

## Female Leadership in Gloria Naylor's Novels: Bloodmothers, Othermothers, and Community Othermothers

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**ABSTRACT** This paper attempts at studying Gloria Naylor's two works, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Mama Day* through Black Feminist Perspectives in order to discuss motherhood and its connections to African models of female leadership. It indicates Naylor's different viewpoints in these two novels: the first novel tries to show obsessed women who suffer in male-dominated society and a strong bond which keeps them alive. These women are in a constant state of struggle in their lives to find their identities. In the second novel, natural forces and ancestral powers connect these women together. Brewster Place offers women close relationship with each other and Willow Springs offers a setting for a healing community with roots in female folk tradition and nature. However, these black women take refuge in cooperating and feeling sympathy for each other to assuage their sufferings and to find a way for their plight in dire and desperate situations through an intimate relationship, sharing their experiences with each other and using powers of intuition and nature.

### INTRODUCTION

Recent critical discussions on mothers and motherhood in novels by Afro-American women writers have largely participated in feminist dialogue concerning mothers and daughters. The discussions of maternity in Afro-American women's fiction have departed from European archetypes, comparing fictional characters to mothers in actual Afro-American families and attributing their strength to economic, political and cultural circumstances. The novels often combine two elements: a positive model of maternity (or female leadership) and a trace of magic or supernatural. Surreal elements in novels may be read as a sign of an African presence, while the mother figures may be viewed as expressions of a conception of female authority derived from West African women's traditions. Such a reading exposes what is distinctively female and African. In doing so, it complements much contemporary criticism of literature by Afro-American women which focuses on feminist and Afro-American aspects of texts.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (1991) traces black American women's West African heritage, considering the importance of "othermothers" and strong maternal leaders. She asserts that female bonding is further evident in an "ethics

of caring" (215) derived from African traditions. By developing her stories around strong women who are influenced by African traditions, Gloria Naylor succeeds in presenting an alternative to the dominant culture's representations of black women. With reference to black women's writings, Nnaemeka (1997) argues, "The texts discuss women's solidarity as an issue of survival; solidarity among women offers a safety net and a breath of fresh air in a suffocating, constraining environment" (19). The experiences Black women writers depict in their texts may reflect the lives of black women.

Gloria Naylor, in her novels *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *Mama Day* (1988) notices the special bond that exists between women characters, including women of different generations. In each novel, a community of women emerges-sustaining, enabling, and enriching the lives of each other. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor indicates the women's sense of isolation, their mistreatment by men and their search for identity through shared experiences. Nnaemeka (1997) states, "Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves" (19). And in *Mama Day*, according to Andrews (1989), these bonds confer "identity, purpose, and strength for survival". In addition, he sees Naylor as moving into the realm of "matriarchal mythmaking" in *Mama Day*, with the real power in the novel coming from folk

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tradition, nature, and “foremothering” (2). As Lamothe (2005) says, “Naylor longs for a lost connection with a past place and time as central to and even crucial to the construction of modern, urban African Americans’ identities” (156).

*The Women of Brewster Place* is almost entirely about women. In this “novel in seven stories”, Naylor focuses on a number of black women who share the common experience of living on a dead end street called Brewster Place. As Naylor (1982) states, “These women come from a variety of backgrounds, with individual goals and dreams; they experience, fight against and sometimes transcend—the fate of the black women in America today” (Book Cover). The black women experience oppression in their relationships with the men in their lives. They defend themselves against their men as well as the white society. They share common concerns, such as the raising of children and these women-centered communities are defenses against sexism and racism, in other words against the abuses that are inflicted on black women.

In *Mama Day*, both the contemporary and the historical bonds between women are important, for, relating to the past helps make possible a connection in the present. As Willis (1987) says, “For black women, history is a bridge defined along motherliness” (6). Here the female community becomes empowered by natural forces and religious traditions in the coastal island community of Willow Springs. In this novel, the bond between women is not because of their isolation, abuse at the hands of men or loss of identity in the white and black bourgeois worlds. It is a force that transcends particulars and is allied to nature itself. The historical connection runs from the legendary free spirit who founded the community, Sapphira Wade, through Miranda (Mama Day) to her niece, Ophelia. This connection among women is related to nature through Miranda’s extraordinary powers of intuition, magic, and fertility as well as through the cyclical sense of time that pervades the island community. At the climax of the novel, this form of sisterhood is affirmed and strengthened. At the same time, sisterhood can still be jeopardized by the seductions of modern America and the evil and divisive jealousies of someone like Ruby, who nearly succeeds in killing Ophelia with night shade poison.

### MOTHERHOOD, SISTERHOOD AND WIFEHOOD IN *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

Brewster Place is largely a community of women; men are mostly absent or itinerant, drifting in and out of their women’s lives, leaving behind the pregnancies and unpaid bills. The women who live in Brewster Place are drawn together because they live on the same dead end street and also because they share a common fate. The dreams of Brewster’s inhabitants are what keep them alive. The dreams unite them and provide a context of sharing and connection.

In Brewster Place, a friendship based on the shared experience of black womanhood exists, occasionally in the form of the mother-daughter relationship. Mattie Michael, the protagonist in *The Women of Brewster Place*, suffers at the hands of her father, Samuel. Early in the novel, we find Mattie as a young virgin adored by her father. She had expected an explosion when her mother told Samuel that Mattie was pregnant; instead, he didn’t speak for two days but then he was unable to express his anger and disappointment at her pregnancy, except through violence because he was unaccustomed to using language or logic. He brutally attacked his daughter and began to beat her trying to force her to tell who the father was, but Mattie refused to say. At the same time, there was no expectation that Butch shows responsibility for Mattie or their baby. After her ejection from home, Miss Eva, with whom she later shares a household and whom she regards as a surrogate mother, helps her but finds Mattie’s excessive mothering unnatural. When Mattie sleeps with her son Basil and channels all her needs into mothering him; in fact, she renders him irresponsible and also dependent on herself. When she puts her house up for Basil’s bail and he skips bail, she loses her home, faces a tragic awakening and ends up in Brewster Place.

Mattie determines to keep Ciel Turner alive when Ciel wills her own death after her baby daughter Serena dies and Eugene abandons her. In a healing scene in which she rocks and washes Ciel from despair back to life:

...Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear

*the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother's arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on.*

*She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb.... (103)*

Finally, Ciel recovers as a result of the magical powers of Mattie's love. Mattie finds out that if Ciel wills herself to live and realizes that she is not alone, then she can look forward to having a brighter future. The bond here is not just that of mother and daughter, even though Mattie had helped raise Ciel years earlier. It is woman-to-woman. Their similar suffering makes them equal. Mattie and Ciel share together their isolation, their burden of responsibility as mothers and the loss of their children.

Another story of the novel that shows mother-daughter relationship is that of Kiswana Browne who is healed in her conflict with her mother by coming to identify herself with her mother as a woman. Kiswana rejects the bourgeois upbringing of her parents and embraces the political ideology of the '60's. She changes her name, shifts from Linden Hills to the ghetto, in Brewster Place. When her mother tells her she lives in a world of fantasy, Kiswana says that she is proud of her heritage and accuses her mother of being "a white man's nigger who's ashamed of being black" (85). Mrs. Browne gives her daughter a short history lesson of her family's proud heritage. The clinching moment for Kiswana comes only when she notices for the first time her mother's bright red toenail polish, like her own:

*I'll be damned the young woman thought, feeling her whole face tingle. Daddy's into feet! And she looked at the blushing woman on her couch and suddenly realized that her mother had trod through the same universe that she herself was now traveling. Kiswana was breaking no new trails and would eventually end up just two feet away on that couch. She stared at the woman she had been and was to become. (87)*

Mrs. Browne relates to Kiswana a personal testimony of a mother's love.

Cora Lee is another woman unbalanced in

her mothering in this novel. Strangely obsessed with doll babies as a child, she bears several children by the many "shadow" men "who came in the dark and showed her the thing that felt good in the dark, and often left before the children awakened" (113). Kiswana, the young 1960s activist, rediscovers her mother's love that nurtures her and extends her own motherly affection to the community by inviting Cora Lee and her children to attend a black production of Shakespeare in the park which has been directed by her boyfriend, Abshu. She is going to change Cora's life and open her eyes. The act of friendship and offer to help, once Kiswana gets beyond her own initial condescension, contributes to restoring Cora Lee's self-esteem, both as a person and as a mother. Her new mothering energy will be directed towards her children's education, and indeed Kiswana lifts her out of her isolation.

Etta Mae Johnson's relationship with Mattie is mentioned as another story of the novel. After many negative experiences that Etta had in her relations with men, now she longs for lasting love; when she meets Reverend Moreland Woods she convinces herself that she has finally found someone to settle down with. After the sex act, Rev. Woods leaves Etta; he has no intention of establishing a stable relationship. Then Etta returns again to Mattie, as to a center. When she reaches the stoop, there is a light under the shade at Mattie's window: "Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her" (74). Etta yet has the deep friendship, support and even moral judgment of Mattie in warding off loneliness and despair.

In this community, Mattie is concerned about improving Brewster Place; she becomes a survivor and giver of advice only after she is befriended by Miss Eva. Mattie becomes the backbone of Brewster Place, she counsels the women on the street. In an interview with Carabi (1992), Gloria Naylor notes that, "what is extraordinary about Mattie is that, in spite of having many problems, she is generous and calm—almost magic yet very human. She allows people to feel free in her presence. Like an earth mother, I guess."

Lorraine and Theresa embody the ultimate commitment of woman to woman. These two young women are still struggling to find their identities. Lorraine wants to feel at one with her neighbors in Brewster Place, Theresa resents her

vulnerability; each seeks a different community. Theresa has soul peace because she accepts they are different from others; she is not concerned about what anyone else thinks about it, while Lorraine has never accepted her lesbianism; in fact, she refuses to even say the word. Lorraine's worst fears come to life when she is physically and psychologically destroyed by C.C. Baker and his gang and in her derangement she murders her only friend, Ben who had served as a father figure for the isolated woman. Fowler (1996) writes of Ben's death: "Lorraine's unwitting murder of Ben...provides a kind of poetic justice for all the women who have been assaulted by men in the course of the novel" (54). Because of its unresolved tensions and concern over power, the relationship between these two women, remains less successful than that between Mattie and Etta, who generously accept and nurture each other.

At the end of this novel, despite numerous conflicts, Naylor gathers these women in Mattie's dream of the block party. They join in an act of protest against the power of men over women (the gang-rape of the lesbian Lorraine) and also against the barriers of racist and class oppression (the bloodstained wall) that distorts relations between the sexes:

*Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands.... The bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and relayed out of Brewster Place past overturned tables, scattered coins, and crushed wads of dollar bills. They came back with chairs and barbecue grills and smashed them into the wall. (186)*

They destroy the wall in the drenching rain. Many references to devastated motherhood are purified through the rhythmic imagery of the rain, suggesting birth and rebirth. The rain becomes an agent of purification of the community in this final story. Rain demonstrates a sense of harmony between nature and women, between outside and inside. Now these women continue to nurture, cleansing the lives of one another. The women are a collective repository of dreams, a source of strength for survival.

Mattie, the surrogate mother of Brewster Place, is described as the novel's standard-bearer. She becomes community mother to the young women of Brewster Place, comforting them and being there in times of crisis. Although these women suffer abuse and violence at the hands of

men and society, they can be resilient if they support one another. As Hooks (2002) explains, "sisterhood wasn't just about what we shared in common—things like periods, obsessive concern with our looks, or bitching about men—it was about women learning how to care for one another and be in solidarity, not just when we have complaints or when we feel victimized" (130). The street becomes the womb in which the female characters nurture one another. The power of love between these women becomes a force that heals, bringing peace and wholeness. They heal their heart and soul as well as body. These black women share a moment of communion, bond together by the recognition of their identity and also of their powerlessness and oppression in the male-dominated society. *The Women of Brewster Place* is a long journey in the saga of Black Womanhood.

#### MYTH AND MATRIARCHY IN *MAMA DAY*

In *Mama Day*, the island, Willow Springs is "feminized" in relation to the mainland, New York. In the matriarchal society, women travel multiple routes in order to construct their roots. On Willow Springs, the Day family, a community of women, preserves their cultural memory through the repetition of maternal practices that include cooking and weaving, and through the transmission of personal and communal stories. Miranda and Abigail remain distinct personalities both for their neighbors—"two peas in a pod, but ... two peas still the same" (153), according to Mama Day—but only together do they make "the perfect mother" (58) for Cocoa.

The title of this novel, *Mama Day*, suggests that the novel concerns maternity. The metaphorical concept of maternity involves female leadership as well as the responsibilities associated with biological motherhood in many societies. Miranda Day receives the name "Mama" not because she has many children of her own—in fact, she has none—but because as midwife, she has "created," or birthed, most of the inhabitants of Willow Springs. Mama Day gives up her chance to be a daughter because she must care for her own mother who grieves for a dead child, and is forced to raise her sister after her mother's suicide, she becomes "Little Mama" (89), when she is still a child; she gives up the chance to be a mother because she must care for everyone else's children: "Being there for mama

and child. For sister and child. Being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. Gifted hands.... And [she's] had—Lord, can't count 'em—into the hundreds. Everybody's mama now," (88-89) and because of her multiple roles as midwife, healer, and community leader, expands traditional ideas of motherhood. Mama Day is not a biological mother, her position as creator is established through her close connection to the natural world. She is the "lady" or leader of the women in Willow Springs. She commands enormous respect and authority. Her age adds to her mystique and to her image as wise woman and eternal mother because as the voice of the island suggests, she "is about as close to eternity [as] anybody can come" (7).

Mama Day is a conjure woman, mid-wife and the emotional mother of the island. Sapphira Wade is the spiritual mother of the island. She is a frightening presence that reminds the people of slavery, broken hearts, and the overwhelming power of nature. Sapphira is an African slave and "true conjure woman ... [whose name] is never breathed out of a single mouth in Willow Springs" (3-4). She represents women oppressed because of their strength and sexuality. Because of her refusal to accept the role of slave and because of her knowledge of nature and female sexuality, she was given the title "witch." As midwife, mother, matriarch, and archetypal Mother, Sapphira embodies maternity. The women's magic she enacted on Bascombe Wade at the other place literally gave birth to the community of Willow Springs: Sapphira persuaded her owner Bascombe Wade in 1823 to hand over the deed of the entire island to his slaves, and then she supposedly murdered him. As Hayes states (2004),

*The beneficiaries of this powerful conjuring, the free, property-owning, self-governing African Americans of Willow Springs, revere Sapphira as their founding mother and 'the other place' as her sacred space. The house was also the literal birthplace of Sapphira's seven sons—a magical number. When she gave the surname 'Day' to her sons, she cast herself as a maternal Creator, mother of all of the Days/days, an identity Miranda underlines by referring to Sapphira as 'the Mother who began the Days.'* (677)

As the novel's community voice explains it, "Sapphira Wade don't live in the part of our memory we can use to form words" (4).

Mama Day is the inheritor of Sapphira's

supernatural powers, as well as inheritor of the sacred space of the Mother, "the other place." Blyn (2002) says, "those powers are powers to heal and protect rather than to punish and enslave.... Mama Day's powers come to her since she is the daughter of the "seventh son of the seventh son" of Sapphira Wade; power is the function of the matriarchal order" (252). As midwife in Willow Springs and matriarch of the community at the time the novel begins, the childless Mama Day is the figurative mother of all the islanders. And "the other place" has been regarded as a matriarchal magic circle.

Sapphira's death is commemorated in a local ritual called Candle Walk—which takes the place of Christmas, itself tainted by commercialism—when the inhabitants of Willow Springs provide extra food and supplies to families whose crop did not do well that year. They march throughout the town carrying candles, singing and chanting "Lead on with light, Great Mother" (111). Harmony between Willow Springs' community is restored at Candle Walk, but its traditions are changing too:

*Things took a little different turn with the young folks having more money and working beyond the bridge. They started buying each other fancy gadgets from the catalogues, and you'd hear ignorant things like, 'They ain't gave me nothing last Candle Walk, so they getting the same from me this year.... There's a disagreement every winter about whether these young people spell the death of Candle Walk'.* (111)

Miranda remembers the ritual in her youth, remembers her father's description both of differences from his youthful experiences and his own father's still different celebration. Miranda voices a healthy acceptance of this change and other changes in the future as natural occurrences:

*It'll take generations, she says, for Willow Springs to stop doing it at all. And more generations again to stop talking about the time "when there used to be some kinda 18 and 23 going-on near December twenty-second." By then, she figures, it won't be the world as we know it no way—and so no need for the memory.* (111)

The candles used to welcome and accompany the spirit—represent the spirit of the Great Mother who has returned in a ball of fire to Africa, and also stand for "the light that burned in a man's

heart”—the spirit of the white man Bascombe Wade who loved Sapphira and who surrendered all his land to her and her offspring. Both are parents of this island and part of its story of origins.

Sapphira's knowledge and power are retained as a familial legacy passed on to Miranda and her great-niece, Ophelia. Miranda is the wise woman of the community, and she possesses formidable powers used in helping and healing the inhabitants of Willow Springs. For decades she is not only the community's midwife but also its guardian of tradition and its central authority figure: "Mama Day says no, everybody say no" (6). Her powers lie not just in herbal remedies or conjure spells; they emanate from deep recesses of the mind and perhaps from more ancient source of power. To Miranda, the realization that "the mind is everything" (90) lies at the heart of what she does and whom she touches. Miranda's knowledge as a midwife and healer has a medically-correct basis. She blends the elements of traditional medical practices with non-traditional folk and herbal remedies that exist as part of the memory of her culture.

Ophelia is the inheritor of a female tradition. Her predecessors had transcended men. Although Ophelia has been raised in Willow Springs by Miranda and Abigail, she is not fully aware of her foremother tradition or open to her instincts or alert to the evil represented by New York or by Ruby's jealousy. She resists hearing the voices at the graveyard, she fails to understand the message of her dreams, and she scoffs at Miranda's power to get her the New York job. She has spent her twenties uncertainly pursuing a career in New York, but she still draws on the connection with Miranda and Abigail and her community by returning to Willow Springs each August for two weeks of its summer lushness. Ophelia finds at home the "living mirrors" of her identity and her continuity with her past. She is only partly uprooted, partly corrupted in her power of belief.

Ruby's treachery is doubly heinous in that it offends against motherhood. The absence of good mothering, the absence of conditions to permit good mothering, and the resultant emotional destruction recur thematically throughout *Mama Day*. Miranda's position as matriarch, ironically, comes at the cost of having her own children. When a lover begs her to leave with him, the youthful Miranda feels unable to leave the family responsibilities thrust upon her when

her mother, Ophelia, goes mad. Abigail names her own first child after the child her mother lost, Peace. The second Peace also dies early. The elderly Miranda meditates that while Abigail lost only one child to her mother; Miranda herself lost all her possible babies.

*Mama Day* reiterates and develops this loss of children and loss of mothers. The second Ophelia loses her mother Grace (Abigail's daughter) to Grace's bitterness over her husband's abandonment, a reenactment of the first Ophelia's inability to assimilate Peace's death. On the mainland, too, nurturance and connection are imperiled. George's mother is a fifteen-year-old prostitute; his father, a client. When he is three months old, George's mother leaves him in a public place and drowns herself. The headwoman of his orphanage for boys explicitly rejects the role of mother, emphasizing that she is paid, that she cannot be her charge's mother. Against such a background of loss, Ruby's manipulation of the role which she had earlier played sincerely gains resonance. Ruby plants poisons in Ophelia while repeating a ritual from Ophelia's childhood, cornrowing her hair while Ophelia sits between her knees. Not only the ostensibly nurturing action but the positional birth imagery draws attention to Ophelia's motherless state.

To build a world in which mothering is possible, people must reshape the fundamental relations between men and women. *Mama Day* attempts a reconciliation that permits mothering and hence the nurturance of future generations. The history of Willow Springs is rooted in racist patriarchy, in Bascombe Wade's ownership of slaves. When he frees his slaves, not including Sapphira whom he couldn't master and therefore couldn't free, one kind of patriarchy ends. Its effects, of course, persist. The emotional alienation between Bascombe and Sapphira reverberates through the generations in a perpetual separation of men and women of the same generation, and of women and their children. In the family tree, this dichotomy is expressed through all-male and all-female generations.

When Miranda realizes that Cocoa is dying from the effects of Ruby's fix, "the other place" is where she immediately goes for help. There, she discovers Bascombe Wade's plantation ledger, inside the water-damaged ledger, she finds the bill of sale for her legendary great-grand-mother, whose name no one in Willow Springs knows. She searches her memory and then her un-

conscious, for hours, trying to connect with Sapphira, to bring the Mother into being by naming her. Going to bed at "the other place" that night, Miranda "pray[s] to the Father and Son as she had been taught. But she falls asleep murmuring the names of women" (280). In her dreams, she "opens door upon door upon door. She asks each door the same thing: Tell me your name. And her answer is to have it swing open so she's facing another" (283). At last, when she is too exhausted to open even one more door, she reaches the nameless Mother, who cradles and nurses Miranda at her full breast. The pre-verbal semiotic communication between mother and infant is emphasized in this passage: "Daughter. ... [Miranda] can't really hear [the word] 'cause she's got no ears, or call out 'cause she's got no mouth. There's only the sense of being, Daughter" (283). If, as Freud believed, rooms symbolize wombs, then Miranda's dream symbolizes a return to the enfolding security of the womb, a nourishing, comforting, blissful preverbal reunion with the mother. In the end, it is "the beating of the Mother's calm and steady heart" (283) that "tells" Miranda how to find the answer she is searching for: she "knows" (283) that she must uncover the old well in the garden and look past the pain.

In ancient Greek mythology, wells are sacred to the Mother. Wells connect the living people in the upper world with the loving and terrible Mother in the underworld. From the silent well, "with a force that almost knocks [Miranda] on her knees" (284), she hears "circles and circles of screaming" (284), the screams of women in pain: Miranda's baby sister Peace, Miranda's mother Ophelia, who tried to throw herself down the well where Peace had drowned, and Miranda's great-grandmother Sapphira, begging Bascombe Wade for her freedom. When Miranda "looks past the pain" (284), as the Mother has instructed, she intuitively what she and George must do to save Cocoa.

Miranda also intuitively that if George is to be saved as well as Cocoa, she needs George's hands in hers "here at the other place" (285). However, George's fear of the very feminine for which he so desperately longs, a fear generated in infancy by his mother's abandonment, is so intense that he cannot overcome it. As Miranda instructs him, George enters the henhouse, for him a dangerous and frightening maternal space, and searches the nest of the fiercest hen, but he

refuses to return to the other place and put his bleeding hands in Miranda's. He rejects the Mother's "connected knowing," and instead, he chooses rationalist "separate knowing," venting his fury at the irrational feminine by killing all the mothers within his reach—the hens in the henhouse—and killing himself by causing a fatal heart attack. Thus, other place represents the relationship of the female characters to themselves. Lamothe (2005) says, "his (George's) death signifies the defeat of his western, masculinized rationality to the African—derived matriarchy that rules over the island" (167).

When Ophelia and Miranda go both literally and figuratively in search of their mother's gardens, Miranda begins to pass on more of the feminine bond from the past by telling Ophelia about her own family tragedy. Significantly, Miranda calls her by her proper name, Ophelia, for the first time, and Ophelia then realizes her connection to her great-mother Ophelia and to her mother Grace. Ophelia recognizes that her bond with Miranda and Abigail is eternal: "My bond with them was such that even if hate and rage were to tear us totally apart, they knew I was always theirs." Miranda sees Ophelia as probably the last woman of the family line but a worthy descendant of the "great mother" Sapphira:

*And now she strides so proud ... The lean thighs, tight hips, the long strides flashing light between the blur of strong legs—pure black. Me and Abigail, we take after the sons, Miranda thinks. The earth men who formed the line of Days, hard and dark brown. But the Baby Girl brings back the great, grandmother. We ain't seen 18 & 23 black form that time till now. The black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun. (47-48)*

Ophelia has inherited the power and now, through Miranda, the knowledge of her foremothers.

Once Ophelia is restored to life, Miranda feels that there are no more secrets for Miranda herself to learn, that the rest of the past will be discovered by Ophelia: "The rest will lay in the hands of the Baby Girl—once she learns how to listen" (307). The sisterly bond is suggested when the grieving Ophelia goes on Candle Walk between Miranda and Abigail, but the promise of Ophelia's future wisdom and power is only fully imaged in the final paragraph, when Miranda sees Ophelia on the hillside: "It is a face that's been given the meaning of peace. A face ready to go in search of

answers, so at last there ain't no need for words as they lock over the distance. Under a sky so blue it's stopped being sky; one is closer to the circle of oaks than the other. But both can hear clearly that on the east side of the island and on the west side, the waters were still" (312). Thus, *Mama Day*, the story of the conjure woman, is also the story of "the beginning of the Days," a story that includes a goddess who must be recovered—as Sapphira will be recovered by Cocoa. It is also the story of the spirit of Africa that has travelled to the New World on wind and water.

*Mama Day* yields strong female characters, forges important generational connections between women and offers a revelatory look at the folk practices and mysteries associated with the female experience in the Southern culture. Wagner-Martin (1988) has identified *Mama Day* as a novel about "the way one generation of women affects another and the way the strong heritage of gentleness and anger, courage and frailty, can shape individual consciousness through several generations of family" (7). Thus, in *Mama Day* strong women at the center of the works help define the southern black experience largely through their relationship with each other and their guardianship of culture.

### CONCLUSION

Gloria Naylor values independence for women, rather than their being controlled by men. She privileges women's connections to other women and establishes a model of family continuity in distinct opposition to the broken Afro-American families found in many other novels. In this

positive vision of maternity, two sides of womanhood—the wise, beneficent matriarch and the angry, jealous sexual female—are shown to be inextricably connected. One side acts for the other. Thus, Naylor's works *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Mama Day* reinforce the importance of connections to an African model of female leadership.

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