow Springs bequeaths to Mama Day and to Cocoa, for this was a place, according to George, that “called up old, old memories” (Naylor 1988:184), and how this ‘pure black’ becomes the ‘home’ that never
changes for Cocoa, because the “old ways, old places” of the Days survive through her grandmother and Mama Day. And even when the danger of being lost to these “old places” looms near through Cocoa’s constant obdurate efforts at a negotiation with the black in her, it is these “old ways” which draw her back and make her aware of, and make her accept, the pain and suffering that accompanies the memories of the past, memories which cannot be destroyed, or even ‘burned away’.

This is a blackness that is *historical*, with its historicity as particular to Cocoa in this case, as it is to the memory of Sapphira in the island community of Willow Springs; it is a blackness that is part of the ethnic cultural memory of Willow Springs, and must be acquired by Cocoa intuitively and experientially rather than learned from an academic study of history (Cocoa does return to school later in the novel to study history). And that will be achieved in the narrative once Cocoa acquires the blackness of her ancestress, of her grandmother, and her great aunt, once she surrenders the ambivalence and self-doubt acquired as a result of her surroundings: the cruelty of the children that accused her of having “white blood” (Naylor 1988:47), the Cosmo magazine (a publication catering predominantly to WASP American women) which she reads, the spectre of Shawn, George’s ex-lover who was also white, and her attempts to achieve more ‘blackness’ to an extent of using foundation cream that makes her look darker than she is actually. Neither
is it an ideological whiteness that must be subscribed to by Cocoa, nor is it a deeper shade of black that she must try to achieve that is important for her; it is an acceptance of what she is, what her family is and what her brief marriage to George Andrews is that will pave the way to her resolution of identity crisis. This is achieved by Cocoa’s acceptance of the island of Willow Springs, her heritage as a coloured woman, and as a descendant of Sapphira Wade, “the greatest conjure woman on earth” (Naylor 1988:110). The cultural memory of different versions of the African American ethnic past is represented in *Mama Day* through a carefully charted and framed narrative rhetoric. These versions of the past (of Willow Springs, and of the African American community) range from accounts of how “we was brought here as slaves, we had no choice but to look at everything upside-down” (Naylor 1988:8), of how George Andrews recounts his growing up in an orphanage with the adage “Only the present has potential” being drummed into his mind by the stentorian Mrs. Jackson, to Cocoa’s angst ridden version of what it meant to be a black woman in contemporary, urbanite New York.

But what is achieved at the end of the narrative is the creation of a map of origins and becoming(s); Cocoa’s origin on Willow Springs and her journey ‘beyond the bridge’ to New York and thereafter her return to the island with a new identity of a married woman, Mama Day’s origin as ‘Little Mama’ and her gradual metamorphosis, over the decades and
across generations, into a modern day version of Sapphira Wade, George Andrew’s origin as an orphaned black boy and his ultimate arrival at Willow Springs wherefrom he never leaves, and even the origin of Willow Springs’ island community in the deeds that Bascombe Wade left. The mode of narration in the novel is mostly experiential (with George and Cocoa speaking from an “I-me” perspective), besides being generational [where the past of Willow Springs and ‘the beginning of the Days’ (a probable signifier suggesting a creation myth, albeit Biblical in its association) constantly interpolates with the present day situation on Willow Springs’ island and in the end of the Days’ lives (Mama Day’s life at its fag end, as well as the actual end of Abigail Day’s life]. The widely interspersed language of remembrance, and cultural identity [“asserting our cultural identity” as Reema’s son, “the one with the pear-shaped head” calls it. (Naylor 1988:7-8)] shapes and moulds this map of origins and becoming with mythic remembrance (the legend of Sapphira Wade), intergenerational remembering (the story of Mama Day’s and Abigail’s mother’s mental ailment after the death of her daughter Peace), and a diversely posited and articulated ethnic remembering which is both historical and mnemonic in nature [the “18 & 23…(which) was just our way of saying something” (Naylor 1988:7) and Sapphira Wade’s taking of her own freedom in 1823, as well as Mama Day’s and Abigail’s remembering of “a time when the wash ads and housing listings in newspapers - even up in the north - were clearly marked colored or
white” (Naylor 1988:19), an obvious pointer to segregation era United States when black was black and white was all that was important].

The narrative that the novel thus becomes is probably the best example of a memory text, where memory work within the narrative operates not only on the level of the interplay of cultural elements from the past embodied in the present and on the level of emblematic memory with spaces and sites like Willow Springs becoming potent media of the cultural transfer that cultural memory perpetuates, but also on the semiotic level of semantics and rhetoric where the novel fits into the role of a literary medium of cultural memory which possesses, as Astrid Erll says, “such mnemonic potentials for literature to transmit versions of a socially shared past…as an ensemble of narrative forms which provokes the naturalization of a literary text as a medium of memory” (2011: 157). Much of what Naylor writes about in the novel *Mama Day* may be said to have been the corpus of African American ethnic experience in post Civil Rights Movement America, especially if one considers the whiteness-blackness dilemma that Cocoa encounters till much late into the novel’s progression and the situations of other characters like the perpetually pessimistic Selma and the eternally optimistic George Andrews. These are not stereotypes of ethnic experience, though the previous sentence may appear to suggest so. These are apt representations of a reality, or many realities that spanned the entire
African American ethnicity in the United States of America in the decades after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s when “they’d put the ghost of Martin Luther King to rest” (Naylor 1988:20). This was a time when it became apparent, for the African American, or to the coloured American, that the permanent question that faced them was “what else did we have but ourselves? We had a more than forgettable past and no future that was guaranteed.” (Naylor 1988:26)

The rhetoric of the past, of memory, achieves a more personal character in *The Women of Brewster Place*, where the narrative, woven out of seven interconnected stories about seven different women from different strata of the society, takes on a different shape altogether, different in structure and emplotment from Naylor’s *Mama Day*. It is more alike Naylor’s other novel *Bailey’s Café* with shared characteristics of narrative structure, strategy and shape. Naylor's protagonists in *The Women of Brewster Place* are coloured women like Mattie Michael, and Cora Lee, individuals belonging to a specific class structure of working, often impoverished citizens who reside within their limited (and therefore, *limiting* by nature) community which, in turn, coalesces, with its hierarchical and at the same time communal ambience, into the structure of a village within the city, a ghetto, to be precise. These women, as Naylor says, are “hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place. They
came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years…” and each of these women, “(l)ike an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story.” (Naylor 1983: 5)

The island’s isolation in Naylor’s novel *Mama Day* is not present in this novel. Here, the ghetto of Brewster Place is a space which “was the bastard child of several clandestine meetings between the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of the Unico Realty Company” (Naylor 1983: 1), much like the meetings that take place in “her bedroom in the dark” between Cora Lee, a resident of Brewster Place, and “the shadow, who had let himself in with his key”. (Naylor 1983: 127). There is, however, a different sort of isolation that Brewster Place breeds for itself, though. It is an insularity that resists change, a hierarchy that demands subservience from any resident of the ghetto who would think to do and be otherwise, like Lorraine and Theresa, like Etta Mae and like Kiswana Browne, some of the women around whose lives this cycle of stories grows and ends in a riot, literally. The novel begins with the birth of a street, a locality, and closes, very poignantly, with the death of that same street. Whereas the first part of the novel (aptly titled “Dawn”) begins with a detailed description of how Brewster Place was born and bred, the last section of the novel (titled “Dusk”, after the penultimate hour of the day before it descends into night) describes the ‘death of a street’ when Brewster Place is “abandoned, the living smells
worn thin by seasons of winds, the grime and dirt blanketing it like an
anonymous shroud. Only waiting for death, which is a second behind the
expiration of its spirit in the minds of its children.” (Naylor 1983: 192)
One thing that is notable in this case is that unlike as it is in Mama Day
where the city of New York is represented in the light of its exploration
by George and Cocoa, in The Women of Brewster Place there is no trace
of the ghetto’s interaction with the city in which it is located. The city is
almost in absentia except for a small connection or two, and that too on
terms of an externality, an external, distant space with which the
characters in the novel only interact in passing; as Mattie does, as the
section titled “The Block Party” does, and as Etta Mae does.

Historical remembering becomes ethnic formation in this narrative
consisting of different but interconnected stories. For example, there is a
point in Mattie Michael’s story where the narrative re-members or brings
forth from her past a conversation she’d had with Butch, her soon to be
lover. The narrative reports, in Mattie’s voice:

Papa said that when the emancipation came, his daddy was
just a little boy, and he had been hard of hearing so his master
and everyone on the plantation had to call him twice to get his
attention. So his name being Michael, they always called him
Michael-Michael. And when the Union census taker came and
was registering black folks, they asked what my granddaddy’s
name was, and they said Michael-Michael was all they knew.
So the dumb Yankee put that down and we been Michael ever
since. (Naylor 1983: 17)
This bit of reminiscence narrated by Mattie encompasses both generational memory in the guise of family tradition (handed down to Mattie by her father and his before him) and historical event in memory (the remembering of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 besides the later day Reconstruction period comprising the Union Census in conjunction with familial memories about the origin of Mattie’s surname). This may also be taken as a mnemonic suggestion about the Reconstruction period in African American history when states like Arkansas, Louisiana and Tennessee (where Mattie Michael’s family lived) were given reconstructed governments by President Abraham Lincoln. There are other examples of historical remembering in the novel which attest to the assumption by the mnemonic rhetoric within the narrative of historic events and occurrences. For example; in Kiswana Browne’s story there is a reference to the ‘Movement’ which obviously signifies the Civil Rights Movement between 1955 and 1968. There, Kiswana Browne speaks to her mother about some people (who) ‘sold out’ during that ‘Movement’. This reference connotes the obvious pro-ideological whiteness that upper-class African Americans may well have subscribed to at that important juncture in American history just because of the possible destabilisation that threatened their hard-achieved status and prosperity. It also presents a pro-ethnic, anti-racist perspective that proliferated in the African American ethnic population
after Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights era, during the sixties and seventies decades.

“The image-producing activity of memory” that “incorporates poetic imagination”, as Renate Lachmann speaks of it (2010: 303) is aptly represented in these lines from Mattie Michael’s story where the narrator says:

Time’s passage through the memory is like molten glass that can be opaque or crystallize at any given moment at will: a thousand days are melted into one conversation, one glance, and one hurt can be shattered and sprinkled over a thousand days. It is silent and elusive, refusing to be dammed and dripped out day by day; it swirls through the mind while an entire lifetime can ride like foam on the deceptive, transparent waves and get sprayed onto the consciousness at ragged, unexpected intervals. (Naylor 1983: 35)

The image that is presented here is a complex one; the images of molten glass, broken glass, and the sea with its waves and its spray together constitute an interaction of the mnemic and the poetic as it would seem. This is, for all it appears, a metaphor for memory in itself. It connotes, separately and connectedly, the interaction between time and memory, between the storage function of cultural memory and the act of recall, voluntary and involuntary, and a possible construction of how, within the interconnected narratives of *The Women of Brewster Place*, the reconstruction of the past is perpetuated. The image of the shattered glass in this narration may also well connect to the prologue that Naylor
presents at the very beginning of the novel; Langston Hughes’ poem from *Montage of a Dream Deferred* where the poet famously asked the question “Or does it explode?” (original emphasis) about “a dream deferred” (Hughes 1999: 268), not in the sense of the explosion and the shattering alone, but in the sense of the hurt, and the dreams that are deferred; in the narrative with the women protagonists like Mattie Michael, Etta Mae, Lorraine and Theresa, and in the context of the ethnic culture of the African Americans whose dreams of living a life of equality and non segregation in America were deferred till late into the twentieth century, even though the Emancipation in the USA a hundred years ago had liberated them from slavery, and federal laws had granted them the right to vote, the right to own property, and so on. Consider, in this case, if that may be, these lines from Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream” oration (which was prompted, most probably, by the Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson’s exhortation to Dr. King to tell “them about the dream”):

...I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”…
I have a dream today!
I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; “and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” (King 1986: 219-220)
This dream that spans so many cultural texts of the African American ethnic is something that is not only just the American Dream that Martin Luther King speaks of, or the Civil Rights Movement fought for. It is also the dream that Mattie Michael, or Etta Mae, or even the liberated Leftist Kiswana Browne has. Very symbolically apt and representative of this dream is the cyclical structure of the narrative as Naylor structures it; the novel begins with an account titled “Dawn” and ends with a description of how the dream (the dreams, even) “ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear”. Naylor says, here that

the colored daughters of Brewster Place, spread over the canvas of time, still wake up with their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn. They get up and pin those dreams to wet laundry hung out to dry, they’re mixed with a pinch of salt and thrown into pots of soup, and they are diapered around babies. They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear. So Brewster Place waits to die. (Naylor 1983: 192)

The hope in the form of the ‘deferred’ dream that is expressed in these lines supplements the ethnic experience of the African American dream for freedom that is iterated in Dr. King’s speech, as well as the dream that explodes in Hughes’ poem besides being as well the deferred dream that Cora Lee encounters at a poignant point in the story “Cora Lee” within the narrative of The Women of Brewster Place where Kiswana takes Cora and her children to watch a Shakespearean play which is, quite predictably so, A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The memory of this
dream of the ‘Afric children’ of Brewster Place is the memory of the

dream of the ‘Afric children’ of the United States. Its reiteration in a
mnemonic configuration within the novel attests to Naylor’s mnemonic
work in her fiction which subsumes and engenders her narratives with a
commemorative impulse, one that seeks to tell the story of the African
American ethnic past in signs that are apparently “no more yielding but a
dream” (Shakespeare 1966: 191) but are actually portentous and subtle
but powerful in their transmission of this cultural dream which is almost
“past the wit of man to say what dream it was” (Shakespeare 1966: 186).

Gloria Naylor’s fourth novel, Bailey’s Café, is again, a collection of
stories about different characters (some of which occur in other works by
Naylor. For example, Bailey’s Café begins the story of George Andrews
which completes itself in her novel Mama Day) which is orchestrated by
the unnamed proprietor of the nearly magical Bailey’s café (it is “a
The narrative begins with an account of his own life presented by Bailey
(the name is not actually his own, though people call him that). The
narrator says:

I never changed the name of this place. When I found myself
here from the wharf in San Francisco, the name Bailey’s Café
was painted across the front window…and I saw no reason to
remove it. Because of that folks think my name is Bailey and I
see no reason to tell them otherwise. (Naylor 1992: 28)
This ‘Bailey’ is the conductor or maestro (the section where he tells about himself and his wife Nadine is titled “Maestro, If You Please”) of this narrative and one of the two men in the novel who have the opportunity to tell their stories. Each of the characters in the novel makes their way to Bailey’s Café, which the unnamed narrator defines towards the end of his story as being “real real mobile…some place, some space to take a breather for a while” (Naylor 1992: 28) from different regions. Bailey’s Café becomes thus a site of convergence for an entire community of people, who are, though probably unknown to each other, connected by parameters of class, ethnicity and economy. From Sadie, a wino and ten cent whore to Sugar Man, a pimp to Jesse Bell, a junkie who was once married to a King (the name recalls Jezebel from the Old Testament who was actually married to a King, King Ahab), 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. Most of the time the café is just a detour on the way to Eve’s who, it would seem becomes a symbol of motherliness and shelter for all the women who come to her after having gone through hell (Eve reminds Jesse at a point of time that Hell is actually where they all are even at that point of time. The Biblical parallel that Naylor draws in the narrative about Eve, the first woman who subsumes within herself all the sins of the other ‘fallen’ women and embodies womanly sin for
having committed the original sin herself is difficult to miss here, though.) Through a series of narrative elements characteristic of the Blues’ musical genre, Naylor formulates a Blues tale that illustrates the many phases of a Blues’ song while embellishing the café’s role within the narrative as the stage, the arena of the performance of the Blues, as the site of mediation which becomes, within the narrative, the primary connector that links all of the stories together.

The epigraph appended to the beginning of the novel is of crucial importance to the narrative because it actually announces a way into the story of Bailey’s Café by talking about how one can find their way to Bailey’s Café. Let us consider what Naylor says in the epigraph:

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
a place never
closing:
Bailey’s
Café
(Naylor 1992: unnumbered page)
Naylor links this way finding to a particular narrative strategy within the novel where Bailey (the unnamed narrator) constantly has to direct many of the characters in the novel to Eve’s, even though he is not aware of the actual address (Jesse Bell shows him the card Eve gave her at the detention centre but he does not know that address. Only when he is told about Eve’s can he actually show her the way. Naylor makes it very apparent in the epigraph that it is not only that the Blues are a way for her characters to Bailey’s Café, in transit from one state of hellish existence to another, but that the Blues become, all in all, a distinct voice within the narrative that “creates” a space for itself - the Blues progression that Naylor uses to plot her narrative, with each character becoming a part of the whole song, one by one.

Houston A. Baker defines the Blues in the following words by way of an exhaustive ontogenetic outlining:

Like a streamlined athlete’s awesomely dazzling explosions of prowess, the blues song erupts, creating a veritable playful festival of meaning. Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation - a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation - of species experience. What emerges is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole. The blues singer’s signatory coda is always atopic, placeless…the blues are a synthesis...combining work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more, they constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America - always
becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World. (1984: 4-5)

On reading through Bailey’s Café, and noticing the deep influence of the Blues on its narrative structure, one cannot but conclude that it is indeed a “phylogenetic recapitulation”, an evolutionary review of the many pasts (the pasts of Sadie, of Mary, of Eve, of Esther, of Nadine, of Nadine’s husband ‘Bailey’ and each of these reiterated in a nonlinear progression within their respective sections through shifts in narrative time and narrative rhetoric) from the ‘edge of the world’ of the present that takes place within the narrative of Bailey’s Café. The anonymous voice of the narrative is atopic, indeed, as Baker suggests about the Blues, but the experience that the voice articulates is beyond any atopia that may be suggested otherwise. It is indeed a heterotopia of illusion through the harbouring of ‘deviant’ individuals (like Mary, and Jesse whom Sister Carrie admonishes using Isaiah and other Scriptures), a ‘real site’ of otherness signified by that physical symbol of the café that brings to one’s mind a space that is non-aligned (like Bailey’s Café is) and is a background for many different meetings (Sadie’s and Iceman Jones’, or Eve’s and Jesse’s in the narrative, for that matter), many different identity markers (like Sugar Man’s role of the pimp, Sadie’s role of the drunkard prostitute, or even Miss Maple’s role of being a suspect queer) which engender different layers of meaning within the narrative.
Bailey’s Café thus becomes, as Michel Foucault would call it, “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (unnumbered. See endnote.). This mode of narration, this generic subversion of the literary narrative to reflect and embody what Houston A. Baker has called the ‘blues matrix’ recalls what Astrid Erll says about the role of genre in the figuration of literary texts as media of cultural memory. Erll says: “Narrative structures play a significant role in every memory culture…the main function of narrative in culture is… ‘temporal orientation’, the linking of past, present and future in a meaningful way…” (2011: 147) which is what this narrative structure followed by Bailey’s Café does; it orientates diverse physical and ethnic spaces (like the delta Eve talks of, like Chicago, like the baseball park ‘Bailey’ speaks of, like Eve’s boarding house) at a specific site of merger, a site of mediation within a framework of temporality (even though the narrative departs from the predominant time frame to speak of ‘other’ times) which is the present confirmed and modelled on the many past(s) that Nadine and ‘Bailey’ encounter and then narrate.

Besides this specific narrative strategy, the rhetoric of memory in Bailey’s Café also manifests through the experiential mode of narration that most of the speakers within the novel employ in their accounts, alongside an interspersing, or interweaving rather of memories of
historical events (like World War II and the dropping of the ‘A-bomb’ by Truman as ‘Bailey’ says it in the section titled “Jesse Bell”) and even through representations of popular cultural history (like the accounts of baseball history) that Bailey’s narrative about himself is punctuated with [“A Josh Gibson, a Satchel Paige, an Oscar Charleston.” (Naylor 1992: 11)]. Also, the interpolations of first person narratives within ‘Bailey’s’ story about himself of the American attack on Japan, the dropping of the ‘A-bomb’, the outbreak of the World War in Europe and how it impacted the United States, along with mnemonic images of the ‘divine wind…Kamikaze’, of “One thousand and five hundred years in Japan” and “the very young, the deformed, and the old (who) were waiting for me in Tokyo”, for the American soldiers who landed there, are examples of Naylor’s intricate memory work throughout the entire narrative of 

_Bailey’s Cafe_.

### 2. 3. The Patchwork Quilt of the Past: Texts, Objects, Sites and Rituals

Mama Day and her sister Abigail Day begin, at that point in _Mama Day_ when Cocoa and George are going to be married, to weave a patchwork quilt. This is a wedding gift that Cocoa has requested them for. The description Naylor presents of the patchwork quilt is vibrant with a detailed locating of colours on the quilt. Naylor says:
The rings lay on a solid backing of cotton flannel; from a distance it looks like she's bending over a patch of sand at the bottom of the bluff when it's caught the first rays of a spring moon -- an evening cream. The overlapping circles start out as gold on the edge and melt into oranges, reds, blues, greens, and then back into golds for the middle of the quilt. (Naylor 1988:137)

It is the perfect picture of an American patchwork quilt, with variegated coloured patches mixing and mashing with each other to form a unified wholeness of beauty and love. On a deeper level of significance, though, the patchwork quilt that Mama Day and Abigail stitch so painstakingly is not just a thing of love, but a part of the heritage that was handed down, generation after generation, through the lineage of the Days. Just like in Alice Walker's story “Everyday Use” where Maggie receives the Lone Star and the Walk Around the Mountain quilts which were stitched by her Grandmother Dee because unlike Dee (Wangero), it is she who understands the value of the quilts, the heritage behind it all which is to be reiterated through ‘everyday use’, a means of perpetuating the memories that go into the making of a family’s generational memories, signified by the different patches sewn within the quilt. In Mama Day, the lines that follow the description cited above attest to this particular emblematic character of the patchwork quilt and how it becomes both a metaphor for the narrative texture of the novel as well as for the nexus between intergenerational and cultural memory that goes into the formation of heritage. In this case, it is specifically an ethnic American
heritage alongside a familial heritage, keeping in mind the important significance of the patchwork quilt in the past and the contemporary of the ethnic American experience. Consider the lines that follow the previous quotation from *Mama Day*:

A bit of her daddy’s Sunday shirt is matched with Abigail’s lace slip, the collar from Hope’s graduation dress, the palm of Grace’s baptismal gloves. Trunks and boxes from the other place gave up enough for twenty quilts: corduroy from her uncles, broadcloth from her great-uncles...the satin trim of Peace’s receiving blanket to Cocoa’s baby jumper to a pocket from her own gardening apron. Golds into oranges into reds into blues...She concentrates on the tiny stitches as the clock ticks away. The front of Mother’s gingham shirtwaist - it would go right nice into the curve between these two little patches of apricot toweling...I’ll just use a sliver, no longer than the joint of my thumb. Put a little piece of her somewhere. (Naylor 1988:137)

The description of the colours of the slowly shaping up patchwork quilt cited above is not, as it may seem, just a description of the colours. A cursory reading of the lines would reveal how Naylor interweaves the entire familial past of the Days (beginning, as it were, with the beginning of the Days) into the fabric of the quilt beginning with scraps of cloth from her long dead sister, to her uncles and great uncles, her own mother and even a scrap of homespun which Miranda Day finds ‘real old’ and suspects to have been part of Sapphira Wade’s dress. All of those generations of the Days seem to come together in the quilt which George and Cocoa would use after their wedding. The patchwork quilt becomes thus a metaphor for the intergenerational memory that Naylor
intersperses the narrative of *Mama Day* with. The act of weaving (by Mama Day and Abigail) and its being gifted to Cocoa (the last generation of the Days) signifies an act of intergenerational transfer that functions in itself a key ‘act of memory’ within the narrative, since it is on the basis of this intergenerational presence (from Sapphira Wade to Mama Day’s own mother and down to Mama Day herself) that the entire narrative achieves its stature and structure as a reiteration of family chronicle in the lives of those who have survived the passage of time and are extant as the remnant of the Days in the present.

On a different level, though, the description of the scraps of cloth that go into the making of the quilt may be said to signify the presence of different historical eras within the fabric of the quilt in itself. If the quilt can be considered a symbol of the family of the Days (and it is so, since the very beginning of the Days and the continuation of the lineage down to Cocoa is contained symbolically by the patchwork quilt), then it is imperative to consider how each different generation of the Days, and thus each different era in the history of the Day family, is represented symbolically through the different varieties of cloth spoken of in the description of the quilt. The gingham cloth from Mama Day’s mother’s shirtwaist of course recalls turn of the century American women’s clothing just after the Civil War era, and after the Emancipation, whereas the broadcloth from of her great-uncles’ time and the homespun of
Sapphira Wade’s dress recalls generally an era even prior to that, maybe even antebellum America.

Broadcloth, it must be remembered, was primarily imported from Europe during colonial times and was synonymous with gentlemanly attire. Later, after American textile industries began to vie with European imports and an American version of broadcloth was popularised, it became a regularly produced textile variety and was often taken to symbolise, as Brian Luskey says, “the triumph of democracy and the ideology of the ‘self-made’ man, even when the real story was woven into America’s conundrum of class”. And this was so since “(f)ine broadcloth - or whatever observers mistook it for - stood for the bourgeois refinement that supposedly was available to the masses if they sought advancement.” (Luskey 2010: 150-151) Sapphira Wade’s ‘real old’ homespun, on the other hand, represents a phase in American history (and the origins of the Day family) when the productive colonial household was celebrated and lauded in its anti-European, anti-royalist cultural manifestation by people like the Reverend Horace Bushnell. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich records Bushnell’s perspective about the prevalence of homemade textiles thus: “Who they are by name we cannot say - no matter who they are - we should be none the wiser if we could name them, they themselves none the more honourable. Enough
that they are the King Lemuels and Queens of Homespun, out of whom we draw our royal lineage.” (2002: 15-16)

Bushnell’s statement is only a case in point to prove the historical significance of homespun here, just like gingham or broadcloth. The mnemonic aspect of it in Naylor’s description that continues after the patchwork quilt ensemble is something that is also very relevant to the discussion here. Mama Day recalls the past of her family in the story of Sapphira Wade and Bascombe Wade as she knows it. The “two ticks of the clock” that tell her about what she “knew about the homespun all along”, about how “(t)he woman who wore it broke a man’s heart”. (Naylor 1988:138). The ticking of the clock and the recall of the story of Sapphira Wade by her descendant Mama Day in the present, symbolised by the scrap of homespun from the ancestress’ dress, which in turn is being woven into a quilt to be used by another of her descendants, Cocoa - all of this becomes an elaborate schema of mnemonic significance in Naylor’s *Mama Day*; a fitting pattern of intergenerational memory configured through a narrative act of memory.

And this image of the patchwork quilt also can be said to become a parallel for Naylor’s narrative style; she incorporates various cultural texts, literary allusions and texts, and even religious scripture into her narratives in an assiduous manner of selection and combination. What is
narrated is also what is remembered, in Naylor’s narratives, and that
which is remembered is narrated in its origins and its past as well as in
its present and probable future. Various objects, spaces, rituals and sites
like the patchwork quilt and the annual ritual of Candle Walk in *Mama
Day*, Eve’s boarding house and the Baileys’ café in *Bailey’s Café* (since
Nadine and her husband are known as the Baileys in the novel, even
though that is not their true identity) along with Brewster Place itself in
*The Women of Brewster Place* become mediums through which the
presence of cultural memory is perpetuated in these narratives. And so it
is with the many texts, literary, religious or cultural, which Naylor
alludes to in all of them.

The images of the tempest, the island and the figure of the sorcere(ess)
(Miranda merges into the role of Prospero here, it could be said) from
William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is significantly woven into the
narrative structure of *Mama Day* while the narrative of *The Women of
Brewster Place* is embedded with snatches from Blues songs by Billie
Holliday and other famous blues musicians from post World War
America. Similarly, in *Bailey’s Café*, the entire structure of the narrative
resembles the aural structure of the blues matrix, as previously
mentioned, with a maestro, or a central conductor in the form of the
narrator, ‘Bailey’ linking all those women and their stories together.
Besides this, there is also the very prominent presence of female Biblical
heroines (or characters) like Eve, Mary and Jesse Bell (or Jezebel, wife of the Biblical king Ahab) whose stories are recreated through a strategy of intertextual reconstruction in Bailey’s Café. Besides these many external texts she uses within her narratives, Naylor also links her own narratives together by creating certain characters common to more than one of her works; George from Mama Day has his origins narrated in Bailey’s Café while in Mama Day, he points out Bailey’s café when he is showing Cocoa around New York. And this is not the only instance of such inter-textual relations between Naylor’s narratives. However, for an inclusive understanding of such an authorial strategy, it would be necessary to use analyses of her other works like Linden Hills and The Men of Brewster Place here.

In Mama Day, the ritual of Candle Walk occupies a very important role within the narrative because of its mnemonic significance. A very detailed description of the annual ritual is rendered in the novel just after George tells Cocoa about his heart condition. It goes thus:

Candle Walk night. Looking over here beyond the bridge, you might believe some of the more far-fetched stories about Willow Springs: The island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an array of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. “Leave ’em here, Lord,” she said. “I ain’t got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people. But I can lead on with light”…nobody knows why every December twenty-second folks take to the road - …it’s been going on since before they were born, and the ones before them. (Naylor 1988:110)
It is quite obvious here that the phrase quoted throughout the novel in the voices of many of the islanders on the occasion of Candle Walk - “Lead on with light”, is a direct reference to Sapphira Wade’s supposed bargain with God about being able to “lead on with light”. The ritual significance of Candle Walk and its coterminous importance with Christmas is attested to on a previous occasion when it is said how even “Reverend Hooper couldn’t stop Candle Walk night”, even though he had not been the first one to try and do that, and that it had “been that way since before Reverend Hooper and it’ll be that way after him.” (Naylor 1988:108) The Candle Walk ritual’s actual origins are unknown, as the previous larger quotation from the narrative shows. However, its celebration has continued unabated over the generations since the time of Sapphira Wade while the ritual itself seems to have originated from the dialogue between the Christian God and the conjure woman Sapphira. The myth of Sapphira Wade in the cultural memory of Willow Springs is memorialised in the annual presence of the ritual since a version of her story also narrates the origin of Candle Walk night, seemingly. Though these are ‘far-fetched stories’ as the narrator would have the reader believe, yet the persistence of these ‘stories’, these origin myths in the narrated life of Willow Springs and its people reflect an aspect of cultural transfer that is both mnemonic and historical in nature. While Candle Walk night becomes a mnemonic symbol in Mama Day’s
consciousness, a symbol that connects her to Sapphira Wade and both of them to her grand-niece Cocoa, for the people of Willow Springs, or for the African American ethnicity in general, it is a cultural presence that subsumes within itself a distant past with alternate religious practices of their ancestors which have, over time, come to a coalescing of sorts with the Christian religion they profess. There is also, besides just this ritual of Candle Walk, the figure of the conjure, or the Hoodoo man (in this case, Dr Buzzard) whose ‘haints’ and ‘hands’ are traces of a remote past when the African American occult traditions came to an encounter with the white man’s Christian religion in the early nineteenth century in America. Commenting on this socio-cultural aspect of the past of African American ethnicity, Yvonne Chireau writes:

With the arrival of European occultism and magical beliefs in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America, the parallel transfer of spiritual traditions of an equally significant group of migrants-those of Africans-had also begun. Although the genealogy for the conveyance of Old World occult practices is more explicit for European immigrants than for Africans (a legacy of print culture), the vast funneling of persons from the African continent into the Western hemisphere swiftly countered the white colonial presence. Magic and occultism, embedded in West African religious beliefs, made the long and torturous journey to the New World, where they were assimilated in the spiritual consciousness of black slaves. (1997: 227)

This assimilation that Chireau speaks of is seen reflected in the ritual of Candle Walk, though the slaves she speaks of are, in case of Willow Springs, not really slaves since Bascombe Wade liberated them and
bequeathed to them the island of Willow Springs. The ethnic experience within the narrative, however, remains constant here as it is in the historical reality that Naylor evokes through this aspect of *Mama Day*. How the narrative incorporates within its rhetoric and its structure a parallel, and intersecting, reconstruction of Christian theology and Hoodoo belief is also notable (Hoodoo itself being an offshoot of an interaction between Christianity and West African religious cults).

Within the trio of Mama Day, Sapphira Wade and Cocoa can be traced a reworking of the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In their case, it becomes a subversion of the male dominated Father, Son and Holy Spirit trio - it is, as one can obviously see, a trio of the Mother, the Daughter and the Holy Spirit. Sapphira Wade, with her physical absence and spiritual, symbolic presence takes on the role of the Spirit, while Mama Day, with her maternal role becomes the mother. Cocoa, on the other hand, is the Daughter in this relationship that is governed by a motif of ancestry and which signifies a complexity of generational transfer; of memory and heritage. Naylor’s narrative, thus, in ways more than one, incorporates yet subverts the presence of a white Christian culture and subsumes it within the fold of an African-American islander cultural space.

The character of Dr. Buzzard forms yet another significant part of the Hoodoo/Conjure aspect of *Mama Day*. He is portrayed as a gambling,
drinking, old conjure-man (originally named Rainbow Simpson) who takes the name of ‘Dr. Buzzard’ and who, in a rare moment of honesty, it would seem, says about himself to George -“Ya see, I’ve always been an old fraud” (Naylor 1988:292). Buzzard’s character in the novel is somewhat of a combination of opposites; while he is berated by Mama Day as being a good-for-nothing, he also is a recurring voice of balance who instructs George about the walk he’d need to take to the Other Place in order besides bringing Cocoa home from the airport and aiding her in her trick on Abigail and Mama Day. He is also portrayed in the novel as a supplier of a ‘gambling hand’ that was guaranteed to help a man’s luck in his gambling. The hands he supplies the men with are made of chamois cloth, with “live frog and all…and all…lodestone, sugar, black pepper, and cayenne in it” (Naylor 1988:210). “Buy one of my gambling hands and you’ll cut your losses even more…” Buzzard announces to Parris and the others who are scheduled to play at his own place that evening (Naylor 1988:208). Interestingly enough, the name of ‘Dr. Buzzard’ is something of a cultural myth in African American spaces inclined towards Hoodoo or even a contemporary understanding of it. It has taken root, if one can be allowed to use the expression, as a popular cultural name for root doctors of the Gullah tradition in contemporary music and literature (the famous Dr Buzzard’s Original Savannah Band which functioned between 1976 and 1984, and the occurrence of the character

Yvonne Chireau mentions the name and records its possible origin in the character of “the most famous Conjurer of all, the Gullah "Doctor" Buzzard, was himself a favored patron of Christian causes. It was said that Buzzard financed and built two of the largest churches on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, in the early twentieth century.” (1997: 231). This “Doctor Buzzard” is not just a character, but more of a historical, cultural name that has its roots in Southern history and the very beginnings of Gullah culture and Hoodoo traditions. The one whom Chireau mentions here was a famous ‘juju man’, a Conjure man from an entire family of ‘Doctor Buzzards’ located in South Carolina whose practice of the mystic arts earned them both fame and infamy. Naylor’s use of the name in *Mama Day*, besides other elements of Gullah culture, Hoodoo tradition, Biblical scripture and, on occasion, Shakespearean characters and plots, recalls what Lachmann observes about intertextuality, cultural memory and literary narratives. She says:

All texts participate, repeat, and constitute acts of memory; all are products of their distancing and surpassing of precursor texts. In addition to manifest traces of other texts and obvious forms of transformation, all contain cryptic elements. All texts are stamped by the doubling of manifest and latent, whether consciously or unconsciously. All texts make use of mnemotechnic procedures, in sketching out spaces, *imagines*, and *imagines agentes*. As a collection of intertexts, the text itself is a memory place; as texture, it is memory architecture,
and so forth. All texts, furthermore, are indebted to transformatory procedures that they employ either covertly or ludically and demonstratively. (2010: 305)

The interplay of cultural paradigms, cultural texts and literary narratives through allusion, paraphrasing, quotation and narrative incorporation within Naylor’s *Mama Day* achieves the construction of an intertext very much on the lines of the patchwork quilt that Naylor speaks about. This creation of an intertext thus attests to the role of this particular narrative of Naylor’s (*Mama Day*) as an example of how the African American ethnic narrative can function as a medium of cultural memory in the context of the African American ethnic experience. Naylor’s other two novels are not exceptions to this, of course. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor performs the same sort of narrative strategy and literary troping, albeit in a more fragmented and isolated manner of emplotment leading on to a different version of an intertextual narrative.

Whereas the narrative structure of *Mama Day* comprises only first person narrations by a primary set of voices (George’s, Cocoa’s and the omniscient narrator’s), in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Bailey’s Café*, the polyphony of voices that emerges within the narratives is one that is enriched by a larger cast of representations from different classes of African American individuals; there are different people of different cultural (and political) inclinations belonging to vastly different class backgrounds (though almost all of them can be related to each other
because of the losses and displacement that they have encountered and the new *shared* spaces which they have arrived at after that displacement; Eve’s boarding house in *Bailey’s Café* and Bailey’s Café itself, besides the closeted atmosphere of Brewster Place as posited against the backdrop of a pullulating and ever growing urban space). As a result the tropes and figures of mnemonic signification in these other narratives of Naylor’s, besides the literary and cultural allusions are more ethnie-specific, and more relatable to issues of ethnic figuration in post Civil Rights era America, or even the Civil Rights Movement which, by way of narrative emplotment, is off and on referred to throughout the various stories in *The Women of Brewster Place*. For example; in *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor uses the phrase “children of Ham” when she refers to “the countless other disillusioned, restless children of Ham” (Naylor 1983: 60) as a marker of an ethnic community (the obvious Biblical reference to the ‘land of Ham’ in *Psalms* and to Noah’s son of the same name who is purportedly the ancestor of all humans born black).

The disillusionment she speaks of is the disillusionment of the ethnic populations of the United States, especially the African American ethnic population whose rights, even if restored by the Emancipation, and other institutions were not in the least reconstituted, as the social history of the era Naylor locates the narrative in would show. The idea of the “Curse of
Ham”, since the seventeenth century, has been used to perpetuate the popular belief that the patriarch Noah cursed his son and his descendants to perpetual vassalage. Many pro-slavery writers have used this to propose a justification of African slavery and similar practices of segregation in American culture. Such Biblical parallels and allusions can be noticed in Bailey’s Café as well, where Naylor narrates the story, through Bailey’s voice, of Jesse Bell who was married to a King. This recounts, very succinctly, the character of Jezebel from the Hebrew Book of Kings who was the wife of a king, King Ahab. The similarities one notices between the Biblical woman and Naylor’s drug addict Jesse Bell attests to the masterly practice by Naylor of intertextual emplotment in her novels.

In The Women of Brewster Place, the blues occupy an important role by way of allusion and literary parallels that Naylor draws between the lives of her characters and the songs (from Billie Holliday and other sources) which she alludes to and quotes. For example: in the section titled “Etta Mae Johnson” which is the story of the character by the same name, she alludes to the Billie Holliday song “I love my man/ I’m a lie if I say I don’t”. The ‘long, long, way to go’ that the song reiterates over and over again is reflected in the life of Etta Mae who, as her story shows, indeed has a long way to go before she can actually come to rest in peace, given her choices of fleeing her home when very young and her acceptance of
a hedonist’s life. Or even the very famous “Strange Fruit” song by Dwayne Wiggins and others (sung by Nina Simone as well as by Billie Holliday) which rememorates the lynching of slaves in South America during slavery times. As a ‘strange fruit’ borne by those Southern trees, Etta Mae’s story with the allusions to snatches from the blues is an example from the narrative of *The Women of Brewster Place* of how Naylor intersperses the stories of the “colored daughters of Brewster Place, spread over the canvas of time” (Naylor 1983: 192)

Cultural memory is not only evoked in *Mama Day, The Women of Brewster Place* and in *Bailey’s Café* through mnemonic configuration and intertextual allusion and incorporation. One obvious and very important narrative strategy Naylor uses to further this memory work in her novels is the creation of fictional spaces of communality and ethnic cohabitation. The island of Willow Springs, Bailey’s Café itself, Eve’s boarding house and the residential complex of Brewster Place are examples of sites of convergence, as said before, which are fictional, of course. The issue that must be taken note of, however, in this case is that these sites of convergence, apart from their mnemonic significance in the narratives in question also are sites of rememoration or what can be called the act of recall and remembering. These spaces become ‘memory spaces’ by hosting the characters’ remembering of their own pasts, and their cultural pasts even though these spaces themselves do not, in a
technical manner of speaking, harbour significant elements of cultural memory within themselves. They are, thus, fictional spaces that aid the reconstruction of cultural memory through the constant interworking of narrative elements with cultural, ethnic and collectively mnemonic elements that Naylor practices in her fiction.