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In Search of My Own Garden:
A Portfolio of Scholarship on Gloria Naylor's Archive and Works

by

Ayanna Woods

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

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In Search of My Own Garden: A Portfolio of on Gloria Naylor's Archive and Works
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ABSTRACT

This non-traditional, portfolio thesis features varied forms of scholarship, made possible with the Gloria Naylor archive. The portfolio's four sections highlight Naylor's papers as well as her published works. This thesis explores models of literary criticism available to us in Naylor's newly processed correspondence that have yet to be studied as they are typically excluded from hierarchical models of academic scholarship. It also explores the networks and community amongst twentieth century Black women writers visible in said correspondence, the potential for community-building through Naylor's published writing, and a groundbreaking document in the archive that has been seen by few. The form of this thesis is inspired by models of literary criticism that we can trace in Gloria Naylor's archive, and expands beyond Western, normative definitions of scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

This is obviously not a traditional thesis. I did not want to do a traditional thesis because my experience has not been traditional. As a Black woman, my mere presence in an advanced degree program defies the traditions of the academy, and I have felt the weight of that fact almost every second of every day since I began my M.A. Additionally, there is nothing traditional nothing about spending more than seventy-five percent of my time in graduate school navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. One of my biggest lessons during my two years at Lehigh was that traditional paths through academia will simply not work for me. It does me and other Black women scholars no good to allow institutions built to exclude us to map their expectations onto us. Instead, I follow the example of Gloria Naylor, who originally wrote *Linden Hills* as her master's thesis and later published it as a novel. My thesis is not a work of fiction like Naylor's, but it takes the forms that best convey the information I desired to share.

What did work for me was the exploration of my own ideas and intellectual interests I was able to do during graduate school. Being able to try new forms of writing or present even my worst ideas as exciting new ventures has been refreshing and liberating. This part of grad school—the part where I follow myself down the intellectual rabbit hole —has been the only part of my expectations of grad school that has turned out to be true.

In falling down those rabbit holes I found new scholarly interests that I was not aware I had and learned to follow them wherever they may lead. This is the guiding force behind my writing a thesis on Gloria Naylor using her archive, as a future in archival work was not on my radar when I arrived at Lehigh. In following my curiosity, I learned about the treasures available to scholars in an author's papers, like Naylor's unproduced

screenplay for *Mama Day*. In following my professors, I learned about the treasures available to every one of us in Gloria Naylor's writing, like the intricate critique of the Black American pursuit of Capitalism that is *Linden Hills*. I found stories that moved, hurt, elated, and inspired me in Naylor's novels, like the love and pain in the lives of Theresa and Lorraine in *The Women of Brewster Place*. And in her archive, I found items, details, and research that puzzled me. Through my coursework and my time as Research Assistant I met literary scholars who study and respect Naylor the way that I do, and I found my niche within literary studies. I also met archivists like Holly Smith and Jaimee Swift, who have dedicated their careers to keeping and protecting the papers and stories of Black women like Naylor, and I learned of so many communities of scholars like myself who are interested in doing the same.

So, this thesis is born of three important aspects of my intellectual interests that I discovered and grew while at Lehigh. The first is my epistemological commitments to resisting anything that academia deems necessary or standard, which I now know to be "a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. Society".¹ The second is my profound respect for Gloria Naylor, whose research and novels inspire me constantly and have become a bottomless, generative resource. The third is my ever-growing interest in archives and memory work. A separate lineage of archival work, memory work was born from the exclusion of non-white archival material from long-standing, predominantly white institutions. This work is distinctive not just in that it is primarily done by Black and Brown people for Black and Brown people. The heritage and

¹ Yosso, Tara J. "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005), 69-91.

epistemology guiding this field reflects commitments to non-Eurocentric definitions of knowledge and scholarship. The lineage of memory work can be found in the work of people like Arturo Schomburg and Zora Neale Hurston, who worked constantly to preserve Black history and document Black culture in the early 20th century. I first learned of this work from Holly Smith when she visited a class on Naylor's archive and works that I took during my first semester at Lehigh.

So, instead of a long, academic paper—an undertaking that would not have fit my intellectual, stylistic, and political commitments—I have compiled this portfolio of projects that reflect the best parts of my experience in graduate school. Among the best parts is my experience as research assistant for the Naylor archive, which helped my curiosity for archives and memory work to grow into a passion.

Everything in this portfolio has to do with Gloria Naylor or her papers. In “Letters Between the Lines: Intimate Criticism between Gloria Naylor and Lucille Clifton,” I outline how the correspondence opens up our understanding of the forms literary criticism can take, using her epistolary relationship with Clifton as an example and creating a term that I feel best describes the literary analysis found in those letters. In “Enjoy Your Success: Intimate Criticism between Gloria Naylor and Terry McMillan,” I discuss the community being created and maintained by Naylor and her peers, and the unique glimpses of Naylor's literary opinions that we can find in her correspondence with Terry McMillan. Both of these essays are rooted in archival research and unique in that I came across the archival items that inspired them whilst processing Naylor's correspondence, much of which had not been catalogued in detail when I began my research assistantship.

The other two pieces of this portfolio take different forms, building on equally important experiences that came out of the RA but illustrate literary criticism outside traditional scholarly venues. In “Community Shapes Meaning: Conversation Through Gloria Naylor’s Words,” I reflect on a collaborative event I facilitated and the excellent springboard for honest, community-building conversation that we found in one of Naylor’s essays. In “Exploring Gloria Naylor’s Archive: A Collaborative Event with Black Women Radicals,” I provide a transcript of a virtual and accessible panel event I participated in that highlighted the Naylor archive and some of the fascinating research and resources that have come from its processing. Both of these pieces are intentionally non-traditional, and I have opted for stylistically less-formal, more accessible writing to reflect the community-oriented nature of the events that inspired them. The intention behind this choice is to free myself and the scholarship I produce from the confines of Eurocentric definitions and measurements of knowledge, which are another manifestation of aforementioned Western standards that only serve to reify the privilege of dominant groups.

That community-oriented nature is also key to the form of this thesis, as I discovered in my time at Lehigh that I want any research I conduct and share to be accessible to as many people as possible. Achieving this often means shorter papers, less jargon, and more public venues. I believe that knowledge belongs to us all and I want my career to reflect that. This portfolio is my way of honoring my own commitment to creating more accessible scholarship that reflects my political and epistemological beliefs.

LETTERS BETWEEN THE LINES:

INTIMATE CRITICISM BETWEEN GLORIA NAYLOR AND LUCILLE CLIFTON

One day last fall, as I was processing Gloria Naylor's correspondence as the archive's Research Assistant, I came across an enthusiastic letter from Lucille Clifton to Gloria Naylor, in which Clifton raves about *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). As a fan of both authors, I immediately took interest in this letter and checked to see if there was other correspondence between the two authors in the archive. The scholarship available to us in Naylor's correspondence is not yet a part of the critical history of her work, perhaps because it has largely been inaccessible until lately. But her correspondence contains potential for rich analysis, particularly because, unlike many writers who only kept their incoming correspondence, she kept copies of her outgoing letters as well. This essay explores how Naylor's correspondence, as documented in her archive, enriches critical conversations about her work.

There's been a lot of scholarship on how Naylor's novels engage with literary sources. For instance, Cheryl Wall has explored the way that Naylor's 1988 novel *Mama Day* engages with Toni Morrison's *Sula*.² Numerous critics, from Henry Louis Gates, Jr.³ to Peter Erickson.⁴ have explored the ways in which Naylor's novels transform classic texts of the Eurocentric tradition, such as Dante's *Inferno* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The literary criticism that we can trace in Naylor's correspondence, however, presents a different picture of the ways Naylor's art was engaged with the literary work of her

2 Wall, Cheryl A. *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

3 Gates Jr, Henry Louis, and Appiah, Anthony. *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad : Distributed by Penguin USA, 1993.

4 Erickson, Peter. *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

contemporaries, like Lucille Clifton. I call this intimate criticism, because it takes place in usually informal epistolary exchanges, often between friends. Intimate criticism is important in that it represents a whole different model of how literary criticism works and distinctive in that this model is only traceable through the archive.

Here is a brief overview of the correspondence between the two authors as it appears in the archive, the first instance of which is dated September of 1987. At that point in her career, Naylor had published *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1982 and won the National Book Award for First Novel. She had also completed her Masters in African American Studies at Yale in 1983 and published *Linden Hills*—which began as her thesis project at Yale under the supervision of Henry Louis Gates Jr.—in 1985 and it was also very well received.⁵ Clifton, by that point, was a prolific writer of both poetry and prose and had received much critical acclaim for her writing. She had published sixteen children's books, five collections of poetry, and a memoir. In 1988 she would become the first author to have two books of poetry chosen as finalists for the Pulitzer Prize.⁶ These books were: for *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969-1980* and *Next: New Poems*, both published in 1987. Clifton had also become a professor of literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1985, and the first correspondence to mention Clifton is actually a letter from Helene Moglen, who was chair of the Women's Studies department there at the time. Moglen writes "at the suggestion of Lucille Clifton," inviting Naylor to apply for a temporary teaching position in the department.⁷

⁵ About Gloria Naylor." *The Gloria Naylor Archive*. 2020, <https://wordpress.lehigh.edu/naylorarchive/gloria-naylor/>

⁶ "Lucille Clifton." *Poetry Foundation*, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lucille-clifton>

⁷ Moglen, Helene. Unpublished letter to Gloria Naylor, September 1987, Box 2, Folder 10, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

The next instance is a fax sent by Naylor in December of the same year, requesting that Lucille Clifton receive a hardcover copy of *Mama Day* upon its publication. Then, in February of 1988, Clifton wrote to Naylor offering support after she canceled her residency at the University of New York at Stony Brook due to a disagreement with June Jordan, who ran the poetry center there, over how Naylor had voted in the National Book Award contest Clifton tells Naylor that she feels that she should be able to “vote according to her conscience” without fear of judgment, and that they will remain friends⁸.

This point marks a shift in the tone of the archived correspondence between these two authors as the letters exchanged become more personal. In December of 1992, Clifton sends a handwritten thank you note to Naylor for an inscription of her copy of *Bailey’s Café*.⁹ This is followed by a letter from Clifton in January of 1993 in which she offers personal updates on her health as well as a profound analysis of both *Mama Day* and *Bailey’s Café*.¹⁰ Naylor writes a response to this letter about a month later in which she briefly thanks Clifton for her engagement and praise, and compliments her reading of the novels.¹¹

The exchange continues in a letter sent in March of 1993 that Clifton calls a “fan letter.” It contains praise for *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*. On the world Naylor builds in the former, Clifton writes: “I found the ghetto a warm and kindly place but one that must inevitably end in violence and in no solution.” She ends the letter saying

⁸ Clifton, Lucille. Unpublished letter to Gloria Naylor, February 1988, Box 2, Folder 16, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

⁹ Clifton, Lucille. Unpublished letter to Gloria Naylor, December 1992, Box 6, Folder 1, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

¹⁰ Clifton, Lucille. Unpublished letter to Gloria Naylor, January 1993, Box 6, Folder 1, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

¹¹ Naylor, Gloria. Unpublished letter to Lucille Clifton, February 1993, Box 6, Folder 1, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

she is “eagerly awaiting” Naylor’s next book.¹² The next piece of archived correspondence does not come until September of 1994, when Clifton writes Naylor again wondering when, as a fan, she’ll have more of Naylor’s writing to read.¹³ She shares that she has watched the 1989 film adaptation of *The Women of Brewster Place*, and gives her opinion, saying:

I thought it well done, but although the characters were well cast and showed their inner kindness, I never think that a movie is as good as the book. Somehow my own imagination is more vivid. The extremely painful ending was not nearly so much so in the picture.

She then moves on, looking to discuss Toni Morrison’s novels, paying most attention to *Beloved*. She writes: “*Beloved* I admit I do not understand. When we studied history, we learned about the ‘savers’ on the underground railroad, not the ‘saved’. I had never realized that before.” She asks Naylor to explain the Morrison novel.

In Naylor’s response, sent in November of the same year, she agrees with Clifton’s musings on the difference between television and the novel. She also updates Clifton on her recent research in Norway and ongoing work on a new novel and informs her of the *Children of the Night* anthology that she had recently edited. And she responds to Clifton’s question about *Beloved* as follows:

...what struck me the most about the novel was the power of a mother’s love. My new novel will touch on slavery and I believe that like any experience there is no exclusive point of view. We all bring ourselves to our view of historical events¹⁴

This is the last instance of correspondence between Naylor and Clifton that has been processed to-date.

¹² Clifton, Lucille. Unpublished letter to Gloria Naylor, March 1993, Box 6, Folder 4, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

¹³ Clifton, Lucille. Unpublished letter to Gloria Naylor, September 1994, Box 7, Folder Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

¹⁴ Gloria Naylor, unpublished letter to Lucille Clifton, November 1994, Box 7, Folder 2, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

Clifton's and Naylor's discussions of *Mama Day*, *Bailey's Cafe*, and Morrison's *Beloved* offer clear examples of what I am calling "intimate criticism." These letters document Naylor and Clifton working out their aesthetic philosophies in relation to one another. In her 1993 letter Clifton explains her admiration for Naylor's "style" by sharing something from her own life: She writes that, "when [she] was a child, one of [her] great problems was that [she] could not understand why [she] could not know what other people were thinking." She goes on, explaining that from this problem came her knowledge that "point of view was extremely important in stories." On point of view, she writes: "omniscience disturbed me as unrealistic, and first person was as limited as I."¹⁵

Mama Day is told through chapters in the voices of George, Cocoa, and the collective voice of the folks in Willow Springs. For instance, the novel begins by introducing the audience to Willow Springs and its history, including the legend of Sapphira Wade:

Willow Springs. Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her.¹⁶

In other sections of the novel, the story is told through George and Cocoa as the audience gets to see different parts of their love story through both of their perspectives. In telling the story this way, Naylor removed the limitations that frustrated Clifton from childhood. Clifton praises this aspect of the novel: "That was what fascinated me about *Mama Day*:

¹⁵ Clifton, Lucille. Unpublished letter to Gloria Naylor, January 1993, Box 6, Folder 1, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

¹⁶ Naylor, Gloria. *Mama Day*. New York, NY, Open Road Media, Kindle Edition, 1988.

everything was known through the perception of three sympathetic characters. That I can manage and it gave me a full real world."

Clifton writes this letter with care and sincerity, which makes the profound discussion of the nature of human thought and perspective and how both affect narrative style flow naturally into her critical discussion of *Mama Day*. And, by using her own childhood mind as an entry point, she makes it personal as well. Her praise of Naylor's use of point of view as a tool for world-building in the novel being immediately after the explanation of her childhood conundrum positions it as the answer to a life-long problem. Within this compliment lies a reading experience that moved Clifton deeply. She is not simply praising Naylor for creating a world that is full and three-dimensional; she is praising her for creating characters that experience this world differently and stitching their stories together with fluidity, thus satisfying the young girl within her who still wants to know what everyone is thinking. This moment is an excellent example of intimate criticism. Clifton is presenting a sophisticated analysis of *Mama Day*, but she is also having a conversation with a friend. As a writer, scholar, and professor of contemporary literature, she brings a certain expertise to her reading of the novel. Yet, because she never published literary criticism on Naylor's work, we do not have an article or essay to house this illuminating analysis. It is available only in the archive, on endearing stationery, bordered with seasonal flowers, colorful birds, or musical notes on a staff.

In her response to this letter, Naylor engages in a bit of intimate criticism herself in addition to addressing the personal points in Clifton's letter as a friend. On Clifton's updates, she writes that she is "very pleased to know" that Clifton "received the inscribed

copy of Bailey's Cafe...thoughtful and kind as always, in good health".¹⁷ On Clifton's analysis, she writes that she found Clifton's "readings" of *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Cafe* "both sensitive and learned." Naylor's choice to affirm and reassure Clifton here is important, as it reflects the aforementioned mutual interest and appreciation that lies at the heart of this epistolary relationship. Furthermore, Naylor's affirmation of Clifton's interpretation of what makes *Mama Day* so powerful is her participation in the intimate criticism of her own work and gives us a small clue as to what she felt about her own use of point of view in the novel.

The letter from September 1994 also adds to our understanding of intimate criticism as it contains a discussion of Naylor's fiction in relation to that of Toni Morrison, one of her contemporaries. Clifton's thoughts on *Beloved*, though she says she does not understand the novel, provide a statement of what she thinks has created the need for such a work, and, implicitly perhaps, the need for Naylor's distinctive take on the matter. In Naylor's response, intimate criticism provides a glimpse into the way Naylor approached the work of her contemporaries. I interpret Naylor's choice to give a brief answer to Clifton's question about *Beloved* followed by offering a comment that there is "no exclusive point of view" as a statement about there being room for both her and Toni Morrison's approach to writing on the same topic. The statement reflects Naylor's commitment to putting her writing and ideas in conversation—and not competition—with her peers in order to build networks of creative exchange and mutual support.

¹⁷ Gloria Naylor, unpublished letter to Lucille Clifton, November 1994, Box 7, Folder 2, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

My analysis of these letters also figures into greater critical conversations about Gloria Naylor, and parallels with work that contemporary memory workers are engaged in across many different interpretive communities. At universities and in grassroots archival spaces, Black memory workers are building an investigation into networks of Black women writers and the untold stories available to us in archival histories.¹⁸ These efforts are informed by a desire to see reemergence of less-celebrated Black women writers of the 20th century like Naylor and Clifton as well as a desire to reclaim the collections and legacies of these authors, as a means of making them more accessible to the communities for which the authors themselves wrote. At the core of all this is a larger—and much needed—epistemological shift that is expanding our definitions of literature, criticism, and scholarship. As I have traced through Naylor and Clifton’s correspondence, there is rich, intimate criticism taking place within the archive that is relevant to the discourse we see in traditional venues of literary criticism and outside of academia altogether. As the Gloria Naylor archive continues to be processed, and as it resultantly becomes more accessible to researchers, perhaps intimate criticism will become a larger part of the critical response to Gloria Naylor.

¹⁸ Georgia Public Library Service. “‘She Gathers Me’ exhibit tours libraries statewide”. Feb 2020.

ENJOY YOUR SUCCESS:

INTIMATE CRITICISM BETWEEN GLORIA NAYLOR AND TERRY MCMILLAN

As a scholar interested in Black women writers, I was always most intrigued by Naylor's epistolary exchanges with her peers. I had a particularly rewarding experience when I came across an exchange she had in the early 1990s with Terry McMillan, author of *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996).

The letters I encountered between Naylor and McMillan provide a unique glance into the networks between Black women writers in the 20th century and the importance of the community fostered within those networks. It allows us to see the solidarity between these two authors as well as others, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Marita Golden. Furthermore, it shows us just how committed Gloria Naylor and Terry McMillan were to supporting the work of their peers as their careers were growing and provides a glimpse of what these two women thought was the impact of work like theirs as it was being published.

My analysis begins with a letter from McMillan to Naylor on the 21st of January 1992. By that point in her career, McMillan had published successful novels, edited an anthology of contemporary African-American Fiction (*Terry McMillan*). In the spring of that year, she would release *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), which would later become a hit film and a star-studded cast, making it arguably her most famous piece of work.¹⁹ In 1992, Naylor had just published *Bailey's Cafe*, her fourth novel, and was at the height of her career.²⁰

¹⁹ "About Her". *Terry McMillan*. 2021. <https://www.terrymcmillan.com/about>

²⁰ "About Gloria Naylor." *The Gloria Naylor Archive*. 2020. <https://wordpress.lehigh.edu/naylorarchive/gloria-naylor/>

McMillan opens this first letter by thanking Naylor for some unspecified information shared before this letter, and goes on to share her excitement at the success of herself and her peers, including Naylor, as a number of notable Black, female authors were scheduled to publish books that year:

This summer will be a totally Black Female Literary event! Toni in March/April, my novel in May, Alice in June, Marita Golden in June, and I hear you're July/August! I'm so excited and flattered I can't tell you! Let's show them all how we do what we do the way that we do it!

Warmly,
Terry.²¹

The list of peers she provides shows the strong wave of Black women writers in the 1980s and 1990s who wrote for and about Black women and saw simultaneous success. And McMillan's excitement at the publication of these other women shows her support of their careers and her joy at their success. Her being "flattered and excited" reflects the respect and high regard she held for these women and their work. Having highlighted the cultural importance of their collective work, the doors their careers are opening for other Black women, and the unique stories and voices they all have at their disposal, McMillan ends this short note with a rallying cry for Black female storytellers to use the power that accompanies their creative gifts. This piece of correspondence is a touching expression of encouragement and support for Naylor and the other women listed.

Naylor responded with an outpouring of support for McMillan in a second piece of correspondence, dated the first of October 1992. This letter begins with Naylor writing that she was "quite touched that [McMillan] went through the trouble of actually buying one of

²¹ McMillan, Terry. Unpublished letter to Gloria Naylor, January 1992, Box 5, Folder 3, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

[her] books," adding that it was "a kind thing to do".²² This detail is important as it demonstrates McMillan's thorough commitment to supporting her peers. In buying Naylor's book after expressing excitement before it was published, she is essentially putting her money where her mouth is. But it seems McMillan did not receive this kind of support from all of the women she regarded so highly. Naylor addresses this by writing that she read in the media that McMillan was "hurt by the lack of support from certain of [her] peers," without disclosing which authors chose not to reciprocate.

Instead of dwelling on this fact, Naylor elects to pour into McMillan, reciprocating her support and encouragement. She writes at length about the value McMillan holds in their field:

You have done a great service to Black writers in this country through the popularity of your work—folks are out there not only buying your books but others as well. Having just finished the first half of my tour, I can personally testify to a huge increase of people who I know were not the type that came out for readings before: church women still in their Sunday best, working mothers bringing their children along. They had read you and read about you spearheading a new movement in Black women's literature: literature that spoke to them. They wanted more of these books—and they were buying them. Granted, they will find me a very different writer from you as I'm sure they found Toni and Alice different from us as well as each other. But the good news is that those bookstores aren't foreign territory to them anymore. And while they may find some of us too literary, some too spacey, and some too self-pretentious and convoluted; I believe that they will keep returning. For that, you are to be thanked.

Here, Naylor is not just giving MacMillan the support and reassurance that she seems to have been craving—she is acknowledging the material impact that MacMillan has had on the careers of other Black writers.

²² Naylor, Gloria. Unpublished letter to Terry McMillan, January 1992, Box 5, Folder 15, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

She is also pointing out the new wave of inspired and excited readers that she has seen and drawing the line between MacMillan's books and these women's inspiration and excitement. By thanking her at the end of the paragraph, she is giving MacMillan the proverbial flowers she deserves. Also important is the section in which Naylor highlights the differences amongst the various writers in question. It is worth noting that she does not essentialize their collective work, as these women are all doing different things in their writing. The similarity is in the impact they have on their readers and popular culture and, most importantly, the profound resonance Black women are able to find with their novels. In explaining what she's seen on tour, Naylor is reminding MacMillan that this last similarity is key and encouraging her to see it as a rewarding sign of the power of her novels. This letter gives us the chance to read—in Naylor's own words—what she thought was the significance of Terry McMillan, a peer for whom she had great respect. Naylor concludes this heartfelt letter by congratulating McMillan, acknowledging her strength and relevance once more:

Terry, enjoy your success. You did it by yourself, hour by hour. The writing. The promotion. And go within yourself—to that same place where you draw up all those earthy characters—for whatever approval you may need.

These final words contain a reminder of the importance of celebrating and acknowledging oneself—a reminder that writers of any time can appreciate.

In these letters, Naylor gives us her opinions which audiences she thinks benefits from her and McMillan's novels as well as the scope of McMillan's impact on Black Literature. This a distinctive contribution to the criticism on the novels of both these authors and on Black women's fiction of the 1990s. The Gloria Naylor archive is overflowing with treasures like the letters I introduce in this essay. As it continues to be

processed and becoming more accessible as a result, researchers like myself will continue to find and write about the unique items Naylor left in her collection.

COMMUNITY SHAPES MEANING: CONVERSATION THROUGH GLORIA
NAYLOR'S WORDS

Since I first encountered Naylor's writing, I have admired her ability to handle difficult and controversial topics with care, focusing on the humanity of the subject. And because she does this, her words inspire others to handle these topics in the same way, which makes her works a great way to frame and introduce different but worthwhile conversations.

I put this to the test in In Fall of 2020, when I began my Research Assistantship with the Gloria Naylor Archive. Part of my duties allotted a few hours a week to creating programming that utilized the archive and invited more members of the Lehigh community to engage with Naylor's work. Suzanne Edwards connected me with Chad Williams in the Office of Multicultural Affairs, and the three of us got to talking about possibilities. Eventually, we decided Chad and I would co-facilitate one of the Faculty and Staff of Color Network's (FSCN) monthly meetings, centering the discussion around a short piece by Gloria Naylor: "The Meanings of a Word" (1986). For this event, we sent members of the group a link to the essay ahead of time, setting the intention for our conversation with the FSCN to be an open forum for members to discuss their feelings and opinions about the word, using Naylor's essay as a starting point.

First published in *The New York Times*, the essay explores the power of language through meditation on Naylor's relationship with the N word. She begins with a story from her own childhood, which makes the piece endearing and relatable from the start. Tactfully, she centers her community and what gives words their power, more than that particular word's potential for violence when it is used as a slur. The story is from a moment in third

grade when a classmate tried to wield the word's power against Naylor. She describes that moment as follows:

I remember the first time I heard the word nigger. In my third-grade class, our math tests were being passed down the rows, and as I handed the papers to a little boy in back of me, I remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did. He snatched his test from me and spit out that word...I didn't know what a nigger was, but I knew that whatever it meant, it was something he shouldn't have called me. This was verified when I raised my hand, and in a loud voice repeated what he had said and watched the teacher scold him for using a 'bad' word.²³

That boy's cruelty is not the focus of the piece, however, as Naylor reflects on how the word is used in her community.

The examples she provides are mostly positive. She writes that it was used as a commendation for a man's "strength, intelligence, or drive," a "term of endearment" for a woman's husband or boyfriend, or "victorious statement of being." These uses of the word show that, in the eyes of the adults around her during her childhood, a "nigger" was not an inherently bad thing to be. In fact, it was something one can expect to be called by the people who loved and supported them most. Naylor does provide a negative use for the word, explaining that it was also often used as a "description of some group within the community that had overstepped the bounds of decency as [her] family defined it." But even in the example of this, the word is accompanied by a negative adjective—"trifling"—and it is clear that the speaker disapproves not of the subject's existence, just their behavior.

The event itself, which took place in February of 2021, went exceedingly well. I'll admit I was nervous at first—being new to the FSCN, I wasn't sure what to expect. How would this topic and Naylor's interpretation of it be received? How would non-Black

²³ Naylor, Gloria. "The Meanings of a Word." *The New York Times*. 20 Feb 1986.

colleagues in attendance respond? Let's face it, the truth is that the N word elicits a strong reaction from most people when they hear it. For some, it signifies familiarity and community, much like Naylor in "The Meanings of a Word." For others, it creates discomfort or even triggers painful memories, be they similar to the moment from grade school Naylor shared or much, much worse.

In our meeting to plan the agenda, Chad and I were able to express a shared nervousness. This was rooted in our knowledge that, no matter how often Black people express that it is harmful, many non-Black people do say the N-word in various ways and for various reasons. The FCSN space is a place of community and understanding—and though we certainly were not anticipating that the conversation would turn ugly—Chad and I didn't feel comfortable allowing our minds to rule out the possibility of hearing a non-Black member say the N word in our meeting. We talked about ways to address that if for whatever reason it did happen, and how to comfort and support Black colleagues in light of it. We also talked about making room for the varied experiences we knew our Black colleagues would have to share with the group. As Naylor wrote in her letter to Lucille Clifton, there is no "exclusive point of view"²⁴ or unanimous consensus on the use of the word amongst Black people. Any Black person you meet can have different opinions and experiences, and we wanted to honor that while also encouraging the group to be receptive and supportive of each other.

On the day of, the group gave us a better event than we could have even imagined. Our Black colleagues responded with their own stances on the use of the word, especially

²⁴ Gloria Naylor, unpublished letter to Lucille Clifton, November 1994, Box 7, Folder 2, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

the use of it by Black people. Some told stories of traumatic incidents that tainted the word for them from an early age, others told us about the communities with which they use the N word, and the place it holds in their lives. One member shared a story that explored the complicated emotions he felt when he was called the N word while visiting a friend in the Middle East. Another Black member, who chooses not to use the word in any context, shared with us a touching conversation he had with his adult son who does use the word. Their ability to listen to and understand one another and ultimately respect each other's wishes resonated deeply with the entire group. We all agreed that, despite our many different positions, that was also the goal of our conversation. Non-black colleagues in attendance expressed an understanding of the power of the word and its significance to Black people and gave us as much space to express ourselves as we needed.

The conversation that day was robust. We flowed easily from each comment to the next. I read a couple quotes from "The Meanings of a Word" toward the beginning and discussed the themes of the piece, and the wonderful folks in attendance took over. But the key to this is Naylor's writing and the way she centers community while telling down-to-earth stories that will pique the interest of any reader who has dealt with similar issues. And if they're Black, there's a strong chance they have. A generous, thoughtful, and caring conversation grew out of our taking a look at Naylor's words. Now, when the people who attended this meeting hear the name Gloria Naylor again, they won't have to ask who she is. They'll be able to say that they've read a short essay by her, and hopefully, they'll be able to speak to its power. And I can only take credit for introducing them to Naylor—the impact she had on our meeting was all hers.

NAYOR'S SAPPHIRA WADE:

NOTES ON KNOWLEDGE, HISTORY, AND SPIRITUALITY

This transcript includes all information communicated verbally during my presentation on April 22, 2021 in collaboration with Black Women Radicals, a Black feminist organization and archive that centers and celebrates Black women and gender non-conforming people's radical political activism and cultural production. Their audience is primarily Black people looking to learn from and engage in Black Feminist, anti-capitalist, pro-queer conversations. This event shared some of the treasures found in the Naylor archive with this public audience, making the information behind them accessible for anyone with access to Zoom or YouTube. The pictures referenced are included in the List of Figures. I have also included some of the Question-and-Answer portion of the event, including only the questions and my answers. I have also abridged some of the comments of the Black Women Radicals host, Jaimee Swift, including only sections of her comments that reference my presentation. The full event can be accessed on YouTube.²⁵

1. Transcript of Ayanna's Presentation

Ayanna: I'm going to go ahead and share my screen [shares screen]. I'll be talking about Sapphira Wade which is an unpublished manuscript in the archive. I'm so excited to share this with you all. I know most of you probably have not heard of it before, because it's pretty unknown.

So, let's get into it here— Sapphira Wade. This is actually a sketch right here from

²⁵ Black Women Radicals. "Exploring Gloria Naylor's Archive." YouTube, uploaded by Black Women Radicals, 4 April 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szeDIU_a0Sg&t=8s

the archive of Sapphira Wade's face that Gloria Naylor did (see figure 1). This sketch is actually about 20 years older than this manuscript, which I love since it shows just how early on in her career this character was in Gloria Naylor's mind.

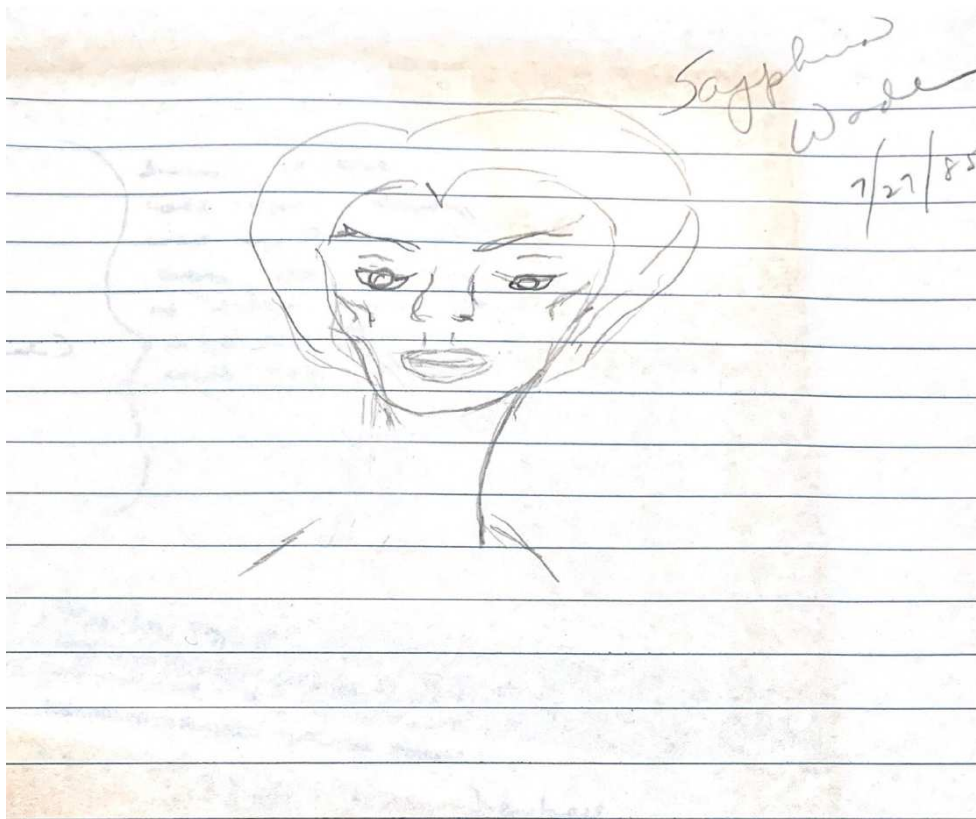


Figure 1. A sketch of Sapphira Wade from research materials for *Mama Day*, circa 1984.²⁶

Some quick background about the manuscript: It's partial—we don't have the full manuscript. What we have contains about two chapters. It was written in 2004, by hand, so in the pictures I'll show you you'll be seeing Gloria Naylor's handwriting and maybe some scratching-out that she did, which is always cool for me. And it follows characters

²⁶ Naylor, Gloria. A sketch of Sapphira Wade from research materials for *Mama Day*, circa 1984²⁶ Box 20, Folder 11, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT.

that you'll recognize if you've read *Mama Day*. It begins—the first part—with Cocoa (one of the main characters from *Mama Day*) as an elder. She is seventy years old and returning to Willow Springs to learn her family history and the history of the island. For those of you who haven't read *Mama Day*: Willow Springs is a fictional island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. The second part follows the life and birth of Bascombe Wade. It follows him from his birth up until adolescence where he eventually leaves his home in Norway. So, Bascombe Wade is actually the person who gave the island to Sapphira Wade and her descendants under mysterious circumstances in 1823. So this manuscript starts with a descendant of Sapphira Wade going back to the island to uncover that history. How did they get the island? What does it mean that they have it? What happened? She wants to know her family's story.

Let's talk about some themes of the manuscript. History—I've already used that word ten times probably, but this manuscript is all about history; what history means; people's different definitions on what history. There's a lot of emphasis on embodied knowledge that is carried over from *Mama Day*, emphasis on community knowledge, and emphasis on spiritual practice. Cocoa is really coming back to figure out: 'What kind of history is important to her, what kind of history was important to *Mama Day*, who was the spiritual leader of her family, what kind of history was important to Sapphira Wade, and how they're all connected. It starts with the story of her finding her roots. There is a lot of interest on Cocoa's parts in the gaps in her knowledge of her ancestors and her heritage, and she's trying to reclaim that story for herself and her children.

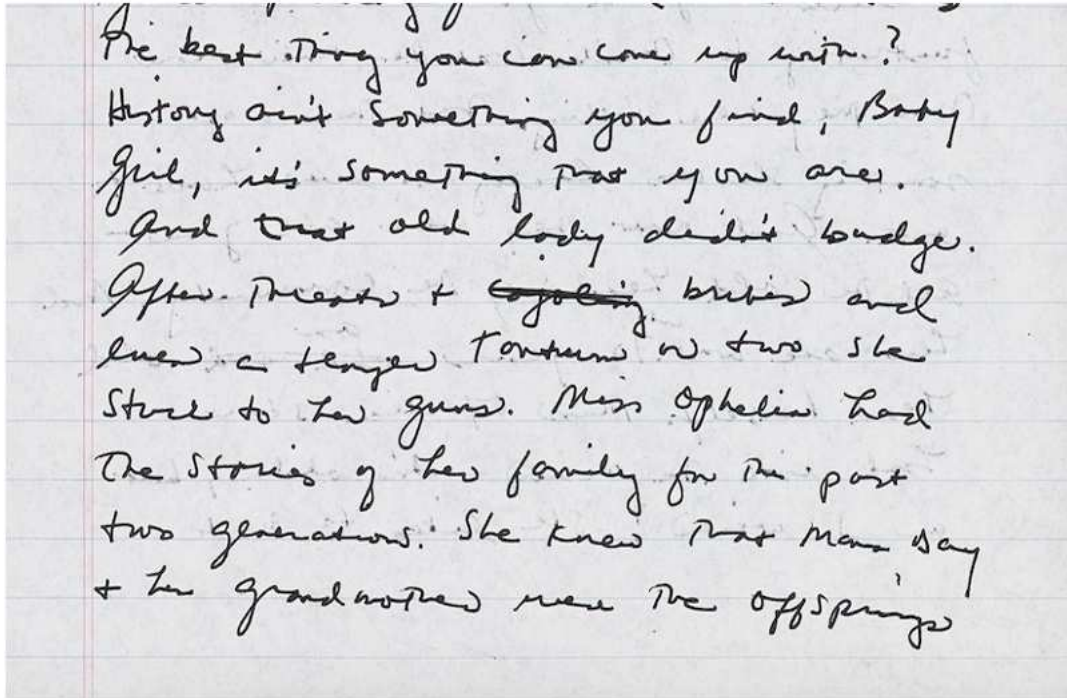


Figure 2. A portion of Gloria Naylor's handwritten manuscript of *Sapphira Wade*, which features Mama Days speaking to Cocoa, circa 2004.

This is a quote that I love from the manuscript (see figure 2). Here in Naylor's handwriting you can see it says, "History ain't something you find, baby, girl, it's something that you are".²⁷ And this is a moment where Cocoa is remembering what Mama Day had to say when she asked her about the history of the island. And this brings us to a point that I find really interesting in the manuscript, which is the juxtaposition of embodied history (and community history) and institutionalized history. So, Cocoa asks Mama Day that question and she's trying to do research in a really formal, scholarly way. We later find out that Cocoa went and got a PhD in History when she wanted to tell the story of, and Mama Day is kind of dismissive of that approach. She's like, you know, 'You don't need to go and get a degree to figure out where you come from.'

²⁷ Naylor, Gloria. *Sapphira Wade*, unpublished manuscript, circa 2004, Box 40, Folder 1, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, pg. 4.

In *Mama Day* we learn of "The Other Place," which is the place where Bascombe Wade and SW lived and it's where they're buried as well. In that house, on the island, there's artifacts and there's the deed that Suzanne mentioned. It's a very spiritual place, and a very historical place and a very sacred place. In *Mama Day*, very seldom is someone besides Mama Day get to go into The Other Place; it's a very special place. And we can think of it in a way as the family's own archive, right? It's curated by the family, by the ancestors as they lived there, and kept the way it was for the sake of not disrupting that history and the gravity of that history.

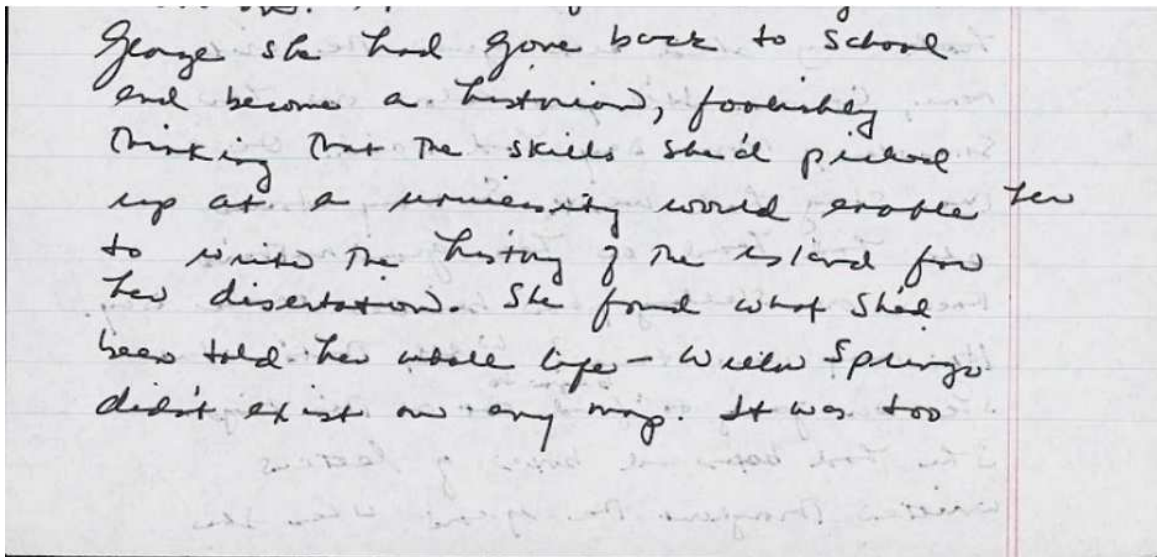


Figure 3.1. A portion of Gloria Naylor's handwritten manuscript of Sapphira Wade, which features Cocoa's understanding of where she must find the history of Willow Springs, circa 2004.

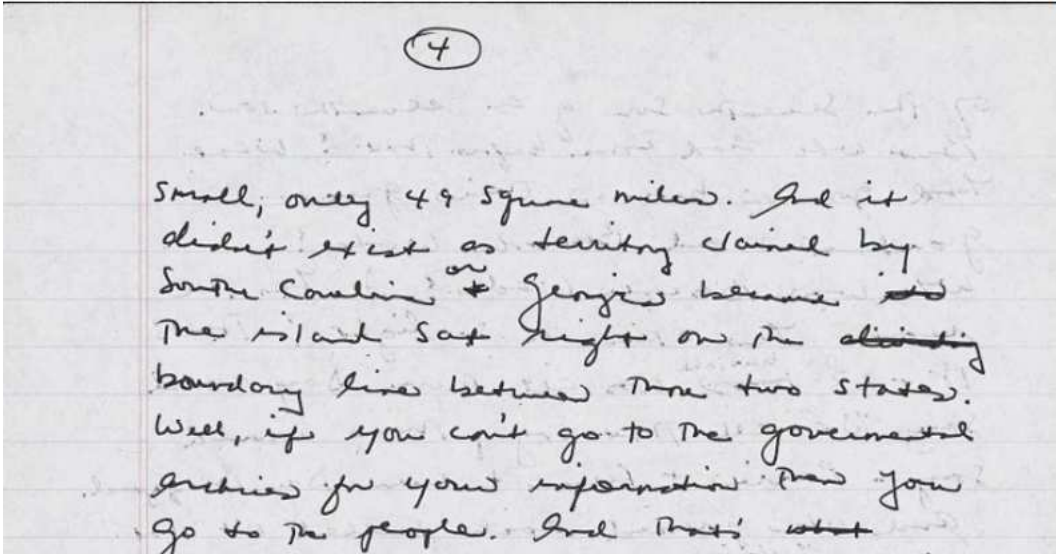


Figure 3.2. A portion of Gloria Naylor's handwritten manuscript of *Sapphira Wade*, which features Cocoa's understanding of where she must find the history of Willow Springs, circa 2004.

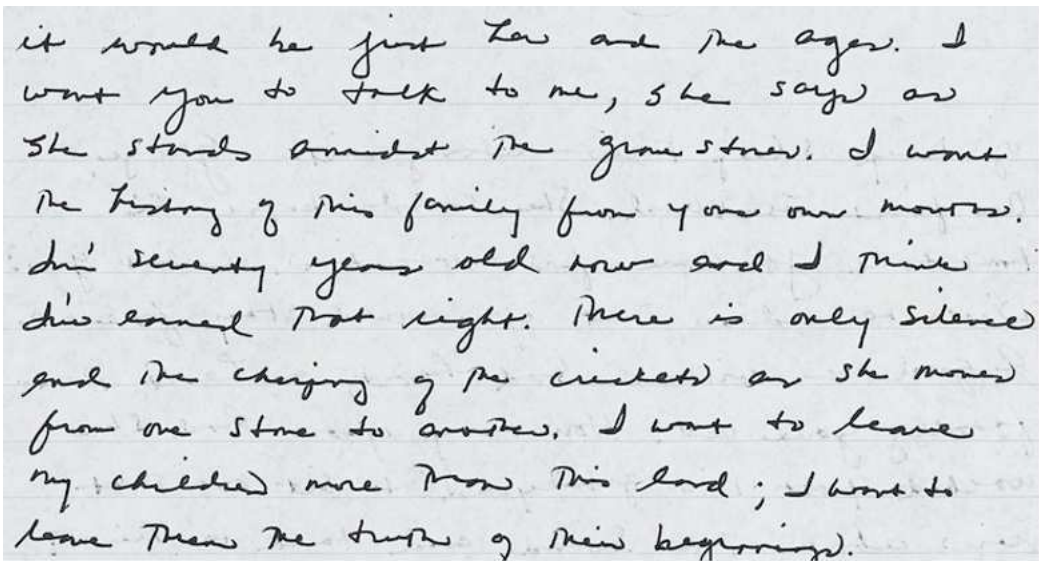
Okay, so I want to talk about Cocoa and her experience trying to use the knowledge she acquired getting a PhD to tell the history of (see figures 3.1 and 3.2). It says:

...she had come back to school and become a historian, foolishly thinking that the skills she'd picked up at a university would enable her to write the history of the island for her dissertation. She found what she'd been told her whole life—Willow Springs didn't exist on any map. It was too small, only 49 square miles. And it didn't exist as a territory claimed by South Carolina or Georgia because the island sat right on the boundary line between those two states. Well, if you can't go to the governmental archives for your information then you go to the people...²⁸

So, that's something that's really important in this manuscript—it's the people who experienced the history. It kind of tells us a lot about what Naylor feels is important in history keeping, record keeping, memory work: emphasizing experiential knowledge. Knowledge that maybe wasn't accepted into institutions and in a Black context that means prioritizing her ancestors, her family, and what she knows. There's a beautiful moment

²⁸ Naylor, Gloria. *Sapphira Wade*, unpublished manuscript, circa 2004, Box 40, Folder 1, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, pg. 3-4.

where Cocoa returns to the graveyard where four generations of her family are buried and begins to speak with her ancestors, asking them to help her find the history of the island (see figure 4). And I'll read this here. She says: "I want you to talk to me, she says as she stands amidst the gravestones. I want the history of this family from your own mouths.... I want to leave my children more than this land; I want to leave them the truth of their beginnings".²⁹

A photograph of a handwritten manuscript snippet on lined paper. The text is written in cursive and matches the quote in the text above. The paper has horizontal lines and a vertical margin line on the right side. The handwriting is dark ink on a light-colored background.

it would be just two and the ages. I
want you to talk to me, she says as
she stands amidst the gravestones. I want
the history of this family from your own mouths.
She's seventy years old now and I think
she earned that right. There is only silence
and the chirping of the crickets as she moves
from one stone to another. I want to leave
my children more than this land; I want to
leave them the truth of their beginnings.

Figure 4. A portion of Gloria Naylor's handwritten manuscript of *Sapphira Wade*, which features Cocoa's speaking to her ancestors in *The Other Place*, circa 2004.

This is just a sneak peek into what this document entails. It's a really beautiful spiritual journey for Cocoa and it kind of mirrors in some ways—if you've read *Mama Day* you'll know. You'll see similarities between the Bascombe Wade section and Cocoa's life in Willow Springs. And it's all about exploring your roots and figuring out your epistemological connections. What is knowledge to you? What is knowledge to this Black family who got this land mysteriously from the man who enslaved her? What is that

²⁹ Naylor, Gloria. *Sapphira Wade*, unpublished manuscript, circa 2004, Box 40, Folder 1, Gloria Naylor Archive, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, CT, pg. 7.

history? How can Cocoa reclaim it as her own now that Mama Day, who was her guide in this, is gone?

So this brings me to want to talk about some questions that this brings up for me when I read this document and every time that I look at it again. First of all, this is really one of the most beautiful things I've read by Naylor. If we had the whole book and it was published, I'm pretty sure it would be my favorite book by her. I wish we had the whole thing, but it always makes me think, what does all of this reveal about Gloria Naylor's ideas and beliefs about history and archives? What are her commitments and what does she value in terms of community archives versus institutionalized archives? What does she give weight to when considering sources of knowledge? What can we glean about what she's trying to say? What is she challenging about the ivory tower and getting a degree being considered in this society the best way to go about doing research and pursuing knowledge and all that? What is Gloria Naylor saying about the real value of that when it comes to a community and a people's history especially, a Black community/a Black family's history, where their story was not told in these institutions? Right? They're not even on a map and so they have to go elsewhere for that information.

So, I love the way this text interrogates that. And one thing it brings to mind for me as I'm working in the archive and working with Mary and Suzanne and our wonderful team here is how can we, who work with Gloria Naylor's archive, uphold her wishes and abide by her beliefs even as an institutionalized archive at a university? How can we prioritize community, prioritize Black stories, Black spaces, Black knowledge even at a PWI, even at an institution, and a private institution like Lehigh university? How can we really honor those commitments and mirror the commitments and beliefs about archival work and the

value of Black stories experiential knowledge that Gloria Naylor is really outlining in this novel and her research for it?

2. Transcript of Question & Answer Portion (abridged).

Jaimee: Wow. I can't even bring in words like people are on twitter saying such excellent—are giving wonderful remarks and comments and I just want to provide a list of kind of like what everyone said during this conversation and how revolutionary and radical Naylor really was, and at the vanguard of so many different themes and topics that we are seeing today. So people talked about displacement, transnational Black feminists relationships. I didn't even know about hoodoo and conjure, and African spirituality and you know honoring the living as well as the dead because so much of our history as Black people has been erased or relegated to the sidelines or interrogated via the lens of white, capitalist, supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative revisionist histories right. Talked about mass incarceration and policing, colonial rule, capitalism... I mean, y'all really did the damn thing. I mean, I'm so grateful for this conversation because it puts Gloria Naylor— oftentimes I feel with Black women's literary works we have our top five or our top ten or we only go towards certain people who are more popular. But we don't interrogate other Black women writers who were also critical to this literary canon, right? Not just in women's radical traditions but also just in Black political thought or literary thought and literary canonical works in general. So, I am just blown away by this conversation. So, thank you. Thank you so much and we have tons of questions by the way. And so we do have about 20 minutes.

So, about two people asked the same question but Sam Sorensen—forgive me if I'm saying your name incorrectly—but they asked in addition to the amazing work

presented here what is an item from the archive that excites you bringing joy or you just love? A question for everyone and I'm also wondering about Ayanna as the GA responsible for processing materials and I'll also put that question in the chat.

Ayanna: I'll jump in here. I think there are so many that come to mind, obviously like, working in the archive every day I see so many things because I've been working with the processing since my time here. With the processing of the correspondence the items that jump out to me are the letters between Gloria Naylor and other Black women writers. Lucille Clifton, Terry Jewell, Terry McMillan, Ann Petrie, Nikki Giovanni—they were really conversing about literature in really interesting ways, pouring into one another and just creating a network amongst each other that is just really beautiful to see. I think, as a Black woman who writes, it is just so encouraging to see that in Gloria Naylor's archive. And it makes me think of my friends who are writers, who I talk about writing with and so that's something that just really gives me joy. Every time I come across it, I'm so excited. So, yeah, it's not one item but it's many and I'm so grateful every time I get to see something like that.

Jaimee: One of the things I love about the Gloria Naylor archive and you all is that when I had a discussion with Suzanne and Ayanna we really went into who has access to archives and I shared a story about how I went to a certain university, and I couldn't even have access to those archives when they refused me. I won't say the name, but they refused me. Meanwhile, at Howard it's very easy. You can easily access Moorland-Spingarn archives—You show ID. I don't know if things have changed but at the time it was easier to access. And it was this Ivy League institution that refused me, and I was just like how do I reclaim Black archives? How do we do that as a community? How do we have access

to our histories? How do we go back and get our histories when we're continuously blocked or ostracized or overlooked or seen as outsiders even while we are in academia? And so what I appreciate about this conversation is you all discuss this, and Gloria Naylor was keen on this. And thank you for honoring her wishes.

And lastly, Ayanna, this question goes to you. So Ayanna, the anonymous attendee asked, “Ayanna, forgive me if you mentioned this earlier you said that you wish you had access to the whole book. Is that story unfinished or does it appear that there are missing pages/chapters?”

Ayanna: Sure, that's a great question. So, we only have the first two sections of Sapphira Wade. Those could be the only sections of Sapphira Wade for all we know. Naylor didn't indicate whether there was more or not. She could have written more and not chosen to share all of it, right, as the person who was curating her own collection. So, it's kind of a mystery. I don't know if, maybe, Suzanne has more information, but we don't really know at the time. I think I can say pretty confidently we can only hope that one day we will discover it because I know personally, I want the rest of that story.

Jaimee: I'm just in awe of everyone's brilliance at this point. I need to take a course immediately from all y'all on Gloria Naylor. But I just want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart for your amazing work and scholarship for doing this. I know things are rough for everyone and I just appreciate everyone so much for sharing your knowledge about this wonderful, wonderful Black woman writer, who we should honor and revere at all times. And so to Suzanne, Ayanna, Stephanie, Mary and Randi thank you thank you so much. And I know our audience is saying thank you to you all in the comments and I just

appreciate it. And hopefully we did Gloria Naylor—or y'all did Gloria Naylor justice today and I hope she's smiling down on us.

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VITA

Ayanna Woods will receive her M.A. in English from Lehigh in 2021. She served as the Gloria Naylor archive's research assistant during the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters. Ayanna processed archival materials, managed social media for the project, and staffed the collection space for visiting scholars. She also assisted with planning and organization for a symposium on the Naylor Archive and assisted with website maintenance. Ayanna earned her B.A. in English from Howard University and was born and raised in Philadelphia. Outside of Naylor, literature, and research, she is passionate about film, music, and spending time with nature.