

**In Search of Inaudible Voice:
Rhetorical Politics in Race and Gender in Gloria Naylor's Fiction**

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Abstract

Writer Gloria Naylor's narration of disunity among African Americans through the depiction of Black characters from a variety of social classes is a consistent theme in her writing. While Naylor's quartet of novels persistently express her concern with this disunity, her writing approach nevertheless changed quite dramatically over the course of writing these novels. As such, Naylor's works are difficult to pigeonhole. Throughout her oeuvre, her writing approach and critical views on inner oppression have become far more complex.

This thesis examines how Naylor's rhetorical strategies, connected to the myriad shadings of disunity, have contributed to her shift in literary style and points to consistent literary interest in how race and gender representations are produced through literary interactions with her predecessors. Specifically, her writing style is influenced by novelists ranging from naturalist writers, such as Richard Wright, to modernist writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston. In exploring this dynamic change, this thesis focuses on Naylor's four primary texts and her last semi-autobiographical novel: *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), *Bailey's Cafe* (1992), and *1996* (2005).

The first chapter discusses the shift in Naylor's writing style, particularly in her first three novels in terms of the form and the content, recapturing the shift in reference to literary predecessors Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey*, the modernism of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God's* takes a form in which the narrator's point of view becomes more subjective rather than maintaining some distance from the characters, which is marked by the naturalism of Wright's *Native Son*. Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is similar to Wright's naturalism in terms of the form and the characters whereas characteristics in *Mama Day* are more closely related to Hurston's modernism.

The aim of the second chapter is to observe Naylor's method of incorporating metaphor, as a narrative strategy, into the naturalistic text *The Women of Brewster Place* and to examine the relationship between metaphor and the disharmony that exists among the females in her text. This study has considered the possibility that the dream first articulated in Langston Hughes's poem, typically regarded as a symbol of the intrinsic difficulty of living as an African American in a biased society, represents Mattie's dream—a dream she has while asleep and a womanist's dream. Mattie ultimately evinces an organic link to the setting, Brewster Place, as well as to each female character. She functions as a structural node, connecting the other female characters in the book and assumes the important role of embodying the metaphor for Brewster Place—seemingly the most critical and recurring theme. Naylor's narrative adopts an inclusive orientation toward the diverse

definitions of womanism, and toward the discrimination that can inheres in this word. It is worth noting that Naylor, as an African American writer, brought to the fore the issue of the corrosive discrimination that compromises the bonds among black women.

Chapter three argues that *Linden Hills* reconstructs the Gothic trope of whiteness represented in the literary canon by locating whiteness within black characters and their community and by primarily offering a distinctive view of the multilayered, invisible effects of internalized racism. Thus, Naylor does not simply reverse the structure of blackness and whiteness. That is, the color scheme of the Gothic trope is not simply the dichotomy between black and white but rather the combination and contrasts of both. A slightly different shade, pink, is additionally used to represent the internalized effect of whiteness. Naylor's narrative inverts black and white politics, placing the feared white within their minds. For the African American residents, this seeps through their thoughts and bodies to some degree and becomes both an unspeakable horror and a desire. Just as white writers have expressed their fear of racial representations of blackness, Naylor, as a black writer, alters the color code and exposes whiteness as uncanny in the genre, revealing African Americans' unconscious dependence on white values at Linden Hills.

Furthermore, Naylor's way of adapting Gothic forms, especially the metaphorical use of frequently used Gothic devices, windows and doors, is discussed in the chapter. In *Linden Hills*, The meaning of the locked door for Willa Nedeed can be read as an analogy of the door in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and simultaneously represents the door of opportunity surrounding African Americans. In adapting the structure of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Naylor rewrites an important aspect of the destruction of the last scene. Willa Nedeed and Willie Mason, who are vulnerable due to their social class and gender, are complicit in triggering the destruction of the Nedeed house. The image of the opening door for poor African Americans who are oppressed in American society is put forward when accomplished African American men refer to it in the former part of the novel. It appears in the finale again with an ironic turn on the original meaning. The door is open but invites threats that could ambush the most accomplished men. Naylor indicates the oppressive mechanisms of gender and class that cause conflict in these communities, drawing attention to the possibility that poor people and women in lower positions in the hierarchy could come together and undermine men in upper positions.

Chapter four discusses that *Mama Day* can be read as a story reflecting a lack of the communication needed—specifically regarding the struggle of black characters exposed to Western culture—to understand figurative language. In *Mama Day*, Naylor adapts Hurston's conception of the importance of voice and rewrites it by focusing on another aspect of storytelling; Naylor assigns increased importance to the attitudes of listeners toward the story, an orientation she regards as more essential to understanding the diverse nature of African American identity. When we examine *Mama Day* in the context of the storytelling tradition, this emerges more clearly. Naylor depicts both reliable and unreliable listeners while adapting and revising Hurston's narrative forms to focus on diversity and discrepancy. Naylor's novel embodies the disparate stories of a person who is fully aware of listening to inaudible voices and capable of reading metaphors, and a person who invariably fails to grasp the true meaning of a metaphor. Given the diversity of the black characters, who have experienced and been immersed in a variety of environments, it seems that some people cannot reacquaint themselves with or open themselves up to their old culture, via rhetorical games; this inability results in a narrowed, potentially dangerous, approach to deciphering language.

The focus of Chapter five is *Bailey's Cafe*. Naylor seems to refuse a fixed setting as opposed to her universe in the previous fictional world. Although a brief episode of George's birthplace, which is described as near New York in *Mama Day*, appears, the central setting is not New York and is hard to decipher; it seems to change intentionally. This is reflected in the description of a main character, Bailey. Bailey functions as a key to connecting other main female characters to their refuge. This study, however, points out that his mind, which is supposed to link them, is unsettling because of his position as a World War II veteran. His ambivalent mind echoes in his memory of the battlefield; as an African American soldier, he reconciles with a lifelong enemy at home to fight against one on the outside. This study indicates African Americans' complex emotions toward the majority in America as expressed in Bailey's narratives.

In conclusion, whereas her writing approach was diverse in each work of fiction and seemed to elude description, ranging from taking from Richard Wright to Zora Neale Hurston and eventually reverting to a personal narrative, Naylor's commitment to unearthing the varieties of discrimination faced in African American communities demonstrated her continuous concern for the problem. This study has revealed that by touching on such problems, no matter how her approach changed over time, Naylor attempted to listen to the voices of the socially vulnerable and to incorporate them into her text. What Naylor has done through this quartet is convey varieties of victimized voices to the world. After publishing her quartet, Naylor wrote semi-autobiographical novel *1996*, in which she reveals her recent combat against mind control. As a renowned writer she did not pass along her personal experiences to a fictional character. Naylor fought back by writing her experiences using a first-person narrative and filling in imaginary parts using a third-person narrative as if to tell readers that whether they believe it or not, it is her story. Naylor's work shows her lifelong career as a writer who was constantly committed to depicting victims' voices.