

ABSTRACT: WHAT WOMEN WANT: INDEPENDENCE THROUGH
EMBRACING THE INNER SPIRIT: NAYLOR'S *BAILEY'S CAFÉ*

By Jaimie D. Okusko

This thesis project explores the objectification of black feminized characters in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, and the ways that they resist negative representations to gain agency.

Naylor's novel gives a complex picture of the historically limited choices of identity that black women have faced. Each character depicts a different approach to the black female body and its domination by patriarchal society. Moreover, through her novel Naylor investigates many different traditions in which individuals come to understand the power of their inner spirit and how they use their understanding of that spirituality to find peace of mind, pride, and beauty. It is important to explore Naylor's novel because in U.S. society men are allowed more freedom of expression, sexually, than women. When women attempt to express that they enjoy sex and find fulfillment in their sexual identities, in a fashion similar to many men, they are viewed as promiscuous and deemed unfit, rather than applauded and encouraged.

My interest in this subject began through my studies in Gender in Literature and Feminist Criticisms classes. To pursue this project the fields of feminism, blues music, African-American culture, sexuality, and gender were researched through a number of avenues including books, journals, newspapers, scholarly criticisms, and a review of graduate class lectures.

Through redefining and adapting their own Christian spirituality, however, they begin to live rich, if unconventional, lives on their own terms. In *Bailey's Café* inner spirituality comes in many forms including, but not limited to sexuality, gender definition, self love, and self acceptance. Furthermore, by redefining that which society has deemed unfit and embracing their inner spirituality, Naylor's characters have gained individuality and independence.

WHAT WOMEN WANT: INDEPENDENCE THROUGH EMBRACING THE
INNER SPIRIT IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *BAILEY'S CAFÉ*

by

Jaimie D. Okusko

A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Masters of Arts-English

at

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Oshkosh WI 54901-8621

April 2011

COMMITTEE APPROVAL

McCrannford Advisor
April 8, 2011 Date Approved

Robert S. Magi Member

4/08/11 Date Approved

Christa Sor Member

4/8/11 Date Approved

PROVOST
AND VICE CHANCELLOR

J. R. [Signature]
4/21/11
Date Approved

FORMAT APPROVED

Marcia [Signature]
4/6/11
Date Approved

To my family and friends who have endured the thesis process with me. Without your encouragement, support, home made meals, or Skipbo breaks I perhaps would not have succeeded. Also, to Lynn Brodhagen to whom I will forever be indebted for her countless hours of reading and editing of drafts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Norlisha Crawford for all her time, dedication, and guidance.

Through selfless generosity of time and resources Dr. Crawford helped me to develop my singular idea into a well argued thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II – RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY	4
CHAPTER III – PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION.....	17
CHAPTER IV – CREATING SPACE	26
CHAPTER V – ONCE FOR YOU, NOW FOR ME.....	43
CHAPTER VI – FITTING (AND BREAKING) THE MOLD	52
CHAPTER VII – EMBRACING DESIRE.....	58
CHAPTER VIII – RESTORING LOVE FOR ONE’S SELF	68
CHAPTER IX – DRESSING UP FOR SELF-ACCEPTANCE.....	86
CHAPTER X – CLOSING STATEMENT	102
WORKS CITED	104

Introduction

In her essay “Selling Hot Pussy,” literary scholar bell hooks presents the pressing question: “How and when will black females assert sexual agency in ways that liberates [black women] from the confines of colonized desire, of racist/sexist imagery and practices?” (127). In other words, what hooks is asking is when will black women use sexuality to redefine themselves away from the stereotype of either the “mammy” or the “exotic sexual object” that the *old* society has projected onto them and would have us believe are the only two ways that a black woman can be. Alice Walker further illustrates this idea saying that:

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, “the *mule* of the world,” because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else – *everyone* else – refused to carry. We have also been called “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen,” and “Mean and Evil Bitches.” Not to mention “Castraters” and “Sapphire’s Mama.” When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats. (Walker 2433)

Walker speaks of how most black women’s status in society has been determined by the interpretations, values, and authority of others. Two of the most stereotyped identities,

which hooks and Walker have emphasized, are that of the ever-loving ignorant mammy or the erotic whore. Although the impression has been given that most black women are limited to these two identities, black women have been struggling to define and redefine themselves for centuries.

Although it is true that in its early phases the feminist movement took great strides to challenge and change the stereotyped and limited perceptions of women, many white feminist critics neglected to include poor white women as well as black and minority women in their discourse. In fact, it was through the work of many African-American feminist critics such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde that marginalized women began to be represented and then in the 1990s other feminist critics began to be more inclusive in their dialogue. As a result of the efforts of such feminist critics the perception of black women, their place in society, as well as their individual communities began to change. Furthermore, these critics helped provide black women with recognition of a multitude of characteristics that define and separate them from both the mammy and the whore personifications. One author of the late twentieth century in particular, Gloria Naylor, challenges the view on black women lacking intellect and self awareness enough to become independent. Naylor presents a novel that not only helps readers redefine black female independence and agency, but also makes them, whether they are white or black, search within themselves, and define the question that has often beset individuals: Who am I? Many critics including Lynn Alexander, Karen Schneider, Carol Bender and Roseanne Hoefel argue that in Naylor's novel female identity is defined through "situations where selfhood is defined by sexuality" (Alexander 93). Naylor's novel goes

deeper than simply identifying sexuality. Through her dynamic male and female characters, Naylor presents the idea that an individual's inner spirit is multifaceted. Naylor is asking readers to consider through each character's struggle a new facet of interpreting inner spirituality. In *Bailey's Café* inner spirituality comes in many forms including, but not limited to sexuality, gender definition, self love, and self acceptance. Furthermore, by redefining that which society has deemed unfit and embracing their inner spirituality, Naylor's characters have gained individuality and independence.

Religious Spirituality

A number of critics including, but not limited to Ivey, Bender, Hoefel, Schneider, and Chavanelle present one prevailing argument regarding Gloria Naylor's novel *Bailey's Café*, which is that Naylor's novel is "a wholesale re-sorting of the material in which the Bible has no privileged status in relation to other sources of narrative. Where stories of Eve, Esther, Jezebel, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and indeed Christ are merely strands in a complex interweaving of narrative material" (Swindell 300) through which Naylor "subvert[ts] the myriad forms of authority patriarchy legitimizes and construct[s] new world order among partially dispossessed women world-wide" (Montgomery 27). Upon close reading, it is clear that Naylor does indeed parallel a number of her characters with that of their biblical counterparts in an effort to demonstrate how those figures are used biblically to keep women oppressed and to re-enforce the patriarchy of Western society. Many of the critics also argue that Naylor's characters do not always recover (Alexander 99) from the patriarchal persecution endured at the hands of their self-proclaimed Christian communities. Although there has been a great deal of writing done on this aspect of the use of biblical text, the critics neglect to take serious note of the power of Christian faith throughout *Bailey's Café*. Through faith Naylor's female characters are able to redefine their spirituality, thus "claim[ing] their right to selfhood by inverting the dreams that once bound them" (93).

Elements of Christian faith can be seen sprinkled throughout the novel. For example, the description of Sadie's mother, who was a lost soul. In her description of Sadie's mother Naylor says that there was

no point in talking about the things that could still have been deep inside. *Faith* had walked out with the daddy on an errand for a pint of milk when she was seven months pregnant. *Hope* had followed a few weeks later when he never came back. *Charity* had amounted to what she considered her goodness in not cutting the squalling throat of his newborn bastard. And that about summed it up, except for the little bit of breath in her body. (42 emphasis added)

Naylor's use of the elements of Christianity such as faith, hope, and charity are profound here. Naylor describes a soul so lost, so beaten down by the limited possibilities for her in society, that even if these things did exist, they are hidden so deeply inside that the character may not be able to find them. To find faith, hope, and charity it takes a very strong willed person who is dedicated to persevering the afflictions of the outside world (worldly suffering), and determined to focus all her strength on the beautiful word of God. Undoubtedly, faith is a very individualistic journey; the individuals who come to faith come to it at different times in their lives and for different reasons. Some people come to faith as a way to find strength to face the world around them, while others come as way to explain any number of happenings in their life.

In *Bailey's Café* the whole essence of the café is that it appears to those who need it, and much like Eve's place it is only visible to those who seek it, much in the same way as the kingdom of God in which Christians are told, "seek and ye shall find" (Matthew 7.7). Some critics have placed *Bailey's Café* into the genre of magical realism. According to Bruce Holland Rogers, magical realism is a "branch of serious fiction" (1) that "is

trying to convey the reality of one or several worldviews that actually exist, or have existed” (1). As a majority of authors present their novels through specific cultures and time periods, this hardly sets any one book apart from another. In part, what makes magical realism distinct is that “it tells stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the ones we call objective” (2). Clearly such a case exists in *Bailey’s Café*, where a character states, “I was told you can find Bailey’s Café in any town” (Naylor 102). Bailey himself states, “My place is a way station” (159). The characters step out of their lives momentarily and into the Baileys cafe in search of something. That “something” is the one element that distinguishes Naylor’s novel from being that of only magical realism and one of specifically Christian based faith.

Rogers states “magical realism puts causally connected events side by side in a way that doesn’t appear to violate objective reality, but attempts to convince us by details that the events described are linked by more than chance” (2). The premise of *Bailey’s Café* is that almost anyone at any given time from any given place can and does wander into Bailey’s Café. The individual only needs to want to have a place to go and the café appears. As previously stated, Bailey comments that “[the café is] nothing but a way station, and the choices have always been clear: you eventually go back out and resume your life – hopefully better off than when you found us – or you head to the back of the café and end it” (Naylor 221). All of the characters who wander into Bailey’s are there because they have no place else to go because society has labeled them “unfit,” which helps demonstrate the idea that the events are linked by more than chance. The events of

the story are linked by the characters' need to belong somewhere, anywhere they are going to be accepted. Universal acceptance of all individuals is a key characteristic to Christianity. What made Jesus Christ so unique is that he ministered to all people from all walks of life. In regards to women, he specifically ministered to those living on the margins of society, which is exactly what Naylor does. *Bailey's Café* is a novel that focuses on black women who live on the margins of society.

Each female character comes to Bailey's café in search of something that is missing in her life. Many of these characters share the same problem, and that is once they experience their sexual awakening they are shunned by their communities.

Alexander argues that "Naylor recasts female sexuality as shaped by Judeo-Christian tradition in which the virgin/whore dichotomy is inescapable...[where a] discordant parallel with biblical tradition...identifies women through implied sexuality rather than actual transgression...shifts from women as whores to whores as women..." (93).

Although this argument rings true, Naylor takes her characters one step further and demonstrates the complex idea that if a woman has faith, and through that faith embraces her inner spirit, she can overcome any label society has placed upon her and gain independence. For example, Sadie comes in from time to time as a way to escape the harsh reality of her life in poverty and alcoholism; Eve comes to Bailey's to find solace and a place to rest after her long journey endured because her godfather's tyranny brought on by her sexual awakening; Sweet Esther comes into the café to find Eve's because she knows that Eve's is a place where she can belong; Peaches comes because she can find individuality and identity aside from being "just another pretty face;" Jesse

Bell comes to the café and to Eve's because she has lost everything to her husband's family including her family, and herself to heroin. Jesse wants to clean up her life and regain her identity. Another character, Miriam, is taken to the café by Gabriel who recognizes her as a lost soul who has been cast aside by her community because of circumstances far beyond her control. Miss Maple (Stanley) comes to the café and Eve's because he recognizes them as places where he is welcome and accepted no matter what he wears. Each of these characters has fallen victim to the judgment and condemnation of a society centered on Westernized biblical text which selectively label women as whores and neglect the lesson that each person is made in God's image and that He practices acceptance and unconditional love.

Part of the problem with society in almost every culture is that people are too quick to judge and categorize. As humans we often forget that one of the main characteristics of Christianity is that we do not have the right to judge. The Book of Matthew states, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:12). Although those who claim to lead a Christian life know this, many are neglectful of this message. As critic Margaret Whitt states it, "each of the women [who] makes her way to Bailey's Café could be dismissed. To casually look at them is to disregard them; only when each of their stories unfolds does the reader appreciate and come to value the person" (1472). It is for this reason that Naylor has deliberately placed her female characters in Christian communities where they fall victim to "proper" Christian values. The purpose is to show how the people collectively use the ideals of

Christianity loosely interpreted to suit their needs to belittle, degrade, and imprison women because they do not fit into the cultural “norm.” As such, Bailey’s café is a manifestation and extension of the characters’ spirituality and faith. Where do people go when everyone has either abandoned or shunned them? Not only have the characters learned that they do not fit the definition of “normal” as set by culture and society because of their sexuality, they have come to the devastating realization that they also are being ostracized by their very own families. For many of them, ironically, it is their family that inadvertently introduces them to the sexual desires that they have; however, once they actualize the power of sexual fulfillment for themselves, they are considered “unfit” and sexually perverse. This is the case for not only Sweet Esther, who was sold to a farmer by her brother, but also in Peaches whose father put her on display for his friends and whose brothers claim her as “someone who was born to be fucked” (102). Naylor establishes this idea through the character Eve whose Godfather burns her clothes, purges her of everything he has ever given her, and banishes her once he finds that she has awakened to her sexuality. Furthermore, Eve not only acknowledges these desires, but craves and enjoys them.

Naylor’s characters are a representation of what critic Judith Butler argues that “as a corporeal field of cultural play, gender is a basically innovative affair, although it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations” (415). Butler suggests that to be gendered a woman enlists a prescribed set of cultural norms that must be adhered to in order to avoid societal condemnation. In a bold and daring move to redefine “proper feminine conduct”

Naylor shows time and again through each female character how the awakening of her inner spirit, i.e. her sexuality, holds grave consequences. Arguably, it is not simply that these women have come to find their inner spirit that causes turmoil between them and their communities. Critic Adriane Ivey believes that through her characters Naylor “argues for the celebration of female sexuality as necessary for spirituality” (86). Taking it one step further, Naylor demonstrates that a woman’s spirituality is an extension of her sexuality. It is the fact that the women found and nurtured their inner spirit through their sexuality that brings forth such condemnation.

In “Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*: Redefining God and (Re)Claiming the Spirit Within,” Jeannine Thyreen echoes the argument that Walker herself presented in the preface to the Tenth Anniversary Edition of her novel *The Color Purple*, that the readers and critics of the book often overlook the most important aspect of the novel and of the characters’ identities: the deep journey of spirituality that each character undergoes. Walker says that “Whatever else *The Color Purple* has been taken for during the swift ten years since its publication, it remains for me [a] theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual” (Thyreen 49). Thyreen states that her purpose is to explore Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple*, arguing that it

grounds the spiritual/theological element so intricately in the material, physical, and bodily reality of blacks (particularly women) in the South during the first half of the twentieth century that its theological dimension is seldom addressed in criticism, which usually is based on feminist, womanist, historical-materialist, racial, or sociological grounds. Or, at

least, when the redefinition of God is considered, the focus is placed upon individual characters rather than the work's larger theological implications. (49-50)

Thyreen believes that to truly understand the novel the reader must, much like Celie, first understand that the lens through which we have been reading the novel is coded in the standard male patriarchal view of God and religion, that as readers we need to shed our prescribed signifiers of God (White Male) and religion (a patriarchy, where women are to be obedient and are seen as either virgins or whores), and look within to find our own definition of God and Christ. Thyreen's argument is that Celie does not truly begin to become free until she realizes and acknowledges that the God she thinks she knows does not truly exist. Celie needs to know that God is very individualistic to each person who believes and that God can be found anywhere such as in the trees, plants, sun, and wind, an idea that Shug suggests to Celie. In fact, Shug asks Celie, "tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to *share* God, not find God" (Walker 200-201). Clearly the ideals of religion have been prescribed to individuals and very few truly take the time, as Thyreen and Walker suggest, to look beyond those signifiers and to find their own definitions. Thyreen asks the question many have asked, but few truly ponder and explore: "What is God?" She argues "*The Color Purple* redefines God, moving...toward an understanding that the Spirit must be claimed within one's self and the Divine recognized in nature and the world in order to have a notion of God that is not oppressive,

domineering, or harmful to either an individual or a community” (50). She argues that once Celie begins to do this, she finds a sense of self, a freedom and identity all her own.

In *Baileys Café*, Gloria Naylor, much like Walker, takes the reader on a deep spiritual journey through the eyes of the female characters and their struggles for definition of personality and agency through their sexuality. Alexander argues that Naylor’s characters “stories all deal with female sexuality, rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions and all form contemporary attitudes toward women and sexuality” (Alexander 92). Naylor’s depiction of strong female characters placed in a Christian text is misinterpreted. Much in the way that Walker presents the idea through her characters Shug and Celie, the characters of *Bailey’s Café* “come to understand that sexuality is also a gift from God only human beings make it ‘dirty’ or abuse this aspect of creation” (Thyreen 62). In Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café* the most powerful characters choose to live beyond the restricted definitions of sexuality. As the black feminist critic Audre Lorde argues: “...the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and full we can feel in the doing” (278). It is arguably true that Christian society sees God as a “patriarchal male supremacist” (Thyreen 49) who has given men control over women and their bodies with laws and doctrine (that are found primarily in the Old and New testaments) concerning a woman’s conduct in society. Within this Christian cultural view men and society are going to rebel at the idea of women no longer accepting their objectivity. Naylor, through her novel, introduces readers to the possibility that women can, by embracing their inner spirit through their awakened sexual power, gain

subjectivity. Thus the female characters in *Bailey's Café* claim divine right over their own sexual bodies.

To claim this right, however, the characters must see beyond American society's rigid set of morals and values determined by Judeo-Christian boundaries that respectful Christian women must follow in order to gain access to social acceptability. To understand how Naylor's characters come to agency, it is important to know how they are held captives by the boundaries of society. In Judeo-Christian society a woman's place in her community has been determined by the catholic doctrine, the Bible. Biblically women have had limited roles in their communities. Women have been portrayed as either trouble makers (Eve and Mary Magdalene) or as the devout and obedient follower (the Virgin Mary, Ruth, and Esther). In their interaction with Christ some women began to take on a bit of a new role as not only the obedient, but also began to assert independence and agency. This can best be seen in the characters of Mary Magdalene, Mary (Martha's sister), and the sinner who washes Jesus' feet with her tears in Luke 7:36-8:3. These women were often used as examples of absolute devotion and held up as examples for all to follow. All of these female characters hold one attribute that separates them from their male counter-parts, and that is humility. Humility is modesty, but it is also the quality to knowing, understanding and admitting one's faults. Through their ability to look within themselves, recognize their faults, and ask for forgiveness these women are able to create a memorable identity. A conflict, however, arises when a woman, through humility, comes to embrace characteristics which have not been Biblically denounced, but set as taboo in society.

The ideal qualities of womanhood, such as obedience and devotion, carried over from the Judeo-Christian values. As a culture evolves, however, so too does the definition of true womanhood. Barbara Welter takes a look at the nineteenth century traits of “true womanhood” as they existed in the antebellum era.

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and her society could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity...Without them...all was ash. With them she was promised happiness and power. (1)

These four characteristics continued to be held in high reverence by society throughout the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. If a woman desired to be viewed as proper, and most women did, she must conform to this code. Naylor’s novel *Bailey’s Café* is set in 1949. During WWII the U.S. government funded a campaign to encourage women to leave the home and go to work in factories to aid in the war effort. This movement led to a great amount of women discovering identity and independence aside from that of house wife and mother. Of course, once the war was over women were encouraged to leave the factories jobs they has been asked to fill and return home to the domestic sphere where they belonged to care for the children and their husbands. Although the traits of “true womanhood” appear to be outdated, many elements remained late into the twentieth century.

Some traits which remained were that women were encouraged “to suffer and be silent under suffering” (3) as it was “the great command a woman has to obey” (3).

Women were expected to simply follow the rules of conduct determined for them by men. For example, in the May 1955 issue of *Housekeeping Monthly* is an article titled “The Good Wife’s Guide,” which contains 18 tips on things women can do to ensure they are good wives. Many of the tips re-enforce the traits of true womanhood. Such tip as “Greet [your husband] with a warm smile and show sincerity in your desire to please him” and “Let him talk first – remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours” are presented as common every day duties of a good wife. Furthermore, the tips go so far as to suggest that a woman holds little to no authority in the home: “Don’t ask [your husband] questions about his actions or question his judgment or integrity. Remember, he is the master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to questions him.” The article ends with what the editors feel to be the most important thing a woman can learn and understand: “A good wife always knows her place.” With conduct advice such as this in popular magazines of the time, it is clear to see that many traits of the code of true womanhood did carry over into the late twentieth century.

Welter is quick to point out that if women did not behave in a fashion that catered to the four traits a true woman was expected to possess they were “no women at all, but a member of some lower order” (2). If a woman chooses to deviate from that very specific code of conduct, she is ostracized from her community and in many cases from her family as well because she has been deemed “unfit” and undeserving of the title *woman*. As such “Naylor’s focus on sexuality in this novel critiques the identification in patriarchal religious tradition of women as either virgins or whores” (Ivey 89). Naylor,

through her characters and settings, presents a community of cast-aways brought together by their circumstances and their Christian faith, and places them on a journey that re-defines positive female sexuality. Furthermore, Naylor addresses how that definition of sexuality conflicts with society's definition of the propriety of female conduct resulting in the woman being viewed as either the virgin or the whore, or in the case of Naylor's black female characters, the woman viewed as the erotic whore.

Presentation and Interpretation

Critic Sylvie Chavanelle argues that “the image given in *Bailey’s Café* is that of a humanity whose dreams crumble to pieces under the blows of fate. No transcendence is achieved through pilgrimage, only a temporary stability and release as in the blues” (74). Contrary to Chavanelle interpretation, Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café* is a journey of progression, showing that if female characters are able to embrace their spirit within themselves, whether it is through sexuality, gender identification, or self love, they can find self acceptance and claim identity and individuality. Naylor’s novel holds three different aspects of character evolution. The first facet is to create an awakening in the characters to become subjective and to control their actions throughout their lives. The second component is that this awakening comes as a result of the character’s understanding of their unique inner spirit. And finally, Naylor’s novel shows a spiritual progression from being a dominated objectified body to a subjective individual through the embracing of the inner spirit. Each character represents a different struggle and new level of independence in the journey to living with agency.

Because each character brings to *Bailey’s Café* a unique conflict between her views of sexuality and the accepted views of society, individual representation such as the ordinary language of folks through a first person narrative (Chavanelle 62) is a key element to understanding Naylor’s text. In presenting each character’s story through the medium of blues music, Naylor allows the reader to “understand the source of [the character’s] pain, which enables [her] to survive” (Lewis 602). This is not only true for the characters, but for the reader as well. In the chapter “Strange Fruit,” from her book

Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, Angela Davis asserts that the song, “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday, introduces a number of ideas as to what role blues music plays in black culture. Part of the argument is that blues music works as a socio-historic medium to merge individuality, emotions, and social politics (183-184). In Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café* “the blues, used by the writer as a matrix to unveil the truth, empowers these marginal beings and connects them in a network of [sister]hood” (Chavanelle 74). As such, the blues is a conduit that allows others to feel the meaning of the lyrics.

In *Stompin the Blues*, Albert Murray, presents a parallel between blues music and life stating that

not only do a number of blues lyrics express an urgent and unmistakable concern with defeat, disappointment, betrayal, misfortune, not excluding death; but even to most exuberant stomp renditions is likely to contain some trace of sadness as a sobering reminder that life is at bottom, for all the very best of times, a never ending struggle. (17)

Furthermore, Murray explains that although the blues gathers its identity from presenting such struggles, blues also is an age old way to dispel ominous atmosphere and express positive impulses, urges, drives, cravings, needs, desires and hence the definitive purpose, goals, and ideals of human existence (16-17). It is exactly this reason that Naylor has presented *Bailey’s Café* through the medium of the blues. Her purpose is to show that although her female characters have been beaten down by circumstances in their lives, they refuse to give up and quit. The women in *Bailey’s Café* find power and

strength through telling their stories, which helps them to embrace their inner sexual spirit.

In *Bailey's Café*, Naylor's epigraph quickly introduces the blues as a medium through which the stories and lives of the characters will be told. The epigraph asks readers to "hush, now you can hear it can't be far away/ needing the blues to get there/look and you can hear it/look and you can hear/the blues open/a place never/closing:/ Bailey's/Café" (Epigraph *Bailey's Café*). Naylor asks us as readers to be quiet and listen to the stories that are about to be told; she asks for our silence so that we may hear and give voice to those who for so long have been denied independence and individuality. Naylor's female characters exhibit many of the elements that are characteristics specific to the blues such as silence, loneliness, up-rootedness, and suffering (Chanavelle 59-62). Naylor also develops popular themes of the blues such as love and that lack of love (66) and the violent and humiliation in relationships between men and women (65) which can be seen through all her female characters. The most important characteristic unique to the blues that Naylor emphasizes is the promise of salvation (73) and a "disposition to persevere" (66). Critic Chavanelle argues that Naylor's novel is problematic in that she does not offer salvation to her female characters. What Chavanelle does not consider is that Naylor's female characters not only survive relationships engrossed in violence and humiliation, they turn away from those relationships no longer allowing the violence to consume them not accepting the shame society projects onto them because of their sexuality thus embracing their inner spirit.

It has been argued that the blues leads to spiritual growth and that there is an overlapping of the secular and spiritual. Albert Murray makes a strong argument that many elements of blues music seem to have been derived from the down home church music in the first place (27) and that the purpose of blues is to be elegantly playful and heroic in its nonchalance (45), which is exactly why Naylor uses the blues to tap the spiritual power that each of these characters has, and it is that spirituality that eventually leads to their independence and identity. Blues is also linked to a certain sexuality that accentuates the female body. Although the blues sometimes leads to an objectification of the black female body, this is not always the case. The blues can, in fact, enhance the viewing of woman as goddess. In the essay “In a Different Cord: Interpreting the Relations among Black Female Sexuality, Agency, and the Blues” Nghana Lewis helps to clarify a few aspects of how the blues is used by Naylor in *Bailey’s Café* to help give her characters agency. Lewis presents the argument that historically black women “used the medium [of the blues] to manipulate and control their construction as sexual objects... [which allowed them a] distinguishable idiom precisely because it enabled black women to own their past, present and future by confiscating and reconstructing their identities” (599), which is exactly what Naylor demonstrates through her female characters in *Bailey’s Café*. The use of the blues by Naylor enables readers to become active participants in the struggles of the characters in the novel: “Every form of the blues has the ability to “tap into” the experiences of some people...[which] frees meaning because it makes imperative the duty of the reader/listener to engage with the writer/singer in the hermeneutic process” (601). The use of the first person narrative allows for many readers

to create a bond of empathy with the characters. Coupled with the blues, the first person narrative gives the characters distinctiveness because as readers we are forced to look within ourselves, grapple with and define our own comfortable boundaries of sexuality and then either condemn or sympathize with the characters. Our interaction with the characters and their struggles is what gives Eve, Sweet Esther, Peaches, Jesse Belle, and Miss Maple their identity. *Bailey's Café* is successful because Naylor uses the blues so well to tell the characters' stories.

Each section of the novel opens with a phrase related to individual characters and the blues. *Bailey's Café* is broken into four sections the first of which is "Maestro, If You Please..." This section is used as the Intonation, what Nick Bromell explains to be an aspect of the blues that is used to "mediate between two traditions and two worlds... between two systems of sound approved by a society and a systematic interpretation of those sounds by those whom that society oppresses" (197). In this section of Naylor's novel, Bailey is introduced and his character is used as the narrator, the medium, through which the women come to tell their stories. He represents the mediator between the society which deems women to be unfit and the reality of acceptance that Naylor develops through each character. Through Bailey's café Naylor "project[s] an intense and inward emotion [of the female characters] into open space" (197).

The journey that Naylor takes the reader on is not one with a sole focus on the characters and their struggles for self actualization. As Bromell explains, call-and-response is used in blues music to develop a "conversation...between individual and communities...to engage in a relationship with its audience...the blues is repetitive, and

deliberately so” (198). To achieve this connection with her audience Naylor employs the blues technique of “call-and-response” which develops the persistence oppression the women face as well as their perseverance to break free from those bonds. One example of call-and-response can be seen through the story of Sweet Esther who continually engages the phrase “We won’t speak about this, Esther” (Naylor 95-99). Naylor’s novel pulls readers into the heart of the debate of how one defines sexuality. How does that definition conflict with society’s definition of propriety in female conduct? And how does an individual reconcile those differences?

When examining the struggles that each character endures, readers come to appreciate the journey that they have survived, and to identify as well as come to terms with our own struggles and journeys for sexual agency in a society that is dominated by biased opinions concerning the propriety of socially acceptable feminine conduct. In the essay, “Queen Bee, King Bee: *The Color Purple* and the Blues” Jerry Wasserman presents points which are fundamental to the understanding and argument that blues music acts as a conduit for the characters of *Bailey’s Café* to tell their stories. This is what Bromell would describe as Naylor’s “lick.” The “lick” is “a formal feature of the blues, consisting of relatively few notes, all taken from a single scale, yet combined and inflected in a new way. Made one’s own” (199). The characters in *Bailey’s Café* all have had very negative experiences which have left them with no place to call home. Because of their sexual conduct these characters have found that they have been rendered almost invisible and have been driven from their communities. Naylor’s “lick” is that she has taken a theme that is not new, the degradation of African Americans, especially black

marginalized women, and presented the stories in a new way; Naylor's female characters rather than continuing to be beaten down by society, embrace their inner sexual spirit and gain individuality and independence.

The final element of the blues is "the paradigmatic chord progression" which is used to "build suspense" (199). Bromell explains that "we feel pressure and desire building within the song/[story] and within our gut: the blues wants to burst through to a third place, to a third possibility beyond the tightly dualistic confines that have been established by the first two chords" (199). In *Bailey's Café* Naylor, by telling the stories of the women has burst through the two predominate depictions of black women, the Virgin Dominated and the Whore Objectified, into a third possibility which is that of a black woman embracing her inner sexuality to establish individuality and self acceptance. By comparison Wasserman states that the characters in Walker's *The Color Purple* live a "blues life of indignity and severe emotional poverty that is salvaged and ultimately redeemed, in part through the agency of the blues" (301). This could not be more true of the characters in *Bailey's Café*. Wasserman argues that in *The Color Purple*, "Shug shows Celie how to emancipate herself by undoing the internalized oppression that has dehumanized her" (302), much in the same way that Eve does for the women who come into the café and later find Eve's house down the block. Naylor frames each character's tale in the form of "the essence of the blues, [which] was precisely its validation of the interior lives of people who had been radically devalued" (302). This allows characters such as Peaches and Sweet Esther to speak their stories to Eve, who then helps them to become free using their very tragedies as fuel for their independence.

When examining the struggles each character endures through the blues, many readers come to appreciate the journey that she has survived. The reader, in many cases also can identify and come to terms with his or her own prejudices and preconceived notions of female propriety. As a result, Naylor has altered the reader's understanding of societal propriety. She also develops black female characters who, through embracing their "erotic sexuality," survive society's ostracism and live in earnest. Audre Lorde defines "erotic sexuality" as "the personification of love in all its aspects-born [of] Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony" (279).

In order to gain agency the characters must look beyond the restrictions of society and determine for themselves where the boundaries of propriety lie. Critic Judith Butler argues that a person becomes a "woman" by forcing her body and personality to conform to the historical and cultural style of "*women*" (405). Gloria Naylor's novel is filled with characters that choose, for various reasons, not to conform to those styles. Naylor's female characters come to a time when they make the decision to redefine their existence by setting their own boundaries and rules for living. Once they have established an existence that falls outside the socially accepted boundaries of their community, they are classified as being improper and "put on the streets," in many cases by their own families. What Naylor has done in *Bailey's Café* is to create a space for these women to go, a place where they are welcomed without judgment and are allowed to live their lives on their own terms with agency. Through the telling of her story, Eve becomes the embodiment of the idea of carving out a space in a community and making it her own.

Once she has created that space, she welcomes those women who need a place to live where they can live with independence.

Creating Space

Not long after Bailey's café opens, Naylor introduces Eve, Bailey's first customer. Eve tells Bailey that her place has always been just down the block from his (79). Eve comes to Bailey's café after what she says is a journey that took about a "thousand years of walking" through the delta dust (82). In order to understand how Eve has come to own her house and why she extends Christian hospitality to other women, the reader must first understand how Eve became the woman she is.

Rejection and neglect are the essence of Eve's story, much like that of many characters in Naylor's novel. Because Eve never knew her parents, her place of birth, her age, or how she came to live with the man she calls Godfather (82), her Godfather would tell her that she "wouldn't be alive if it weren't for him, *he* would decide when [she] was born" (82). He further elaborates the story of her "creation" by telling her that because it was he who found her in the ragweed patch, chewed the umbilical cord to her birth sac, and saves her, he feels that "going through that for any she-creature earns me the right to decide when it was born" (83). Because of his persistence in the story of her "birth" and because he took care of her, Eve simply accepts that her life is confined to a world that he has created for her. Eve is led to believe that her very existence is owed to this man. Seeing him as her only family and salvation, Eve looks to him for nurturing and kindness, which he bestows on her until the time she begins to become a woman.

When Eve's breasts begin to develop, her Godfather ceases being the caring figure she had once known. With the development of her breasts come the longing glances of the men in the community and the glares from the "slitted eyes" (83) of the

“righteous righteous” (85) women who held Eve and Godfather in their sights with questions of judgment and condemnation. Eve says she is caught between three forms of punishment. She is forced to live in a house filled with either silence or laughter and the neglect of touch. Eve is in a position where she has no choice as to how to live because any choice she makes will bring down Godfather’s wrath. And Eve fears making Godfather angry because his laughter is far worse than the “leaden leaden silence so heavy your heart feels like groaning under the weight” (84). Godfather uses the silence to intimidate Eve, and the laughter to humiliate her. Godfather also punishes her womanly maturity with neglect, the neglect of human contact. Eve says, “I was now forced to go through months and months with no one and nothing to touch me” (83). As time passed, Eve began to crave the touch she had been left without, so much so, that she even risks making Godfather angry by “pretending to slip [in the tub] just so that I could be allowed to reach out for his arms. And to know that just this one time he would permit me” (84). Eve’s isolation from human touch is so severe that she says, “When the Saturday-night baths stopped, anger was the only thing left in my home to touch me” (84). It is undeniable that Eve craves the touch of another human being. The longer she is deprived of even the most basic and harmless interaction almost every human desires, the more Eve yearns for contact.

Because Godfather went to such great lengths to deny Eve any form of physical human contact, she learned to fear his wrath; however, Eve gets to the point where her longing for touch outweighs her fear. And so it is out of absolute desire that Eve finds herself pressed to the ground one day with Billy Boy dancing and stomping around her.

Naylor describes Eve's first interaction with the earth in a provocative manner, which allows the reader to begin to understand just how deeply neglected Eve is, but also allows the reader to feel the sensuality of that first touch, that first awakening of sexuality.

So the game first began in the early evening. In the summer. And near the Louisiana delta that means the air is cream and the lingering heat from the sun throbs just under the rich soil. And I felt the warm earth against my warm flesh, pressed so hard into the ground I could hear my heart beating in my ears-beating in time with that last throbbing warmth of the sun in the packed dirt under my stomach and thighs. And then the vibrations of Billy Boy stumbling and crashing through the low bushes as he came closer. So close: the vibrations: the pounding of my heart: the quickness of my hot breath against my arm. And underneath it all--through it all--just a tremor. A slight tremor of the earth moving. (86)

This is the point where Lynn Alexander argues that "Naylor reclaims female sexuality from a patriarchal tradition which would condemn it as destructive defiance of divine law" (94) because Eve dares defy *Godfather*. Alexander clearly is making the reference to the biblical story of how Eve defies God and gains knowledge of good and evil. What Naylor does, in fact, is position her Eve in a situation to gain, not evil, but good. The good being Eve's sexual awakening. It is this tremor and the sultry delta dust that begins to alleviate the pain and longing for human contact that was stolen from Eve by the "righteous righteous" eyes of the women in the community. With the passing of time, the game progressed. Eve began to inch her dress higher and higher, pressing harder and

harder into the earth, “I part my thighs ever so slightly and arch my pelvis hard into the soil-there, yes, now I can feel it even down there” (87). With her sexual awakening Eve says, “the earth showed me what my body was for” (87). Her craving for sexual contact grows stronger and stronger to the point where

I sought [Billy Boy] out and sought out the earth whenever I needed release from the tight silence in my house, tightening to the point of danger the closer I grew toward womanhood. Or when the spring brought a looseness and new blooming that were equally threatening. And I began to choose more dangerous places, places that made being touched that way all the sweeter: the paved road leading to the cotton exchange, the patch of oaks within sound of the hymns drifting out of the church during evening prayer. Never too close, but never too far away either. (87)

Eve’s longing may have been initiated by the neglect of touch, but once she experiences the wondrous freedom her sexuality can give her, she hungers after it more and more.

What Eve experiences is something that most people have at some point in their lives. Yet, because of the strict and controlled world in which she lives, Eve is in perilous danger every time she ventures to play another round of *Stomp, Billy, Stomp*. Although Eve fears being caught, once she has awakened to the new freedom her sexuality allows her, she is defiant in her quest for it. One of the most elemental human traits is that subconsciously (or sometimes with outright knowledge) people desire to rebuke those who we feel have neglected us or have told us that we cannot have what we desire. Eve is no exception to this idea. Because her Godfather neglected to give her the touch that

every person needs, Eve finds it someplace else. Eve could no longer, as Butler would say, conform her body to her Godfather's idea of "woman," after finding the liberating joy and freedom that came with "hump[ing] myself into the ground" (87). Naylor does not make the selection of locations where Eve and Billy Boy play the game accidental; Eve's Godfather is the only preacher of the only church in town. He works as the scale foreman and bookkeeper in the cotton exchange. Critic Maxine Lavon Montgomery argues that "perhaps the most definitive change in Eve's evolving consciousness occurs when she comes to recognize his church as a social construct reflecting the hierarchies of a society which relegates women to the undesirable position of subservient 'other'" (28). Naylor places Eve in locations to show Eve's defiance of Godfather, whether he knows it or not. Because Eve had been denied existence through touch, she steels her identity through the playing of *Stomp, Billy, Stomp* on the very earth that Godfather holds sacred. Eve's world begins to open to the possibility of relieving her deprivation. Through an innocent game of hide-and-go-seek the fulfillment of emotional and physical contact eventually leads to her sexual awakening and the fulfillment of her inner spirit. As author and critic Alice Walker argues, "[Black women] must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity...the reality of [our] spirituality" (2433). Walker further states that the creativity can stem from "a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling... [leaving] her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use" (2434). Eve uses the medium of a young girl's imagination: "With hide-and-go-seek you only have to call out, I see you- there's no touching - and I wouldn't have been too afraid to

play that game” (Naylor 86) and that imagination leads to the discovery of the power that her sexuality provides for her.

One day Godfather does come to know of *Stomp, Billy, Stomp*. The final round of Eve’s liberating game is played where her Godfather called home. Eve had chosen to “sprawl...on my stomach, my nose buried in the peppermint grass...The strangest thing, that grass, the way it was mixed in all unruly with the tangled weeds and dandelions that passed for a back lawn while it grew straight and neat along the dirt walk” (85). Naylor’s use of biblical references to the “straight and narrow path” her Godfather intended her to walk is contrasted by the unruly and tangled wildness of Eve’s desires. When Eve’s Godfather finds her he simply laughs, a “laughter keened high over my heaving body, spinning and diving, circling the clouds-a flock of wounded doves screaming” (89). This laughter is the final shard in the shattering of innocence Eve is to experience at the hands of her Godfather. Because of her sexual awakening, Godfather throws her out of his church and out of the town: “He said I was going to leave him the same way he’d found me, naked and hungry” (88). As a result of his wrath, Godfather does just that.

The first chores I ever did around that house were to haul the wood and build the yard fire where he burned every one of those brown sack dresses he’d sewn for me. And then he made me strip off the one I was wearing- and he burned that, too, along with the cotton underpants and cotton wraps I used to bind down my breasts. Those underpants would have been ruined anyway, because then he purged me with jars of warm water and Epsom

salts. To remove, he said, every ounce of food his hard work had put into my stomach. (88)

Because Godfather is disgusted by what he has found Eve doing he punishes her in a manner that will humiliate her; leaving her not only naked of the clothes he has provided, but stripping her of any dignity she possesses. He then throws her out of his home, out of his life, and out of his community.

With nowhere to go and no one to whom she can turn, Eve starts walking. “On her thousand year trek,” Eve contemplates the path her life has taken. She comes to understand that “I fault them – not him – for what happened later. And I thought about those righteous righteous women every time my bare feet split open and bled afresh on that trek from Pilottown” (85). Despite her Godfather’s complicity, Eve believes that it was not Godfather’s fault alone that she was deprived of human contact and eventually shut out of the community. The blame also lies with the judgment the women passed down through their glaring eyes. It is highly unlikely that these women were righteous at all. Furthermore, this is not the only example Naylor gives of women judging other women. Naylor emphasizes the condemnation of the women against their fellow sisters to illustrate just how engrained the ideals of female subservience are that Eve is defying through embracing her inner sexual spirit.

Although she recognizes she has not met the expectations of Godfather and because of the judgments of the righteous women, Eve, true to the characteristics of the blues ethos, is up-rooted from her home and community. Instead of lamenting and wallowing in her exit from the community Eve says is “I don’t spend a lot of time with

the right or wrong, good or bad of what I am – I am” (Naylor 85). Although this statement is short, it is very powerful. Eve exemplifies two very important aspects of Christianity. The first is that she does not hold a grudge against those who have wronged her. Jesus tells his disciples; “If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 11:25). Eve understands that in the eyes of the community she has sinned, and although she does not agree she does not hold ill feelings towards them. The second aspect of Christianity that Eve exemplifies is that she does not judge others. This is a unique part of who Eve is. Because she understands the emotional pain that comes with being unfairly judged by others, Eve remembers what it says in the book of Luke. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38-41). It is this element of Christianity that Eve carries with her and a reason for why she opens her brownstone to those in need.

Naylor’s depiction of her character walking a thousand years of delta dust is significant. Bobby Wilson makes the observation that “the birth of the blues followed these early Delta Plans when white supremacy was redeemed...and black exploitation reached center stage” (801). Much like the birth of the blues, Naylor’s Eve has trekked a thousand years through the delta to “arise out of the means of coping with great human suffering” (802). As many critics including Maxine Montgomery, Lynn Alexander, Carol Bender, Roseanne Hoefel, and Anthony Swindell have argued it is no small coincidence that Naylor names her character that represents salvation Eve in relation to the biblical character. Although Eve does not initially know where or to whom she was born she does

know from what she was born, and that birth came through the deep red delta dust (90). Again, Naylor roots her story deeply in the text of Christianity. It does not take a stretch of imagination to know that Eve is a reference to the Genesis story of Adam and his wife Eve. In the Biblical story it is Eve who eats of the forbidden fruit and introduces sin into the world. Arguably Eve's awakening to her sexuality is the metaphorical forbidden fruit of which she partakes. In Naylor's story it is the denial of unconditional love that introduces Eve to the earth thus awakening to her sexuality, which critic Karen Schneider states, "Eve's re-creates herself – without divine intervention – out of the delta dust, thus earning an existential independence" (12). Eve's resurrection out of delta dust has not earned her independence, it is because she has awakened and embraced her sexual spirit that Eve has gained identity and subjectivity.

Western biblical philosophy believes that a woman's sexuality is a sin. Karen Schneider, however, argues that through Eve Naylor argues that the "shame of female sexuality is revealed as the source of "sin," not its consequence" (12). Thus what Naylor is showing is that sexuality is not a sin at all, but a part of a person's inner spirit. Also Biblically, Eve is made from the clay of the earth and the rib of Adam's rib: Naylor's Eve is also "born of the delta" dust that seeps into her every pour (90). Much in the way Alice Walker claims that historically black women "forced their minds to desert their bodies and their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay" (2430), Eve states that "the only way I could walk [the path] was the way I was. I had no choice but to walk into New Orleans neither male or female-mud. But I could right then and there choose what I was going to be when I walked out" (91). What Eve speaks to

here is an idea that Judith Butler also argues, that “as a strategy of survival, gender is performance... Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture” (405). Undoubtedly on her journey through the delta Eve gained a full understanding of the powerful identity that her sexuality gives her. Eve has learned much like Butler says that once an individual understands that gender and its prescribed conduct are performative, an individual can choose to wipe clean the historical and social slate of “gender” and write in her true un-coded identity. Once she has this knowledge, Eve understands that she cannot keep it to herself, but must extend it to those who need the ideals of hospitality and hope that were denied her.

Through the act of walking what Eve says is a thousand years, she has humbled herself by taking a good long look at who she truly is and accepting that individuality. Eve says, “I don’t spend a lot of time with the right or wrong, good or bad of what I am-I am” (Naylor 85). This statement is the essence of Eve. She has, through her suffering, come to a place where she recognizes exactly who she is and who she wants to be. By having Eve describe herself using the very words God uses, “I Am,” Naylor is giving Eve a very powerful identity. Furthermore, Eve says, “I learned to eat what the muskrats ate--hope” (90). Muskrats are animals that are very good at adapting to survive and do not give up a fight easily, much like Eve. After being sent out of the community she could have given up and quit, but she perseveres. In Romans it says,

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope

of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who he has given us. (5: 1-5)

Eve has suffered, but she now understands that her suffering and her thousand year trek through the delta has given her character, and her character is one of independence and agency.

While Bailey's café can be read as an extension of Christian faith and hospitality in that one seeks in order to find and the café appears, the refuge Eve creates represents that and more. What makes Eve's different from Bailey's is that Eve only allows a certain type of woman to live at her place. The women who come to Eve have come because they belong there: "a woman is either ready for Eve's or she's not" (80). The women who come to live at Eve's are there because they have learned the same lesson as Eve: "Eve knows exactly what some people think about her. And she honestly doesn't care" (81). Eve has put aside the historical and cultural living style of what society has qualified as "woman" and she has adopted her own market of identity. Not only do the women not care what society thinks about them, they have a very healthy combination of spirituality and sexuality that enhances their characters. When the women come to Bailey's looking for Eve's he tells them, "Go out the door, make a right, and when you see the garden – *if you see the garden* – you're there" (81 emphasis added). Only women of a certain character are able to find Eve's much in the way that only certain people find the

Christian path to salvation. It is available to everyone, but only specific people are strong and courageous enough to walk that path.

But does she know about delta dust? That's what I ask any time I'm tempted to let a woman stay here because of the pain in her story: Daddy beat up on her. Mama beat up on her. And every blessed soul in between. But does she know, does she know about delta dust? Early last summer one came here who'd had Lucky Strike spelled out on the inside of her thigh with a lit cigarette butt. A reminder to get the right brand the next time she was sent to the store. I estimate it must have taken him a good hour to spell out the name of those cigarettes because the letters were so evenly matched and she had full, sorta bell-curved thighs. And she could have used a place to stay too. Had left Mr. Lucky Strike for a new man who'd gotten her pregnant before going back to his wife. From there on in, her story shifted into the familiar key of and-nobody-loves-you-when-you're-down-and-out...But I let her finish her story-they always need to finish their stories-even though, looking at the flesh that had healed into deep craters with a scaly film, I knew I wouldn't take her in. Although hers was the worst I'd heard, except for Esther's, and I'd still kept Esther for other reasons. That kind of woman hated men. And there was no more room available for that kind in my boardinghouse...Besides, with all that this woman had been through and would still keep going through-they

always manage to keep going through it-she didn't know, just didn't know about delta dust. (82)

The delta dust is metaphorical for baptism and spirituality. Eve is not baptized in water, but is reborn from the earth. Her spirituality is born from her sexuality, which she discovers pressed to the red delta dirt. There has always been a strong symbolic connection between women and the earth. Almost everything on the earth is nurtured and grows. The book of Matthew reminds Christians of God's ever reaching love and care. "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (6:26-27). As such, if Eve is born from the delta dust, she too then is an extension of God's love and nurturing, which she extends to those who are in need. Eve listens to the women's stories and although she has empathy for them, she only allows women to stay who have learned to live without hate towards men, and who will not continue the cycle of violence by allowing it to happen again and again. As previously stated, Eve exemplifies the ideal of forgiveness to others. Many of the women who come to Eve have given up their lives to despair. They believe that everyone else is to blame for their troubles. They do not understand that a person cannot simply change addresses and out run despair, for it is found from within one's self, much in the same way faith and spirituality is found within. Eve only takes in women who have learned to respect themselves as being people of value rather than just another door mat for society to wipe their feet on. Clearly critics Montgomery and Alexander are correct in their discussion that through Eve's Naylor demonstrates female characters who "possess the inner strength to escape abuse and

redefine herself in the face of rejection” (93). Eve knows that unless a woman understands that she, like Eve, is made from the earth in God’s image, she will not understand that God loves her just as she is.

It is for this reason that Eve “ended up here, taking over this brownstone and starting [her] garden” (91). Eve starting and cultivating the garden is a reference to the Garden of Eden.

Even the stone wall blooms around Eve’s garden. And there’s never a single season without flowers. The spring aubrietias and Russian mustard planted between the stones give way to summer pinks that kinda scent the air with clove before the autumn joys take over along with alpine poppies and columbines...[there’s] something else about that wall: They’re all wildflowers...[Eve’s] got some kind of plan to all of this. As you move in toward the center of that yard, where that large tree stump sits, spring, summer, or fall you’re gonna find circles and circles of lilies. Day lilies. Tiger lilies. Madonna lilies. Canna lilies. Calla lilies. Lilies of the valley. They grow in low clusters and on stalks; they vine up the stump of her only tree. Swamp lilies. Peruvians. Casa Blancas. Enchantments. Pink. White. Yellow. Brown. Striped. Lilies-of-the-Nile. Stars of Bethlehem. Nerines. And none of them have a price. But all of her other flowers are for sale.

Lynn Alexander presents the idea that the “flowers become part of the healing process” (95). In the center of Eve’s garden is the tree stump, or castrated phallic symbol, used to

represent a space where men no longer rule. The lilies are symbolic of Eve's identity and are her statement to the world: "As the flowers most often associated with funerals, lilies symbolize that the soul of the departed has received restored innocence after death" ("Lily: The Meaning..."). Through her journey Eve in essence died and was reborn of the earth, the very place she gained her sexual awareness. Furthermore, "Greek lore associates lily meaning with birth and it is a symbol for motherhood because the flower was said to be created from the breast milk of Hera" ("Lily Meaning and Symbolism"). Eve nurtures her garden bringing in the women society deems wildflowers. Eve is "ordering the universe in the image of her personal conceptions of Beauty" (Walker 2436). Perhaps Eve, being raised by a preacher, remembers the Lord's words

Consider the *lilies* of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, of you of little faith? (Luke 12:27, emphasis added)

Arguably then, the lily represents God's unconditional love and care. Naylor's use of the lily here is a direct reference to Faith and how much faith Eve has not only for her own salvation, but the salvation of the women who come to her looking to heal themselves, to redefine and nurture their inner spirit. Through Eve Naylor has created a space where the true values of Christianity are allowed to grow and flourish. Through her novel Naylor brings together a group of people who, much like Eve, have been unjustly judged and cast out of their communities. Because of her own experiences, Eve has created a space

where “she passes no judgment on the behavior of those women once she lets them live there, and she passes no judgment on their [male] visitors” (Naylor 92). Naylor creates for them a community where unconditional Christian love can nurturer their souls and heals their spirits.

Naylor’s presentation of spirituality echoes that of Walker who brings to light the idea that black women hold a very deep spirituality that many of them do not even know they possess. This can clearly be seen in *Bailey’s Café*. This deep spirituality is not only the element that brings the characters to the café to find redemption and spiritual healing, it is also the conduit that allows each character to actualize her identity independent from the labels that society (or their families) has previously forced on them. As previously established, Walker asserts that this spirituality is displayed “in the only materials [women] could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use” (2434). I am suggesting that the material and medium the characters of *Bailey’s Café* use are the very tools that have imprisoned them: their objectified bodies. The women in the novel repossess and redefine their objectified bodies and claim them for their own. As such, the women are no longer simply surviving what society has done to them. They disregard the value society has placed on their bodies, thus possessing and living their spiritual souls through the self defined value and worth of their free sexual expression and spirituality.

Walker notes that many black women, in order to fulfill their spirituality and independent identity, much like Virginia Wolf points out, also need a room of their own

and enough money to support themselves. What Naylor has done in the creation of Eve's place is to provide these women with that very thing; a room of their own where they can not only be comfortable with their sexual identity, but can also rule and possess their own identity free from the superior eye and judgment of society. Eve's is the haven these women seek: where the characters accept gentlemen callers on their own terms and deny passage to anyone they want.

Once for You, Now for Me

Many characters come to Bailey's café with wounded souls in search of the spirit within and healing. These characters have been forced to live and suffer in silence. One of the first memorable female characters Naylor introduces is Sadie. Sadie's character is an example of the "possibilities" in life that are available for a black woman. Those possibilities, however, are never truly explored because society and life have prevented their development. Sadie is taught at a young age that life can be very harsh and confining. As a child Sadie learns quickly that silence is a form of salvation and safety. Sadie's mother never wanted a child and often referred to Sadie as "The One the Coat Hanger Missed" (41), so much so that Sadie had thought it was her name. As a result of her poor choices in life, Sadie's mother slowly drinks herself into insanity turning tricks on the streets of Chicago. At age nine Sadie comes to understand that the best way to avoid aggravating her mother is to "become very good" (43).

The child discovered ways to make absolutely no noise. Sadie became so good at being quiet in the morning, the woman would have to clear her bleary eyes and open the shutters to find her: under the shelves of the cupboard, a soda cracker softening in her mouth before she dared chew it; in the middle of her pallet, legs clenched tightly together to hold back her full bladder since a creaky floorboard separated her from the chamber pot.

(43)

It is important to remember here that one characteristic of true womanhood, under the tenet of domesticity, is that women must suffer in silence (Welter 3). At a very early age many women are ushered into the world of forced silence, and it is often their family who introduces them to such situations. Sadie is a very tragic character in that her learned silence is something she carries with her through her marriage and subsequent ruination because she never truly learns to speak for herself. Sadie is a character who early in life became a lost soul due to the abuse of her mother and later to her own abuse of alcohol. Although she found her way to Bailey's café, she does not have enough courage or strength of character to find her way to a place where she will be able to live with agency.

Again, it is Alice Walker in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" who brings to light the tragic reality sociologist Jean Toomer learned, that black women, women like Sadie, hold within themselves

[a] spirituality...so intense, so deep, so *unconscious*, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. (2430)

Although this spirituality exists in most people, society has in some way beaten it out of the women of whom Walker and Toomer speak. The characters in Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, through a series of progressive tales, are able to find their inner spirits, and use those spirits to enhance their lives. Naylor's characters "become more than 'sexual

objects” (2430), but in order to do that, they must first break the barrier of silence and find hope.

As previously stated, many of Naylor’s characters are victims not only of forced silence, but also of the very rigid moral code placed upon them by men. One character through whom the effect is most profoundly seen is Esther. At the age of twelve, Esther (much like Sadie) learns that obedience and silence are necessary for survival. Esther’s understanding of the world is limited to that which her brother tells her, but as Esther says, “I believe in my older brother” (Naylor 95) because he is kind to her, keeping and caring for her for twelve years despite his wife’s protest. When Esther is told by her brother that she is the new “bride” of the man for whom he works she is told, “Do what he tells you, and you won’t be sent away like the others” (95). Security, for children, is established and nurtured by individuals in their life whom they have come to trust. Esther is no exception to this rule. Because she needs shelter and food to survive and she fears that she will be sent away, Esther believes her brother allowing obedience to rule when addressing her new husband. In so doing, Esther also learns silence and to her the two are synonymous. Her new husband allows Esther to sleep in a very comfortable bed in a beautiful room and provides food and shelter for her. Lynn Alexander argues that, “Esther imagines herself as being like a “princess” and does not immediately understand her situation” (97). Esther believes herself to have landed in a fortunate situation, and that her brother is caring for her by giving her to the farmer to marry.

My new husband has four hundred acres and six men, along with my brother, to help him plow. There are jars and jars of pickled beets, string

beans, cabbage, molasses, and whole plums in the cellar. Thick burlap bags of flour, potatoes, and cornmeal that tower high over my head where I kneel after he calls me. (95)

Through this description of the food, Naylor illustrates the complexity of Esther's situation. To a young girl the wealth of food in the cellar is a symbol of comfort and stability, indicating the ideals of a healthy fulfilling marriage. It is in the last line of this description that Naylor brings Esther's terror to light. The fact that Esther sees this abundance of food only when she is kneeling in the cellar is beyond disturbing and clearly paints the binary between the two worlds in which Esther lives: the light and comfortable world of the bedroom upstairs and the cold dark dehumanizing world of the cellar where the farmer calls her to kneel. Although the farmer gives Esther many of the comforts and necessities she needs to survive, in turn he also abuses her sexually in the cellar when she is called to kneel and continuously tells her, "We won't speak about this, Esther" (95-99). Through the use of call-and-response Naylor has submerged the audience in Esther's pain and shared silence (Wood 392). Very early on in her dealings with her husband, Esther and the reader learns that silence is part of being obedient and a necessity for survival. For Esther, this way of living has become normalized.

It is in the dark cellar where Esther's innocence and childhood fantasies about marriage and white flowers are stolen from her that she learns about a world she did not know existed. Esther says, "[...] in the dark, words have a different meaning. Having fun. Playing games. Being a good girl" (97). Esther is told that in the basement she has a

wooden chest of toys with which she is to play, but also comes to understand that these are not children's toys. They are

leather-and-metal things. No jumping ropes. No rubber balls. The edges of the metal things are small and sharp. The leather things coil around my fingers like snakes. They are greasy and smell funny. (97)

Coming to the profound understanding that her body is a playground for this man and that "being a good girl" means being obedient and silent is a devastating revelation for Esther. After each trip to the cellar where she kneels in the dark, he tells her, "We won't speak about this, Esther" (95-99). Because she does not want to disappoint her brother, and out of fear of being sent away, Esther does not speak of it.

Critic Karen Schneider suggests that "Esther is utterly powerless against evil" (11). At times it appears that way because she begins to take solace and comfort in the darkness of the cellar because she is "glad that it is dark. He cannot see my face..." (Naylor 95-96); however, Naylor empowers Esther through faith. Esther says "I lie there the first night and pray to God very hard that he will never look at me. God answers my prayers" (95-96). Like many of Naylor's characters, although Esther is imprisoned by silence, she also understands that there is hope and that this hope lies in the hands of God. Aside from the hag who comes in the morning to wash Esther and rub expensive lotion on her, Esther is alone. For comfort and hope she turns to God for salvation and God answers her prayers. Esther says, "I try and try to find a word for what happens between us in the cellar" (97) but she cannot find one and is "ashamed of my ignorance" (98). At first, Esther is ashamed of what she does in the cellar because she knows it is not what a

man and his wife are supposed to do: “My husband touches me and there are no babies...Should he touch me when I am in bed and not kneeling in the cellar? (98). She fears having him look into her eyes, knowing he will see the shame that rests there. Because she fears being disobedient to her husband, thus risking being sent away, Esther obeys each time he calls, going to the cellar, where it is dark. Esther “rejoices” in the darkness and silence (96).

In the isolation of her silent world, Esther also finds comfort in listening to the radio. Ironically, it is the radio that begins to break Esther’s silence and gives her the answers which she seeks. It is the radio program “The Shadow” that “becomes my friend because it finally gives me the words I have been seeking. What we do in the cellar is to make evil” (98). It takes many years for Esther to fully acknowledge that in the darkness of the cellar something evil and shameful happens to her. “At night when my husband is home from the fields, [and] his eyes avoid mine” (97) it is because she knows that if he were to look at her, he would not see any shame on her part, but see his own shame reflected in her eyes.

As a result of this newly gained understanding Esther stays with the farmer “only” twelve years

because I am a good sister. My older brother gets higher wages with each passing year. I stay even though I come to understand that I am not married...My older brother gets peace at home when he buys the fat wife a Bendix washing machine. I stay one year for each year my older brother took care of me against the shrill protest of the fat wife. And each time I

am called into the cellar to kneel among the sacks of potatoes and flour, I count the days left to repay my debt. (98-99)

Esther has learned that her body is a precious commodity. With her body, obedience, and silence she can buy a better life for her brother and his family. Critic Karen Schneider argues that Naylor's character Esther references "the Old Testament Book of Esther relat[ing] a story of family cohesion, the price of female disobedience, and redemptive power of a woman's beauty" (10). Agreeably Naylor has displayed the characteristics of obedience and family loyalty, more importantly; however, Naylor has demonstrated that a great deal of power lies not in a woman's beauty, as in her story Esther is described as an ugly monkey, but in a woman's ability to use her body. As Naylor has shown, when the "husband" is sexually satisfied, it is Esther who actually holds the power because it is her body to give and, when she is ready, to take back.

And after twelve years Esther does just that. Embracing the sexual power of her inner spirituality, Esther leaves the farmer and her brother having bought her freedom by repaying each day of her brother's "caring" with what Schneider calls "soul-killing degradation" (10). Esther even debates killing the farmer, but much to her anguish Esther realizes that she cannot save the "other twelve-year-olds with brothers" (99) who will take her place because "there are too many of them [men] to kill and there are just too many twelve-year-olds" (99). Although the acknowledgement of this fact brings Esther sorrow, she also rejoices because she has come to learn some very important lessons about the playground of a woman's body. When Esther arrives at Eve's house, Eve gives her a room and removes the light bulbs herself, saying,

‘What they’ll need from you, they’ll need in the dark if they know it or not...even that type could not bring themselves to return if they saw your eyes. You have the most honest face of any woman I know, sweet Esther.’
(99)

Eve knows that Esther’s eyes and honest face will give away the secret that Esther carries within herself. Much like many of the other female characters in Naylor’s novel, Esther has come to learn that it is she who actually holds the power over the men, not the other way around. This is in itself a complex notion to conceive of because of the duality of Esther’s body. It is true that men are using her body to gain sexual pleasures in a fashion that suggests bondage and/or fetishes, and as such it is arguable that the men hold the power over Esther’s body. I suggest, however, that Esther also holds power because she allows her body to be used in such a fashion, perhaps in an effort to save the other little sisters. Esther is the sole owner of that precious commodity of flesh that they crave and need. It is hers to give and hers to take away. “Men must only visit in the dark. And they must bring me the white roses. And they must call me *little sister*. Or I no longer come” (99). Esther sets the rules of engagement. In her estimation, she no longer is owned because she has made the men subservient to her. Esther does not see the use of her body as an act of love, but a way to make the men her possessions. The men who come to visit will never know duality of the sexual power, the give and take in the encounter that they share. Esther has learned that the men who come to visit need her in the desperate way that they need water to survive, and it is Esther who sets the terms for their survival. The men will come to her bringing the white roses that she was denied in the fantasies about

marriage that were stolen with her twelve year old innocence, and they must call her *little sister*, which is an act of sheer genius on the part of the author Gloria Naylor. By demanding that her callers call her little sister, Esther is claiming her own identity and living her life with agency. The label of little sister brings the image of family and protection to mind. Each man who calls Esther little sister is being forced to subconsciously acknowledge that they are not protecting or being a guardian over her, but are robbing her of innocence. Esther realizes that the men who come to see her are slaves to their lust; she owns them and has power over them because she is the only one who can satisfy their weakness. Esther uses her body to reclaim the power taken from her and in so doing has begun to live her life on her own terms, no longer kneeling in the cellar simply fanaticizing about being saved, but actually taking control of her destiny and living life on her own terms.

Fitting (and Breaking) the Mold

For many of the characters in Naylor's novel, the emotional costs and subsequent penalty of silence are the main elements that stifle their genuine identities as seen through Esther. Silence for black women is purchased at a much higher cost than it is for white women. Author Patricia Hill-Collins addresses the way that abuse, specifically sexual abuse, has been used for centuries to control African American women. Hill-Collins argues that "sexual violence visited upon African American women has historically carried no public name, garnered no significant public censure, and has been seen as a crosscutting gender issue... Black women were raped, yet their pain and suffering remained largely invisible [because] rape (sexism) signaled *private* humiliation" (217). For centuries black women had been victims of sexual violence at the hands of their white owners. Black women endured their suffering within their community without any other option because there was no one to whom they could turn for help and protection. Because black men and women were seen as chattel, they held no rights or civil liberties. White people, believing that black men and women were a lower species than they; were therefore automatically inferior. Although slavery ended, sexual violence and rape perpetrated against black women did not, something which is evident throughout the Jim Crow segregation era. Furthermore, Hill-Collins points to an even more alarming trend in black women's silence: the preconceived notion that black men would protect their women, but this was not always the case. Not only did a black woman fear assault by a white man, as society and cultures changed and although "black men would protect "their" women from sexual assault, [they] inadvertently supported ideas about women's

bodies and sexuality as men's property" (217), and so, black men were also among the perpetrators. As a result of this objectification placed on the black female body, black women feared the very men who were supposed to protect them. Moreover, black women such as Esther were trapped in situations where they did not dare to speak out about the abuse because if they did they would only perpetuate the stereotype of black men as sexual predators.

Because a woman's place in society and her expected conduct has been rigidly set by Biblical and cultural expectations of proper womanhood, women have consistently been left in search of how to define or redefine themselves. In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Judith Butler states that it is important "to examine in what ways gender is constructed through specific corporeal acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts" (403). Butler's argument is that the body is defined through a series of actions that are determined by historical and cultural acceptability. Butler asserts that "embodiment clearly manifests a set of strategies... This style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities" (404). This is to say that the female body, although gendered as woman because of her physical construction, is further defined and constructed through a series of social and historical styles. These styles can either create or limit possibilities of identity for women. "To be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained

and repeated corporeal project” (405). What Butler argues is that history and culture prescribe a set of values and socially acceptable actions that define woman. If a woman is obedient to the cultural and historical norms, then she will “earn” the signifier or label of woman. This idea is something that has been seen throughout history from one culture to another. Black women for centuries have worked within these boundaries to try to create a space for themselves, a place where they can be accepted according to mainstream standards and where they can survive with respectability if not live independently.

One character in *Bailey’s Café* who exemplifies this idea is Peaches. When she begins to realize just how much men like her, she desperately tries to be what she knows society sees as the proper woman. Peaches tries a number of things to help her fit acceptably into the standards of a proper woman in her community. She earns straight A’s, works part time for the druggist, joins the Girls Guides and Missionary Circle, rolls bandages for the resistance, and sings for the glee club, war relief, and church (Naylor 105). None of these activities, however, can distract Peaches from the fact that she enjoys that which she has been taught to fear, her enjoyment of her sexual desire. A discussion on Peaches will take place as this thesis continues. At this point it is important to note that she is an example of Butler’s argument that women do not self-style, but try to adapt their character to meet the expectations set forth in the code of proper womanhood in order to survive in their communities. Although these limitations on their identities exist for Naylor’s female characters, a number of them are able to look beyond the historical and cultural margins. Much like what Butler proposes, in Naylor’s novel *Bailey’s Café*

Eve's house and the café are places, personal space if you will, created by the characters, for the purpose of achieving independence and agency.

Of course for a character to live life on her own terms as opposed to simply surviving their situations they must first breach the boundaries of their cultures. Western culture has done women no favors in the definition of proper feminine behavior, in terms of sex and sexuality. The very act of sex is something that women are taught to feel shame towards, which is clearly exemplified through the stories of Eve and Esther. In the Western culture women are expected to have sex only to procreate, as stated in the Bible. Culturally, for men, however, sex is something that is a rite of passage, and a mark of maturity at the very least; at most sex is a badge of honor and virility in which women are objects and challenges to be conquered. In most cases men are not only allowed, but encouraged to participate in as much sexual intercourse as they reason necessary in order to fulfill their masculine desires. Women who seek to be held in high regard, as previously established, have it deeply ingrained in them from a very young age through the teaching of obedience, purity, and piety that they are not only to shun, but also to fear sex as something that will limit and confine them for life. The more sex and sexual partners a woman has, the more unfit she is to hold the title woman, thus becoming a symbol of filth and promiscuity. If proper gentle women are found to have been intimate with a man prior to marriage they are looked at as morally suspect and become "fallen" women. Fallen from what exactly? Fallen from grace? Fallen from the propriety that is every woman's birth right? Undeniably many women have this respectability of character stolen from them because they have had the misfortune of being born into a lower socio-

economic class where stereotypically morals and values are assumed to be “loose,” or they are victims of abuse and rape because of their race and ethnicity. Naylor gives such an example in the character of Miriam (an Ethiopian Jew). Miriam adamantly states, “No man has ever touched me” (143), yet she is pregnant and thus regarded as unfit to be a proper woman. Miriam is still stitched tight and has been a victim of female castration (commonly termed genital mutilation) because her mother believed that “finding her a decent husband would be difficult with so many other virgins to choose from, and that is why she had the midwives close her up that tightly. It raises a woman’s value” (152). Because of this Miriam can prove that no man has ever touched her because “there was no way for the girl to be lying, or the whole village would have heard her screams” (146). Despite all of this physical evidence, Miriam is not believed because she is pregnant. Miriam endures much of the same ostracism as the Virgin Mary does. Naylor’s description of female castration as a means of raising a woman’s value brings to the forefront the length that various societies will go in order to objectify a woman, which robs a woman of the value of her identity.

Without a place like Bailey’s café, women such as Esther and Miriam would not have had a place to go where they could find comfort and individuality. Because their communities have cast them out, they do not belong anywhere and more often than not, when people have no where left to go, they often turn to religion, spirituality, and faith. For the characters in *Bailey’s Café* their faith in the desire to find happiness and acceptance brings them into Bailey’s café, where they can, through embracing their inner spirit through a number of different avenues such as religion, sexuality, gender identity,

self-love, and self-acceptance learn to become comfortable with who they are and live as individuals.

Embracing Desire

There is a misconception that when a woman embraces her sexuality she instantly becomes promiscuous. One opposing view is that Eve's house is nothing more than a glorified brothel, and the women who live there are merely degrading themselves via prostitution. By contrast, Naylor has developed characters who find themselves at Eve's under their own choosing because "they dreamed dreams that no one knew – not even themselves" (Walker 2430). It is Eve who listens to their stories and provides for them the place that they need to fulfill those dreams, and in many cases even helps them acknowledge what that dream is. In so doing, of course, the female characters defy what their communities have established to be acceptable for a woman to do with her body. The female characters in the novel have much more freedom and independence as well as individuality because they not only accept within themselves that they enjoy sex, but also freely express their sexual desires through their practices at Eve's.

Naylor's character Eve is revolutionary in that she is able to acknowledge her sexuality, survive, and make a place for herself in the world. Because of her own self-evolution, she is able to create a place where other women who are aware of the power of their sexuality are able to live and thrive. As Wasserman states, "An early turning point in the novel, this is also one of its many *blues moments*: 'moments in Afro-American discourse when personae, protagonists, autobiographical narrators...successfully negotiate an obdurate economics of slavery and achieve a resonant, improvisational, expressive dignity'" (303). Through her character Eve Naylor has successfully created a space where the women who come to Eve's are able to walk away from the degrading

labels placed on them by society and redefine themselves as independent women expressing their spirituality through their sexual desires. Each character understands that her sexual desires are not perverse. With the exception of Esther, they do not have sex to manipulate and hold power over any one. They do not use their bodies as objects, but as a means of expressing their inner love. They use their bodies to establish subjectivity as individuals. In Eve's case it is the gift of understanding that her desires are shared by other women and the ability to empathize with and hear their stories. In Esther's case, it is the gift of enjoying that which others may not enjoy. Her fetishes are not an extension of perversion but a unique individual expression. In Peaches' case, it is the gift of beauty which she wants to embrace for herself rather than feel it is a curse and a means for men to grope and abuse her. In each character, it is society that defines them as perverse.

In her essay, "Goth Women, Sexual Independence..." Amy Wilkins asserts that Goth women have been able to make a space for themselves that allows them to use active sexuality to create a feeling of sexual subjectivity, to "engage in sexual play...while sidestepping most of the stigmas and dangers of society, and [to] allow them to see themselves as strong and independent women" (329). This is a very important idea that is shared with Naylor's *Bailey's Café* in that a number of women seek Eve's as a safe place to reside. All of these women have been condemned as unfit to deserve the title "women" because they have discovered, acted on, and found great pleasure in their sexual desires.

In her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" Audre Lorde asserts that erotic is defined as "the personification of love in all its aspects-born of Chaos, and

personifying creative power and harmony” (279). When women are able to see beyond society’s definition of the erotic and realize that it is not synonymous with the perverse and pornographic, they are able to begin to discover and re-define their own erotic desires within their personalities. Lorde argues that the erotic is “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (278). Once women come to the realization that everything in their world can be erotic, whether it is work, love, or play, then women begin to possess the power that the erotic can give them to live freely with agency in their lives. Lorde’s argument is clearly exemplified in Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*: the characters in the novel are not sexually perverse, but have looked deep within themselves, recognized their erotic power, and have used that power to actualize identity and live with agency.

Lorde opens her argument with the fact that historically women

[...]have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values the depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. (278)

This is the case in Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*, where a number of the characters are made to fear their erotic power. Peaches is taught to hate her beauty because it is the one thing that gets her noticed. Her father and his friends are very quick to comment on how pretty

“Daddy’s beautiful baby” (102) is and fantasized about her to fulfill their own sexual desires. Peaches remembers that “before I was nine years old, my father’s friends would sit [me] on their knees, touch the soft curls on [my] head, raise [my] dimpled arms. ‘The gal has promise, Jim.’ And he would nod, proud. So proud” (104). Peaches’ father and the men who would handle her with watering mouths are the very men who are quick to continually warn Peaches of the dangers of her beauty and the men she will encounter. “I remember the wall he started building around the house when I was nine years old. And I remember that it was already too late” (105) because not only had the men started to notice her, but she had also begun to experience an awareness of her sexual desires. Her father goes so far as to greet men at the door and “prop his shotgun in full view” (103) because he is protecting her. To her father, Peaches’ beauty is something that only he and his friends can properly appreciate. When it comes to other men, Daddy Jim takes on the role of dominate male “protector.”

It is Peaches herself who comments though, “he shouldn’t have worried about the boys. He should have worried about the mirrors...Everywhere I turned, I could see her. But what was she doing in my room? She was a whore and I was Daddy’s baby” (104). Through the character of Peaches, Naylor has depicted the struggle women face when they begin to realize their sexual awakening. Because the virgin/whore dichotomy is so deeply engrained in Western culture, women do not understand that there is another choice, and it is that choice which Naylor is emphasizes in Peaches. Because Peaches’ father applauds and idolizes her beauty, often setting Peaches on a pedestal as a goddess, he has given her the impression that he expects her to be pure and innocent at any cost.

As Peaches becomes aware of her sexual desires, she begins to feel shame that she is disappointing her father. Because she has been stained with the stereotypical label the US gives such beautiful woman, Peaches has come to equate her beauty and sexual desires with perverse sexuality. In every mirror Peaches sees not herself, but a reflection of the lens through which her community views her.

I had a bedroom full of them...Every mirror outside had told me what she was: the brown mirrors, hazel mirrors, blue mirrors, oval, round and lashed mirrors of all their eyes when they looked at me. Old eyes, young eyes, it didn't make any difference if the mirrors belonged to me: I saw her standing there unclothed with the whispered talk among my brothers, their smudged laughter about the sofa down the block on which they were always welcome. But there was a difference when it came to the women: the young and unmarried reflected her with an envy so intense it bordered on hate; those older and married, with a helpless fear. Yes, they all looked at me and knew, just knew, what she was. You have to believe what you see in the mirror, don't you? Isn't that what mirrors are for? (104)

Peaches has come to internalize every negative feeling and fear her father and community has projected onto her. Even her own brothers know of her desires which she struggles to keep buried inside. Because they are jealous of the constant attention she receives from their father, they mock her implied impurity. She is a victim of the normalized interpretation of beauty and the erotic power that beauty can give Peaches.

As a result of this stigma, Peaches learns to hate the sexual woman she is and has become. Because her family and community use her beauty solely for sexual purposes that have nothing to do with expressions of genuine love and deep emotions, Peaches hates herself. Because the women in her community fear Peaches' sexuality because of the strength they think she gains over the men, Peaches learns to abhor her sexuality and the power it gives her. She detests it because she perceives her sexuality to be a handicap. Peaches goes so far as to break a mirror because "I could see her small brown nipples tightening as I remembered how it felt to be pressed into the dark corner of the high altar, to have his soft hands squeezing and stroking, his breath warm against the top of my head" (104-105). Critic Rebecca Wood also argues that "this internal whore/virgin dichotomy disintegrates when Mary [Peaches] realizes that she actually looks forward to sleeping with men and feeling their touch" (389); however, Wood goes on to assert that Peaches "becomes the whore-ific image she so despises and must eventually overcome" (389). When Peaches begins to realize that she enjoys the attention of the men and truly enjoys the sexual encounters, she is horrified. And yet it is not so simple, Peaches is taught that her beauty is something that is to be feared because it will only lead to bad things, i.e. the identity of a whore. Her beauty and thriving sexuality are something that run grotesque in that she realizes the freeing yet confining aspects of her enjoyment. Within her lives the light and darkness: sexual freedom that invites the condemnation of her community. How does a woman choose? Clearly Peaches is a victim of exactly the kind of labeling and censoring Lorde is talking about in her essay. Peaches is taught to fear her beauty and sexuality and the power that comes with them. Peaches tries to lock

this “other” sexual self away, denying the very existence of that which makes her a whole person: “In horror I watched her grow up, and I learned to hate her for breaking my father’s heart” (105). Peaches tries a number of things to help her fit acceptably into the standards of a proper woman in her community.

Peaches, like many women, tries so very hard to hold captive within herself, that very desire that makes her human: sexual desire. When Peaches can no longer fight her desire, she compartmentalizes and embraces it.

I gave them *her*. Sweet, Sweet relief. Their eyes would cloud over, the pupils tiny pinpoints that finally reflected nothing-not her and least of all me-as they groaned and sucked and plunged and sweated. Free at last, *I* was free as I gave them her...Any teacher. Any janitor. Any deacon. Any porter. Any storekeeper. Any race, any age, any size-any son of any man-had the power to drive away that demon from the mirror. Over and over, they became my saviors from *her*. (105)

Although Peaches believes she has found salvation through pursuing her sexual desire, she express herself only under specific circumstances where her surreptitious enjoyment of others is secretly fulfilled in order to preserve a part of herself so that she can “fit” into that ever important role of the proper woman. This idea of course only works if the community does not know about her sexual conduct. Peaches, because she is taught to fear her sexual self, has, in an effort to survive, fractured her “true identity” into parts, compartmentalized and sold that which is one of the most defining element to her personality, her sexuality. She has been taught that sexuality is perverse and should be

shunned and shamed, and if she cannot control it, she should tear it out and separate it from her true self. In essence then Peaches is trying to have both the proper and erotic self but often feels that she is not successful.

Sick: I got called that a lot when they found out. A sick bitch. But I already knew that. I had to be sick, because over time, very slowly over time, I was forced to admit that I actually enjoyed being held and touched by some of the men I lived with. I was starting to look forward to their coming to bed. There are no words to describe how ugly that realization was. I knew she was a whore. Had always been a whore. Was probably born a whore. For as long as I could remember, I could see her in their eyes. But now at I looked in the mirror – thinking of how my own body had betrayed me with him – I could see her in mine. (107)

What Peaches hits on here is the double edge that erotic power has: It will result in ostracism, yet at the very moment an individual is being cast out of her community because she is deemed improper, she begins to realize that “proper” is equated with negation and leads to self dehumanization. “Before I only hated her. Now I wanted to hate myself” (107). Once Peaches comes to hate her beauty she scars her own face. The act of self mutilation is Peaches’ final attempt to rid herself of that “other” part of her that does not allow her to fit in to acceptable society. The men she encounters after this see her scarred face as a tragedy because they only see Peaches at “face value” and do not see her inner power and beauty.

When Peaches finds her way to Bailey's Café and then to Eve's, she begins to learn what she did not previously understand: how to express what Lorde emphasizes, that the erotic is a blend of intensely felt positive emotions, and because those emotions are positive they are empowering. I assert that when Peaches begins to truly feel and experience the power that her beauty provides her, when she uses her sexual desires to fulfill her own erotic pleasure, she begins to learn that her beauty and erotic desires give her power, and that power gives her identity.

As the months pass, "she comes closer to healing and to love" (Chavanelle 61) by learning how to balance her desires. It is at this time that Peaches' father wanders into Bailey's café on a number of occasions searching for her. When Peaches' father is led to Eve's she asserts that

'The girl chose the flower,' Eve said. 'And you try growing daffodils in the fall.' Eve won't let [...] the father past the front door. Visible over her shoulder are the eager men waiting to visit Peaches. They sit knee to knee in the parlor. That side of the room blooms with bouquets of yellow flowers. The word didn't take long to spread. The hot one who moved into the second-floor takes on all callers. But there are fewer men now than the week before, who were fewer than the week before that. 'Leave your daughter here,' Eve says, 'and I'll return her to you whole.' (113)

Naylor's use of flower representation continues here with the character of Peaches. Peaches chooses the daffodils because they, like her when she first arrives at Eve's, are very fragile.

The autumn wind is chill outside and the fragile heads of the daffodils wilt easily in the heat of the parlor. And if the [men] go upstairs with a bouquet that's less than perfect, Eve's taught [Peaches] to send them back down again. Look in that mirror good, and accept no less than what you deserve. The longer the line, the longer the wait; the later the season, the warmer the house. And it's the same fifty dollars for a fresh bouquet. (113)

When the reader first met Peaches she has not fully embraced her inner spirit. Her community sees her as being "addicted" to sex. Through allowing her to embrace her sexual desires in a space free from judgment, Eve is helping Peaches become a whole person. As the quote shows, there are fewer and fewer men coming to visit, and Peaches is staying with each caller longer and longer. Although critic Lynn Alexander argues that Peaches stay at Eve's does not signify recovery (99), Naylor implies that Peaches does in fact recover. She is learning how to separate lust from love and how to show genuine love for others and more importantly for herself through her sexual desires. Once Peaches has mastered her inner spirit, Eve will return her to her father whole (Naylor 114). Eve's is a place where Peaches can experience the full positive emotions of her erotic sexuality. Thus when Peaches comes to live at Eve's she does so because she has found a place where she is no longer simply surviving the label the public has shamed her with, but she has embraced her sexual identity and has begun to live with self-love.

Restoring Love for One's Self

In Naylor's *Bailey's Café* each character embodies a representation of a progressive journey to individuality and agency gained by embracing her inner spirit. Each character represents a different manner in which feminized characters can be objectified and belittled by the men and women within their communities. Naylor's characters, through their time spent at Eve's, for the most part, find their independence through embracing their inner spirit whether that it is through religious spirituality, sexuality, gender identification, or self love. Those who successfully find self acceptance on those terms no longer simply survive but actually enjoy life. The character of Jesse Bell is one character that presents a unique problem because of where her family comes from, and who her family is. Jesse's family, The Bells, are born to proud people who work long and hard on the docks. She is already a woman living with a strong sense of individuality and assertive pride. As such, this difference in characterization from Naylor's other female characters leaves the reader to wonder why Jesse is in Naylor's text. What aspect of embracing the inner spirit does she represent? Critic Adriane Ivey argues that Naylor's character of Jesse Bell is used to "resemble the animosity between the biblical characters of Elijah (Uncle Eli) and Jezebel (Jesse Bell)," where in the biblical story, Queen Jezebel is "constantly condemned for her sinful ways and her worship of the pagan God Baal" (91). This argument rings true when doing a parallel reading between the Bible and *Bailey's Café*, however, what Naylor also emphasizes through the character Jesse Bell aside from yet another way in which a woman can fall victim to patriarchy and a perverse interpretation of religion and "god," is how a woman

can, through setting aside what society believes and determines as proper feminine conduct, and by embracing her inner spirit is able to gain independence.

Because of Jesse's upbringing and her strong sense of sexuality and identity, she is perceived as a threat to the community on Sugar Hill. Furthermore, Jesse is a representation of the ideal of Free Will, which philosophers such as Rene Descartes have argued is "the faculty of will with freedom of choice" ("Free Will" 1). This freedom of choice involves "an activity that...both our intellectual and volitional capacities, as it consists in both judgment and active commitment" ("Free Will" 3). Arguably every individual has free will, the freedom to choose a particular path within the realm of the options presented. When considering women, however, it can be surmised that they do not have, or only experience limited options from which to choose because they are confined by their society's rules and codes of conduct and as established earlier women who dares to venture outside the boundaries of that code are seen as unfit to deserve the label "woman." Jesse Bell's character is an exception to that premise.

In order to understand Jesse and her role in Naylor's text of self-defined identity and independence the reader must first know Jesse's character before she marries into the King family and subsequently loses her sense of self identity. Jesse states

...I am quite a woman. Was a woman before I was a girl... I carried a good name. And I was a good wife. I mean, a good wife... My people always made their living from the waters around Manhattan Island. And it was an honest living. I grew up around rough men who worked as hard as they cussed and drank... It takes a real strong woman to make a home for

men like that, or you just wouldn't have no home. She's gotta be able to dig her toes in and give back one for one... Power knows power. Women like that breed daughters like that, and the docks were full of 'em for the Bell men to marry. My brothers respected every woman they took up with- any other kind wouldna lasted down there. (118, 120-121)

Jesse has always had a voice of agency because she comes from a strong matriarchal line. She was raised by a mother who would not take any back talk from anyone, including her own sons (121). Mother would "show 'em that big scar running straight across her belly- push her skirt band right down n show 'em: I got this cause I wouldn't take no shit from a man; you think I'm gonna take it from a *boy*?" (121). Jesse also grew up around men who worked long hard hours in a community filled with people who asserted their identity through pride in their homes and families. The Bells accept those who know how to affirm their power in a respectful manner. The Bells are people who stand up for that which they believe and allow others to do the same. Jesse knows and understands that "power knows power." The Bells, male and female, should not be disrespectful or demand power, but extend it as it is extended to them. In essence, from Jesse's perspective, power itself resembles the Golden Rule: treat your neighbor as you would like to be treated.

When Jesse marries her husband she believes she has found a man who will, like her brothers, respect her for who she is. Jesse says,

My husband was different [from the rest of the people on Sugar Hill]. Way different. He loved everything about women. I mean, even little things like

how I managed to get the seam in my stockings straight or how I penciled in the beauty mark over the right side of my lips...he's watch me...for a whole hour, just fascinated...Not so much that I was doing it, but that it was being done-this thing that women do...[H]e *was* special cause I never had a problem about her...from the very beginning he understood about her. (123)

Jesse believes her husband is special because he appreciates her for who she is and adores all her subtle character distinctions, such as Jesse's connection to what her husband calls her "special friend" (125), that special friend is a woman Jesse says also understands her needs (125). When considering the situation, however, Jesse astutely comments that

When you're into women as much as [my husband] was, I guess you understand that somebody else might feel the same way about 'em at times like you do...[but] I respect my home; I never brought her there although he told me I could. Your friends are welcome here, Jesse, he'd say-even your special friend. But I knew better than that. There's only so much you can expect even the best of marriages to take. My needs were my own. But so was my home. (125)

Jesse is not a fool. She is an independent woman who knows that there are many different ways in which a person can love and be loved. Jesse is a devoted wife who respects her husband and her role as a wife in the home they share. Clearly, both Jesse and her husband recognize that women can be beautiful complex individuals who are capable of

an infinite capacity to love. She is the only character who is introduced as not being a lost soul without a sense of independence.

When Jesse marries into the King family who live on Sugar Hill, however, she learns that there are many different ways in which the patriarch and a community can assert their “power,” stealing the strength from those who they feel threaten their power. Jesse speaks in awe and amazement of Sugar Hill and its people.

Those women got treated any old way and took it. I don't mean being slapped upside the head or any such thing; they figured that was the kind of treatment I saw around me growing up. Well, I had sometimes, but there are worse things than hitting a woman. Like having your husband call you *stupid* and *lazy* in front of a whole roomful of people while you stand there and smile and smile. No, the men wouldn't use the exact words stupid and lazy, but it amounted to the same thing. And if I could figure it out with my lack of education, surely she could, and still she smiles and smiles and smiles. Yeah, there are worse things. Like having the girlfriend and the wife at the same dinner table. Like the wife knowing about it all the while, and the husband knowing she knows, and him getting a thrill out of it all. Cause the wife's not going to say a word. Cause this son of a bitch is a doctor somebody or a lawyer somebody – or maybe just a man somebody that she feels she's nobody without. Women up there look at other women as nothing unless they're attached to some man's name. And attached they stay, no matter what he does. And personally, I knew a few

of them who actually got their butts beaten worse than some women down on the docks. But they got beaten by stone sober men behind stained-glass doors. And with all their money, they couldn't afford to cry. (121-122)

In this section Naylor strikes a blow deep into the heart of stereotyped assumptions about black culture. The stereotype is that only among the poor and “rough” uneducated members of the black community women are degraded and objectified. Naylor calls attention to what most people would rather not know: abuse and objectification know no limits and are not solely elements to any one specific social-economic class in black communities. Simply because a man is educated and has money does not exempt him from the custom of claiming women as property to be owned and dominated. One thing the middle class women on Sugar Hill understand is that they are to be obedient and silent. And as long as they are married and attached to a man, any man, they feel they substantively exist. Jesse's character challenges this idea in that she sees the idiocy in a human being owned. Furthermore, in this passage Naylor eloquently demonstrated how even women can buy into their own objectification. *Bailey's Cafe* is set in 1949 just after the end of WWII, where women in the U.S. society, because of longstanding ideals that a woman's place is in the home where she is to be obedient to her husband, believe they are insignificant as individuals unless they are married to a man. Naylor demonstrates this idea in her stark comparison between Jesse Bell and the women of Sugar Hill; the idea that many women across the spectrum, even in today's society, continue to buy into the Americanized norm of women being objectified.

Although confused at first by the Sugar Hill women's behavior, Jesse eventually learns that most of the King family are good people. But they are corrupted by Uncle Eli and his worship of "god." Jesse has little regard for Uncle Eli going so far as to call him an old Uncle Tom (123). Furthermore, Jesse says,

I don't even think he was my husband's real uncle. I don't think he was anybody's uncle cause that woulda meant he had to be somebody's mother's child. A woman wouldna birthed him. A woman woulda seen the hate in his eyes for us the minute he slipped out of her, and she woulda crushed his puny little head between her legs. (123)

Clearly, Jesse detests and does not respect Uncle Eli. Her dislike of him stems not only from how he treats people, but also because he is always talking about raising the race, to which Jesse responds, "To raise something, you gotta first see it as being low-down. And I didn't see a damn thing wrong with being colored" (125). Jesse believes that Uncle Eli wants to make the Kings as respectable as white people, which immediately suggests that Uncle Eli does not have pride in his family or his race.

And where did Uncle Eli want us to be lifted up to? Why, white folks. And not even the honest ofays who worked with my uncles and brothers at the docks. Real white men. Naw, he meant the dicty white folks. The ones with money... White folks are looking at us. White folks are judging us. They were Uncle Eli's god. And it was a god I wasn't buying. (125)

One literary scholar, Adriane Ivey, argues that

Eli's worship of "dicty white folks" (Naylor 125) as God is a comment on the traditional concept of the Christian God and how that concept has been used to keep both black people and women confined to narrow spaces in religious terms. (91)

Ivey's comments are important when considering how Naylor presents the feminized characters in *Bailey's Café*. Naylor presents characters that are able to find spirituality through a number of mediums, not limited to religion. Through finding their spirituality they have respectability. In many cases respectable means being able to be financially sound and participate in religion, specifically a Christian religion. Under this ideology, the more educated an individual becomes, the more respectable they are. Jesse Bell's character presents yet another means of discovering just how the manipulation of any spirituality can strip an individual of their respectability and sense of identity. It is true that within the multitudes of communities there is a variation in the definition of respectability. In the case of Uncle Eli, the more a black person can assimilate "whiteness," the more "respectable" he or she is. Jesse learns that her husband does not even know what delicious food is. Uncle Eli does not allow the Kings to eat bar-b-que, for example, because it is associated with colored folks; and he calls it "slave food" (124). Although Jesse desires to fit into the middle class community of Sugar Hill and the King family, she refuses to turn her back on traditional African American culture. She resists losing her cultural identity just because Uncle Eli sees it as beneath the King family. When her presence is required at a King gathering she goes, but in turn she entertains her family and the Kings at her house as well. "Yeah, we played jazz and

played it loud the way it was meant to be heard. And them that wanted to dance, danced. If the truth be told, it was mostly the Kings up there on the floor begging us to teach ‘em the new steps... I had my parties often, and I had ‘em loud” (126-127). Jesse does not demand or even ask anyone to enjoy with her traditional African American culture; the Kings simply do so out of their own desire to have fun. Uncle Eli, however, does not like this reaction to the culture. He quickly associates the gatherings at Jesse’s house with “orgies” and Jesse with “being a loose woman” (127). Throughout the Jesse Bell section of the novel there is a rift of discord that runs between her and Uncle Eli and the Kings. There is constant tension and disagreement over what is deemed proper conduct for a woman and where her place should be within the family. Jesse is too domineering and vocal about her beliefs and her life to be considered a proper woman by Uncle Eli. As the section progresses through the nineteen years of Jesse’s marriage she slowly loses to Uncle Eli the sense of her identity and voice on her own terms.

After her son is born Jesse thinks, for a brief time that “maybe now they’ll accept me” (127), but she quickly realizes she is wrong. In fact, Jesse says it was when her son was born and Uncle Eli declared, “Look what Jesse Bell has given *us*” (127), that she really began to lose her grip on her own identity. Jesse says it started slowly with no one thing causing the loss. Rather, a number of things happened to corrode her power over the years. As Jesse points out,

You know I didn’t take it laying down, but all this didn’t come stringed together like I’m saying; it came in little pieces, one thing this year,

another the next. I can still hear my husband: Now, Jesse. Now, Jesse.

Trying to convince me it was all in my mind. (128)

Jesse knows that as time passes her influence and respectability are being eroded in her son's eyes as well as her husband's, the man who originally had loved everything about her.

One incident that brings Jesse very close to losing her struggle with Uncle Eli is when her "son refused to go to Mother's ninetieth anniversary party because he didn't have anything in common with *those people*" (128). When her son refuses to spend time with the Bells, Jesse knows she has all but lost him because he does not understand, nor does he recognize, that he is from a line of strong independent men. Jesse has finally come to understand herself that her son has been influenced by the Kings, specifically Uncle Eli, to think of the Bells as lesser people simply because of who they are. It is at this Jesse started drinking in an attempt to "figure out how it all happened" (138). Jesse begins to find through drinking the solace and support she is not getting from her husband. The culminating event, however, was when Jesse's son is accepted into Harvard and Uncle Eli decides to throw a party in his honor. Jesse tries to warn her family not to trust Uncle Eli, but because they are proud of Jesse's son accomplishments, they are "suckered into the cookout" (128). Jesse knows the event will be when Uncle Eli makes his final attempt to "embarrass them in front of everyone on Sugar Hill. To give the boy a real send-off by killing any last bit of respect he might have had for my side of the family" (129). The end result is exactly what Uncle Eli intended. It rains terribly that day.

Although he has ordered a tent, Eli makes sure there is no room under it for the Bell family.

And there's all of Sugar Hill under his fancy tent with their fancy clothes, chitting and chatting, with their champagne glasses. His flunky waiters runnin between 'em with little bits of grilled mushrooms, smoked cheese, and that kind of shit on silver trays. That sound like a cookout to you? So here come my people with the things they was supposed to bring: a crate of spareribs and about thirty chickens that Mother had cut up and soaked overnight in her special sauce, bowls of potato salad and coleslaw, cases and cases of beer. They stack all that stuff up in the corner of the yard, cause there sure wasn't no room under Uncle Eli's tent... Like I told you, I'm from proud people. And there was no way they were gonna go home with their tails between their legs just cause they'd been set up. (129-130)

In this scene Uncle Eli asserts his power by embarrassing and humiliating the Bells. By showing them to the inhabitants of Sugar Hill as low down, common, stereotypical blacks who know nothing about what he sees as high culture and proper society, Eli deals the final blow to Jesse's influence as well: "and the crowd under that striped tent looking out at 'em like they were a bunch of trained monkeys from the circus" (30). Jesse knew in advance what Eli was up to but could not convince her husband that the whole situation was a set up. Jesse's husband is anything but supportive of Jesse even going so far as to tell her to not keep trying to help her family because he is embarrassed to be associated with them. The ultimate breaking point for Jess's self-esteem comes when her Mother

dies as a result of catching cold at Uncle Eli's cookout (130). When Jesse loses not only her husband's and son's respect, but also literally her mother's life to Uncle Eli, she no longer has the will to keep fighting.

Jesse says, "Liquor wasn't enough after that. Nothing was enough to answer the questions that kept haunting me and haunting me-- when had Uncle Eli killed me in my own home?" (130). Eventually Jesse turns to heroin because "when you're that far up there, everything becomes clear...I mean you can see everything about your life, all the time" (131). Jesse is a woman who has been beaten down by the patriarchal community in which she tries to become a member. It is through the use of Jesse's character that Naylor depicts the reality that women can be individuals and have power, but the power they have can be stripped from them. In Jesse's case, it takes years to wear her down into becoming self-destructive and having no social value.

Because of her heroin addiction, Jesse finds herself in jail after the "dyke club" she frequents is raided. It is while sitting in jail that Jesse realizes this is the opportunity for which Uncle Eli has been waiting. He uses every bit of his influence to degrade her.

Her rejection of the Kings' value system is made explicit when her lesbian relationship, though accepted by her husband, becomes a reason for scandal and means for discrediting her as a wife and as a mother. In the strict codes of a patriarchal system such as is represented by Uncle Eli and his family, a woman can be only one kind of wife and mother. Any deviation in terms of sexuality is ostracized. (Ivey 92)

Because of her relationship with her friend, Jesse is seen as a woman unfit for any title that is associated with proper womanhood. Critics Lynn Alexander and Karen Schneider argue that Naylor is comparing Jesse Bell to the biblical Jezebel who is synonymous with “someone who is adulterous and seductive, a manipulator of men” (97) and “wicked, depraved woman” (11). Although this too is clearly how Uncle Eli sees Jesse, Naylor’s shows a woman who fought for nineteen years to keep her individuality as well as be a good wife and mother. Through the character Uncle Eli, Naylor shows how society or specific members in a community can erode a person’s sense of self-identity and independence.

So I’m out there by myself, on display like a painted dummy in a window as the name Jesse Bell came to mean that no-good slut from the docks and the nineteen years I’d put into my marriage didn’t amount to dog shit; the care I’d given my son-dog shit; the clothes I wore, the music I liked, the school I went to, the family I came from, everything that made me *me*-- dog shit. (Naylor 131)

Jesse believes that it is Uncle Eli who has caused her to lose every characteristic that makes her the independent woman she is. Prior to losing herself to heroin, Jesse is still a respectable woman. What Jesse loses sight of is the fact that Sugar Hill is only one small place in the world, she can move. There are many times in life when individuals cannot control what society or people in the community are going to do to them, but individuals often can choose how to react to what is done. This control of one’s own reaction is called being free. If an individual keeps his or her faith and does not surrender to despair,

there is always hope that one can overcome just about anything. What I am suggesting is that Naylor uses the character of Jesse Bell to demonstrate how a character can lose and eventually regain their sense of self pride.

It takes a very strong will and a dedicated individual to see through the evils of the world and find salvation. With regard to *Bailey's Café* and Eve's place, Naylor herself has stated that "if you have truly within yourself realized you're at the end of the world and that you have to do some thing with your life. You can leave it the mess that it is or you can pick it up and try to begin again" (Ashford 82). According to Naylor, spirituality is unique to each individual (82), which is a reoccurring theme in her novels. What Jesse is finally able to do when she decides to find Eve's is to become clean by beating her heroin addiction. In the section where Jesse and Eve meet, Naylor illustrates the struggle and complexity of the idea of free will. Eve visits the women's prison and its isolation cells intending to give her card only to those inmates who will seek help. Readers are told, "Many times [Eve will] walk back up that hall without having spoken to one of them or handed out a single card" (Naylor 133) because Eve believes "there's no need to waste directions on someone who's just going to spend her life staying lost" (133). When Eve sees Jesse in her cell, she stops, not because she "was moved by her story. But when [Jesse] was tired of wallowing in her own shit, [she could] come and find her" (133). Eve knows that every person is not intended to walk a spiritual path. Although Uncle Eli may have pushed Jesse until she reached the breaking point, it was still Jesse's decision to respond by using heroin. Just as simply, it is Jesse's decision to quit and restore herself to health.

After Jesse finally does find Eve's home, they return to Bailey's café to talk. Jesse relates her story and swears she is going to quit. Eve knows Jesse is only telling her a half truth and says, "I never waste my time. Never...Now you've put me in to the position of ensuring that I have not wasted this hour" (137). It is at this point that Eve takes Jesse out the back door of the café and asks Jesse what she sees. When Jesse replies that she sees nothing, Eve knows Jesse has no intention of quitting. The fact that Jesse cannot see anything but "black empty space" represents that Jesse does not have the faith within herself that is necessary for gaining her salvation. Eve pushes Jesse to the point where Jesse's pride is insulted. Jesse then sees the simple bedroom of her childhood (138). The appearance of this room in Jesse's imagination indicates her willingness to find herself and reconnect with a time and place when she knew who she was and had pride in her character. It is again Naylor who reinforces this critical point saying,

You have a choice. You can go outside the backdoor of Bailey's Café and find the void. It's a void that allows creativity because if you are strong enough you can create any world that you want...Other people go out there and create different things, and some people go out there to fall off the edge of the world. (Ashford 85)

It is out behind the café where Jesse begins to reassert her free will. She does not go out there to fall off the edge of the world. She is strong enough to create the simple room of her childhood, and as such Jesse truly does desire to change her life, to become reacquainted with her inner spirit and regain her independence.

Naylor places Jesse in her childhood bedroom because it was a time and place of innocence: a place where anything was possible. However, when Jesse comments on the room and asks where she is, Eve replies, “Hell” (Naylor 138). She does so because it was in this room where Jesse goes to quit heroin cold turkey, the first and second time. After her first round of detoxification from heroin, Jesse describes the experience as speeding along at seventy miles an hour without a car and then hitting a brick wall. “You don’t go unconscious, so you can feel crushed pieces of your skull stabbing back into your brain, your lungs collapsing in, each bone snapping and crumbling, your insides busting open as your guts rip apart” (138-139). It is necessary for the reader to understand the extreme of Jesse’s pain that she has inflicted on herself. Again, the notion that a spiritual path is not easy to take nor easy to stay on is reinforced in the novel. People are inherent sinners, bound to make mistakes. Salvation is not limited to those who never make mistakes because there is no such person. Naylor says, “we have within us the mechanisms to always keep going on. You know we all meet disappointments great or small and we have in us the ability to build again... There is no end to what the human spirit can do” (Ashford 85). In her novel she shows that individuals must embrace their inner spirits using it as a means to keep moving forward in their lives.

With Jesse’s struggle, Naylor makes the point even clearer. Although Jesse says she is clean after experiencing those four painful days in that room, she is not clean. Eve lays

the velvet case beside her on the bed. It was lined in sky blue silk. The eyedropper was made of crystal, the teaspoon and syringe pure silver, the

book of matches embossed. [Jesse asks Eve,] “What is this? Some kind of joke?” But the woman sitting on the edge of the bed was definitely not laughing. “You think I’d touch this crap after what I’ve just gone through?” “Yes,” Eve said, “I do. But the next time you shoot up, it’s going to be with style.” (Naylor 139)

This is not the only time that Eve tempts Jesse. After the second time Jesse quits cold turkey Eve presents her with another velvet case. The point Naylor is trying to make here is that individuals have free will. In this scene, Eve, as Naylor says, is

there to show people who come that way that they can make it. No one’s going to nurture them into making it. It’s tough love. They have to reach within themselves and pull out either something spiritual or...psychological or...physical or something in order to go on. (Ashford 85)

The room that they are in is a manifestation of both Jesse’s free will and her faith in her own ability to find her spirit within to heal herself. When she chooses to keep her faith and rise above her addiction, she asserts her true character.

Resting a bruised and swollen hand on the velvet case beside her, Jesse turned her head to look around at the room that had no doors. “The needle is gold this time, isn’t it?” “It’s gold,” said Eve. “And if I made it through, I suppose I’d get platinum. Would that be the end of the line?” “Remember where we are’ that’s only the beginning of what’s available here.” (Naylor 142)

Through the act of tempting Jesse, Eve is simply reminding her that the choice will always be hers. Critic Lynn Alexander argues that “feminine salvation...demands self-knowledge, self-worth, and self-determination, not just a vague desire for redemption” (98). And although Jesse argues that it was Uncle Eli who has stripped her of her good name, Naylor presents the idea that it was Jesse’s ultimate action exercising self love that motivated her free will that will help to alter her behavior and save her. The bottom line is this: As individuals we all have choices to make in our lives. If we think we are going to walk through this life without ever getting knocked down, we have another think coming. In the end, it is Naylor who points out what most people know, but do not want to admit: Ultimately, it is we who make the mistakes, and it is we who, if we are strong like Jesse, can fix those mistakes. Life is meant to be a journey of trial and tribulations. Sometimes it is not only society we have to fight against to assert our individuality, sometimes the toughest opponents we face are ourselves.

Dressing Up for Self-Acceptance

Up to this point Naylor's novel has given a presentation of the unique characteristics of women and their journey to individuality and independence through embracing their inner spirit and healthy self-affirming forms of sexuality. It may come as a surprise then that near the end of the novel Naylor introduces the character of Miss Maple. Miss Maple is a unique even among the individuals who live in Eve's house. Unlike the other characters, he does not take gentlemen callers. Miss Maple is, in fact, a male character named Stanley, whom Eve hires him to be her housekeeper.

At first read Miss Maple's character is one which poses great difficulty for maintaining the line of interpretation that thus far has been presented. In fact, few critics even address Naylor's male character and those who do brush lightly over his presence in the novel. One critic, Sylvie Chavanelle argues that Naylor's use of Stanley in the novel is to "include action and suspense, with a satirical slant" (62) and as a means to present the "essential element of the blues [that] mitigates our feelings and saves the narrative from an excess of sentimentality: humor" (71). Arguable, Stanley's story is anything but humorous. When viewing Stanley through the critical lens of Judith Butler, the purpose of his story in Naylor's text becomes clearer. In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler argues that "sex [is] a biological facticity, and gender [is] the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity" (404). Furthermore, Butler asserts that "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (406). According to Butler historically society has defined and redefined gender based on a certain set of criteria that include dress, actions,

and mannerisms. If a person is seen successfully “acting” the part of a man, that individual is identified as masculine. The argument is also true for women. This critical point seems straight forward until one asks the questions: Is there really masculine and feminine or, as Butler argues, are human beings simply bodies upon whom societies and cultures place identities?

Miss Maple is a perfect example of Butler’s argument when she says,

If gender is the cultural significance that the sexed body assumes, and if that significance is codetermined through various acts and their cultural perception, then it would appear that from within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender. (407)

This argument rings true until you consider Miss Maple from Naylor’s point of view. Much as she did with the female characters in the novel, Naylor, through the character of Miss Maple, is commenting on just how judgmental US society is when considering a person’s gendered appearance. And how that judgment can and often does limit a person’s ability to connect with his or her own inner spirit and live their lives with agency. In the case of Naylor’s other female characters, society deemed them perverse because they dared to embrace their sexuality. In the case of Miss Maple, society deems him unfit, not only because he is black, but because of how he prefers to dress. Miss Maple’s dress is an extension of his spirituality which Naylor is showing should not be bound by society, but determined by Stanley’s own desire of expression of comfort and self acceptance.

When the reader is first introduced to the character of Miss Maple he is being degraded and called a faggot by Sugar Man (163). It is Bailey who is quick to point out that “Miss Maple isn’t a homosexual” (163). In fact when Bailey originally meets Miss Maple, he was “dressed like a Wall Street banker” and has “a cultured voice and it’s clear he’s had a lot of schooling” (164). Ironically, Miss Maple had come into the café with one purpose, and that was to wait until Gabe’s pawn shop opened so that he could purchase a revolver and one bullet (165) with them, he intended to commit suicide. With his initial appearance of that of a cultured Wall Street banker, it leads the reader to wonder: how did this man get the name Miss Maple and why does Sugar Man call him a faggot? The answer, a sequence of events that take place in Stanley’s life which lead to his redefinition of his spirit and self-acceptance, goes straight to the essence of Butler and Naylor’s argument.

Miss Maple wears dresses. Light percale housedresses most of the time, because he’s Eve’s housekeeper. But in the summer, when he takes a day off he might show up in here with a backless sundress or a little cotton romper. We’re talking no wigs. We’re talking no makeup. No padded falsies. No switching. And if it’s near the evening, we’re talking a five o’clock shadow that he runs his hands over like any tired man after a day of hard work. (163)

This might lead to one surmising that a man who prefers to wear dresses is homosexual or exactly what Sugar Man says when he uses the disparaging term “faggot.” This assumption is no less biased than arguing that because Peaches enjoys sex she is a whore.

Stanley lives contentedly with his masculinity, but prefers to wear dresses because he is comfortable in his own skin. At the very least, he is a man who appears to have an identity crisis. Miss Maple, however, is not a man trying to act like a woman and even he says, “If I intended to be impersonating a female, wouldn’t I have done a better job than this? (204). Simply because an individual prefers to dress in a particular fashion does not mean he intends to be the gender that is presumed to be socially aligned with the clothes he is wearing. Butler makes the point that

the redescription needs to expose the reifications that tacitly serve as substantial gender cores or identities, and to elucidate both the act and the strategy of disavowal which at once constitute and conceal gender as we live it. The prescription is invariably more difficult, if only because we need to think a world in which acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express nothing*. (414)

Sugar Man and the majority of people who see Stanley wearing a dress make the very presumption that Butler argues needs to be addressed. There are direct correlations in our society regarding a person dresses and what gender characteristics and identity we assign to that person despite the individual’s own sense of identity, which is exactly what Naylor is emphasizing. Miss Maple is in fact simply a man who has become connected to his multifaceted inner spirit and is living his life with agency because of his self awareness.

Naylor further describes Miss Maple in a manner that causes readers to question Stanley's motivation in choosing to dress the way he does.

In fact, it's impossible to look at the way Miss Maple walks in here and not see a rather tall, rather thin, reddish brown man in a light percale housedress. And that's about it, with the exception of a pair of flat canvas sandals to round off the outfit. He'll straddle the counter stool like a man, order in a deep voice, and eat his meal in a no-nonsense fashion. And if you want a conversation-although most folks don't-he'll hold one with you in a very same manner. (163-164)

After analyzing Miss Maple's mannerisms, it is clear that he is and associates himself with being "masculine." Miss Maple will tell a person very succinctly regarding wearing a dress that he has learned, "Those dresses weren't making a bit of difference to anyone but me. On the upside, I'd never felt more like a man" (204). And so, how does the transformation take place from the appearance associated with a Wall Street banker to one of a dress-wearing housekeeper?

In telling Stanley's story, Naylor depicts a very strong-willed man and his journey to self identity. At the onset of his introduction, Stanley tells the reader, "My name is Stanley. My middle names are Beckwourth Booker T. Washington Carver...Papa named me after great men because he expected the same from me" (165). There is no mincing of ideas here when looking at such a powerful name. The name itself is enough to cause a person to struggle with who he is and how meeting the high expectations that have clearly been set for them will be achieved. Through a series of stories the reader also

learns that Stanley dislikes his father because his father is constantly being picked on by his brothers for being weak and preferring reading and learning over field work and fighting (174). As a result of seeing his father taunted, Stanley has fostered an opinion of him as weak and not courageous. But what humiliates Stanley more is how the community sees his father. Early in his character description Naylor has set Stanley in a position where society judges him because of his appearance, much in the same they do with the female characters in the novel. Because they are black, own a great deal of land and are very prosperous, the majority of the community, which is white, does not care for them. In fact, when his father goes to town in his nice car and fancy clothes he is often the victim of vandalism and insults (172-173). When Stanley's aunt Hazel tries to tell him that his father is "teaching me something very special: how to be my own man" (173), he dismisses the idea as somewhat of a joke because "I thought my father was pathetic for never fighting back...I didn't see him as a man at all" (173). Naylor is using the character of Stanley to emphasize how judgment is not solely limited to females. Stanley has always associated being a man with the kind of actions his uncles partake in: working hard, drinking, and fighting back when people were disrespectful to them. That is until the day he is forced to accompany his father to town to get his graduation present.

The present is a complete set of Shakespeare's works bound in leather and gold leaf. Initially, Stanley does not consider it "a real man's gift" (175), but it is on this particular visit to town that Stanley learns what it means to be truly a man. Father and son are harassed by a group of whites known as the Gatlin boys. Who are nothing more than lower class racists (176). The harassment the Gatlin boys dish out is pretty routine,

shouting insults, until one of the boys asks Stanley's father, "How is it that [you] think [you] can parade all up and down town wearing them clothes" (179). To which Stanley's father simply replies "I wear these clothes because I can" (176). Because of the manner in which he replies the Gatlin boys become enraged and, in an attempt to humiliate them, proceed to cut off Stanley and his father's clothing and locking them in a storeroom. At this point, disgraced, Stanley loses his temper and shouts at his father that he is nothing (181). Because of the father's seemingly inaction, it is not surprising that Stanley does not understand his father or that Stanley is ashamed of him. While locked in the store room, Stanley's father tries to explain who he is and why he has raised Stanley the way he has.

From the day you were born I've been speaking to you in a language that I wanted you to master, knowing that once you did, there was nothing that could be done to make you feel less than what you are, and I knew that they would stop at nothing to break you-because you are mine. And I wanted their words to be babble...as you learned your own language, set your own standards, begin to identify yourself as a man. You see, to accept even a single image in their language as your truth is to be led into accepting them all. (182)

Stanley's father is trying to teach him one of the most important lessons any person can learn, a lesson Naylor exemplifies time and again through her characters: You are not who or what people tell you that you are. A person gains independence and individuality by simply being him or herself, allowing all the negative stereotyping and labeling of

society to fall to the wayside. Butler's argument is that the way we present ourselves in dress and through our actions are seen as codes for our identity. The coding and often stereotyping by society of human individuals, as Butler and Naylor argue, does not allow for the individuals inner spirit to be freely expressed. Society as a whole is continuously guilty of only seeing people at face value and making snap decisions about individuals personalities based solely on what is seen. And the Gatlins only "see" prosperity when they see Stanley's family. In the eyes and mindset of the Gatlins, prosperity is something belonging only to white people and as they do not have it, they are enraged with jealousy towards Stanley and his family.

After his speech to Stanley, his father searches for any clothes he can in the space where they are, so that they can defend themselves clothed. The only items available for them to wear just happen to be women's clothes. Dressed in a "red taffeta with spaghetti straps and a huge circular skirt puffed out with yards of lace crinoline" (184), Stanley's father proceeds to beat every last Gatlin down to no more than the skin and bones of flesh that they are. All the while he is beating them he is also telling them that he is a peaceful and sensitive man who through the grace of the Lord and hard work is nothing close to being their degraded and ignorant equal (185-186). Furthermore, he impresses upon his son that "There is no greater strength than what is found within. There is no greater love than reaching beyond the boundaries to other men. There is no greater wealth than possessing true peace of mind" (186). What Stanley's father has said is the essence of Naylor's argument. A person is the sum not of their dress or their actions, but of who they are within. What their great inner spirit moves them to be is who they are. Because

of his father's actions Stanley has begun to see his father as physically strong and emotionally tough. He now begins to understand his father's philosophy on life; that he chose not to fight, not because he could not, but because most of the time fighting only brings an individual down to the level of the protagonist. Despite that he and his father are wearing dresses, Stanley comments, "I would have followed him, dressed like anything, bound for anywhere" (186).

Because we are all citizens in a society that says making mass assumptions about a person's identity based solely on appearances is appropriate, many readers may have a very hard time understanding Stanley's decision to wear dresses, arguing that that no man is going to start wearing dresses simply because he comes to understand his father. Stanley's story is similar to Jesse Belle's in that neither character can say with definite resolve that it was one specific incident that leads to the alteration and subsequent revival of their inner spirit. Through the telling of Stanley's story, Naylor shows that a person's inner spirit can be defined and redefined by a number of encounters. Although Stanley has become comfortable with his identity in his home town, he continues to grow when he goes to college. When at college Stanley eventually majors in mathematics because he sees it as less subjective than the other disciplines. Stanley has a multifaceted inner spirit and through each experience he has, he demonstrates how he refused to be placed in a stereotyped identity.

When Naylor shifts the story to Stanley's choice of professions it is because she wants to emphasize the critical point that expectations based on a person's race and ethnicity often is judged just as quickly as their dress. Unlike clothing, however, skin

color is something an individual cannot simply take off. While attending college Stanley is rejected at the Red Cross blood bank simply because of his race and ethnicity. Stanley is then drafted into the infantry during WWII, but refuses to go because as he states to the draft board, "If my blood wasn't good enough for the Red Cross, why were it good enough to be spilled on the battlefield?" (189). Because he is a Conscientious Objector, Stanley is sent to prison for three years. Stanley is constantly being reminded that because the U.S. society evaluates a people's identity based solely on their race, his inner spirit and human individuality is not being seen.

Readers may be tempted to reason that one defining moment for Stanley's choice of clothing is the result of his rape while it is in prison. His cellmate stares at him for weeks, and then starts whispering "I'm gonna fuck you or kill you" (193). The way Stanley sees the situation, he has a choice to make. And he chooses life. In the chapter titled "Assume the Position" Patricia Hill-Collins presents an important argument to be considered. She says many in the American prison system use institutionalized rape as a way to create and maintain a masculine power structure that mirrors the heterosexual society of the "free" world that exists outside the prison walls. Hill-Collins' research shows that in prison the social power structure is established and maintained by inmates sexually objectifying each other. The weaker members of the population are sexually dominated by the stronger inmates. If one is raped or penetrated, one becomes feminized, and thus become the "women," who become the property of other men within the prison population. The only way to regain the perception of one's masculinity is to penetrate or rape another man (236-237). When considering Stanley in Naylor's novel, Hill-Collins'

assertions make the character's role clearer. Stanley endures rape at the hands of his cellmate, and yet Stanley asserts that "I was never raped, because I never resisted" (193). Hill-Collins' argues, however, that resistance is not required for sexual violence to be considered rape. A person not wanting to partake in such an activity is not the rapist's concern. But having control of his own actions, choosing to resist or not is key to remaining masculinized in his own sense of himself. Stanley knows that it is also a choice of either allowing his cellmate to take him sexually or kill him. Under those circumstances, it could be surmised that the sexual violence inflicted on Stanley by another man changes Stanley, initiating him into an effeminate state. It is Stanley himself, however, who combats that idea, stating "And I bet you're thinking, So *that* explains it. Well...you're wrong...I am not a homosexual, but I'm not stupid either" (193). The choice for Stanley, although forced, is clear cut. In order to survive Stanley knows he must not resist his cellmate because if he does so he will end up like the Mexican kid who got a "box parole" (193), taken out of prison dead. In choosing life, Stanley maintains his masculine identity and his own sense of self.

Just when the answer to understanding why Stanley chooses to wear a dress appears to be provided, Naylor continues on with his story. Although his experiences with his father and prison influence Stanley's decisions, it also is through his doctoral degree in mathematics that Stanley comes to wear dresses. As he travels the American countryside searching for a job, he endures one rejection after another. Stanley is not foolish, he understands that although the job advertisements state that they want the "most qualified man" (197) for the job, they mean the most qualified white man. Instead

of submitting to and allowing himself to be mentally defeated by the practices of Jim Crow racism, Stanley decides to deal with the rejections as if they are a math problem, working the probabilities of just how many positions he can be rejected from in just how many cities. When Stanley is working the numbers and laws he feels “it [is] liberating” (197) to know that it is not him personally who is to blame. He tells every person he meets in every interview, no matter how many times they have met him, his full name because “I want to be remembered” (197). After talking about the concept of statistical independence and working toward the probability estimate of total failure (199), Stanley arrives at the fact driven conclusion that there is not really one thing that is keeping him from getting hired except his racial identity.

I always signed my entire name at the end of the query letters that stated my qualifications, and it headed every page of a marketing proposal-- Stanley Beckwourth Booker T. Washington Carver-how could they not realize I was an American Negro? (202)

Herein lies the brilliance of Naylor’s argument. Rather than seeing the obvious references in his name, because Stanley looks so impressive on paper, with his PhD and all the marketing analysis proposals he does, no prospective white interviewer can imagine that a black man can be responsible for such genius. So, they call him in for interviews, expecting a white candidate. It is at this point that Naylor points an incriminating finger at US society, forcing readers as individuals to come face to face with their own prejudices and assumed judgments of people. Clearly, racist white people were not going to hire Stanley because he was black, so what difference did Stanley wearing a dress

make? None at all. And so, Stanley makes a practical choice: He wears dresses as a way to beat the heat waves that leave his perspiring body riddled with welts and blisters as he goes from job interview to job interview.

Those dresses weren't making a bit of difference to anyone but me. On the up side, I'd never felt more like a man. With each new town I was growing stronger in purpose, having no excuse for not working from dawn until well after dark....I could talk as if I'd been working in the field for years with a ring of authority in my voice...I knew more about [the product] than many of the companies distributing them--and it showed. In the way I walked into an office. The way I leaned toward a desk, flipping open a portfolio. Sometimes forgetting that with French pleats I had to close my legs. (204)

Critic Rebecca Wood believes that Miss Maples' character is used by Naylor as a metaphor to emphasize the abuse of the African American people. "[Stanley's] body displays the stigmata of black collective memory and rebels against Stanley's attempts to transcend race" (385). Undoubtedly this idea is clear, however, Naylor uses Stanley's character to show more than a black man's ability to endure abuse at the hands of a predominantly white society. Naylor's male character is used to once again emphasize that although society may judge and classify a person, that individual, through embracing their inner spirit, can raise themselves to independence.

Stanley is a perfect example of Butler's argument depicted in a character. When the interviewers meet Stanley who is wearing a dress, they see a black man in dress; they

do not see the intellect behind the application. On paper, Stanley is the perfect individual for the position. In person, Stanley has proven his theory that his inner spirit and intellect mean nothing, but his appearance means everything. What many people neglected to recognize is that Butler also argues that society needs to look beyond the physical including one's race and perceived gender, to focus on a person's character. "Gender appears to the popular imagination as a substantial core which might well be understood as the *spiritual* or psychological correlate of biological sex" (411 emphasis added). That reduction of the individual to appearance alone does not work for understanding the females or this male in Naylor's novel. Butler's point is that society leaves it to and goes no further than their imaginations to determine a person's character based on appearance and mannerisms to judge individual's characters. The only association that can be made about Stanley as "feminine" is because he wears dresses. Everything he does, from walking into a room to sitting on a bar stool to eat, indicates that he is masculine in his sense of self. In composing a letter in his head to his father Stanley says

"Papa," I will say, "the language you taught me is wonderful. I have been in small towns and large cities; I have been in clothes of every description. There is no doubt--nor ever will be--that I am a man. And it doesn't bother me that practically no one in this country understands a single word I say."
(212)

When Stanley meets Eve he is accepted for who he is: a man in a dress. He comes to live and work at Eve's. Through his job there he is able, in his free time, to put his marketing

research and knowledge to good use writing jingles for domestic products and winning contests that eventually lead Stanley to become very prosperous (213).

Butler ends her essay by stating that

Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds. (414)

In essence, Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* is an exercise in exactly the idea of relinquishing power to those who through their creative inner spirit and sexuality find individuality, self love, and self acceptance. As a result of Naylor's novel, the cultural field of bodily interpretation has been broadened and those who read the novel just may begin to look at all individuals in a new way. Naylor's whole presentation of the characters can be established through one quote. It is Stanley who when looking out over the land his family owns and considering what to teach his future children says, "I must, above all, teach them that our dictionaries are totally useless when it comes to the definition of this dream. Look out there, I will tell them, and what you see is..." (195). Naylor's message is clear; a person cannot put into words the sum total value of land or of a dream by simply looking at it. A person must experience that dream; ideal; sense of self identity, inner spirit, or sexuality; or self love to its fullest very much in the same way that one cannot define the value of a person or his or her character by simply looking

at them and only seeing his clothing, or her scared face, or her garden. The true value of a person's spirit comes from how we use what we have within us.

Closing Statement

In *Bailey's Café* Naylor uses feminized characters to demonstrate many of the fundamental characteristics of Christianity that have been often overlooked by patriarchal societies using religion as a means to maintain "power" over others. What they often forget is that Christ ministered to individuals who lived on the margins of society. He reached out to those whom society had deemed as unfit and had discarded; in much the same way, Naylor's character Eve reaches out. Through Eve, Naylor reminds readers of the importance of unconditional love, generosity, and hospitality, all of which are cornerstones of Christianity. Christian spirituality is not something that is meant to be locked up inside; it is meant to be lived. In the Bible it is stated that God made people in His image, and as thus, the inner spirit each individual carries is an extension of the Lord. This is the message that Naylor presents through her female characters.

Using blues music as a conduit, Naylor has told the stories of remarkable marginalized women who through their own unique struggles in life have learned the fundamental importance of unconditional love, and have extended that love to those they encounter. Naylor has forced readers to travel beyond their comfort zones to recognize that each individual carries within a unique inner spirit that can be expressed in a number of different ways. Varied across the full spectrum of humanity, those means of expression are no less acceptable than any other.

In the discourse of critical analysis regarding *Bailey's Café* a great deal of work has been done to support the idea that Naylor parallels many biblical characters in an attempt to demonstrate how, through the guise of Christianity, patriarchal societies have

marginalized women. Many critics, Lynn Alexander especially, argue that Naylor “creates a discordant parallel with biblical traditions, which identifies women through implied sexuality rather than actually transgression, in which the movement shifts from women as whores to whores as women...” (93). Furthermore Alexander asserts that Naylor’s women use their sexuality as a survival mechanism (93) to endure the oppression they receive at the hands of the patriarchal society, but that the female characters, even through their arrival and stay at Eve’s, do not always transcend recovery (99). Undeniably Naylor recognizes and comments on the many ways that the patriarchal society objectifies women. What Naylor does with her female characters, however, is to create a space where they can and do reclaim those objectified bodies. Naylor is making a bold statement: Her marginalized female characters understand and embrace the power of their sexualized bodies. Naylor’s characters are more than simply surviving patriarchal society. Through embracing their sexuality, which is an extension of their Christian spirituality, they come to embrace their inner spirit and live with purpose and agency.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Lynn. "Signifyin(g) Sex: Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* and Western Religious Tradition." *He Said, She Says*. Ed. Mica Howe and Sarah Appleton Aguire. Cranbury: Rosemont, 2001. 91-105. Print.
- Ashford, Tomeiko R. "Gloria Naylor on Black Spirituality: An Interview." *MELUS* 30:4 (Winter 2005): 73-87. Web. 30 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable.pdf>>.
- Bender, Carol and Roseanne Hoefel. "Toward a Literacy of Empathy: Inhabiting Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*." *Gloria Naylor: Strategy and Technique, Magic and Myth*. Ed. Shirley A. Stave. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001. 182-195. Print.
- Bromell, Nick. "The Blues and the Veil: The Cultural Work of Musical Form in Blues and '60s Rock." *American Music* 18:2 (Summer, 2000): 193-221. *JSTOR*. Web 11 March 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable.pdf>>.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia Press, 1997. 401-417. Print.
- Chavanelle, Sylvie. "Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*: The Blues and Beyond." *American Studies International* 36:2 (1998): 58-76. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web 11 March 2011. <<http://web.ebscohost.com.www.remote.uwosh.edu>>.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999. Print.

- “The Good Wife’s Guide.” *Housekeeping Monthly*. 13 May 1955. Print.
- “Free Will.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 49:1 (Jan. 2002): 1-18. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Web. 2 June 2010.
- Hill-Collins, Patricia. “Assume the Position: The Changing Contours of Sexual Violence.” *Black Sexual Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 215-245. Print.
- hooks, bell. “Selling Hot Pussy.” *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia Press, 1997. 113-128. Print.
- Ivey, Adriane L. “Beyond Sacrifice: Gloria Naylor Rewrites the Passion.” *MELUS*. 30:1 (Spring, 2005): 85-108. *Oxford College of Emory University* Web. 20 July 2010. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable.pdf>>.
- Lewis, Nghana tamu. “In a Different Chord: Interpreting the Relations among Black Female Sexuality, Agency, and the Blues.” *African American Review* 37:4 (Winter, 2003): 599-609. *MLA Bibliography*. Web. 20 July 2010. <<http://web.ebscohost.com/www.remote.uwosh.edu>>.
- “Lily Meaning and Symbolism.” *Avica Veneflca*. 2010 Web. 3 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.whats-your-sign.com>>.
- “Lily: The Meaning & Symbolism of Lily.” *Teleflora*. 2010. Web. 3 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.teleflora.com/about-flowers/lily.asp>>.
- Lorde, Audre. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury. New York: Columbia Press, 1997. 277-282. Print.

- Montgomery, Maxine Lavon. "Authority, Multivocality, and the New World Order in Gloria Naylor's *Baileys Café*." *African American Review* 29:1 (Spring, 1995): 27-33. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 March 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable.pdf>>.
- Murray, Albert. "The Blues as Dance Music." *Black Music Research Journal* 10:1 (Spring, 1990): 67-72. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 March 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable.pdf>>.
- Murray, Albert. *Stompin the Blues*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1979. Print.
- Naylor, Gloria. *Bailey's Café*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. Print.
- Rogers, Bruce Holland. "What is Magical Realism, Really?" *Speculations* (2002): 1-3. *Google.com*. Web. 25 June 2010.
- Schneider, Karen. "(E)merging (Im)possibilities in *Bailey's Café*." *Gloria Naylor's: Early Novels*. Ed. Margot Anne Kelley. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999. 1-20. Print.
- Spirited Filled Life Bible: New King James Version*. Jack W. Hayford. gen. ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publisher, 1991. Print.
- Swindell, Anthony. "Latecomers: Four Novelists Rewrite the Bible." *Biblical Interpretations* 15 (2007) 395-404. Koninklijke Brill: Leiden, 2007. Web. 11 March, 2011. <<http://web.ebscohost.com.www.remote.uwosh.edu>>.
- Thyreen, Jeannine. "Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*: Redefining God and (Re)Claiming the Spirit Within." *Christianity and Literature* 49:1 (1999): 49-66. *MLA Bibliography*. Web. 24 Jan. 2010. <<http://web.ebscohost.com.www.remote.uwosh.edu>>.

- Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens." (1974): 2430-2437. Print.
- Wasserman, Jerry. "Queen Bee, King Bee: *The Color Purple* and the Blues." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 30 (2000): 301-316. Print.
<<http://www.jstor.org>>.
- Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." (1966): 1-4. Print.
- Whitt, Margaret. "*Bailey's Café* as Sports Bar, or Why Baseball Needs a Way Station." *Callaloo* 23:4 (2000): 1464-1474. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 March 2011.
<<http://www.jstor.org>>.
- Wilkins, Amy C. "'So Full of Myself as a Chick': Goth Women, Sexual Independence, and Gender Egalitarianism." *Gender and Society* 18:3 (2004): 328-349. *MLA Bibliography*. Web. 7 July 2010.
<<http://web.ebscohost.com.www.remote.uwosh.edu>>.
- Wilson, Bobby M. "Review: [untitled]." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90:4 (Dec 2000): 801-802. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 March 2011.
- Wood, Rebecca S. "Two Warring Ideals in One Dark Body": Universalism and Nationalism in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*. *African American Review* 30:3 (Autumn, 1996): 381-395. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 March 2011.
<<http://web.ebscohost.com.www.remote.uwosh.edu>>.