

UNDERSTANDING
GLORIA
NAYLOR

Margaret Earley Whitt



University of South Carolina Press

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NAYLOR

Margaret Ear

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藏书章



University of South Carolina Press

For Ruth Meriwether Earley

*And her great-grandchildren after her:
Thomas, Carson, Avery*

*and for
Charley and Jessica
and
Wintry*

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The volumes of *Understanding Contemporary American Literature* have been planned as guides or companions for students as well as good nonacademic readers. The editor and publisher perceive a need for these volumes because much of the influential contemporary literature makes special demands. Uninitiated readers encounter difficulty in approaching works that depart from the traditional forms and techniques of prose and poetry. Literature relies on conventions, but the conventions keep evolving; new writers form their own conventions—which in time may become familiar. Put simply, *UCAL* provides instruction in how to read certain contemporary writers—identifying and explicating their material, themes, use of language, point of view, structures, symbolism, and responses to experience.

The word *understanding* in the titles was deliberately chosen. Many willing readers lack an adequate understanding of how contemporary literature works; that is, what the author is attempting to express and the means by which it is conveyed. Although the criticism and analysis in the series have been aimed at a level of general accessibility, these introductory volumes are meant to be applied in conjunction with the works they cover. They do not provide a substitute for the works and authors they introduce, but rather prepare the reader for more profitable literary experiences.

M. J. B.

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UNDERSTANDING

GLORIA NAYLOR

Understanding Gloria Naylor

Career

Gloria Naylor's first four novels—*The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), and *Bailey's Café* (1992)—constitute her quartet of novels, the books she planned as the foundation of her career.¹ Each of the novels in turn connects with the one to follow; mention of a character or a place in one becomes the central focus of the next. In the ten years that separate the first and fourth novel, Naylor demonstrates an increased sophistication in recasting character and place. In these novels children die, dreams get deferred, and place, whether literal or mythical, becomes a way station in life's journey. In each novel, a community of women emerges—sustaining, enabling, and enriching the lives of one another.

In the late 1970s, in a creative writing class at Brooklyn College, the professor told her students to be bold, send out their creative endeavors, and say that the sample was part of a larger work.² Gloria Naylor, sitting in that class, took this advice and mailed off "A Life on Beekman Place" to *Essence*. They published the story in March 1980 while Naylor was still an undergraduate; it was an early draft of the "Lucielia Louise Turner" chapter/story in the work-in-progress that was to become her first novel.

In 1982 *The Women of Brewster Place: A Novel in Seven Stories* was published by Viking Press. Describing the female

residents in looks and lifestyles was important to Naylor. As she states in a 1989 interview in *Ebony*, "One character couldn't be *the* Black woman in America. So I had seven different women, all in different circumstances, encompassing the complexity of our lives, the richness of our diversity, from skin color on down to religious, political and sexual preferences."³ The following year the novel won the American Book Award for Best First Novel. From the beginning, reviewers looked at Naylor's work alongside that of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, who published *The Color Purple* the same year. Naylor, who had herself only recently discovered the existence of a long black literary tradition, was suddenly a part of it. When *Ebony* touted the reigning black women novelists in 1984, Naylor was the chosen representative of those who "are coming forward to take their place in the sun."⁴

Her second novel, *Linden Hills*, was published by Ticknor & Fields in 1985. At Brooklyn College, Naylor had been reading Dante's *Inferno* in a survey course of great works of western literature when it occurred to her that Dante's structure would work for the neighborhood she had in mind, a place where its inhabitants sell their souls for a piece of the American Dream—a home in the right neighborhood, a marriage partner to enhance an image, and children who would carry on the design. To be successful in Linden Hills meant obtaining an address as close as possible to the lowest circle of this upscale hell.

Three years later, in 1988, Ticknor & Fields published *Mama Day*. From three perspectives, Naylor delivers the love story of George and Cocoa—from the points of view of George, Cocoa, and the mystical island of Willow Springs, an island off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, which

speaks for itself and does not appear on any map. The reader's attention and consciousness must shift from New York City to Willow Springs, from the world of rational, logical thought to a place of otherworldliness, where "across the bridge" thinking does not make sense on an island imbued with the haunting power of Miranda (Mama) Day. This is a large novel in every aspect, one in which Naylor demonstrates that love's power operates in ways the human mind can only begin to fathom. References to Shakespeare abound in this novel and are most apparent in her use of *The Tempest*.

The way in which life operates on Willow Springs moves this novel into the mythic realm. Suspending belief is paramount to accepting, if not completely understanding, Willow Springs and the conjuring activities of Mama Day. Listening is important in any Naylor novel, and in *Mama Day* the author gives instructions on how to listen. The reader needs to understand that words will appear which no one speaks, unknown words will have a variety of meanings depending on context, and known words may mean something other than what the reader thinks. A story exists below the surface of the words; to read the story thoughtfully is to listen actively to a world that makes its own sense.

Similar instruction is given at the beginning of Naylor's 1992 *Bailey's Café* when the reader discovers that words are symbols for music: "There's a whole set to be played here if you want to stick around and listen to the music."⁵ The culminating novel of the quartet, which has also been rewritten and presented as a play, is organized around a jazz set. All the world's a jam, it would seem, and its players merely instruments upon the stage. As in the beginning of Naylor's career,

the seven “women” of Brewster Place are now a new seven women who wander into the world of the maestro, a man often called Bailey, who happened to buy a café by that name and never bothers to tell its visitors that Bailey is not his name. The café is introduced in *Mama Day*, but when it appears in the fourth novel, it is no longer in one specific place; it may exist anywhere. People who need it will always be able to find it. Life has not been kind to the characters assembled here, but their stories, which reflect who these women are, like everything that matters in life, are below the surface (19).

In *The Men of Brewster Place*, her 1998 fifth novel published by Hyperion, Naylor returns to familiar territory. While Brewster Place’s women take center stage in her first novel, Naylor shifts her focus to the men that add meaning to the lives of their women. The flat single roles the men played in the first novel are expanded here, giving depth and understanding to their personalities. Man by man, their individual relationships with the women are placed in larger contexts. While no community of men emerges, Naylor ends this novel with hope.

Naylor’s writing includes other genres. She has written personal essays for *Essence*, *Life*, *People*, and the *New York Times* and its magazine. She has edited and written an introduction for *Children of the Night: The Best Short Stories by Black Writers, 1967 to the Present*.

Overview

Down deep, there is something inherently southern in Gloria Naylor. It can be seen in the way she tells a story, paying careful attention to the details of her characters’ lives, and in

the painstaking meticulousness with which she draws the places where those fictional characters dwell. Though she was born in New York City, she was conceived in Robinsonville, Mississippi, the oldest daughter of sharecropping parents who had spent their days in Tunica County in the Mississippi Delta, in the northwest corner of this cotton-growing state. Roosevelt and Alberta McAlpin Naylor left Mississippi in December 1949 so that their first child could be born in the North, a part of the country that her parents perceived would offer educational opportunities for this unborn child and those that would follow. Her mother loved to read but was denied the use of the public library because of her skin color. It was coming North that provided her parents with the opportunity to become real Americans and to see their children spend their youth dealing “within this society,”⁶ for at mid-century, Mississippi was very much a closed society, as historian James Silver called it, to those other than white Christians.⁷

Naylor has said that it was her “conception in the South that has played the more important role in shaping [her] life as a writer.”⁸ She was born on January 25, 1950, a birthday she shares with Virginia Woolf, who once asked a question which Naylor appears to answer in her writing: “Why are women . . . so much more interesting to men than men are to women?”⁹ Naylor’s response expands Woolf’s statement, suggesting that women can also be more interesting to women.

Naylor was a high school senior honor student at Andrew Jackson High in Queens when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in April 1968. Naylor found her response to that event influenced by her mother’s conversion to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and that group’s message of a theocratic govern-

ment. At the time becoming a Jehovah's Witness missionary seemed appropriate, so she got behind the wheel of her Dodge Dart and took to "the dusty byroads leading from I-95 South, just wanting to see whatever the towns looked like wherever that road ended."¹⁰ She was a missionary for seven years (1968–1975), spreading that message in New York; in and around Dunn, North Carolina; and in Jacksonville, Florida.

When she returned to New York, she enrolled in Medgar Evers College with plans to seek a degree in nursing. When the study of literature began to occupy more of her time, she transferred to Brooklyn College of the City University of New York and graduated with a B.A. in English in 1981. As Naylor relates in her 1985 "Conversation" with Toni Morrison, in her creative writing class she learned that in order to write good literature, one had to read good literature. The list included Tillie Olsen, Henry James, and Toni Morrison, but it was Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* that had a singular significance: "Time has been swallowed except for the moment I opened that novel because for my memory that semester is now *The Bluest Eye*, and *The Bluest Eye* is the beginning. The presence of the work served two vital purposes at that moment in my life. It said to a young poet, struggling to break into prose, that the barriers were flexible; at the core of it all is language, and if you're skilled enough with that, you can create your own genre. And it said to a young black woman, struggling to find a mirror of her worth in this society, not only is your story worth telling but it can be told in words so painstakingly eloquent that it becomes a song."¹¹

A scholarship for graduate work at Yale made it possible for Naylor to pursue her newly discovered awareness of a long and rich black literary tradition. *Linden Hills*, her second novel,

became the creative thesis for an M.A. in Afro-American Studies from Yale in 1983, a manuscript she completed while teaching at George Washington University. In 1985 Naylor won a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and served as a cultural exchange lecturer in India for the United States Office of Information. In 1986 she was visiting professor at New York University and wrote several HERS columns for the *New York Times* on such topics as psychics, dating, and the popularity of the television game show *Wheel of Fortune*. She also won the Candace Award of the National Coalition of One Hundred Black Women. In "Reflections," a piece in *Centennial*, she interviewed her parents, who had by this time been married thirty-six years, about their varying reasons for leaving the South and coming to New York.

Naylor was a visiting lecturer at Princeton in 1987 and a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1988. Other universities at which she taught or lectured include the University of Pennsylvania, Boston University, Brandeis University, and Cornell University. She was a visiting scholar at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England, in 1992. From 1989 to 1994 she served on the Executive Board of the Book-of-the-Month Club. In order for Naylor to have control over her books as they move into various genres, she formed One Way Productions in 1990.

Naylor sees herself as a filter through which her characters come to life.¹² She has expressed disappointment, for example, that George in *Mama Day* turned out to be a football fan, which required of Naylor hours of research on a sport that did not interest her.¹³ Also, she was not pleased that in *Linden Hills* Willa Prescott Nedeed came out of that basement with her dead child prepared to clean the house: "What that woman finally

came to, after that whole travail, was that she was a good wife and a good mother and that she could go upstairs and claim that identity. That is not what I thought Willa would do, but Willa was Willa."¹⁴ In what she calls her psychic revelations, her characters assert themselves, and she feels obliged to honor those images. Characters in a book not yet written appear to her, and it is only later that she knows what to do with them. As an example she tells this story: "One image that kept haunting me from even before I finished *Linden Hills*: a woman carrying a dead male baby through the woods to this old woman. I didn't know why she was carrying the dead baby, but I knew her name because the old lady said, 'Go home, Bernice. Go home and bury your child.'"¹⁵ Several years later when she was working on *Mama Day*, it occurred to Naylor that Bernice's baby, the one she had gone to such extremes to conceive, was going to die. Naylor acknowledges that while she is not slave to those images, she does feel compelled to honor them.

Naylor conceived her quartet in the late 1970s, knowing that the composition could begin after she had her titles, dedications, and the last lines in mind. Writing about the black community in all its multivocality and displaying her characters in colors she describes as nutmeg, ebony, saffron, cinnamon red, gold, nut brown, smoky caramel, to list a few, were of paramount importance to her in a time when many black writers were expected to depict *the* black experience. Each of the four novels was to be a voice representing some part of the black community: *The Women of Brewster Place* was meant to "celebrate the female spirit and the ability to *transcend* and also to give a microcosm of Black women in America—Black

women who are faced by a wall of racism and sexism."¹⁶ In this quartet Naylor provides stories in octaves, themes in refrain, and characters in repetition. With the addition of her fifth novel, Naylor's pattern of character and geographical connection continues.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* Naylor uses the seven different notes of a musical scale to convey seven different stories. *Linden Hills* also has seven stories; the grace notes of shorter, quicker stories attached sound the various alarms—losses, one by one, of everything that was once held most dear: love, food, religion, music, athletic endeavor, family, and the connection with the past. As a celebration of love and magic, *Mama Day* explores a "brave new world that has such people in it," as Shakespeare reminds the reader in *The Tempest*. For here, characters who are dead talk without words to characters who are alive and listening. The romantic love story is embraced within a familial love that resonates with magic, orchestrated by *Mama Day*'s hands that move to and with a tempo which she alone hears. In the final novel of the quartet, *Bailey's Café*, Naylor presents its seven stories of female sexuality through the blues, best delivered by jazz. Each character is a living embodiment of pain so deep that movement away from its source, a recurring motif in the blues, is an urgent necessity. The café as way station is all that is left in this world for a moment of rest. The black man's blues is the pulse of *The Men of Brewster Place*, and the novel's last line offers a possible prediction of Naylor's future direction: "the music plays on . . . and on . . ." (173).

The Women of Brewster Place

To date, *The Women of Brewster Place* has had two lives—one when the novel was published by Viking in 1982 and a second when the novel was produced as a made-for-television movie in 1989. With Oprah Winfrey as the executive producer and starring as Mattie Michael, this visual enactment of Naylor's work brought a second round of printed attention to the dead-end street where seven black women, having arrived through various routes and means, find themselves. For example, several months before the movie premiered in March of 1989, *Redbook* reprinted the Mattie Michael portion of the novel, with the title of "Mama Still Loves You."¹ In 1980 and 1982 *Essence* published two stories—an early draft, entitled "A Life on Beekman Place," of what would become the "Lucielia Louise Turner" chapter² and the Kiswana Browne story, published under the title, "When Mama Comes to Call. . . ."³

Essence, with a circulation of just under a million has, since its inception in 1970, been marketed to African-American women. It is ranked by *Magazines for Libraries* "among the top for readership among African-American adults" and is said to "appeal to both a male and a female audience."⁴ On the other hand, *Redbook*, with a history dating back to 1903 and a circulation of some five million, appeals to "young married women and mothers" and its fiction is generally "romance or family oriented."⁵ *Redbook's* decision to publish Naylor's story in late 1988 recognized her writing as having audience appeal beyond the African-American community.

Contemporary reviewers welcomed the first life of *The Women of Brewster Place*, and, not unexpectedly, the strongest, most positive comments were from women who praised Naylor's representation of community. Dorothy Wickenden of the *New Republic* highlighted the desperate charms of the dead-end street, cast the men who visit at night as leaving behind "babies and bile," and favorably compared the novel to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which was published the same year. Wickenden sensed the power that permeates the community as these women "through laughter and companionship . . . make themselves virtually impregnable."⁶ Annie Gottlieb, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, sees the female bonding that happens on Brewster Place as an example of a feminist issue that had been pressed by the "vanguard of the women's movement"—the need for women to pay attention to their relationships with other women. Historically, women have written about women in relationship with men. Now here was a book where "women are the foreground figures, primary both to the reader and to each other, regardless of whether they're involved with men." But Gottlieb does not let the issue rest, choosing to see the novel not as realistic but rather as mythic. The characters, though vivid and earthy, "seem constantly on the verge of breaking out into magical powers."⁷

On the other hand, Loyle Hairston, writing for *Freedomways*, a quarterly review of the Freedom Movement, points out Naylor's shortcomings in addressing the issues of the Movement. Hairston chastises her for not being more politically correct, calling her a "kind of closet social Darwinist who does not see the U.S. as oppressive." He claims that the narra-

tive "gives no hint that its author is in serious conflict with fundamental U.S. values." Hairston overlooks, marginalizes, and minimizes the supportive female community precisely because Naylor "bypasses provocative social themes to play, instead, in the shallower waters of isolated personal relationships."⁸ Hairston acknowledges Naylor's entry in the literary world as an enjoyable read, but hopes that her "next offering will plumb further the depths of human experience."⁹

Naylor opens her novel with an epigraph—Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem," which appeared as part of his 1951 collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. In writing about this collection, Hughes commented as though all the poems were part of a whole and related them in their entirety to "Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed—jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop." Naylor's vision is reflected in Hughes' words on the collection of his poems: "This poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition."¹⁰

"Harlem," like the novel, is about the possible consequences of dreams deferred; it presents seven questions or situations which parallel the circumstances of the seven women of Brewster Place and their respective stories. The poem does not provide answers, but the way in which the poet asks questions suggests that the answers are all in the affirmative: Dreams dry up like raisins in the sun, fester and run like sores,

stink like rotten meat, crust and sugar over like syrupy sweets, sag like a heavy load, and finally explode—just as the collective women of Brewster Place do at novel's end in Mattie's dream, when together they tear down the wall, once baptized by vomit and later stained by blood. According to critic James Emanuel, the poem "traces in figurative language the long scar of psychic abuse which might . . . develop a fatally eruptive itch."¹¹ His suggestion of an eruptive itch falls far short of the power that deferred dreams have in *The Women of Brewster Place*.

The book is framed by a mythical, metaphorical day—"Dawn" to "Dusk"—in which the street comes to life through an ugly birthing process and at novel's end waits to die.¹² Brewster Place is located in a poor section of a large unnamed city, akin to New York City. Its origins are bleak: it is a bastard child, created by the wiles of men in clandestine meetings, not with the hope of new life entering prime real estate, but rather with the aim of economic gratification, individual mercenary urges pulsing toward the "consummation" of their respective desires (1). These ravenous men will "erect" and then "abate," all in the proverbial damp, smoke-filled room, so that Brewster Place can be "conceived" (1). Naylor's word choice is overtly sexual and deliberately skewed.

From the first paragraph the reader knows that the origins of Brewster Place are foreboding. Its birth comes three months after the conception, and, as could have been predicted by such beginnings, its true parentage is hidden (1). Given time, origins cease to matter and a community can forget, so by the time the baptism occurs two years later and a representative of the leg-

islature breaks a bottle of champagne against a corner of one of the buildings, people can cheer (1). In a city that is growing and prospering, Brewster Place had a possibility of becoming "part of the main artery of the town" (2). As blood flows through human arteries from the heart to the various organs and parts of the body, vital to sustaining life and activity, Brewster Place as artery suggests the only glimmer of hope for this malconceived offspring of greed. But when representatives of power in the legislature fight for their own various small veins as though they know the lifeblood of their community depends on it, Brewster Place experiences the effects of racism in the American city. Brewster Place was never home to the dominant white society; it was home instead to "dark haired and mellow-skinned Mediterraneans," who carried the cultural marks of their ethnicity with them in their sounds and smells (2). There was no spokesperson who mattered, who would be listened to, to sustain Brewster Place as artery. In other words, no white person cared enough. When a wall was erected, making Brewster Place a literal dead-end street, it had the effect of a huge clamp, clotting the blood flow that could have kept it vibrantly alive.

In 1953, in the fictional world of Brewster Place, a brown-skinned man known as Ben came to integrate this Mediterranean world. As handyman/janitor who would do the work that the tenants would never consider doing, Ben is always "less than." He uses the polite deference of "yessem" to the paler Europeans; he is a harmless "nice colored man," as though the adjective colored necessitated specific and hasty categorizing. He could be courted by lonely women with homemade soup and bread, but, instinctively, taught by a lifetime of being

reminded of his place because of his strange hair and skin, Ben knew never to show up at someone's door without the tools of his trade as his entry—a broom, a wrench (3). Naylor places Ben in the foreground, creating around him a kind of mystery, a story not yet told. Because Ben is the focus, Naylor makes this marginalized character central and sympathetic.

The Mediterraneans had seen Brewster Place through both its youth and middle age—the bastard child does grow up. In its old age, after the erection of that wall and the exodus of one group and the relocation of the colored daughters to the only place left that would have them, Brewster Place experiences a revitalization. Naylor's black women who come to Brewster Place are experiencing hard times, and their life choices, for whatever reasons, have been reduced. But Naylor makes clear in the "Dawn" of this day, at the beginning of the book, that these women, though down, are by no means out. Naylor uses repeated images of strength and laughter to counter what could be a prevailing notion: a person down on her luck would be despondent.

Naylor creates a sassiness in her women who claim their space in Brewster Place with an assurance that does not depend on male approval, that functions confidently on its own terms: "straight-backed, round-bellied, high-behinded women who threw their heads back when they laughed and exposed strong teeth and dark gums" (4-5). These women are prepared to help one another. Naylor draws on a final image of an ebony phoenix to conclude "Dawn." The classical myth of the phoenix, with its many variations, has to do with a fabulous bird, resembling an eagle, that every five hundred years burns itself on a funeral pyre and out of its decomposing body rises

again. These women will not disappear, grow old and die. For through their stories, "each in her own time and with her own season" will rise again (5). The image of these women as a collective phoenix testifies to their indestructibility.

After the seven stories of these women are told, "The Block Party" attempts to draw the community together—and does so in two entirely separate ways. Its function is also to bring to a close a literal day and turn that day into a metaphor: the book begins in "Dawn" and concludes in "Dusk." It is "Dusk," not only on this day, but on everything that Brewster Place has been. In "Dawn," when Brewster Place was conceived, it was humanized, but here at its death, it is dehumanized by Naylor's use of negative images to announce its death. Its conception is recast at the end, the story is rewritten; where earlier it had been "conceived," now it had been "spawned" (191). Besides being associated with the activity of aquatic animals producing numerous offspring, the use of "spawn" is often contemptuous. All the people have abandoned Brewster Place, and the colored daughters, a reminder of what this book has been about, have taken their collective phoenix elsewhere, and those deferred dreams, the ones that eventually do explode on Brewster Place, are still dreams that will "ebb and flow, but never disappear" (192). Like the phoenix, these women will rise again. It is only the empty Brewster Place that can die, and, at novel's end, still waits to do so.

"Mattie Michael"

As Naylor prepares the reader for the women's individual stories, she says that "each in her own time and with her own

season" will rise again (5). For Mattie Michael, who serves this novel as matriarch, surrogate mother, and mentor to the other women on Brewster Place, the season is winter and the time is only a moment. For the reader to understand how Mattie, the proud mother of an only child named Basil, has lost her home, Naylor moves from the real time of a moment into memory, which recalls Mattie's story. To do so, Naylor uses tangible objects to mark the passing and collapsing of time, specifically the opening use of plants and later the use of oatmeal.

When Mattie first arrives on Brewster Place, it is a snowy day. By indirection Naylor lets the reader have hints of Mattie's past. Mattie comes, bearing beautiful plants, personified and central in the description, for it is the plants that are in the foreground; once they "had an entire sun porch for themselves in the home she had exchanged thirty years of her life to pay for" (7). Using the sense that is most often connected with memory, Naylor uses the smells of someone's cooking to take Mattie back in time, into her youth, so that her story can begin. The smell she inhales is "like freshly cut sugar cane" (8), and sugar cane leads directly to "summer and Papa and Basil and Butch" (8). How she comes to Brewster Place is not just background information, but essential to understanding the strength she will exhibit in her new surroundings.

All the pages that follow this moment are in the time of memory. Mattie, led by her sense of smell, moves through time that, as Naylor captures it, "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, one hurt, and one hurt can be shattered and sprinkled over a thousand days" (35). When Mattie goes to sleep that first Saturday night

in Eva Turner's home, she awakes Sunday morning, but memory time takes over the narrative—for years have passed—and Basil and Ciel, Miss Eva's granddaughter, are now rambunctious children. On this new morning, briefly in real time, Miss Eva prepares the oatmeal, but before the children can finish the meal, memory time returns. Basil's bowl of oatmeal, food that represents a source of strength and a means of keeping him alive, becomes a literal measure of his growth. In memory or collapsed time, the oatmeal causes Basil's legs to reach from the first rung to the second rung of his chair. But from one rung to the next, collapsing all the events that happen in real time, Miss Eva would be dead (40). And when Mattie looks at him again, once more in a shift to real time, Basil has become a man, "gulping coffee and shoveling oatmeal into his mouth" (41). It is still Sunday morning. Oatmeal serves not only as a literal meal at breakfast time, but also as a powerful and useful tool to manipulate time. Through Basil's eating oatmeal, Naylor moves the narrative from Basil's childhood to his adulthood.

Naylor's use of language, including her figures of speech, particularly unusual ones, are worth noting for how closely those choices respond to thematic development. Butch, Mattie's only-time lover and Basil's father, is cinnamon red (8), sparks of fire highlight his body (10), and in an excellent example of synesthesia, his laugh is like "the edges of an April sunset" (9). When Mattie agrees to go caning with him, the "April sun set in its full glory" (11). Naylor's use of each of these images continues to build on the blood-red imagery that she begins with in "Dawn." Butch's connection with Mattie fol-

lows his "sugar cane theory" of life: "Eating cane is like living life. You gotta know when to stop chewing—when to stop trying to wrench every last bit of sweetness out of a wedge—or you find yourself with a jawful of coarse straw that irritates your gums and the roof of your mouth" (18).

Seduced by his language, his looks, and her physical response to him, Mattie is a willing sex partner for Butch on this hot summer afternoon. Naylor describes the act of sex in detail, but she does it in Butch's mind. In reality, Mattie is talking and Butch is staring intently at her face, but in one of the longest sentences in the novel (86 words), that carries its own breathlessness down the page, "his mind slipped down the ebony neck that was just plump enough for a man to bury his nose into and suck up tiny bits of flesh that were almost as smooth as the skin on the top of her full round breasts that held nipples that were high, tilted, and unbelievably even darker than the breasts, so that when they touched the tongue there was the sensation of drinking rich, double cocoa" (17). By the end of the sentence, the reader forgets that all this is happening only in Butch's mind. The reality of the act itself does not take place in the language of the afternoon they spend together. The reader knows it happens, however, because in a few pages Mattie is pregnant. Where it must have happened has to be the "deep green basil and wild thyme [that] formed a fragrant blanket on the mossy earth" (15). When the baby is born, Mattie names him Basil, the site of his conception, locking in the memory of physical place. According to herbal lore, basil is used as a love charm and, in various legends, has some peculiar effect on women.¹³