The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor

Edited by
Sharon Felton
and Michelle C. Loris

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Michelle dedicates this volume to Victoria, Salvatore, and Teresa–with love.

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Series Foreword

Critical Responses in Arts and Letters is designed to present a documentary history of highlights in the critical reception to the body of work of writers and artists and to individual works that are generally considered to be of major importance. The focus of each volume in this series is basically historical. The introductions to each volume are themselves brief histories of the critical response an author, artist, or individual work has received. This response is then further illustrated by reprinting a strong representation of the major critical reviews and articles that have collectively produced the author's, artist's, or work's critical reputation.

The scope of *Critical Responses in Arts and Letters* knows no chronological or geographical boundaries. Volumes under preparation include studies of individuals from around the world and in both contemporary and historical periods.

Each volume is the work of an individual editor, who surveys the entire body of criticism on a single author, artist, or work. The editor then selects the best material to depict the critical response received by an author or artist over his/her entire career. Documents produced by the author or artist may also be included when the editor finds that they are necessary to a full understanding of the materials at hand. In circumstances where previous isolated volumes of criticism on a particular individual or work exist, the editor carefully selects material that better reflects the nature and directions of the critical response over time.

In addition to the introduction and the documentary section, the editor of each volume is free to solicit new essays on areas that may not have been adequately dealt with in previous criticism. Also, for volumes on living writers and artists, new interviews may be included, again at the discretion of the volume's editor. The volumes also provide a supplementary bibliography and are fully indexed.

While each volume in *Critical Responses in Arts and Letters* is unique, it is also hoped that in combination they form a useful, documentary history of the critical response to the arts, and one that can be easily and profitably employed by students and scholars.

Cameron Northouse

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Chronology

1950	Gloria Naylor born
1968	Naylor becomes Jehovah's Witness
	Begins work as switchboard operator
1981	B.A. in English from Brooklyn College
	Begins graduate work at Yale University
1982	*The Women of Brewster Place* published
1983	American Book Award
	M. A. in Afro-American studies from Yale University
1985	*Linden Hills* published
1988	*Mama Day* published
	Becomes a member of Book-of-the-Month Club selection committee
1989	Film version of *The Women of Brewster Place* shown on ABC
1990	Begins One Way Productions
1992	*Bailey's Cafe* published
1993	*Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, critical collection published by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, New York: Amistad Press
1994	Stage production of *Bailey's Cafe* performed by Hartford Stage Company, Hartford, Connecticut
1996	*Gloria Naylor,* critical work published by Virginia Fowler, Boston: Twayne Publishers

Introduction

Gloria Naylor offers one of the most powerful and promising voices in contemporary American literature. In just over a decade she has produced a body of work enormously diverse in its literary appeal and extensive in its vision. Beginning with her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, which was published in 1982 and which won the American Book Award for first fiction in 1983, Naylor's appeal can be traced throughout an impressive range of critical scholarship. Current criticism is largely divided among five categories: the examination of Naylor's work

- as a production of an African-American writer,
- as an example of work positing a feminist or women's studies agenda,
- as a focus of influence studies or intertextual comparisons,
- as a study in narrative and/or rhetorical methods, and
- as an exponent of popular culture.

Whereas these critical viewpoints commonly overlap, this overview consciously seeks to separate these scholarly perspectives into smaller units to facilitate their discussion. We emphasize in this introduction the first two perspectives--Naylor's work as representing African American and feminist concerns. The other issues, while they are indeed salient critical perspectives, are often subsumed under the more comprehensive explorations of African American and/or feminist views. Some of the essays selected to appear in this volume, however, do engage in depth the other three critical perspectives.

African American scholars have embraced Naylor's work for its authentic representations of a cross-section of both native African lives and the lives of all classes of African Americans. Naylor's characters have not escaped the burden of their race, and critics have found fruitful material in Naylor by which to trace the history of race relations in America. Beginning with Sapphira Wade, a slave whose bill of sale from 1819 is provided as a frontispiece to *Mama Day*, and ending perhaps with *Linden Hills*' Laurel Dumont, a young black woman who holds a corporate position at IBM, Naylor has depicted a range of roles available to African Americans in our society. Race will be tainted, upon occasion, with class in Naylor's fiction, for the most affluent among her cast of characters--for instance, Luther Nedeed--will demonstrate the least moral value, whereas those with the fewest material possessions--like Miranda Day--will be the most spiritually developed.

Feminist scholars and those interested in women's studies have also found Naylor's work especially noteworthy. Naylor's women accomplish remarkable deeds and demonstrate an enormous strength of character. From the mundane--Mattie Michael's offering a piece of homemade angel food cake to another woman--to the miraculous, the birth of George to Mariam, a virgin mother, Naylor's women are all survivors, blessed with talents that make them extraordinary women.

A third focus of much Naylor scholarship involves influence studies. Several scholars have established convincing readings of Naylor's work as including parallels to and/or revisions of Shakespeare's canon. Other critical work links Naylor's *Linden Hills* to Dante's *Inferno*, and Naylor herself has confirmed this use of Dante. A scholar in this volume establishes and argues successfully for a critical link between Naylor's fourth novel and yet another classic--Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Additionally, Naylor's work takes its place among a notably diverse legacy of major American authors, including Walt Whitman, William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston just to name a few. The notion of influence studies, however, sometimes implies comparisons between or among works, and under this category, scholars have offered fruitful comparisons between Naylor and a spectrum of American and world authors: Charles W. Chesnutt, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Jean Toomer, Ann Petry, Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Bessie Head, Paule Marshall, Ntozake Shange, Audre Lorde, Eudora Welty, up to and including Lee Smith.

Furthermore, considerable scholarship has been devoted to Naylor's rhetorical and narrative methods. *The Women of Brewster Place,* for instance, is identified as "a novel in seven stories." This paradoxical designation confirms the innovative structure and style of Naylor's book. Rather than being judged as seven distinct stories, Naylor's work insists upon a vision of unity. The first six stories each feature the narrative of a different female protagonist, and the seventh inscribes the women in a collective union, the block party. Naylor's work exhibits the cohesiveness of a novel, but it is indeed a novel with a contemporary cinematic feel. Naylor's later productions continue to garner additional critical inspection regarding her narrative techniques. Like Faulkner's Snopes and Sartoris clans, characters will reappear from one Naylor novel to the next, sometimes in a slightly different guise. Also, like Faulkner, Naylor consciously plays with chronology: for instance, George from *Mama Day* (1988) is actually born in a later novel, *Bailey's Cafe* (1992). There is a critical initiative that suggests Naylor's first four novels might be seen as a holistic collection, a consciously-designed quartet much like Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*. The argument for quartet design will be more definitively established once Naylor's future literary works are offered and assessed. Other successful analyses of Naylor's rhetorical and narrative methods link her work to specialized storytelling techniques such as magical realism or writing through women-centered prose.

Naylor's cinematic narrative method is responsible, no doubt, for her first novel being turned into an enormously popular television movie. Thus, scholars who embrace popular culture have readily adopted Naylor's work, for no less esteemed a popular culture icon than Oprah Winfrey starred in the television adaption of *The Women of Brewster Place*. Winfrey served as the guiding force behind getting studio executives to pursue the project, and as a result of these efforts, Naylor's work reached a huge audience and received significant critical acclaim. Other issues portrayed in popular culture--such as female genital mutilation, the Holocaust, and hoodoo/folk medicine--find expression throughout Naylor's canon.

In short, any reader--young or old, black or white, male or female--will find something of value in Naylor's powerful compositions. Naylor's work illuminates: it provides an insight into places we may or may not have lived, violences we may or may not have experienced, lessons we may or may not have learned. Most of all, she illuminates for us the deepest places of our human selves and the dilemmas of our own human ways. Naylor's work forges ***connections***, connections among other African American writers, other female writers, other classic literary figures. Equally important are the connections she makes within the canon of her own texts. This volume utilizes that central notion--connections--as a thematic ground for the essays selected herein for inclusion. A more specific preview of each essay will be offered at the end of this introduction.

An African-American Voice

As an African American writer, Naylor's work stands alongside the history of the best fiction produced by African Americans this century. Charles W. Chesnutt, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison have all been identified as voicing concerns and issues vital to an understanding of African American life, giving voice to experiences that are similarly reflected in Naylor's fiction. Two of the women who live on Brewster Place have, like Ellison's Invisible Man, migrated from the oppressive society of the South in hopes of locating a more promising future up North. Mattie Michael was banished from her family because of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Likewise, Etta Mae Johnson was forced to leave her Rutherford County, Tennessee home because the Southern community could not deal, in 1937, with her feisty attitudes. Whereas life in the North will present challenges of its own, Mattie, Etta Mae, and Ellison's Invisible Man will embrace their residence in the North--they will find a place from which they can grow--and they will consider the move a displacement that finally results in personal progress.

Similarly, the street itself--Brewster Place--will demonstrate the limited success available to African Americans even in the more receptive North. The housing project of Brewster Place is built on "worthless land"; moreover, once the brick wall is erected, the community becomes enclosed, a dead end, left to determine its own prosperity or decline. The block community is, at least to some degree, knitted together by the presence of Ben, a poor, old black superintendent who lives in the damp basement apartment. Again, like Ellison's Invisible Man or Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground," the grim basement view provides Ben with an unusual perspective of this community. His hole is not only a place from which he can observe the goings-on of the block, but also it is a place from which he can retreat to drink himself into an alcoholic stupor. The residents know that when they hear him, early in the morning, singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," he is returning from the haze of too much alcohol. As a result of Ben's death (and the rape of one resident), the community loses its focus, its stability. The women are forced to take steps to

assert a new sense of solidarity in their neighborhood and in their sense of identity, joined in a common goal--as African Americans and as women who refuse to be vulnerable.

African American concerns have formed a primary consideration in Gloria Naylor's other novels as well. *Linden Hills'* Luther Nedeed is, in one sense, the epitome of success: coming from a clearly-defined patriarchal heritage, this fifth generation Luther Nedeed has inherited a veritable kingship over which he rules. Owner of the Tupelo Realty Corporation and therefore overseer of an entire community, the power he wields is considerable. The community is geographically situated in concentric circles, and the closer one moves to the bottom of the hill, the more prestigious the address--and the more domination one may expect Luther Nedeed to enact. Not only does Naylor reverse the reader's expectations over the notion of class ascendancy--which, in the case of *Linden Hills*, means descending the hill (an observation that led to the critical link to Dante's *Inferno*)--but also she portrays Luther Nedeed with bitter irony. The man who could be a marvelous role model, an immensely successful black businessman, property owner, and wielder of power, is in fact reprehensible.

Much like *Song of Solomon*'s Macon Dead, who is an equally heartless and shrewd businessman, Luther Nedeed has lost his spiritual center. He attends his ten-year class reunion with the active intention of locating a woman who has become desperate, a woman disillusioned with her prospects of happiness and eager to secure a husband at whatever cost. He finds such a woman, and the relationship more resembles a business arrangement than a marriage. His treatment of her, as well as the expectations he holds for his tenants, establish him as a totalitarian power broker, ruthless and diabolical.

Readers should notice that the lack of a spiritual center extends beyond just Luther Nedeed. Indeed, members of the entire community sell themselves out just for the prestige of living in Linden Hills. Barbara Christian has said that every upwardly mobile resident has to "erase" a part of him- or herself for the opportunity of living here. Because virtually every resident pursues the same variety of wealth and power that Luther Nedeed embodies, Naylor presents a sharp social and class critique of all African Americans who sell themselves out.

Furthermore, as if Naylor wanted her thematic lesson regarding African Americans who sell themselves out to be abundantly clear, she offers two or three other portraits of individuals in *Linden Hills* who lose their spiritual centers, and we see the traumatic or ridiculous ends to which they come. The first is that of Winston Alcott, a young man on his way to an "establishment" version of success by his skill as an aspiring lawyer. His dirty little secret, the obstacle to his unfettered success, is that he has been pursuing a homosexual relationship for some eight years with David. He has decided to give up his homosexual lifestyle, however, and in fact to marry Cassandra, a socialite, in order to improve his chances at promotion, at rising through the corporate partnership more quickly. The marriage is *the* social event of the season, notable for its display of ostentation. But despite the fur capes, the expensive caviar, and the cordial festivities, readers understand the inauthenticity of this union: this marriage is for show only; it holds no potential for success.

Laurel Dumont is married to Linden Hills' ambitious district attorney, and she herself holds an equally prestigious position at IBM. Yet in order to achieve her material successes, she has deliberately distanced herself from her African American heritage, from any sense of self she has known. After she entered

college, Laurel never quite found the time to visit her grandmother (Roberta) who raised her, so when she finally does return to her grandmother--Laurel is thirty-five--her desire to reconnect with her past is staggeringly difficult. As Laurel listens to classical music, Roberta suggests that perhaps she might listen to blues singers such as Billie Holliday, Bessie Smith, and Muddy Waters in order to recapture her heritage. Laurel fails to forge a connection between herself and Roberta (or among her other black female acquaintances), however, and her suicide depicts the dire consequences of losing touch with one's past.

The third portrait Naylor offers in *Linden Hills* of an individual obsessed with control is much more comic, but under the comedy lies a ridiculously futile objective. As Assistant to the Executive Director at General Motors, Maxwell Smyth has allowed his ambition totally to negate his humanity. He changes the spelling of his last name from the common "Smith" to the rarer "Smyth," a move that makes a public statement of sham erudition. But Maxwell attempts to control his most private functions as well: he never sweats, and he regulates his diet to such a degree that he no longer requires the use of toilet paper. Naylor makes the point through Winston, Laurel, and Maxwell that once an African American denies his or her most basic impulses--sexual, emotional, or physical--the result will inevitably be problematic. Her point is underscored by the portraits she offers of the few "good" people in *Linden Hills*. The ones who are most humane don't live in Linden Hills at all and they own very few material possessions, but they are spiritually rich.

Mama Day is the novel set, geographically and perhaps psychologically, closest to Africa: the island of Willow Springs represents the portion of the United States that juts out into the Atlantic Ocean towards Africa; moreover, it is not claimed by either neighboring state. Those who live there embrace the powerful magic of the conjure woman Miranda Day. Miranda's magic comes to her from a rich ancestry of conjure women, the most important being Sapphira Wade. Sapphira's ties to Africa are clearly present; her bill of sale opens the text and it is due to her actions that the island of Willow Springs was deeded to its current residents. Lineage, ancestry, and heritage are privileged in this novel; few African American novels offer such a careful rendering of history, and it is a precedent that adds not only tradition but dignity to the lives of *Mama Day*'s characters.

Another source of dignity must be noted in Miranda Day herself--in her extraordinary ability to bridge the gap between the culturally different worlds of the mainland and the island. For example, at one end of the medical spectrum is shifty Dr. Buzzard (and the spiteful Ruby as well) whose attempts at the invocation of magic and/or "spell-casting" always seem to benefit Buzzard or Ruby more so than the patient. While there is comedy in their portraits--Dr. Buzzard is a laughable character with his rooster-tail hat and his necklace of bones--the reader remains necessarily nervous regarding these two; Buzzard and Ruth wield their variety of power irresponsibly, allowing it to be tainted by narrow personal motives. At the extreme other end would be traditional medicine, the mainland's way, the established Western form, clearly represented by Dr. Brian Smithfield. Miranda's way occupies a more central position; she retains the conjure woman's secrets of beneficial roots and herbs, and she is blessed with an intuition, a sensitivity to subtle physical signals, not often found in Western medicine. Like Pilate, the most natural of women from Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Miranda is constantly associated with the natural symbol of

eggs. Similarly, she serves as a bridge between Cocoa, who has immersed herself deeply in the mainland world--specifically, New York--and the island's traditional ways. Although Miranda is firmly entrenched on the island, she still watches Phil Donahue to expand her horizons all the way to a New York studio audience. In many manifestations, Miranda Day serves as a balancing force, a nexus that successfully negotiates between two very different worlds.

Inherent in the above sketch of *Mama Day* is the sense that Naylor's African characters are beginning to assume a wider variety of portraits. That idea is significantly fleshed out in *Bailey's Cafe*: not only is there a large number of characters in Naylor's fourth novel, but also the portraits they occupy are notable for their breadth and their diversity. *Bailey's Cafe* gives voice to an Ethiopian jew who has become pregnant despite her claims of virginity, a Stanford graduate who cross-dresses, a woman who is prostituted because of her brother's demands, a plethora of lost individuals who seek a way out of their misery. Counterposed to these characters are several more, including the reader him/herself, who will compassionately listen to the endless litany of emotional pain they reveal.

A Feminist Voice

Feminist concerns are so intricately woven into the fabric of Naylor's fiction that one might point merely to Naylor's statement that her goal as a writer is to give a voice to the voiceless--and that many times the voiceless one is a black woman, an individual for whom, at the time Naylor began writing, few authors had spoken. In the exclusive interview included in this volume, she calls herself a transcriber of lives; she expresses a similar sentiment in the classic interview with Toni Morrison published in *Southern Review* and with a number of other interviewers. Moreover, Naylor is careful now to define her brand of feminism as social, economic, and political equality for all humans. What is perhaps most interesting to note is the manner in which her feminist concerns have evolved throughout her career.

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor admits her stance was essentially romantic: the black women she gave voices to were largely victims, and their united attempt was to break through a wall--recall the closing pages of the work--of social, and particularly male, entrapment. Mattie Michael is betrayed in some sense by Butch Fuller, by her father, by the justice system, and clearly by her well-loved, ungrateful son. Etta Mae, Lucielia, and Cora Lee are all, despite their various stages of commitment, ultimately used and discarded by their men. Whether the women have achieved any progress by the end of the novel is a question left unanswered: the women strive to tear down the wall separating Brewster Place from the rest of society--in effect, leveling the playing field between themselves and mainstream society--but their effort occurs only in a dream. These women may be moving towards social equality, but the final words affirm that Brewster Place ambiguously "waits to die." In any case, the women of Brewster Place continue to come up short regarding issues of economic or political clout.

No greater social or political clout is awarded to any woman in *Linden Hills*. Willa Prescott Nedeed, like generations of other Nedeed wives before her, is physically entrapped in a basement; thus, she is entirely stripped of her voice. Only one individual, Willie, can hear the eerie strains of her haunting wails

permeating through the neighborhood, and he does not yet understand the meaning of these cries. The opening lines of the poem he creates--"There is a man in a house at the bottom of a hill. And his wife has no name" (277) suggest at least the potential for change, but just like Brewster Place which waits to die, this poem has not yet been written; it exists only in the shadowy edges of Willie's sleep. Furthermore, only through a fabulous set of circumstances does Willa have the opportunity to be released from her prison, from her entrapment as a "madwoman in the basement."

One might argue that *Linden Hills* offers at least a portrait of a woman, Laurel Dumont, who has achieved economic progress. But the effectiveness of her portrait must be tempered by the personal demons that accompany her success. She has discarded her heritage in her drive to achieve economic status, and her terminal encounter with Luther Nedeed teaches her the cruelest truth of all: that despite her efforts, despite all she has given up, she is still nothing. Laurel has fought a history of "ingrained male assumptions that she didn't count" (246). This encounter, however, is too much to bear. The interpersonal bonds that sustained and supported the women's collective efforts in *The Women of Brewster Place* have failed to provide Laurel with a reason to survive. Laurel's facelessness at the time of her suicide speaks to her loss of identity, just as the face of Priscilla McGuire Nedeed disappears throughout her successive photographs.

Perhaps the purest validation of the male's unyielding grasp of social, political, and economic power in *Linden Hills* is demonstrated by a conversation between Maxwell Smyth and Xavier Donnell. Maxwell explains "some hard cold facts [about black women]: there just aren't enough decent ones to choose from. They're either out there on welfare and waiting to bring you a string of somebody else's kids to support, or they've become so prominent that they're brainwashed into thinking that you aren't good enough for them" (108). He continues with the observation that there is "a whole mass [of black women] that are coming out of these colleges with their hot little fists clenched around those diplomas. . . . They no longer think they're women, but walking miracles. They're ready to ask a hell of a lot from the world then and a hell of a lot from you. They're hungry and they're climbers. . . . Hook up with one of them and . . . [y]ou get your balls clawed off" (109-110). Clearly, the playing field has not yet achieved equality or balance here, for educated and motivated black women remain undesirable in the patriarchal framework of Linden Hills.

Naylor extends her feminist framework in what is perhaps her best novel to date, *Mama Day*, which wrestles with the problem--and the power--of romantic love. The novel defines that problem as a struggle for both self-identity and mutuality (mutual recognition). The terms of such love, the novel declares, are steep and may not be met in a world limited by a patriarchal system. The vision of the novel challenges us to a radical suspension of disbelief: if we are to be transformed by the power of love we must know how to listen; we must be able to see with the heart.

Naylor uses the love story of Cocoa and George to illustrate her feminist vision of love. Both Cocoa and George struggle with each other to maintain their self-identity, but both are defensive, fearful to be vulnerable, to express their feelings and needs. Cocoa, however, eventually lets down her guard: she wants George to see her true self. She invites him home to the magical, matriarchal world of Willow Springs where he can see who she is by understanding where

and who she comes from. Cocoa's true self descends from a long line of Day women--conjure women, women with special spiritual powers. Cocoa's ancestry begins with Sapphira Wade, a woman who could "grab a bolt of lightning [and turn] the moon into salve." Sapphira Wade, a slave who took her freedom, gives the Day line its name and forges a family of powerful women.

The power of the Day women currently resides in Cocoa's great-aunt Miranda Day, the ruling matriarch of Willow Springs, a conjure woman whose healing powers challenge George's rationalist, masculinist ways of seeing and understanding. George, "a good hearted boy with a bad heart" as Mama Day defines him, must learn that love, "the power greater than hate," requires that he break through his resistance to Miranda's female, intuitive, irrational, and emotional world. He cannot. George knows only "the facts" and what he can see right in front of him. George's maps, his ways of knowing, are useless in Willow Springs.

Challenging George to a central condition of romantic love--an act of mutuality--Miranda requests George's "hand in hers--his very hand--so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. . . . So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over" (285). George refuses. He violently resists by destroying the hen house. George would rather die for love of Cocoa than live loving her in the terms of mutual recognition set forth in the novel.

Naylor's compelling feminist vision then offers us this lesson about love: because of our common human nature both men and women have a similar motivation to experience love, but the capacity to fulfill this desire is confounded by a difference in gender. For Naylor, love--a balance of self and other--can be transformative and magical only if we are willing to transcend the limitations of our gendered reality.

Bailey's Cafe furthers Naylor's discourse on the complications and implications of a gendered reality. Her account, framed by the Holocaust and Hiroshima, connects the collective burdens of sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism that drive us to the despair at the "edge of the world." In this novel, Naylor includes women worldwide in her vision, and, indicative of her growth as a writer, she includes men such as the fatherly narrator Bailey, whose character she endows with fullness and substance.

Re-envisioning the stories of Biblical women--stories written by men--Naylor offers her most compelling portrait of female sexuality. Beginning with Eve, a woman whose sexuality would, in traditional patriarchal terms, define her as a "whore," but who instead "choose[s]" who she is, and culminating with Mariam, the mutilated virgin who, at Christmas, gives birth to George, the baby whose birth is meant "to bring in a whole new era," Naylor unfolds for us her reconstruction of the female condition. She presents to us women who have been violated and scourged by male violence and male menacing. She presents to us women who are themselves victimizers of other women. But transcending the mutilation and degradation, Naylor's women have hope, compassion, and the power to bring forth new life.

Naylor's feminist concerns have deepened and matured in both *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Cafe*. The women in these novels are powerful and important even when they have been oppressed and violated. These women are often mothers, caregivers, healers, or just plain survivors of the violence done to them. No longer offering a one-dimensional portrait, the women and the men in *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Cafe* are multi-leveled, complex, polyphonic, even as they may be disturbing; these characters demonstrate the author's increasing maturity as a writer. Naylor said in the interview included here that she wants her work to present a community of people who are both saints and sinners. An authentic portrait of African Americans--male and female--necessarily includes both light and shadow, and in these last two novels, signifying Naylor's accomplishments, readers see a more complex portrait of humanity.

A powerful vision obviously shapes Naylor's works. Her stories illuminate for us the complexities of human character. Her stories, which we love to read, are tales of women, like Mattie Michael or Cocoa Day, who fall in love and are betrayed or transformed by the experience. Her stories are tales of men, like Luther Nedeed whose lives are consumed by greed and a thirst for power; or men like Bailey, who are somewhat indifferent guardians and guides to humanity's search for meaning; or men like George Andrews, who would give his life--but not his soul--for love.

The moral geography of Naylor's stories is central in all her works. "Where" her stories take place illuminates for us the moral meaning of these common lives. *The Women of Brewster Place*, set on a dead-end street, depicts the struggles and survival of seven poor black women whose lives are dead-ended by an oppressively male world. *Linden Hills*, a tale of class and money, power and greed, unfolds a grim allegory of material success and spiritual bankruptcy that must be read in conjunction with its progressively-entrapping geography. *Mama Day* gives voice to a storm of love and magic and the magical transformation wrought by human compassion, and it portrays a place--and a mood--not easily located on any traditional map. Finally, *Bailey's Cafe*, a novel set both everywhere and nowhere, transcribes a metaphysical place with an apocalyptic vision: it is "the last place before the end of the world" (68).

Naylor's work, in short, forges connections--between love and loss, hope and despair, between the sacred and the mundane, security and fear, light and shadow. To paraphrase a line from *Bailey's Cafe*, no one we meet through the artistry of Naylor's pen comes in with a simple story. Every one is multifaceted; each can be viewed from a variety of critical perspectives. Therefore, "plan to stick around here and listen while we play it all out" (35).

The essays collected here represent some of the best scholarship being produced and published on Gloria Naylor. Please note that we have departed slightly from the usual *Critical Responses* series format by omitting reviews of Naylor's work. Because several fine reviews were included in the well-known Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah volume on Naylor, we have decided to avoid any possible duplications and to concentrate instead solely on scholarly articles.

Upon occasion, we have also departed slightly from the straightforward manner of reproducing critical articles exactly as they were published. On a small number of essays, in order to assist future scholars in their own research, we have purposely constructed a Works Cited bibliographic entry wherein none existed in the original manuscript. We have clearly included a notice if the Works Cited entry was constructed by us, and we certainly take full responsibility if there are any errors present in such a constructed entry.

Scholars, please take advantage of the Naylor bibliography included before the general index.

Presenting a diversity of critical responses has certainly been one of our goals as editors; however, another goal has been to include essays that demonstrate the thematic idea of *connections* suggested earlier in this introduction. We offer here the perspectives of new and established scholars, domestic and international, black and white, male and female, and views both critically embraced and uncommon. Each scholar has made his or her own unique connection to Naylor's works, and we are confident that the inclusion of our exclusive interview with Naylor will offer a base from which additional fruitful scholarship will develop. For quick reference, then, here is a brief survey of the essays selected for inclusion in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor.*

Ebele Eko's essay connects Naylor's work--especially an examination of Kiswana Browne--with the work of other black female writers. Eko includes a treatment of two other novelists, Bessie Head's *Maru* and Paule Marshall's *Browngirl Brownstones*, along with an exploration of Ama Ata Aidoo's play, *Anowa*. An examination of the ways in which language usage characterizes individuals is the focus of Cheryl Lynn Johnson's dissertation excerpt. While Johnson's work pursued her thesis--a "womanist way of speaking"--through fiction by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Naylor, we have included here just her focus on Mattie Michael's and Butch Fuller's relationship. Jacqueline Bobo and Ellen Seiter's essay on *The Women of Brewster Place* offers a nicely synthetic view of the feminist emphasis of both the text and the television adaptation. Their essay will be of interest not only to feminist scholars but also to those interested in exploring narrative versus screen versions of works and to those pursuing popular culture issues. Maxine L. Montgomery's article explores the supportive relationships between the female characters; she notes that Mattie Michael plays a pivotal maternal role. Finishing out the discussion surrounding *The Women of Brewster Place*, James Robert Saunders' essay pursues some commonly critically-unexplored territory. He looks at a few of the religious and spiritual figures found throughout Naylor's first three novels: *Brewster Place's* Reverend Moreland T. Woods, the Reverend Michael Hollis from *Linden Hills*, and several of the spiritually-connected characters of *Mama Day*.

Five essays comprise the discussion on *Linden Hills*. Mary F. Sisney offers a powerfully creative reading of *Linden Hills* as an example of the rarely seen black "novel of manners." She also includes important comparisons between Naylor's work and that of Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset. Offering a critical connection between *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day* is Nellie Boyd's essay. Boyd looks at the importance of place and leadership in these two novels. Grace E. Collins' article, as its name implies, counterpoints the differing narrative strategies Naylor employs in her depictions of the similarly-named characters Willa and Willie. Charles P. Toombs discovers that Naylor employs food tropes throughout *Linden Hills*; he argues that a character's choice of foods helps to delineate his/her character in this novel. The fifth essay, commissioned for inclusion in this volume, is by Christine G. Berg; it establishes Naylor's usage of a specific Walt Whitman poem. This poem, recited at the occasion of Winston Alcott's wedding, represents virtually the only white voice in the novel, according

to Berg, and she extends with conviction the observation that Whitman is among the best-loved of poetic mentors for African Americans.

We include here a more expansive collection of criticism on *Mama Day* than has been available so far; it is fair to say that *Mama Day* is the most critically pursued of Naylor's four novels. With that in mind, we have selected criticism that represents the range of scholarship. Opening this chapter is Susan Meisenhelder's work that presents a scholarly discussion of George, Cocoa, and Miranda Day as intricately and spiritually linked to one another. Suzanne Juhasz's essay is an adaptation of a chapter from her book *Reading from the Heart: Women, Literature, and the Search for True Love*. Juhasz isolates a number of connections not only among Naylor's female characters and women's romantic fiction in general but also between Naylor's work and that of--surprisingly--Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. The next essay, Lindsey Tucker's "Recovering the Conjure Woman," will be of special interest to scholars pursuing a study of unique African and African American folk traditions, especially those related to medicinal issues. Conjure is a favorite trope among African American writers--male and female--and Tucker does a fine job establishing comparisons and contrasts between Naylor's and other writers' use of this mystical heritage. Hélène Christol's study examines the unusual geographic placement, Willow Springs, found in *Mama Day*. She then goes on to substantiate how geography and genealogy are combined. Gary Storhoff's essay features a strong interpretation of the Shakespearean subtext of Naylor's third novel. Storhoff's work must be considered a classic among the Naylor critical canon. Lastly, Elizabeth T. Hayes finds abundant evidence to substantiate her claim that *Mama Day* may be viewed as a narrative of African American magic realism.

The chapter on *Bailey's Cafe* demonstrates the diversity of critical perspectives that Naylor continues to attract. In her second essay included in this volume, Maxine L. Montgomery looks at the multiple voices in *Bailey's Cafe* and, coming around full circle, compares this work back to Naylor's earlier novels. Angela diPace's essay explores the underlying use of the Holocaust and World War II issues as they pertain especially to Bailey's narrative. Karah Stokes' essay isolates an important narrative technique Naylor utilizes in her depiction of a violent act, and Stokes then compares Naylor's technique with that of Charles W. Chesnutt. William R. Nash studies the issue of cultural nationalism. Philip Page, who has published a major work on Toni Morrison, pursues the images of wells and abysses in this fourth novel; he links their inclusion to Jungian archetypes. Rebecca S. Wood's work investigates the themes of universalism and nationalism throughout Naylor's fourth novel. The works by Nash and Wood--offering different perspectives on similar subjects--should be especially provocative viewed in comparison to one another.

Finally, an exclusive interview with Naylor completes this volume. This interview, we hope, will serve as an important resource in future Naylor scholarship because of the diversity of issues she discusses with such candor. Naylor talks freely, not only about her past, her concerns as a writer, but also she revisits some issues regarding her prior work. Perhaps more importantly, she offers some suggestions regarding the direction and the interests she embraces for her future work. She ends with a comment that forges an important connection of her own--between her garden and the human spirit.

The Women of Brewster Place

Eko, Ebele. "Beyond the Myth of Confrontation: A Comparative Study of African and African-American Female Protagonists." *Ariel* 17.4 (Oct. 1986): 139-152.

Times have changed since the sixties, and a new breed of black women writers in African and America are giving creative birth to a new breed of female protagonists. One of their deep concerns, a point which Hoyt Fuller has stressed,[1] is to help destroy degrading images and myths and recreate for black women images that liberate and build up self-identity. The myth of black mother-daughter confrontation, to which a whole volume of a scholarly journal has been devoted,[2] is one such.

I intend to focus on the creative process of myth destruction and recreation in two works each from Africa and America. By comparing and contrasting the confrontation of daughters and their mothers and "totems" of that tradition--the reactions, the revelation of deep-seated mother-daughter resemblances, and the challenge the daughters become to those around them--I hope to prove a number of things. First that, far from being selfish, spoiled, and pugnacious, these daughters are budding activists, products of the times (all four works are published between 1959 and 1983). Second that their mothers too experienced similar frustrations in their youth but lacked a voice and silently conformed. Third that their conscious choice achieves a double goal: raising the level of their awareness, and challenging others to greater black consciousness. Fourth, these daughters are their writers' mouthpieces, used to address pressing problems in African and African-American communities. In a sentence, I will try to show the crucial importance of female determination to stand for equity and choice.

The characters I discuss--Anowa in Ama Ata Aidoo's play, *Anowa*; Kiswana Browne in Gloria Naylor's novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*; Margaret Cadmore in Bessie Head's novel, *Maru*; and Selina Boyce in Paule Marshall's novel, *Browngirl Brownstones*--reveal many bonds and parallels, despite obvious separations of time, space, and even genre. "You got to take yuh mouth and make a gun," says Silla Boyce, Selina's mother,[3] a statement which finds ironic fulfillment in each of these four daughters under study. There are astonishing resemblances in their defiant utterances, their self-assertion, their committed and courageous opposition to the oppressive status quo. Each

struggles to break free, to be herself, to be different from her mother's expectations. Nevertheless, each discovers in herself a mere extension of her mother's personality. They are similarly unified in their expressing and dramatizing what I may call "creative rebellion" against oppressive institutions and traditions. Their capacity for personal sacrifice and the challenges they pose to others demand that they be looked at seriously as catalysts for social, economic, and political changes.

An exciting starting point is the deceptive lull before the dramatic moment of confrontation over cultural and ideological values. A critic has summarized the situation thus:

> The conflict is basically between the idealists (the daughters) and the pragmatists (the mothers). . . . [T]hey are grieved to see their children making choices that they do not understand, turning their backs on the things the mothers have struggled to attain.[4]

In *Anowa*, Anowa's mother Badua, a village woman of Ghana, wants her daughter to become a full woman in the village, "happy to see her peppers and onions grow."[5] In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Kiswana's middle-class mother swears to whatever gods will listen to "use everything at her disposal to assure a secure future for her children."[6] In *Maru*, Margaret's foster mother, the missionary Margaret Cadmore senior, who rescues and nurtures the orphan child of a dying Masarwa woman, raises her with great care to prove her pet theory that "heredity is nothing, environment is everything."[7] Selina's mother, Silla Boyce, an ambitious Badjan immigrant to New York, labors and saves so that she can buy a brownstone house to pass on to her daughters. All of them are well-meaning mothers, who like Janie's grandmother in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, long for them "to pick from higher bush and a sweeter berry."[8] They wish for their daughters what they missed, because in the words of the poet Tagore, "when you feel sorrow, grief and joy for someone you enlarge yourself, you enrich yourself."[9]

Ironically, the daughters refuse to conform. They rebel against their mothers, not *as* mothers but as representatives of societal authority and expectations. Bell Hooks explains this universal psychological phenomenon in terms of her personal experience with her mother:

> She is also always trying to make me what she thinks it is best for me to be. She tells me how to do my hair, what clothes I should wear. She wants to love and control at the same time. . . . I want so much to please her and yet keep part of me that is my self my own.[10]

The daughters want to be themselves. Anowa wants to choose her own husband in a conservative society where one's parents do the choosing. Her stubborn independence is nothing short of radical. In a language shockingly disrespectful in context, she declares her stand: "I don't care mother. Have I not told you that this is to be my marriage and not yours" (17). Adding shock to shock, she proceeds to do what she pleases, leaving home with a promise not to return. Anowa's rebellion is a challenge to her entire community and evokes prompt reaction, not only from her parents but also from the elders of the village.

Her mother's warning carries the potency of a collective curse: "It's up to you, my mistress who knows everything. But remember, my lady--when I am too old to move, I shall still be sitting by these walls waiting for you to come back with your rags and nakedness" (17). Her father, Osam, wants her apprenticed to a priestess to curb her spirits. The village old woman laments that the age of obedience has run out, while the old man blames it all on fate, remarking that Anowa has the "hot eyes and nimble feet of one born to dance for the gods" (20). Regardless of threats and curses, Anowa leaves with her head held high, promising to make somebody out of the husband they had ridiculed as a cassava man or a worthless fellow.

Just as Anowa's haughtiness shocks the entire village community, Kiswana in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* shocks her middle-class parents with her inflammatory denunciation of their status symbols and values: "I'd rather be dead than be like you--a white man's nigger who's ashamed of being black!" (85). Matching action to words in the vogue of black activists in the sixties, Kiswana chooses an African name (instead of Melanie), blows her hair into an afro, quits college, moves out of her bourgeois neighborhood to a low-income project, decorates it with African artifacts, and gets a boyfriend in dashiki. The reaction she gets is as sharp as it is forceful. Her mother's lone voice carries with it the moral superiority and confidence of the self-made black middle class, whose hard-earned security has come under fire. She taunts Kiswana about her misguided zeal and mocks her foolishness:

> Where's your revolution now, Melanie? Where are all those black revolutionaries who were shouting and demonstrating and kicking up a lot of dust with you on that campus? Huh? They're sitting in wood-paneled offices with their degrees in mahogany frames... (83-84)

She adds, "There was no revolution, Melanie, and there will be no revolution" (84). The battle rages back and forth, each pointing to concrete actions to defend her stance. Denouncing her parents as "terminal cases of middle class amnesia," Kiswana declares that she is now physically near her people (the poor blacks) and their problems. Mrs. Browne counters by pointing to the solid achievements of the NAACP, which she supports, as opposed to the futile dreams of those she calls "hot heads."

In the remote Botswana village of Dilepe, Margaret Cadmore in Bessie Head's *Maru*, like Kiswana, has to face a crisis of choice. She is alone, a new teacher in a strange village; her white foster mother has retired and gone back to England. She has been brought up like an English girl, with Western manners and impeccable English. Everyone who meets her assumes she is a colored, a status not without prejudice in Botswana but certainly much better than that of the Masarwa, who are considered the lowest of the low, condemned to perpetual servitude to Botswana people. Against that background, Margaret Cadmore's firm and cool declaration in answer to her colleague's simple question, and later to the headmaster's inquiry, "I am a Masarwa" (24), sends waves of shock the length and breadth of Dilepe village. With her one-sentence identification, Margaret confronts herself, her past, her upbringing, her future, and her society. She defies all assumptions, bursts out from the walls of her white foster mother's protection, and stands proud, aloof, and vulnerable.