

When Ethnic Identity Meets National Identity: An Analysis of Bailey's Identity Transformation in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*

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Abstract Adopting Arnold van Gennep's tripartite model of "rites of passage," to study Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, this essay traces Bailey's rites of passage before and during his stay in Bailey's café to unravel his national identity transformation. Before his arrival at the café, he experiences an identity crisis due to his American national identity, particularly with the atomic bombs. It leads him to separate from America and comes to the liminal street of Bailey café, which constitutes a blues matrix that calls upon the historical sites of the way station, allowing him and other castaways to gather, rest, and transform. Through his encounters with Stanley and Gabe on the street, Bailey is able to gain the affirmative and transformative power of the blues and reintegrate with his American identity. Thus, the essay argues that the ideological aspect of American's national identity requires African Americans to transcend and to dream, and the blues empowers them to do so.

Key words American national identity; rites of passage; the blues; *Bailey's Café*; Gloria Naylor

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When Langston Hughes sings "Let America be America again" (3), He envisions an ideal America with such values as liberty, opportunity, and equality. For the majority of African Americans, America has never been the Promised Land or

Garden of Eden (“America never was America to me” [Hughes 3]). The conflict between ethnic identity and national identity of African Americans is well reflected in *Bailey’s Café* (1992), the fourth novel of Gloria Naylor (1950-2016), one of the black women writers that contribute to a “renaissance” of black women writing after the 1970s. The novel presents the life stories of five black women and two black men on the edge of the world before 1949 and envisions two way stations, Bailey’s café and Eve’s place, as asylums for them to heal their identity crises. This essay traces the transformation of the café proprietor Bailey’s national identity so as to unravel the dynamics between an African American’s ethnic identity and national identity, as well as the transformative potential of the café as a blues space.

Bailey’s Café is a blues novel filled with transience and liminality. Consisting of several loosely connected miniplots, the novel is structured to imitate a blues session. The writer of this essay believes that the narration of each major character follows a threefold progression: separation, liminality, and incorporation, a tripartite processual structure of “rites of passage” raised by Arnold van Gennep in his study on ritualized experience. Van Gennep uses “rites of passage” — “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age” (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 94) to delineate the underlying structure that accompanies human psyche from one social status to another. Dorothy Perry Thompson takes notice of van Gennep’s theory in her study on *Bailey’s Café* and acknowledges the validity of the concept of “liminality” for African American literary criticism, as “it applies to characters caught between very different cultures” (98). Because of this cultural schism, African Americans need to go through various rituals to develop more wholesome mentality and identities. Thompson remarks that “[e]ach of Naylor’s major figures [in *Bailey’s Café*] is at some stage of the liminal process” (99). Naylor herself also admits that “it [the café] is there as a situation that embodies a turning point in each of these characters’ lives” (“Gloria Naylor” 95).

One crucial cultural schism addressed in *Bailey’s Café* is African American’s national identity crisis. This identity trouble is best illustrated by W. E. B Du Bois’s remarks on African American’s “double-consciousness”: “One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (5). An African American’s racial being is at times in conflict with his national being. The reason for this schism lies in the reality of being black in America. Due to the still rampant racial injustice, African Americans find it hard to fully embrace the American ideal set by the founding fathers in the Declaration of Independence — equality, liberty, and justice. As Bailey is a man who holds negative views towards racial integration in

America, his dissent against American's military actions in World War II weakens his national identity and triggers his identity crisis. Generally speaking, his realistic attitude and pessimistic views towards racial relationship in America undergo a transformation in the novel. Thus, taking van Gennep's structure into consideration, this essay centers on Bailey's development of national identity and traces the three stages of his rites of passage. It is believed that such an analysis will shed light on the dynamic transformation of one's national identity, particularly among the ethnic minorities in America.

Separation from America

The first phase in van Gennep's structure of rites of passage is separation, which mainly "comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group [...] from an earlier fixed point in the social structure" (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 94). In order to attain a more highly individuated stage of growth, one must leave the old ways behind. For Bailey, his national identity generates an identity crisis leading him to self-demise, so he needs to leave his national identity behind.

"Bailey" actually is not the café proprietor's real name. He only adopts the name of the café after he arrives at the street. Growing up in Brooklyn as an avid baseball fan, "Bailey" develops a strong indignation towards racial inequality in America because he cannot see "the American way" (Naylor, *Bailey's Café* 12) in baseball, which means "in the owner's box ... colored and white together" (12). Bailey's egalitarian "American way" calls upon "the American Creed," an ideology essential to American national identity. Stanley Hoffman believes that there are two features in the formation of the American national identity: one is the material, which is the population of America; the other is ideological, which features "the American creed" — a belief that is based on the principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights (72). Samuel P. Huntington also holds the view that the American Creed is "an indispensable part of their national character and national identity" (68), which can be summarized into five key principles: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire (Lipset 63-4). For different ethnics, the American Creed weakens the monolithic racial and religious factors in the dominating Anglo-Protestant culture in America. Furthermore, African American literary theorist Houston A. Baker, Jr. coins the capitalized word "AMERICA" to denote an integrationist vision of America similar to "the American Creed." "AMERICA" is an "immanent idea of boundless, classless, raceless possibility in America" (Baker 65). Baker points out that AMERICA is a utopian dream but the black community needs to discover it in America so as to strive for a better

future. Unlike other countries, America is a nation that ideology precedes any single national or ethnic history, so both the American Creed and AMERICA are constructed ideas that have founded the nation. Thus, this essay stresses the ideological part of American national identity in analyzing Bailey's national identity.

AMERICA is not real for Bailey. For him, there is an inconsistency in American life: egalitarianism is only true as an idea but not true in the real world. Joining the military is supposed to be Bailey's rites of passage towards being an American man, reconciling his ethnic and national identities. However, his hidden grudge towards AMERICA and the atomic bombs cause the army life to be his failed rite of passage. Bailey views joining the army not as a patriotic action but as a civil obligation. Nevertheless, he ponders, "I was willing to give that [my life] up for them [my unborn children] — not my country, them. Without them I knew there would be no America" (23). Thus, he conjures up a reason for his fighting and killing — fighting for the future of his race, "my unborn children" (23). However, his selective cause does not hold water. Once he sets foot in this War, his identity changes from a black man in America to an American soldier. His intention to replace his national identity with his racial identity eventually leads to his own mental breakdown.

As Bailey, the American soldier, gradually approaches Japan, he somehow senses "the divine wind" — "Kamikaze" (25) in the air. "The wind fluttering the edge of her flowered kimono, unraveling the baby's swaddling band as they hurled down the jagged cliffs of Saipan" (25). The divine goddess-like wind has been blowing for "one thousand and five hundred years in Japan" (25). Like many of Naylor's spiritual writings, she feminizes "Kamikaze," the renowned suicidal aviation attack unit of Japan, into a timeless wind goddess who protects Japan as well as the earth. This goddess pleads to the American soldiers for millions of innocent Pacific islanders' and Japanese citizens' lives. This wind makes Bailey "couldn't set foot in Japan" (25) because through the divine wind, he foresees an omen that "the very young, the deformed, and the old were waiting for me in Tokyo" (25). Indeed, American army's forthcoming months of bombardment await Japanese people, as well as two atomic bombs.

Addressing the ethical dilemma and humanity challenges of the atomic bombs, Naylor adopts a universal stand rather than a national one towards the bombs. The holy wind speaks for the souls of the dead, pleading against the atomic bombs, because it brings forth a new age of humanity — the atomic age that might lead to the end of human beings — the ultimate suicide project. Before

the bombing of Hiroshima, Bailey reflects, “[a]nd you gotta understand we were winning the war” (25-6). His words echo the then President Truman’s advisor, Admiral William Leahy’s view. Leahy points out that before the atomic bombs, “the Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender” (441). Thus, Bailey believes that he becomes a part of a national crime that is directed by his American white leaders. Using Hiroshima and Nagasaki as social and scientific laboratories for Japan’s speedy unconditional surrender eventually facilitates America’s global transformation — from a country mainly focused on domestic affairs into a global military empire, particularly in the Pacific region. Although Bailey’s prayers of survival have been answered by the atomic bombs (“My salvation rose like the head of a newborn” [26]), the “fruits” of the atomic bomb is the unconditional surrender of Japan and the rise of America as a global military empire, “spawning” (26)/ stationing her children in Japan, South Korea, the Marshall Islands, and all over the Pacific region.

Realizing the imperial action of America, Bailey has a mental breakdown on his arrival at the wharf of San Francisco after the War. When his fellow soldiers celebrate homecoming (“The boys were home” [27]), Bailey is stranded in the water. “I still believe this country had even been worth Hiroshima happening, but at the very moment of Hiroshima happening, it all stopped being worth it” (27). The atomic bombs make his rites of passage of American identity in the army a failure. Stranded at the shore of America, he cannot set foot on this land that commits the national crime. Stop believing in AMERICA, he loses his national identity at America’s borderland. He is *separated* from a traumatized national identity. It is a moment of utter schism of his double consciousness, which echoes Homi K. Bhabha’s remark that “the people are the articulation of a doubling of the national address, an ambivalent movement between the discourses of pedagogy and the performative” (149). Here, for Bailey’s case, the “discourses of pedagogy” refers to the teachings of AMERICA, while “the performative” designates American’s empirical and hegemonic actions in the War. The practice of America is in conflict with the ideology of America, and Bailey, an African American soldier, bears this conflict with his body and is overwhelmed by this fissure. Feeling lost, Bailey attempts to commit suicide by drowning. It is at that moment that his wife Nadine and Bailey’s café appear, and he is separated from the country and brought to the liminal world.

Transition in the Liminal Space

Bailey’s café initiates him into the liminal stage of his transition. The borderless

and nationless café provides him with a temporary identity — Bailey, the proprietor of Bailey’s café — and a temporary shelter to resolve his identity crisis. Bailey’s temporary identity is crucial for his rites of passage. Refusing to reveal to the readers his real name, Bailey grants himself with freedom and ambiguity. Furthermore, during the liminal stage of rites of passage, former social roles are suspended to allow the people to be themselves (Turner, “Betwixt and Between” 11). Thus, like a new born, Bailey’s “nameless” situation grants him with the power to transcend and transform.

Not unlike Dorothy in *Wizard of Oz*, Bailey is carried into a magical space of endless ambiguity. The café “sits right on the margin between the edge of the world and infinite possibility” (76), and it is “real real mobile” (28). The magical café separates Bailey from the common world. In Turner’s study on rites of passage among Ndembu people of Zimbabwe, the people who go through transitional rites — the neophytes — are often spatially separated: “... neophytes ... are very commonly secluded, partially or completely, from the realm of culturally defined and ordered states and statuses” (“Betwixt and Between” 8). Thus, liminality is a spatial concept, which can be used to describe the spatiality of the street of Bailey’s café. The café is not easy to find. Although everyone is welcome to come to the café, it can only be noticed when one is truly hopeless. When some frequent customers cannot find the place, “they’ll start asking questions. Hey, why wasn’t this place here last month when I came by?” (28) The secretive and fluid nature of its location insulates the café and makes it a perfect place for Bailey to go through his liminal period.

Like most rituals of transition in many tribal cultures, magic is needed to finish the ritual. In *Bailey’s Café*, it is carried out by an African American goddess. During rites of passage, close contact with “deity or with superhuman power” (Turner, “Betwixt and Between” 8) allows one to transcend limits. In the story, Eve, the owner of the Eve’s place — a women’s boardinghouse, is an older resident in the street who initiates Bailey into the role of café proprietor with a touch of magic, making everything natural and indubitable. “Eve was my first customer ... I didn’t have to explain the routine to her, like no one had to explain it to me” (80). Without actual words, Eve makes Bailey accept his new status and new “routine” immediately, as “complete obedience characterizes the relationship of neophyte to elder” (Turner, “Betwixt and Between” 10). Being a woman with no age, probably more than a thousand-year old (82), Eve is a reference to the first woman in the Bible. The presence of a timeless woman as an eternal goddess of the street adds to the transcendence of the street. Thus, this is a space merging immanence and

transience with a slight touch of magic.

The timelessness and transience of the street is connected to Naylor's intentional historical reference of the way station in American history. Although Bailey's café does not have a fixed location, it is believed that it is mostly based in a brownstone near the pier at 125th Street in Harlem, New York (Whitt 153). Thus, it is still largely an American place. As Eve says to Bailey, "My place is a way station, just like yours" (159), Bailey's café and Eve's place are temporary American way stations for the most desperate in the world. From the early 19th century to the end of Civil War, there were many way stations along the secretive slave escape route called Underground Railroad. Since the slave escape network uses railroad terminology, "way stations" is used to refer to "hiding places, places of safety, and stops along the freedom route ... 'Station masters' sheltered the slaves in the stations and provided the fugitives with food, clothing, and protection" (McCaslin 560). Way stations also "served as a postal center and message drop" (Robinson and Fulkerson 40) and provided illiterate slaves with communicative and gathering locations. Thus, Naylor reinvents way stations into a café and a women's boardinghouse.

Bailey's negotiation with American identity starts from his entering this liminal space. His first lesson is learning to listen to the blues because the blues is a cultural matrix for AMERICA. The narrative intentionally imitates a blues session, with the café proprietor Bailey as the "maestro" introducing different "players" to sing their blues in the "Jam" and ending with "The Wrap." Virginia C. Fowler observes that "the novel's prevailing spirit is the spirit of the blues" (122). Moreover, way stations are the perfect places for the blacks to sing their blues. The blues is understood by Baker as a cultural "matrix" for African American literature, which is a "point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulse always in productive transit" (3). Baker's understanding of the blues is "to summon the black blues singer at the railway junction ... [which] is marked by transience" (7). Jeff Todd Tilton also comments that the blues are way-stations for people to rest: "within the larger story cycle, each song, sometimes each stanza, becomes a way-station, a temporary resolution that will give the singer strength to begin again" (2). Both the textual and the spatial connections with the blues allows the way stations to be places defying definition and generating possibilities. Thus, serving various despondent customers at the way station, Bailey learns to truly listen to the customers' stories/blues ("listen below the surface" [33]).

Naylor intentionally places Bailey's stories at the beginning and Stanley's at the end as bookends for *Bailey's Café*, because "they are antithetical to each

other” (Naylor, “A Conversation” 150). Thus, as Bailey’s foil, Stanley’s personal transformation reinforces Bailey’s transformation. Stanley is a man stubbornly believes in AMERICA because he comes from a truly AMERICAN family. With a mixed Yuma-Black-Mexican ethnic root, the family obtains financial success in a deserted land. However, Stanley’s failed job-seeking attempt disillusion his American ideal. Ready to commit suicide with a loaded gun, he comes to the street. At Eve’s place, Stanley is offered a nickname, “Miss Maple,” and a job, housekeeping. Wearing women’s clothes, he is able to recreate himself into a free man.

Thanks to the café, Bailey the maestro develops empathy through his narratives and in-depth listening (Bender and Hoefel 194). He sees through Stanley’s womanly attire and acknowledges his manhood. Defending Stanley’s sexuality in front of other customers, “Miss Maple isn’t a homosexual” (163), Bailey praises Stanley of his intelligence, courage, strength and freedom. Stanley creatively uses a white woman’s name to enter advertising jingles contests, eventually making a fortune that allows him to go back to America and start a company. The way stations grant him freedom to develop creative skills that a black man needs to survive in America, or in Di Loreto’s words, Stanley grows to be a “modern trickster” (571). Appreciating Bailey’s friendship and understanding, Stanley celebrates his leaving with Bailey with a heartening toast. Listening to Stanley’s blues, Bailey understands that beneath the seemingly disappointing reality, AMERICA is still a possibility for their race, as long as they know how to find it.

Incorporation with America

Sometimes, one needs to leave home so as to find home. As the café is the blues site celebrating multiplicity, the meaning of border is weakened, particularly in Bailey’s transnational relationship with Gabe, a white Russian Jew. On the liminal street, Gabe’s pawnshop is a timeless gateway for the Jews in exile. Thus, Naylor appropriates the racial significance of the blues site and reaches a broader sense of transcendence — racial and national transcendence. Nevertheless, it is this transnational relationship that allows Bailey to reintegrate with America.

Gabe is like Bailey’s father in many ways. Both of them like to talk, and both of them share common interests in topics such as “politics, the war, and that bloodbath over in Europe” (144). Although these conversations are not always friendly but they form a deeper connection and mutual understanding through their sharing. Furthermore, Gabe helps Bailey transcend his ethnic and national limits

by involving him in a concerted effort of assisting Mariam, a teenage girl from a Beta Israel village in Ethiopia that observes some strict Jewish rules. Because of her pre-marital pregnancy, she is exiled from her religious community. Finding her in a backstreet in Addis Ababa, Gabe guides her to the borderless street, so Gabe's action challenges the border of America and grants Bailey with a transnational perspective.

Standing in the transnational shelter, Bailey sees the limit of America as a nation actually lies in the problematic construction of "nation" itself. America, like many other countries, has its faults and defects. The then newly-founded country Israel is given as an example. When Gabe tries to send Mariam and her baby son George to Israel, he finds out that Israel has not recognized the Ethiopian sect of Judaism so Mariam and George are denied entrance. Thus, all nations have limits and restrictions. Eventually, it is America that gives them hope. A black rabbi named Matthews, who "has other Falasha people in his congregation up there in Harlem" (222), is willing to offer them shelter and help. Then, after Mariam dies, Bailey is able to find a quality boys' shelter in New York for the orphaned baby George. Thus, Bailey gradually comes to an understanding that America is still the land of hope for many.

Through his friendships with Stanley and Gabe, Bailey is able to listen to the blues, and listen to what lies underneath these people's pains — hope. When baby George is born, the street reaches its celebratory pinnacle, bringing everybody on the street together to celebrate life and hope. Gabe and Miss Maple dance with Bailey, forming a cross-racial brotherhood at the moment. The ceremony brings Bailey's rites of passage to an integrating moment, as Bailey transforms from listening to singing the blues. Furthermore, he gains the power of the blues through his narration of *Bailey's Café*, as he is the "maestro" (1). As Albert Murray puts it, "[t]he blues lyrics ... express ... his [the singer's] sense of humor as well as his sense of ambiguity and his sense of possibility" (208). Thus, the power of the blues is an affirmative and transcendental power. The blues narrative ends with the chorus in "The Wrap", embedding significance of both positivity and possibility, which is in line with the affirmative message of the blues.

As sites of the blues matrix, both the street and the narrative offer space for Bailey to find AMERICA. Baker believes that "the blues matrix — the fluid, mediating vernacular of the New World — enables one to understand that, rather than being a nation of strangers in search of Anglo-male domestication, AMERICA has no strangers" (112). Baker finds that the fluidity and transience of the blues accord with the transcendence of AMERICA. In the blues matrix, African

Americans gains the power of creativity and transcendence; in this matrix, African Americans find home in America. Thus, through Bailey's "singing," he develops a power to dream and transcend, to view AMERICA as a possibility.

However, gaining an understanding that America is still a land of hope does not end Bailey's liminal stage in the café. Since one feature of the blues is ambiguity, Naylor gives an open ending for Bailey, continuing his liminal position as the café proprietor. As "you eventually go back out and resume your life" (221), Bailey would eventually leave the café and integrate himself with America. The narrative of *Bailey's Café* stops on January, 1949. According to Charles E. Wilson, Jr., the novel reflects on a period of transition in American history between World War II and the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that mandated school racial integration (111). Thus, a reasonable speculation is that 1954 would be a good year for Bailey to leave the liminal street and prepare for the coming Civil Rights Movement, carrying on the fight for a better America like a true American.

America is a country built on dreams and ideas, so to be a true American is to be able to dream. Iranian American writer Azar Nafisi believes that "If you believe your country was founded on the actualization of a dream, then an obvious and essential question arises: How can you dream without imagination?" (34) For Nafisi, to be an American is to have the ability to imagine a better possibility rather than accepting the status quo. Thus, Bailey's acquired ability of singing the blues allows him to imagine a better possibility — AMERICA, enabling him to be a true American. It is in the blues matrix where his ethnic identity comes to terms with his national identity, as both the blues and the American national identity require one to be positive and to be transcendental. Thus, through the transformative power of the café as a space of the blues, Bailey is able to see America as a home for him and for his race. Most importantly, home is not a stasis, so is America. African Americans need to transform the current America and make it into AMERICA — a true home for their race and for many.

Nevertheless, America, as both a nation and an ideology, has never been under greater controversy than today. Recently, President Donald Trump signed a controversial executive order banning refugees and travellers from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering America in limited dates, which incites many to criticize the order as "un-American" (Lowry). This incidence might lead one to doubt that the nation's core values have changed, and America is not the America any more. Therefore, reflecting over *Bailey's Café* and other writings on American's national identity and national ideal is more relevant than ever before.

Note

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