Chapter 4

BAILEY’S CAFÉ
Bailey Café is the most ambitious, audacious, and mesmerizing novel. In this fourth novel, Naylor uses her continuing experimentation with patterns of narration, definitions of reality, and depiction of the supernatural elements.

Bailey’s Café is a collection of deeply moving personal stories of female sexuality through the blues. Each character is a living embodiment of pain. In this novel also Naylor uses the elements of blues as in The Women of Brewster Place: the loss and the desire to move on and call-and-response. Mattie Michael loses her house and son and Lucielia loses both her daughter and husband. This loss that each of these characters experiences is what calls them out of their current state of grief. Naylor chooses to locate the novel within a specifically cultured and gendered context of disposed women world-wide. The structure of the novel itself mimics that of a blues song. As in her earlier novels, Naylor uses seven as a recurring number; once again, as in The Women of Brewster Place, she has seven stories to tell about the women who come to the café, each one representing a note on a chromatic scale. Naylor exposes the painful details of female sexuality in “aching consciousness.”

Naylor draws Linden Hills on Dante and Mama Day on The Tempest, Bailey’s Café re-imagines biblical women – Eve, Mary, Jezebel, and Mary Magdaline – in a late 20th century netherworld. A novel “about sexuality,” according to Naylor, it is “structured ... like a jazz set.” Using a kaleidoscopic point of view, Naylor tells stories of sin and redemption, love and hate, damnation and salvation. She records each of the women’s stories, in effect to institutionalize it.
The novel comprises a series of loosely connected stories – each one from a different woman’s point of view. Naylor begins with “Maestro, If you Please. . .,” which sets the stage and tone for the rest of the characters. From there the novel moves to “The Vamp,” a simple introductory phrase that can be repeated indefinitely until a soloist enters, those characters will step forward, one at a time, during the “The Jam”. Each of the novel’s characters, or performers, has the opportunity to tell their story or play their part. Finally, the novel moves into the “The Wrap,” which indicates the music is over; the story has been told. In this section George’s birth has been introduced. As George will grow up to tell Cocoa that she was not a bitch. The Wrap in Bailey’s Café suggests the sagacity of George’s instincts about the mother he never knew.

By taking these sections individually, Naylor signifies upon the blues form as a way of creating a blue space that transcends audacity and becomes a more visual form of expression. With this novel, Naylor achieves the emotional magnitude of traditional African American musical forms, conveying extremes of pain and pleasure, sadness and joy. The black women in the novel grapple with a continuum of sexual exploitation and violence, from child prostitution to sadomasochistic pedophilia.

Naylor reveals her extraordinary ability to imagine, create and relate the stories of half a dozen people nearly destroyed by the past, yet getting some glimmer of hope with a magically real, communal celebration of the birth of Mariam’s son George during the Christmas season. Voices representing a multi-cultural community call and respond to each other in ritualizing George’s birth, an event assuming prophetic
dimensions. George's long-anticipated arrival, like that of the Messiah, could signal either an end or, hopefully, new beginnings for the pluralistic group present. Naylor creates an image of global harmony but denies the privilege of knowing the fate of the young mother and son: Does Mariam find acceptance among an American Jewish community? What is to become of George, now en route to Wallace P. Andrews Boys' Home? In short, Bailey's Café is filled with life, albeit life in deep pain, and it touches the readers, informs and enriches them. It serves as way stations, place to go when they are defeated, to gather the strength to re-enter their lives: "There is nothing in back of this café. Since the place sits right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility, the back door opens out to a void. It takes courage to turn the knob and heart to leave the steps" (76).

Bailey's Café is one of the most powerful and thought provoking novels. Shavonica Wildon opines that like Chaucer, Naylor has constructed her characters in such a way that they are on a pilgrimage. Chaucer sent his pilgrims on a religious journey whereas Naylor sends her pilgrims on a journey to self-redemption. This is the whole premise behind the café that many patrons accidentally or purposefully arrive to the boarding or to the whorehouse of Eve's. (Shavonciaw @ wcs.edu, 2004) In an interview with Toni Morrison, Naylor mentions that she feared the sense of finality suggested by her first novel, The Women of Brewster Place. Already she had begun the emotional trek to Linden Hills, whose environs are visible from Brewster. Within the tradition of African American women's fiction Naylor's texts are unique in that they are symbiotically related: Brewster's community activist Kiswana Browne is
from the middle-class Linden Hills; Cocoa, in *Mama Day*, is a cousin to Willa Prescott Needed, who perishes along with her husband and son in the apocalyptic flames which destroy the Needed home in Linden Hills; Cocoa’s husband George sees Bailey’s Café from Harlem. That Mariam’s son, also named George, is to attend Wallace P. Andrews Boys’ Home echoes the story-line in *Mama Day*, for Cocoa’s husband is a product of that academy.

Gloria Naylor begins this women-centred novel with a lullaby. This enigmatic epigraph serves to introduce the novel’s birth with this cradle song:

> 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 Café.

In this cradle song, Naylor invokes the blues as a vehicle to take her characters from one form of existence to another and takes its subsequent power prior to introduce the characters of the novel. The stories which comprise the novel echo and reecho each other, but resist closure.

Bailey’s Café is a halfway house – 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 exclusive, it is delightful to watch as Naylor manages not only to argue on both sides but also to embody the contradiction 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 hopelessness. The café offers its customers a menu of different food — except for the weekends, when anything desired is available — and a period of time in which no time passes. "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," says Bailey.

The first division of the novel switches the reader's attention to the narrator, who commands the stage: "Maestro, If You Please. . . ," where maestro plays the integral part to the story and he sets the stage and tone for the rest of the character: "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" (4).

Bailey discloses his early childhood which portrays a slice of Brooklyn life during the first decades of the twentieth century. His parents were servants of wealthy coloured people; as a child, he thought that his family must be the only poor coloured family. This belief turned out to be instructive because he learned that his perspective on the world was narrow and that he could not draw assumptions about the economic status of all coloured people based on the wealthy coloured guests that attended his
parents’ employer’s parties. Because his parents had different opinions on every issue, he learned that information on the surface was just that. And what appears to be Naylor’s digression into many details about the old Negro baseball leagues is really a purposeful reminder that behind every player, inside every team, there is a story that might not have gotten its due. Later he would use the lessons from these formative years to serve him well at Bailey’s Café because “anything really worth hearing in this greasy spoon happens under the surface” (35).

When the maestro mentions that his father had been a bat boy for the Cuban Giants and would have gone barnstorming with the team had he not met his future wife (8), he mentions only the surface tags. The Cuban Giants were the first known black professional team, whose players were “as Cuban as chitlins,” for “they were former waiters and porters at the Argyle Hotel in Babylon, Long Island … founded… as a summertime divertissement for white vacationers.” Games were played almost every day from early spring to late fall, and in winter, teams went to Florida or California, Cuba or Mexico because “Negro baseball was played the year-round” and “the black baseball player was nearly always a travelling man.” Especially the Philadelphia Giants were the team that breathed life back into eastern blackball. Maestro is convinced that the better ball was being played in the Negro leagues.

When the maestro went off to fight in the second World War, the public’s treatment of his baseball heroes had prepared him for the way in which the public would also treat the black men serving with him, and he used baseball allusions to make sense of his new environment: “Dorie Miller was the Satchel Paige of the war in
the Pacific” (20). The story that exists under the surface is worth repeating, for though Miller shot down the Japanese planes which were dropping torpedoes, the maestro did so having never before shot an antiaircraft machine gun.

The war took maestro to the islands of the South Pacific, but his own efforts in the war can be traced by isolating the dozen times Naylor makes reference to Tokyo: “We weren’t getting into Tokyo” (21, 22, 23), the plural pronoun suggests an urgency on the maestro’s part to arrive, for if the war were going to be won, it had to be won “on land – the enemy’s land” (23). The refrain reminds the reader that the maestro wanted to see and feel that excitement. When the war ended with the atomic bomb, the maestro realized its simultaneous role in salvation and desecration: “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” (27)

Nadine is Bailey’s wife, and her presence in his life is one more lesson for the maestro. She gives the maestro “a whole different way of looking at ... women” (19) and becomes his mainstay in his path to understand that what happens in life is below the surface. When the maestro returned from the war and found himself in San Francisco, he was war and world weary, and knew only that “life was going to be very different” (27). It was Nadine who saved him and led him to “this café” (27) through the fog.

Naylor chooses magical realism, a kind of telling in which imaginary events or images are rendered in a sharply detailed, realistic manner. The maestro found himself
a business in Bailey Café, not a café at all, but rather a way station—a place to rest, “some space, some place, to take a breather for a while” (28).

“The Vamp” is a simple introductory section, where Bailey introduces his café to gain clarity about how Bailey’s Café works. The two characters that the maestro introduces are Sister Carrie and Sugar Man—two characters that appear to be polar opposites. Maestro sees both of them as “one-note players. Flat and predictable” but when taken to a lower key the maestro is able to demonstrate that “every point’s got a counterpoint” (33-34).

Both Sister Carrie and Sugar Man come to the café only on weekdays. The wide open choices on the weekend do not provide the comfortable restrictions that these two need. Sister Carrie is “a woman afraid of her own appetites” (33); Sugar Man is content to pay triple the price for the predetermined food that he orders as though it were his choice (33). Further, as the two expose their stories, Sister Carrie worries that her daughter Angel will smell “like a bitch in heat,” a projection of her own evil thinking, which causes her to be hypersensitive to the pimping of the Sugar Man types of the world. On the other hand, Sugar Man sees himself as a protector, a refuge for angels who need “a shoulder to lean on when they have to cry” (34). For girls who are going to travel this path anyway, he can be their pillar of support. Sister Carrie’s giving way to her carnal desires would depend on Sugar Man’s providing the necessary strength that women need in this world. To Sugar Man, Sister Carrie is a dried stick, and to her, he is filth and scum (33), but on the surface, and anything “really worth hearing ... happens under the surface.” (35)
The next section is “The Jam,” which describes the main part of the novel. Like the seven women on Brewster Place in her first novel, Naylor delivers another community of women, whose lives are sustained and enhanced by the company they keep. Brewster Place has Eva Turner, the woman who knows that Mattie Michael, upon first seeing her, is in trouble and needs help; Bailey’s Café has Eve, who runs the boarding house “right down the block from this café” (80); she is the maestro’s first customer. Before introducing Eve’s story and exploring the community of women, Naylor, in the longest story, begins with a woman who separates herself from the community, whose pathetic situation is made even more so by her own isolation from the community of women and from a man who offers her love too late to make a difference.

The first chapter in “The Jam,” entitled “Mood: Indigo” is taken from Duke Ellington’s 1931 highly popular “Mood Indigo.” Sadie is another form of the name Sarah and is reminiscent of the biblical Sarah in several unexpected ways. She was barren during her childbearing years because her mother had her sterilized at fourteen, doing it for her because her “life woulda been pure hell ever having to take care of a child” (45).

Sadie’s early years are separated by the time before and after her life on the streets. Sadie’s mother took her on the streets when she was just thirteen because she had been “selling (her) tail all this time to feed (Sadie) till (she was) sick and near death” (44). As Sadie grew older, her mother would scream her name when she beat her, primarily because she had not been aborted. She was called by her mother “The
One the Coat Hanger Missed” so many times that she believed that it was her name (41) because of a result of failed abortion. However she was forced into prostitution in order to pay their bills and support her mother’s absinthe habit. Sadie’s goal was to please her mother, to hear her say, “I’m so proud of you. You’re a good girl, Sadie” (44). In this sordid world, the money Sadie makes buys her a clean place to live. However, decency of work is sacrificed for the dream of a clean home. Sadie’s dreams were just that, and when her mother succumbed to absinthe poisoning, all Sadie heard in the end was the lifelong repetition curse: “Look at what I come to, trying to feed you. Just look at what I come to” (46). In Sadie’s world there is no benevolent God who stops the unwelcome advance. Sadie’s mother views Sadie’s life as a pure hell to take care of a child and consider as repayment to care for 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 :“(S)he went off with a man older than enough to be her father, and she ended up living with her mother again for the next twenty-five years” (51).

Then Sadie lived out the middle years of her life trying to defy the odds of converting the dirty shack by the rail-road tracks into the white bungalow with green picket fence of her dreams. She felt nothing around her was good enough as she tried to fight for with the man who was “the closest thing that she would ever have to what she’d dreamed of” (52). She told Daniel when he smashed the first pot:
—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. (55)

Those flowers were her comfort; to Daniel, they were her folly. Then Daniel 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 peep in and see if she was packing. He saw through the grimy windowpane that she was.... — They stay, he said” (55-56). Although Daniel acknowledged Sadie’s worth, this victory was short lived.

After Daniel’s death and loss of her home, Sadie reverts to the only path in life that can make her dreams live. Then Naylor takes Sadie from the harsh realities of a life of endless, unrequited toil to the café making it “the last place before the end of the world” (68). The café affords Sadie one or more possibilities for her situation, yet her story finds no resolution.

Then Iceman Jones enters Sadie’s life gives her the love she has never experienced. She is capable of playing out the developing relationship with Iceman in her mind because in reality he is present in her life, giving her first real kiss (76), offering to share with her what he has: “What I have, you’ll have. What I eat, you’ll eat. Wherever I lay my head, there’s a place for you” (77). And he also says, “She can stay here with me long as she want to. If I eat, she gonna eat; if I sleep, she gonna sleep. If I ain’t got nothing but a cotton house, she got a corner.” In her mind, Sadie
already has Iceman Jones, so in reality, she refuses him; he offers the moon, but even that, at this point for Sadie, cannot replace her alcoholic dependence on the stars (78). When Iceman Jones proposes to her, she cannot accept and her story ends with no closure. This frustrated love affair between the unlikely pair reminds that there are no part endings in life or literature. Naylor directs Sadie and Iceman Jones out the café back door, into "nothing.... Since the place sits right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility, the back door opens out to a void" (76).

Naylor moves the story to Eve's boarding house whose story serves two functions. Its initial purpose is to tell Eve's story and her background into her appearance at Bailey's Café as well as how and why she is the owner of the boarding house. Its second purpose is to establish Eve as the central mother figure for the women that find her boarding house. Eve runs the 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.

Eve is a customer in the café, but as proprietor of the boarding house she holds more power within this quasi-nether world than anyone else seems to. Only she makes actual decisions about who may stay and who will go. She is not moved by charity. She is not a charitable woman. Her powers and motives remain elusive and mysterious. Eve has been in the neighbourhood for twenty-five years when the maestro and Nadine take ownership of Bailey's Café. She arrived in New Orleans in
1913, stayed ten years, and then left, eventually to open her boardinghouse and plant her garden.

Eve's name is an obvious reference to the first woman created by God out of Adam's rib, who claims that "he found [her] in a patch of rag-weed, so new [she] was still tied to the birth sac." (83) Like the biblical Eve, she has no earthly mother or father; unlike her namesake, though, she has no Adam. Eve's lost love comes as a result of those in her community passing judgment on the relationship she has with Godfather. That she has no clear cut parental ties suggests that she is at once natural and supernatural — more than a mere woman — and her song is replete with references to organic matter, especially the rich delta soil. Godfather is a man of few words and she experiences his love on Saturday nights. Naylor's Eve faces problems without a male partner. Both men and women of the town begin to read their own stories of and about her sexuality. Men are simple to read as they "had only one question in their eyes," which she instinctively knows how to answer: "(Godfather) would kill us both with his bare hands" (83). The women are more complicated, more unnatural in what their eyes ask. The more these women's eyes ask, the more does Eve realize that she "was now forced to go through months and months with no one and nothing to touch [her]" (83). It is the "righteous righteous" women (85) upon whom Eve places the greatest blame, which leads her to Bailey's Café.

Eve's lost innocence happens during a game of hide and seek, which is viewed as a sinful machination of self-pleasure. Eve is cast out of her community for the "original" sin of discovering the connection between her body's urges and the
vibrations of the earth. Eve explains, “The earth showed me what my body was for. Sometimes I’d break my fingernails from clawing them into the dirt or bite my arm to keep from crying out. Billy Boy is stomping up dust as I humped myself into the ground - him sweating and baying at the clouds.” (87) While Billy Boy is portrayed as an idiot only doing the bidding of his playmate, his “Adam’s apple straining, head thrown back to the sky” (87-88), Eve is treated by Godfather as purposefully evil, deserving of excommunication. Before he banishes her, he already has tried to quell her natural inquisitiveness and spunk with pulpit words that “resembled rounds of thunder” and with angry laughter like “lightning vibrations” (84). When Godfather finds her in the throws of this illicit game, the third and final stage of this chain reaction is set in motion.

Godfather, a figure for male authority, is ubiquitous in his influence within the delta community. Perhaps the most definitive change in Eve’s evolving consciousness occurs when she comes to recognize his church as a social construct reflecting the hierarchies of a society which relegates women to the undesirable position of subservient “other”: “To be thrown out his church was to be thrown out of the world” (85). Eve’s leave taking occurs as Godfather strips her of the clothes and purges her of the food he has provided. Naked and hungry, she is forced to provide for herself amidst dire economic circumstances. Eve successfully recreates herself, however, in preparation for her role among a community of outcast women. As she grows into womanhood, her burgeoning sexuality, given fullest expression during her earth-
stomping with Billy Boy, rekindles her awareness of a vital oneness with the rich earth. One of her many rendezvous with Billy Boy takes place under a juniper bush while Eve is “low to the ground, trying to blend in, with mu brown hair, brown skin, and brown sack dress” (86). At one point, Eve recalls the essence of the Louisiana delta:

The delta dust exists to be wet. And the delta dust exists to grow things, anything, in soft 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 eyes, gluing my lashes together. 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. ... 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)

That Eve walks a thousand years before reaching Bailey’s, is an important allusion linking her role among a community of women to the millennial reign of Christ. On one level, she is a redemptive figure for women such as the feisty Jesse
Bell, who turns to heroin and female lovers when her marriage into the wealthy Sugar Hill King Family ends in a bitter divorce.

Naylor’s Eve is thus a character that can be placed within the antithetic poles Daryl Dance uses to define the mother figure in African American writing (123). Neither an Eve, in the biblical sense, nor strictly a Madonna, she resides somewhere between the two extremes. Her ability to manipulate reality and her close affinity with the supernatural are qualities that invite a comparison with folk figures such as the shape-shifting trickster or the revered conjure woman. Despite the many ambiguities surrounding Eve’s character, her role in the narrative action is to be considered in terms of her effect on her female wards. Jesse, the omniscient narrator points out, is cured in less than a month.

Later Eve undertakes a journey from Pilottown to Arabi whereupon she becomes one with the delta dust. And when Eve finally reaches Arabi, she is naked, just as she was when her Godfather brought her into his world. She takes that naked self and covers and packs it with mud, so that when she arrives in New Orleans, she is created out of “dust from the ground” that had been watered from mist (Genesis 2:6-7), so Naylor’s use of mud suggests that Eve gives birth anew to herself. Her life in New Orleans makes a good deal of dollars, “not one of them earned on (her) back; and a love of well-kept gardens.” (91) It is a reminder of the Garden of Eden from biblical.

Naylor has made Eve’s character well travelled and essentially a self-made woman. Eve cements her 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.

Echoed throughout, the stories the women relate is female subjectivity to male desire. Such is the case with Sweet Esther, whose pervasive hatred for men stems from the commoditization of black women within the context of a rural economic system. Esther suffers exploitation as her elder brother barters her to an older, propertied farmer in exchange for higher sharecropping wages. Esther, still a child, becomes the victim of sexual abuse in the hands of a man who forces her into sadomasochistic activity, and passively surrenders to the farmer’s whims. He does anything and everything to her in the cellar of his house, as she stays with him for twelve years. Now she stays in Eve’s basement, and the men who come to see her bring white roses, which she loves because she can see them in the dark.

Commenting on the metonymies that signify Esther’s status and her self-concept, Maxine Montgomery notes, “The pink and lace-trimmed bed where she must sleep alone reveals her confinement to a socially prescribed gender role. Her monologues point to a profound self-hatred in a world that evolves no terms for her existence.” She says, “I like the white roses because they show up in the dark. I don’t. The black gal. Monkey faced. Tar. Coal. Ugly. Soot. Unspeakable. Pitch. Coal. Ugly. Soot. Unspeakable” (95). Naylor’s linking the white rose with Esther suggests a message that is a recurring theme in “Sweet Esther.” In Eve’s basement Esther no longer fears the abuse she endured for those twelve years in the monster’s home, but
the memory of those days are reflected in the hate that remains in her eyes; the white rose is a sign that even at Eve’s she cannot speak that part of her life.

In “Mary (Take One)” the abused woman is a (re)figuration of Mary Magdalene, who washed the feet of Jesus with her hair. The description of Mary’s beauty is so powerful that it weighs on her – informing, directing, and dictating every move she makes. Her earlier memories are shaped by her own reflection as seen in the eyes of men who cannot help being dazzled by her beauty. From her father she learns she is beautiful. He gives her the nickname Peaches because of her skin colour: “Plump and sweet. Yellow and sweet” (102), the name itself suggesting a succulent morsel, temptingly desirable, ready to be devoured in a single swallow.

In a mocking inversion of Mary Magdalene’s act of humility, the refigured Mary humbles herself to all men to rid herself of the whore she sees reflected in their eyes: “I was free as I gave them her. Over and over they became my saviors from her” (105). After Mary scars her face to destroy the beauty that makes men want her, she ends up at the brownstone. Symbolically enabling her to change her perspective, Eve lifts Mary’s veil and says “Beautiful” (112). What Naylor’s womanist perspective describes here is not the scar itself, but Mary’s act of making it. The self-inflicted pain, a commonality in the luminal process, becomes a catalyst for change. Eve, recognizing the import of the act, welcomes Mary as she has so many other liminars. She is a womanist who, to use Michael Awkward’s term, fosters “(comm)unity” for her suffering sisters in a setting that mocks the hypocritical values of their pre-separation communities.
Eve also plays a central mother figure in the lives of the women, like Jesse Bell, divorcee, bisexual, and drug addict. Through a long and complex symbology, Naylor effectively revises the biblical Jezebel’s story so that her motivations become natural and understandable, and her general character simply “womanish”: willful and committed to survival and wholeness for entire people. Also, in keeping with the vernacular tone of Walker’s definition, Jesse is a working class woman who “loves the folk” – her family. However, as Jezebel is beaten by the power of Elijah’s more “organized” and patricentric religion, Jesse Bell’s more fragmented and woman-centered rituals – seduction, cooking, putting on makeup – do not save her being symbolically thrown to the dogs as Jezebel literally was. Explaining how she seduced her husband, Jesse boasts, “I got him the same way I kept him – with the best poon tang east of the Mississippi” (122). Later she says, “He loved everything about women... how I managed to get the seams in my stockings straight or how I penciled in the beauty mark over the right side of my lips. H’d watch me trying to arch my eyebrows for a whole hour, just fascinated, you know?” (123). Though these actions may seem trivial to others, Jesse knows their power. She warns, “You gotta keep tight reins on a man like that, cause Maybelline made a whole lot of those pencils. So Mama went where Papa went, or Papa didn’t go out that night” (123).

In spite of Jesse’s power over her husband, she loses him to the masculine traditions and ideas of Uncle Eli. Most of Eli’s suggestions for how the family should operate are based on the power of money, whereas Jesse’s are connected to family bonding. For example, when Jesse suggests her son be cared for by her mother, Eli
says he should have a nanny. Instead of spending his summers fishing with Jesse’s brothers, the boy goes to camp. Ultimately, Eli wins and Jesse turns to drugs and back to her lesbian lover.

Naylor invokes the African womanist element of necromancy in devising a method of salvation for Jesse Bell. Eve has the magical power to reconstruct Jesse’s girlhood bedroom in the void in back of Bailey’s Café. Eve repeatedly tempts her with the images of Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, the heroin that parallels them, so that she can effectively wean her. Eve’s magic has to help Jesse (re)vision the images and ideals as the real enemies that intoxicated her, that have destroyed her selfhood. However, Eve’s powers are limited. She can help Jesse only if Jesse uses her own willpower to help herself. Because self-healing in Naylor’s revision involves seeing the past from a different perspective, the (re)figured character, though placed there by Eve, must (re)create her own view of herself in that past. If Jesse is going to be saved from elements that kill her self-esteem and confidence, she must be emotionally involved in the process.

Jesse Bell’s flower is the dandelion, a weed that Eve would under ordinary circumstances eliminate from the garden, but, like all the women she cares for, Jesse’s is a special case (117). The dandelion has been called the tramp with the golden crown, but all of the parts of this weed can be used – the leaves, stems, flowers, and roots – for various foods, a high source of vitamin A. Naylor chooses a weed that symbolizes both grief and bitterness.
The most traumatic story in Naylor’s text is also its most complex and significant revision. “Mary (Take Two)” is a womanist tale so anchored in the source of historical female pain that Naylor must switch the narrative voice from male (Bailey) to female (Nadine). Nadine’s is the more appropriate voice as hers is the perspective that has the most distance from Western ideology, the plus of gender identification, and the advantage of collective remembering that that gender identification and her cultural rootedness allow. Also, she has an emotional distance not possible for Mother Eve. Nadine notices that Eve cries softly after she hears the story of Mariam, whose name means “little Mary.”

Mariam’s story is based on the Mariology of Judeo-Christian history. That history includes the dignity and human fallibility of the Holy Virgin, the Immaculate Conception, the virgin birth, and the Assumption. To spiral away from and above this history, that is, to effectively revise it, Naylor first “revisits” it. She gives the reader a starting place that is recognizable because it is similar to biblical history: a young pregnant woman appears, claiming that no man has touched her. Then, the author adds to the biblical story of the Holy Virgin a cultural history from modern times: the young woman’s “virginity” is related to tribal clitoridectomy rites. Her mutilation attests to her claim that she is a virgin, thus attesting to her dignity. The modern history Naylor chooses allows her to recede from the biblical one, then ascend to a startling Africana womanist (re)figuration: Mary is a slow-witted child who has suffered gender oppression in a male-dominated society. In order for her to “rise
above" her oppressive past (achieve Assumption), she seeks Mother Eve and the community of the brownstone.

First, Naylor locates her figure, Mariam, in a geography and genealogy that would account historically and culturally for her condition, her innocence, and her humility. Mariam is the first child of a Beta Israel mother, one of the Ethiopian Jews, "outcasts in their own nation" (146), who closely follow Jewish traditions. Four unidentified biblical passages are cited in the midst of Mariam's mother's story, beginning with Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (146) closely followed by verses 6-7 (146) of the same chapter and book. The latter calls on the child's guardians to teach the child these ways, for they are commandments from their God. But through Mariam's mother's pain, the reader comes to understand a different interpretation of the dictates. Mariam's mother has delivered a female child, for which she must stay fourteen days in the "hot and airless hut of blood" (147), moving to a second hut for another sixty-six days because she is unclean (147). Naylor's language is a reminder of the law stated in Leviticus 12:5. On the birth of a male child, the mother has only seven days, followed by thirty-three days that she shall be unclean (Leviticus 12:2, 4). The Beta Israel expect and look forward to the birth of sons, but Mariam's mother wants the female child, "tells no one how hard she begged Adonai" for the child to be female and secretly hopes that the second one will also be female (148). Mariam's mother wants the time away from her husband so that she can return more fully rested; male children reduce the rest time by half. Although Mariam's mother wants this to happen,
she feels guilty because she is not following the letter of the law – all interpreted through Eve’s understanding of how she believes Mariam’s mother must have felt.

Naylor closely follows the details of these tribal traditions, as reported by anthropologists, even regarding the daily routines of the people. She writes: “All prayers turn toward Jerusalem as they spin linen, shape iron, and bake pottery outside their broken hovels” (146). For linguistic accuracy, Naylor’s recursive strategy is to have Mariam paraphrase the words of the Holy Virgin. In an eastern, apocryphal “Black of James” tale that “deeply influenced the cult of the Virgin in the west,” Mary is reported to have said, “I am pure before Him (God) and know not a man” (15:3). In the Gospel of Luke, she says, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (Luke 1:34, AV). Naylor’s Mariam says repeatedly, “No man has ever touched me” (143-46). When Eve bathes Mariam, she concludes, “No man has even tried” (152).

Mariam’s slow-wittedness, when juxtaposed with Eve’s symbolic recalling of her clitoridectomy, becomes a serious indictment of Mariam’s native community. Her feeble-mindedness is a metaphor for the mental immaturity of young girls who suffer, in an African society, irreversible damage to their psyches and their physical persons because of tribal “customs.” Naylor’s revisionism, which should end in liberation for all her refigured women, does not stop short of aggregation for Mariam. After Eve the necromancer re-creates an Ethiopian village in the void, the baby is born and Mariam disappears in a flood of water. In traditional Mariology, there is no mention of Mary’s “death.” No body is found, and she is believed to have been “translated to heaven.” Thus, Naylor constructs her own plausible “transitus” or assumption. Mariam’s
aggregation, then, is to become a part of the collective memory of a people who will have specifics for a new Mariology.

“Miss Maple’s Blues” is about Stanley Beck worth Booker T. Washington Carver (unidentified surname). When he makes his way to Bailey’s Café, he is “set on using the last money he had in his pocket to buy a pawnshop revolver” (165). On a crowded night in the café, the first person he meets is Eve, who hires him as her housekeeper. By the time the maestro is introduced to him, he has been dubbed Miss Maple by Eve. Along with Mariam, Miss Maple’s introduction to the way station is not strictly according to process; but then Stanley is not exactly another woman whose story is mired in sexual degradation or abusive addiction. Stanley’s is a story of racial discrimination and degradation, yet on the part of those who see him, a target for sexually pejorative name-calling.

Stanley finds comfort from the heat in wearing women’s dresses, “light percale housedresses most of the time” (163). He is carefully described so as not to be taken as a man who deliberately tries to pass as a woman. He makes no effort to camouflage his male body; women’s dresses are simply a cooler alternative to his hot wool flannel interview suit. As a man with a Stanford Ph.D. in statistics and a hundred job rejections from the West to the East coast, he figures that the likelihood of securing a position in his field of expertise will not be altered by wearing a dress. The maestro goes to some lengths to remind Sugar Man and Jesse Bell, who call him a faggot (116), that Miss Maple is not a homosexual: “Come on, Miss Maple isn’t a queer”
(116) and for Sugar Man, "faggot has been the kindest thing he is called Miss Maple" (164).

Miss Maple's background addresses another race-related issue that is not explored among the other women. Stanley is mixed race — Native-American, Hispanic, and African American, but he lived in California where his identity was crushed into "one six-letter word" (171). During his adolescence, Stanley thought [his] father was pathetic for never fighting back," and it would take him a bizarre encounter to "understand that [his] father was also teaching [him] something very special: how to be [his] own man" (173). When Stanley is ready to leave home for college, his father has purchased for him a set of thirty-eight volumes of Shakespeare's plays, including the sonnets. It is the kind of gift that his father knows will only increase in value and importance to Stanley as he matures, a present his father is more excited to give than Stanley is ready to receive. They must pick up the books from the head clerk Peters at the freighting office, a Ku Klux Khan member, whose best side comes out when he sees the contents of the crates: "Peters opened the cover like a man making love and wiped his sweaty hands on his trousers before daring to touch the tissue overleaf" (177). Shakespeare has power in this brief moment to bring together a Klansman and a black man; each has a history with the other, yet this moment lets the other become aware of how much they do not know about each other: "And then each looked into the other's eyes, knowing what they were doing while knowing they couldn't stop" (177). Until the Gatlin boys appear on the scene, Peters and Stanley's father relate to each other as human-to-human, without the labels.
The Gatlins’ presence destroys what the Shakespeare collection has created. Shakespeare’s vision is akin to Stanley’s father’s, but the Gatlins have intruded and reshaped the brave new world. Nevertheless, Stanley has received the message finally and substantially from his father, for in that moment, he “filled [his] world” and Stanley “would have followed him, dressed like anything, bound for anywhere” (186).

Changing his major at Stanford from the more subjective courses to one where getting a high grade depended on objective evaluation, serving time in prison for being a conscientious objector during WWII, learning how to survive prison rape, returning for the completion of his advanced degree, and setting out to find suitable employment takes every bit of the inner resources his father has instilled in him.

Miss Maple has been with Eve for two years, and he will leave with enough money from writing jingles for commercials to establish his own business. As the 1949 New Year rings in, Miss Maple is in community with the maestro. Miss maple’s father grounded him internally, but it took Eve’s place to give him the rest he needed, the affirmation to become “one of the freest men” the maestro has ever known (216). Whether he departs from Eve’s in a pair of pants or in a dress, as Stanley or Miss Maple, it matters little, for he has played out his ragtime and come to understand his worth.

Two loose ends remain in the final pages of the novel. One is the relationship of Gabriel to the maestro, the archangel Michael. Gabriel is presented as a Russian Jew and Michael as an American Negro. The two represent two separate voices who have different opinions on practically every subject and are not afraid to tell each
other those positions. They speak from two separate backgrounds; have a world view that is shaped by their early years and the cultures out of which they come. The second loose end is the delivery of Mariam’s baby, which Eve handles by recreating the Ethiopian hillside that is Mariam’s home, and unlike the earlier moment with the plum, both baby and mother survive his birth.

Naylor suggests that the miracle happens because of the force and support of the community’s presence. When the baby arrives, everyone is present to celebrate the moment; the unexpected happens – Nadine hugs the maestro; Gabriel, Miss Maple, and the maestro dance; Jesse does the flamenco; Peaches sings; Esther smiles; and the whole community joins in song. Eve has created a space where Mariam can follow the laws of the Beta Israel, can rest as Leviticus dictates. And on the eighth day, there will be circumcision. Gabriel is present to handle this moment, but the community stands strong. Miss Maple and the maestro become honorary stand-ins for the Jews who are not present.

Peaches begins to sing shortly after George’s birth:

Anybody ask you who you are?

Who you are?

Who you are?

Tell him – you’re the child of God. (225)

In response to her song the others join in:
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. (226)

This interaction between the characters in this way not only unifies them but also brings out their cultural and religious differences. Their voices serve as the hope for world peace:

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)

The maestro has come to understand that what he values most in Gabriel’s faith is that “nothing important can happen unless they’re all in it together as a community” (227).

Naylor foregoes the happy ending in the wrap, but she lets the maestro give a hopeful ending. Mariam dies in the wall of water that she has created to bathe in, so her young son George will be raised an orphan, never knowing that on the occasion of his birth “the world lit up with lights” (228).

In this section, “The Wrap,” Bailey says, “I don’t believe that life is supposed to make you feel good, or to make you feel miserable either. He says “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 with the same words to live by: the blues is not supposed to make you feel good either, it is just supposed to make you feel.

Gloria Naylor, in Bailey's Café, has successfully taken the elements of the blues and formed them into a written text without losing the rhythm, tempo and style. This novel is a pause in life. Naylor is perhaps suggesting that resolution to stories will come in what has been said before. As a collective, characters recur, stories continue, themes repeat. To end one place is really only to rest, to go back, to start anew, and as T. S. Eliot states in “Little Gidding” from Four Quartets:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.8

Bailey's café is clearly religious – filled with Biblical references and retorts to Biblical stories – and, just as clearly, magical. It posits the destructive power of real events and argues that fiction is equally powerful. It encompasses history, myth, imagination, and quotidian detail. So much is packed into a relatively short book, so little left out, that it spills into the imagination of the reader and travels in a hundred different directions.
This abundance plays against the particular pains contained in the various characters’ stories. Pain is one thing the world contains in excessive amounts; Naylor doesn’t hesitate to show us this. But the world contains everything else in excessive amounts as well. Through her beautiful prose and by way of a reckless inclusion, Gloria Naylor achieves an exuberance that prevents “Bailey’s cafe,” pain-filled as it is, from being an unhappy book.
References


