

ÉVA MIKLÓDY

“REDEFINING THE “OTHER””: RACE, GENDER, CLASS, AND VIOLENCE IN GLORIA NAYLOR’S *BAILEY’S CAFÉ*”

What is most striking about *Bailey’s Café* (1992), Gloria Naylor’s fourth and latest novel, is its narrative structure which recreates the form of the traditional blues in an inventive and masterful way. Her book is, however, not only a bravura of form, but a highly lyrical rendition of human suffering and desperation. It is an unquestionable fact, though, that Naylor’s adaptation of the form and content of the blues enables her to simultaneously represent extraordinary human pain and misery in extreme proportions and, to alleviate the despair and grief inherent in this theme with the “melody” of her blues, that is to say, the lyricism of her expression. Put differently, her novel accomplishes what Ralph Ellison suggests about the blues, that is, that it “keep[s] the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience in one’s aching consciousness, [it] finger[s] its jagged grain, and transcend[s] it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” and it creates “autobiographical chronicle[s] of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically” as well (qtd. in Murray 130). Accordingly, *Bailey’s Café* centers on loneliness, alienation, uprootedness, and lovelessness as experienced by the various characters of the book.

The novel’s multivocal blues structure is comprised of a series of narratives told from the specific points of view of these characters, who frequent Bailey’s café, which functions in a “clean, well-lighted place” fashion for society’s “waste,” the wretched of the earth, who “fall through the cracks of the upswings and downswings” (*Bailey’s* 41). At this point, it seems important to note Naylor’s obvious interest in places

that can serve as asylums for social outcasts, people marginalized in a variety of ways. In her first award-winning novel, for example, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983), Brewster Place, a ghettoized neighborhood offers temporary shelter for a bunch of colored women whose lives have gone awry and there is no other place for them to go. Bailey's Café, located on an indiscriminate street of New York City, functions in a similar way since it is, as Naylor describes it, "the last place before the end of the world for some[...]" (68) and is "sit[ting] right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility[...]" (76). The same applies to Eve's boardinghouse, and Gabe, the Russian Jew's, pawnshop, which are similar "waystations" for recuperation in the vicinity of the Café.

Bailey's Café, though not in the position to grant perfect salvation to its refugees, offers the possibility of a remedy of some sort. As Bailey, the narrator of the book, points out in the novel, "We do nothing here but freeze time; we give no answers—and get no answers—for ourselves or the next man" (219). "If life is truly a song, then what we've got here is just snatches of a few melodies. All these folks are in transition; they come midway in their stories and go on" (219). This also explains that Bailey's is not an ordinary café in the traditional sense of the word. People go there not to eat or drink but, as Bailey explains, to "[hang] onto to the edge,"—the edge which is the Café itself—and, to "take a breather for a while" (28).

This novel, by assembling people who belong to various race, gender, class, as well as social and cultural background offers a chance to reconsider the notion of the "other." My aim, then, in this paper is to look at the dispossessed and marginalized frequenters of Bailey's Café, and to examine the conceptual basis that allows the use of the notion of the "other" to define them. I will, however, also put forth the idea that Naylor's book revises and extends her previous assumption of the "other" as represented in *The Women of Brewster Place* and that she thus reconceptualizes this notion in a significant way. Since a major component of these narratives is violence, I will also examine the types and functions of violence and point out how violence can define these characters as the "other."

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor brings together a small body of women who share a unique form of oppression because they are victims at once of sexism, racism, and, by extension, of classism. This is,

in fact, one of the basic tenets of black feminist criticism, which, in view of this complex system of the black woman's oppression, labels the black woman as the "other." Since the concept of the "other" can emphasize difference in a meaningful way only in relation to somebody else, black feminist critics hold the view that the "other" encompasses all that are black, female, and from a lower social class in opposition with their white, male, and middle-class counterparts. This also shows that black feminist critics have appropriated and accommodated the concept of the "other" to suit their expressed political aims.

My main contention is that in *Bailey's Café*, Naylor renounces this restrictive and exclusory view of the "other," and she rather integrates the variables of race, gender, and class, in order to achieve a more humanistic and universalistic illustration of the "other." For example, she reconsiders and alters the unequivocal role of blackness in the definition of the notion of the "other." Her obvious intention is to blur the color or racial as well as the ethnic lines when she merges the following ethnic configurations in Stanley, alias Miss Maple's, ancestry, who is one of the male patrons of Bailey's Café: "[...]I had aunts of all assortments: pure-blooded Yumas; full-blooded Negroes; full-blooded Mexicans; Yuma-Mexicans; Mexican-Irish; Negro-Mexicans; and even one pure-blooded African who still knew some phrases in Ashanti: all hearty and strong" (171). One of the best representation of Naylor's attempt to synthesize or integrate differences is Miss Maple's original name, Stanley Beckwourth Booker T, Washington Carver, which, according to some critics, is also an example of a move towards "cultural homogenization". Stanley's name refers to prominent African-Americans in United States history; James Beckwourth, a frontier explorer; George Washington Carver, a renown scientist and inventor; and Booker T. Washington, who himself was a spokesman for assimilation (Wood 384).

The figure of Mary (Take Two)—originally called Mariam—gives evidence of the possibility of combining various religious and cultural practices and backgrounds. Mariam, a fourteen-year-old black Ethiopian Jew, is a highly ironic personification of the Virgin Mary of the Holy Scripture, who, defying historical time and cultural environment, becomes impregnated by immaculate conception in the green hills of Ethiopia and gives birth to her son, George, in New York City. Prior to her expulsion from her native village and, because of her suspicious

pregnancy, Mariam, according to the Beta Israel customs, undergoes female circumcision. Her son, George, born of the still virgin Mariam, serves as a Christ figure, a redeemer for the forlorn customers of Bailey's café: "[...]maybe it's meant for this baby to bring in a whole new area. Maybe when it gets here, it'll be like an explosion of new hope or something, and we'll just fade away" (160). One critical opinion holds that George also "embodies the connection between African past and American future because of conceptual geographic history" (Wood 390). It is, in fact, the entire scene of George's birth as well as the naming ceremony and the ritual of circumcision following it that testify to the possibility of a synthesis of racial, gender and cultural differences, with all of the book's outcasts present. There is Gabe, the Jew, an embodiment of the messenger angel, Gabriel, because it is he who directs Mariam and all of the social outcasts of the book to the Café; Bailey, the main narrator of the book, whose real name remains unknown and who assumes the name of the Café out of convenience—for not having to change the sign on the Café—a war veteran from Brooklyn; his wife, Nadine, a prototype of African beauty; Miss Maple with his highly mixed racial, ethnic and even sexual background. There is also Eve from the Louisiana delta, who dismisses her sexual identity altogether and claims to have created herself sexless out of the mud of the delta. By acting as midwife at George's birth, she actually lives up to what her name means. There is Mary(Take One) alias Peaches, a light-skinned beauty from Kansas City, as well as Jesse Bell from the docks of Manhattan Island and Esther, a coal-black woman. Despite their differences, they are capable of celebrating George's birth in unison by singing a popular Christmas carol which can be considered as the cultural code of their newly established community of outcasts. This underlines the idea that "there [can be] harmony between opposing rituals and traditions drawn from a multicultural background" (Montgomery 32).

Naylor also expands the category of gender as a significant component of otherness by changing the all-women-community of Brewster Place into one of both sexes. She even shows that there are instances in which it is not one's sexual identity that makes one eligible to be the "other." In one case, sex is shown as interchangeable and is completely eliminated, in another. Stanley or Miss Maple assumes a double sexual identity, when he willingly accepts his female nickname,

Miss Maple, given to him by Eve after she starts to employ him as her housekeeper and bouncer of her boardinghouse. Miss Maple, true to his name, also wears a dress and sandals when doubling as housekeeper.

Eve, whose origins are unknown, since it was her Godfather who found her “in a patch of ragweed, so new [she] was still tied to the birth sac” (83), generates a sexless identity when, escaping from her Godfather’s tyranny, she emerges from the Louisiana mud: “I had no choice but walk into New Orleans neither male nor female—mud. But I had right then and there choose what I was going to be when I walked back home” (91).

For both Stanley and Eve their manipulation with their sexual identity is a self-liberating and self-defensive act. Stanley liberates himself from his painful memories of the torments of his job search. He is not only capable of coping with his situation in his assumed identity as a woman, but this also expresses that his mental and physical suffering is commensurate with the suffering of women who have the capacity to bear it better than men. Bailey observes right at the beginning of the book that “a woman can drag the whole thing out—over years—and pick, pick, pick to death” (5).

For Eve, relinquishing her sex, makes it possible for her to become everybody’s mother, and thus to start her boardinghouse into which she takes women who are in need of both mental and physical recovery. She is a redemptive figure who is even able to assume supernatural power and use magic and conjure for healing.

By changing Stanley into a woman and Eve into a sexless person, Naylor has also been able to give evidence of the fact that the “other” is not necessarily a gender-specific category.

Naylor also allows her characters a relatively large degree of class mobility and, by doing so, she suggests that the notion of the “other” is not determined by belonging to a particular social class either. Jesse Bell from the Manhattan docks marries into a rich middle-class black family, which does not change the contemptuous attitude of Uncle Eli toward her and her family. Stanley’s well-to-do, middle-class background calls for hate and humiliation from the poor and uneducated Gatlin boys.

These examples offered by Naylor’s novel show that “the other” is a larger and more flexible category than has been interpreted and employed by black feminist critics and than is represented in *The*

Women of Brewster Place. Moreover, *Bailey's Café* also breaks new ground in the sense that it introduces yet another factor on the basis of which the concept of the "other" can further be expanded. Naylor, in this book, offers a new perspective from which to re/consider the notion of the "other," by acutely describing the shared experience of violence of all of the book's characters. What follows from this is the fact that it is all of society's victims, who, as the critic Mark Ledbetter argues, "have inherited the scars of marginality from the abuse imposed on their previous generations" and who, therefore, "willingly embrace violence done to their bodies and even inflict violence to their own bodies," that can be termed as the "other" (Ledbetter 39).

In accordance with what he also says, that is, that "violence characterizes otherness," (22) violence seems to be a paramount experience for all of the characters of Naylor's novel. Bailey has gone through the hell of Pearl Harbor; Gabe, the Jew, has had a "front-row seat" in the holocaust. Both male and female characters suffer sexual assault as well, of which rape is a major type. Women's bodies are, however, violated sexually in so many ways that rape as a sexually violent act has to be also reconsidered. Sadie's mother, a prostitute, for example, uses a coathanger to abort the unwanted consequences of her regularly "being raped." Sadie is the product of one case when the coathanger failed to operate properly. She hears her mother say "The One the Coathanger Missed" so often that she thinks for a while that is her real name. Sadie's mother, in fact, exemplifies those who both embrace and inflict violence to their bodies. Sadie, who suffers from her mother's lack of love for her, follows in her mother's footsteps: in order to regain her mother's love, she also prostitutes herself and uses peroxide on a pair of forceps to kill her unwanted children. Esther is sold by her brother to a rich boss so that he can derive material gain. As a grave consequence for Esther, she has to satisfy the sexual fantasies of her brother's sado-mazochistic landlord for twelve years. Down in the cellar where she is taken each time, she painfully realizes that she will soon have to learn how to "play" with the sharp-edged "leather-and-metal things" that the boss calls "toys" and she will equally learn that "in the dark, words have a different meaning" (*Bailey's* 97).

Stanley, though not actually raped, experiences the threat of rape when in prison for refusing to fight in the war, which is almost as dreadful as rape itself. As he says, "[he] was never raped, because [he]

never resisted” unlike the Mexican kid, “who made the mistake of being too pretty and to unwilling” (193).

The ritual of circumcision, in itself an act of violence, becomes even more dreadful as soon as is done out of material interest. When Mariam, in Ethiopia, is prepared for her future marriage by being circumcised, the village midwives sew her up tighter than usual to raise her value as a wife. It is interesting to note though that when George’ circumcision takes place we cannot think of it as an act of violence any more since the emphasis shifts onto the act as a ritual of male initiation done quickly and properly.

Mary, a beautiful nymphomaniac, performs a violent act on her own body because she cannot cope with the discrepancy between her external image as a sexual object to be savored by men and her internal image as an innocent child. When she realizes that her external image has overpowered her internal image, and that she actually enjoys being the whore that she has become, she cuts up her face in order to take control of that image and to reconcile her appearance with her damaged self-concept.

On the basis of the examples discussed above, I suggest that Naylor’s characters, in *Bailey’s Café*, define themselves as “other” through their common experience of violence, which is not limited to physical violence only, but implies mental and emotional violence as well. Ledbetter argues that “the most intimate act of naming, knowing and experiencing is through metaphors of the human body,” and thus “body metaphor lays claim to the world and narrows the distance between who we are and the experiences we have, by describing the world with the most personal terms we have, ourselves” (Ledbetter 12). Violence is, therefore, such a metaphor, by which we can fathom the specific experience of the “other.”

It can be, thus, concluded that Naylor revises and reconceptualizes the notion of the “other” by shifting the emphasis from gender, race, and class, onto the “violated body.” Anyone who suffers violence becomes a victim, thus Naylor adds another oppositional relation to the already existing ones of male/female, black/white, lower-class/middle-class, that of victim/victimizer. Since all of us have experienced or will experience some form of violence during our lifetime and therefore, at such moments become the “other,” I find such approach to the definition of the “other” a more humanistic and universalistic one. In *Bailey’s Café*

there is a scene which very well represents that each human being is a potential victim of violence beyond the boundaries of race, gender, and class. It is George's naming ceremony, when all of the Café's hopeless pilgrims join in a gospel song of hope:

Anybody asks you who you are?
Who you are?
Who you are?
Anybody asks you who you are?
Tell him—you're the child of God. (225)

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