

Re-Articulation of Double-Self in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to re-articulate the double-self as dialectical existence rather than as an opposing force in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*. Additionally, it depicts the fight for African American identity and advances the notion of feminist consciousness. Racism is being fought against. The male characters are observed to dominate, degrade, and harass women. The work introduces the concept of sad mulatto, emphasising the significance of racial roots. They emphasised the ideas of generational continuity, the transmission of cultural values, the evolution of the heroines' socio-political status, and the relationship between sexism and racism. The interaction between class, race, gender, and various lifestyle choices was examined. They passed on culture and contributed to preserving tradition in their neighbourhood.

Keywords: Identity, Social, Racial, Culture, Double-Self, Racism

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Gloria Naylor, most influential African-American literature, emerged as a new and innovative force opening areas of exploration and experimentation. Simple naturalistic narrative, the statement of proposition of African Blues, and the most sophisticated, multi-layered storytelling method are all examples of storytelling. Developing one's own "voice" in writing is a major issue for most African American authors, and this quest is evident in the conflict between oral and written techniques of narration that she experiences. As she speaks for her characters' physical, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, and sexual awakening and highlights the importance of each in the total growth of a human being into a whole, her fiction challenges the dichotomy of mind over body. She wants to re-evaluate and challenge what she sees as inaccurate representations of African-Americans of both sexes from various socioeconomic tiers of American society.

Naylor has held a pivotal position at the forefront of the steadily expanding black feminist literary movement since the release of *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), which won an American Award for the

best first novel. This movement has contributed to the public's acceptance of black female writers as legitimate authors of American literature. Like many of her contemporaries, she was unaware of the richness of the black literary traditions until she reached adulthood. Her major concern in her novels has been to give a different picture of the women in the society. She uses her writings as a means to dismantle the constructing walls of the traditional role of women. She uses the black women as a metaphor for all women and for that matter all people who are caught in the social trap and are known as stereotype. Each of the women appeals to the masses, and not to the elite.

Linden Hills, Naylor's second novel, was released in 1985. The imaginary setting of Brewster Place is continued. It offers a brutal analysis of the tumultuous fight for African American identity over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The focus of the novel is on a fictional black middle-class community called Linden Hills. Through this, Naylor has made an effort to illustrate the ways in which certain African Americans efface themselves in an effort to be both Americans and African Americans. However, Naylor portrays the majority of Linden Hills' modern residents as educated, intelligent individuals who are expected to be aware of their culture and black identity and who have experienced both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, but who are unable to effectively create and react to these healthy ways of seeing oneself. Despite the fact that such adherence to the mythical American dream is harmful to oneself, others, and Afro-American culture and identity, Naylor insists that the very crumbs of American life and the promise of material success will serve as the criteria that many African Americans will use it as the yardsticks by which they will evaluate themselves and others. Focusing on the food that the characters eat and the rituals and standards of conduct that surround it, Naylor conveys the battles for an authentic African American identity in her novel in the most stunning way. According to Naylor, eating is a good approach to grasp the issues with African American identity. The healthy African American identity of Linden Hills' middle-class portrayal is as vaporous for many characters as the lingering aroma of pricey Cavivar after ingestion.

The imaginary middle- and upper-class black enclave of Linden Hills, located in Wayne County, America, is where the characters of the novel, *Linden Hills*, live. It is in the name of a location that is a meticulously planned little universe. Since 1820, the first Luther Nedeed - the man who bought his freedom and travelled to the North in search of Linden Hills - has been passing down to Luther Nedeed the land for a house development. Ironically, those that are prosperous are more spiritually and culturally undernourished. The Linden Hills were developed by Luther Nedeed. Luther Nedeed is the name of both him and his male

offspring. Following the first Luther Nedeed, every succeeding generation has a son named Luther who resembles his father identically. In a similar manner, each generation marries a fair-skinned woman who quickly adopts Mrs. Nedeed's persona. They developed a strategy based on the first Nedeed's idea that white people will dominate Wayne Country and America in the future, funding their struggles for dominance since the earth itself was white. Their wives, however, were not free to mingle with other families. These spouses' seclusion is an accurate representation of life in *Linden Hills*.

Luther sets himself apart from his neighbourhood through both his morals and the moat he constructed around his home. Because they envision the future of America as "White," the Needs are successful. They want Linden Hills to be "a magnificent black wad of spit right in the white eye of America" (*Linden Hills*, 9). They lose sight of their own ideals because of their animosity, and the outcome is just as bad for them as it is for white Americans, who have lost their spirituality in the name of consumerism. Luther understood that "magician's highest art is not in transformation but in making things disappear," (*Linden Hills*, 12) yet others invested in Linden Hills because they believed it would change America.

As a means of getting a piece of the white money pie, Luther establishes the Tupelo Realty Corporation. His sole issue, according to Luther, "was selecting who among the blacks in Linden Hills should own the property and build homes" (*Linden Hills*, 10). The privileged lots of Linden Hills were only open to black people who were comfortable with the idea of denying their identities and cultures in order to pursue material success, like the Needs: "The Tupelo Realty Corporation was terribly selective about the types of families who received its mortgages" (*Linden Hills*, 15-16). The residents of Linden Hills had a thousand years and a day to sit still and forget what it means to be black, but only "certain" people were allowed to live there. Thus, it becomes evident throughout the novel that Luther is more interested in trying to acquire goods than he is in changing America. There is no God, only "the urge to acquire," because Linden Hills is about achievement as much as being black. For the sake of having material wealth, the people of Linden Hills are so willing to vanish and lose their identities.

In order to examine the insanity that lies beneath these upwardly mobile, affluent African Americans, Naylor exhibits two male teenagers. Letser Tilson, whose family still resides in Linden Hills at the top, and Willie Mason, a resident of Putney Wayne in the city's economically depressed black neighbourhood. The fact that both men are poets and have known each other since junior high is crucial to Naylor's thematic concerns since artists have historically pursued ideals that are anti-materialistic. Additionally, because they

are poets, these young men can provide Linden Hills a perspective that is wholly based on the human and that is able to identify and assess the lost souls of the community. Both poets are unemployed. These two men, especially the talented, sensitive, and perceptive Wille, are able to peek inside the lives of these successful people and observe the loss of Afro-American identity and humanity, which can easily be one of the costs of material success in America, while performing odd jobs for the residents of Linden Hills in the days leading up to Christmas. Through a parallel story that focuses on five generations of Nedeed women, Naylor is able to see inside the hollowness of these people's existence. Maxwell Smyth, a local, is General Motors' highest-ranking black executive.

The central theme of *Linden Hills* is the subjugation of black women by black men. Men are significant because they have the power to control life and death, according to Luther Nedeed's life philosophy. Nedeed never regarded any women as human beings because they are owned, fed, and forgotten. The novel features a number of women characters who develop independently of one another. There are two elderly women among the supporting cast, as well as several respectable middle-aged spouses and moms and several intelligent young women. One of the most important keepers of traditional beliefs is Grandma Tilson, although she is no longer alive. She provided the catfish heads Luther Nedeed used to make the female corpses appear alive, as if passing on some principle of feminine energy. She had fought Luther Nedeed as the lone combatant against his upwardly mobile black community. Her warning against self-betrayal and identity loss, which is frequently disregarded by middle class people, is intended for both women and men.

Roberta Johnson, Laurel Dumont's grandmother, is one of the several elderly women who offers guidance on developing one's own identity. Although the second-generation mothers of Linden Hills have similar aspirations for the future, they are not portrayed as joining together out of a sense of camaraderie and forming a true community. They are looking out for themselves and their own families, just like many of the males. One of the best-defined women of the type is Mrs. Tilson, Lester's mother.

In *Linden Hills*, a black patriarch battles prejudice under the belief that he is a demi-god who can control the lives of other subordinate African Americans. He treats them cruelly and neglectfully because he believes that women have no other function but to carry children. He also believes that once a woman gives birth to an heir, her duty in the world is complete. For him, a black woman is a machine for creating children. Because of Luther Nedeed's prejudice against black women and life, Willa Nedeed's story is one of horrors.

The majority of the people who live in Linden Hills have traded their African American identity - and even their souls - for the lofty ideals of material and professional achievement. Because none of the characters have achieved anything that may be viewed as personally significant, we discover that they have been sold out for personal achievement. None of them has achieved anything or won any victories. According to Catherine C. Ward, Naylor presents us with a number of individuals who do actually sacrifice the personal for the material. She views *Linden Hills* as another interpretation of Dante's *Inferno*. In "Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*: A Modern Inferno," Ward avers,

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

Their cultural and personal starvation are highlighted by the food they consume as well as the eating-related actions and circumstances. The characters who were never a part of Linden Hills, like Willie "White" Mason and Norman Anderson, or those who mentally or physically left it, like Lester Tilson, Kiswana Browne, and Ruth Anderson (Norman's wife), are the most psychologically and culturally healthy characters in the novel. They do not have money, cars, houses, or any other material possessions that are considered success by dominant culture, like Willie "White" Mason and Norman Anderson.

In her analysis of other Linden Hills inhabitants, Naylor investigates other intricacies of this cultural deprivation, and one topic is around what they eat or don't eat. Characters struggle to survive in the lack of a strong African American identity. Another group scene, which is reminiscent of the Alcott wedding ceremony, shows Willie's racial and cultural well-being and how Naylor uses food to illustrate how the residents of Linden Hills have lost their sense of self. Willie and Lester have come to Mr. Chester Parker's house to perform an unspecified task. It is the evening before Lycentia Parker, Mr. Parker's wife, is to be buried. Like the Andersons, Willie, Lester, and Grandma Tilson, Roberta Johnson is genuine, warm, funky, and comfy. When Laurel arrives, one of Roberta's first actions is to offer her some homemade lemonade.

All of the characters in Linden Hills, or those that wish to live there, are shown as having no idea who they are as African Americans. They typically have advanced degrees, are financially affluent, and are human shells. They don't take pleasure in their cultural history and focus much of their efforts on purposefully

eradicating the remnants of black cultural identity. The first Nedeed even aided the Confederacy during the Civil War and almost owned his wife Luwana, as Naylor demonstrates by following the history of this self-effacing process. The first Nedeed brought Linden Hills' vision to life. The dream was carried out by his sons, and numerous cooperative black people, including Xavier, Maxwell, Laurel, Roxanne Parker, and the Dumonts, added endlessly to the machine's powder supply. At the novel's end, Luther's wife Willie breaks into Luther's home and both Luther and herself after escaping from the subterranean prison. They don't even defend or appreciate the lives of individuals who are similar to themselves. The other residents of Linden Hills "let it burn" (*Linden Hills*, 304). Only Willie and Lester are still around as witnesses to the cultural and personal devastation that is Linden Hills, and only these two young black men and those outside of Linden Hills appear to be aware that eating barbecue ribs is unhealthy. A well-kept yard, an Olympic-sized pool, and an empty heart are essentially less significant than eating fried chicken, drinking beer, and sipping cheap wine.

The recounting of recollections in *Linden Hills* informs, but it denies access to women who exhibit fortitude or independence within neither marriage nor do they suggest a way out. Willa lacks the means to go back to the neighbourhood. She is cut off from the outside world by her husband and a locked door. Now that she is no longer expected to be a mother and a wife, Willie has two options: she can either pass away or give in to her husband's intense pressure and meet the same end as past Nedeed women. Just as Willie's mental health was destroyed before to her actual death, her characterization is ended with her physical death by fire. She acquires a black feminist awareness once she is aware of her situation. Willie hopes to live the life of a respectable black lady, but she is unable to do so. She then gets ready to overthrow the exact institution that denied her humanity and womanhood. She understands that she is in charge of her life and that it is her own fault, not Luther's, that she is in prison. Willie attempts to restart her life with firm purpose. Luther may have guided her to the basement stairs, but she has already descended them on her own. Through this, Naylor illustrates the plight of black women in America and outlines how they learn to understand themselves and their lives.

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