

“What Shall I Give My Children?”
The Role of the Mentor in Gloria Naylor's
The Women of Brewster Place
and Paule Marshall's
Praisesong for the Widow

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“What Shall I Give My Children?”

*What shall I give my children? who are
poor,
Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land,
Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand
No velvet and no velvety velour;
But who have begged me for a brisk
contour,
Crying that they are quasi, contraband
Because unfinished, graven by a hand
Less than angelic, admirable or sure.
My hand is stuffed with mode, design,
device.
But I lack access to my proper stone.
And plentitude of plan shall not suffice.
Nor grief nor love shall be enough alone
To ratify my little halves who bear
Across an autumn freezing everywhere.*

Gwendolyn Brooks¹

The question Gwendolyn Brooks asks in her poem "What Shall I Give My Children?" is a central question asked by African Americans: how can I who am considered less than perfect by mainstream America give to my children a sense of their own self-worth? In a culture where being poor, black, and female triply marginalizes an individual, what kind of consciousness develops from such marginality? How does such marginality carry over into the next generation and into the community of other women? How does the power of mentoring and affiliation help women to overcome the institutional oppression leveled against them because of race, gender and class? Gloria Naylor and Paule Marshall create in their fictional worlds the answers to some of these questions.

Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place* exposes the sources of power among women traditionally seen as powerless, women who create a community which is non-threatening to the outside world precisely because its inhabitants are marginal, or to use a phrase from Gwendolyn Brooks, "sweetest lepers." In her book *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*, Nina Auerbach argues that women's communities are usually seen as defective or transcendent: either there is something wrong with women who choose to live together without men or there is something other-worldly about them.² The common attitude toward women is that women's completeness is dependent upon their involvement in heterosexual relationships. Auerbach goes on to argue that women themselves internalize this view and also see women's communities as incomplete or defective. Yet Naylor's women of Brewster Place stand against many of these values. It is not that her women are indifferent to men, for many of their joys and their miseries are a result of their involvement with men. The energy of Brewster Place arises out of the women's affiliation with each other, however. It is their sense of responsibility for the welfare of each other that binds them together. Though marginalized by mainstream standards, these women develop a sense of their own worth and pass that same worthiness on to others in the community.

Paula Giddings in her book *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* begins with an epigram from Toni Morrison which captures the same power that Naylor depicts. About the black woman Morrison says, "... she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality, she may well have invented herself."³ Naylor creates for us a community of African American women

who not only invent themselves, but also take responsibility for assisting others in the act of self-creation. Self and other are inextricably linked in the consciousness of the women of Brewster Place, and such linkage is the source of power in this community. African American women writers, Gloria Naylor among them, have been under some attack for their apparent need to elevate black women at the expense of black men. Certainly in *The Women of Brewster Place* only the shadowy figure of Kiswana Browne's lover, Abshu, and the drunken janitor Ben are portrayed in a favorable light. Ben has been humanized by his suffering over the loss of his daughter, though mostly he must remain drunk to stave off the pain. Abshu represents the black male who gains his self-esteem and confidence from his return to African heritage and his desire to help the community of black people in Brewster Place. The other males in the novel are seen as negative primarily because they are shown to be selfish: Basil with his whining, wheedling ways, Eugene who can only blame Ciel for his unemployment and his burden of the family, Reverend Woods who takes advantage of Etta Mae's "generous" nature for the evening and then dumps her back at Brewster Place. Whether African American women writers are unduly harsh on black males is as much a political and social issue as it is a literary one. One must be sensitive to the concern that a traditionally marginalized group feels about the lack of solidarity among its members. On the other hand, writers are more than social advocates. While I have not sought to explore the relationships between men and women in these novels but rather to examine the relationships primarily among the women, the issue of gender relations and the black experience is one that needs further study, especially in the areas of racial consciousness, gender identity, and power relations.

Brewster Place is an urban neighborhood conceived by white male politicians, a housing project built on worthless land to appease voters and to line pockets or ensure political bids for the progenitors of the project. What started out as a housing project for returning WW I veterans became an ethnic neighborhood for Mediterraneans and finally the home of blacks migrating to northern cities in search of greater prosperity than the South provided. Naylor writes, "Brewster Place became especially fond of its colored daughters as they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home. . . . They cursed, badgered, worshiped, and shared their men. . . . They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster

Place. . . . Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story."⁴

The narrative device Naylor uses to develop the idea of African American female consciousness is the voice of the mentor. The novel is told in seven parts, each from the perspective of one of the inhabitants of Brewster Place. Naylor creates a series of mentors, women whose voices reverberate throughout the novel, and each mentor carries the voices of past mentors who have healed her and bound her to the community through shared experiences. They teach each other and support each other in their misery. The seven sections in the novel are tied together with a number of cinematic techniques: the collapsing of time into a flashback or a brief image; the use of setting to unite scenes, especially the street scenes in Brewster Place; the power of sensory impressions, like the smell of food cooking; the "camera's eye" which moves in and out of the apartments on Brewster Place. The most pronounced linkage among the sections is established, however, through the use of the mentor's voice, appearing and reappearing throughout the novel, echoing from one character to another.

The novel opens with the arrival of Mattie Michael, the central consciousness in the novel, to Brewster Place. A mature woman by the time the novel begins, she acts as the able spiritual and emotional guide for many of the other female characters she meets there. As the moral agent in the novel, Mattie represents the voice of charity and sensitivity, a woman whose suffering has not made her bitter and competitive, but rather strong and supportive. Mattie herself comes from a long tradition of affiliation among women. The consciousness she possesses at the opening of the novel is a "fortitude/pain-bought," to quote Paul Laurence Dunbar, the product of much anguish at the hands of her lover, her father, and her son.⁵ Yet it is the consciousness of a woman nurtured first by her mother, and then by Eva Turner, a woman who takes her into her home and makes her a part of the family, when she and her son Basil are homeless. Eva's voice reverberates in Mattie's ear long after Eva is dead and the pain of Mattie's past long over. As Mattie stands on the street outside her new home on Brewster Place, she recalls those thirty years in Eva's home. She remembers the warnings Eva gave and she disregarded about pampering Basil and thereby crippling him. Yet Eva was always there for her, even when Mattie could not help herself from loving Basil too much. One of the most poignant sections of the novel is the treatment of the deep mother-love Mattie showers upon Basil and the resulting weakness of character it produces in him.

Love does not humanize him; it makes him shiftless, selfish, and weak. Naylor does not blame the victimized Mattie, however; instead she shows the complex interrelation between mother and son, older woman and younger man that develops under Eva's roof.

The mature Mattie becomes the sage, the mentor, who is no longer passionately troubled or troublesome. She is the calm, unifying force, who suggests proper values through actions, rather than preaching and cajoling. The voice of the mentor can certainly be critical, as Mattie's is toward Etta Mae Johnson, for example, because the mentor operates with a system of values she abides by deeply. In being critical, however, Mattie does not deny Etta Mae's worth as a friend.

Etta Mae arrives in Brewster Place, an aging black woman who has always made her way in the world by attaching herself to men. They have hurt her but she knows no other way of life. When Etta Mae lights upon an affluent preacher as a suitable prospect, again Naylor draws with sensitivity the complexities of women's hopes and women's friendships. Etta sees the preacher as a prospective husband, someone who will provide security. Mattie is stunned by the extent to which Etta can delude herself into believing the preacher's attention is anything more than a "mating dance." The two women quarrel, but Etta's words do not wound Mattie for they have a shared history of communication, even on uncomfortable subjects. Mattie's insight into human vulnerability makes her sensitive to Etta's desperation, just as Eva's insight once made her sensitive to Mattie's plight. Mattie reveals her character and her solidarity with Etta in the observation, "Sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is a time for silence. A time to let go and allow people to hurl themselves into their own destiny. And a time to prepare to pick up the pieces when it's all over. Mattie realized that this moment called for all three" (70). Mattie shows a generosity of spirit and ability to counsel and to refrain from counsel. Late in the evening when the disappointed Etta returns to Mattie's apartment, it is Mattie who has left a light in the window and the music playing. Etta, understanding that Mattie will not scorn her, climbs the stairs "toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her" (74). Just as Eva Turner saved Mattie years before, and just as Etta Mae was Mattie's rescuer when Mattie was young, unmarried, and pregnant, here Mattie rescues Etta. Naylor treats effectively the reversal of roles and the ennobling power of love as women sustain each other.

In perhaps the most affecting scene of the novel, the one Naylor says was the starting point for the book, Mattie rescues Ciel Turner, Eva's granddaughter, from a death she has willed for herself. The scene opens with talk of a baby's funeral and then follows with a flashback to Ciel's life of anguish with Eugene, the father of her daughter Serena who has died. Ciel is passionately tied to him, even when she hears "nagging whispers of trouble" concerning their relationship. When Eugene pities himself, complaining that no one cares for him and blaming her for costing him so much money, Ciel responds to him with total selflessness. She has an abortion to protect him from further responsibility and worry, yet he plans to leave her anyway. During their dispute, the baby, Serena, left alone in the kitchen, is electrocuted when she puts a fork into a light socket. Unable to bear the losses, Ciel wills death for herself. Mattie, seeing Ciel dying before her very eyes and refusing to accept it, literally rocks Ciel back to life. Through human touch, Mattie rocks Ciel across history. She becomes not an individual mother who suffers the loss of her child, but one of the multitude of sufferers, collectively connected to mother suffering: "It was exorcising the evilness of pain" (103). Mattie, in the images of mother and midwife, assists Ciel in rejoining the world by binding her to other victimized women who too had to find a way to exorcise the pain.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* other characters also serve as mentors, but what they all share is the power acquired through experience to be whole and human, despite the dehumanizing culture that surrounds them. They seek to support others, to prepare others to meet the world with pride and self-worth, despite the fact that they have been "adjudged the leastwise of the land." These women have overcome the problem of identity that Gwendolyn Brooks presents.

Brooks's poem also reverberates throughout Paule Marshall's novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*. To answer the question "what shall I give my children," some African American parents would shape an answer in favor of materialism, teaching their children the work ethic and the model of success epitomized in the American dream. To achieve success the children must perfect themselves by white standards because the white power structure determines who will have access to material well-being. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. analyzes the problem of adhering to this theory of perfectibility, whereby blacks internalize a sense of themselves as defectives and seek to perfect themselves by white values and standards. In his book *Black Literature and Literary Theory*,

Gates argues that when blacks accept white values, they do it at the expense of their own identity and self-worth.⁶ Like Gates, some black parents see the danger of perfecting oneself in the white image to gain wealth and success, and, indeed, counsel their children to learn about their African heritage and to connect themselves to their ancestors and the culture they provided. The conflicts between materialism and spiritualism are central to Marshall's novel. While Paule Marshall, in her novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, uses only the oxymoron "sweetest lepers" from the Brooks poem, the central question asked in the poem becomes the premise for Marshall's novel.

Avey Johnson, the central character, involves herself in a personal quest which leads to her discovery of her heritage and to the re-discovery of herself. Structured in four parts, the novel traces Avey's quest as she rejects the material world in favor of the spiritual world. She seeks her own personal history as a way to place herself in the history of black people, a history within the white power structure, which has marginalized blacks and called them defective by white standards. Avey has been able to obliterate this history because of the measure of wealth and success she and her now-dead husband have achieved over the years. At sixty-four, the widowed Avey experiences an awakening and an alteration in values that arise from her journey, both literal and figurative.

While the journey is the dominant structural device in the novel, each of the four parts has specific formal devices to create meaning. Each part is characterized by a unique setting which elicits meaning or memory in Avey. Also each part is characterized by the artistic elements of black music, particularly blues, jazz, and gospel; dance; and poetry. These black art forms become associated with spirituality and a life connected naturally to African culture, while the artifacts of white culture becomes associated with decadence and deadly materialism.

Part one, "Runagate," which takes its name from the Robert Hayden poem about slaves escaping to freedom, establishes the conflict in the novel between materialism and spiritualism through the technique of juxtaposition of setting. At the opening of the novel, Avey is aboard the *Bianca Pride*, a cruise ship, when she experiences a dream vision that returns her as a child to the summer visits with her great-aunt Cuney in the South Carolina Tidewater. The literal journey, the cruise, is interrupted because of a visionary journey Avey makes with her aunt to the Landing, the place in South Carolina where Avey's ancestors, the Ibos, were brought ashore as slaves. In her dream,

Avey recalls the lesson from her aunt learned years ago but forgotten until now. Cuney told her of the visionary or spiritual capabilities of the Ibos: "those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one."⁷ When the Ibos looked at the Landing, the story says they walked on water, trying to get home. The implication is that the Ibos could see into the future, a future of enslavement and deprivation at the hands of the white masters, and that seeing what lay before them, they tried to flee. The parallels in faith, determination, and spirituality the story draws between the Ibos and Christ are internalized by both Cuney and Avey.

Avey, however, had spent her adult life trying to escape the lesson taught by the Ibos and carried on by Cuney's grandmother and Cuney herself. Her escape had been executed by material well-being achieved for the past fifty-odd years. Aboard the cruise ship, the epitome of white materialism, Avey's consciousness is awakened to the false values she had been living by. She becomes aware that the recollection of Cuney and summer journeys to the Landing call her to duty: "in instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill. It had taken her years to rid herself of the notion" (42). The rest of the novel details her journey away from the mind-dulling effects of materialism and toward a recovery of identity tied to her history taught by her mentor, Cuney. The decision to leave the cruise ship is motivated not only by the dream of her youth with Aunt Cuney but also by the juxtaposition of settings, the Landing with the cruise ship, particularly the Versailles Room. Her daughter Marion, the political activist aghast that her mother would even consider a cruise, said of the dining room, "Versailles. . . . Do you know how many treaties were signed there, in that infamous Hall of Mirrors, divvying up India, the West Indies, the world?" (47). Avey looks at herself and her two black companions in a mirror and sees three blacks totally isolated from the whites. In fact, everyone is isolated from one another; the tables look like remote islands. When Avey is served dessert, "Peach Parfait a la Versailles," the imagery of excess does not escape her. She is sickened by the white values reflected in the cruise ship, its passengers, its food, the excess in the material world that has been gotten at the expense of black people. With such a recognition of the false values which erupts through the juxtaposition of settings, the Landing and the Versailles Room, Avey leaves the cruise ship to begin a different kind of journey,

one which strips her of material values and renews the spirituality she learned from Cuney.

Part two, "Sleeper's Wake," set on the island of Grenada, is also structured by the journey motif and by the juxtaposition of settings. The journey is a visionary one, like the recollection of Cuney and the Landing. She recalls in a dream her life with Jerome Johnson, her deceased husband, and in that dream, Marshall contrasts Halsey Street with North White Plains. Halsey Street, where they had spent their young married life, Avey recalls with great fondness. It was there that Jay, as she called him, dedicated himself to his family and their success. While he was being ground down in work and rejected for advancement because of his color, he escaped through music--blues and jazz. These art forms represent solace and life itself to him, while he devoted himself to rising in the world. Jay perfected himself by white standards. He earned all the credentials that mark one's access to the world of money and power: a college degree, a CPA license. Finally by his wits and ambition, rather than white generosity, he succeeded. If asked "What Shall I Give My Children?" surely he would have answered money, education, a home, and status. He was able to move them from Halsey Street to North White Plains, but Avey wonders at what cost to himself? She understands that in his pursuit of "white" credentials and success, he put aside his jazz and blues albums, the music that once put life back into him after his work siphoned most life from him.

When Avey considers what they lost in the move, she says, "Something vivid and affirming and charged with feeling had been present in the small rituals that had once shaped their lives" (137). The music and dance that filled their young lives together disappeared: "something in those small rites, and ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the praisesongs of a Sunday . . . had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power" (137). Jay, who internalized the Puritan work ethic with a vengeance, suffered a death of the spirit in the process of accumulating material wealth, a Mephistophelian bargain.

To demonstrate Avey's awakening, Marshall embeds in Avey's insight her recollection of Cuney's words. Avey says to herself that to avoid the loss of one's soul in pursuit of wealth, "It would have taken strength on their part, and the will and even cunning necessary to withstand the glitter and the excess. To take only what was needed and to run. . . . Above all, a

certain distance of the mind and heart had been absolutely essential. 'Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem, but her mind was long gone with the Ibos.' " (139). At the end of "Sleeper's Wake," the emotional crisis of the novel passes and Avey awakens from her visionary journey through her domestic life prepared to recover what she has lost.

"Lave Tete," part three, is structured by the same journey motif and contrast of settings that characterize the first two parts. Avey walks out of the hotel, stripped of her middle-class, fashionably-attired facade. The rather plain black woman walks along the beach, where she meets Lebert Joseph, a new-found mentor who, like Cuney, points her in the direction of self-discovery and spirituality. Because she cannot "call her nation," Avey is persuaded to make the excursion to the nearby island of Carriacou to observe those who can. The wharf setting causes her to recall summer excursions her family used to make on the *Robert Fulton*, it was on this boat ride, as the young Avey observed the multitudes of black people, that she was aware of a connection among them all. "For those moments, she became part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity" (191).

On board the "Emanuel C" on its way to Carriacou, she widens the confraternity to include these people of Grenada who welcome her into their midst. On the journey to the island, several old women soothe her with "maternal solicitude" as she rids herself of the material world. In a fit of vomiting, she feels the weight inside her break loose, a weight that she noticed on board the cruise ship at the lavish meal in the Versailles Room. In her mind, she links these black women on the "Emanuel C" with those women who presided over the rituals at Mount Olivet Baptist Church in Tatem. Cuney, Lebert Joseph, the old women of the church and the island all merge as part of the confraternity she will join willingly.

Part four, "The Beg Pardon," opens with Avey cleansed, like a newborn, of the material world. Empty in both mind and body, she is ready to fill the gaping hole inside herself. This part of the novel brings us full circle. She realizes the dance the people now perform is exactly like the Ring Shout that the old people did at Mount Olivet. When Avey observes and then participates in the ritual dance, The Beg Pardon, the threads she once sensed connecting the black people on the *Robert Fulton* now connects her to her people and heritage: "Looking on outside the church in Tatem, standing waiting for the "Robert Fulton" on the crowded pier at 125th Street, she used to feel them streaming

out of everyone there to enter her, making her part of what seemed a far-reaching, wide-ranging confraternity" (249).

Avey's awakening is complete when she acknowledges the mission she is duty-bound to fulfill. Each summer she will bring her grandchildren to the Landing and tell them the story of the Ibos and the spirit that connects them all.

Both Naylor and Marshall treat the power that arises from marginalized groups who forge a community out of their common history. In each of the novels, the mentor binds people together in this common history. Unlike Gwendolyn Brooks's speaker who says "My hand is stuffed with mode, design, device/ But I lack access to my proper stone," the mentors in these novels have gained access to their stone. They have been able to create or sustain an identity that is often undermined by bigotry and hatred. To answer "What Shall I Give My Children?", they might respond with Baraka's words that "there were black angels straining above her head, carrying life from the ancestors, and knowledge, and the strong nigger feeling."⁸

Notes

¹Gwendolyn Brooks, "What Shall I Give My Children?" *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 53.

²Nina Auerback, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 5.

³Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam, 1984), epigram to Part One, "Inventing Themselves."

⁴Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (New York: Penguin, 1980), 5. Further references will be made within the text.

⁵Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Misapprehension," *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1968), 126.

⁶Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 5-10.

⁷Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1984), 37. Further references will be made within the text.

⁸Amiri Baraka, "Ieroy," *Collected Poetry by LeRoi Jones* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) quoted in *Praisesong for the Widow* in the epigram to Part One, "Runagate."

Critique

In her discussion of Mattie Michael and Avey Johnson as mentors in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Wells uses as a focal point Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "What Shall I Give My Children?" It is a socially and politically institutionalized assignment that becomes cosmic when experienced by African American women. Joanne M. Braxton expresses it: "As Black American women, we are born into a mystic sisterhood, and we live our lives within a magic circle, a realm of shared language, reference, and allusion within the veil of our blackness and our femaleness. . . ." ¹ Wells quotes Toni Morrison regarding the black woman: "She has nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of her reality, she may well have invented herself." And she invented a self that shaped her identity within the constrictions of a hostile network that wove a tapestry of bonding, the foundation of becoming a mentor, or providing "ancestral presence" to borrow phrases from Braxton, in the image of "the outraged mother." The roles of mentors and bonding are survival mechanisms, spiritually and physically.

Harry B. Shaw, categorizing Brooks's poetry, placed "What Shall I Give My Children?" under the heading "The Labyrinth--111 Surviving in the Labyrinth"² and states:

Miss Brooks's poetry depicts an elaborate system . . . or labyrinth, . . . characterized by myriad pitfalls, dead ends, endless wrong choices and other hazards, and the poet refers figuratively to it as "the way back home or Mecca," or alludes to a spiritual return to Africa which is consistently depicted as the embodiment of the original dignity and freedom for the black man. It is the tortuous road that lies between spiritual death and spiritual rebirth. . . .³

Wells describes Mattie Michael as the "moral agent" in *The Women of Brewster Place*, representing "the voice of charity and sensitivity, a woman whose suffering has not made her bitter