CHAPTER VI

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Gloria Naylor’s second novel, Linden Hills was published in 1985. It continues the fictional world of Brewster Place. It presents a scathing examination of the precarious struggle for African-American identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The novel is concerned with an exploration of the fictional middle class black community in Linden Hills. Through this Gloria Naylor has tried to devote a significant amount of her attention in detailing the ways in which some African Americans efface themselves as they try to be both Americans and Afro-Americans. In this sense the novel records the specific consequences of W.E.B. Du Bois’s ideas of double-consciousness. However, in the novel Gloria Naylor positions most of the contemporary inhabitants of Linden Hills as educated and intelligent people who are supposed to be aware of their culture and their black identity, who have lived through the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements, but who are unable to create and respond to the healthy ways of seeing oneself effectively. Naylor insists that the very crumbs of American life and promise of material success will often be the criteria that many Afro-Americans will use it as the yardsticks by which they will evaluate themselves and others, no matter that such an adherence to the mythological American dream is destructive to self, others and Afro-American culture and identity. In the most striking way Naylor captures the struggles for authentic Afro-American identity in her novel by focusing on the food which the characters consume and the rituals and codes of conduct that surround its consumption. Naylor suggests that in order to understand the problems of African American identity food consumption is a viable way. For
many characters in *Linden Hills*, the healthy Afro-American identity of its middle-class representation is as vaporous as the whiff of scent remaining after the consumption of expensive Caviar.

*Linden Hills* is set during December 19-24 (Christmas—the season of giving and of material excess) in the fictional middle and upper class black community of Linden Hills in Wayne country, U.S.A., where people live down the hill. It is in the name of a place which is an intricately laidout miniuniverse. It is a housing development area handed down to Luther Nedeed since 1820 by the first Luther Nedeed, the man who purchased his freedom and went to the North to find Linden Hills. The people who are wealthy, ironically, they are more spiritually and culturally malnourished (bankrupt). Luther Nedeed is the creator of the Linden Hills. He and his male progeny, all are named Luther Nedeed. After the first Luther Nedeed, each subsequent generation has a son named Luther who looks exactly like his father. Like this each generation marries a light skinned woman who is immediately absorbed into the identity of Mrs. Nedeed. They had a plan based on the first Nedeed’s understanding that the future of Wayne Country - the future of America... was going to be white; white money backing white wars for white power because the very earth was white. However, their wives were not allowed to mixfreely with other families. The isolation of these wives reflects the life of the residents of Linden Hills.

Luther seperates himself from his community by his values, as well as by the moat he built around his house. The Nedeed succeed because they see the “White” in American future and they want Linden Hills to be

“a beautiful black wad of spit right in the white eye
of American” (*LH* 9)
In their hatred, they lose right of their own values and the result is just as negative for them as their goal was for white American which has becomes spiritually denerated in pursuit of materialism. While people buy into Linden Hills because they see it as a way of changing America, Luther recognised that

"magicians supreme art is not of transformation but in making things disappear" (LH 12)

Luther creates the Tupelo Realty Corporation as his way to have a share of the white money-pie, and his only problem:

"was deciding who [of the blacks] in Linden Hills should own [the properly and build homes] (LH 10)

That is, only those blacks, like the Nedeeeds, who were comfortable with (or consciously unaware of) the idea of effacing themselves and their cultures to achieve material gains would qualify for admission to the privileged lots of Linden Hills:

The Tupelo Realty Corporation was terribly selective about the types of families who received its mortgages No, only "certain" people got to live in Linden Hills... They had a thousand years and a day to sit right there and forget what is means to be black...

(LH 15-16)

So it becomes clear throughout the book that Luther feels less concerned in transforming America than he does about trying to possess things. Moreover, because Linden Hills in not only about being black but about success, there is no God, only, "the will to possess". Thus the residents of Linden Hills are willing to disappear, lose their identity, for the sake of possessing material wealth.
The current Luther Nedeed invited applications from anywhere in the country from.

"any future Baptist ministers, political activist and Ivy League graduates... were now given first priority since their kind seemed to reach the bottom [Tupelo Drive, the most exclusive address] faster than the others... Finally devoured by them own drives, there just wasn't enough humanity left to fill the rooms for a real home, and the property went up for sale." (LH 17-18).

In order to explore the madness that lurks underneath these outwardly successful, upwardly mobile African Americans Naylor presents two young men Letser Tilson, whose family lives at the top of Linden Hills but still in it, and Willie Mason, who lives in Putney Wayne, who lives in the economically poor black community of the city.

The two men have been friends since junior high school and both are poets this is central to Naylor's thematic concerns, for artists throughout history have pursued goals that are antimaterialistic. Furthermore, as poets, these young men are able to bring to Linden Hills a underperspective, one that is fully predicated on the human and that can recognize and evaluate the lost souls of Linden Hills. Both poets are out of work. It is by doing odd jobs for the residents of Linden Hills in the days before christmas that these two men, especially the gifted, sensitive, and insightful Wille, are able to peep inside these poeple's lives who have "made it" and see the loss of Afro-American identity and humanity, which can easily be one of the payments for material success in America.

Maxwell Smyth, Laurel Trimont, Winston Alcott, Xavier Donnel, Chester Parker and his wife, Lycentia, Reverened Michel, Hollis, Professor Daniel Brathewatte live in Linden Hills and everybody is after his own piece of American dreams. Their ideal is Luther Nedeed and his
values are their values and his lifestyle is their own lifestyle. Thus all of
them are locked in their wrong choices. Naylor sees inside the vacuity
of these people’s lives through a parallel narrative that focuses on five
generations of Nedeed women. One of the residents, Maxwell Smyth, is
the highest ranking black executive at Genral Motors. In order to make
his blackness disappear:

“He adopts tricks like spelling his name
‘Smyth’ getting straight ‘A’s never appear-
ing to sweat or get cold, availing sex and
adopting a special diet and routine that al-
 lows him to control even his bowel habits
so that they become a five minute routine.”

(LH 202-204).

Smyth is in “a race against the natural” and he is “winning.”

The present Luther Nedeed has imprisoned his wife, Willa
Prescott Nedeed, and his son in the basement of their home presumably
because his five-year old son is too light complexioned and therefore he
feels Willa must have been unfaithful. Luther fails to remember or
acknowledge that all the Nedeed men had married quadroons or octoroons
and that sooner or later those “White Genes” would come up and would
be seen. In the basement prison, Willa Prescott survives as best she can
on the supply of powdered milk and cereal that Luther believes will help
her to if teach her his lesson for her presumed infidelity, subdue her
spirit, and cancel any right she thinks she might have for an independent
life. Luther’s choice of food provisions for Willa tell that the use of milk
and cereal are bland, devoid of any of the richness and complexity of
Afro-American food culture. Moreover, the choice of the food indicate
the emptiness and sterility of the contours of Luther’s life.
Another resident, Laurel Dumont, has already achieved professional goals that Smyth envies Laurel’s name suggest her status. She has been a winner all her life. To attain her present status, she has to cultivate her natural and physical talents though she is emotionally starved. Laurel’s mother dies when she was quiet young. When her father remarries, Laurel feels alienated from her step-mother. Consequently, the girl began spending summers in rural Georgia, with her grandmother, Roberta Johnson. As she grows she graduates Phi Beta Kappa from Berkeley, and works her way into a top executive position at IBM and marries a man believed to become like next state’s Attorney. However, she remains emotionally far removed from her husband and even from her deep sense of herself. In fact she destroys her essential spirit in order to be successful and free when her husband decides to divorce her. She faces not just the emptiness of his in the life, but the emptiness of herself. In the end, a confrontation with Luther Nedeed makes her realize that there is no inner core to her person but only a frightening void. As a result she kills herself by diving off the high board into an empty pool. Her mutilated and faceless body symbolizes her spiritual condition.

Winston Alcott is a homosexual resident of Linden Hills living at the second Crescent Drive. He ends his eight years old relationship with his lover David just to beat the rumour, and to continue his legal career which was under a cloud. He marries and as a reward for entering a doomed marriage Luther Nedeed grants him a lease on the exclusive Tupelo Drive area.

Another resident of Linden Hills is Xavier Donnel, who is in love with Roxanne Tilson. But it is doubtful whether she would turn out to be a right choice as a wife. Xavier is also as ambitious as Maxwell Smyth although he has not learnt all of Maxwells tricks for hiding his
blackness. When Xavier asks Maxwell’s opinions about marrying Roxanne Maxwell advises against it by stating that Roxanne’s family: “has one foot in the ghetto and the other on the watermelon rind” (LH 116).

Chester Parker is the husband of the dead Lycenlia. He is greedy black middle class man who is also a resident of Linden Hills. However, when he is seen mourning for his wife, he is also seen preparing himself and his house for his next wife.

Reverend Michel T. Hollis is a person who also lines on the fifth Crescent Drive. Hollis is a lesser version of Nedeed and both, Nedeed and Holl’s quarrel at Lycentia’s funeral Hollis is angry because he thinks that Nedeed is infringing on his territory by assuming an official role at the service as the president of the Tupelo Reality company.

Needed delivers a eulogy whenever a tenant dies. Though Hollis is a man who represents the Church, he has spent years together in pursuing sensual pleasures and material possessions. As a result he has an endless supply of women, closets full of expensive suits, and a couple of LTD’s. He is portrayed as an emotional zero.

Professor Danviel Braith Waite is a historian whose education was supported by Nedeed. After recieving his Ph.D. he moves to Linden Hills and settle down in a home given to him by Nedeed. He has lived there for thirty years. With his enlimate knowledge of Linden Hills, and with his full access to the records of the Tupelo Drive Reality Company he has written a twelve volume history of the area. His goal is to win the Nobel Prize. However, since the death of his wife, Laurel Dumont, his house is transformed into a tomb and closed The only thing he works on is to record the decay around him He has no intention of
stopping the corruption that he observes, but thinks only of using it as a means of winning honour. All these characters live a stale life as they are guided by the philosophy of Nedeed.

Linden Hills centres around the theme of black men’s oppression of black women. Luther Nedeed’s philosophy of life established the rule for the generations that followed:

“Men are important, they control life and death.
Women are one not important, they are owned fed and forgotten. Nedeed never saw any women as human beings.” (LH 97)

There are a variety of women characters in the novel who grow in isolation from each other. Among the minor characters there are two older women, several respectable wives and mothers of middle age and several well educated young women of rising generation. Grandma Tilson is one of the stern guardians of traditional values, however, she is no move alive. She had fought Luther Nedeed as the lone fighter against his upward striving black community and she had provided the catfish heads that Luther-Nedeed used to make the female corpses seem alive, as if passing on some principle of female vitality. Her warning against self-betrayal and loss of identity, so often neglected by the middle class residents, is meant for all women and men. The other older women is Roberta Johnson, Laurel Dumont’s grandmother, who gives advice about finding one’s own identity.

The second generation mothers of Linder Hills share an ambition for a better life, but they are not shown as coming together out of a fellow feeling and creating a genuine community. Like many of the men they are out for themselves and their own familes. Mrs Tilson, Lester’s mother is one of the most fully characterized women of the kind
According to Lester, her ambition killed his father as she forced him to have two jobs. Moreover, she has betrayed the values of black integrity by wanting an easier life for Lester in his struggle for dignity and power. Lycentia Parker. Now dead apparently took a more destructive attitude in heading a petition drive to keep poor blacks out of Lindern Hills, and her feelings are shared by the women in her wake, including Xavier Donnell’s aunt. All of them are concerned with mateiral wealth and status, with appearances but drive little human sustenance from each other.

The young woman also tend to fare badly and remain detached from each other. Roxanne Tilson, for example is twenty-seven wants to marry some one rich and black, and yet she chings to Xavier Donnell at the price of some acute humiliation. Though Xavier loves her, he is fearful of the commitment and anxious because the upward career, he aims for as a G.M. manager makes marrige to Roxanne that is unwise and foolish.

Marie Hollis, originally sharing her preacher husband’s distance for up-tight-middle-class congregations, grows away from him when he recieves the plum post in Linder Hills and begins cultivating other women, which results in the ultimate desertion.

Cassandra, who is rarely mentioned, is made the victim of another spurious marriage with the homosexual Winston Alcott, who betrays himelf and his love David for respectability as an attorney.

Laurel Dumont’s tragic story is the most developed among the minor women characters of Linden Hills. She has chosen instead of swimming and music she loves, a career as a top IBM executive and a high status marriage with the district attorney Howard Dumont. Her increasing emptiness leads her to divorce and withdraw from life and so she reaches out for support from the other women. Unfortunately she is
unable to get it either from Mrs Neeceed, her grandmother or Ruth Anderson so she is pushed into committing suicide.

Ruth Anderson is the only one among the young woman who has successful relationship with a man. And since she and Norman are everything for each other, the issue of black sisterhood seems to be less relevance, Norman’s insane attack shatters her dream of stability but still the two have affirmed their love that they are committed to each other.

Linden Hills is the story of a black patriarch who fights against racism thinking that he is a demi-god who can rule the life of other inferior African Americans. He thinks women come last in the social hierarchy, he side tracks, neglects and tortures them believing that they have no role except bearing children and once she becomes a mother and gives a heir, her role in the world is over. Black woman for him is a child producing machine.

The life of Willa Neeceed, the wife of Luther Neeceed, is a story full of horrors due to his misconception about black women and life.

Willa Prescott Neeceed is a graduate, self sufficient and an employed person who believes that a woman is incomplete unless she marries. Hence she marries Luther Neeceed and looses her own selfhood. Luther marries her as she suits his need. Rather all the Neeceed men have married those whose paleness of kin matched the paleness of their spirit so as to produce Neeceed clan.

But this tradition is broken by the child of Willa and Luther: as willa is dark skinned and bears a fair son. Neeceed consider the child a bastard, and to punish his wife he keeps her locked in the basement with a limited supply of cereal and water. The son actually carries the genes of his maternal ancestors but dies due to ill treatment. Willa understands
her own predicament in the prison and finds her position no less than
predecessors such as Lawana Packerville Nedeed, Evelyn Creton Nedeed,
etc.

In the basement Wella learns the truth about her life and helps to
understand her predicaments. She finds records left by former Nedeed
wives in the Bible, cookerybooks the pictures reveals how she has been
tricked by social conditionings when she analyses her own relationship
with Luther, she finds her expectation of marriage and the reality of being
married to a man who does not value her humanity are radically different.

Willias experiences are similar to Luwana Packerville, who to was
kept in solitary confinement, in her growing insanity so she had created
a correspondence with a fictitious sister. As slave she was purchased by
Luther Nedeed:

"Luther told me that I have no right to my son. He
owns the child as he owns me .... I thought my sale
to him was only a formality.... O Blessed Savior, can
it be that I have only exchanged one master for an-
other ? (LH 117).

The enslavement of her husband causes Luwana to lose faith in
God. It is painful to know how Luwana’s child was taken away from
her:

"The child was weaned last month He was well past
two and could now take solid food without ham. Now
Luther has taken him to the solicitor today. He told
me to prepare a special supper since the law decrees
that a child must follow the condition of its mother
This is the final humiliation.... it a better meal that I
must cook to celebrate the fact that I am now to be
owned by my own son” (LH 119)
Besides this Luther humiliates Luwana to an unberable degree. Earlier the role of wife is denied to Mrs. Nedeed, when she produces a child, the role of mother is denied, when the child is weaned out. The control of the father is so complete over his child that the child does not take food from his mother’s hand. Seeing this sadistic relationship Willia becomes aware of the replicated pattern in her own marriage.

The Nedeed women has no women friends and does not have access to intimate knowledge of how other couples and other women function. They have no way to check or conform how unbalanced their own relationship is with their husband. Willia says:

“It seems so unjust that I am barred from having friends among the white wives because of my husband’s colour and among the colored because of his wealth.” (LH 120)

Willia is permitted to perform social functions befitting Luther’s wife, but has no opportunity to develop women friends she has to become aware of what she has forsaken and what has been stolen of her i.e. herself. She gives up her right to think and speak Willia unlike Luwana who is a slave with no legal rights she was a college graduate with a job but has to face the reactions and little regards which the society has for a single independent woman.

Evelyn Creton Needed, is the second Nedeed wife who operates her world through the means of providing food. She understands Nedeed’s sexual inadequacies which explains his coldness towards her. Her sexual frustration and self hatred are expressed in an obsession with cooking. First she cooks to win her husband’s attention, if not love. After that she uses small furtive doses of pergatives and aphrodisiacs but when neither yields any positive result she starves herself to death and ultimately uses rat poison to kill herself on Christmas Eve.
The third wife, Priscilla McGuine Nedeed is more sophisticated and reveals her story through a photo album. She moves from being an enthusiastic woman with a strong sense of her own identity to a fading and finally absent presence. In the last photos, she has cut out or blotted out her face and in the empty square has written “me” (LH 249).

This was another chronicle of a Nedeed wife wasted, destroyed and gone Willia’s journey from innocence to self-discovering is a dead end, but she has also brought to an end the Nedeed dynasty she has achieved self hood and poetic justice with a strength derived from recognizing the accumlated sufferrings of the Nedeed women. A kind of sisterhood is established between Willia and her dead predecessers.

A major strategy which the Nedeed men use is to maintain author-ity over their women so they keep them isolated from the community. They accomplish this mainly by using their class status. That is, because the Nedeed men are the most wealthy members of the black community, they and their wives are not fully participating members of the community at large. The Nedeed women’s lives are similar to that of Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, like Janie, they are put on a pedestal because of their social-economic position and are denied access to the larger black community that might provide resources that could creat altanatives to the effacing process that is the price one apparently pays for the Nedeed’s kind American success. Although Jenie eventually has a somewhat that productive intercourse with the commun-ity of Eatonville, the Nedeed women remain isolated. They have only their individual selves to rely on and the few avenues of expression available to them: letters, reciepies, cookbooks, photographs, ardering shopping etc.
It is Willa Prescott Nedeeeds who, after her child dies in the basement-prison, slowly and painfully begins to explore the books and boxes in the basement and discovers her fellow inmates, the records of the other Nedeeeds' existence. She finds the letters of the first Nedeed wife Luuwana Packer Ville; the recipes and cook-book of Evelyn Creton, who literally ate tons of food and purged herself to death. Nayler gives the two important contemporary eating disorders of the time. Anorexia and bulimia-these were largely associated with woman and issues of identity. The photographs of Patricia Maguire, who carefully recorded her own gradual disappearing from life even from photographs, so that not even her image of herself remained. The life records of these Nedeeed women show their wasting away under the authority of their husbands, even though these praticular women had all of the material possession that mythically should insure their survival. The Nedeeed women's life-styles, though submerged and separate from the lives of other Linden Hills residents, are actually identical to the fate awaiting all who embrace the Nedeed way to "get over" in America. Aart of this way requires, as Barbara Christian puts it,

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

Past and Present reveal a trail of human destruction tied to the Nedeed ambition. passed from generation to generation and from designer house to designer house, to "get over"
Most of the Linden Hills residents have sold their African American identity, indeed their very souls, for the grand illusions of material and for professional success. We find that the characters have been sold out for personal success because none of them have achieved anything that might be considered "personal". There is no success or triumph for any one of them neither intrinsic, subjective or internal. Catherine, C. Ward sees *Linden Hills* as another version of Dante's Inferno and thinks that Naylor presents us with a series of characters who indeed sacrifice the personal for the material. Ward writes,

"In their single minded pursuit of upward mobility, the inhabitants of Linder 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."^2

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

Willie and Lester's visit to the Anderson apartment is a good example of the cultural health in the have-nots lives. Norman invites Wille's and Lester to his and Ruth's apartment because it is coldout side, he says simply and sincerely;
“Look, why don’t you monkeys come up to the house and have a little something hot.”

“Norman offers real hospitality even though he is poor for, “The Anderson poverty was a standing joke on Wayne Avenue. People said that if Norman brought home air, Ruth would make gravy, pour if over it, and tell him not to bring home so much the next time.” (LH 32).

Furthermore, the Anderson apartment is threadbare for every sixteen months Norman went:

“screaming and tearing at his face and hair with his fingernails, trying to scrap off the pinks. He resorted to his teeth and bare nails only after every thing else had failed-jagged sections of plates and glases, wire hangeer curtain rods, splinters of wood once part of a dresser.” (LH 34).

Eventually Ruth does not replace the furniture which Norman destroys and she removes glasses and silverware from the apartment, so that finally the Andersons only have three styrofoam cups-cups that cannot be broken or used to scrape off the pinks and an almost bare apartment. Although the Andersons do not have material possessions, the:

“dilapidated garden-apartment” is one in which [Visitors] found themeselves thinking. What a nice feeling to be allowed into a home. And it was a home with its bare woodfloors, dusted and polished, and with three pieces of furniture that sat in three large rooms, one sofa in the living room, one kitchenette set with plastic bottomed chairs — one bad.” (LH 33)

A Norman and Ruth are genuine hosts, the kind who make guests
feel welcome. Ruth set the styrofoam cups before Willie and Lester as if they were expensive China, and;

"Norman poured the coffees and made such a ceremony of unwrapping Willie’s cheap blackberry brandy... your might have thought it a rare cognac” (LH 34)

Into such a scene is projected taking a good-natured laughter, a sense of community.

Willie, Lester, Ruth and Norman provide the initial commentary on the Linden Hills resident. Ruth says, for example, that she lives in Linden Hills, but she never wants to live there again.

"I’ve had that life... and I lasted six months. Those folks just aren’t real” (LH 35)

Lesrter says that the Linden Hill’s residents.

"are a bunch of the saddest niggers you’ll ever wanna meet. They eat sleep and breathe for one thing - making it.” (LH 36)

Lester Tilson ofl though he lives in Linden Hills-just barely since his family’s home is at the top has taken advantage of the insights which his grandmother, Mamie Tilson gave to him. She was the only one of her generation of Lindern Hills residents to stand up to a Luther Nedeed. She had told Luther Nedeed;

"I used to fish with your daddy down in that there pond, Luther, and he gave me this land and ain’t giving it up. So take your frog-eyed self and your frog-eyed son out of here. And I know your evil ways - all of you” (LH 12)

Lester remembers his grandmother's legacy and tells Willie's, Ruth.
and Norman that

“Grandma Tilson hated those Nedeees.” (LH 40).

Later in the same day Willie’s visit to Lesters home is a major contrast to the genuine warmth and community which he had experienced at the Andersons home. Lester invites Willie to spend the night so that the two young men can have an early start on seeking jobs in Linden Hills. Ruth gives them the tip about the possibility of jobs. Lester does not, apparently, follow social protocol in forewarning his mother that Willie would be having dinner and spending the night. Mrs. Tilson’s first condescending and hypocritical statement is,

“Well, I guess we can always find more and especially for such a good friend of Lesters.” (LH 48)

Willie and Lester both know that she has never approved of Willie as a friend for her son. Willie, who “always felt too big and awkward and black” in the presence of Mrs. Tilson, is able to mutter, “Look I know you didn’t plan on me being here... It’s sort of short notice and

“I’m not very hungry anyway.” (LH 48)

Mrs. Tilson, trying to recover and reinstitute her social graces, says

“Nonsense..... There’s always something for company.
But we’re eating like peasants to night just fried chicken.” (LH 48)

Rather than the relaxed and unassuming sense of community which Willie had experienced in the Anderson home, here he finds “serialized” smiles, updates on the cost of reupholstering furniture, the obligatory coasters, and a general sense of discomfiture. The dinner itself reveals what Mrs. Tilson and Roxanne, Lester’s sister have given up to live among the privileged naturalness. Similar situations is expressed by Toni
Morrison in *The Blues Eye* she two depicts black women who deliberately remove a great deal of their black culture and black identity in their quest to be middle class. Anne Grey in *Quickstand* also removes a great deal of her culture as she attempts to ‘ape’ everything white. Similarly in *Linden Hills* the residents are empty shells underneath the material that glitter. After making sure that her dining table is set with the starched linen napkins, the China, the silveware. are and the fragile Norwegian crystal, only then is Mrs. Tilson concerned with how Willie might be perceiving the argument that erupts during dinner between Roxanne and Lester:

“Lester Roxanne, please, not in front of company, or
“Now Willie’s going to think we’re a group of
barbarains in this house.” (*LH 55*)

Roxanne, on the other hand, is so bent on defending her upwardly mobile boyfriend, Xavier Donnel, and filling the conversation “with the importance of her new promotion” that she only eats

“two bites of chicken and [a] teaspoon of potatoes.”

(*LH 54*)

That Roxanne only nibbles at the “peasant” “common food” rather than “getting down” signals her cultural starvation and deprivation.

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

In one scene, Wilhe and Lester are doing workat a wedding reception in Linden Hills. Ironically the two are not thought of as good enough to work as waiters, where they will be seen and thus present a
reminder to these middleclass folk of what they have given up in their pursuit of American success their blackness. The families of the bride and groom hire whites as waiters and servers. Willie and Lester are hired to take out the trash and garbage, to help to load and unload supplies; but they are able, while doing the dirty work they are able to occasionally look through the kitchen doors and observe the wedding shenanigans:

“The four foot wedding cake held miniature of the bridal party on two sets of golden stairways that ran up each of its sides ... This was definitely no fried chicken and-potato-salad affair. The [white] waiters were coming into the kitchen and unwrapping trays of marinated shrimp, stuffed artichokes, caviar, and some kind of cheese that Willie didn’t recognize, so he knew it must have been expensive.” (LH 82)

Surrounding this display of foods the dress of the wedding guests:

“...the Halston minks and Saint Laurent fox capes... The impeccable make up, the manicured hands and custom-made hairdo’s were only rivaled by the sculputured attire of their male escorts .... But even as glass after glass was refilled from the champagne fountain .... Willie couldn’t help feeling that something was missing ... spontaneity... These niggers would be afraid to sweat.” (LH 52-83).

These people are like the air bushed models and carefully constructed images. They had a lot of fluff, superficiality, a nd glamour symbolizing nothing. Even the bridegroom is a fake. Winston Alcott is gay, and has a long term relationship with his best man, David, but refuses to follow his heart and continues his gay relationship because being married to a women is necessary for her promotion to full partner in his law firm and for continued descent in Lindern Hills to the most
prestigious address, Tupelo Drive, Luther Nedeed’s gift to the bride and groom is “a mortgage on Tupelo Drive” (LH 87) And although Winston should be happy that he has “made it” all he can do, like most of the guests is present a “frozen grimace” for a smile (LH 87)

Xavier Donnel is the boyfriend of Lester’s sister Roxanne, is also present at the Alicott wedding, and his date is a white woman, a secretary at his office. He had thought that escorting a white women would generate the appropriate appearance, and it had, for the wedding guests a truly believe in “white for whites sake”. During the festivities, Xavier

“sat with his arm thrown over the chair of a young, blond woman. He playfully offered her a bit of cheese and she ate it from his fingers.” (LH 84)

The ‘bit of cheese’ is symbolic of Xaviers own cultural starvation, for the falling in love will Roxanne Tilson, and like Winston Acott and his rejection of David, Xavier is not convinced that Roxane is the best match for his professional and pecuniary pursuits. He is unsure whether he should ask Roxanne to marry him because she is not on the same social or geographical level as he is; he is unsure what impact such a marriage would have on his position as a Vice President of Minority Affairs at General Motors Corporation. He fails to observe, in his socalled dilemma, that Roxanne would be the ideal black woman for him. She has “groomed her life and body with a hawklike determination to marry black, marry well or not to marry at all. And at twenty seven, with a decades, worth of beaching creams and hair relaxers, coupled with a Wellesley B.A. and a job in adagency, she was still waiting (p.53)

Moreover her eating habits if Xavier knew them, would immediately qualify her for admission to Linden Hills most exclusive vestibule, for her eating.
"consisted of nibbles - bits of lettuce and cucumber, dabs of fish and cottage cheese. She never lost weight because periodic depressions would send her nibbling potato chips, French chocolates and Hostess Twinkies."

(LH 53)

Xavier need not have lost so much sleep over whether or not he should marry Roxanne, for with Roxann he would never be burdened by a woman eating greasy pork ribs, collard greens, deep-fried catfish, hog maws, and the like. Roxanne would always present the correct appearance.

However, Xavier had to be positively and absolutely sure that Roxanner would not hinder his prospects at general Motors or his social ascension down Linden Hills he had worked had to become the perfect supernigger, including an Ivy League education - brainwashing, so he consults epitome of black sophistication Maxwell, Smyth, Assistant to the Executive Director at General Motors, and next in line for the Executive Direction position. His life story is a telling one, often humorous and ever say's;

"Maxwell had discovered long ago that he doubled the adds of finishing first if he didn't carry the weight of that milligram of [black] pigment in his skin... In college [Dartmouth] he found that his blackness began to disappear behind his straight average and his reputation for never sweating... The pinnacle of his success lay in his French tiled blue and white bathroom. The only thing his bathroom lacked was toilet paper... Through a careful selection of solids and liquids, he was able to control not only the moment but the exact nature of the matter that had to bring him daily to [the toilet] His stomach and intestine were purified by large quantities of spring water and camomile tea. He found variety in clear juices-apple, strained cranberry, and, or rare occasions, small sips of Chardonnay. He learned that the very tips of broccoli florets.
asparagus and even parsley moved less noticeably through his system than the stems. Young animal flesh-baby scallops, calf's liver and breasts of squab were the purest to digest. He would have put a forkful of cabbage, a slice of onion, or a single bean into his mouth with the same enthusiasm as a tablespoon of cyanide [He even used a bidet] where he was sprayed with perfumed and sudsy water.”

(LH 102-05).

The above quotation shows most forcibly Naylor’s use of food in her scathing examination of the extremes which some blacks will take to defeat the “natural” in their pursuit of material success and white acceptance. In fact, to General Motors, no one could even say Maxwell’s butt smelled “because it didn’t” (LH 106). Central to “making it” for the Linden Hills residents is the elimination of anything overtly connected to positive African - American life and culture, and the food these characters consume is crucial to Naylor’s thematic interest. The ultimate price which Maxwell pays for his success is his confinement to his bathroom, where most of the meaning in his life unfolds or drops out.

It should not, and does not surprise Xavier that Maxwell’s advice to him is not to marry Roxanne. She is not, in Maxwell’s view perfect enough. He suggests that Xavier should marry a white woman or wait for that special black woman, exceptional like Maxwell, though he admits that such finds are rare.

During Maxwell’s visit to Xavier, Willie and Lester are cleaning out the garage for Xavier’s mother, and the two young men have an encounter with Buppies. The conversation takes an immediate turn to race and the lack of opportunities available to black people. Maxwell and Xavier contend that progress is being made and that they are both living proof, in their view, of that fact Willie and Lester offer a counter-position that
black people are poor because they are black, that racism and discrimi-
nation are still major determining forces in the lives of everyday black
people. Maxwell thinks that real progress can be measured; one need only
look at the most recent issue of Penthouse magazine to see that social
barriers are no longer operative, for he says,

“There was a time when you couldn’t find a picture
of one black women in a magazine like Penthouse.
And see what the center fold is this month.” (LH 115)

That the Maxwell Smyths of the world are completely lost to their
people is captured at the end of the scene when the narrator records
Willie’s reaction to the magazine’s centerfold, for he understands what
Maxwell cannot. He recogzie’s the exploitation of people, family even, in
that photograph that-woman was a dead ringer for his baby sister. (LH
116).

Willie’s racial and cultural health and Naylor’s use of food to
demonstrated the loss of personal and cultural identity of the Linden Hills
residents are captured in another group scene, much like the Alcott
wedding ceremony, Willie and Lester have come to Mr.Chester Parker’s
house to do an unspecified job. Mr.Parker’s wife, Lycentia, has died and
it is the night before her burial.

“The caterers have set up” (LH 126). Before the guests arrive for
the wake, Mr.Parker tells the young men that he wants them to steam
the wallpaper off the masters bedroom so that the next day the paper-
hangers can put up new wall paper and he can bring out the new
furniture for his new bride; Mr.Parker plans to marry as soon as Lycentia
is buried. After completing half of the job, the young man returns
downstairs to peek it on the wake. The narrator captures the coldness
and sterility of the guest’s lives through their forced and superficial
attempts to express their condolences and in their eating behaviours:

"People. Help [ed] themselves to the cold buffet.

[Willie] hadn’t really been listening [to the guest’s talk] so much as looking down into the faces that were looking up through the clear dinner plates form the glass-topped table. And some thing was haunting him about the rhythm of the knives and forks that cut into the slices of roast beef... The plates never seemed empty of the brown and bloody meat... Willie knew it was just an illusion. Those plates were actually being emptied... They had to put those forks down." (LH 30-34)

Similar to Willie’s earlier reaction the guests at the Alcott wedding, during the Parker wake the monotony and the lack of spontaneity of the people as they eat seize his attention and provide both the description and the criticism of these people’s hollow lives. When Luther Nedeed arrives “carrying a cellophane-wrapped cake... He was the only guest. Willie’s had seen bringing food that night and it surprised him,” for Willie

"know that his family always has fried chicken and baked stuff for awake and so it was the last thing he expected to see done in Linden Hills.” (LH 136)

Luther lies and tells the guests that his wife baked the cake. He dominates the converstnation, and, although the other guests had already eaten, when he declares that he does not like eating alone,

“One by one, the other knives and forks were lifted and meal continued with the pathetic motions of children being forced to eat.” (LH 138).

The guests are like machines, and Willie is surprised that they actually, somehow, manage to consume real food, Naylor’s rendering of the black elite of Linden Hills is similar to Nella Larsens a critic of the black middle class of Naxos in Quicksand.
Parker gives Willie and Lester the left over food from the wake. Willie pig out on it and has wild and crazy dream with the refrain “Willie, eat it... eat it... Eat it” (LH 145). The next day Willie tells Lester.

“The stuff Parker gave us upset my stomach. There was something strange about that cake. I mean, it didn’t taste home made.” (LH 152)

Indeed, there is not any “home” in the Linden Hills residents to live.

Laurel Dumont, for example, realizes, very late that there is no home in Linden Hills. She then temporarily leaves her in search of one. She visits her grandmother Roberta Johnson, in rural Georgia, for, as a child, it had always been visits to her grandmother that contained the most meaning and warmth in her life. This section of the novel devoted to Laurel Dumont, Naylor makes the most significant connection between the Nedeed women and the other women who live in Linden Hills. Laurel, like the Nedeed women, lives a privileged yet empty life, where a house is not a home. In her trip to Georgia, Laurel tries to recapture “home”, but her white, liberal Phi Beta Kappa education at the University of California at Berkeley, her executive position at IBM, her husband, Howard (whose family had lived in Linden Hills for over sixty years and who was,

“the first black D.A. in Wayne he county, handpicked remind her to be the next state attorney general and even her house, a showcase, that her grandmothers houses is no longer her home.” (LH 232)

Roberta Johnson understood this long ago, when Laurel went away to college,

“All Roberta knew was that she had crashed in her

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life insurance to send a child she had named Laurel
Johnson to the state of California, and it had sent her
back a stranger.” (LH 226-27)

Roberta Johnson is like the Andersons, Willie, Lester and Grandma
Tilson: down to earth, warm, funky, comfortable and real. One of
Roberta’s first gestures upon Laurel’s arrival is to offer her some home-
made lemonade.

When Laurel explains to Roberta why she has come, Roberta tells
her: “but this ain’t your home, child” (LH 231) Roberta’s intent is to
encourage Laurel to make a home for herself on her own territory. It is
with this understanding that Laural returns to Linden Hills. Soon after
arriving in Linden Hills, Laurel slips into a depression that overwhelms
her. She concludes that her houses is sterile, her marriage a charade, and
her career meaningless. Although these insights are necessary ones, Laurel’s
energy is spent trying to “get over” mean that she has no resources,
especially no cultural or racial ones, that might help her to understand
that she can begin again. Instead, she thinks that her life is hopeless
(even after Robrta comes to Linden Hills to help her) and plunges into
her empty, expensive specially made diving pool.

Laurel’s belief that her life is hopeless and her seeking of freedom
in the pool (though empty of water) is similar to Kate Choplin’s render-
ing of Edna Pontellier in The Awakening who also came to the real-
ization that her marriage was a fraud and that she had no home in her
New Orleans mansion and who plunged into water (the sea) to find
freedom. Similarly Eden and Laurl also feel that individual freedom can
only be had in death. They have no knowledge of or ability to recognize
a tradition of women who had succeeded on their own terms.

All the characters who live in Linder Hills or aspire to live there,
are presented as individuals who have lost all sense of who they are as Afro-Americans (or as people, period). They are usually highly educated, financially successful, and yet empty shells of human beings. They take no pride in their cultural heritage, most of their efforts are spent in the deliberate removal of most vestiges of black cultural identity. In tracing past of this self-effacing process, Naylor shows that the first Nedeed even helped the confederacy during the Civil War and literary owned his wife Luwana. The first Nedeed put the dream of Linden Hills into operation. His sons carreid out the dream and the many willing blacks like Xavier, Maxwell, Laurel, Roxanne Parker the Dumonts add infinitum powder in the machine that continually perpetuated itself. At the end of the novel, Luther’s wife Willie escapes from the basement prison, burns up Luther’s house’ Luther and herself. While the other Linden Hills residents “let it burn” (LH 304) They do not even protect or value the lives of those like themselves. Only Willie and Lester remian as witnessess to the personal and cultural destruction that is Linder Hills, and only these two young black men and the blacks outside Linden Hills seem to know that eating barbecue ribs fried chicken and collord greens and drinking beer and cheap wine are intrinically more important than a manicured lawn, an olympic - sized pool, and an empty heart. Although Naylor does not suggest that the attainment of material success be avoided, she asks, At what price?

The presentation of memories in Lindern Hills provide information, but gives no access to women who demonstrates strength or self-determination within marrige nor do they point to an escape. Willa has no means to return to the community. Her husband and a locked door stands as barriers between her and the rest of the world. Removed from the role of mother and wife Willia can now either die or succumb to the overwhelming pressure brought by her husband and suffer the fate like
previous Nedeed wives. Willia's characterization is concluded with her physical death by fire, just as her mental health has been destroyed prior to her actual death. When she becomes conscious about her predicament she develops a black feminist consciousness. Consciousness means an understanding about what one is and what one could become. Willa expects the life of a good black woman, but, she fails in getting such a satisfactory life. As a result she prepares to destroy the very system responsible for the denial of her humanity and womenhood. She realizes that she is responsible for her life and that she is imprisoned not because of Luther but because of herself. Luther might have led her to the basement steps, but she has walked down herself, this knowledge gives her "strength" and "power". Willia with firm determination tries to start her life again. It is through this Gloria Nalylor projects black women's predicament in Ameja and delineates the way they become aware about themselves and their life.
CHAPTER-VI

REFERENCES


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