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GLORIA NAYLOR'S COLOURS IN THE PATCHWORK QUILT OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION.

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M.A. BY THESIS

UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

1999

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GLORIA NAYLOR'S COLOURS IN THE PATCHWORK QUILT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION.

M.A. THESIS BY LISA LAU EE JIA. 1999.

Abstract

This thesis undertakes to examine Gloria Naylor's contributions to and continuation of the African American literary tradition.

"Lead on with light, little Mama."¹

The following chapters will explore and identify Naylor's key concerns and the issues she grapples with as a feminist, a novelist, and an African American woman of this time and age. Naylor's writings are juxtaposed with other associated texts, namely the writings of her predecessors and contemporaries. Such comparisons serve to contextualise Naylor's work, and more, to highlight the intertextuality within it, an intertextuality which heretofore had not been possible given the limited availability of literary works by African American women writers before the 1970s.

The structure and form of Naylor's work are discussed in this thesis as are also the issues of women bonding, socio-economic oppression of proletarian women, the homogenisation of middle-class African Americans into the wider American society, women's sexuality, the language of women, "de-mythification", and the recasting of female characters in the retelling of tales. Although a feminist, Naylor has taken the unprecedented course of devoting her latest novel to the motivations, limitations and grievances of African American men, and consequently, one chapter in this thesis is also devoted to a study of black men, with emphasis on the male characters in Naylor's five novels.

Naylor is as much a product as she is a part of the African American literary tradition, especially that of its women writers. The following is a study of the writings of a true daughter of African American literature, and increasingly, a young mother of the same.

"Lead on with light, Little Mama."²

¹ Gloria Naylor, Mama Day (1988. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1993) 117.

² Ibid.

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“When did it happen -- this kind of blooming from pale to gold?
...And now she strides so proud, a sunflower against the brown arms over
hers, the sweat flowing from the reddish gold hair and absorbing every
bit of available light to fling it back against those high cheekbones, down
the collar bone, on to the line of the pelvis, pressing against the thin
summer cotton. The lean thighs, tight hips, the long strides flashing light
between the blur of strong legs -- pure black.”³

³ Gloria Naylor, Mama Day (1988. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1993) 48.

The abbreviations used are as follows:

The Women of Brewster Place	WB
Linden Hills	LH
Mama Day	MD
Bailey's Cafe	BC
The Men of Brewster Place	MB
Union Street	US
The Street	Street

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Preliminary Words

"The rings lay on a solid backing of cotton flannel; from a distance it looks like she's bending over a patch of sand at the bottom of the bluff when it's caught the first rays of a spring moon -- an evening cream.

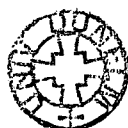
The overlapping circles start out as gold on the edge and melt into oranges, reds, blues, greens, and then back into golds for the middle of the quilt." (MD 137)

No one who has read *Mama Day* could possibly forget the magnificent double-ring quilt sewn by Miranda and Abigail, the fantastic gallimaufry of colours and textures caught up in the quilt, etched on the imagination of the reader through the richness of Naylor's words. This quilt was not created merely to be a wedding present, but a family heirloom, partly made to celebrate the fact that there will be further generations, and partly made to be passed down through a line of Day-women. The description of the quilt in *Mama Day* is representative of Naylor's writing, concerned as it is with womanist matters, African American traditions (both literary and physical), and the sheer beauty of language.

"... oranges, reds, blues, greens ... golds ..."¹

Quilting is a time-honoured art-form of African American women, one of the few practised and permitted during the days of slavery. It is a method of

¹ MD 137.



expression as well as a visual representation of the collaborative efforts of the women. It has been noted by many critics that the combination of beauty and utility of patchwork quilts perfectly reflects the suppressed but unstifled creativity of African Americans, a creativity severely limited by the weary, ceaseless practicalities and necessities of day-to-day living. As Alice Walker commented, a quilter was “an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use.”² With a bitter history of having only been entitled to the leftovers of the American society, it has become a matter of pride with African Americans that that which others have deemed useless and discarded is rescued and transformed into articles of beauty and value. Quilting, therefore, has passed into African American literary tradition as a symbol of the resourcefulness and resilience of a race, a testimony to the African American art of improvisation, transformation and survival.

Metaphorically speaking, the work of African American women writers can also be said to form a patchwork quilt. The literary patchwork quilt of these remarkable women had been growing since Phyllis Wheatley laid the first piece down, and since then, the different novelists, poets, and dramatists have been contributing their pieces from a rainbow spectrum of colours and textures. They have drawn their inspiration from the women before them and around them, and from their own secret and suppressed fears and fancies, hopes and dreams.

² Alice Walker, *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1967. San Diego: Harcourt, 1983) 239.

Taking all these which others had disparaged and denied the worth of, the African American women writers have sewn together a picture of their lives as Americans, Americans of colour, and above all, as female African Americans.

It is no coincidence that Naylor incorporates quilting in *Mama Day*. Being well acquainted with the literary themes and traditions of her predecessors, Naylor is able to draw upon their work as well as upon the effects of their work. The foundations laid by her predecessors enables Naylor to tap into the likely prejudices and preconceptions of her readers. As an author, she is able to make her points with calculated awareness of the level of understanding and the set of existing stereotypes in American society, some of which were introduced or altered by other African American writers. This introduction will trace the intricacies of Naylor's own designs and themes, and also how her work is occasionally patterned along the writings and concerns of her contemporaries, simultaneously drawing from and contributing to the ever-growing literary tradition of African American women writers.

“...overlapping circles...”³

“In the history of the African-American literary tradition, perhaps no author has been more immersed in the formal history of that tradition than

³ MD 137.

Gloria Naylor.”⁴ With this wealth of material at her disposal, it is little wonder that Naylor’s novels incorporate a large element of intertextuality. Intertextuality, or “each text in dialogue with all previous texts,”⁵ is a fairly recent development in African American literature, a contemporary literary device widely used in Naylor’s generation, but one which would have been “impossible before the late seventies.”⁶

It is very clear to see that *The Women of Brewster Place* picks up from Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), and Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) amongst others, in its portrayal of the effects of urban lifestyles. It also incorporates the influence of Shakespeare, “engaging European as well as American traditions.”⁷ *Linden Hills* draws heavily upon Dante’s *Inferno* for its form and its ideas of vice and punishment, and builds upon Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in its concern over the image of African Americans in the eyes of African Americans. Naylor identifies the vices of the late twentieth century with the deadly sins of old, demonstrating how economic prosperity and the culture of individuality of urban civilisation had positively fostered the influences of avarice, envy, gluttony and betrayal on human nature. *Linden Hills*, carrying as it does its disturbing and penetrating prophecy and warning to

⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Anthony Appiah, ed. *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present* (New York: Amistad, 1993) ix.

⁵ Deborah E. McDowell, “The Changing Same,” *Reading Black, Reading Feminist. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990) 107.

⁶ Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Anthony Appiah, ed. *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present* (New York: Amistad, 1993) ix.

⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

newly enriched African Americans struggling to break into the upper classes, is a powerful novel in its own right. It does not seem that its heavy reliance on the structure of Dante's work has significantly strengthened this novel.

Finding herself temporarily caught in a mental rut while writing *Mama Day*, Naylor went to a library and decided to acquaint herself with William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1958).⁸ The evidence of this case of intertextuality is then seen in the structure of *Mama Day*. Naylor's seven years as a Jehovah's Witness has also left its impact on her writings. In *Bailey's Cafe* more predominantly than anywhere else, Naylor displays her intimate knowledge of the Biblical tales and verses. In this instance, Naylor uses the Bible more effectively than she had used *The Inferno* to enrich and support her work. *Bailey's Cafe* is an exercise in retelling and recreating stories of women, rescuing these biblical tales from the distortions of patriarchal influences and recasting them into the mould of the lives of modern day women.

The self-inscription of black women requires disruption, rereading and rewriting the conventional and canonical stories, as well as revising the conventional generic forms that convey these stories. Through this interventionist, intertextual, and revisionary activity, black women writers enter into dialogue with the discourses of others.⁹

There is intertextuality even within Naylor's own work. The working classes of Brewster Place could look over the wall at the end of their blind alley

⁸ Naomi Epel, *Writers Dreaming* (New York: Carol Southern, 1993) 174.

⁹ Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues. Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," *Reading Black, Reading Feminist. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990) 131.

at the “jewel” beyond, that was Linden Hills. The teenage Willa Prescott who had been so ashamed of her aunt Miranda Day of Willow Springs had gained the right to a wedding band and a house at the bottom of Linden Hills by becoming Mrs Luther Nedeed. Miranda Day reappears in Naylor’s third novel which includes an orphan by the name of George Andrews. *Bailey’s Cafe*, the last in the quartet of novels, presents amongst other stories, the poignant tale of George’s parent and the mystery of his existence. Naylor’s most recent novel, *The Men of Brewster Place*, is clearly a response and even a sequel to *The Women of Brewster Place*. The novel *Sapphira Wade*,¹⁰ which Naylor is currently working on, will be from at least two different perspectives: that of Sapphira Wade and Orphelia Day, two characters from *Mama Day*. It may even be a sequel to *Mama Day*.

Naylor’s writing, progressing as it does in non-linear fashion, lends itself to clearer analysis if regarded in terms of the structure of a patchwork quilt. Writing as she does about African Americans, Naylor designs her work both structurally and thematically like patchwork pieces sewn together to form the larger pattern. Even her characters who play a part in one another’s lives are like patchwork pieces making up the mosaic, each piece hemmed around by other pieces, lending its colours and textures to complement or be juxtaposed against its neighbouring pieces. Naylor’s novels contain characters which link

¹⁰ “Voices From the Gaps.” Online posting. The Unofficial Gloria Naylor Homepage. Internet. 12 Jan. 1999.

all the separate novels into a world of their own, just as patterns of the double-ring quilt “had to twine around each other” (137, MD). One stitch following another, one novel following another, Naylor creates her patchwork quilt, a world of her making and imagination, peopled and extended character by character, place by place, and patch by patch.

Naylor’s world is a world of black communities. Not black communities as compared with white ones, and not black communities measured up against any other communities, but black communities of all types - from working class communities to upper class ones, from those living in northern cities to those living the rural lives in the South. As much as each piece of the quilt is part of the quilt yet separate and distinct in itself, so too does Naylor stress that her characters are American, part of the American society, and dealing with the social problems of America, but they are nevertheless distinct and separate because they are African Americans. The patchwork pieces may be sewn together, but they do not blend into a single piece, no, they remain separate to form the grand pattern that is America. Naylor had said of American society, “No, it is a patchwork quilt, not a melting pot. Because - guess what? - nobody was melting.”¹¹

The identity of Naylor’s own writings is certainly not “melting” although it engages in intertextuality at all levels and from numerous sources.

¹¹ Marie Perry Donna, Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993) 229.

While it is found that Naylor's uses of language are "rooted in Afro-American folk speech,"¹² Naylor had cut her teeth on the work of white authors, Victorian novelists amongst others, long before she was aware of the existence of black writers. The discovery of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* may have given her "the ability to conceive of myself as a writer," but her early loves in literature continue to influence her craftsmanship as an author. Naylor's themes, concepts and even her novelistic structures may be novel ones, but her use of words in the English language remains largely unexperimental.

A generation before Naylor's, Zora Neale Hurston had written, "Ah change jes ez many words ez Ah durn please!" A writer who took this opinion to heart and then took it to even greater lengths, is Ntozake Shange, who even renamed herself, changing the very words which identified and defined her. It seems worthwhile to quote a fairly long passage from her:

I cant count the number of times I have viscerally wanted to attack
deform n maim the language that I was taught to hate myself
in.....yes/being an afro-american writer is something to be self-conscious
abt/ & yes/ in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings I
want to think n communicate/ I haveta fix my tool to my needs/ I have to
take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us
space to literally create our own image.¹³

Shange offers a challenge to the reader who comes upon her writing, the words and unfamiliar appearance of the words requiring an initial process of

¹² Barbara Christian, "Trajectories of Self-Definition. Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction," *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*, ed. Majorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 246.

¹³ Ntozake Shange, Foreword. "Spell #7," *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1978. London: Methuen, 1992) 68.

decoding, which is of course exactly the effect Shange intended. Shange had meant to halt the reader in his/her tracks, derail the reader completely from convention, and using the visual effects and unexpectedness of unfamiliar spellings and lack of punctuations, jar the reader into a new mindframe to suit the new environment she plunges the reader headlong into. Where Hurston had expressed her disregard of criticism against her experimentation with words, Shange had extended this disregard to a practice, stating that this self-conscious and deliberate departure from convention is a necessity in order to escape the linguistic oppression which had long served, extended, and expressed the racial oppressions faced by her people.

Naylor, however, does not bring her writing into direct confrontation either with the sensibilities of her readers or with convention. Like pale threads woven into the seams of the quilt, Naylor's linguistic contributions to the literary tradition may not leap up to catch the eye, but they lie subtly present, contributing, strengthening and enhancing the beauty of the grand design. Changing words is not part of Naylor's techniques, and it does not appear to be Naylor's intention to challenge her readers. The smooth flow and confiding charm of her use of language insinuates the novel concepts it carries into the consciousness of the reader.

Having said that, it should not then be supposed that Naylor is not an experimental writer at all. To some extent, all African American women writers

are necessarily experimental writers as they seek to build up their relatively young literary tradition. Naylor, like Walker, Shange and others, does write in the language of women, employing grocery lists, recipes, domestic records, letters, scrapbooks, and even photographs to help her inarticulate characters find a medium in which to communicate and express themselves. Like Morrison's plague of robins which herald Sula's return to Medallion,¹⁴ the fresh eggs telling of Bernice's failure to conceive,¹⁵ is an example of Naylor's use and involvement of nature in her writings as signals, pointers, and prophetic omens which contribute to the progress of the tale.

The Colours of Gloria Naylor

In many novels written by African American writers featuring female protagonists, there had been an emphasis on the alienation and lonely struggle of these protagonists. Lutie Johnson, Helga Crane, Maud Martha, Jadine and Meridian are just a few. Minor female characters had also been seen to struggle in isolation, like Corinthians Dead of *Song of Solomon*, Mrs Hill of *Meridian*, Mem of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Pauline Breedlove of *The Bluest Eye*. Oft repeated as this theme was, there have been exceptional examples of female friendship, where women had understood that in coming together, they were stronger in the face of opposition and oppression. Walker had shown us Shug as Celie's friend, lover and protector, Morrison had presented us with

¹⁴ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973. London: Chatto, 1980) 89.

¹⁵ Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Vintage-Random, 1988) 44.

Sula and Nellie, soulmates so united in their friendship that they were almost one (even if Nellie failed to recognise this for many years), Shange had presented a family of women in *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, headed by a wise and loving mother, and some two decades before, Larsen had shown us Irene Redfield, an unwilling ally for most of the novel to Clare Kendry, reluctant, but understanding the necessity of the alliance.

It was Naylor, however, who wrote an entire novel comprised of the interaction and bonding of these seven women who were thrown together in close proximity to one another when they all ended up on Brewster Place. Female bonding and emotional generosity amongst the women are the patterns along which the 7 chapters of *The Women of Brewster Place* are sewn together. Brewster Place was first baptised with champagne, and then with blood and vomit. The baptisms powerfully symbolise the huge chasm between the promised and the unfulfilled American dream. Naylor's novel is about how the women cope, living in a men's world, and in a white world. Desperate acceptance is the key to Brewster Place's survival, and celebrated by its author. "To this day I still call that book (*The Women of Brewster Place*) ...my love letter to the black woman in America."¹⁶

¹⁶ Gloria Naylor, "The Love of Books," *The Writing Life. National Book Award Authors* ed. Neil Baldwin and Diane Osen (New York: Random, 1995) 174.

When she wrote *Linden Hills*, Naylor gave up her many female voices to court our twentieth century Dante and Virgil, Willie and Lester. The deep male voices of these two young men and Luther Nedeed may dominate the novel, but female voices *are* heard in the background, first in the terrible, subhuman wail echoing around Linden Hills, then in a huge repertoire of women's uses of language. Silences, memories, photo albums, cookbooks, self-addressed letters, and even a progression of footwear, all speak to pass on the Mrs Nedeeds' inheritance and testimony of suffering and endurance. Where Naylor's first novel had sought to address the lack of women's voices by making each protagonist articulate, her second faithfully portrayed the voids and absences in a community where they should be heard but have not been.

Having been brought up by Southern parents in New York, Naylor has a deep respect for the folk wisdom, traditions and beauty of the South. She is not predominantly a Southern writer like Alice Walker, but Naylor does bring the North and the South into beautiful contrast to highlight the African American traditions and how far they have evolved. Mama Day is placed in contrast to George Andrews, one representing the wise, learned and knowledgeable, the other a formally educated, intelligent, logical man. The sense of yin and yang is very strong in this third novel of Naylor's, where there are clear opposites co-existing in harmony. Willow Springs, the domain of a powerful matriarch, Sapphira Wade, is mystical, self-contained, mellow and timeless. On the other side of the bridge, New York represents the triumph of industrialisation and

technology, with all its vigour, rapid change and scientific discoveries of mankind.

There are some charming little examples of the differences in culture and moral emphasis in the North-South comparisons which it would be a shame to bypass. One of the most striking differences in Willow Springs to the rest of the Western world is the way measurements are used. Time, for example, is not measured in digitalised seconds, minutes and hours, leading to days and weeks and years. No, time is measured by seasons and in one's memory. When calculating the age of Ruby, Mama Day recalls, "Ruby could talk when I delivered her baby brother Woody – the one got killed in the Second World War. And Irene named him after Woodrow Wilson, who was President then. So what that make Ruby?" (MD 69) Like an African griot mentally and orally keeping the records of the history and ancestry of his people, so too does Mama Day serve her community. George is baffled by the total lack of objective, standard, detached forms of measuring devices when presented with the family grave, "the sizes of the headstones represented the missing dates -- but only in relationship to each other" (MD 218). As the logical engineer from across the bridge, he asks for deeds of sales, records and names. Mama Day works by touch, while George works by thinking. Miranda Day would have found no use for the metric system which governs George's life as she measures efficiently in terms of "a piece about as long as half a hand" (MD 81), and "a piece about the size of the last joint on her little finger" (MD 82).

Mama Day was Naylor's first unchaptered novel. In *Mama Day*, Naylor fused her favourite characters and characteristics, creating George, the ultimate man and lover, Miranda Day, the wisest of conjure women, Cocoa, sassy but sound, the young, modern black woman who inherited all the strength of the "ancient mother of pure black that one day spits out this kinda gold" (MD 48). In this novel, Naylor combines her Southern upbringing with her Northern environment, expressing her warm admiration of the African American woman and her partiality towards the African American man, blending magic and myth with prosaic practicality. There is much in *Mama Day* which perches on the edge of belief, and this is what imparts a peculiarly African flavour to a tale set in America.

Mama Day is a novel which creates a space in an almost mystical realm where everybody old and young, male and female, can be heard. The people of Willow Springs, a place beyond the bridge to everyday life and reality and not even found on a map, listen to and address those beyond the realm of the living -- both Miranda and Cocoa go to the family graveyard to share their lives and problems. Here in Naylor's third novel, there is no one who needs to go unheard simply because they speak quietly or because they speak without words.

By her fourth novel, *Bailey's Cafe*, the voices are clamouring for listeners, no longer timid or buried and unheard, no longer deferring to the rules of patriarchy. Sister Carrie and Sugarman, Bailey and Gabe, Ms Maple, Eve, Jessie and others are heard surging forward to voice their opinions and tell their stories. Even Nadine comes forward to say her piece, and Esther manages to tell her tale. Mariam is the only character who does not find a voice, and Mariam is also the only character who dies. Thus does Naylor stress the importance of voice, because it is seen that a lack of articulate voice in the cacophony of this sound-polluted modern world can mean a diminishing of existence.

Bailey's Cafe continues to incorporate the mystical element which had pervaded in *Mama Day*. The handful of individuals who come to the cafe on a transit in their journey through life, take refuge while they recover and renew strength for the continuing struggle to refuse roles and expectations fostered upon them. Naylor's emphasis on the individual's will increases and environmental factors are just that -- factors, not an all-governing force.

Reinstating the significance of black men in the lives and in the literature of black women meant that Naylor had to grant voices not only to the women, but now also to the men, which she did in *The Men of Brewster Place*. In so doing, Naylor established herself as an African American woman writer who tells the tales not only of her sisters, but also of her entire race. As an African

American woman novelist, Naylor has indeed come a long way in her literary tradition which dates from the days of Harriet E. Wilson, the first African American woman novelist. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), features the tale of a single protagonist, and a tale very probably semi-autobiographical. Naylor writes the tale of anyone she deems has not had a hearing or a voice, male and female, (and with the inclusion of Bascombe Wade in her current novel,) black and white alike. Racism, sexism, classism, are one and all grist to Naylor's mill.

Chapter One : *The Women of Brewster Place*

Before we metaphorically tiptoe and peep over the wall to let our gazes wander along the street of Brewster Place (on which two of Naylor's five novels are set), it is instructive to contextualise Naylor's 1983 American Book Award winning novel (WB) by exploring some of its predecessors.

Literary Inheritance

By the time Naylor wrote her first novel, it had already become African American writing tradition that portrayals of cities of the north were being stripped of the illusion of being a safe haven for coloured people who had been discriminated against and oppressed by the white capitalistic America. Writers such as Wright, Petry, Ellison, Hansberry, Shange and others had already pointed out the corrosive influences a city could have on the spirits and moral fibre of its people. Richard Wright's landmark *Native Son* (1940) demonstrated how ghetto living, as forced upon the African Americans, produced a Bigger Thomas, a young man so driven that he found murder to be his only possible act of creation and freedom. As one critic had put it, "Urban nihilism is the real subject of *Native Son*."¹ Another literary work which analysed the dehumanising effects a hostile urban environment would breed and cultivate is Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946).

¹ Robert Bone, "Richard Wright," University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers 74 (1969): 25.

The Street has but one protagonist, the beautiful, talented, determined and virtuous Lutie Johnson. In seeking to make her point that the living conditions African American women were forced to accept would lead any spirited, self-respecting one of them inevitably to crime, Petry had to stress that the eventual act of murder was not due to any flaw of character in her protagonist. Petry effectively explodes the myth propounded by the American Dream that if one is honest and diligent, one will be rewarded. By making one such as Lutie Johnson resort to murder, Petry's argument doubles in the weight it carries because if the epitome of a good woman was forced to such dire measures, how much more likely were the untalented, unlovely and less virtuous to do the same.

From page one of the novel, the very elements are seen to be in collaboration against the people in the street, the wind seeming to take pleasure in calculatedly adding to the inconvenience and discomfort of all the passerbys. Throughout the novel, the wind, the heat, the cold, the noise, the congestion, all seem to contribute to the assaulting of the senses, all heightening the tension of such a residence (as we find in 116th Street of New York) and detracting from the good nature of its inhabitants. Petry clearly credits the street with active malicious intent, "Streets like the one she [Lutie Johnson] lived on were no accident. They were the North's lynch mobs, she

thought bitterly; the method big cities used to keep Negroes in their place” (Street 323).

Lutie’s sentiments are acknowledged and sometimes echoed by the other women on the street who are common victims. Even the passive, submissive Min understands the menace of the street, thinking to herself, “It wasn’t somehow a very good place to live, for the women had too much trouble, almost as though the street itself bred the trouble” (Street 355). Mrs Hedges shows her awareness by behaving quite to the contrary and choosing to live in a prominent place on the street. She chooses to exploit the circumstances there instead of protesting the conditions, even when she is in a position to do so, being the partner of Mr Junto. (Perhaps in her envy of attractive women especially those with “good hair”, choosing to exploit her people is her perverse form of protest.) Whatever form their awareness takes, Petry reiterates through her women characters and of course in particular through her protagonist the point she wishes to drive home, that the street is positively an evil force poisoning the lives, minds, futures and potentials of its inhabitants, children and adults alike. As one critic put it, “Petry’s city virtually guarantees the defeat of a person in the deforming environment.”²

Petry is certainly not alone in protesting that a hostile environment leaves few decent and viable alternatives to the woman who intends to be

² Michael Lynch, The City in African American Literature (New York: Associated UP, 1995) 183.

financially successful. A decade and a half after the publication of *The Street*, another memorable fictional character was created in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). This character is yet another ambitious coloured woman, also a mother and a one-time wife, Silla Boyce. Silla sums up the conflicting pressures which bear down so heavily on her in her own uniquely resonant vernacular fashion, “We would like to do different. That’s what does hurt and shame us so. But the way things arrange we can’t, if not we lose out.”³ In her words, Silla Boyce suggests that coloured women are all but compelled to act against their better judgements and even against their consciences in order to thrive and compete in a world that relentlessly begrudges them economic advancement.

The Women of Brewster Place depicts a very similar predicament of the problems of urban lifestyles if one is poor and coloured, but differs from fatalistic novels such as Wright’s and Petry’s in two vital aspects. Firstly, Naylor’s women protagonists are not alone. They do not exist in isolation where the whole world is out to get them and there is not a single helping hand to be found. These women do not survive the hostile and soul-destroying forces of city living because they are exceptionally gifted or intelligent. They are ordinary women who survive because they understand that they belong to a sisterhood of all women, and care for one another through the times that would have devastated them had they been standing alone. This is easily illustrated by contrasting the diametrically differing attitudes of Mattie Michael and Mrs

³ Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (New York: Feminist, 1959) 224.

Hedges, the matriarchs of their streets. Mattie is a nurturing and motherly neighbour while Mrs Hedges lures vulnerable young women into the trap of prostitution, the trap of 116th Street. The lack of solidarity and sisterhood amongst the women in Petry's novel who are isolated and spiritually cut off from each other withholds from them the healing powers of community support.

Like the women of Marshall's novel, Naylor's protagonists in *The Women of Brewster Place* are women who belong to their little community, to their village within the city, and this is their stronghold. It is significant that Silla Boyce had confided the things which "hurt and shame" her in a conversation with the women of her community who frequently gather in her kitchen to cook and sell food for extra income. Thus, for the poor, coloured woman, the kitchen is her stage and the women who gather there her audience. Neither Silla Boyce nor most of Naylor's protagonists come to the destructive ends which befall Bigger Thomas and Lutie Johnson. It appears that the support of the community acts as a possible antidote to the poison of the city.

The second major difference Naylor introduces into the literary tradition is that her characters are individuals, able to control to a certain extent their own destinies, and not one hundred percent subject to environmental forces. Although Naylor praises *The Street* as being a "painfully honest and wrenching novel", she does not contribute to Petry's school of thought which identifies the

city as a stupefying and malignant force. Naylor never ceases to insist that her characters are responsible in large part for their fates and their lives. No one compelled Theresa and Lorraine to move from Theresa's Linden Hills apartment to Brewster Place. They made the decision to move because their neighbours at Linden Hills had disapproved of their lesbian relationship and had thus upset Lorraine. Similarly, Mattie Michael could have stayed forever in Miss Eva's house but for her mistake in over-coddling her son. No one forced her friend Etta Mae to make her "*1200 mile-odyssey*" to Brewster Place, just as no one forced Cora Lee to have baby after baby. As for Kiswana Browne, against the wishes of her parents, she freely chose to live in a place like Brewster because it was in keeping with her ideals.

Naylor's many stories of how her women came to live at Brewster Place indicate that although their choices are somewhat limited, they *do* have choices. The women who live in Brewster Place have their various cultural heritages, their backgrounds, their past experiences, their memories and skills, and all these add up to make each of them able to resist simply being carried along by the flow which rushes Bigger Thomas and Lutie Johnson onto their desperate retaliation and subsequent crimes.

Furthermore, unlike the majority of novels written by other past and contemporary African American women writers, Naylor does not create the single heroine. "I decided that if I had one book in me, I wanted it to be all

about me, and the me in this case was a multifaceted me.”⁴ With this recognition of the many sides to a self, Naylor gives voice to a number of female protagonists whose lives are interwoven because they all live in Brewster Place. Each tale is the tale of one working class, African American woman, but the millions of variations which could be spun of each tale are the tales of the millions of working class African American women.

Narrative Strategies

The Women of Brewster Place is a little more complex and a little less linear than merely being seven short stories strung together end to end. Like pieces in a patchwork quilt, Naylor brings her characters in one by one, each character adding to the colour and completeness of the quilt.

Besides being divided into seven short stories which are then sequenced -- or patchworked -- into a novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* is given a short prologue and epilogue. The prologue is Hughes' celebrated *Harlem* from his *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. The poem contains a direct warning of the dangerous repercussions rippling through the community if the American Dream continues to be held beyond the reach of the African Americans. In her prologue, Naylor already begins to raise the issues she is to elaborate upon and tackle in the novel, alerting her reader to the menace underlying the draining,

⁴ Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with Gloria Naylor," *Callaloo* 20.1 (1997): 185-186.

oppressive lives which her characters trudge along. Hard upon the heels of Langston Hughes' poem which precedes the novel, the reader is met with an introductory section symbolically entitled *Dawn*. Like a darkened stage being gradually illuminated, Naylor's authorial narrative voice introduces the historical and geographical layout and boundaries of Brewster Place, which would contain all the physical settings of the following seven stories.

Taking up the issue of the dream deferred in the Hughes' poem, Naylor uses her prologue to tell the reader why and how the potential of Brewster dried up like the proverbial raisin in the sun. The loss of Brewster Place's potential comes in the shape of the wall. The raising of the wall is the work of some unseen authority which has no direct contact or immediate acquaintance with the actual residents of the street. The "how" explained, Naylor sums up in one succinct phrase exactly why this happened, "there was no one to fight for Brewster Place"(WB 2).

The relating of the inauspicious history of Brewster Place is the first indication the reader receives of Naylor's preoccupation with the granting of a voice and a hearing to her characters. In response to the whisper within her, "Was there no one telling my story?"⁵, Naylor tells the stories of characters caught within a certain class, under certain conditions, whom she feels have not been heard often enough or loudly enough, if heard at all. Naylor picks up on

⁵ Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, "A Conversation," *Southern Review* 21.3 (1985) : 568.

this issue again further on in the novel at the Brewster Place Block Association meeting, where no sensible progress is made because once having been granted a voice, the residents of Brewster Place are unable to control their new-found privilege, "This was the first time in their lives that they felt someone was taking them seriously" (WB 139). The comic element of this episode serves to point out the level of deprivation from articulation and hearing which is the common lot of Brewster Place residents and those in similar situations.

In the telling of these stories, Naylor employs two basic narrative techniques. The authorial narrative in which *Dawn* is written continues throughout the novel, but in the seven chapters, carefully withdraws into the backstage. (It only takes the stage again, coming to wind down the curtain when *Dusk* is told.) In the bulk of the novel, the narrative voice is augmented by the voice of the women. Each woman in the novel, even the unpleasant, scandalmongering Sophie, is given her own voice. In this, Naylor upholds the African American literary tradition which had already been established by its women writers, the tradition of giving women the right and freedom, and not merely the privilege, of expressing themselves in whatever way they choose.

Writing as she does in naturalistic mode, it is easy for Naylor to create a rapport between the reader and her omniscient narrator. However, it is by no means Naylor's intention that the voice of the omniscient narrator which threads through the novel should dominate. Like other contemporary African

American women writers, Naylor has the task of teaching her reader to accept the validity of her characters' tales as told by them. Since her characters are not of a privileged class in society, nor are they particularly learned or well educated, and being unable to boast of either exceptional talents or extraordinary experiences, it is by fairly unconventional methods that Naylor procures a sympathetic hearing for her humble protagonists. Like Gwendolyn Brooks in *Maud Martha*, Naylor seeks to convince the reader that there is reason indeed to celebrate the lives of women in very ordinary situations.

Drawing on the good faith already established between the reader and the omniscient narrator, on occasion Naylor subtly combines the subjective viewpoint of the character with the objective voice of the narrator, slipping smoothly from the one into the other. "Their love drove them to fling dishcloths in someone else's kitchen to help him make the rent, or to fling hot lye to help him forget that bitch behind the counter at the five-and-dime" (WB 5). The choice of the word "*bitch*" is the point where the decorous voice of the narrator gives way in a flash to the furious voice of the character. Thus does the narrator, with free indirect discourse, shift effortlessly into the minds of the characters to bring us their authentic sentiments. This is an instance where showing and telling are so closely stitched together that there is no ungainly seam to be seen between the two, no awkward transitional break. The previously established reliability of the narrator is in part transferred over to the protagonist who shares in this narrative voice.

The Mattie Michael chapter receives the lion's share of narrative duration. In varying stages of retrospection and flashbacks, the life and not the biography of Mattie is unfolded. The reader is shown Mattie's world through her senses, her thoughts and her feelings. Her character traits are not defined but revealed through her direct discourse, her silences, and her choices and actions. The tale is not exclusively the heroine's just as Mattie's life does not exist in isolation. It is a life touched by other lives which happen to be hemmed onto or nearby her own.

From this very first chapter, Naylor has chosen to break with the tradition of having a single, often tragic heroine. It is not by representing Mattie as the tragic mulatta, nor by casting her as a helpless victim of some dastardly villain that Naylor wins for Mattie the reader's respect and goodwill. The attraction of a Mattie lies in the accessibility of such a character. Mattie is never larger than life, rather, a character one feels one can easily identify with. In her interactions with others, in her secret hopes and fears, in her generous and caring nature, Mattie displays strength of purpose, steadiness, good upbringing and a keen sense of responsibility. For the reader, all this would amply qualify her as a deserving character.

Despite her younger past, Mattie is a dependable first person narrator. That she pays in full and more for her mistakes seem to exonerate her. She

further endears herself to the reader by withholding blame, not looking back to find fault even in those who have treated her unfairly. Mattie is not a heroine because she possesses so much or has so much to offer. In a paradoxical way, she is a heroine because so much has been stripped away from her. We are shown that this ordinary woman has been capable of unconditional love for her son and tremendous strength of endurance. This is the recurring pattern and main thrust of all the other tales. The tragedies of these women may be simple tragedies or even commonplace ones, but it is cause for congratulations that the women survive them and continue to struggle in search of better lives.

It is not every protagonist who makes such a reliable narrator. Etta Mae for instance, likeable as she is, is not much given to introspection. When she launches on her tirade against Mattie at the church, she loses credibility in the reader's eyes because she shows a lack of balanced judgement in her self-delusion. Kiswana Browne is not to be depended upon for dispassionate narration either for she is exposed as being youthfully naive in riding roughshod over her family's principles. Even though this chapter is presented through the filter of Kiswana's consciousness and the sieve of her understanding, the constant juxtaposition of her mother's stance with her own, and her mother's ability to outguess and out-talk her, undermines the reliability of Kiswana's narrative.

It is impossible for the average reader to fully identify with Cora Lee's abnormal obsession with having babies, and although we listen to her side of the story, the omniscient narrator chiming in in italics, "Don't understand you, Cora Lee....." (WB 113) distances the reader from the protagonist. Lucielia, lost in her grief, Theresa, unsociable and uncaring of others' opinions, Lorraine who is eventually driven insane when she is raped, are none of them suitably objective narrators. They steer the course of their stories, but riding in the backseat with them is the omniscient narrator.

Union Street and The Women of Brewster Place

Side by Side

In a wonderful coincidence, only two years after *The Women of Brewster Place* was published, across the Atlantic emerged a novel entitled *Union Street*, which in structure and setting paralleled Naylor's first novel. *Union Street* closely resembles *The Women of Brewster Place* and also comprises a large number of female protagonists - namely one for each of the seven chapters - whose lives edge and overlap one another's because they too are neighbours.

Like Naylor, Pat Barker wrote about the lives and daily tribulations of working class women. Since she was born in Thornaby-on-Tees, *Union Street*

was set in a city in the north-east of England. Notwithstanding the fact that while Naylor was writing of African American women and Barker of English women, and despite the huge geographical distance from Naylor's Brewster Place situated in a city in the north of America, there are striking thematic similarities between the two novels. It is by juxtapositioning these two novels that one can obtain a fair approximation of the extent to which the working class African American women suffer for being poor and for being women, and the extent to which their sufferings are imposed on them because of their race. (It should also be noted that although they later corresponded about their novels, neither Barker nor Naylor were aware of each other's work at their time of writing, nor did they work in collaboration.)

The Sisterhood of Women

Union Street is structured along a beautiful chronology of age in the way each successive protagonist is in a more advanced phase of life than the previous one. Beginning with Kelly Brown at eleven years of age, the next chapter is Joanne Wilson's, who although only eighteen, is already pregnant. Lisa Goddard in the following chapter is in her very early twenties, while in chapter four, the gentle Muriel Scaife with a twelve-year-old son is clearly about a decade her senior. This trend continues through Iris King and Blonde Dinah to the final chapter where Alice Bell dies at seventy-six. The collective lives spanned by the spectrum of these women with their varying ages almost

seem to move the reader through the life of a single woman. It could be the life of any given woman there.

Naylor identifies the universal quality of women's lives in *The Women of Brewster Place*, "The young black woman and the old yellow woman sat in the kitchen for hours, blending their lives so that what lay behind one and ahead of the other became indistinguishable" (WB 34). Pat Barker parallels this identification, illustrating how women share so many common experiences, living as they do under the same conditions, that their lives often duplicate one another's. Indeed, in her mental confusion as she goes to her death, Alice Bell is no longer able to distinguish between the experiences which are her own, and those which she has witnessed other women undergo. "She stopped in confusion as the memories threatened to overwhelm her. These fragments. Were they the debris of her own or other lives? She had been so many women in her time" (US 263). These choppy, fragmented sentences contribute to the fragmenting of certainty. Barker seeks to weave her characters' lives so tightly together that she further extends the shadow of doubt, now over the reader's mind as well as that of Alice Bell's, by having Alice remember an incident which she had not seen, the incident of Joanne and Ken in the railway tunnel. The chapter closes with Kelly taking Alice's hand, just as the first chapter had concluded, and Barker brings her reader full circle, as if to say that although individuals will live and die, the pattern of their lives, the lives she had portrayed, will repeat itself over and over and over again.

The structure of both novels which bind the women so tightly is a reflection of their authors' convictions that there exists a solidarity and sympathy amongst women, of the authors' inherent beliefs in the sisterhood of women. For both Barker and Naylor, women have the power to comfort, and Naylor takes it a step further in portraying that her women characters also have the power to heal. Inheriting the literature and tradition of Zora Neale Hurston, of Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, of Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, amongst other giants of the contemporary African American literary world, Naylor clearly subscribes to and builds upon a belief that a sisterhood of women generates the strength to absorb and neutralise the poisons which leak into lives and communities.

Like the other male-parent characters in the novel, the male parents of Brewster Place are uncaring, and at best, selfishly irresponsible. With such a heritage, it is little wonder that Brewster Place is baptised with the crocodile tears of one of its parents and the misguided cheers of the audience, an unholy baptism of hypocrisy and false hopes. It is the women who resurrect the glimmer of optimism which re-enters as Brewster Place evolves into a "village" within the isolation of the hostile city. Not only does the street develop a personality, but it also marshals its strength of endurance by developing a community. The creation of this community as Naylor presents it, owes more to the hand of its women than its men. Significantly, with its identification to the

mothers who live there, “Brewster Place mourned with these mothers because it had lost children also” (WB 3), Brewster Place is personified as a nurturing, somewhat motherly, and therefore female entity.

Naylor’s women in her first novel are seen as taking on the roles men would play in their lives, but sometimes fail to. For example, many of Naylor’s women are protective of one another, the strong shielding the weaker ones. When Lorraine is threatened by C. C. Baker, it is Kiswana who defends her, while above them in her apartment, Theresa “had been ready to run out and help” (WB 163).

Mattie’s story is similar. When she is beaten by her father, it is her mother who goes to great lengths to protect her. When Mattie is banished, it is Etta Mae she turns to who takes care of her through her pregnancy. (However flighty in her own lifestyle, Etta Mae is a loyal and dependable friend to Mattie.) When Mattie finds herself homeless, it is Miss Eva, even though at that time a stranger, who takes her in and gives her both a shelter and a sanctuary. In glaring contrast, Mattie’s father, the father of her child, and her son, the men in Mattie’s life, have done little to nurture or save her.

Mattie in her turn, devotes her energies to caring for the women who need it, like Luciella Louise Turner. In that chapter, there is the celebrated rocking scene where Mattie restores Luciella to life and to sanity. This scene

finds a slightly less dramatic parallel in *Union Street* where Iris King catches Muriel who snaps at the sight of her husband's coffin, and leads her back to her home and her life which she had literally tried to flee.

Although female bonding which easily transcends the gap of generations is present in both novels, the cultural differences of the two sets of women make for a different quality of sisterhood. In the *Union Street* community, as long as they uphold the status quo and do not threaten the existence and continuation of the system, women could expect help and sympathy from the other women. However, the woman who tries to break away in protest of the system would find her hardships multiplied by being left quite alone. Mrs Brown, unlovely though she is, could be seen as a twentieth century, working class, English version of Nora Helmer⁶ in her prioritising of personal fulfilment over the prescribed role of a mother which society had thrust upon her. There is, however, no applause for this modern day, *Union Street* Nora; Mrs Brown who is not accepted on Union Street illustrates the point that there is only censure for women who commit the canonical sin of abandoning or even neglecting their children in search of self-fulfilment or personal happiness. In a paradoxical way, the women in *Union Street* help to trap one another in the web of their troubles, providing partial cures but never permitting preventions. They may love one another, but their love is very far from unconditional.

⁶ Henrik Ibsen, "A Doll's House," *Four Major Plays: A Doll's House, Ghosts, Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder* (Oxford: OUP, 1981).

Traditionally, African American women are seen to be more forgiving of one another's vices. Even though Mattie gently chides her, "You gonna have to stop this soon, Cora" (WB 123), Cora Lee still likes Mattie because the note of caution was delivered out of concern, and not in order to "do jury duty on other people's lives" (WB 123). Likewise, Mattie has no reproaches for Etta even though she disapproves of her lifestyle; she has only "the light and the love and the comfort" (WB 74) with which she waited up for her friend. African American women are seldom ostracised to the point of despair or total loneliness for defying established moral standards. It is this reassurance of always having someone to fall back on that enables them to go forward confidently, daring to make mistakes and force changes in attempting to create better lives.

The Trap

The African Americans who move into Brewster Place are the last of its residents, "...they milled like determined spirits among its decay, trying to make it a home" (WB 4). In her prologue, Naylor was already making her point that in being the last in line even for such an undesirable place to live as Brewster, African Americans and especially the women, generally appear to have only the dregs and leftovers of the greater society.

Once freed from slavery and granted civil rights (albeit exercised only for a brief period, 1865-1965), and therefore granted -- at least in theory -- their place as citizens of America, the African Americans found themselves thrust into open economic competition in their capitalistic country, a country that had not equipped them to cope or to compete. This is oppression of a socio-economic nature, just as their very living in a place like Brewster Place is. The use of geographical boundaries to limit opportunities, restrict potential and access to facilities, and otherwise control the African Americans in industrialised urban cities in the north of America is an age-old stratagem, and was most eloquently explored and elucidated upon in Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin In The Sun*.

Even before the Younger family have moved into the house they had just purchased in a white neighbourhood, Clybourne Park had already sent its representative to dissuade them while insisting it is not their colour prejudice at work. Hansberry's concluding scene of the play is that of the Youngers in a bustle packing to move, against all odds, bound for Clybourne Park. The conclusion is presented with triumph, and one of the victories won is that this particular working class black family will no longer be confined to living in an apartment too small for them, moving instead to a house in a location of their choice. This same point was made in Wright's *Native Son* even more explicitly when Max points out that even the white realtors, like Mr Dalton, who are known as philanthropists towards the coloured people would refuse to rent

houses or apartments outside the Black Belt to Negroes. They do so, assuaging their consciences by citing the same hollow excuse that Negroes are happier living in their own communities, turning a blind eye on the urgent demand due to necessity of the Negroes for alternative housing, thereby effectively marginalising them from the larger American society as well as from the American Dream.

African Americans have long been thoroughly cognisant of the ill-effects of socio-economic oppression practised on them which they are relatively helpless to avoid being victims of. The working class men and women of Brewster Place have not the option of passing for white and thereby gaining a foothold into white society. Nor is it an option they either seek or wish. Not particularly venerating white society nor seeking its approval, they seem content to live by their own rules, not aspiring to gentility or other forms of middle class morality. Excepting the young and idealistic Kiswana, they do not go to the other extreme either in their protest or in promoting black pride and African descent and identity. Dealing with cold practicalities every day, the residents of Brewster Place are singularly down to earth and few have many illusions left. Since they are not able to rid themselves of socio-economic oppression, and neither do they try to fool themselves that it does not exist, it is only left for them to derive methods for dealing with it and its effects upon their lives. Nevertheless, for all the pressure of necessity, the Brewster Place

community appears less engrossed with matters financial than the North-easterners of England in *Union Street*.

In all justice, it should be recognised that socio-economic oppressions are of a different nature and stem from different causes in the North-east of England as compared to cities across the Atlantic. In the North-east, it would seem that the culture has become one where money is always foremost in people's minds, probably due to an urgent lack of it.

With rising unemployment levels, men are often made redundant and women who had no thought of seeking a career and had cultivated no skills to do so, have had to take jobs to make ends meet. With this displacement of the social order, it is unsurprising that the people are forced to turn their minds to survival, finding it hard to hope when their most basic needs are threatened. It is a society where each member knows the sense of need is never far away, and Barker reminds the reader of this in many tiny but telling instances - when Kelly goes hungry, when Alice Bell resorts to newspapers for the needed warmth, when Lisa cannot afford a proper maternity brassiere, and so forth. It is a society beset by a thousand fears, and seemingly ever recurring ones. "Love, security, order, these were achievements painfully wrested from a chaos that was always threatening to take them back" (US 152). Whatever the causes of economic woes, similar fears and preoccupations are also seen to besiege the Brewster Place women, "Her own spirit must one day have a place to rest

because the body could not, as it pushed and struggled to make all around them safe and comfortable” (WB 40).

As it is undeniable that the residents of Union Street have enough to preoccupy them given such wretched circumstances, it is doubly strange that they do not struggle to seek greener pastures. Oddly enough, this struggle is conspicuously absent in *Union Street*. *Union Street* is not about change in any direction, whether it be progress or deterioration, but about continuity. Grim and grey as the novel is, grim and grey as their lives are depicted as being, the women on Union Street do not appear to harbour any burning desires to move away from the Northeast of England. They may seek changes in their jobs, in their marital status, in their housing location (as long as it is within the Northeast or at least within the country), but their overall conditions are unchanging. It is a curious thing that although the women suffer and some bemoan their lot, they do not actively seek change in their situations. Taking a character like Iris King for example, who although may think to herself, “When haven’t I had a lot on?” (US 180) and carries her heavy burden very strongly, nevertheless does not use her remarkable strength to eliminate or lessen or otherwise escape her burden. In the same way, sordid as it is, Blonde Dinah had been “In that job forty year” (US 224).

Even the younger women do not search for any avenue of escape. For Joanne Wilson, “every older woman had become an image of the future” (US

94), but she does nothing to break free from the path the older women had taken, even when a brighter option becomes available to her. None of the residents of Union Street are seen working to escape the working class conditions they had been born to, except perhaps the young Richard Scaife. This phenomenon may be due to inertia, or insularity or fear of jumping from the frying pan into the fire. In comparing *Union Street* to *The Women of Brewster Place*, one may think it could perhaps be even more simply due to a lack of belief that any change would necessarily be for the better.

This phenomenon is amongst the most striking of differences in the attitudes of the women in the two novels. Although also working class women, the women on Brewster Place have perhaps imbibed so much of the American dream that whatever their current or past circumstances, they cannot be persuaded to relinquish their hopes for better things to come. They are not in Brewster Place because it is their birthplace; “they came because they had no choice and would remain for the same reason” (WB 4). This indicates that whatever the failings of Brewster Place, it is the best option these women have taking all influencing factors into consideration.

The differences in their outlooks on life is physically enacted by the physical distances the women travel. If travel does indeed broaden the mind, the willingness of the Brewster Place women to travel wherever better opportunities may lie is the indication of their willingness to embrace change

and with some luck, progress accompanying that change. The ambitions of the Union Street residents can be taken to be in direct proportion to the restrictions of their little world, a world of narrow alleyways and cramped living quarters where neighbours seem to be “coming through the wall” (US 105).

If the Brewster Place women seem to possess far more mobility than their Union Street counterparts, it should be noted that their mobility is not due to financial means. In her last odyssey, Etta Mae stole a car to make her journey. As far as we can trace it, Etta Mae had travelled from Tennessee through St Louis, Chicago, Asheville, to Harlem in New York, and finally back to Brewster Place. Her travels were all in search of better opportunities. For Mrs Harrison, on the other hand, “The Bluebell on one side and the Mission on the other were the limits of her range” (US 80). What would have induced acute claustrophobia in Etta Mae is a refuge for Mrs Harrison who scuttles back into “the shelter of the alley.”

The attitudes with which the working class communities react to their socio-economic problems are most clearly illustrated in the attitudes they pass on to and instil in their children. However wretched the conditions for African Americans, they remain unshaken in their faith in the potential which their children represent to them and to their race. This legacy is a time-honoured African American tradition and an integral part of their culture which dates, possibly, from the days of slavery. As they had not the power of improving

their lot, they could only hope for better opportunities for their offspring. As Langston Hughes had recorded in his poetry, African Americans suffered, but suffered in hope, investing their sufferings and hopes in their future generations.

“All you dark children in the world out there,
Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair.
Remember my years, heavy with sorrow --
And make of those years a torch for tomorrow.”⁷

This tradition of investing heavily in the future provides the backbone to their racial pride, lending them the courage to aspire against all odds, whether in their secret dreams or in jest, to the very highest and most exalted of positions. That America has never had a coloured president, or that Basil is an illegitimate baby does not cause Etta Mae to hesitate to joke, “Yup, I think we got the makings here of the first coloured president” (WB 25). Their aspirations for their children are no idle ones. Parents like Mattie sacrifice everything to improve their children’s opportunities and to boost them into better lives than they themselves have had.

For better or for worse, in the working classes children are often viewed more as the responsibility of their mothers than their fathers. For the women, their children are the crosses they carry - they weigh them down heavily, but they also represent the hope of future salvation. Women who find that the fathers of their children, who for whatever reason do not provide the love and

⁷ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Mother,” Selected Poems. (1959. New York: Random, 1974) 289.

support they need, very often pour their lives into their children. This applies equally whether we think of Mattie or Iris King, of Lucielia or Muriel Scaife, or Cora Lee or Lisa Goddard.

The parents of *Union Street*, although caring deeply for their children, do not nurture sky-high aspirations for them. John Scaife, Richard's father, did not even expect his son to stand out as a student of a big school, let alone plan for him to attend such a school and later move on to a different, higher standard of living. There is little to be said for Mrs Brown who is hardly a role model of a mother, and it is only too easy to see the lives her children will lead. Linda and Kelly, without guidance, proper education, or emotional support from home, are stuck in their ruts and unlikely to ever escape Union Street. Iris King who has earned the respect of the street as a good mother may pride herself on having clothed her daughters like little princesses and provided them the material comforts she lacked in her own childhood, but although she ensured her children "took their first steps in Clarks' Start-rite shoes" (US 194), she did not set their feet on a path which could lead out of Union Street and onto better things. Her ambitions for her daughters go no further than that they should maintain their good reputation (and hers!), and that they may not suffer at their husbands' hands, just as John Scaife's for Richard went no further than "the world of work, pub and football" (US 157).

Having lived their own lives within a very confining society and having followed the set lifestyle patterns of their older generations and neighbours, the adults on Union Street do not plant the desire for change or even advancement in the minds of their children, far less encourage them to struggle and strive for it. Expectations are often self-fulfilling, and the lack of expectation is the social trap of a Union Street.

The primary sensations of the characters in Union Street is that of cold, hunger and pain, their mindframes set on frustrations, anxieties and deprivations. Life seems a miserable business when one's world is such an abrasive world. It is the undying hope in the future of their children and their race that lifts the tales of African Americans in *The Women of Brewster Place* from the sombre tones of *Union Street*. The African Americans cherish an undampened optimism that in time to come, they will obtain larger and larger wedges of the American pie until they obtain the portion that is their due. This optimism enables them to incorporate more humour and lightheartedness in their lives. Where *Union Street* is unrelievedly grim, Naylor's novel contains a balance of sunshine and rain, tears and laughter.

Diffusing the Poison

When life grows just that bit too sordid, when a reprieve is desperately needed whatever the costs and however transient, those caught in Brewster Places and Union Streets turn to activities which can afford them forgetfulness. Mental escapism, or at any rate, mental fogging through activities ranging from drink to drugs, from movie watching to sexual intercourse, are the unsatisfactory and unwholesome means used to counter frustrations. Unfortunately, the most effective and healthy method of diffusing the poisons of day-to-day drudgery and desperations is practised far less than it should be. It is a method incurring no financial costs and indeed, quite priceless -- the inclusion or injection of humour.

Barker's sardonic tone colours the humour of *Union Street*. It is a humour usually at someone's expense, like Elaine tormenting Soppy Lil in the cake factory. Sometimes there is a little caustic humour from the omniscient narrator which serves to comment upon the failings of a character, "her mother always turned to housework when she was especially distressed. It was a tribute to her stoicism that so little got done" (US 58). Other times, the humour which the characters indulge in is slightly perverted, like Mrs Harrison who retrieves used condoms with sugar tongs, "She held up the tongs and smiled. 'George is the one for sugar in our house'" (US 78). Much later on in the novel, the reader discovers that Mrs Harrison had never forgiven George Harrison for mistreating

her when she was a young wife. The quality of her humour, if it contains any mirth at all, would probably be that of private, spiteful glee. By and large, *Union Street* contains little to raise a smile from the reader.

Naylor's humour in *The Women of Brewster Place* is both a reflection of the lifestyle she is portraying as well as a narrative technique. What differentiates the two is the awareness of the characters. There are moments of sly humour only shared between the reader and omniscient narrator, a privileged knowledge withheld from the characters. In *The Two*, the omniscient narrator underscores the amusing workings of human nature as the residents of Brewster Place first view Theresa, the men with interest and the women with caution. "Through slitted eyes, the women watched their men watching her pass, knowing the bastards were praying for a wind" (WB 130). This adds to the sense of the novel consisting of a multiple layered tale, with everyone watching someone else, and the reader invited to watch overall along with the narrator. As knowingly and smoothly as the women shift into the minds of their men, so too does the narrator transfer the reader into the minds of the characters, in this instance with the placing of a single word, "*bastard*".

Naylor warmly appreciates that it is a characteristic of the social interaction in the African American working class community that humour prevails amidst adversities. There is much humour in *The Two* provided in the character of Sophie, especially the humour of the ludicrous. Sophie gives the

girls no benefit of the doubt and goes to the extent of searching their garbage for evidence of their strangeness. “What do they do with all them chocolate chip cookies? It was surely a sign, but it would take some time to figure that one out” (WB 132). The degree of her obsessiveness provides its own laughter, but it is humour tinged, for the reader, with exasperation and impatience with such silliness, as the narrator intends. “Sophie was standing on the top step and tried to peek into the bag. ‘You been shopping huh? What ya buy?’ It was almost an accusation” (WB 133). Sophie’s paranoia is at one and the same time sickening and amusing.

Humour abounds again as Sophie questions Ben eagerly when he comes out of apartment 312. So carried away is Sophie by the whole business of discovering something to report about Theresa and Lorraine which would give her a strong footing on which to condemn them that she does not even seem to realise Ben is stringing her along. She takes up an idea and makes everything bend to it, and this in fact dries up the laughter for the reader to watch how things can so easily be misconstrued by malicious minds.

We have a different type of humorous situation when Theresa throws her preparations for a meatloaf for dinner against Sophie’s window, the actions of a woman goaded to her limits. This is a case of responding with the ridiculous to the ridiculous. There is a delightful catharsis here as the air is cleared with the laughter of both women, but too quickly, the humour is

dispelled as things subside into the vicious cycle once again, and undaunted and unabashed, Sophie spies on.

Naylor's women may suffer no less than the women on Union Street, but they do laugh a lot more. Naylor's humour is generally of a more innocent and open-hearted variety. For instance, there is warming camaraderie in the humour of the explanation by Etta Mae of how she stole the car, a humour not directly at anyone's expense, but based on unspoken, shared understanding between the two friends. Indeed, many of the exchanges between Mattie and Etta are teasing and witty. The following is a sample of their direct discourse minus the accompanying visual effects:

My, my, you the most impatient Christian I know.
 Probably the only Christian you know." [pause] "You plan on dazzling the Lord, Etta?
 Well, honey, last I heard, He wasn't available. You got more recent news? (WB 62).

It is a charming humour, completely void of malice or other darker undertones. This is all the more remarkable because when seen in context, this little exchange contains Etta Mae's saucy rebuttal to Mattie's earlier chiding, Mattie's reprimand, her criticism of Etta's inappropriate dressing, and Etta's sassy, irreverent retort. While aware that they are half-playing certain roles - Mattie as the good Christian woman and Etta as the flirtatious one - the two friends are able to speak their minds and make their points with some eloquence. Their humour serves to remove the sting from their words, and this is a completely opposite use of humour from that which we have witnessed in

Union Street, where the slap of Barker's infrequent humour more often than not leaves one smarting.

Distinctive Voices

Just as the type of humour a society creates, indulges in, and is tickled by is the result as well as an indicator of their culture, so too is the language they employ in their thoughts and in their speech.

In both novels, a notable feature of the language of the working classes is that of ungrammatical English. Both the working class African Americans and the English are never free of the awareness that their speech differs from those of a more privileged section of society. When Mrs Brown assumes her "refined voice" to impress her new boyfriend, her "*posh voice*" which she had "got back on the way down stairs" is like a garment which is slung on at will to associate herself with a class higher than her own.

In the case of Barker's North-easterners, their English dialect employs many colloquial words peculiar to the region as well as to their class - "howay", "summat", "owt", "bairn", "allus", etc. Pet names such as "flower" and "love" are also in common and casual usage. There are even whole expressions peculiar to them. It is notably the case that colloquial expressions are usually more graphic than the norm but seldom more abstract than the

norm. This almost seems to suggest that the drudge of their lifestyles drag them away from any possible luxuries of the lyrical to the prosaic.

This brings to mind Naylor's description of the worshipping in Canaan Baptist Church which is the church of the working class African Americans. "Canaan's congregation, the poor.....could not afford the refined, muted benediction of the more prosperous blacks who went to Sinai Baptist....." (WB 62). The working class African Americans speak a different type of English from that of their wealthier, better educated counterparts from areas like Linden Hills. The Brownes both speak grammatical, standard English, whereas the English of a character like Mattie is strewn with "ain'ts" and "gonnas", sprinkled with the misapplication of indefinite articles and the absence of the "g" in verbs which end with "ing".

The African Americans have a love-hate attitude towards this refinement. It is unsurprising given that such refinement in America had been associated with the white people who had better educational opportunities, and while the coloured people may grudgingly respect all that proper speech stands for, they are unlikely to love those who employ it. For some, it is even a mockery of their failure to achieve the American dream when frustrations overwhelm their better judgement. The most striking illustration of this occurs in one of Alice Walker's novels, where the poverty-stricken Brownfield grows to resent his wife's correct, grammatical English because for him, it represents

a class he cannot hope to get into, “Why don’t you talk like the rest of us poor niggers?”⁸

Just as Americans are said to have Americanised the English they speak, the African Americans have Africanised the American English they speak. It is ungrammatical English in the conventional and standard sense, but of recent years, their way of speaking has come to be recognised as a legitimate form of English and not merely as some bastard variation of English. There are those who call the English as is spoken by African Americans “ebonite”. The recognition of ebonite as a different rather than inferior form of English goes hand in hand with the African American understanding of and pride in the duality of their social inheritance, “We will make our language conform to the truths of our many selves....”⁹

However, it is not the linguistic classification of their language which is our primary concern, rather, the use of the language which reveals the way perceptions are influenced and shaped even as they express the ideologies of the culture.

There is often an excess of negations in the sentences of the working classes. These excesses are there for different reasons in the two novels. “Not

⁸ Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (London: Women’s, 1996) 56.

⁹ June Jordan, *On Call. Political Essays*. (Boston: South End, 1985) 30.

that I'm not a God-fearing woman" (US 78), as said by Mrs Harrison of Union Street is a sentiment lacking direct, positive affirmative and reflects the general community habit of defensiveness and insecurity which dogs their manner. On the other hand, when Eugene in chapter four of *the Women of Brewster Place* shouts, ".....I ain't never gonna have nothin'" (WB 95), his multiple negations are explosive rather than shrinking, used to weigh his meaning with all the emphasis he knows how to load it with, bursting from the depths of inarticulate despair and frustration. Eugene's negations are confrontational while Mrs Harrison's were denying.

Another insight one can occasionally glean from the lifestyles of a people is through their form of address. A very common form of greeting in *Union Street* appears to be "Now then," which would be replied to with the same. It sounds a very cautious form of address, the advance kept very distant, giving and requesting no information. It is also quite impersonal as the person is not addressed by name. It is little more than an acknowledgement of the person's existence, singularly lacking in warmth and approachability. In contrast, the African Americans constantly address each other very personally by their first names, lending an air of informality and ease to their relationships. They further their extension of warmth by often accompanying their greeting with some form of physical contact; hugs between women, slaps on the back for men. Perhaps it is the famous English reserve at work which carefully

ensures that the people in *Union Street* do not touch more than is strictly necessary except when drunk or engaging in intimacies.

The *Union Street* people have a way of referring to children and other family members as “*our* so-and-so”. The “*our*” may be somewhat endearing, but it also lends their reference an air of possessiveness which may well be suggestive of territorial instincts lurking just beneath the surface. While it does have the effect of claiming an individual as part of a society, it also signals that theirs is a fairly closed community which would probably be unwelcoming if not downright hostile to and suspicious of outsiders.

Another instance where a reader has a chance of watching how a similar situation in both novels is expressed very differently is when a woman leaves her boyfriend. For Mrs Brown in *Union Street*, it is “Wilf’s had his chips” (US 5). There is a brusque quality to this expression which attempts an air of indifference, a sense of brushing Wilf off, a concealing of vulnerabilities. When Etta Mae finds that “Bennett is starting to fray my nerves” (WB 26), her subsequent decision establishes her independence, her freedom of choice, and her ease of mobility, “I can walk when I am ready” (WB 26). Etta uses the word “I”, and in not doing the same, Mrs Brown distances herself from the unhappy occurrence. Even in their use of language, the *Union Street* characters seek to distance themselves from emotional involvement and the exposure of vulnerabilities. It is a far less trusting community than that in Brewster Place.

In analysing how language reflects culture, it is particularly illuminating to consider Kelly's use of language because she is little more than a child, and therefore very susceptible to the influence of the language she hears and parrots. Because the way Kelly phrases her thoughts is directly influenced by her command over the language and the vocabulary she thinks in, and this in turn is copied from and limited by the people she lives among, Kelly's world view is an unevenly developed and restricted one. For example, Kelly does not see the loveliness of the blossoming of a young lady in her sister, and this is mainly because from Barker's sardonic view of that environment, Kelly would know no words designated to express this. Instead, Kelly only notes "the hair in Linda's armpits.....the breasts that shook and wobbled.....foul-smelling brown blood out of her fanny" (US 3). With such a perception and no chance to possess any other, it is little wonder that Kelly does not want to grow up.

Young as Kelly is, she is already in the habit of swearing, and with almost every utterance. Upon getting out of bed, she addresses these words to her sister, "You mucky bloody sod! Why can't you burn the buggers?" (US 2) This is hardly to be wondered at, shocking as it is, considering this is the type of language she has been brought up with. However, in employing such words, she does come across as a belligerent person. The common usage of such terms also degrades the person to whom they are addressed, although clearly this is so

habitual that Linda and all those of that community are practically immune to the effects.

A parallel to Kelly's rough habits of speech can be found in the likes of C.C.Baker who terrorises the unlit alley between the Brewster Place's brick wall and the last building on the street. Vulgar in his words and especially before the women whom he takes pleasure in sexually intimidating, C.C.'s language not only mirrors but is the forerunner of the violence he is ever prepared to perpetrate. "Ya laughing at me, huh, freak? I oughta come over there and stick my fist in your cunt-eating mouth" (WB 162). Being a lot older than Kelly although not yet past being a boy, C.C. not only swears out of habit, but with deadly intent. The high frequency of such vulgarity has the same result on Brewster Place as on Union Street and indeed anywhere at all - it immunises the community to the crudity and the threat in the language.

Because words inspire deeds, vocal violence can mutate into physical violence, violence breeding further violence, albeit of different forms. Just as C.C.Baker becomes immune to the horror of his violent language, he also becomes immune to the horror of his violent deeds. After raping Lorraine, his parting words are cruel in their insolence, "Man, how she gonna prove it? Your dick ain't got no fingerprints" (WB 171).

The Men

There is a clear trend of social and domestic violence in *Union Street* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, a trend which is more prevalent in the working classes than the middle classes, be they in America or in Europe. In both novels, a patriarchal society is the norm. Patriarchal societies may not directly sanction domestic violence, but they are seldom structured to prevent it from happening. When order is threatened or broken down in a patriarchal society, women are generally the first to be exposed to the firing line. The seams which hold a patriarchal society together begin to unravel and problems begin to spiral out of control when external social forces render the men unable to play their roles as breadwinners and heads of their families. Clinging desperately onto the shreds of their self-respect, some men give way to their baser instincts.

The case of Brian Goddard in *Union Street*, as Barker tells it, is a classic one. He loses his job, he drinks, he cannot face his own guilt and inadequacies and beats his wife to vent his frustrations when she confronts him. This is practically a formula, and a dreadful one mainly because it is so credible.

One major reason why the problem of domestic violence prevails on Union Street is that the men there do not appear to respect their women. Ted, Iris King's husband, goes so far as to send his friends up to her room when he

is drunk. Again, it is all part of the environment, where their fathers have beaten their mothers, and this is sort of life they expect to lead themselves. "He thought he had a right to hit you. His father had always belted hell out of his mother, so why not? It was just like God bless you to him" (US 190). The circle of aggression goes unbroken, as the wives then occasionally are pushed to breaking point, like Lisa Goddard, who hits her son, and harder than she wants to. It is a deadly cycle of domestic violence which permeates through the generations.

It must be acknowledged that the Union Street women half-expect to be on the losing end as far as their relationships with their men go. Protective mothers like Iris King "tried to drill it into her girls: a man can put his cap on, you can't, you're stuck with it" (US 201). This is the mothers' way of preparing their daughters to survive in a harsh environment, but this results in girls being brought up to accept that husbands who abuse or desert their wives are nothing out of the ordinary. The danger of such expectations, even if it is only because the women wish to be realistic, is that expectations have a habit of being self-fulfilling.

Where Naylor allowed that there are a small number of women who by the sheer strength of their personalities are able to challenge the system and stand a little beyond its standard norms, Barker has a technique of categorising which reduces the individuality of her characters. She almost seems to imply

that given a person's circumstances and background, it is inevitable that when such-and-such an event occurs, the person would do such-and-such a thing. She treats her women with more sympathy and reserves her most rigorous categorising for the men.

Pat Barker hardly allows her men any redeeming feature. Naylor may have tried not to deal too harshly with her male characters, but Barker has no such scruples. The only male character Barker presents as a decent and giving person is the midget Joss. This is the only selfless man in the novel and he is deformed. This may be taken as an indication from the author that such men in that society are such a rarity as to be almost freaks of society.

The physical manifestation of domestic violence is not much different on Brewster Place. We hear in *Cora Lee* that "A pot of burnt rice would mean a fractured jaw, or a wet bathroom floor a loose tooth" (WB 113). Two generations before Naylor's, an African American authoress had written of one elderly character imparting her experiences to her granddaughter, Janie, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see."¹⁰ This statement was made in concluding that when men are made to suffer, their women are made to suffer along, directly or indirectly, or both. Hurston's character had concluded that the sufferings and domestic violence African American women face are in large part caused by the white people who oppress their race. While

¹⁰ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937. London: Virago, 1986) 29.

there is doubtlessly some truth in that, a comparison of *Union Street* and *The Women of Brewster Place* has made it plain that being the marginalised ethnic minority is only part of the reason domestic violence exists. Considering *Union Street* with its cast of white, English characters, it would perhaps be more to the point to conclude that while racial discriminations may augment it, domestic violence simply is prevalent in a working class community, regardless of race.

However, it must be noted that there is a marked difference between the brands of patriarchy practised in *Union Street* and *Brewster Place*. In the African American culture as portrayed in *The Women of Brewster Place*, the women expect far more of their men. Because they try to fulfil their roles as understanding wives and good mothers, there is indication they hold that this earns them the right to expect financial support and emotional commitment from their men. Some women in the African American community command respect and receive it, even from the most reluctant of men. Eugene, for example, fears Mattie even as he resents her, and in his resentment, he is rude to her, but in his fear, he does not dare refuse her entry into his apartment. It may even be against his will, but he has a certain respect for her.

Naylor may be a feminist, but she is a very different feminist from the likes of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Michelle Wallace. Writing as she did in the early 1980s, Naylor consciously “bent over backwards not to have a

negative message come through about the men.”¹¹ When Sam Michael beats his daughter, he is still painted in shades of grey, and he is still a character one could pity - his anger was roused by his wretched feelings of betrayal in his love of his daughter. “Sam Michael looked at it, saw it was his daughter, and he dropped the stick and wept” (WB 24). Naylor’s deliberate placing of words like “looked” and “saw” indicates Sam’s awakening from a condition blind fury, appealing to the reader’s sense of clemency by portraying it almost as a *crime passionnel*. Naylor quickly steers the reader away from dwelling on this by having Mattie remember her father without reproach when she does think of him. When Sam Michael weeps, when the gentle Ben mourns his daughter, these men are redeemed because they grieve. They are not saints, but their remorse redeems them from being lost souls.

Naylor may have wished to prevent a wholesale damning of the men in her novel, but even she seemed to have reasoned that in a world where the rules are made by the men, it can be deduced that they are to blame to some extent when their rules prove to be harmful ones. The creators of Brewster Place are men, men who are unnamed, men who hide behind the anonymity of official titles, positions and authorities, men who are only identified as “the alderman of the sixth district and the managing director of Unico Realty Company”(WB 1). Through a sympathetic portrayal of the consequent sufferings of some women, Naylor demonstrates that men like Butch, Basil, Eugene and the others

¹¹ Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, “A Conversation,” Southern Review 21.3 (1985) : 579.

are failing their women when they are irresponsible, overly dependent or cowardly.

Light as Naylor's censure is of the men, her latest novel *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998), presents even more extenuating circumstances which further exonerate Ben, Basil and Eugene. Naylor does concede that there are cases where no exoneration is possible (as in the case of C. C. Baker, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4), but on the whole, it can be seen that with the passage of time, Naylor bends over backwards further and further in ensuring a minimum of negativity in her portrayals of male characters.

In all, Naylor is perhaps the most insistent of contemporary feminists African American writers in protesting that men are as much victims of the system as women. In the creation of her second novel, Naylor imaginatively and lovingly courts the acquaintance of her fictional male protagonist by letter before commencing to write the novel, while in her third, *Mama Day*, Naylor creates a Christ-parallel in her favourite character, George Andrews. This marked sympathy for her male characters paves the way from *The Women of Brewster Place* to *The Men of Brewster Place*.

Dusk

The Women of Brewster Place tells the tales of the working class African American community. At the close of this novel, there are few positive changes. Cora Lee continues to have one baby after another, Etta Mae and Mattie find no way to leave Brewster Place, Lorraine is taken away, Theresa packs up to go. The lack of any changes or victories won is by no means a pessimistic parting message from the author. The women in Naylor's first novel do not have fairytale endings of perfect lives but neither are they crushed by their very imperfect ones. They may not live happily ever after, but they live on.

By her close attention to the most trifling of details in their lives, by giving her characters a voice, Naylor's intent could not have been clearer - namely that in the very survival of her ordinary characters in such a world as they find themselves inhabiting, Naylor sees reason to celebrate. Severely tested, they survive by developing and maintaining enthusiasm, commitment and resilience. The victory of the Brewster Place women is an understated one, a victory which lies not in overcoming tremendous odds, but in managing to endure them. "They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear" (WB 192).

Chapter Two : *Linden Hills*

From her top floor apartment in Brewster Place, Kiswana Browne can see the trees on Linden Hills, the setting Naylor creates for her second novel. Its closeness in proximity to Brewster Place seems in indirect proportion to its social distance from the Brewster Place culture and system of values. Linden Hills may house African Americans just as Brewster Place does, but African Americans who have evolved into a very different type of people. In her second novel, Naylor portrays America's contemporary middle class blacks (mostly living on First Crescent Drive through to Fifth Crescent Drive) and upper middle class blacks (on Tupelo Drive).

Predecessors

African American writers have traditionally given generous emphasis to the portrayal of the proletarian class of African Americans and their communities, demonstrating how socio-economic oppression has marginalised them from sharing in the American Dream. It is rare that an entire novel is given over to closely scrutinising the well educated, professional, financially secure class of African Americans. Nevertheless, Naylor's *Linden Hills* does not spring into existence without some forerunners. Reaching and reading as far back as five decades ago, black women writers had already begun to provide African American literature with illuminating touches on the topic of their

race's growing preoccupation with materialism. It is relatively few novels which have carried this theme, but it is possible to trace through their infrequent accounts the threads of moral deterioration winding through the tapestry of African American literature, a literature which is faithfully reflecting and recording as well as analysing the phenomenon of the growing numbers of middle class African Americans and the new culture that has been evolving alongside.

In the late 1920s, Nella Larsen published *Quicksand* with her dark-skinned heroine, Helga Crane, who is, in part, of Danish descent. Being herself the only black member in a white family when her Danish mother remarried one of her countrymen after the death of Larsen's West Indian father, Larsen wrote with tremendous insight and understanding of the conflicting loyalties and temptations a Helga Crane would experience. Loving the funk and natural spontaneity of the Harlem world, yet coveting the ease and affluent lifestyle of her Danish relatives, Helga Crane is both dissatisfied and dislocated.

The following year, Larsen published another novella, *Passing* (1929) which demonstrated the extent to which the lighter-skinned coloured people, like Clare Kendry, were prepared to deny their African American ancestry. These African Americans passed themselves off as whites in order to secure social status, certain rights and opportunities, and material gain. The very term "passing" suggests that in this activity lies the successful crossing of some

hurdle, possibly a hurdle beyond which greener pastures are to be found. Clare Kendry found she had necessarily alienated herself from her own people in order to keep up the deception on which her marriage and life were based. Missing the world she knew, Clare Kendry made Irene Redfield “the link between her and her poorer darker brethren” (*Passing* 97). Larsen had recognised and warned against the corrosiveness of avarice, and more, the loneliness of denying one’s self-identity, which Naylor picked up upon and richly portrayed the effects of in her 1985 novel.

Continuing to track down the predecessors of *Linden Hills*, one would inevitably run into a highly memorable heroine, a beautiful, high spirited, black woman who unhesitatingly trades her integrity for money - Cleo Judson of Dorothy West’s *The Living Is Easy* (1948). More than anything else, Cleo Judson desires to be a proper, established, received Bostonian. This desire is oddly enough coupled with a desire to recapture the happiness of her childhood.

To her first end, Cleo manages to obtain a large house at an enviable location. The furnishing of it causes her some initial concern, and the full extent of her greed comes to the fore when she sees the Duchess’ furnishings: “She would give her soul to sit behind this exquisite tea-table and pass these fragile cups to the admiring ladies of her acquaintance” (*The Living is Easy* 115). Shocking as it is to realise that she is ready to pay the heaviest of prices

for a mere set of furniture, the ironic twist in this is that the bold, independent Cleo hungers after admiration, approval, awe and envy from her peers, which she is convinced that such furniture and other material luxuries will obtain for her.

To fulfil her second craving, Cleo manipulates and deceives those nearest and dearest to her, wrecking her sisters' marriages without regret to keep them close to her. Although not quite as charming as Cleo Judson, Mrs Tilson living on the edge of Linden Hills displays the same amazing lack of conscience when she hounds her husband into his grave, as her son accuses her of doing, simply to acquire the material things she desires. These women appear either to be blind to their own duplicity and deceptions, or unconcerned about them, so dazzled are they by "bright nothings", to borrow a phrase from Naylor.

For those wishing to climb the social ladder as prescribed by the greater American society, the geographical location of one's house as well as the type of housing is of utmost importance. The acquisition of wealth by proletarian classes wishing to move into the middle classes has often been for the purpose of buying or renting a house in a good neighbourhood where their children will attend good schools and they will be associated with other middle class people. Cleo Judson desired a good address, in Brooklyn, for this reason.

Silla Boyce in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), had different reasons for bending all her efforts towards the purchasing of a brownstone house. An immigrant to America from Barbados, Silla wants the brownstone house partly as a symbol of a higher status achieved, and partly to reassure herself that this is the tangible evidence of her success and result of her hard work. Unfortunately, like Cleo Judson before her, Silla Boyce disregards her conscience and integrity, prepared to offer the exchange of her soul not for youth, but for affluence, "Yes, Silla has done it. She has lied and feigned and forged. She has damned her soul but she did it!" (*Brown Girl* 114). The exclamation mark reveals both Silla's triumph and her horror at her own actions. Neither Silla Boyce nor Cleo Judson end up happy or contented women, their tales and lives serving to illustrate the authorial comments of Marshall and West who both participate in the moral tradition of African American writers.

Once in a good location, there is a tendency for the coloured middle classes to try to put physical distance between themselves and the poorer members of their race. Cleo Judson, frustrated with her race whom she deems as having no racial pride, finds it distasteful to even walk among the working classes, while Mr Binney who moved to Cambridge when other Negroes came to his housing estate, "could say with pride, right up to the day of his death, that he had never lived on a street where other coloured people resided."¹

¹ Dorothy West, *The Living Is Easy* (1948. London: Virago, 1987) 128.

It was Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) who most succinctly illustrated this point about physical distance signalling social distance between the classes. In her sketch of the girls newly arrived from Southern cities like Mobile, Aiken, Baton Rouge and Meridian, Morrison demonstrated how fiercely they disciplined themselves to keep their precariously slender social distance from those of the proletarian classes, watching for “the laugh that is a little too loud, the enunciation a little too round, the gesture a little too generous” (*Bluest Eye* 64).

Not only do these girls distance themselves from the poorer sections of their race, but they bring up their children to do the same, and worse, to view themselves as separate from other Negroes, whom they derogatorily label as *niggers*. “She had explained to him the difference between coloured people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Coloured people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (*Bluest Eye* 67). In such stereotyping, these middle class Negroes find they are able to insist on their respectability, as long as they are not associated with the proletarian classes. This process involves a deliberate burial of their past and roots and the erosion of their spontaneity as they seek to shake off funk in all forms.² “The ultimate horror of bourgeois

² Susan Willis, “Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison,.” *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (London: Methuen, 1984).

society against which Morrison writes and the end result of both alienation and repression is reification.”³

The inclination for some Negroes who have made significant financial advancements (leading to improvements in social status) to escape their colour and racial identity in order that future successes may not escape them had been humorously and poignantly summarised and illustrated by Langston Hughes. In “Low To High”, the gentle, plaintive, vernacular voice speaks as if it were a voice of the conscience,

“Now you’ve got your Cadillac
You done forgot that you are black.
How can you forget me
When I’m you?”⁴

In *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison identified the next stage of the bourgeois society’s influence, that these social climbers then forget the truth of their identity and begin to use material things as substitutions for self. Macon Dead had relied on the owning of property to estimate his own self-esteem. “It was because of those keys that he could dare to walk over to that part of Not Doctor Street and approach the most important Negro in the city” (*Song of Solomon* 22). Not only does Macon Dead value himself in relation to the ownership of material objects, but he also anchors his identity to them, “without those keys, he would have floated away at the doctor’s first word:

³ Ibid., 267.

⁴ Langston Hughes, “Montage of A Dream Deferred,” *Selected Poems* (1959. New York: Vintage, 1974) 249.

‘Yes?’ Or he would have melted like new wax under the heat of that pale eye” (Song of Solomon 22). Macon Dead depends on his wealth for courage, self respect and visibility. Applying the same standards to others, he dismisses those who are unpropertied, fading them in his sight as he feels himself fading without the security of his houses.

As such, this is the creed Macon Dead teaches his son, “Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (Song of Solomon 55). Similarly, for those who aspire to owning property in Linden Hills, “making it into Linden Hills meant ‘making it’.”⁵ Such is their unit of measurement of a life well led. In juxtapositioning the lifestyle of Macon Dead with his sister Pilate’s, Morrison demonstrates how dry, cold and unmusical a life based on materialism can be, and therefore, how undesirable.

In *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison portrays a heroine named Jadine who is a firm believer of the primacy of material success. Jadine is a young coloured lady who has been taken under the wing of white benefactors, and having enjoyed the success and luxury of their lifestyle, feels the burden of owing up to her racial identity. “I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside - not American - not black - just me” (*Tar Baby* 215) In seeking to shun the liabilities she feels dog her as a black person, Jadine overlooks the fact that

⁵ Ibid., 15.

she is attempting to alienate herself from the very factors which contribute to the forming of one's identity. Her hatred of Eloë is very similar to Linden Hills' hatred of places like Putney Wayne.

Jadine and Helga Crane differ in that Helga would not accept the permanent patronage of rich, white people even though they are her relatives, and away from Harlem, she misses the culture and lifestyle of her people. Helga Crane may have enjoyed the comforts of Denmark, but she never becomes a creature of that world, unlike Jadine who gives herself wholly to the lifestyle and adopts the values of her white patrons. Jadine who saunters through every door of opportunity held open for her by her patrons and their financial resources would find a Clare Kendry or a Helga Crane foolish, one for risking so much to be in the world of black people, and the other for futilely forfeiting the economic advantages offered her. Jadine has no conflict within herself of being torn between racial love and loyalty, and material desires and rich living. Even the fact that she is given a status above that of her uncle and aunt, and waited upon by them as servants does not cause Jadine any twinges of discomfiture.

As we have seen, various character types in *Linden Hills* may have been found in other earlier African American novels, but never had they been brought together in a single community to act and interact as Naylor brings us in this novel. In *Linden Hills*, the Nedeeds had carved out a niche in the

stonework of America where black people could be of the elite, creating a closed little world of their own, “The Nedeeds made a history there and it spoke loudly of what blacks could do” (LH 16).

Naylor’s *Linden Hills* differs from its predecessors in that it is not the values of a white world imposed on the world of the African Americans which corrupt them, rather, a set of values they freely, devastatingly embrace, of their own free will. Luther Nedeed, the villain of the novel, is foremost in practising and promoting the vices of the former oppressor, exploiting people to his benefit once he has scrambled into a vantage point which permits him to do so.

Naylor does not deny the influence of an outer, bourgeois society which tempts others to imitate it, but the racial issue in *Linden Hills* is not based on the traditional white oppression of blacks. As a critic put it, “To support their ethic of a new black people of material progress, the Nedeeds increasingly imitate the repressive technique of the exploiting white racists they are supposedly defying.”⁶ A situation has developed where it is no longer racial discrimination which is to be feared, but a discrimination of the ambitious against the poor. When Naylor describes how Maxwell Smyth tries to ignore being a black man in his determination to be the best man, she is telling the secret of success of *Linden Hills*, where racial identity is shunned in order to

⁶ Luke Bouvier, “Reading in Black and White: Space and Race in *Linden Hills*,” *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. H. L. Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 145.

avoid the undertow of racial issues leading to potential conflict. The residents of Linden Hills are those who have discovered that this is the quickest way to rise in a society which discriminates against the coloured people and are fully prepared to subscribe to it.

Naylor concretises the segregation of the classes in both her novels. In *the Women of Brewster Place*, there was a wall at the end of the buildings forming a dead end alley, shutting out the Brewster Place residents from the thoroughfare of the city, effectively marooning them from the greater society and its activities. In *Linden Hills*, a marble banister separates Linden Hills from Putney Wayne. With the erection of these solid walls and banisters, the segregation is tangible and definite.

Morrison and Naylor make the same point about the psychological burden of maintaining this social distance. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison writes, "The line between coloured and nigger was not always clear; subtle telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant" (67). In the same way, in her *Linden Hills*, Naylor points out that people like Xavier McDonnell and Maxwell Smyth suffer the same torment of the unending watch, ".....no room for error, any break in his stride, any telltale mannerism or slip of the tongue may shatter the illusion he was standing behind." As much as these black executives struggle to "walk that tightrope out there" (LH 110) thinking that successfully doing so will lead them into the top levels of society, so too

does the girl from Mobile, Aiken, Baton Rouge or Meridian struggle to rid herself of all spontaneity that she may not be dragged back out of the middle classes. They are similar in that they are willing to sacrifice themselves in protecting the myth of the “Super Nigger”, their lives “a race against the natural”⁷, in their progress up the slippery rungs of America’s social ladder.

The Linden Hills residents are most decided in trying to prevent the low-income housing project, regardless of the fact that their neighbours had been suffering the lack of heating and water. These are people of the upper-middle classes so firmly established that it is not only due to their selfish fear of being associated with the poor that motivates them, but amazingly, the very real fear they have developed of their own race, seeing themselves as a people apart. Apparently, Lycentia Parker had said, “Chester, I’m going to do everything in my power to keep those dirty niggers out of our community” (LH 135). Clearly, Lycentia Parker no longer considers herself as one of the Negro race. These upper class coloured people of Linden Hills appear afraid of contamination by association with other coloured people. It is Luther Nedeed who strips away their masks of hypocrisy and speaks the unpalatable truth, identifying their secret horrors,

We must give them [white people] credit for one thing: they’ve become civilised enough by now to recognise that there are two types - the safe ones that they feel they can control and trust not to spill tea on their carpets while they use a dozen euphemisms to form a coalition to keep the other type from moving too close. (LH 137,138)

⁷ Ibid., 104.

Thus does Luther Nedeed indicate his disdain of the white system of social recognition, a disdain spoken in “deadly honest” words which shames the others who had been cowed into conformity by the system.

The remainder of the chapter will be given over to an analysis of how Naylor uses *Linden Hills* to illustrate the moral points she wishes to make. The following two sections show how the structure and form of the novel contribute to a portrayal of the upper and middle class African Americans, while a closer look at Luther Nedeed in the next section of the chapter is instrumental in gaining an understanding of the source of evil. A large portion of the chapter, “The Language of Women”, joins Naylor in her constant watchfulness over how the women are affected.

Echoing Dante's Inferno

Linden Hills is not divided up into chapters in the conventional way, rather, it is divided by the days of the week before Christmas, from 19th December through to Christmas eve. This dating corresponds with one half of the plot - that of Willie's and Lester's journey down Linden Hills in search of odd jobs. As the dates move forward in time day by day, the two boys move further and further down Linden Hills into Tupelo Drive and finally into

Nedeed's house. Their journey has often been paralleled to that of Dante's and Virgil's through hell.

Naylor draws on Dante's *Inferno* in *The Divine Comedy* for the physical layout of Linden Hills. Dante's hell had ten concentric circles with the devil in the centre, frozen up to his waist in a lake of ice, while Linden Hills is formed of eight concentric circles sloping downhill ending with Nedeed's house surrounded by a twenty-foot wide moat which resembles a frozen lake in the winter. Just as lower hell, the City of Dis, is heavily walled off, Tupelo Drive, the three concentric circles closest the Nedeed house naturally (and perhaps ominously) closed off by the cemetery, proudly closes itself off from the Crescent Drives and announces this by two twelve-foot brick pillars.

The first five circles of First to Fifth Crescent Drives correspond to Dante's upper hell, where the sins are incontinence, lasciviousness, gluttony, avarice and wrath. As much as these are regarded as the lesser sins, so too are the Linden Hills residents there less wretched in their lives. Critics like Catherine Ward had noted other symbolic details in *Linden Hills*, like the fact that Ruth Anderson is a very Beatrice-like character in her absolute goodness, "a symbol of the fullest expression of human love."⁸ In the same article, Ward revealed that in a letter to her, Naylor informed her that Nedeed's house

⁸ Catherine Ward, "Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*: A Modern Inferno," *Contemporary Literature* 28.1 (1987): 72.

number 999 was so designated because in Linden Hills where the system of values is inverted, turning 999 upside-down would make it the sign of the beast. Another critic noted that Naylor points out that Nedeed is “de-eden” spelt backwards⁹, concealing the ultimate evil behind a mask of respectability.

Like Dante’s journey through hell, Willie finds his journey through Linden Hills not only a physical one, but a psychological one. It is a journey of self-discovery, a spiritual journey. The novel moves closer and closer to 25th December but never quite gets there; there is no more than a quick glimpse into the depths of hell for Willie, and no salvation for Luther as he never makes it to Christmas, the Christian festival of the birth of a saviour.

There is much irony bordering on dark humour in the use of poetry in this novel. The bronze plaques over the Wayne Junior High School are a parody of the lines over the gateway of Dante’s hell. While the last two plaques carry the same message as Dante’s lines about the creation of the place, the opening lines on the two verses carry directly opposing messages:

“I am the way out of the city of woe
I am the way to a prosperous people
I am the way from eternal sorrow.”¹⁰

Although the school plaque promises a bright future and prosperity, its lines are only parodies of the original Dantean warning of the ruin which lie beyond:

⁹ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰ Teresa Goddu, *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. H. L. Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 44.

“Through me the way into the woeful city
 Through me the way to the eternal pain,
 Through me the way among the lost people.”¹¹

The authority of the plaques which stand as the north star for the young people of Linden Hills and of Putney Wayne is undercut by its close resemblance to the Dantean warning.

As befits an institution of education, the final line of the school plaque reads, “Abandon ignorance, ye who enter here.” The final line over the gateway to hell reads, “Abandon every hope, ye that enter.” The latter version seems far truer in relation to the Linden Hills residents. The narrative exposes the falsity of the alluring promises of the Linden Hills creed and ideology by reminding the reader that the original version of the lines on the bronze plaques had first hung over the gateway to Dante’s hell.

Narrative Strategies

There are other instances in the novel where poetry is used. It is a narrative technique of *Linden Hills* to use poetry to highlight certain points for the reader, almost as an aside to an audience, which will not be perceived by the characters. When David alters the Whitman lines and recites them at Winston’s wedding, their inner meaning remains opaque for all who hear the lines, except for Winston and Willie.

¹¹ Alighieri Dante, *The Divine Comedy. 1 : Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971) 47.

At the mourning for Lycentia Parker, Willie hears a rhythm in the clicking of cutlery which brings to his mind a Wallace Steven's poem, "*Cuisine Bourgeoisie*". Thinking of those lines brings Willie to a better understanding of how the Linden Hills residents think and work. When Willie listens to Braithwaite's discourse, he involuntarily speaks a line from T. S. Eliot's "*Gerontion*" which comes unbidden to his mind, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" The unfolding of further lines from this poem teaches him to question the validity of Braithwaite's work and stance. At every turn, poetry guides Willie's understanding and moral code. It also serves to deepen the reader's perception of the situations, defamiliarising, challenging and illuminating, giving the reader another dimension in which to savour the full horror of a Linden Hills.

Even as Willie moves around actively above ground, scraping plates, steaming off wall paper and shovelling snow, locked in her basement underground, Willa Prescott Nedeed embarks on a parallel spiritual journey of self-discovery. Her tale is told in italics, representing the second or sub-plot of this novel, and her tale chimes repeatedly into the Roman type which carries the tale of the above ground happenings. Gradually, with Willie's curiosity over Nedeed's wife, Willie and Willa move closer and closer to one another in their spiritual journeys and in a wonderfully suspenseful moment, Naylor even brings them physically to opposite sides of a door, "Willie began to descend the

steps slowly.....Will's foot touched the bottom of the concrete stairs" (LH 296). Will's tale as told almost entirely by the omniscient narrator in italics intertwines with the other plot, rendering the novel a sense of a dialogic voice. The narrative techniques Naylor uses to achieve this effect and to speak through this effect is well worth dwelling upon.

In her second novel, Naylor makes frequent use of the cinematic code of editing in order to focus the attention of the reader on some particular point in the narrative. To illustrate an instance where Naylor employs this technique, we can examine the scene where Winston Alcott is speaking to his friend and lover, David.

"What kind of life am I gonna have, goddammit!"

"It's the kind you want, Winston."

"That's a lie" (LH 76).

Immediately picking up from that, we are transported into another time and place where the first indication we have of the transposition is when we hear Winston's father saying, "If it's a lie, son, I guess you will be thinking about marriage soon" (LH 76). Without directly doing so or even appearing to do so at all, Naylor's deft use of classical cinematic editing in her novel enables her to challenge her character's sentiments and indicate to the reader that they may ring hollow, while carefully preserving a beautiful continuity of narrative. It is Mr Alcott who ostentatiously calls his son's bluff, but the timing of the scenes is entirely the work of the narrator who uses sharp juxtaposition to emphasise the poignancy of the point.

Winston's encounter with his father continues until Mr Alcott says, ".....you'll realize that it is the kind of life you want, Winston" (LH 78). "If it is not the kind of life you really want" (LH 78), this is once again David speaking, his words coming hard on the heels of Mr Alcott's when Naylor match-cuts her scenes, picking up from two previous, different scenes. With a swift and sure touch, the narrator brings the tale back and forth to different locations in perfect cohesion, selecting the words which can and would double in meanings and applications, absolutely laden with added significance. "Editing functions.....to move the story along.....to constitute the causal logic of narrative events.....to set up a coherent and credible fictional space.....to orchestrate quite complex relationships of narrative space and time."¹²

The novel does not limit itself to moving forward day by day in time or in Willie's and Willa's growing consciousness, but progresses by swift backward and forward leaps in time. The cinematic code of editing is occasionally used to aid the delving into the distant past to bring the reader the history of most of the characters. Chronologically speaking, Laurel Dumont is already dead at the bottom of an empty swimming pool, but "the cry of an old woman calling a little girl home" (LH 216), the sound of the name "Laurel" in the air recalls the memory of Laurel Dumont as a child. Naylor's cinematic

¹² Pam Cook, ed. "History of Narrative Codes." *The Cinema Book*. (1985. London: British Film, 1990) 213.

montage technique is achieved this time by the echo of the name resounding in the past, and for thirty-two pages, the narrator tells of Laurel's progress through life to end up in Linden Hills. The reader is restored to the present by the same call of "Laurel, Laurel" (LH 248), this time, the summons not to a child, but to a dead thirty-five year old woman.

Occasionally, it is the narrative voice which produces a reply to a character's consciousness. Luther Nedeed thinks to himself that "it would be a cold day in hell before he let some woman tear it down" (LH 20), and the narrative voice cross-cuts to time its words beautifully, alerting the reader to ominous events about to occur, "It was cold. In fact, it was the coldest week of the year....." (LH 20).

There are other effects Naylor achieves by the deft organisation of scenes in her novel. When Willie discovers Laurel at the bottom of the pool, "Without thinking, he turned her over" (LH 249). In italics the very next paragraph follows with, "*Her face was gone.*" Naturally, the "her" in the italics does not refer to Laurel Dumont, but to Priscilla McGuire Nedeed who had simply erased her face with bleach in a photo album Willa came across. The continuity editing is highly successful in imparting to the reader, who is abruptly wrenched out of one scene and thrown into another, the terrible physical reality of Laurel's suicide. "Perhaps the foremost effect of continuity

editing is to efface the moment of transition between shots.”¹³ The cinematic code of editing is also used with great effectiveness to link the parallel journeys Willie and Willa are going through, as well as to link the African American women in a common bond of wretchedness, each having been so denied their identity in their lives that they sought, in their different ways, to reproduce this nullification by destroying their images or faces, a way of mutely shouting their sorrow to the unseeing world. Laurel Dumont and Priscilla McGuire had never met, but they are mystically linked through the horror of Willie and Willa, their horror an indication of the depth of emotion evoked in them at the resulting plight of these women, a horror born of natural concern which Laurel and Priscilla, for whatever reasons, did not receive in their life times.

Naylor uses the cross-cutting effect to intertwine her two parallel tales which are spatially separated although occurring simultaneously. Chapter 22nd December begins with Willie’s nightmare and the chant of “Willie, eat it.....Eat it.....” (LH 145). Two pages later, Willa’s tale is taken up again with the echo, “Will he eat it?” (LH 147). With her clever play on the sound of the words, Naylor makes the repetition echo in the reader’s mind, again mysteriously connecting these two characters in spirit. Another example of Willie and Willa’s parallel journeys can be found in the chapter 23rd December. By that time, their spiritual odysseys have dovetailed so far as to make it possible for them to have reached a common focal and pivoting point in their thoughts.

¹³ Ibid., 208.

Willie lies in his bed composing a new poem in order to calm his troubled mind, “There is a man in a house at the bottom of a hill. And his wife has no name” (LH 277). It is almost as if Willie’s conscious recognition, his voluntary articulation, and his mental struggle to name the truth which lies at the heart of the matter enables Willa to come to the solution, “*Her name was Willa Prescott Nedeed*” (LH 277).

It is important to note that Naylor is not writing in a completely naturalistic way, and that she does include elements of mysticism, mystery and myth to make her points. This is a style Naylor had used sparingly in her first novel, only requiring her reader to suspend disbelief in the implausible dream which all the women dream, including the absent Ciel who had once been a Brewster Place resident but had gone away. It is a style Naylor will exploit in her third novel, *Mama Day* where the knowledge and power of Miranda Day are little short of magical. In *Linden Hills*, Naylor develops on this technique by manufacturing a possible but once again improbable series of coincidences, timing the events of the novel so that they interlink as neatly as the edges of a zipper, pulling together to contain a complete tale, told from both the masculine and feminine perspectives.

The “de-edened” Nedeed

Besides Lester, Willie and Willa, the only character to move through every chapter of the novel is Luther Nedeed. Likened to the devil of Dante’s hell, Luther Nedeed is an enigmatic and fearful figure in *Linden Hills*. The first Luther Nedeed had puzzled everyone as to his intentions, and his great-great-grandson, the fifth Luther Nedeed is no better understood by his neighbours. The succession of Luther Nedeeds in Naylor’s twenty-paged prologue to *Linden Hills* is significantly bewildering. This is because the narrative is designed to confuse, calculatedly befuddling the reader as to which Luther is precisely the Luther under current discussion. In a reader’s bafflement, it is an obvious conclusion to arrive at that one Luther is much like the next. Thus does Naylor contrive to lead her reader into a similar experience as the characters in the novel undergo, the common experience serving to ensure the sympathy of the reader would be unlikely to lie with the protagonist.

It is ironic that the Luthers who lord over their wives would be almost indistinguishable from one another except for their wives. It is the easiest means of identification to say this was the Luther who married Luwana Packerville, or Evelyn Creton, or Priscilla McGuire, or Willa Prescott. Without the names (and maiden names) and personalities of their wives, it would seem that all the Luthers were one. Living in the same house with the same ambitions and habits, were it possible for the four Mrs Nedeeds ever to meet and compare

experiences, it is likely they would testify to being effectively married to one and the same man. The Luthers seem content to carry on their tradition of always being “Luther Nedeed” as they each try to shape their wives to fit the mould of the self-effacing and effaced Mrs Nedeed, and nothing else.

The similarity of all the generations of Luthers is the secret of the Nedeed strength and prosperity. Loyal adherence to tradition is what enables each Nedeed to flourish. The fifth Luther Nedeed came to his terrible end, burning to death as if in the fire of hell, because he had broken with two vital traditions of his forefathers. Firstly, he had failed to bring a pale-skinned bride into his house who would be pliable and would ensure the succession of his family. Nedeed attempts to rectify his mistake by breaking her in as a suitable wife for him, going to monstrous lengths to do so, but to no avail. His downfall was already predestined by his break with tradition.

Luther’s second break with tradition was his lack of faith in the desirability of a Linden Hills. “Since there was nowhere left to go with his land and nothing left to build, he would just let the fools keep coming” (LH 17). Luther Nedeed was able to give free rein to his sadistic inclinations in controlling the occupancies of Linden Hills, “.....he had the pleasure of watching their bewilderment as it all melted away the further they came down” (LH 17). In ranging himself against the Linden Hills residents in a way his

forefathers had not been given to doing, Luther ensured his own death by being deserted by his neighbours at his hour of need.

It would seem that for a Nedeed, a break in tradition is indeed fatal. Even an innocent transgressing of tradition does not go unpunished. The sixth and unacknowledged Nedeed, (Sinclair Nedeed), broke with tradition, albeit not through any fault of his own, by being pale skinned instead of dark, and this caused his father to disown him and kill him by locking him in a basement. As he did not bear the name of Luther, he did not have the chance to be a Nedeed and to flourish as his ancestors had done.

The fifth Luther Nedeed moves through the novel bringing despair and darkness into the lives of those he touches, an antithesis to a character like Ruth who brings renewed hope to all who come in contact with her. It is implicit in the plot of the novel that Luther's is the hidden hand behind the marriage of Winston Alcott, separating him from the person dearest to him. Nedeed was aware that Laurel Dumont would soon commit suicide because he had a hand in driving her to that state. Like the epitome of evil, Nedeed commits the entire repertoire of sins which damn people down into the City of Dis - violence against his wife and neighbours, and against the natural state of things, fraudulence and manipulation of others in his power to devastating ends, goading the despairing to self violence, and committing the canonical sin of treachery, betraying his son, his tenants, and all who look to him for guidance.

Despite that lengthy list above, it should be noted that Naylor does not render a wholly damning portrayal of this character. As is typical of Naylor, she does not paint even the devil all in black. Nedeed's tale, as any other tale, has two sides to it.

Nedeed is a man of tremendous force of personality as is evidenced by his neighbours' habitual deferral to him. He is always poised and composed, skilled and efficient in his craft as an undertaker. In the final section of 24th December, Nedeed is seen to suffer in his own way. His memories and regrets sadden him as they would sadden any ordinary man, and suddenly, Nedeed ceases to be a monster, only a pitiful character who had tried to thwart others and ends by thwarting himself. Seeing things from his point of view, Luther's redemption as a character in this novel lies in the fact that he fails to understand that he is not justified in his actions.

However cleverly Luther Nedeed had manipulated others, whatever the depth of his understanding of human nature with its ambitions, blindnesses and desperations, Luther had never fully understood women. For Luther, providing his wife with money and material comforts justified his demand that she repays his generous input into her with obedience and a son the image of himself.

“....he could not understand what had gone wrong. He had never been cruel or abusive to her. He must have given her at least six lines of credit in his name.....and he asked so little of

her in return.....simply honor what his family had done, just as he honored it" (LH 68).

Given Luther's attitude, it would be fair to suppose that in his eyes, a wife is a machine. He had received guidelines from his forefather as to the methods of operating it, but does not have a repair manual at hand when it malfunctions. His bewilderment and air of injury indicate his total absence of guilt over his treatment of his wife and son.

The Language of Women

There are at least three kinds of languages employed in the novel as far as the voices of the characters go. There is the street dialect Willie and Lester communicate in, which Mrs Tilson despairs of. Mrs Tilson wishes her son to speak in the formal, standard, correct English of the majority of the Linden Hills residents, a form of English which signals good education, civilised manners and higher status in society. Luther Nedeed who is at the top of the social ladder (and therefore at the geographical bottom of Linden Hills) takes it one step further and speaks even more formally, employing archaic expressions and euphemisms like "denizens of the darker hue" which sound hilariously outdated to the two young men. The stiff formality and rigidity of Luther Nedeed's language reflects his inflexibility of character and purpose.

The third type of language in the novel is the language of women. It is a wholly feminine language which may not communicate wholly by the expected rules of logic and rationale. It is a language Willa has to learn to read before she can find herself and her voice. This is a feminine language unheard by men and buried under time and silence. This is a language which requires interpretation because it has lain forgotten and unappreciated for years, the language of all the past Mrs Luther Nedeeds.

Braithwaite, the historian of Linden Hills, would have sold his soul for the key to this language had he known it existed. He had boasted that his is “the whole story, the real story” (LH 263), and had not realised that a vital part of the story lay in a bible, recipe books and a photo album. Braithwaite claimed to have had a “whole series of checks and balances from numerous sources” (LH 263), never knowing that his historical account of Linden Hills and the Nedeeds is necessarily a lopsided account because it lacks the records of the Mrs Nedeeds.

Locked away in the unused morgue and alone after her son dies, Willa Prescott Nedeed begins to wish for the oblivion of death. Willa had not been part of any community either before or after her marriage, a community in which she could find sanctuary, and perhaps even a stronghold. She had not the privilege of sharing in a sisterhood of women from whom she could draw the support and love withheld from her by her husband. When the lonely Willa

accidentally discovers hand-written entries in an old Bible of a woman who lived many generations ago, this diary reignites her interest in living once again. Her own sentiment “There can be no God” (LH 93), was written on the old Bible by another woman alerted Willa to the fact that someone in that house had perhaps suffered as she was suffering, to come to the same conclusion as herself. Exploring further, Willa takes the chance of bonding with a sisterhood of women among the women of the past, a sisterhood spanning across the ages to bring the same sharing and wisdom as belonging to a community would have done for Willa.

Luwana Packerville, Willa discovered, was a Nedeed wife just like herself. In tracing the tribulations of Luwana’s life through the fragmented entries in the bible, “using these ancient records as signposts” (LH 118), Willa begins to gain an understanding of truths in her own life. Watching the sufferings of Luwana, Willa as well as the reader are shown how a patriarchal order may sanction the psychological abuse and emotional starvation of women in a way that leaves no room for the women to understand the wrongs done to them.

Luwana who was a slave, had married for freedom. Willa sees that she herself was a slave to her fear of society’s disapproval, marrying to set herself free from the social stigma of being single. As Willa begins to reflect, finding

her own plight being the same as Luwana's on one level, she identifies so closely with Luwana that they seem to merge into one woman:

She thought her marriage would set her free, and it should have. It should have. She massaged her throbbing forehead. There must have been some law in this country that made it so. He was just cruel and trying to frighten her. And she was so happy about the wedding. Finally free (LH 117).

Just who the "she" is in the beginning of the passage is not quite clear, and indeed, it could have referred equally to either or both the women. It is only in a later part of the passage that it gradually becomes clear Willa has begun to think of her own life. Because Luwana had had the courage to see that marriage had not set her free, Willa is heartened enough to follow suit, admitting to herself that freeing herself from social stigma had only plunged her into the trap of society.

Luwana Packerville fought her miseries bravely and in an attempt to bring comfort to herself, began to write letters to herself. In her letters, it is clear to see that there was a struggle to rationalise the treatment meted out to her by her husband, to certify if she had been wronged in any way. What poor Luwana had not understood was that the language she was using had not been formed to articulate her wrongs. "Since this man asks nothing of you, I cannot imagine what is pressing you so" (LH 122). In telling herself that, Luwana overlooks the fact that a husband may fail in his duty as a husband not only when he abuses his wife, but also when he neglects her to that extent. Society had not been sophisticated enough to recognise that the alienation of a woman

may also constitute a wrong done her, even if she is provided with all the material comforts.

Luwana felt a sense of guilt - as is shown in the way her replying letters gently reproach herself - of finding anything to complain about when no demands were made of her. When in one letter she was bold enough to begin hinting at her husband's malice and cruelty, sensing that ".....I have been the innocent vessel for some sort of unspeakable evil" (LH 123), the very next letter, she lost heart at such boldness and chided herself for "senseless prattle about evil" (LH 123). Moreover, Luwana had not been able to see when her arguments were flawed and thus led herself astray. For example, when she was upset about her husband manumitting her son but not herself, she tried to tell herself, "It is a small matter since I could go nowhere and would go nowhere - this is my home" (LH 119). It is a brave attempt on her part to rationalise away her sense of injury, but she passes over the vital point that it is the principle of the issue and all it symbolises, and not the practicality of it which has so hurt her.

Generations later, Winston and David had identified the same problem in their language when they were seeking to define their relationship in a homophobic society which has not even "made up the right words for what we are to each other" (LH 80). Society had "made up plenty of words and you can read them on any public bathroom wall" (LH 80), as David pointed out, but in

restricting its terms to labels, words which carry deprecatory, disparaging, even condemning and ridiculing connotations, these words cannot express the true nature of a loving, homosexual relationship. Winston had been right to reject the application of those words society had made up which would demean the beauty of his relationship with David, but he was too cowardly to challenge the standards set by society and did not choose to fight the good fight by creating new words to teach the society of the truth.

Being a new bride in the 1850s or thereabouts, Luwana must have found the language even more restrictive than David and Winston did. Of late, it has been recorded, especially by African American women writers, that the fragmentations and the silences of women are used to “encode oppression” and “raise the problem of the black woman’s relationship to power and discourse.”¹⁴ Luwana did not understand that she was in the trap of a society that had no words for the articulation of such wrongs, and no knowledge of a need for such words, “a woman speaking a man’s language, expressing her intentions in a refracted, masculine-defined way.”¹⁵ This lack meant that some very real sufferings were negated, unacknowledged, even dismissed as fancies and petulance.

¹⁴ Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogic, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” *Feminists Theorize The Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. (New York: Routledge, 1992) 144-66.

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981).

Evelyn Creton who also married a Nedeed is not a woman who wrote diaries or letters to herself. Her legacy is left in recipe books and grocery records, another wholly feminine way of recording life and the trials of life. This experimental style of writing was also explored by Ntozake Shange in her novels, where character is revealed through such records. In *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, the child Indigo invents and records recipes for happiness, peace, forgiveness and etc., using sweet, delicate, beautiful ingredients like flower petals and honey. Her sisters and her mother record and trade cooking recipes which they have found are to their taste and give satisfaction. In so doing, they almost seem to be recording and exchanging life's experiences and advice. These novel methods of written communication and records side-step the problem of "another's speech in another's language"¹⁶, enabling women to navigate their way through a minefield of possible cultural stereotypes.

Both Shange and Naylor as female African American authors of this age, are acutely sensitive to the fact that women may not communicate or write as men do, and have their own methods of voicing their innermost needs if one would but listen to their stifled or silenced articulations. "With the diversity of black women's lives now acknowledged in literature, African American women writers search for new ways to express old and new situations and silences."¹⁷ The books of Evelyn which would mean little or nothing to her husband are

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Sandi Russell, *Render Me My Song* (London: Pandora, 1990) 162.

easily decoded by Willa Prescott two generations later. Naylor hints that in this form of recording, women pass on their secrets to other women in a code that men would overlook and fail to read or understand and would therefore remain safe from masculine discovery and possible masculine disparagement and destruction. It is a way of ensuring that it will only resume full meaning in the hands of a sensitive, understanding, receptive reader.

In her imagination, Willa comes to make the acquaintance of Evelyn, reading in the careful handwriting and detailed records that “this had been such a proper woman” (LH 187). It is through her imaginative sympathy that Willa reconstructs the unwritten details, paying tribute to the long dead Evelyn’s “quiet dignity and immaculate grooming” (LH 187), which the entries in her books testify to even through the years past. In Evelyn, Willa recognises how, as Nedeed wives, they had both sought to beautify themselves, whether it is by commercial cosmetics or home-made ones, blaming their marital failures on themselves for lacking something. She sees what a pathetic attempt and futile struggle it was on their part to make themselves as desirable as they could to their men, never realising that these things should not have made the difference, never appreciating their own beauty simply because it had gone unappreciated by their husbands. With her discovery of each Nedeed wife, Willa learns more and more about herself and her motives, and about how women are different from men.

Evelyn Creton Nedeed was a very feminine woman in her choice of weapons as well as her choice of records. She battled her unhappy situation with domestic weapons - herbs, cookery, food. In a sense, Evelyn had progressed from Luwana's state because she is fighting to change her husband's attitude towards her, in a way that the somewhat passive Luwana did not even seem to conceive of doing. Luwana had tried to make sense of her situation while Evelyn had already successfully identified it as one she does not wish to maintain. Whether she was trying to change herself or change her husband (by adding various items to his food which she hoped would work a magical change in him), Evelyn was constantly seeking change, actively experimenting for change, "mixing and measuring page after page, month after month. A little more of this, a little less of that" (LH 148). Evelyn fought back with patience and perseverance.

All the same, Evelyn was like Luwana in not finding any words to articulate her truths. She had mentally prepared explanations in case she was ever questioned about the ingredients in her husband's food, "but she would have been hard-pressed for the language to explain their need" (LH 188). Both women recorded their emotional mutilation by physically mutilating their bodies. Luwana had recorded the passing of time in a painful way, carving lines on her chest and stomach, passing the emotional pain onto a physical one in order to ensure its reality and fight it. Evelyn had "measured her anguish" by

calculating how long it would take her to eat herself to death, purging herself of the needed calories day by day.

When self-consolation, patience and attempted change failed, Evelyn self-destructs, committing suicide with prussic acid. Like the case of Laurel Dumont, it was clear that she was rapidly approaching the stage where she would take her own life, but in neither case did the people around them see this and try to stop it. It would seem that Naylor makes a subtle point here that even this modern day and age, despite the misleading sense of progress, things may not have changed all that much for women.

Priscilla Nedeed had not been like the former Nedeed wives and Willa was cheered by the photographic evidence of her high spiritedness and gaiety. The third Mrs Nedeed was an unsuspecting, happy, laughing, carefree Priscilla McGuire prior to her marriage. She is a woman of individuality who managed to be different even within the constraints of conformity as is witnessed in her photos, *“they could have been three wax figures but for the determined animation in the arch of her brows and her insistence on changing the way she held her head...”*¹⁸ (LH 207). By this time, Willa had come so far in her empathy with the women who had occupied the same house as she did, shared in the same sufferings as she suffered, that she is able to foresee the destruction

¹⁸ This quotation is italicised, as it also is in the text, to indicate it is from the narrative half of Willa Prescott Nedeed, below ground.

of Priscilla when she sees that the lady is allowing herself to be shadowed by her son. Willa has learnt to see a pattern and be forewarned by it.

There are few records of Priscilla apart from the photographs, but they are sufficient to tell their story of self-mutilation - the bleach on photos, the word "me" scrawled beneath the empty hole where her face should have been - a course of action which is the same in essence as that of Luwana's or Evelyn's. Like the two before her, Priscilla sought to record her absence since no one else seemed to notice or care about it.

Whether it is accurately heard or otherwise, like the story of *Maud Martha*, the tale of the Nedeed women is in actuality a tale of "bitterness, rage, self-hatred and the silence that results from suppressed anger."¹⁹ The Nedeed women are strong ones as they prove in their power of endurance and the tremendous energy it must take to silence themselves and submit to their husbands. Their tragedy is that it was all misguided and misplaced energy, which destroys them instead of destroying their unhappiness. They are all wives who have been dehumanised by their husbands, women consumed with their silent, mute rage, silenced because they did not know they had a right to rage, and would not have known how to rage even if they had wished to. They are women who have been victimised without their knowledge and beyond their

¹⁹ Mary Helen Washington, "'Taming all that anger down': Rage and silence in Gwendolyn Brook's *Maud Martha*," *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. H. L. Gates Jr. (London: Methuen, 1984) 249.

knowledge, losing their identities, their voices and their sanity in being Mrs Nedeeds. They had unfortunately all succumbed to the natural female instinct of turning upon themselves when they found that by the standards of society, their husbands are apparently blameless. What they failed to question was the fairness of standards set by a patriarchal society. The Nedeed women had unknowingly committed the sin of self-treachery in their silence and ultimate acceptance of their husbands' ruling in their lives.

The records of the former Nedeed wives warn Willa of how things will be if she does not halt their deterioration. Willa's initial reaction to this is anger, a healing, strength-giving anger, first misdirected at the dead women, then redirected at the wrongs in her life. As Lorde had identified in one of her presentations, anger can be put to good use, "Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional.....anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act....."²⁰ Taking a step which had eluded the other Nedeed wives, Willa was able to utilise her anger in a healing process, then resolve that anger and put it aside, proceeding from there to a mental rebuilding of her life.

²⁰Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Feminist, 1984) 127.

The male character in the novel who comes closest to gaining an understanding of women and their psyche is Willie. No one apart from Willie had realised the disappearance of Willa. The smoothness of Luther's explanations disguises the truth as easily as the store-bought cake he brought to the wake had disguised his lies. It was only Willie who was puzzled by the discrepancy, ".....the way the butter , rum and raisins went down all smooth and easy.....he had almost missed tasting her absence" (LH 147).

Willie is not typical of a conventionally masculine man. There are hints in the novel of his homosexual tendencies, tendencies thus far unindulged, and these tendencies seem to enable him to comprehend from a feminine perspective. Lester who is less sensitive than Willie, goes through Linden Hills undisturbed and unhaunted by dreams in his sleeping hours, "I am gone before my head hits the pillow" (LH 211). At the marriage reception, it is only the three men who have homosexual tendencies, Willie, Winston and David, who understand the Whitman poem. There appears to be an understated point here that those who are at the furthest ends of the scales of masculinity and femininity are those furthest from reaching an understanding of one another.

Naylor had displayed sympathy towards homosexuality even from her very first novel. In showing the paranoia and ludicrousness of the community's over-reaction to the lesbians, Teresa and Lorraine, she attacks society's disparagement of couples who do not abide by conventional heterosexual



relationships. Naylor hints that many more people than it appears do have both heterosexual as well as homosexual inclinations, even if they fail to realise it. Mattie Michael for example, had never thought herself inclined towards lesbianism, but recognises that “maybe it is not so different. Maybe that’s why some women get so riled up about it, ‘cause they know deep down it’s not so different afterall” (WB 141). Etta Mae who has been with innumerable men, finds herself uneasy when trying to put her finger on the difference and fails to.

In her description of the relationship David and Winston shared, Naylor lavished on it her most sensual touches:

.....sliding down the neck toward the chest under his slowly circling hand, revealing the silvery image of his waist, his hips, his lean and woven thighs. The wetness slipping across the sweating glass over the fine down on the testicles and collecting there like crystal welts. Palm following palm, breath meeting breath through the blurred mirror - complete (LH 78).

In the lyricism and beauty of her description, Naylor leaves no room for viewing this homosexual relationship as a dirty or unnatural one. One inevitably feels a sense of pity that it had to be broken up, especially when one compares it to the lack of emotional sympathy between Winston and the woman he marries. The narrative deliberately carries no account of any warmth between Cassandra and Winston in order to heighten the sympathy for the chemistry sparking between David and Winston.

Naylor is certainly not alone in displaying a gentle portrayal of lesbianism and homosexuality. Alice Walker in *The Colour Purple* (1983) had written of the shameless and joyful relationship between Shug and Celie. Ntozake Shange in *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (1982) had portrayed an entire lesbian community, the women of a dance troop called “Azure Bosom”, which she deliberately emphasised included the most lovely, elegant and tasteful of women. These writers all broadcast the same message - that as long as they are loving relationships, whatever the gender of the partners, they do not deserve condemnation. Naylor upholds the growing literary trend of modern African American women writers in demonstrating that it is not the outcasts of society who may have homosexual tendencies, but even the most respectable and desirable of people.

Through the challenging of established moral norms, Naylor is partly seeking to free herself from expressing her authorial intentions in a refracted way (to paraphrase Bahktin’s definition of dialogism). In her portrayal of the language of women, Naylor herself has to contend with the age-old problem of rescuing and distilling women’s language and meaning from man’s language, employing a range of methods like the African American tradition of signifying, unorthodox forms (photographs, recipes, grocery lists, etc.), the deconstruction of patriarchal homophobia, and juxtapositionings, in order to even partially escape the limitations of “man’s language”.

Morals in Conclusions and Destinies

What the Nedeed women had not known was that like their husbands, they lost strength when they lost their tradition, even if it was a tradition no one had yet cherished. Laurel Dumont failed to listen to the wisdom of her grandmother, Roberta, and failed to find a solution to her problems, just as Mrs Tilson, paying no heed to the teaching of Mamie Tilson, tries to rush her son and daughter further down Linden Hills, not knowing that she would be rushing them to their destruction. Mrs Tilson appears in the light of a self-deluding woman, but one with a certain amount of manipulative power in her home. We encounter further dark humour from Naylor when she has Lester heartlessly summing up the blindness and hypocrisy of his mother in his telling comment, “No woman’s gonna hound me into my grave so she can weep over it in imported handkerchiefs.” (LH 52) Mrs Tilson who had lost a husband in using him little better than a workhouse to achieve her ambitions (according to Lester), amazingly has learnt so little from her loss that she ironically urges Lester to save himself by working just as hard, continuing to prioritise material advancement over mental and emotional health.

The Linden Hills women are generally thought to be rather privileged women of the middle or upper-middle classes. Roxanne, Willa, Laurel, not one of them seem to have found peace or happiness. The only woman in *Linden Hills* who is a happy woman is Ruth Anderson who had once lived in Linden

Hills, but now lives in Putney Wayne and would never consent to returning to Linden Hills because she treasures her happiness.

Roxanne Tilson, perhaps under the tutelage of her mother, ignores the warnings of Mamie Tilson about selling the mirror in her soul and submerges her pride in her ambition to move up the social ladder by marrying well. To satisfy her vanities, she willingly accepts the humiliations a man like Xavier imposes on her, willing to put up with much for her eventual material gain. Nowhere does it appear that she has a sincere love or concern for Xavier, and Xavier's falling in love with her reflects more his lust than his love. Portraying Roxanne in this unflattering light, Naylor signals her warning of the dangers of such priorities.

Roxanne and Xavier could easily become another pair of Dumonts. Undoubtedly Roxanne would give much to have Laurel's achievements; a career at IBM, a husband in Tupelo drive, while it is Xavier's ambition to emulate his mentor Maxwell Symth, rise to greater heights in General Motors, and perhaps move down into Tupelo Drive. As their story goes, the Dumonts' marriage falls apart. With all the outward trappings of success and their high profile lives, the Dumonts have not even managed to make a home. Living across on Putney Avenue, the Andersons have a home visitors could envy, and one in which both partners recognise "love rules in this house" (LH 38). Naylor makes her point that the chances of having a happy life and a home has no

direct correlation to the amount in one's bank account and the tragedy in *Linden Hills* is that few there seem to comprehend this obvious fact.

Laurel Dumont is a tragic character in her life and in her death. Living on Tupelo Drive as she does is an indication that her sin was a grievous one, and certainly graver than mere avarice. Laurel Johnson had arrived in Tupelo Drive through her own self-treachery, "captured by the images in front of her: the Phi Beta Kappa pictures.....front page of the New York Times.....the bridal picture in the Dumont family album....." (LH 228). Damned on the concentric circle so close to the bottom of the hill, Laurel takes her own life, committing her final sin of violence against oneself.

In her conviction that the music of Bessie Smith and Billie Holliday have nothing to do with that of Gustav Mahler's, it equally escapes Laurel that her life has anything to do with that of her race and community. Laurel Dumont is a splendid example of character who would have earned the exasperated and sardonic censure of a critic like Michele Wallace, "If a black woman has a few dollars in the bank and a Master Charge card, she's already thinking of herself as privileged, that she has no right to complain about anything, and that she has no connection whatsoever to that poor slob of a black woman on Lenox Avenue and 131st Street, or any other black woman for that matter. Middle-class black

women are slow to identify with each other's problems. We are all so special."²¹

As Wallace points out, unlike the working-class Brewster Place women who survive a much rougher life than her own, Laurel had not known the strength she could draw from her community. With all her privileges, Laurel Johnson Dumont had not been privileged to the survival skills of female bonding, humour, sisterhood and sharing. Laurel had thought meanly of the proletarian class African Americans, deeming them "women who were drug addicts and alcoholic.....women who got their identity through a crop of worthless men they let drag them down.....moaning about Jim Crow, unpaid bills, and being hungry" (LH 235,236). Considering herself as living on some more exalted level, Laurel declared that their lives "have nothing to do with me and what I am going through" (LH 236). With such an attitude, Laurel had alienated herself from her people and cut off a possible source of emotional support, closing off a solution to her woes.

The narrative is sympathetic towards the woes of Laurel in recognising that it is only too easy to be caught up in the rush of life.

With so much in the house, they didn't miss each other as they both stumbled on their way up, not realising that their stairways were not strictly parallel. Slowly, deceptively, the steps slanted until the couple's fingertips could barely meet across the chasm.....and since their hands were grasped so tightly on their respective set of stairs, it wasn't until they had

²¹ Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues. From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 1990) 135.

nearly reached the summit and had time to pause that they realised they had been moving together but away from each other (LH 232).

The slanting of the stairways, “deceptively”, seems to be charged with some active malicious intent, having some mystical allusion to Luther Nedeed, who living in his white house at the bottom of the hill, had actively wished and worked towards the erosion of their unity, destruction of their marriage, and the suicide of Laurel. Naylor does not lay the entire blame on Laurel’s shoulders. Their stumbling is an indication of their blindness, suggesting that although she and her husband had contributed to their downfall, they were menaced by society’s prescribed values. The narrator’s voice in Laurel’s story is less a critical one than a pitying one.

The conclusion of *Linden Hills* had caused critics discomfort, because far from delivering a blow at the patriarchal Lutheran tradition to delight the hearts of feminists, Willa simply desires to resume her life as a housewife and to do so in the Nedeed house, no less. In this, Willa resembles another heroine of African American literature, Gwendolyn Brooks’ Maud Martha, whose story concludes with her bubbling happiness at being pregnant again. Brooks had tried to show her readers that the ordinary African American woman does not need to be elected president of America before she can find valid reason to be joyful. In her heroine’s extreme ordinariness and yet high individuality, Brooks had demonstrated that what gives women joy defers from woman to woman and should be cherished and celebrated, however mundane it may seem.

Despite the message of *Maud Martha*'s conclusion, which seems to have fallen by and large on deaf ears, the conclusion of *Linden Hills* was so unexpected that it had initially discomfited even its author. Amazingly, Willa Prescott Nedeed does not desire revenge. This had amazed Naylor as much as it does the indignant feminist reader, and Naylor, with disarming charm, candidly admits as much, "I said, 'Oh Lord, woman, don't you know what the end of this book has got to be? You've gotta tear that whole house down to the ground, or my book won't make any sense!' Obviously she didn't care. And I was angry with her for a good week - I just stopped writing and ran around the house cursing her."²²

Eventually, Naylor lets the character learn and live in her own way, thus showing that as Willa's author and creator, she is the first who must learn to respect the principles Willa chooses for herself. It is not by cutting down her husband's individuality that Willa assumes an individuality of her own. Her lack of desire for revenge is her way of showing that she is strong enough to wrestle an identity for herself without infringing on that of others.

Naylor celebrates the strength of Willa by showing that her heroine is no longer afraid to choose a course of action she deems holds happiness for her, even if it overlaps with what has been stereotyped as unbecoming

²² Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, "A Conversation" *The Southern Review* 21.3 (1985): 587.

submissiveness. Willa does not simply negate a male assertion of her identity, but ends with creating a new definition of herself, even if that does mean including elements disparaged by others. With the full knowledge of the wrongs of all the former Mrs Nedeeds and her own wrongs, Willa accepts the past and prepares to pick up her life from the present point and no other.

Chapter Three: *Bailey's Cafe*

As Kiswana Browne spiritually and literally looked over from Brewster Place to Linden Hills, so too did George Andrews and Orphelia Day of *Mama Day*, standing on the pier of 125th Street, Harlem, look over at the deserted brownstone which was Bailey's Cafe. This is the reader's first glimpse of the cafe, "A deserted, crumbling restaurant stood near the pier. The side windows had been broken, but across the front in peeling letters I could read Bailey's Cafe" (MD 131). Thus does Naylor link the final novel of her quartet onto her third novel although chronologically speaking, *Bailey's Cafe* predates *Mama Day*.

Overview

In *Bailey's Cafe*, Naylor reverts to the short story sequence structure with its multi-vocal quality which distinguished her first novel. This fourth novel comprises yet another seven chapters sandwiched between an introduction (The Jam) and a conclusion (The Wrap), and once again, each chapter is named for its protagonist. In this novel, Naylor demonstrates a sharper focus than ever on the problems faced by black women in contemporary America. Where *The Women of Brewster Place* had celebrated the struggles and survival of proletarian African American women, *Bailey's*

Cafe clearly identifies their multi-faceted obstacles and traces the problems to their varied sources.

Each chapter except the last is written to bring forth different aspects of the complicated problems which confront African American women. Each chapter, save the seventh, portrays the stifling, damaging and even destructive forces which culminate to threaten the individuality of the women, to dismiss their diversities, and to reduce them into prescribed roles. Each of the first six chapters contains a penetrating identification and analysis of different methods of subjugating and victimising black women.

In the seventh chapter, Naylor departs from her custom of having a female protagonist. The final and most lengthy chapter in the book is devoted to a male protagonist. Miss Maple is a cross-dresser, the inclusion of which is particularly innovative, and even bold, on Naylor's part. (As this chapter tackles the issue of racism and sexism against men, a discussion of Miss Maple can be found in Chapter Four of this thesis, subtitled *The Sexuality of Black Men*.) Running through and connecting the series of short stories and monologues which this novel is comprised of, is the common thread of recognition that while the African American community in general suffers socio-economic oppression and racial discrimination, circumstances are further exacerbated for its women who occupy the lowest rung in society and therefore stand last in line for consideration.

Authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison in the creation of characters like Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Celie of *The Color Purple*, and Sethe of *Beloved*, had sought to illustrate the plight of sexually exploited women. Following in their footsteps but wishing to further this growing awareness, Naylor makes it her task not only to depict the plight of such women, but to seek an understanding of how the women fall, or are pushed, into such plights. Chapter by chapter, story by story, Naylor formally dissects the subtleties and complexities of the workings of sexual exploitation, noting it as a process in which men and women both participate.

Like her literary predecessors, Naylor notes that sexual exploitation of women continues largely ignored but rampant in an age when women are overtly being granted more political and legal rights than ever before. In “[adding her] voice to that whole stream of consciousness”,¹ Naylor distils for the benefit of her readers, the shocking range of methods of sexual exploitation in a very complete catalogue of wrongs suffered by women; from the blatant and hackneyed ideas of forced prostitution, to the enslaving quality of rigid social definitions, the ever-deferred American dream, the withholding of information and therefore of alternatives, the trap of ingrained conformity, and the patriarchal notions of good and evil.

¹ Charles H. Rowell, “An Interview with Gloria Naylor,” *Callaloo* 20.1 (1997) : 179.

The Cafe

Where *The Women of Brewster Place* was written in naturalistic vein, the tales of *Bailey's Cafe* contains elements of the mystical. As Morrison did with her teratological character of Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Naylor also refuses to explain her *Bailey's Cafe* in its entirety. Employing a hauntingly mythical quality in her tales without compromising their realism, Naylor explores the extremes of social horrors which befall women. In *Bailey's Cafe*, "Naylor again takes up the dream metaphor."² As Nash noted, *Bailey's Cafe* is a thematic sequel to *The Women of Brewster Place* in that where one novel portrays the deferral of dreams, the other illustrates broken dreams.

Bailey's Cafe is said to be "on the edge of the world" (BC 28). A unique space is required and therefore created by Naylor where time can be frozen, and the author can metaphorically lift her characters out of the real world in telling their tales. It may be fruitful to conjecture that Naylor conceived of this device to help her readers refrain from judging by conventional, existing moral standards. Naylor is not the only African American writer to have felt the closely constricting chains of society's standard code of morals. The very first woman to write a slave narrative in America, Harriet Jacobs, had also found it necessary to plead for the reader's clemency on the grounds that her heroine's

² William R. Nash, "The Dream Defined: Bailey's Cafe and the Reconstruction of American Cultural Identities," *The Critical response to Gloria Naylor*, ed. Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris. (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1997) 211.

situation was dire and inconceivable to the majority of others more fortunate than her. In *Incidents In The Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Jacobs tried to shield her protagonist from censure by submitting the argument that premarital sexual intercourse is a far lesser sin than the only alternative - the rape of a slave.

Just as Jacobs had challenged the conventions of fiction and femininity, so too does Naylor, writing and publishing 120 years later, feel compelled to do. In *Bailey's Cafe*, Naylor demonstrated that there are people who have undergone experiences which have not been part of the experiences which shaped our currently held moral standards and expectations. To particularise, African American women have a history and experience seldom taken into consideration in the prevalent, white American standard of rights and wrongs, the standard which governs the country not only legally, but socially as well. In *Bailey's Cafe*, Naylor stretches the reader's mind to encompass the many different experiences of her varied cast of characters.

Both Bailey and Eve provide spaces in a spiritually crowded, polluted and suffocating world, "some space, some place, to take a breather for awhile" (BC 28). The "some place" is a deliberately ambiguous reference to the location of the street where Bailey's Cafe, Eve's boarding house, and Gabe's pawnshop can be found, a location which is not bound by the constraints of reality. According to *Mama Day*, the cafe is geographically situated on the wharf of San Francisco, but Bailey's Cafe does not appear to have a set place in

the real world. It seems to appear everywhere, "This place had to be real, real mobile" (BC 28). Perhaps it is a cafe which appears where ever people need it enough to find it, as Bailey hints, "we're only here when they need us" (BC 28). For Sadie, the cafe was in Chicago, while Ms Maple needed to find it when he finally got to Pittsburgh. Amazingly, Mariam was guided to it all the way from Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. (Mariam was directed to Eve's house and the cafe by Gabe, whose name appears to be an abbreviation of Gabriel, who is, in biblical terms the angel who was the messenger of God.)

Naylor turns all certainties upside down in this fourth novel. Even brownstone buildings, the symbol of permanent fixtures (and economic advancement), concrete constructions commonly used as landmarks or reference points, cannot be relied upon to be where one supposes they are simply because they had been in the past. Eve's boarding house is a sanctuary to some and a brothel to others, a "whorehouse convent" (BC 116) as Jesse calls it. *Bailey's Cafe* was designed by Naylor to "upset your assumptions about what is male or female, what is purity, what is whoredom"³, in short, to take nothing for granted and to bring the ends of extremes dovetailing together.

The mobility of the cafe renders the cafe almost surreal, but once again, Naylor offers no apology and seems content to leave her readers guessing.

³ Virginia C. Fowler, "A Conversation with Gloria Naylor," *Gloria Naylor. In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne, 1996) 151.

Having warned us that “anything really worth hearing.....happens under the surface” (BC 35), it would be futile to try to nail the location of Bailey’s Cafe in geographical terms, partly because it was created to exist on a different level altogether, and partly because to dwell on such details would be to miss the point of the novel and defeat its purpose. Even the cafe owner is not named, and ‘Bailey’ only plays the role as the cafe owner, a role almost thrust upon him, “.....I found myself in here” (BC 27). Who Bailey is is of no importance -- what is important is the role he fills. Naylor uses every means she can to urge the reader to go beyond the surface meaning of the written words. Because “it is not always external drama, but internal drama that is going on”⁴, it is important to read not only between the lines, but also to read what is omitted, and to hear what is not said. As discussed in the previous chapter, the language of women is in large part a silenced language. It is through this novel that Naylor has the double task of educating her readers as to how this novel should be, and indeed, needs to be read, and to impart messages that would be all too easily lost if directly voiced.

The reader is not without guidance in this venture. Bailey, Nadine and Eve, all practising their philosophy of tough love,⁵ are nevertheless characters who have fine-tuned their sensibilities to such a level that when confronted by powerful emotions or attitudes, they are not only aware of them, but feel them

⁴ Charles H. Rowell, “An Interview with Gloria Naylor,” *Callaloo* 20.1 (1997) : 180.

⁵ Philip Page, “Living With the Abyss in Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Cafe*,” *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, ed. Sharon Felton and Michelle C Loris. (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1997) 225.

tangibly. For instance, according to Bailey, “the corner of the room was turned into a block of ice” (BC 94) by Esther’s force of hate towards men. A less acutely sensitive observer would have passed by Esther unseeingly, but in Bailey’s Cafe, there are translators for the language of silence.

Bailey’s Cafe is a novel “shaped by jazz.”⁶ The prologue, “Maestro, If You Please...” begins the novel with a flourish, the three dots following like a drumroll. Jazz is a collaborative music and in this prologue, we meet our conductor. Because Bailey takes the role of the overall narrator, we often see through his eyes, adopt his perspective, and understand through his consciousness. Bailey is, therefore, a conductor in more than one sense; the maestro who orchestrates the stories, the guide through the experience of this novel, and the transmitter of nuances and ambience.

“The Vamp” is a musical term for the short passage (usually a simple one) played before or after solos. It is also the title which heads the 5 pages which explain the set up of the cafe and the regular customers and characters one would encounter in them. Either Bailey or Nadine would perform ‘a vamp’, so to speak, in the beginning of each chapter, narrating a short introduction before the character takes over the narration of his/her story. “The Jam” is the title which ushers in the sequence of seven short stories. ‘Jamming’ is a musical term for the collective improvisation of the combination of voices

⁶ Charles H. Rowell, “An Interview with Gloria Naylor,” *Callaloo* 20.1 (1997) : 182.

and musical instruments, each contributing to the music with different but harmonising tunes and rhythms. Even the epilogue entitled “The Wrap”, carries yet another musical term. Naylor constantly reminds the reader of the influencing structures and themes of jazz music upon her novel. The very first chapter of the novel, Sadie’s story, was inspired by Duke Ellington’s song, and duly entitled *Mood Indigo*. Naylor is only one of the African American writers to draw heavily upon jazz music for the structure and inspiration of her work. (Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, James Baldwin, Al Young, Toni Morrison and Amiri Baraka are examples of others who acknowledge and utilise the structural influence of jazz in their works).⁷

Despite the fact Naylor wished to draw heavily upon jazz music in the writing of *Bailey's Cafe* and had said in an interview “the form of the work has been either influenced by the content, or either the content demanded the form of the work,”⁸ the novel does not read like the lyrics of jazz music and its stories are more detailed and complex than the rhythms of jazz would involve. Jazz might well have been its inspiration, and there are certainly refrains (repetitions of certain phrases) which do *resound* in one’s mind even in one’s silent reading, but *Bailey's Cafe* despite its avant-garde style of writing does not actually resemble or incorporate the music of jazz.

⁷ H. L. Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay ed. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (New York: Norton, 1997) 56.

⁸ Virginia C. Fowler, “Interview: The Human Spirit is a Kick Ass Thing,” Gloria Naylor. In Search of Sanctuary (New York: Twayne, 1996) 263.

There is certainly much signifying and figurative language used in this novel, and at times, Naylor even writes very cryptically in order to break the mould of lax stereotype and force the reader into a thinking response. When Stanley said "I was never raped because I never resisted" (BC 193), it is the horror unelaborated upon and untold which chills, perhaps more than a gory account could do, especially to twentieth century readers already immune through daily exposure in the mass media to horrors of all descriptions. Sometimes Naylor's humour is sly, as when Bailey comments of Sister Carrie, "She'd starve before she'd answer you. A woman afraid of her own appetites" (BC 33). The double meaning of the word "appetites" with all the significance of its sexual innuendo, is but one of the many examples of the constant signifying which goes on in Naylor's novel, which is entirely characteristic of the African American literary tradition.

Defamiliarisation

"The core of the work [*Bailey's Cafe*] is indeed the way in which the word *whore* has been used against women or to manipulate female sexual identity."⁹ As such, Naylor devotes her first chapter to a systematic and thorough deconstruction of the damning label of "whore", seeking to strip this word of all its familiar disparaging and depreciating connotations.

⁹ Virginia C. Fowler, *Gloria Naylor. In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne, 1996) 150.

To this end, Naylor creates a character wronged by all, but nevertheless possessing the sweetest and most unprotesting of spirits. Door after door of opportunity is slammed shut in Sadie's face, and she is, at every turn, forced into prostitution. Without the benefit of anyone's protection, formal education, or even a subsistence level salary, Sadie's only possible recourse in order to achieve her dreams is to sell her body.

And what are Sadie's dreams? To win love and approval from her mother, and to have "a trim white bungalow with a green picket fence" (BC 44). In America, the land of opportunity, Naylor all too easily envisions and depicts a girl of Sadie's circumstances, who though prepared to undertake the most gruelling of jobs ("maybe if she slept on the bench, she'd have enough energy to work faster tomorrow....." <BC 61>), and undergo an extreme degree of self-deprivation ("she drank her dinner of hot water and sugar" <BC 60>), a Sadie would still have to resort to prostitution if she is to realistically attempt achieving her singularly modest dreams.

As the story unfolds, "The Vamp" which has a dual meaning and can be applied either as a musical term or a derogatory label for women, increasingly grates on a reader's sensibility as being both inapt and inaccurate in its latter application. No one could be further from a wanton seductress than Sadie who desires neither men nor money. It is not Naylor's intention either to mince words or preserve niceties, but to lay bare even the most unpalatable of truths.

Steadfastly refusing to allow the distressed and indignant reader to conveniently exempt or exclude Sadie from the ranks of “vamps” (and thereby blunt the thrust of the chapter), Naylor insists that Sadie is, by any definition, a whore, and a twenty-five-cent whore at that.

Although Naylor is uncompromisingly adamant that Sadie sells her body for money, Sadie is also unmistakably a lady. What Bailey saw as the miracle of “the thick mug [losing] its cracks and stains, hitting the table top with the ring of china, while the bent tin spoon and paper napkin became monogrammed silver and linen” (BC 40), was on another level, the miracle of Sadie’s self-respect, dignity and composure retained intact in a world that all but conspired to strip her of everything. This miracle is seen through the eyes of Bailey and Nadine who bear unsentimental but faithful witness to Sadie’s indubitable lady-like manners. This down-to earth couple are characters who have learnt to see past labels, even the blinding label of a “twenty-five-cent whore”. Practised at listening and taking things “one key down” (BC 34), Bailey and Nadine recognise and lead the reader to recognise also the lady within the whore. Indeed, the label of “the vamp” or “the whore”, hung on one such as Sadie, loses its virulence, its damning connotations crumbling into dust, successfully deconstructed.

Pat Barker in *Blow Your House Down* (1984), was yet another woman writer in the same time period seeking to provide an insight into the lives of

prostitutes. Although Barker's second novel is once again set in England, the world's oldest profession appears to affect women in many similar ways whichever side of the Atlantic they may find themselves on. Where Naylor sought to deconstruct the very word "whore", Barker worked to deconstruct the common perception of prostitutes. To this end, Barker's protagonists were prostitutes, thus closing the gap between them and the reader, allowing them to tell their tale without the moral standards an omniscient narrator might impose. Barker's prostitutes are strictly professionals, performing services for which they are duly paid. She presents them as ordinary women who love their children, are kind to their friends, and vulnerable to insults and injuries. "It was terrible, it was really humiliating, and it changed you completely. You felt as if you'd had the words 'common prostitute' stamped right through you, like 'Blackpool' through a stick of rock. It was the 'common' that hurt. 'Prostitute', well, you couldn't very well deny it; but she wasn't common. They had no right to say that."¹⁰

Barker presents the inside view of the lives and trials of prostitutes who are made pariahs of society, "One day as Brenda was walking home from the shops a woman she knew crossed the road to avoid speaking to her.....she felt as if she was exposed on a high ledge, with lights shining on her, and crowds of people all looking up and staring."¹¹ Barker captures Brenda's fear of being

¹⁰ Pat Barker, *Blow Your House Down* (1984. London: Virago, 1995) 49-50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

hoisted and exposed for public censure and humiliation. From two thousand years ago when Jesus prevented a crowd for stoning a woman for adultery¹², society has always been so guilt-ridden in structure that a whipping boy brings things into a comfortable balance. As Morrison illustrated in *Sula*, society felt itself free to be virtuous as long as it could find a dumping ground for its vices and misfortunes. "Their convictions of Sula's evil changed them.....They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general, bond together against the devil in their midst."¹³

Both Naylor and Barker recognised that prostitutes are commodified to remove their humanity in order that they may be used as chattels for waste disposal, epitomising the sins and evils that all others are mercifully saved from. Society at large keeps its feet clean by treading those like prostitutes into the mire of contempt. "I realise that most women benefit from the fact we have a delineation of 'whore' and sometimes they are conscious that this is going on and they play into it, perpetuate it for their own ends."¹⁴ In *Bailey's Cafe*, Naylor does not point the finger solely at men as the oppressive party, but accurately incriminates the women as part of the problem. This point will be taken up and discussed at greater length further on in this chapter.

¹² John 8: 3-11.

¹³ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973. London: Chatto, 1980) 117.

¹⁴ Virginia C. Fowler, "A Conversation with Gloria Naylor," *Gloria Naylor. In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne, 1996) 146.

Returning to our perusal of Naylor's first tale of Sadie, we see that Naylor employs different methods to get her points across. In being able to create a situation clearly the exception to the rule that prostitutes are undeserving and abandoned creatures of the basest variety, Naylor is able to prove that absolutes are misleading and whores are not all contemptible. Naylor breaks the common notion that women fall into two distinct categories, good women and bad women, and that there is no crossing over between the groups. Procuring sympathy for her protagonist, "The Vamp" renders it impossible to despise a Sadie, and therefore equally impossible, without engaging in the practise of double standards, to continue a blanket condemnation of prostitutes in general. Through Sadie's tale, a space is cleared in the time-honoured prejudices surrounding the term "whore".

Reconstruction by Retelling

Deconstruction, however, is not the sole aim of *Bailey's Cafe*. "In *Bailey's Cafe*, I am retelling classical Biblical figures, I am retelling their stories."¹⁵ The influence of Naylor's seven years as a Jehovah Witness is evident in all her writings, as Virginia Fowler has noted and discussed, but it is in her fourth novel that Naylor draws most extensively upon her knowledge and understanding of the Bible to make her points. The retelling of the tales offer alternative explanations and representations of women and their tales, whom

¹⁵ Sharon Felton, and Michelle C. Loris, ed. "Interview: The Human Spirit is a Kick Ass Thing." *The Critical response to Gloria Naylor*. (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1997) 257.

and which Naylor believes to have been long misunderstood and misrepresented.

The stories of Eve, Queen Esther, Mary Magdalene, Jezebel and the Virgin Mary are retold in the subsequent five chapters in a 'womanist' mode (taking the term 'womanist' as it was first defined by Alice Walker in contrast to 'feminist'), to replace the traditional patriarchal context in which they have been accepted and understood for centuries. Each tale displays different facets of the manipulation of female identity as has been practised through the ages.

The process of reconstruction appropriately begins with "Eve's Song", the protagonist being named for the first woman and "mother of all living".¹⁶ Eve's grandfather who fancies himself her creator, plays god to her in the form of a fearsome figure somewhat larger than life. Modelled on the god of the Old Testament, Eve's grandfather is a god who provides shelter and sustenance in exchange for total obedience. Eve is permitted and given no birthdate except that which her grandfather randomly assigns to her at any given instant, thus signalling to her that her point of existence and origin is decided by him alone.

A chance discovery of the eroticism of the earth's tremors against her body awakens Eve's sexuality. That was the beginning of Eve's recognition of

¹⁶ Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983).

her oneness with the earth. As Morrison had pointed out in *Sula*, women are not permitted, much less encouraged, to explore or to delight in their sexuality. Sula was pariah of Medallion for “the easy way she lay with men.”¹⁷ Likewise was Eve ostracised, and worse, cast out of her village and the only world she knew by her grandfather for the heinous crime of enjoying sensations and sensualities derived from the earth and her body. “To be thrown out of his church was to be thrown out of the world” (BC 85).

Just as the very first Eve was driven from the Garden of Eden into the wilderness, so too does Naylor's tale parallel this and our protagonist is driven into the delta, hungry and naked. There in the delta, Eve is returned to the earth, becoming a creature of the earth and nothing else. “I had no choice but to walk into New Orleans neither male nor female - mud” (BC 91). The trek in the delta was a necessary part of Naylor's story because in order to recreate herself, Eve had to go beyond the confines of society and culture, and to some extent, even beyond time and history, “The walk that took a thousand years” (BC 82). Once upon a time originating from the rib bone of man, Eve is recreated and given the status equal to man - a creature of dust and clay in its own right, no longer merely a derivation from another such creature. Naylor ostentatiously omits any mention of a mate or partner for Eve, driving home the point that this Eve as she retells the tale, is not created merely as a companion for man.

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973. London: Chatto, 1980) 122.

Of the process of recreation which took place in the delta, few details are supplied to the reader, but we can be certain the earth reclaimed Eve, "I was born of the delta" (BC 90). The recreation is as unexplained as the mystery of creation, and Eve is a highly mystical figure in the novel. The calculated element of mysticism at this juncture also serves to warn that it would be unwise to oversimplify matters and suppose the existence of any formula for women who wish to recreate themselves.

Incongruity reigns on all levels in "Eve's Song"; from the unremovable dirt beneath the fingernails of a well dressed woman, to the singular phenomenon of a woman stepping beyond the boundaries of any patriarchal context or definition. In an interview, Naylor stated, "I am not determined by an accident of my biology"¹⁸ and she gives the same prerogative to the twentieth century Eve of *Bailey's Cafe*.

"It seemed there was nowhere on earth for a woman like me" (BC 91). Having been tried and tested by her long trek and not been found wanting, Eve finds within herself the power to construct a sanctuary not only for herself, but for other women suffering the same problem of dislocation. No longer the temptress guilty of causing the fall of man, "Eve's Song" resung places Eve

¹⁸ Virginia C. Fowler, "A Conversation with Gloria Naylor," *Gloria Naylor. In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne, 1996) 144.

within the ranks of Naylor's other healers like Mattie Michaels and Miranda Day.

The role Eve plays is gradually unfolded over the next few chapters. Her house extends a protection to those who would in all probability have died otherwise, saving the spirits which had been psychologically murdered by society. "Her healing methods also include allowing the women to continue with no recriminations and no difficulties, the self-destructive behaviour that brought them to here the first place - with several differences: they will act out the behaviour in protected, structured environment, among other women and they will act it out in style."¹⁹

All stages of healing are to be seen in that house - from the long, painful struggle of Esther's, to the promised full recovery of Peaches, the rapid progress of Jesse, and the tragic loss of Mariam. Eve even lends a hand to the disillusioned Ms Maple, setting him back on his feet. In every case, Eve's remedy is the restoration of hope and beauty as miraculously as she coaxes out-of-season flowers to bloom.

Queen Esther is celebrated for her role in saving the Jews from their enemies and certain death. To briefly recapitulate, Esther was sent to the harem of King Xerxes by her cousin Mordecai, where she wins the king's favour and

¹⁹ Virginia C. Fowler, *Gloria Naylor. In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne, 1996) 125.

is crowned queen. She pleads successfully for death to her enemies and favours for her people and her cousin.

Naylor turns this heroic tale on its head, raising heretofore unasked but pertinent points of contention in "Sweet Esther". Naylor's Esther is forced into the equivalent of prostitution at twelve years of age by her brother who barter her in exchange for favours and concessions from his boss or landlord. Through this tale, the point is made that the women are not consulted and have no power of decision as to their willingness to sacrifice themselves so thoroughly, as to be sex slaves for the sake of others. Hinting at the terrible, repeated episodes of rape and sexual perversions Esther is forced to undergo for a dozen years, the tale gives one to think furiously of the tremendous vulnerability and helplessness of women placed in this position. Naylor exposes the chilling callousness of male relations who hold their women in so little worth. The apparent dispensability of the women and the ease with which they can be replaced, "the other young girls waiting in line to sleep alone in his pink-and-lace bed"(BC 99), exposes too the empty honour of the titles used to mask the ugliness of the positions. Esther is as much a wife as the biblical Esther was a queen.

In the case of sweet Esther, she is yet another of the multitudes of plain, poor, little black girls who are commodified for the sake of material advancement with no recognition or regard for the enormity of their suffering

and sacrifice. These are unsung heroines, given no voice and no hearing. On almost every page of Esther's story, the refrain runs, "We will not speak of this, Esther" (BC 95-99). In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Naylor had already partially created another such character in Daddy Ben's crippled daughter. Sweet Esther, however, with "the most honest face of any woman" (BC 99), is a full fledged character of heroic material, for not only did she stay twelve years in repayment of a debt, she would also have wished to save her people, except "there are too many of them to kill.....there are just too many twelve-year-olds" (BC 99). The horror of Esther's tale is multiplied by the fact that hers is not an isolated case, but the fate of an unknown number of others.

Esther who tells her tale in the present tense, "I stay one year for each year my older brother took care of me against the shrill protests of his fat wife" (BC 98), has been as yet unable to put her past behind her. By the time she escapes, she has suffered so many years of physical and psychological rape that she takes refuge in a form of insanity. Esther hides in the darkness of Eve's cellar re-enacting the perversities once forced on her and re-enacting also the betrayal of her brother, "they must call me *little sister*. Or I no longer come" (BC 99).

Esther's narration is a singularly disjointed one, constantly interspersed with the obsessive thought of how she was betrayed by her brother into a silent

conspiracy against herself, "We won't speak about this, Esther". Her narration is further fragmented by her short sentences, at times shortened to single words.

I like the white roses because they show up in the dark.

I don't.

The black gal. Monkey face. Tar. Coal. Ugly. Soot. Unspeakable. Pitch. Coal. Ugly. Soot. Unspeakable (BC 95).

Esther begins with a perfectly normal sentence about the roses but immediately follows that by a flat "I don't". There is a sense of an eagerly communicative nature rendered uncommunicative by suppression. Once her thoughts turn to herself, Esther seems to be throwing the rest of those adjectives at herself. Not only is there a notable diminution of articulateness - the labels decreasing from three words to two, and then to single adjectives - but the repetition of those adjectives also indicates how constant and powerful a torment they are in her mind.

Pecola Breedlove of *The Bluest Eye* was another little girl who suffered such violent violation of mind and body that she too turned to insanity as a way of surviving a horror her mind recoils from. Both Pecola and Esther had their childhoods, futures and sanities thoughtlessly devastated. The two girls had in common the following experiences. They had been victimised by those closest to them and in trusted positions of guardians or protectors. Both were geared by society to believe in their inherent ugliness - Pecola, brought up in a family who believed themselves ugly, and ultimately, resulting in her craze for having blue eyes, her epitome of beauty and security; while Esther fancies herself too

ugly to be loved, "I am glad he does not look at me or he would not give me a bed like this" (BC 96). In both Morrison's and Naylor's stories, the suffering of the girls may be gauged by the extent of the mental trauma they continue to undergo.

The same may be said of Peaches, our beautiful protagonist of the next chapter. "Mary (Take One)" examines the position of women who are naturally partial to the giving and receiving of sexual pleasures with varied partners in a society which defines nice women as having the exact opposite characteristic. Peaches is by no means the first fictional figure of this persuasion - there have been other women like Reba,²⁰ Hannah,²¹ Shug,²² Liliane,²³ to name but a few who unashamedly enjoyed an extreme degree of sexual freedom.

The expectations and single-tracked perceptions which ranged from "The gal has promise, Jim" (BC 104), to her father's building a high wall around the house, surround Peaches from infancy to adulthood, invariably shaping her to fit an age-old mould. This chapter raises the awkward question of whether a Peaches was ever given a fighting chance to be other than that which at least the male half of society immediately presupposes her, ".....what every man in here was thinking: Born to be fucked" (BC 102). Just as Mary Magdalene was cast by myth-making and Christian tradition as the prototype of

²⁰ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1978 London: Chatto, 1987).

²¹ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973. London: Chatto, 1980).

²² Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (London: Women's, 1995).

²³ Ntozake Shange, *Liliane* (1995. London: Minerva, 1996).

a reformed prostitute, so too does Western tradition cast Peaches as a nymphomaniac.

So torn is Peaches between a natural inclination to enjoy her own sensuality and her desire to be "Daddy's baby"(BC 104), she becomes a schizophrenic, desperate to delude herself into dislocating herself from the monster which she alone appears to see reflected in the eyes of men. The dual personality Peaches develops is an illustration of the psychological danger to women who attempt to fit themselves into the male defined categories of saint or sinner. Naylor exposes the danger awaiting those who depend on the approval of others for the generating of self-love, reiterating her message that women must learn to value themselves without using the currency of their desirability to men.

Mirrors feature prominently in Naylor's writings and it is particularly instructive to note the significance of mirrors to Peaches. One critic has noted, "the figure of Mary Magdalene had been a frequent subject in Western painting, including one that may have influenced Naylor's portrait: a painting by Georges de la Tour, in New York's Metropolitan Museum, that depicts Mary Magdalene at the turning point of her life, looking at herself in a mirror."²⁴ For Willa Nedeed of *Linden Hills*, it was at the turning point in her life too that she sought a mirror, seeking to confirm her identity. Peaches,

²⁴ Virginia C. Fowler, *Gloria Naylor. In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne, 1996) 130.

surrounded by mirrors of all descriptions, cannot bear her identity, cannot bear the reflection of her own seductive beauty of face and figure. Her aim is not to find herself, but to try to lose herself. She is the victim of an ideology which sternly rules that the two aspects she finds within herself cannot coexist and must be mutually exclusive.

“Like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.”²⁵ It appears to be Peaches’s art form to please and be pleased sexually, and when this is emphatically denied her, she understands enough to fear herself, “I didn’t even trust myself to take packages from the doorman” (BC 110). Tormented in the trap of her identity crisis, Peaches resorts to the desperate measure of trying to kill the part of her she cannot reconcile to herself, “I grabbed the [beer] opener in both hands and dug down.....” (BC 111).

Eve’s prescription for Peaches is relatively straightforward -- providing her with a space in which she can fearlessly express both aspects of herself without needing to constantly fight herself. As Eve finds her receptive to her teachings of not short-changing herself in self-valuation, “.....Peaches will still demand daffodils. More perfect and more perfect daffodils” (BC 114), Eve is able to promise Daddy Jim a full recovery, “I will return your daughter to you whole”(BC 114). The word “whole” is the key to the matter, for Peaches will

²⁵ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973. London: Chatto, 1980) 121.

achieve wholeness and recovery only when she desists from denying or trying to escape any facet of her nature.

Another protagonist who goes into auto-destruct mode is Jesse Bell. Seeking escapism from revilement and heavy personal losses, Jesse becomes a heroin addict. Retelling the story of Jezebel from the first two books of Kings, Naylor demonstrates how a woman of this age and time may still find herself thrown to the dogs, if not physically, at least figuratively.

In biblical tradition, Jezebel was the painted woman who defied the prophet Elijah and led her husband astray into the worship of Baal. Through a sympathetic portrayal of a similar tale from the point of Jesse Bell, Naylor's rewritten version of this story throws a different light on the triumph of Elijah. (With his influence, power and heavy-handedness, and the closeness of his name to that of the prophet who vanquished Jezebel, Naylor appears to have humorously recast Uncle Eli as a ruthless, twentieth century Elijah.)

It is the story of Jesse Bell which runs parallel to Jezebel's that throws a new light on the biblical tales, tales which had been accepted in a certain context and held up as the standard ever since. As far as can be determined, the crimes of Jezebel were in keeping to her faith and defending her religion and her prophets. That she was a true and loving wife to King Ahab was not any vindication, nor was the fact that she fought to protect her husband and the

worship of her god. So too was Jesse a good wife and mother, and true to her family (the Bells) and to her culture. Naylor points out the unwritten rule of society that double standards are practised for men and women where courage is concerned. Women are not honoured, but penalised for upholding their principles and values unless those coincide with patriarchal principles and values.

Although the characters of Jesse Bell and Willa Nedeed of *Linden Hills* vastly differ in personalities, they are both women who find themselves married into similar circumstances. Brought into upper middle class families, they are required to play the role of acquiescing wives who would provide heirs and support the tradition of their husband's families.

The very fact the chapter is entitled Jesse Bell, the maiden name of our protagonist, is an indication of how fiercely she clung to her roots and the pride she took in her family and her clan. "I was proud to be a Bell" (BC 125). Refusing to subscribe to the snobbery and contempt of Uncle Eli's doctrines, "I didn't see a damned thing wrong with being colored" (BC 125), and refusing to be ashamed of the people and culture she loved, Jesse fought the good fight. She cleverly used all the weapons at her disposal, including her strength of personality and her sexuality to draw her husband to an understanding of her and a mutual enjoyment of her traditions. With diabolical cruelty, Uncle Eli bided his time and in one fell blow, defeated all Jesse's efforts. After that, "the

nineteen years I put into my marriage didn't amount to dogshit; the care I'd given my son - dogshit; the clothes I wore, the music I liked, the school I went to, the family I came from, everything that made me *me* - dogshit" (BC 131). The swift recitation of this list of grievances carries the imagination of the reader plunging down into the rapid despair experienced by Jesse.

The reiteration of "dogshit" echoes the fate Jezebel met, all eaten except the palms of her hands, by wild dogs, and "the carcass of Jezebel shall be as dung upon the face of the field."²⁶ Just as her namesake was so dishonoured as not to even be granted a burial as befitted her status, Jesse understood that Uncle Eli's revenge was to nullify her as thoroughly as possible. Not content only with stripping her of her family and the life she knew, he took also the good name in which she had such pride, and "the name of Jesse Bell came to mean that no-good slut from the docks" (BC 131).

"Mary (Take Two)" is a heartbreaking revision of the story of Mother Mary. The story of Christmas has long been glorified in such a cliché manner that it has often overshadowed the plight of Mary, the woman used as the vessel for the coming of the saviour. It has been long assumed that she was blessed and contented with her lot. The Semitic name of "Mariamne" meant "Mother and Queen of Heaven".²⁷ Naylor presents us with Mariam, a mere

²⁶ 2 Kings, 9:37.

²⁷ Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983).

child of fourteen, unwed and pregnant, and therefore, as may be (logically) expected, bewildered and terrified.

It should be noted that Mariam's story is not told by Bailey, but jointly by Nadine and Eve. This has two implications, firstly, that there are certain subjects men may be ill-qualified to represent or relate. (Naylor had already hinted of this when Bailey's mentioned that it was Nadine who "clued me in" (BC 92) to the fact that the flowers Eve surrounds her garden with are all wildflowers.) The second implication of the third party narration of Mariam's tale is that Mariam has nearly no voice of her own. Taking it a step further, Mariam very nearly has no will of her own either. Circumcised, impregnated, exiled, and eventually bearing a child, all without having any choice in any of these matters, she is as helpless as she is inarticulate. The only sentence Mariam ever speaks and speaks repeatedly is the single terrible truth she knows and maintains, "No man has ever touched me" (BC 143). After the successful delivery of George (Naylor's Christ-figure), Mariam dies.

The suddenness and almost unwarranted tragedy of Mariam's death strikes the reader with some cruel impact. How Mariam met her death is a mystery Naylor leaves unexplained, caustically highlighting the patriarchal view that that women are mere vessels to such an extent that they can cease to exist after they have served the purpose of their existence, with supposedly no loss to society. The whole of Mariam's tale smacks of disillusionment with the

reality of women's positions in society, and is made all the more poignant by Mariam's own unawareness and ignorance of how far she has been wronged.

The process of defamiliarization takes a sudden and somewhat jarring twist with the introduction of a male protagonist in the seventh chapter. While it is true that "Miss Maple's Blues" continues the deconstruction of gender stereotyping, crossing and recrossing with nonchalance and ease the line society draws so rigidly between masculinity and femininity, it is puzzling to find that Naylor deemed it necessary to illustrate racial discrimination through a male character.

It is however a notable point that Miss Maple, being a man, does exercise greater control over his life as a private individual than the women are permitted to. Naylor not only uses a male character to illustrate racial discrimination, but also as her narrator. Bailey narrates the bulk of the novel, and his narration lends an objectivity to the tales. Understanding so keenly the general preconceptions and prejudices of her contemporary audience, it may be conjectured that Naylor (ironically and perhaps even satirically), utilises a male voice, the voice of a man-of-the-world, in short, Bailey's voice, to further ensure the credibility of her tales. It may be that Naylor, finding herself addressing a readership which is to some extent confined in the thoughts and ideologies of a patriarchal tradition, finds it useful to participate in this tradition

and walk a little way with it in order to point out just how and where it leads women astray.

“Not unknowing accomplices”²⁸

Where Brewster Place housed people who congregated there endlessly awaiting the realisation of dreams, Bailey's Cafe gathered a collection of characters at desperation point, people “hanging onto the edge” (BC 28). Brewster Place was not a destination, but a transit area from one phase of life to another, if indeed another could be reached, “the few who would leave forever would be the exception rather than the rule” (WB 4). Bailey's Cafe was only a transit area in that it was where people paused while they chose between life and death, “It was the last place before the end of the world for some” (BC 68).

The women of Brewster Place, although poor, were eminently respectable and even an Etta Mae would heatedly defend her respectability. To an uncharitable mind - like that of Sister Carrie's - Sadie, Eve, and all the women in Eve's house, could easily be classified as whores. The women of Brewster Place have been dealt a relatively rough deal in life, being working class, black women and therefore of the group most disadvantaged, but the women of *Bailey's Cafe* have truly horrifying and unbearably abrasive encounters with life.

²⁸ Virginia, C. Fowler, “A Conversation with Gloria Naylor,” Gloria Naylor. In Search of Sanctuary (New York: Twayne, 1996) 146.

The single greatest difference between the women of Brewster Place and of Bailey's Cafe is that the latter suffer a sense of dislocation, of being misfits and lepers of society. At Brewster Place and even in their lives previous to that at Brewster Place, these women had known and benefited from a sisterhood, even across the generations. By her fourth novel, Naylor had begun to deplore the reality of the lack of a network of support amongst women, and those like Sadie, Jesse, Mary, Esther and others find themselves bereft of a community of any description until they find the cafe.

Apart from the main male protagonists of *Bailey's Cafe*, i.e. Bailey, Ms Maple and Gabe, whom a reader may be supposed to be sympathetically disposed towards, few of the men in *Bailey's Cafe* are seen to be actively or deliberately seeking to victimise the women. Eve's grandfather had acted according to his principles; Esther's brother had, after twelve years of trying to do his duty, taken the easy way out; Mary's father and Jesse's husband had loved them without understanding their needs; and even the high priest and *kahens* who exiled Mariam had done so without intended malice, rather, with a sense of inevitability. "The men, if they do fail, they are well meaning in their failures."²⁹ As for characters like Esther's "husband" and Uncle Eli, there are other characters like Peaches' lover, the gambler, who loved so perceptively

²⁹ Ibid., 155.

that “he never called me anything but Mary” (BC 109), and Iceman Jones who had sought to extend love and protection to Sadie.

The burden of blame is laid at the women’s door, for perpetrating and enforcing conformities which disadvantage and damage other women, for strengthening instead of breaking the vicious circle. As Lorde had lamented, “Black women shed each other’s psychic blood so easily.”³⁰ In Sadie’s tale, all the women fail her - her mother, the prostitute she served, her husband’s daughters. Eve’s resentment is reserved not for her grandfather, but for “those righteous righteous women” (BC 85), “with their slitted eyes and evil questions” (BC 83). Esther’s sister-in-law has so little clemency that she condemns Esther to that ugly fate without a qualm, and Mariam’s mother, in fear and ignorance, damages her daughter beyond redemption. Most outstandingly in Mariam’s case, Naylor points the finger of guilt at the women, “No man has ever touched me” (BC 143).

In 1953, Gwendolyn Brooks presented *Maud Martha*, a masterpiece in miniature. Maud Martha initially appears a very ordinary, simple black woman of the working class, facing the conflicts and problems fairly typical of those in similar situations. The genius of *Maud Martha* lies in the internal drama, a drama only in existence because of Maud’s latent creativity and complexity,

³⁰ Audre Lorde, “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger,” *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Feminist, 1984) 156.

her awareness of the petty but daily injustices she faces, her irritation in having her sensitivities constantly ridden roughshod over. Maud is conscious that she is mildly victimised, but in a multitude of ways, for things quite beyond her control.

For comparative purposes, we find that although African American women in general suffer the same wrongs, Maud Martha is wronged to the degree experienced by the majority, while the women of Bailey's cafe are driven to the point that the issue often becomes a matter of life and death. Naylor pushes the boundaries of extremes to test them and to discover how fatal they are, while Brooks demonstrates how social injustices, poisonous as they are to the general well-being of women, can be survived in small doses.

As in Sadie's case, there was no one to appreciate Maud for her inner virtues as she should be appreciated, but for Maud, life goes on despite this lack of emotional fulfilment or reward. In Sadie's case, the deprivation is so severe that as no one recognises the lady within, she is forced into prostitution and alcoholism. Maud suffered at the hands of her family and her husband, held as being of less consequence or less worth because she is not very pretty. Nevertheless, she continues to lead her life in an ordinary way while Peaches, persecuted for her looks, tries to destroy them. Maud may have been of least consequence in her family and much overshadowed by her sister, but she was not the sacrificial victim Esther was made to be. Maud is trapped in a certain

lifestyle, but she is not so optionless as the docile and naive Mariam who is trapped by the circumstance of birth and abused beyond imagination.

Maud Martha has a range of survival techniques which enable her to do more than survive, even to find joy amidst the ordinary buffetings of life. Maud is a very adaptive woman, as we witness her sense of relish taking over the squeamishness of cleaning a chicken when meat is scarce. She maintains her pride and self dignity and will not work for Mrs Burns-Cooper, an employer who fails to recognise her basic humanity. Maud Martha survives by keeping a low profile and demanding very little of life, taking pleasure and finding dignity in tiny incidents, as she did when she allowed a mouse to escape with its life. Most importantly, Maud fights back, fighting with a silent rage and hate³¹ the things which she ought to fight, the things which threaten to crush her, "There were these scraps of baffled hate in her....."³²

The women of *Bailey's Cafe* do fight back too, but often in self-damaging ways. Esther fights with hate as Maud does, but with brooding, festering, icy hate which eventually mutates into a form of insanity in her case. Sadie retreats from reality and manages in that way to hold onto her dreams with the help of alcohol. Peaches resorts to fleeing, running away from her

³¹ Mary Helen Washington, "Taming All That Anger Down: Rage and Silence in Gwendolyn Brooks' 'Maud Martha,'" *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. H. L. Gates Jr. (London: Methuen, 1984) 249-261.

³² Gwendolyn Brooks, "Maud Martha," *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. H. L. Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York : Norton. 1997) 1649.

home and herself, while Jesse tried to take on the system single-handedly and lost badly. Eve and Mariam are on opposite ends of the scene, Eve who won so decisively she had the power of recreation, while Mariam did not even know she had to fight, let alone how to do so.

As Gayl Jones had written about Walker's women, so too do her words apply to Naylor's: "Many of the women in Walker's early works become what men imagine them to be. It is a frequent theme in black women's fiction. It is Walker's outcast women who struggle against males' truncating images of who they are and might become, in the same way the males must contend with whites' truncating and obliterating metaphors for their humanity and possibility."³³

In the middle ages, attributes of virgins and whores may have been confused and often interchanged, but in the twentieth century, the two are held to be as different and distinct as white from black, denying by ignoring the existence of the whole range of colours in between. It may be said that this polarisation is part of our inheritance from the Middle Ages, a inheritance of evolving (or mutating) social ideology, which Naylor challenges. Naylor chose to lift *Bailey's Cafe* into the realm of the surreal in order to reach to the ends of extremes and reconcile them, demonstrating that opposites can be no more than

³³ Gayl Jones, "Blues and Spirituals: Dramatic and Lyrical Patterns in Alice Walker's 'The Third Life of Grange Copeland,'" Liberating Voices. Oral Tradition in African American Literature (Massachusetts: Cambridge, 1991).

complementary segments of the whole. This process has involved major deconstructions and reconstructions, overhauling pre-existing definitions and connotations to free certain words from dragging their ancient burden of guilt and humiliation any further. Naylor's quest, as it was from her first novel (albeit a quest carried out in a remarkably different vein this time) is to present as truthful and complete as possible an understanding of the black woman whether virgin or whore, in all walks of life, under all conditions.

I am the first and last.

I am the honoured one and the scorned one.

I am the whore, and the holy one.³⁴

³⁴ Majorie Malvern, Venus in Sackcloth (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1975) 55.

Chapter Four: *The Men of Brewster Place*

Having completed her quartet, Naylor's fifth novel returns to share the geographical location of her first. *The Men of Brewster Place* begins with a look down the memory lane of Brewster Place, recalling the "coloured daughters". This narration of the memory of women is interrupted by the voice of Ben, who picks up the narrative thread and carries it thereon into the masculine realm.

One critic is of the opinion that it was unnecessary for Naylor to use the location of Brewster Place in order to tell the story of these men.¹ He contends that this was a marketing ploy on Naylor's part. Naylor herself responded, "There will be no *The Children of Brewster Place* or *The Pets of Brewster Place*. I have told the whole story."² Naylor appears insistent that she returned to Brewster Place for personal reasons of satisfying her own sense of integrity as an author, rather than for any commercial reasons.

Having told the women's side of the story, Naylor establishes equilibrium by awarding multi-vocality to the men of Brewster Place to tell of their secret motivations, their social conditions, their freedoms and constraints. Retelling has become a tradition of as well as a technique employed by African

¹ Eugene Kane, "Naylor Didn't Have to Go Back." 26 Apr. 1998. Online posting. Online Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Features. Internet. 14 Oct. 1998.

² barnesandnoble.com "Chat Text." 12 May 1998. Online posting. Gloria Naylor Homepage on AALBC Website. Internet. 14 Oct. 1998.

American authors to break the old stereotypes, to re-educate readers, and to give voice to their side of the story which had historically been long-suppressed and unheard. Naylor had begun retelling in *Bailey's Cafe*, and continues to do so in her latest novel, but striking out in quite a different direction. *The Men of Brewster Place*, which in structure is designed to closely mirror the short-story-sequence of *The Women of Brewster Place*, contains Naylor's retelling of her own stories, and now from the men's perspective. Naylor places herself in the novel situation of being a black, feminist woman writer, writing on behalf of black men³.

To this end, Ben is resurrected with poetic licence, a gentle character already known and loved, and one moreover who had met a tragic end when caught up in the vicious circle of violence and destruction. Ben establishes his credibility as a reliable narrator with his objective and unjudgemental tone, and by explaining that he has been there watching Brewster Place and its inhabitants, and taking care of them, for many years. As a narrator, Ben is not effaced, but plays a similar role to that of Bailey -- the role of the conductor orchestrating the scenes that each voice may be heard in turn, voices conducted to harmonise and set off one another's tales without drowning any tale out.

Ben, as narrator, contends that black men are not the cause of the problems faced by black women, rather, the problems are common to their race.

³ African American men will also be referred to as "black men" in this chapter.

Ben's primary contention is that however poor a fare the African American men of these working classes may offer their women, it is the best they can manage, under the circumstances. Ben lyrically declares that life can be a tragedy for everyone, "hardworking, all of 'em. If they was working at a job or just working at despair" (MB 8). In this novel, Naylor writes of men of all ages whom we either hear of or from, men in all stages of life, of all temperaments -- from the elderly, long-suffering Ben, to the young, misguided C.C.Baker, from the homosexual Eugene to the promiscuous womaniser, Moreland, from the public-spirited Abshu to the gifted and retarded Jerome. As is typical of Naylor's novels, each chapter deals with a different aspect of a whole, rather in the manner of a multi-faceted gem being turned slowly in the light to be examined from a variety of angles.

In a conversation one afternoon with Toni Morrison, Naylor heard Morrison's view that "Men can hide easier because they can always be men. They can be abstract, in a crunch, and they can know what maleness is. They have a posture for that. They have job for that. They have an idea of how to be male and they talk about it a lot."⁴ Moving from the viewpoint of "they" to "us", Naylor delves far beneath the surface image projected by men to the world, uncovering the faces behind the "strong-black-man mask" and the "fuck-you-all-who-gives-a-shit mask" (MB 91). Naylor reveals a deep understanding of the private and jealously guarded insecurities and fears and inner conflicts

⁴ Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, "A Conversation," *The Southern Review* 21.3 (1985): 571.

men struggle with in fulfilling and living up to their roles as *men*. Through Ben, her narrator, Naylor gives her view that men partly define themselves in relation or in reaction to women. "And with each of 'em - no matter who he was - there was always a Her in his story" (MB 8).

The narrative thread of the novel follows Ben's consciousness until it fades out after the last chapter. In the epilogue, "*Dawn*", the consciousness is picked up by Abshu in the new day. Representing the new generation of the men of Brewster Place, Abshu carries it beyond the death of Ben, beyond the destruction of Brewster Place, and beyond the close of the novel.

The Silence of Black Men

Ben as a character is instrumental in demonstrating that one of the prices most commonly paid by men for their postures as men is the price of silence. Just as the language of women had incorporated silences as part of their repertoire, so too do men struggle with the identical problem. The breakdowns in communication and understanding may often be due to missed or misinterpreted silences. The question that naturally arises then is why are the men silent on certain issues?

Ben had described his grandfather as a bitter man and a silent sufferer. "It was a story that he carried inside"(MB 13). The story of Grandpa Jones is

told in italics to indicate the departure from Ben's narration to that of the omniscient narrator who knows of things beyond Ben's ken. Ben himself carried a silence within because to articulate the memory would be to experience in full the horror of the memory; silence became his refuge and his defence, a method of holding the horror ever at bay.

In Ben's tale, silence is not always easy to come by -- the need to speak and tell one's stories and memories being a very human need -- and thus, Ben becomes a drunkard. Ben drinks because drink aids him to maintain his silence and therefore his sanity, "And then if I drink enough everyday, I can bear the touch of Elvira's body in bed beside me at night and not have my sleep stolen" (MB 27). We also know from *The Women of Brewster Place* that Ben drank partly to keep from having to hear his daughter's crystal-bell-like tones and thereby be confronted by the memory of her, "The bells had almost begun to deafen him...he knew what was coming next, and he didn't dare waste time by pouring the wine into as cup" (WB 149). Drink assists Ben in stifling a part of the self which he cannot live with, and is a method to reach the silence so desperately preserved in order that life may not fall completely apart.

Silence had been traditionally taught to the young African Americans from childhood because that had been a survival technique, especially for those living in the South. When Grandpa Jones had tried to protest his conviction that wrong was being done, "his mother slapped him. Boy, shut your mouth, you

hear? Shut your mouth. Be a man” (MB 15). It therefore becomes explicit to the child whose consciousness is being shaped by such exhortations that part of being a man involved being silent about the things which torment one most. Richard Wright in his autobiographical *Black Boy* tells how he, as a young African American boy growing up in the South, was often chastised for volunteering his opinions, and the chastisements had usually taken the form of slaps, blows and beatings. The deterrents against speaking out of place are strong ones as silence is seen as a method of protection.

In many other works by African American women writers, there had been indications of women being silenced, and more, silently passing on sorrows and sufferings like a terrible legacy to their children. Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* had been taught and indoctrinated with a hate and mistrust of men that had been handed down through generations of women in her family, while Alice Walker’s *Meridian* had imbibed and inherited her mother’s dislike of her own children. This is the burden of being “stained with another’s past as well as with our own.”⁵ Similarly, African American men leave their legacy of pain, in this case, the pain of unaffordable silences to their successive generations, “It is my turn to be the silent old man as I inherit more than my share of the pain riding on the question, What does it mean to be a man?” (MB 28). In Ben’s words, there is a sense of continuity and a recurring burden of a too-high price repeatedly paid by man after man after man.

⁵ Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (London: Camden, 1975) 45.

Ben also identified some of the other difficulties faced by proletarian African American men in trying to establish their status as men. "My next job in the city was shoeshine boy. We all called ourselves boys even though in my late twenties I was the youngest one there" (MB 19). It is clearly not age which set the men apart from boys in this society, but the respect accorded a male which determines his status. In *Union Street*, the women in the cake factory are never dignified by the term "ladies", or even "women", ".....and they were girls. Would never be anything else though some of them were forty, fifty, even sixty years old." (US 93). And in Jesse Bell's story in *Bailey's Cafe*, Naylor had already illustrated that the only time it was acceptable to call the longshore men, who had such a strong sense of self-worth, boys, was when they were too drunk to protest.

Ben begins his tale by admitting that "Near to sixty-eight years old when I look back over my life, and one of the things that bothers me most is that I ain't never been in a situation where anybody ever called me sir" (MB 11). Respect is apparently what all the men of Brewster Place crave, respect in all forms -- self respect, respect from their women, from their peers. So vital is this respect that these men would resort to desperate measures to ensure they are not deprived of it, not stripped of their manhood.

For Ben, "I pray that I've finally found the answer to what it means to be a man" (MB 28), which, for him is alcohol, because drink enables him to distance his memories from his mind and thereby save the remnants of his self-respect. Basil too sought self-respect and worked madly at two full-time jobs and a part time one to make amends to his mother, "I was starting to feel like the man I always wanted to be" (MB 43). Eugene could not cope with the thought of his wife losing the last shreds of her respect for him as a man, which he feared would happen if she knew of his homosexual tendencies. He preferred to hurt her and himself, and be the worst type of man, of the most despicable variety, than to cease to be a "real" man in her eyes. C.C.Baker was so desperate to become a man and not just remain a punk, with all its juvenile connotations, that he murdered his half-brother. It would seem that all these men are trying to live up to a mental image which exists very clearly in their minds, the image of the role model of a man.

Even Greasy who had lost his job, his wife, and his sanity, had but one thought left that he held onto and protested repeatedly, "I'm a man." The two phrases that Greasy ever says, "I'm a man" and "I'm trying", the phrases of a man already driven past the point of insanity, contains a most basic and succinct summary of how all the men of Brewster Place live - with the insistence against all odds that they are men, and the lifelong struggle to live up to the burden and glory of that.

The Soul Music of Black Men

For Naylor, the blues have always been a voice and alternative language for the African Americans, the preservation and the expression of all the frustrated longings and thwarted dreams of the race. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Etta Mae, a woman who moved in a continual search for happiness, lugs her Billie Holliday records with her everywhere she goes. In *Linden Hills*, Roberta (Laurel's wise grandmother) identifies the fact that in her rejection of the blues, Laurel had tried to set herself apart from other African Americans and her community. Failing to understand herself, Laurel Dumont had spurned the likes of Billie Holliday and confined herself to the classical music of European civilisations which signals her refusal to associate herself with the problems of her race. As such, Laurel never finds the consolation or the answers she seeks, even after hours of listening to the music of a Gustav Mahler. In *Bailey's Cafe*, Naylor insists on hearing all the lamentations of her characters in the form of music, hearing them as jazz and blues, listening in this special way in order to take things a key down, in order to hear what lies tremblingly afraid and unsaid beneath the bravado of what is declared, oft repeated, even fiercely protested. Now, in her fifth and latest novel, Naylor once again underscores her point that the blues is a form which represents and records the trials and tribulations, the hopes and despairs of African Americans, especially those who live in Brewster Places.

The next chapter continues in Ben's narrative voice. It is the story of Jerome which Jerome himself would be unable to articulate or recount. Ben, watching over Brewster Place, acts as a one-man Greek chorus to the reader, observing all that happens, speaking the opinion of the man-about-the-street, a spectator of life, and a filter of consciousness of the happenings at Brewster Place.

Brother Jerome acts as another type of filter in the novel, a filter of matters which go deep beneath the surface. This second chapter is an extraordinarily lyrical tale of a retarded child. In an otherwise deliberately prosaic novel designed to convincingly convey the reality of life for the men folk of Brewster Place, Jerome's story contains the element of mysticism Naylor has included in all her previous novels, to varying degrees. Jerome has not been given a character or even a voice. He is more a vessel than a human being, an instrument which absorbs and replays all the vibes from the men around him. The very buildings of Brewster act as conductors of emotions, "The Amen brothers coming form every brick, every piece of concrete and iron railing on Brewster Place" (MB 37). All of these emotions and vibrations flow into Jerome and miraculously, under the catalyst of light, flow out again as the blues.

Part of the air of unreality is derived from the way Naylor carefully omits any hint of Jerome's own emotions. His needs do not apparently go

beyond that of the purely physical, “if he got hungry.....if he had to go to the bathroom....” (MB 36). There is not the slightest hint of ordinary human traits of desires or intentions on Jerome’s part. Naylor clearly does not intend to give any plausible explanation of how a spastic child who has no experience of life and seemingly no self awareness has somehow managed to translate the deepest heartaches of men into “the sound of the black man’s blues” (MB 37).

The Sins and Sons of Black Men

In a large number of novels written by African American women writers which contain female protagonists, there has been a notable lack of reliable men and model husbands. In a remarkable portrayal of urban life for African American women as working and single mothers, Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), portrayed men as the exploiters and oppressors. Lutie’s husband, Super Jones, Mr Junto, and Boots Smith were one and all negative forces in Lutie’s life.

Lutie Johnson may regard men as her enemy, but although many a milder protagonist such as Gwendolyn Brooks’ Maud Martha would not go to such lengths, even Maud has good reason to find the men in her life unsatisfactory. Her father and brother had shown favouritism towards her prettier sister simply for being prettier, and any male admirers there might have been were also Helen’s. Even the man who eventually married Maud did so

more out of self love than love for Maud. Paul, of *Maud Martha* (1953), was a somewhat indifferent husband, a husband who could not, or at any rate did not provide much emotional fulfilment to his wife. Paule Marshall's Deighton Boyce of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), appears to be yet another feeble husband who had been incapable of sharing in and supporting his ambitious wife's aspirations. None of these however, were presented in such a damning light as Gayl Jones's male characters in her novels *Eva's Man* (1976) and *Corregidora* (1988). These novels insistently cast the male characters in the role of single-minded sexual exploiters of women who left the women a legacy of trusting no man.

Many black women writers had noted the difference in the level of emotional participation between men and women. Audre Lorde explained the problems derived from this difference by identifying the fault to lie with the men, "We all have the ability to feel deeply and to move upon our feelings and see where they lead us. Men in general have suppressed that capacity, so they keep women around to do that for them. Until men begin to develop that capacity within themselves, they will always be at a loss and will always need to victimise women."⁶

⁶ Audre Lorde, *Black Women Writers At Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum, 1983) 151-152.

The theme of victimised women, especially the sexually exploited, had begun from the slave narratives, but in those narratives, the offenders were largely white men. This theme continued to be explored from the early 1970s with the novels of Alice Walker (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*) and Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*), the crucial difference being that now the offenders were black men. These novels wrote of the sexual exploitation that African American women, although legally no longer slaves, nevertheless still continue to suffer. It was seen that the likes of Grange, Brown, and Cholly Breedlove, out of their desperations and drugging lives, inflicted atrocities of a violent and sexual nature on their women - those closest to them and most easily within reach. It was Alice Walker's 1982 novel, however, that presented the most scathing portrayal of Southern African American men; most scathing because it was the most thorough and incriminating despoiling of a woman's life by her husband. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's husband stripped her of everything - from a sense of self worth to the sister she loved. Mr. __ replaced Celie's hopes and dreams with fears and daily abuse, inflicting humiliations and withholding affection, attempting to crush her spirit entirely.

There were outraged protestations against *The Color Purple* for its negative portrayal of black men by a black woman writer. There was a general notion that black men faced quite enough oppressions and obstacles without being backstabbed by their own women. There was a fear that the idealised picture of the race would be tarnished by the stereotyping of black men as

aggressors. Oddly enough, in recent years, the stereotype of black men as perpetrators of violence has been replaced by another stereotyped belief that black men are naturally aggressive because they *need* to be, either in order to prove their manhood in a white America, or because they have no other outlet for the frustration of failing to prove their masculinity. It has been argued that there exists a black-male-as-victim⁷ syndrome which makes every crime committed by a black male a racial issue in America.

In Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Basil Michael had been just another in a long long list of African American male characters who had let their women down badly. Basil had not been guilty of malicious intent, but he was dependent, selfish and irresponsible. All this was turned around in *The Men of Brewster Place*, where Basil is a totally reformed character. More than that, for the first time, we hear the resolution of African American male character who openly states that it is his purpose and mission in his life thereafter to "be a solid family man"(MB 50). This character is Naylor's anti-thesis to all the cruel husbands and bad fathers of the other African American works of fiction. Men, as conceived of by Naylor, are not solely self centred. There are no straw men in *The Men of Brewster Place*.

The theme of African American men letting their women down is common enough to contemporary African American works of fiction,

⁷ Devon W. Carbado, "Black Male Racial Victimhood," 21.2 *Callaloo* (1998) : 337-361.

especially those by the women writers, but few write as forgivingly of the men as Naylor does. Lutie Johnson kills Boots Smith in an attempt to eradicate all men who had created a system wherein she and her son were victimised, while Mem Copeland fought Brown with everything she had and at one point threatened to kill him with a gun. It is true that Celie reconciles with her husband, but not before she throws his sins in his face and he learns to treat her with more respect.

The author who most bluntly addressed the issue of forgiveness was Ntozake Shange. In 1978, *for colored girls* was first performed on stage which turned the tables and insisted that some black men are insupportable and recalcitrant offenders who do not deserve to be forgiven. Shange adopts a positively militant attitude towards men who fail their women and offer in exchange lip-service apologies. Shange goes so far as to humorously but ruthlessly categorise the most commonly used excuses, ranging from those used by men who expect allowances to be made for their misdeeds, “O baby, ya know I waz high, I’m sorry”, to abusive approaches, “Shut up bitch, I told you I was sorry”, from men who shirk emotional responsibility, “I do ya like I do ya cause I thot ya could take it, now I’m sorry”, to men who deliver ultimatums in the same breath as apologies, “I ain’t ever gonna love ya like ya want me to

love ya, I'm sorry."⁸ Shange's women make it very clear that they are no longer prepared to accept verbal excuses when they have been hurt or disappointed,

You can carry all the guilt and grime ya wanna
just don't give it to me
I can't use another sorry.⁹

The tone of Naylor's novel towards wayward men as far as the women are concerned is a very conciliatory tone, especially when compared with that of her contemporaries. After having been hurt repeatedly by the men in her life, Mattie Michael might well have held a similar sentiment of "I can't use another sorry", especially because she had had her life wrecked by her men once more than she could find the strength to rebuild. It is a tragedy that Mattie Michael dies without knowing of Basil's efforts to make amends to her, but in Naylor's novel, this woman dies having forgiven her son without needing to know of his repentance. Unlike many other feminist writers who portray men as natural enemies of women, Naylor holds, "The truth is that throughout our history, black women could depend upon their men even when they were unemployed or underemployed."¹⁰ In her next chapter, Eugene, Naylor continues to drive home her point that even when men do not seem to succeed in living up to the expectations of their women, they are nevertheless men who are doing their best under very trying circumstances.

⁸ Ntozake Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow hasn't been enuf (1978. London: Methuen, 1992) 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰ Gloria Naylor, "The Myth of the Matriach," *Life* 11 (1988): 65.

The Sexuality of Black Men

Ben, who sits on his “throne” each dawn watching the residents of Brewster Place come and go, is aware when trouble comes to the Turner family. What Ben does not guess is the hidden reason which causes all the trouble. Through the chapter, the word “*faggot*” appears at intervals in italics, creeping in unexpectedly like a guilty secret, a haunting whisper which follows Eugene constantly.

Chino is, of course, the epitome of the “faggot” and all that Eugene most dreads himself transforming into, the spectre that “walked out of my [Eugene’s] worst nightmares” (MB 79). The description first rendered of Chino does indeed resemble a phantasmagoria with the confusion of gender identification, the paint and perfume and silver bodysuit, but in a certain twisted way, Chino is nevertheless a pitiable and singularly loveable character. This is by no means the first time that Naylor writes with marked sensitivity towards her homosexual characters. Like Chino, David of *Linden Hills*, had also been a character with penetrating powers of understanding, especially of the internal conflict that torment the homosexual men who desire acceptance in a heterosexual setting.

In an interview in 1992, 12 years after *The Women of Brewster Place* was first published, Naylor had said, “Most of my male characters are three-

dimensional. Eugene, Ciel's husband, is immature and can't take pressure, but I think he is the only one."¹¹ In choosing to retell this story in her latest novel, Naylor has her work cut out for her in redeeming Eugene's character. This fourth chapter is told by Eugene himself as narrator after Ben had introduced the story and put in a good word for Eugene. It is very necessary for Eugene to tell his own story if the reader is to share in the secret and come to understand and sympathise with Eugene's thoughts and intentions.

In this chapter, there is no mention of the part Mattie Michael played in the life of the Turners. Without doubt Mattie was more a part of Ciel's life than of Eugene's, as the women shared a strong bond of sisterhood, but it would also have reflected badly upon Eugene if he had to recount of his brusque treatment of Mattie. Moreover, her presence in Ciel's chapter had always been a silent reproach to and accusation of Eugene's shortcomings and inadequacies as a family man.

Although the plot of "Eugene" runs otherwise very similar to that we already know from "Luciela Louise Turner" (minus the presence of Mattie Michael), the retelling contains the subtle differences of perspective which lead the reader to the other half of the tale. Extenuating circumstances are made known - Eugene's discovery and handling of his homosexual tendencies, Eugene's genuine love for his wife and daughter, Eugene's guilt, self-hatred,

¹¹ Angels Carabi, "Interview with Naylor" *Belles Lettres* 7 (1992): 41.

and pain. Ciel's suffering is not impressed upon the reader, and the whole narration conspires to evoke sympathy for Eugene as being caught between a rock and a hard place.

When Eugene loses his job and returns home to quarrel with Ciel and blame her for being pregnant again, Ciel refuses to rise to the bait and asks, "All right, Eugene, what do you want me to do?" (MB 88). In Ciel's version, the narration continues with, "He wasn't going to let her off so easily" (WB 94). In Eugene's version however, it reads, "We both knew what I wanted you to do.....throw my ass out the door.....a door with new locks" (MB 88). In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Eugene tried to make Ciel take the brunt of his rage, while in *The Men of Brewster Place*, he retells the story to indicate that he wanted to rouse her to the point where she would take her anger out on him.

The rest of the dialogue between husband and wife follows the first story almost word for word, but there are other differences. In Eugene's version, he shouted, "I aint never gonna have nothing.....Nothing, do you hear me, nothing!" (MB 88). In Ciel's version, it is written, "I ain't never gonna have nothin'.....Nothin' do you hear me, nothin'!" (WB 95) The absence of the "g" at the end of certain words and the substitution of "ya" for "you" in other sentences lend a more menacing air to the character of Eugene which does not appear in the retelling of Eugene's tale.

Eugene is unable to articulate the depth of his horror at the death of his daughter, but the language he employs when speaking of it, a language containing repetitive denials, indicates he cannot bring his mind to accept the reality of the happening, “She wasn’t crawling under the kitchen table.....she wasn’t trying to poke her fingers into the slits of the electric socket.....she wasn’t banging against the electric socket...” (MB 90). Eugene forestalls any condemnation of his behaviour by condemning himself most mercilessly, branding himself Serena’s murderer. In order to help her readers comprehend the pain Eugene endures, Naylor presents a comparative pain – the whipping Eugene asks of Chino, “searching for his type of pain to replace mine”(MB 94). The shocking note on which this chapter ends convincingly persuades a reader that Eugene is a tortured man, not exactly more sinned against than sinning, but a man who suffers more than he has inflicted sufferings on others, a man who has more than paid the price of penance.

“Black communities may be perceived as more homophobic than other communities because there is a tendency for individuals in black communities to verbally express in an outspoken way anti-gay sentiments.”¹² Eugene Turner tore himself apart, destroying himself and those he loved when he could not reconcile homosexuality with being a man. His personal tragedy is that he had never been able to recognise self-definition, or even self-redefinition, as characteristics of true manhood.

¹² bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. (Boston: South End, 1989) 122.

A character who could have given Eugene Turner sound advice had they ever met is Miss Maple, from Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Miss Maple is a cross-dresser (whose cross-dressing is wholly unrelated to his sexual inclinations). Bailey who speaks of Miss Maple, hence giving the reader a glimpse of how Miss Maple appears to the men around him, speaks in glowing terms of the degree of freedom Miss Maple enjoys by daring to defy convention, "...the man had flair -- and courage...he can wear any piece of cloth on his own terms..." (BC 213) Both Eugene and Miss Maple break social conventions (the former by his acknowledgement of his homosexuality and the latter by cross-dressing), but only one of them is suffocated by shame. Miss Maple is a man of such confidence and emotional security that he dares to take any name, any title, any job and certainly any attire, without harbouring fears it may compromise or detract from his identity and masculinity.

Naylor has consistently displayed a singular gentleness in her handling of homosexual characters. This tendency of hers is very possibly due to her natural inclination to grant a voice to those sidelined by society and deemed as being somehow lesser only because they are different. "Like the heterosexual woman, the homosexual man was the victim of a double consciousness, a double standard."¹³ Eugene is certainly a victim, but Miss Maple, one of

¹³ Gloria Naylor, "Love and Sex in the Afro-American Novel," *The Yale Review* 78 (1988) : 24.

Naylor's most remarkable and admirable characters, had found the understanding and courage to reconcile the duality and even the multiplicities within himself, having "learned [his] own language, set [his] own standards, began to identify [himself] as a man" (BC 182).

The Secrets of Black Men

It is almost strange that Rev. Moreland T. Woods has been included as a man of Brewster Place. This preacher appears to belong more to the upper classes than the working classes. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the Moreland T. Woods who seduced Etta Mae was a guest preacher at Canaan Baptist Church, a church which drew its congregation from "the poor who lived in a thirty-block area around Brewster Place" (WB 63). Sinai Baptist Church however, was for the "more prosperous blacks." In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor had rearranged things a little. Sinai Baptist Church was now for a congregation "primarily black and working-class, pulled from a fifty-block radius that included Brewster Place" (MB 104).

It is only in *The Men of Brewster Place* that we get a proper look at Rev. Woods whom we only had a glimpse of in Naylor's first novel, and then, only as a dynamic preacher and a womaniser. However, this would not be an entirely new character to Naylor's readers as Naylor had already previously created another character of a preacher (also of Sinai Baptist Church) who was

ambitious and corrupt. The character of Moreland Woods seems drawn very much from or at least parallel to the character of Rev. Michael Hollis of *Linden Hills*. Both clergymen are mercenary, egoistical, avaricious, heavy drinkers and womanisers guilty of adultery. Both are politically ambitious men who did not hesitate to manipulate the church for their own ends in a time when the church was the principle all-black institution and career for educated black men.

It is almost odd that Sinai Baptist repeatedly employs preachers who, while admittedly being charismatic preachers, are exploitative and live richly off the tithing income from the congregation. Naylor has yet to create a preacher in her novel who is genuinely spiritual and sincere. In this, she appears to adhere to a folklore of African American tradition which “consistently depicts preachers as lovers of women, money, cars, chicken, liquor”¹⁴. This tradition apparently stems from the desire to ridicule a figure of authority which a preacher undoubtedly holds in a black community as well as in his congregation.

There is clearly no “Her” in Rev. Moreland’s story, contrary to Ben’s beliefs. Moreland considers the affairs he had with women as the fringe benefits of his job. Sister Louise who was unmarried, pregnant, and in need of help, was seen only as a stepping stone to obtaining his new church. There may not have been one single woman affecting Moreland Woods’ life to any great

¹⁴ Patrick E. Johnson, “Feeding the Spirit in the Dark,” *Callaloo* 21.2 (1998) : 401.

extent, but his life is nevertheless touched by the lives of the men around him. It is very far from being a brotherhood-equivalent of the sisterhood we had already seen existing so strongly and supportively in Brewster Place. Although popular with the women, Moreland seems hated by the men around him, from Deacon Bennet, his arch rival in Sinai Baptist Church, to Clifford Montgomery Jackson (Abshu), who daily plots to kill him.

Not only was Moreland Woods corrupt, he also betrayed the very people who elected him to Council. Having moved into the upper classes, Moreland Woods voted to destroy Brewster Place and with that, the lives and futures of those who had believed in his promises and had loyally supported him to reach the heights of his political ambitions. Abshu, the only true son of Brewster Place, eventually strips Moreland of his position as councilman, but not even Abshu could turn the tide of demolition which had turned against Brewster Place.

The Struggles of Black Men

It is wry humour from Naylor to place the stories of C.C.Baker and Rev. Woods back to back. One is a preacher and councilman, the other is a street gangster and drug dealer, but both are individuals who menace the society of Brewster Place. Although only one may be technically and legally a criminal, both destroy the lives of others in order to become the type of men they respect.

Richard Wright had once written in defence of the law breaker, “through the years, our loyalty to these gangster-politicians remain staunch because they are almost the only ones who held out their hands to help us, whatever their motives...the most paradoxical gift ever tendered to us black folk in the city is aid from the underworld, from the gangster, from the political thief.”¹⁵

Naylor indicates that she is aware of such “gifts” when she describes Royal, the gangster from the underworld of the area around Brewster Place, with marked sarcasm, “Hometown boy makes good. Buying turkeys for Thanksgiving. Candy for Christmas. A real upright citizen. Makes us all proud to be black” (MB 125). Naylor is not as approving as Wright of these gangster-politicians, because she places emphasis on the fact that while they may give back in material ways to their society (and of that, clearly only a tiniest fraction of their ill-gotten gains), the crimes they commit against the society far outweigh the benefits they offer in return. As is illustrated in C.C.’s story, the gangs trap their young people with bribes and threats, ruthlessly killing and forcing others to kill, and in general, terrorising the public with violence. Naylor indicates that while the system may have conspired to cause desperation to ferment in one such as C.C.Baker, it is the lure of the underworld with all its conditions and its code of laws that motivates C.C.Baker to his crime of fratricide.

¹⁵ Richard Wright, *The Struggles of Black Men - Twelve Million Black Voices* (London: Drummond, 1947) 121-122.

C.C.Baker sees the world very like a Bigger Thomas does.¹⁶ Trapped within the confines of a section of the city, this category of young men who feel that their very existence is threatened, prefer negative recognition to no recognition at all, "There is no conscience in the streets" (MB 125). Craving the respect which recognition implies, they represent a group of dangerous young men who would rape and kill to obtain their ends. Bigger Thomas had had a strange reaction to his crimes. He had felt elated, free and even proud of them. He felt his friends and family ".....*ought* to be glad!.....they ought not to stand here and pity him.....but look at him and go home, contented, feeling their shame was washed away."¹⁷ C.C.Baker had a similarly skewed perspective, "He is dealing and proud of it. And wants his old man to be proud of it too" (MB 125). The argument of extenuation in both cases is that these boys are products of their environments, victims of circumstances.

In the story of C.C.Baker, Naylor portrays him as a case beyond redemption. He is beyond redemption because he does not want another way of life. He has been claimed by the streets to the extent that he would be a danger to anyone attempting to free him of the streets. His story is told on two distinct levels of consciousness - one in the police interrogation, and the second which is the italicised 'true-story', narrated by the omniscient narrator with an

¹⁶ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940. London: Picador, 1995).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 334.

occasional delving into C.C.'s own point of view. Just the same, Naylor does not tell his tale with any marked sympathy. The tone of the narration makes it clear that it is a tragedy when impressionable and desperate young men of the African American community totally misunderstand what it means to have courage and be a man, "*He aims for the face ... C.C. runs and runs ... he thanks God for giving him the courage to do it. The courage to be a man*" (MB 129). In one of her articles, Naylor had identified and described this particular problem of the urban, proletarian, African Americans of this age, ".....in the impoverished inner cities today we are seeing the rise of the unemployable. These young men are not equipped to take responsibility for themselves, much less the children they are creating."¹⁸

The Social Black Man

Abshu's story immediately upon the heels of C.C.'s presents another set of contradictions. Where C.C. defied the system which he felt alienated and confined him and chose to go outside the boundaries of law and establishment, Abshu sought to work with and within the system. He played by the rules to improve his life and the lives of those in his community, getting a degree, doing social work, and "followed the law to the letter" (MB 144). In showing that Abshu too had endured adversities in his childhood but had chosen to lead a law-abiding and generous life, Naylor demonstrates that C.C. had taken a

¹⁸ Gloria Naylor, "The Myth of the Matriach," *Life* 11 (1988): 65.

conscious and selfish decision which he need not have taken. Abshu is Naylor's rebuttal to any arguments that taking to crime may sometimes be the only way, a rebuttal to any proposal that C.C. is merely a negative externality of a corrupt system or otherwise fated to live by breaking the law.

"One thing he [Abshu] did thank the Masons for was keeping him out of gangs"(MB 140). Like another male protagonist of Naylor's Abshu appears to have benefited from being placed in foster care. George Andrews of *Mama Day* seemed to have owed the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys much more than just his surname. He grew up to be a respectable and responsible man, and one of Naylor's greatest and most giving of lovers, and contrary to C.C.Baker, an asset to the society instead of a burden to it, or worse, a menace.

Unlike George Andrews who had Cocoa in his life, Abshu does not mention any 'Her' in his story. We know of his lover Kiswana Browne from Kiswana's chapter in *The Women of Brewster Place*, but this does not appear in Abshu's own story. The top priority of his life is to improve conditions for the poverty stricken of his race, especially for the children.

It is perhaps through his experiences with the Masons that Abshu consciously shaped his character to be all that he found the Masons lacking. The very addressing of the Masons as "Mother Mason and Father Mason" indicates that they are only playing roles, fulfilling their duties, and little else.

The mention of the “one and a half sandwiches”, and the “half an apple”, are all suggestive of things only done by halves, conveying the atmosphere of living without ever experiencing completion or satisfaction, a condition that Abshu became determined to destroy in as many lives as he could reach out and touch. “Existing that way all the time, on the edge of hunger, on the edge of kindness, gave Abshu an appreciation for a life fully lived” (MB 140).

The language used by the Masons, “Dirty feet - stink, stink”, or “Don’t be a piggy-piggy” (MB 139), indicates that in that house, there is no recognition of the boys at all, either by way of recognition of their ages or their individual needs and characteristics. The narrowness of the Masons’ interpretation of life instilled a craving in Abshu to broaden the Brewster Place youth, using certain basic rules and discipline, a lot of time and patience, and above all, tapping into the power of language to transform.

Abshu understood that language could be a tremendous weapon in his struggle. The incongruous episode of Sammy and his friends shouting abuse at the older bullies was orchestrated by Abshu and was the result of his conviction that “there is something in Shakespeare for everyone” (MB 135). By juxtapositioning the language of Shakespeare to the language of the street, “You ain’t getting our turn, you base wretch, you unspeaking sot - you pigeon liver” (MB 142), Naylor produces a very strange effect, at once humorous and yet totally incongruous. In using Shakespeare as the symbol and epitome of the

established world of literary achievement and high (white) culture, and in passing on to her readers that sense of displacement even as they laugh, Naylor drives home her point that for the boys of Brewster Place, that is exactly how far their world is mentally removed from a world of order, education, intellectual activity and all the security which accompanies that.

The Sorrows of Black Men

There are certain terrains socially defined as male-territories. Just as the working class women had their podiums in the kitchen, so too did working class men find their podiums in the barbershop. The talk here however is very far from being confidential or personal. The bond among the men of Brewster Place do not appear to be as nurturing as that among the women. Abshu, the only other public-spirited man of Brewster Place besides Ben, had fought for Brewster Place and the welfare of its children, but he did so on a political and public footing, in contrast to the one-to-one nurturing methods the women of Brewster Place extended to each other.

Greasy who was in desperate need of care was no one's responsibility because the men in that barbershop had a very under-developed sense of their place within a community. These men talk less to share than be heard. Like the youths they were when they "needed the others continually near to verify their existence" (WB 161), the talking and the airing of opinions and the comfort of

being heard now that they are grown men, becomes for them the verification of their existence.

In her five novels, Naylor has created a hugely diverse host of fictional male characters. These memorable characters range from Maxwell Smyth (LH) who is winning his race against the natural, to Miss Maple (BC) who understands the difference between social convention and nature, from the stern, Puritan grandfather of Eve (BC), to the corrupt, lascivious Reverend Michael Hollis (LH). The young poet of Linden Hills, Willie, is as ardent a student of life as Bailey, the seasoned maestro of the orchestra of life-stories in his cafe. We have met Luther Nedeed (LH) in the pit of his hell and equally have known the Christ-figure of George Andrews (MD), both of whom were dead before the end of their respective novels.

In *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor created or retold the stories of eight more men, but with the possible exception of Ben, none of these men possess charismatic personalities. Much more than the rest of Naylor's previous fictional characters, male or female, the men of Brewster Place are products of their environment. Each chapter of *The Men of Brewster Place* holds a social statement from Naylor, but the very fact that this novel is something of a sequel already seems to compromise the three-dimensionality of its characters. It can be contended that for the reader who has not first been acquainted with *The Women of Brewster Place*, *The Men of Brewster Place* is a novel which stands

on its own. Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that its author drew heavily upon *The Women of Brewster Place* for the structure and history of her latest novel, even lifting whole passages directly and repeating them in *The Men of Brewster Place*.

The Sacrament of Black men -- and Black Women

Naylor had said that "In the writings of African American women, the test of love is what the black woman stays through." It would seem that it is the same test of love for the black man who "hung in here on this street when the getting woulda been more than good" (MB.4). As she had done before, Naylor concludes her novel with the seed of hope, personified in Abshu. Brewster Place is irretrievably lost and its inhabitants are scattered and dispersed far and wide, but it had successfully bred its one manchild who would continue to represent the spirit of Brewster Place.

A few added thoughts...

Naylor grows from strength to strength with each successive novel, establishing herself as a writer who genuflects before no social taboos. Writing over 120 years after the first novel by an African American woman,¹ lesbianism (WB), cross-dressing (BC), homosexuality (LH), and other controversial and “closet” issues, one and all find their places in Naylor’s works.

“*Brewster Place* [*The Women of*] was her emotional book. *Linden Hills* her more cerebral. *Mama Day* explored the spiritual realms, and *Bailey’s Cafe* dealt with the sexual.”² While this in-a-nutshell description errs on the side of oversimplification, its underlying thrust is justified --- that Naylor concerns herself predominantly with the workings of human nature, and not only that of the African Americans (although primarily so). The literature of Naylor is a reflection of, a prescription for, a warning against, and also a celebration of human nature. There is right and wrong and tragedy and triumph in all her novels. Naylor had acknowledged, “I, too, am a moral writer...”³

In an age where the individual voice is given much attention, and the previously unheard have already been heard and have aired their long-suppressed, first wave of grievances, Gloria Naylor is a most timely author. In a

¹ Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* was published in 1859; *The Women of Brewster Place* was published in 1980.

² Naomi Epel, *Writers Dreaming* (New York, Carol Southern, 1993)168.

³ Charles H. Rowell, “An Interview with Gloria Naylor,” *Callaloo* 20.1 (1997) : 180.

climate when developed nations wallow in old guilts over past treatments of minorities and discriminatory practises, indulging in emotional excesses and hysteria, Naylor's work is even handed and just in its portrayals, unsentimental without leaning over into embittered cynicism. Self-aware, self-analytical, and self-articulate, Naylor handles serious issues and highly emotional matters with sensitivity, but also with equilibrium. As she had said, "Drama can be internal."⁴

In her recentest novel, *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor throws new light on the taboos which overshadow African American men, daring to probe deep into the question of what makes a man out of that which is merely male.⁵ The intentions which motivated this latest novel were excitingly fresh -- an African American woman telling the secret stories of African American men -- but this fifth novel lacks the resonance of Naylor's quartet. *The Men of Brewster Place* is interesting, whereas *The Women of Brewster Place* is riveting.

From the prologue to her very first novel, Naylor manages to raise a smile amidst the grimness even while describing Ben's stupor and drunkenness, even while hinting at his misery and heavy secret. "And if anyone ventured close enough the next day, Ben could be heard grumbling about an unfaithful

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ As *The Men of Brewster Place* was published in April 1998, it should be noted that at the time of writing, very few reviews of this novel were available.

wife and a lame daughter, or was it a lame wife and an unfaithful daughter?" (WB 4). (It would seem that all misfortunes are equally likely, and that either possibility is crushing enough to explain Ben's despair.) As it continues through this novel and the successive four others, Naylor's humour continues to keep the most malignant of despairs and the most bitter of situations from being plunged into a depression. "I think human nature is dark; I really do."⁶ With such a sentiment, it is little wonder that Naylor constantly seeks to lighten the darkness with a little laughter, a little humour.

There are many novels which capture the lightheartedness, the warm camaraderie, and the funkiness of African Americans and their distinct culture, but humour is not prevalent in African American literary tradition (although there has been no shortage of *irony*). Many authors (from Hurston to Naylor herself) have written of the playing of the "dozens"⁷ and the witticisms of signifying in everyday African American life and interaction, but this has been a literature predominantly characterised by the recording and portrayal of discriminations resulting in oppression, strife and suffering. Poets like Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown had employed a certain degree of humour in their writings, ranging from the wry to the sarcastic, but African American novels have seldom been amusing. The purpose of these novels - as their authors had intended - was not entertainment, but to serve as a voice of the people, or a

⁶ Marie Perry Donna, ed. "Gloria Naylor," Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993) 236.

⁷ A street game consisting of the impromptu trading of mock-insults.

vehicle for expression. Gloria Naylor is amongst the first of the African American women authors to write humorously. Not exactly comic relief, Naylor's use of humour lightens without trivialising, rendering her sympathy compassionate without being stifling.

The extensive use of humour, however, is not Naylor's sole development of her literary tradition. As has been discussed and illustrated, Naylor's work incorporates a large degree of intertextuality, drawing from and building upon the works of European, American and African American authors past and present. The opening paragraph of each chapter further serves as a reminder of the intertextuality within Naylor's own novels. Naylor's authorial voice is therefore a pioneering one, enriching as well as upholding the African American literary tradition by exploring previously forbidden or unreachable territories. Naylor brings in new colours, patterns and textures as she adds to the African American literary patchwork quilt. In the course of this thesis, we have seen that Naylor deals with issues of solidarity amongst women, women's language, silence and articulateness, de-mythifying, retelling, materialism, culture and identity, the relationship between black men and black women, sexuality, social taboos, and the evolving African American society.

No longer under the shadow of being the "inferior race", no longer needing to prove that "black is beautiful", no longer needing to justify or to represent, Naylor is of the generation of African American writers who have

the freedom of being “race-writers” by choice rather than necessity of circumstance. Racial matters are given due consideration in Naylor’s work, but they are not overwhelmingly foremost in her mind. Nevertheless, Naylor is keenly aware of her role as an author, and more, of the space and position she occupies in the African American literary patchwork quilt, or her place within the African American literary canon. Taking herself and her work very seriously, every stance Naylor takes is deliberate and considered, each image and symbol she draws upon or triggers is no coincidence.

Naylor’s work contains space as well as structure, flow as well as direction, the language of the mind as well as spirit. In her novels, Naylor reflects the all-important fact that she is keenly aware of her roots without being tied down by them.

“Lead on with light, little Mama.”⁸

⁸ MD 117.

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