

women have no women friends and do not have access to intimate knowledge of how other couples and other women function. They have no way to check or conform how unbalanced their own relationship is to their husband. A major strategy which the Nedeed men use is to maintain authority over their women so they keep them isolated from the community. They accomplish this mainly by using their class status. That is, because the Nedeed men are the wealthiest members of the black community, they and their wives are not fully participating members of the community at large. The life records of the Nedeed women show their wasting away under the authority of their husbands, even though these particular women had all of the material possession that mythically should insure their survival. The Nedeed women's life-stories though submerged and separate from the lives of other Linden Hills residents are actually identical to the fate awaiting all who embrace the Nedeed way to "get over" in America. Part of this way requires, as Barbara Christian, in "Naylor's Geography: Community, Class and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*," puts it,

That the Linden Hills residents must erase essential parts of themselves if they are to stay in this jewel neighbourhood. Each of their lives has been damaged by the pursuit of wealth and power that Nedeed embodies ... They distort their natural inclinations, introducing death into their lives, even as the Nedeeds who make their money as funeral parlour directors, have distorted their families in order to create Linden Hill. (106)

Past and present reveal a trail of human destruction tied to the Nedeed ambition, passed from generation to generation and from designer house to designer house, to "get over." Most of the Linden Hills residents have sold their African American identity, indeed their very souls, for the grand illusions of material and for professional success. We find that the characters have been sold out for personal success because none of them have achieved anything that

might be considered “personal.” There is no success or triumph for any one of them neither intrinsic, subjective nor internal. In “*Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills: A Modern Inferno*,” Catherine C. Ward sees *Linden Hills* as another version of Dante’s Inferno and thinks that Naylor presents us with a series of characters who indeed sacrifice the personal for the material. Ward writes,

In their single minded pursuit of upward mobility, the inhabitants of Linden Hills ... have turned away from their past and from their deepest sense of who they are. Naylor feels that the subject of who we are and what we are willing to give up of who-we-are-to get where we-want-to- go is a question of the highest seriousness-as serious as a Christian’s concern over his salvation. (67)

The food these characters eat and the activities and conditions associated with eating underscore their cultural and personal starvation. The characters who were never a part of Linden Hills, like Willie “White” Mason and Norman Anderson, or those who mentally or physically leave, it, like Lester Tilson, Kiswana Browne and Ruth Anderson (Norman’s wife) are the most psychologically and culturally healthy characters in the novel, they do not have money, cars, houses and all other material and dominant culture-determined signs of success. In *Linden Hills* the residents are empty shells underneath the material that glitter.

Naylor explores additional nuances of this cultural deprivation in her dissection of other residents of Linden Hills, and what they do or do not with food is central to one theme. The absence of positive Afro- American identity in the lives of characters is struggling “to make it.”

All the characters that live in Linden Hills or aspire to live there are presented as individuals who have lost all sense of who they are as Afro-Americans. They are usually highly educated, financially successful, and yet empty shells of human beings. They take no

pride in their cultural heritage; most of their efforts are spent in the deliberate removal of most vestiges of black cultural identity. In tracing past of this self-effacing process, Naylor shows that the first Nedeed even helped the confederacy during the Civil War and literary owned his wife Luwana. The first Nedeed put the dream of Linden Hills into operation. His sons carried out the dream and the many willing blacks like Xavier, Maxwell, Laurel, Roxanne Parker the Dumont's infinitum powder in the machine that continually perpetuated itself. At the end of the novel, Luther's wife Willie escapes from the basement prison, bums up Luther's house' Luther and herself. While the other Linden Hills residents "let it burn" (304). They do not even protect or value the lives of those like themselves. Only Willie and Lester remain as witnesses to the personal and cultural destruction that is Linder Hills, and only these two young black men and the blacks outside Linden Hills seem to know that eating barbecue ribs fried chicken and collard greens and drinking beer and cheap wine are intrinsically more important than a manicured lawn, an Olympic-sized pool, and an empty heart. Although Naylor does not suggest that the attainment of material success be avoided, she asks, "At what price?"

The presentation of memories in *Linden Hills* provides information, but gives no access to women who demonstrate strength or self-determination within neither marriage nor do they point to an escape. Willa has no means to return to the community. Her husband and a locked door stand as barriers between her and the rest of the world. Removed from the role of mother and wife Willia can now either die or succumb to the overwhelming pressure brought by her husband and suffer the fate like previous Nedeed wives. Willia's characterization is concluded with her physical death by fire, just as her mental health has been destroyed prior to her actual death. When she becomes conscious about her predicament she develops a black feminist consciousness. Consciousness means an understanding about what one is and what one could become Willa expects the life of a good black woman, but,

she fails in getting such a satisfactory life. As a result she prepares to destroy the very system responsible for the denial of her humanity and womanhood. She realizes that she is responsible for her life and that she is imprisoned not because of Luther but because of herself. Luther might have led her to the basement steps, but she has walked down herself, this knowledge gives her “strength” and “power.” Willia with firm determination tries to start her life again. It is through this Gloria Naylor projects black women’s predicament in America and delineates the way they become aware about themselves and their life.

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