GLORIA NAYLOR
OTHER PLACES
REVEALING A WRITER’S ARCHIVE
SEPTEMBER 1 - MAY 27
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Introduction

Gloria Naylor (1950–2016) was a gifted storyteller, teacher, scholar, and archivist whose work explores the beauty and complexity of Black women’s lives in the 20th century. She is best known for her novels—*The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, *Mama Day*, *Bailey’s Cafe*, *The Men of Brewster Place*, and 1996.

Naylor’s writing is filled with other places—locations that disrupt white supremacist, misogynist histories and geographies—whose spatial dynamics gather, shelter, or propel her characters and plots. In Naylor’s third novel, the “Other Place” is the home of Mama Day’s ancestors. It is a place where, through lost documents and dreams, she accesses both the grief and the power of her family’s history from enslavement to the creation of a vibrant Black community. Taking a cue from the “Other Place,” each section of the exhibition highlights a place that Naylor imagines in her novels, researches in historical documents, visits on research trips, or lives in herself. These places offer insight into Naylor’s visionary portrayals of the creative strategies Black people, especially Black women, employ to thrive despite oppressive social, political, and economic structures.

In her novels, Naylor honored Black women’s archival practices as a form of resistance and in her own archival practice, she saved drafts of her creative works, carefully crafted letters, and meticulously compiled research materials. In Naylor’s novels, Black women document their histories by making quilts from beloved clothing, collecting records, creating photo albums, writing recipe books, and making commentaries in the margins of authoritative texts. Naylor’s own collected papers document her artistic process and also contribute to twentieth-century literary and intellectual history, making her archive a creative achievement in its own right. In Naylor’s life and in her novels, archives are “other places” that affirm the lives and contributions of Black women often sidelined in state archives and dominant histories.
Brewster Place

*The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor’s first novel, was published in 1982, won the National Book Award for best first novel in 1983, and was produced as a television miniseries starring Oprah Winfrey in 1989.
A collection of “seven stories,” the novel’s interconnected chapters detail the experiences of Black women who live in an apartment building on Brewster Place, a setting loosely inspired by a Harlem apartment building owned by Naylor’s grandmother Luecelia McAlpin (whose first name is shared by one of the novel’s characters). Naylor’s 1998 novel, *The Men of Brewster Place*, returns to this setting with a focus on the men living there.

*The Women of Brewster Place* is as much a portrait of the dead-end street itself as of the women who dwell there. It begins with the street’s birth as a result of corrupt meetings between politicians and real estate developers. Even though the women revolt in a dreamscape to break down the wall that separates Brewster Place from the rest of the city, the novel ends with the street’s quiet death, as a result of “court orders and eviction notices.” *The Women of Brewster Place* offers a sharp portrait of the politics of place, the promise (and the limitations) of Black cultural traditions and community in the context of twentieth-century U.S. racism, urban poverty, and gentrification.
This is the oldest document in the Gloria Naylor Archive, written while the author was a student at CUNY-Brooklyn College. In 1979, Naylor broke onto the literary scene when she published a short story called “A Life on Beekman Place” in Essence magazine. A second story, “When Mama Comes to Call,” also appeared in Essence, and the two pieces would later become chapters in The Women of Brewster Place. As in her first publication, the eponymous street in this early draft of the novel is “Beekman Place,” a name that Naylor later changed to avoid confusion with a real Beekman Place on Manhattan’s East Side.
Letter from Gloria Naylor to Robb Forman Dew, May 29, 1985

This letter is one of many over the years between Naylor and U.S. novelist Robb Forman Dew in which the writers discuss their lives and literary endeavors. Here, Naylor describes – on her new word processor – her recent move to an apartment in Hudson Heights, on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Several letters in the archive describe Naylor’s multiple searches for this apartment, after spending four months living in her sister’s basement. In another epistle, to novelist Pat Barker, she writes that her three requirements are light, space, and a view of the Hudson River. As in this letter, Naylor often writes privately about the importance of space to her writing process.
Linden Hills

Naylor’s second novel, *Linden Hills* (1985), is set in an affluent Black neighborhood. The novel begins with Luther Nedeed’s purchase of the land in the nineteenth century. An undertaker and landlord, Nedeed originally leased property to “local blacks who were too poor to farm,” and his heirs turned the property into a private enclave catering to wealthy Black men and their families. Under their stewardship, Linden Hills becomes “an ebony jewel” that reflects the American dream of wealth and property ownership, but “reflect[s] it black.” The novel’s chapters tell the stories of inhabitants of Linden Hills who sacrifice parts of themselves to gain economic success. Naylor’s novelforegrounds how these characters, by giving up “the sanctuary of their culture,” fail to understand structural oppression and abandon radical critique of racial capitalism.
Naylor worked on *Linden Hills* in the months prior to and during her time in a graduate program in Afro-American Studies at Yale University. Archival materials reveal how Naylor’s experiences at this elite institution influenced her approach to the novel. Her research bibliographies, for instance, show that she read numerous twentieth-century sociological studies of the Black middle class. In a journal entry from 1981, Naylor anticipates that her time at Yale will itself have research value: “I’m sure *Linden Hills* will grow within the next two years because in New Haven I’ll be in contact w/ the type of people I’m writing about.”

Handwritten Journal Entry, July 11, 1981

In the summer of 1981, Naylor traveled to Spain, Morocco, France, and Germany, anticipating that “solitude” and a “different atmosphere” would inspire her writing for *Linden Hills*. But, in this journal entry, written while she was in a hostel in Cadiz, Naylor describes the European atmosphere as uncongenial:
“‘Can anything good come out of Europe?’ I thought so—misled by Baldwin & Hemingway & Vidal I really thought so. But I need a community—a reflection of myself & there’s nothing here.” This journal entry underscores the importance of U.S. Black community spaces and neighborhoods to Naylor’s writing process during the early years of her career.

Handwritten Journal Entry, October 24, 1981

While Naylor began the MA program at Yale University in the fall of 1982, she kept a journal reflecting on her academic experiences and her writing process for *Linden Hills*. In this entry, Naylor considers how she will apply the “concentration and ability [she has] achieved in her creative projects” to literary criticism. Exploring the tension between these two pursuits, Naylor writes that *Linden Hills* is “calling to be created,” and she resolves to devote her Saturdays exclusively to the novel. Other journal entries explore how Naylor’s experiences of conflict between a
predominantly white, elite educational institution and Black culture and community shape her portrayal of Linden Hills.

Handwritten Journal Entry, December 22, 1981

In this entry, Naylor considers the centrality of the South to her own origin story even as she affirms the cosmic reach of her art. She muses that, even if she were “stranded on a desert island,” she would still write, her words “wasted and worn by natural forces but punctuated correctly in the memory of the cosmos.” She ends the entry by returning to her own beginning: “Once upon a time, there was a little black girl who was conceived in Tunica County, Mississippi.” This brief journal entry evokes the geographic trajectories featured in so many of Naylor’s novels: Southern birthplaces, northward migration, and islands with distinctive epistemologies.
Single-page notes and sketches on scraps of paper like these are a commonplace in the archive. In these two sketches, Naylor maps the geography of Linden Hills, the circular drives that descend down a hill toward the home of the neighborhood’s founding family, Luther Nedeed and his heirs (labeled “L’s house” in the smaller sketch). The lined tablet paper, a note about the neighborhood’s logic and characters (some of whom never appear in the published book), is the earliest dated material pertaining to Linden Hills in the collection. Overall, these notes and others like them leave documentary traces of Naylor’s writing process from maps of structural schemes and timelines of historical details to citations of inspirational literary quotations.
Naylor submitted a draft of *Linden Hills* as her MA thesis. African American studies scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. served as her advisor for the project. Naylor once described *Linden Hills* as her “intellectual book,” characterized by deep engagement with “American social thought.” Her thesis proposal includes a bibliography with works by Black intellectuals including Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Horace Mann Bond, and E. Franklin Frazier. In the proposal, she describes the process of writing *Linden Hills* as a realization of the productive counterbalance between her training as a critic and her “contributions as a creator.”
Chris Van Allsburg’s representation of Linden Hills, with homes perched on a hillside, aligns the viewer with Luther Neeed’s perspective, looking up toward the neighborhood from his home at the bottom of the hill. This is the cover art for the first edition of *Linden Hills*, published by Ticknor and Fields in 1985.
Robin Harris’s cover art for Methuen’s U.K. edition foregrounds the novel’s reference to Dante’s *Inferno*, with rings of fire representing Linden Hills’ circular drives, and visually underscores the parallel journeys taken by the novel’s main characters, Willie and Willa. In her thesis proposal, Naylor described their relationship: “Willie must find a way to come to terms with this society’s definition of manhood for him and Willa must do the same with its definitions of womanhood. While Willie is at the top of the hill and moving down, Willa is at the bottom of the bottom of the hill and making a circular trip through time.” This cover image emphasizes how Black women and working-class Black men in the novel contend with dominant social ideologies, historical narratives, and physical space.
Typed Letter from Corlies “Cork” Smith to Gloria Naylor,
September 19, 1984

Corlies “Cork” Smith (1929–2004) was Naylor’s long-time editor, working with her on almost all of her novels, with the exception of The Women of Brewster Place (1982) and 1996 (2005). In this letter, Smith shares the cover art for Linden Hills for Naylor’s approval. The archive includes numerous letters between Smith and Naylor, many of which document the business of publishing in the 1980s. Naylor’s epistolary exchanges with Smith and other correspondents portray the challenges Black women authors faced in the overwhelmingly white and still predominantly male publishing industry as well as Naylor’s strategies for navigating them.
India

In November 1985, Naylor spent three weeks in India as a cultural lecturer with the United States Information Agency. During her stops in Mumbai, Kolkata, Aurangabad, Mysore, and Hyderabad, Naylor met with Indian scholars, writers, and activists for lectures, readings, and seminars on “Contemporary Black Women Writers in the US.” Reflecting on her trip, Naylor wrote appreciatively about her interlocutors’ “intellectual enthusiasm.” Concerning her conversations with Dalit (lower caste) writers, Naylor wrote: “it is a rich source for the appreciation of the structural relevance involved with my being a minority writer in a majority culture.” As Naylor traveled more, she increasingly positioned her novels in conversation with minoritized cultures from varied historical and geographical settings.

Naylor stayed in contact with many of the women she met on this
trip, and the correspondence in her archive reflects a growing transnational network of literary scholars and writers. For instance, after *Mama Day* was published in 1988, the journalist Ammu Joseph sent copies of the review she wrote for *The Indian Post*, and Naylor also exchanged several letters with Anjum Katyal of Seagull Books. Naylor’s trip to India fostered a growing understanding of global audiences for her writing. This broad perspective is apparent in her subsequent novels, *Mama Day* (1988) and *Bailey’s Cafe* (1992), which situate the Black diaspora more explicitly in the context of global social justice.

United States Information Agency, India Tour Travel Itinerary, September 1985

On her trip, Naylor read from *Linden Hills* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, lectured on “Contemporary Black Women Writers in the U.S.,” and participated in conferences at Jadavpur University, the American Studies Research Center in Hyderabad, Osmania
University, the American Center in Mumbai, Maradwatha University, and the Literary Criterion Center for English Studies in Mysore. In addition, she gave interviews with *The Telegraph* and *Radio India*.

Handwritten Letter from Gloria Naylor to Corlies “Cork” Smith, November 29, 1985

In this letter to her editor, Naylor explores how her experiences in India have shifted her understanding of herself, her writing, and U.S. citizenship. She writes, “I have had to redefine poverty, silence, and laughter. But what has been especially touching is that these seminars have forced me to redefine myself. The various intellectuals who have presented papers . . . are under the impression that I’m an American writer. . . To them, being black is an American experience . . . It’s odd, I had never considered what I have to bear at ‘home’ a weight until someone lifted it off.”
Handwritten Letter from Nabaneeta Dev Sen to Gloria Naylor, January 14, 1987

Naylor first met Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1938–2019), a prolific Bengali poet and scholar, during her 1985 visit to Jadavpur University. Dev Sen was publicly known for her bracing honesty and irreverent tone. But this letter reveals Dev Sen at her most vulnerable, as she writes, “I am getting old and bored and losing confidence in life and in self.” Naylor’s international correspondence with activist intellectuals like Dev Sen connects with her later novels, which depart from a U.S. frame to emphasize alternative political imaginaries and transnational coalitions.
Willow Springs

Willow Springs is the island setting of Naylor’s third novel, *Mama Day* (1988). The novel follows the descendants of Sapphira Wade, an African-born woman enslaved in Savannah, Georgia in 1819. Since Sapphira secured the deed to the island in 1823, an autonomous Black community has flourished there, independent from white supremacist U.S. institutions. Although Willow Springs is a fictional island, its portrayal draws on research trips that Naylor took in 1985 to the southern U.S., where she “gathered folk remedies and personal recollections from rural black Americans in their eighties and nineties.” She also traveled to the Sea Islands and New Orleans, in search of “remnants to the African legacy to these [folk] beliefs.”

After the publication of *Mama Day*, Naylor purchased a home on St. Helena Island, one of the Sea Islands. There, she worked as a
production assistant on Julie Dash’s 1991 *Daughters of Dust*, a film that tells the stories of generations of Gullah women on the island. Following the 1989 television miniseries of *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor founded her own film production company, One Way Productions, in order to write and produce her own screenplays. Maintaining creative control over a feature film version of *Mama Day* was one of her major priorities. Although the film was never made, documents in the archive record her attentiveness to rural Black community spaces as well as the forms of knowledge preserved by Black women.

Ink Sketch of Willow Springs, undated

According to the novel, Willow Springs is “forty-nine square miles curve[d] like a bow, stretching toward Georgia on the south end and South Carolina on the north,” connected to the continental United States by a bridge that straddles the “dividing line between them two states.” This geographic fact ensures that both states’
claims to ownership fail, protecting the inhabitants of Willow Springs from white supremacist laws about “slaves not owning nothing in Georgia and South Carolina.” This sketch is reworked as a stylized, graphic woodcut image (pictured below) in the prefatory pages of the published novel.
This sketch is a close-up of the area of Willow Springs where most of the action in *Mama Day* takes place: Mama Day’s trailer (including the chicken coop where one of the novel’s climactic scenes unfolds), her sister Abigail’s house, the “Other Place” where Mama Day’s and Abigail’s ancestors lived, and the nearby graveyard where those ancestors are buried. In the “Other Place,” Mama Day connects with her family history, ancestral knowledge rooted in African practices, and – ultimately – with Sapphira Wade herself.
Family Tree for the Day Family, undated

This family tree maps the generations of the Day family, from Sapphira Wade (born in West Africa in 1799) to Ophelia “Cocoa” Day (born on Willow Springs in 1953). Cocoa’s cousin, Willa Prescott Nedeed, is a main character in Naylor’s *Linden Hills* (1985). The family tree resists patrilineal models of descent, positioning Sapphira Wade as sole matriarch, and reflects Naylor’s interest in numerology with its emphasis on the number seven. By printing a map of Willow Springs and a family tree as prefaces to *Mama Day*, Naylor emphasizes an intimate connection between place and time, with the history of the Day family rooted in the “other place.”
Handwritten Notes, “Notes / Fishburne,” October 5, 1993

Naylor was keen to produce *Mama Day* as a feature film and worked for many years on a screenplay. These notes show how Naylor transformed the novel’s different plotlines into a three-act screenplay. The title line refers to the actor Laurence Fishburne, who had—to Naylor’s great delight—formally expressed his interest in playing the role of George. The archive shows that Naylor took great care and time to gather support from industry executives and actors, and yet the film was never produced. As with her experiences in higher education and publishing, Naylor’s foray into filmmaking once again found her advocating for her art in a predominantly white industry.
EXT. WEST WOODS. MORNING

George is limping as he comes through the clearing and sees the Other Place.

EXT. OTHER PLACE. MORNING

George hesitates outside the garden gate. He sees Mama Day sitting in the rocker on the veranda. They stare across the length of the yard. George opens the gate and enters.

He stumbles through the debris of the garden. When he approaches the foot of the veranda, she doesn’t wait for him to open his mouth.

MAMA DAY

I want you to hear me out. I can do more things with these hands than most folks dream of—no less believe—but this time they ain’t no good alone. And there was a time in my past when they weren’t no good alone. I’ve been suffering from the memory of that failure most of my life. Our past can be a powerful thing. It can crush us— or if we’re able to look beyond the pain, it can set us free. And now it done given me the answer we need.

GEORGE

What do you want me to do?

MAMA DAY

What I need you to believe.

Typed Screenplay, Mama Day, December 15, 1993

One of many iterations of the Mama Day screenplay in the archive, this version realizes the three-act structure outlined in the October note. Naylor’s revision anchors the narrative in the “Other Place,” establishing its significance from the opening shots, and cuts down the cast of characters from the novel more dramatically than earlier screenplay drafts. Here, we feature a conversation between Mama Day and George set in the “Other Place.”
March 6, 1985

Gloria Naylor
111-27 204th Street
Hollis, New York 11412

Dear Gloria,

Here are some comments about M'Dear and some suggestions how it might be developed as a half-hour drama for television.

First off, we like the piece very much. It is rich, and thick, and dark and vibrant. It lives on the page and lives on in the memory. The characters, the action, the sustained mood and moodiness are all of a piece almost hypnotic in their power to leap over my rational mind and take residence in my heart and my imagination. We are determined to do the piece, but the rigors and restraints of the half-hour format make it impossible to do without substantial condensation and some changes.

May I suggest you consider the following ideas:

1. Eliminate references to or quotations from "The Journal of American Folklore." What I think you intend would constitute a delicious irony, but in a 25-minute story I can only see them as an intrusion and a stumbling block.

Letter from Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee to Gloria Naylor, March 6, 1985

This letter from legendary actors, directors, producers, playwrights, and civil rights activists Ossie Davis (1917–2005) and Ruby Dee (1922–2014) offers three pages of detailed feedback on one of Naylor’s earliest screenwriting projects, a half-hour television drama entitled M'Dear. The central narrative of M'Dear, a mother’s grief at her baby’s death and her entreaties to the eponymous conjure woman for assistance, was never realized on screen, despite Davis’s apparent commitment to the project. However, readers of Mama Day will recognize it as a version of what would become Bernice’s and Mama Day’s story.
Bailey's Cafe

In her fourth novel, Bailey's Cafe (1992), Naylor creates a space that appears to people in need of a safe haven, people who find themselves without hope in the face of oppression and marginalization. As Bailey, the novel’s narrator, describes the cafe: “Even though this planet is round, there are just too many spots where you can find yourself hanging on the edge just like I was; and unless there’s some space, some place, to take a breather for a while, the edge of the world – frightening as it is – could be the end of the world, which would be quite a pity.” Guests arrive from wherever they are in the world: San Francisco, Ethiopia, New Orleans, Detroit, and Chicago. Even though the Cafe is both everywhere and nowhere in particular, Naylor’s research materials associate it with Black cultural centers, especially the famous 125th Street in Harlem, which is still home to the legendary Apollo Theatre. Naylor’s research materials for Bailey's Cafe show
that its life-affirming hope, however tenuous, rests on Black spaces that flourish on their own terms, independent from predominantly white institutions. If the Black community on Willow Springs finds freedom from a white supremacist state through the island’s unique geography, Naylor’s Bailey’s Cafe thrives on independent Black aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual traditions that can be accessed from anywhere by those who need refuge.

Handwritten Note, “Bailey’s Cafe,” undated

A rich jazz soundscape surrounds the characters in Bailey’s Cafe, and this note sketches the novel’s structure in musical terms. In a pitch to publishers, Naylor wrote, “I would like to see if I can meld the lines between the act of hearing music and the act of reading text. For example, if Duke Ellington’s ‘Mood Indigo’ were to be prose, what texture and tempo would the words assume?” Many of the novel’s section titles foreground its jazz structure – “Maestro,
If You Please,” “The Vamp,” “The Jam,” and “The Wrap.” In a detail not explicit in the published novel, the note links individual characters with particular instruments. The novel itself, like the cafe it describes, is a space defined by jazz forms.

Pencil Sketch of Bailey’s Café, undated

Bailey’s Café, like Brewster Place, does not have a specific New York City address, but this sketch and other archival materials suggest how the city informed the novel’s setting. The annotations on the photocopied map and the sketch situate the café west of 12th avenue, between the island of Manhattan and the Hudson River. In her previous novel, Mama Day, Naylor describes this spot as the birthplace of a major character, and Bailey’s Café tells the story of that character’s birth to Mariam at the back of the restaurant. The map and the sketch, collected among Naylor’s research materials for Bailey’s Café, reveal the intricate
geographic detail informing the interconnected worlds described in her novels.

These baseball cards are part of the extensive research materials Naylor collected for Bailey’s Cafe. Bailey, the Cafe proprietor, describes Ebbets Field and the Negro League baseball teams that played there as central to his childhood in Flatbush, Brooklyn. Naylor deliberately reverses language from the baseball cards to celebrate Black players’ outstanding athletic achievements rather than describing them as secondary to iconic white players. For example, the card for Pop Lloyd describes him as the “Black Honus Wagner,” while Bailey says, “the highest compliment to pay the Flying Dutchman [Honus Wagner] is to call him the White Pop Lloyd.”
This pamphlet informs Naylor’s representation of Mariam, a pregnant fourteen-year-old girl ostracized from the Ethiopian Jewish community, Beta Israel, where she was raised. (The term “Falasha,” in use at the time of Naylor’s research, is now considered derogatory.) Gabe, a Jewish refugee from the Caucasus Mountains who runs a pawn shop next to the Cafe, wants to find a place where Mariam can safely have her baby, but the Israeli government won’t let her “into the country under the Law of Return.” Bailey’s Cafe reflects on the relationship between the ancient Ethiopian Jewish community, “outcasts in their own nation,” and European Jews displaced by white supremacist, genocidal violence.
Eve’s boarding house, home to the women whose stories make up the majority of Bailey’s Cafe, is another key place in the novel. Some characters condemn Eve’s place as a brothel while others, including Eve herself, describe it as a boarding house for women who have nowhere else to go. This research bibliography outlines feminist analysis of sex work as an important intellectual context for the novel. In particular, the bibliography highlights works in which women are “given the chance to speak for themselves.” In Bailey’s Cafe, the women at Eve’s (with the exception of Mariam) likewise tell their own stories. Eve’s is a specifically Black feminist space, where Black women can heal from the injuries produced by sexist, racist, and classist institutions.
Wurlitzer Jukebox Advertisement (Front and Back), December 1989

This is one of several documents about jukeboxes among the Bailey’s Cafe research materials. The stamp on the back suggests that Naylor might have gotten the advertisement at a vintage jukebox store, where she could have seen the Wurlitzer in action. According to the flier, this particular Wurlitzer jukebox is part of the “Golden Jukebox Age,” when the aftermath of World War II fomented desire for “the dreamland of music.” There is just such a jukebox in Bailey’s Cafe, which is also set in the post-war period, and characters feed it nickels as its “blue-and-yellow lights” play across their faces. Just as the women at Eve’s can get their favorite flowers and order any meal they like at the cafe on weekends, so too can they choose their preferred soundtracks.
These notes list details about film and music in the 1930s and 1940s. Similar handwritten lists appear among the archived research materials for most of Naylor’s novels, an indication of her aesthetic commitment to historical and material specificity. The names of musicians, clubs, record stores, actors, directors, and bandleaders on this list reflect Black culture of the time. For example, “Bobby’s Records” refers to the Harlem store on 125th St., just down the block from the legendary Apollo Theatre, founded by independent songwriter and producer Bobby Robinson upon his return from military service in 1946. Few of these names appear directly in Bailey’s Cafe, but they undeniably inform the novel’s setting and soundscape.
Composition Book with Handwritten Notes, “Records” and “Movies,” undated

Handwritten Notes, undated (c. 1992–1993)
Naylor adapted Bailey’s Cafe for the theater, and after a reading at the Kennedy Center, the Hartford Stage mounted a full production in 1994, directed by Novella Nelson (1939–2017). Naylor’s undated notes consider the mechanics of adapting a novel for theatrical performance, including a sketch of stage geography. Some copies of the script in the archive document Naylor’s collaborative work with Nelson, with handwritten questions about staging and possible script revisions. The script includes Naylor’s vision for blocking the cafe and Eve’s boarding house as well as her musical selections.

Draft Script with Annotation, Bailey’s Cafe, undated (c. 1992–1993)
Parchman

In addition to *Mama Day* and *M'Dear*, Naylor’s archive includes other screenplays, including one focused on Parchman Farm, also known as Mississippi State Penitentiary. Opened in 1901, Parchman Farm, located among 20,000 acres of cotton fields, was one of two Mississippi prisons originally reserved for Black people in the state. There, prison supervisors forced incarcerated people to labor as unpaid agricultural, commercial, and domestic workers. As forced labor camps with predominantly Black populations, prison farms like Parchman functioned in much the same way as antebellum plantations and convict leasing systems. Naylor’s screenplay, set in 1937, tells the story of three Black women imprisoned at Parchman, focusing on their life-affirming friendship. *Parchman* connects violent histories of enslavement in the United States to the rise of the prison industrial complex, with
a particular focus on Black women’s resistance to carceral abuses through cross-class coalitions.

Although TNT (Turner Network Television) optioned the Parchman screenplay from Naylor’s One Way Productions, they declined to produce it and paid a “kill fee” in 1998. Even though it was not produced, the screenplay is a major Black feminist contribution to criticism of the prison industrial complex.

Draft Screenplay, Parchman, undated (c. 1998)

Parchman focuses on the lives of three Black women – Alberta, a teacher wrongfully arrested for prostitution and recently arrived at the prison farm; Lou Anne, convicted of manslaughter in the death of her abuser nineteen years ago; and Precious, Lou Anne’s eighteen-year-old daughter, who was born in the prison and is rumored to be the superintendent’s daughter. Over Lou Anne’s objections, Alberta teaches Precious how to read, a skill that she
will need “in the outside world.” In return, Precious and Lou Anne teach Alberta how to survive in the prison. At the end of the screenplay, the women work together to engineer Alberta’s and Precious’s escape so that the latter’s baby can be born outside the prison.


This document, prepared by a research assistant at Naylor’s request, transcribes songs from “Jailhouse Blues,” an album released by Rosetta Records in 1987. The album is a collection of women’s a cappella songs recorded at Parchman penitentiary’s women’s camp between 1936 and 1939. This album clearly inspires Naylor’s screenplay, as Alberta’s story broadly recalls a recording by Eva White about her unjust arrest for solicitation. According to Cheri Wolfe’s liner notes for the album, these recordings bring to light the distinctive contributions of Black women to the Mississippi Delta blues tradition most often associated with male
artists like Skip James, Muddy Waters, and B.B. King. The songs on “Jailhouse Blues” critique white supremacist structures that dehumanize Black women and express Black joy.

Photocopyed photograph, Building at Parchman Farm, undated

This photocopied image pictures the superintendent’s mansion at Parchman, a setting that Naylor’s screenplay describes as “a large black and white Victorian cottage with a screened veranda and lush garden.” Naylor’s superintendent casts his penal project as a social good, saying “everything [the prisoners] eat, the clothes they wear, all of it, is taken care of right here. And even with the depression going on we turned a profit on our cotton last year and expecting to this year as well.” On the “Jailhouse Blues” album, “Ricketiest Superintendent” exposes the violence behind the superintendent’s words. Parchman Farm made exorbitant profits through the theft of incarcerated people’s labor, skills, and knowledge. Naylor’s screenplay shows how guards enforced
compliance with arduous regimes through beatings, sexual assault, and murder.

W. Africa & N. Europe

Western Africa, Scandinavia, and Willow Springs were to be the settings for the novel that Naylor anticipated would be her seventh, titled Sapphira Wade. In a 2000 interview, she outlined the plot, stating that it would recount the origin story of Willow Springs, the events leading up to Sapphira’s “mysterious means of obtaining land from Bascombe Wade” in 1823. As Naylor envisioned it, Sapphira Wade would have a global scope: “Well, in my new book what I’m going to do is follow Wade’s journey from Norway and Sapphira’s journey from Senegal. They meet in Savannah and they go off with a Native American group.” Although Naylor never published Sapphira Wade, she did include an unfinished 35,000-word draft among her collected papers. The
first section of that draft, written in June 2004, relates Cocoa’s return to Willow Springs as an elderly woman in search of her ancestors’ 200-year-old history. The second section, dated August 2006, begins with the birth of a child in a fishing village in North Norway in 1789. The draft’s central themes resonate with those found in Naylor’s earlier novels: migration, folk knowledge, and religious belief. At the same time, the unfinished *Sapphira Wade* develops new territory for Naylor, including detailed historical portrayals of colonialism, nationalism, and whiteness in the nineteenth century.

USIA Travel Itinerary for West Africa, July 1993

Just as she traveled to India in 1985, Gloria Naylor toured Senegal, The Gambia, and Côte d’Ivoire with USIA in 1993. She met with professors, writers (Sény Baïll, Tanella Boni, Boubacar Boris Diop, Monique Ilboudo), and cultural figures (griot Jaliba Kuyateh) at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, the U.S. Embassy in Banjul,
and an Ivorian Writers’ Association event in Abidjan. Lecture and discussion topics included “literatures and national languages,” and “comparative study of African and African-American writers.” In a letter, Naylor indicated that part of her purpose for this trip was “research for my new novel, Sapphira Wade.”

Newspaper clipping, “Ms. Gloria Naylor Visits” by Bakar Fatim, Newsmonth, August 1993

Newsmonth (1993–1998), an independent monthly newspaper in The Gambia, highlighted Naylor’s visit as the first time the author “set foot on Black African Soil.” The piece, written by Bakar Fatim and sent to Naylor with the compliments of editor Baboucar Gaye, frames Naylor’s storytelling as part of an African tradition. Fatim writes that Naylor’s next novel, to be titled Sapphira Wade, will “undoubtedly again be a celebration of the African American woman – another story of our mothers.”
In 1994, Naylor traveled to the United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway, another trip that was part of her research for *Sapphira Wade*. A small collection of unsent postcards, collected with other research on Scandinavia, furnishes images of places that feature prominently in the unfinished manuscript: the “northernmost town in the world,” Hammerfest, in Norway’s Finnmark region; waterfront homes in Trondheim; a stave church with Viking architecture; and a goahte, the traditional dwelling of the indigenous Sami. The partial *Sapphira Wade* manuscript explores the cultural, religious, and linguistic relationships among nomadic indigenous groups, settled rural communities, and cosmopolitan urban centers. This portrait of Bascombe’s early life explores how emergent nineteenth-century Norwegian nationalism at once obscures and exploits the layered histories of and varied cultures that shape the region.
Naylor’s research materials for *Sapphira Wade* include several articles about masks from Senegal, which Naylor identified as a setting for Sapphira’s story, and from southeast Africa. In particular, these articles describe masks as a legacy of the interaction between Islam and sub-Saharan art and culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The provenance of these masks, grouped in the archive with Naylor’s awards, is unknown. Perhaps they were gifts that Naylor received on her visit to Western Africa or perhaps she purchased them herself as reference images, like the Norwegian postcards, for the novel she was researching.

Naylor planned to write *Sapphira Wade* from the early years of her literary career. In a journal entry from 1981, when she was working on *Linden Hills*, she laid out her plans: “After Willie and Lester will come Mom Day and somewhere after her Sapphira.” In a letter to friend and fellow writer Julia Alvarez, Naylor wrote, “I have lived with [Sapphira’s story] for a long time. The woman’s face first came to me when I was working the midnight shift on a hotel switchboard back in the late 70s. I drew it and put it away, knowing that she was my muse.” Her words suggest that this sketch from 1985 may have been one of many that Naylor drew over the years.
Handwritten Journal Entry, January 1, 2000

Naylor wrote this journal entry at the “turn of the millennium,” while she was docked at Cuverville Island off the western coast of Antarctica. In it, she alludes to the traumatic experiences of racism that she would later describe in her “fictionalized memoir” 1996 (2005) and reflects on the healing she needed in order to write Sapphira Wade. She describes Cuverville Island as less “frightening” than the Lofoten archipelago in Norway, the setting of Bascombe Wade’s origin story, because at the edge of the earth she can see things differently: “here the snow seems to ameliorate the starkness of the planet. . . . At the end of the world other things in the world appear dwarfed.”
April 22, 2006

Dear Julia—

I read Saving The World and I think it’s quite an achievement. It could have easily been two books; I was almost as drawn along by Alma’s story as I was by Isabela’s (perhaps because I knew it was based on your life) but I’m sure that the 19th century story was the more challenging. I read with two minds because I’m going to try and tackle an historical novel next: one mind let itself be drawn along with the narrative while the other one sought the intimate details used to set the time and place. And I realized that subtle hints are enough: a mantilla, a cloak, all suggest her costume; I “saw” the ship without a lot of technical terms for its components. I’m sure the temptation is to try and use all the research that was so hard to come by but you didn’t fall into that trap. I learned a lot and found myself asking many questions (which you don’t have to answer): Was there distance between her and the traveling and the researching or was it one continuum within a reasonable span of time from the research to the writing? How long did the research take her? How long did the actual writing take her? One story shadows another—were they written separately or did her mind bounce back and forth from one century to the next? How many drafts?

I was asking myself these questions because of what I’ve been grappling with as far as “Sapphira Wade.” All the years, all the traveling, all the research. How do I tell this story? I don’t want to be like Dorothea’s husband in Middlemarch: decades of effort ends in the production of a table of contents.

Typed Letter, Gloria Naylor to Julia Alvarez, April 2006

This letter is one of many intimate exchanges between Naylor and Julia Alvarez (b. 1950), in which the two writers share details about their personal lives and literary endeavors. In this document, Naylor divulges that she has begun to make progress on Sapphira Wade, with “a lot of digging, a lot of concentration in the sifting, selecting, [and] polishing.” She writes that her breakthrough on this long-awaited novel “has begun, believe it or not, with poetry.” She ends her message to her friend by writing, “for now, I’m living one of the lines of my poem: A woman must tell stories / to save her life.”
Handwritten Manuscript, “Opening Chapter of Sapphira Wade,”
June 2004–August 2006

Although unfinished, this 131-page draft focused on Bascombe Wade’s origin story is carefully crafted and edited with reference to Naylor’s extensive research notes and fragmentary early drafts of key scenes. However, Naylor may not have planned to continue her work on the novel because she donated the original handwritten draft as well as the research materials about the nineteenth-century western Sahel that were to provide historical context for Sapphira’s early life in the novel’s second section. Nonetheless, her inclusion of the partial draft among her collected papers suggests an invitation to read the unfinished work. Both the draft story of Bascombe Wade’s upbringing and the research she did for Sapphira’s story reveal the broad geographic purview of her literary vision and provide new contexts for thinking about her published novels.
Gloria Naylor’s collected papers are a map, at times fragmentary and at times detailed, to the interconnected worlds of her creative works and to the global network of audiences, writers, and aesthetic traditions with which she was engaged. Gloria Naylor’s vision, both in her archive and in her literary works, honors creative place-making by Black communities that preserves marginalized histories, provides mutual care, and builds hospitable refuges from white supremacist, misogynist, classist, and homophobic institutions. In this work, she reminds us that mass incarceration and police violence, migration and gentrification, homophobic violence, the enduring legacies of enslavement and colonization, capitalism and globalization have shaped the ground on which we stand. At the same time, she reveals places that might still be otherwise through Black joy, cultural traditions, and resistance to oppressive structures that can build liberatory communities and different futures.
Credits

The Gloria Naylor Archive [https://wordpress.lehigh.edu/naylorarchive/]

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