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Linden Hills and The Women of Brewster Place : Race, Class, and Gender Seen Through the Gothic

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LINDEN HILLS AND *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE:* RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER SEEN THROUGH THE GOTHIC

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Gloria Naylor uses Gothic elements in two of her novels, *Linden Hills* and *The Women of Brewster Place*, to highlight struggles and fears of the black communities of these texts. In each, the characters try to navigate through a white, patriarchal world, which causes them to struggle economically, emotionally, and socially. Throughout reading these texts, it is clear that Naylor uses the sins of the father, the absent mother/fear of motherhood, and religion versus the state/science, all Gothic elements, to show how these characters are put in the position of other and how they respond to occupying that space.

Each of these Gothic elements deals with relationships, whether those relationships are between individual people or a person/small group of people and the larger society. Some of the relationships explored through these texts are between black men and women, black men with other black men, and black women with other black women. The heterosexual, homosexual, hetero-social, and homo-social relationships of both texts all weave together a larger narrative. Through these elements and relationships Gloria Naylor poses many questions, but none so compelling as: What does a black community, outside of white patriarchy, look like?

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Chapter 1

Two of Gloria Naylor's novels, *Linden Hills* and *The Women of Brewster Place,* show different sides of the black experience (particularly for black women). There is the wealthy community of Linden Hills and the poor community of Brewster Place, and while their social class may differ economically, they both are still trying to navigate through a white patriarchal world. One way in which Naylor shows this is through the Gothic genre. She uses this genre as a mode for exploring the different issues her characters deal with. Some of the Gothic elements that Naylor uses are the sins of the father, the absent mother, the fear of motherhood, and religion vs. state (science). These Gothic elements deal largely with "othering," particularly of people who are not of European decent. This is especially true of American Gothic where Native and African Americans were two groups that were taken advantage of. However, as Audre Lorde has written, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Gloria Naylor was not trying to dismantle or change the issues or prejudices the black community deals with when she wrote these texts; instead she is only highlighting and bringing about a greater awareness of these problems. The Gothic is a "white tool" as it is a genre that originated in Europe, and therefore would not be able to change anything; however, because it is familiar it may help those outside of the black community understand the issues that are raised in the texts more clearly.

Jerrold E. Hogle's chronicles the history of Gothic literature and gives a framework for understanding what the Gothic is. He also discusses how different critics,

such as feminists, look at and use the Gothic. One of the most important details is the description of the Gothic's main function as explaining and exploring a society's fears, such as, "gender-crossing, homosexuality or bisexuality, racial mixture, class fluidity…" and much more (Hogle 12). This section of the book sets the framework for the following critics' articles and helps lay the groundwork for the background of the Gothic in this paper.

Fred Botting's book, *Gothic*, takes understanding the Gothic as a genre to the next step as he breaks down different themes and topics that are essential to the genre. In the section of excess and transgression, Botting explains how old family estates were the site of the Gothic because one of society's fears was not being able to pass down one's inheritance. The home was sacred and any transgression could threaten that. The Gothic is a genre that was used to try to warn readers of the consequences of different transgressions. Similarly, most of the transgressions seen in Gloria Naylor's novels, *Linden Hills* and *The Women of Brewster Place,* are those against society or what society deems inappropriate.

This continues in the chapter, "Homely Gothic," where Botting goes into further depth about different transgressions and the home. One of the biggest transgressions is the sins of the father. This refers to a patriarch in a family transgressing against someone else or a group of people, usually a group who is disadvantaged in society, such as African Americans. The patriarch's family then prospers because of this sin; however, future generations will need to pay for the wrongs that have been committed. This payment occurs in various ways throughout the history of the Gothic, but usually ends

with the demise of the family. This is clearly seen in *Linden Hills* and is modified in *The Women of Brewster Place*.

Botting also discusses the importance of wanderers and doubles by chronicling the theme through different Gothic texts ranging throughout the 1800s. It is through doublings that the reader can see the sins of the fathers passed down through the generations. However, doublings and wanderers also play an important role in setting the tone and mood of the story in the Gothic. It is through these features that the stories can develop an uncanny effect.

The uncanny is so important in the Gothic as it is this that creates the terror the reader feels. This terror is what is supposed to keep the reader from committing whatever transgression is being discussed in the book. Sigmund Freud explains the uncanny in his article, "The Uncanny." Freud states that the uncanny is created when one is unsure of where one is (418). Leaving the reader questioning what is reality from fantasy, if a character is actually human, or if they (the readers) are sane is all a part of creating the uncanny. Doubles are essential to this, especially in relation to characters, as the repetition suggests immortality (425), a quality seen in *Linden Hills*.

Other Gothic elements are the absent mother and fear of motherhood. In many Gothic tales, the mother has been dead for many years before the action of the plot begins, and women who are alive many times fear motherhood. In the nineteenth century, labor and delivery were very dangerous, accounting for one part of the fear, however, women were commodities and their role was to produce more workers. It is through the French feminist critic, Luce Irigaray's, article, "Women on the Market," that one can begin to understand this fear. She explains how women are valued for their

bodies and how well they can provide children. It is this that she calls "exchange value" (804) as a woman's body changes from being human to being manufacture. She also discusses the differences among the roles of mother, virgin, and prostitute, and explains that all women fall within one of these three categories (808). Therefore, if a woman is not a mother, she can only be a virgin or a prostitute. These views of women are seen through the female characters of *The Women of Brewster Place* all too well.

The final critic that is used in this chapter is Roberta Rubenstein and her article, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters: Shirley Jackson and Female Gothic." Although she uses Shirley Jackson's works to, "explore…representations of the primitive and powerful emotional bonds that constitute the ambivalent attachment between mothers and daughters…" (309), her analysis of the relationship between a mother and her child within the home can be used in other Gothic texts, such as the two in this paper. Her article supports many of Irigaray's points by showing them in specific texts. It is through these examples, that I have been able to apply the Gothic to explore race, class, and gender in Gloria Naylor's texts.

Sins of the Father:

The sins of the father is clearly seen in both texts, as the Nedeed men's sins against the community are chronicled in *Linden Hills* and several fathers, such as Mattie and Lorraine's fathers, are seen as sinning against their daughters in *The Women of Brewster Place.* In both texts, the reader sees the cause and effect relationship between the fathers and their children and in turn the communities.

In Linden Hills, inheritance is everything. The second Luther Nedeed built homes on his property and gave black families a thousand year and a day lease. When the person

on the lease dies, the only way their spouse can stay is if there are children, since the property is given to the next blood relative. If there is no blood relative, the property must be given back to the Tupelo Reality Company (Luther Nedeed). This is why Laurel Dumont is evicted from her home; her husband leaves and files for divorce. Since they have no children, the property is then forfeited back to the Nedeeds (*LH* 243-45). This situation is representative of the way all the Nedeed men have treated the residents of Linden Hills. They take advantage of them because the Nedeed family really owns the property, leaving the residents powerless.

It is also clear through the Dumont situation that blood relations and inheritance are important in Linden Hills. This is why Luther locks his wife and son up in the basement, ultimately resulting in their child's death. He does not believe the child to be his because he is so much lighter than all the previous Luther Nedeeds. However, what Luther does not acknowledge is that all of the Nedeed wives, including his own, have been light skinned, passing their genes along until they appeared in the youngest Luther. This makes the law of primogeniture impossible to be met in the adult Luther's mind, which leads to the unraveling of his family empire. The sins of the original Luther are finally visiting his children through a, "tyrannical father interested only in the preservations of the law of primogeniture" (Botting 52). The present Luther does not even confront his wife about his suspicions, because he only cares about, "making it right." He does not care about his own child and does not show any emotion when the boy dies. Instead he only cares about keeping his forefathers' legacy of control going, which he has in his head cannot be done with this child. Naylor takes this "tyrannical father" from the sins of the father in the Gothic, which Fred Botting, discusses in *Gothic*.

He writes, "[t]he Gothic theme that the sins of the father are visited on the offspring is manifested in the representations of the illegitimacy and brutality of paternal authority, the repetition of events, and the doublings of figures and names in successive generations" (129). This is exactly what the reader sees in *Linden Hills*; each child is just as frog-like as his father, has the same name, marries the same type of woman, and does the same things. Naylor writes about the first two Luther Nedeeds:

> He grew up to carry his father's first name, broad chest, and bowlegs. Big frog and little frog, the town whispered behind their backs…It seemed that when old Luther died in 1879, he hadn't died at all, especially when [the townspeople] spoke to his son and especially when they glanced at those puffed eyelids and around those bottomless eyes. He, too, brought an octroon woman into his home who gave him only one son – another Luther Nedeed (*LH* 4-5).

However, for the first time in five generations, there was a son born who looked just like the father, but white (18), which causes the questioning of the legitimacy of the youngest Luther, and leads the adult Luther to show his brutality, resulting in the child's death.

Another important part of the Gothic to keep in mind while one is looking closely at the present Luther Nedeed is the function of the home. Within the Gothic, "…the home and family were seen as the last refuge from the sense of loss and the forces threatening social relations. The home, however, could be a prison as well as a refuge" (Botting 128). Luther Nedeed's home is supposed to be safe, however, believes that evil has found its way in. He believes his wife has been unfaithful, because he has done everything his ancestors' journals said about how to conceive a son who looks just like the father, however, that has not happened (*LH* 18). Therefore, his family home is no

longer a refuge from the world, but has been a prison where he will "go insane" if he does not "remove it" (his son) (*LH* 19).

It is through the Nedeed family, that Naylor creates an uncanny effect, an important aspect of the Gothic as it is a genre that plays on one's psychological as one reads. It is therefore, important to understand Sigmund Freud's discussion of the uncanny. He has written in "The Uncanny," that, "… the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty…[is] one does not know where one is…" and that "[t]he better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny…" (Freud 418). With the doubling of the generations of Nedeeds, it becomes confusing for the reader to distinguish easily at times what time period is actually being discussed. This disorientation is one that even the residents of Linden Hills sometimes experience, resulting in "a vision of terror" (Freud 425). Most of the residents in Linden Hills are terrified of the Nedeeds as they hold the keys to the community. If one commits an act of transgression according to the Nedeed moral system, one is exiled from the community, a fate that no Linden Hills resident is willing to experience. It is through this fear that the Nedeeds have been able to hold onto Linden Hills and its people.

Though the sins of the father in *Linden Hills* are seen through multiple generations in one family, Naylor uses this Gothic element differently in *The Women of Brewster Place.* She does not stay as true to the Gothic element's form in this novel, but instead uses it as inspiration. When in the Gothic, the sins of the father are usually sins these men have committed against outsiders. The most common sin is to transgress against people who are disadvantaged or othered. In this Naylor novel, the reader sees

the effects of fathers who have sinned against their daughters. In this case the daughters are the others. First, they are women, which put them at a disadvantage. Secondly, all of these women are in situations that cause them to have a tough time as well. Ben's daughter is handicapped, Lorraine is a lesbian, and Mattie is very young and pregnant out of wedlock.

The first father who has transgressed against his daughter is Ben. The reader is introduced to this broken man who drinks and sings, "'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' [when] he was on one of his early drunks…" usually after the mailman came and went (*WBP* 3-4). Many residents would hear him, "mumbling about an unfaithful wife and a lame daughter, or was it a lame wife and an unfaithful daughter? They could never tell which" (4). In Lorraine's story, "The Two", the reader learns that he was a sharecropper whose daughter was sexually abused consistently by their landlord. When Ben found out he went to his wife, who told him he couldn't do anything about it because they would lose their home. She then degraded him by saying that if he were more of a man their daughter would not be in that position to begin with (*WBP* 152-53). Ben's transgression is that he does nothing for his daughter. He allows her to continue to be abused, eventually getting drunk enough to face his daughter's attacker every week and believe that she was lying, until she leaves (154).

While Ben wants to be there for his daughter, he cannot be. However, Lorraine and Mattie's fathers are the opposite as they disown their daughters. Lorraine is disowned because her father finds out she is a lesbian. She recounts the experience to Ben saying, "[h]e found a letter one of my girlfriends had written me, and when I wouldn't lie about what it meant, he told me to get out and leave behind everything he

had ever bought me. He said he wanted to burn them" (148). She then goes on to tell him that she sends her father a birthday card every year, now without a return address, in hopes that one day he'll read them (148-49), which reminds Ben of his daughter, as she too used to send him letters without a return address. Through their similar situations, Ben and Lorraine end up becoming close and have a father-daughter like relationship.

The reader can see a similar theme in Lorraine and Mattie's situations as Mattie's story also has to do with sexuality, as she is disowned because she is young and pregnant out of wedlock. In her father's attempt to find out who "ruined" his daughter, he beats her with a broom, becoming so enraged that he enters into a trance-like state. It isn't until his wife shoots their shotgun and points it at him, threatening to kill him if he touches their daughter again, that he stops (23-24). Ultimately, Mattie leaves and never sees her family again, resulting in her identifying solely with being a mother.

The sins the fathers in *The Women of Brewster Place* commit are not the traditional sins of the Gothic that future generations must pay for, unlike the sins of the second Luther Nedeed of *Linden Hills.* So what is Naylor trying to show her audience? It is known that she tries to show black women's lives in a truthful way, which is why one could read these two novels as foils of one another, each one exploring the lives of black women in different social circumstances. It is obvious what harm these men's actions have caused their daughters, but if one looks a little closer, one will see that their actions have also caused society harm. Naylor has these male characters perpetuate many of the problems seen in the black community to highlight one part of some of the problems they face.

One of these problems is economic; all three of these women face economic challenges directly because of their fathers' inability or unwillingness to help them. Ben's daughter leaves and, judging from the note she leaves him, becomes a prostitute, Lorraine works at a bakery while living with a cousin, and Mattie lives in boarding houses until someone takes pity on her. Mattie experiences some economic success for a period in her life, but it unfortunately does not last. Lorraine is the only one of the three who seems to experience any real economic success that lasts. Perhaps this is what Naylor is trying to portray through the sins of these fathers. Being too weak, like Ben was, or too rigid, like Mattie and Lorraine's fathers leads to negative consequences. It is only when one has balance and is in the middle of these extremes that there is a positive outcome.

Another problem is the broken home, as all of these women lose their fathers. None of these fathers were there emotionally for their daughters and in some way turned their backs on the girls when they needed their fathers, resulting in the break of relationships. Ben's daughter leaves, and while she sends him letters with some money, she does not put a sending address so he cannot contact her. The relationship is now either on her terms or non-existent. Similarly, Lorraine sends her father cards, yet she does not put a sending address so she does not feel his rejection when he sends them back. While he most likely does not keep the cards, not getting them back gives Lorraine hope that one day he will look at them. Again, the reader sees a daughter who wants to have a relationship with her father, but on her own terms. Mattie is the only daughter who does not reach out to her father. The reader sees one instance, when her son is still a baby, which she reaches out to her mother, who says she cannot leave her sick husband.

Unlike the other two daughters, who reach out to their fathers on multiple occasions, this is the only mention of any communication Mattie has with her parents after she leaves home.

Absent Mothers and the Fear of Motherhood

Fathers are not the only characters who have strained relationships with their children or cause trouble for others. The themes of doubling and the uncanny are not exclusive to the sins of the father either. While these are more prevalent in relation to fathers in the Gothic, they can also be seen with mothers. The absent mother, another popular Gothic theme, is also seen in both texts. This time the Nedeed women are chronicled, and the reader learns, with Willa, of all the Nedeed women before her. Each and every one of these women has been effaced by their husbands once they have produced a son. The Gothic critic, Jerrold E. Hogle writes, "From the start, then, the oppression and 'othering' of the female seen from her point of view has been a principal Gothic subject, even to the point of depicting her reduced to an object of exchange or the merest tool of child-bearing between men" (10). Once the Nedeed women produce a son, the Nedeed men slowly begin to push their wives aside, until their sons are no longer dependent on their mothers for survival, at which point the Nedeed men lose all need for them. While Willa (the current Mrs. Nedeed) is locked in the basement, she discovers this history of her foremother-in-laws. This effacement is most clearly depicted in Priscilla Nedeed's story. In each year's family picture, "...the only thing growing [...] was her absence" (*LH* 209). Finally, Willa comes across a picture where Priscilla's face was no longer visible. She discovers that,

> Priscilla McGuire ended at the neck – and without her features, she was only a flattened outline pressed beneath cellophane. The narrow chin, upturned nose, and deep fiery eyes were a beige blur between the shadows cast by the two grown men on each side of her. The entire face, the size of a large thumbprint, had been removed (*LH* 249).

Willa then begins to think that this was done on purpose with some kind of chemical (249), however, that is not the case, which helps continue the uncanny feelings one has while reading this novel. Willa comes to this realization through this physical example of what all the Nedeed men do figuratively to the women they marry through the last page in the photo album where Priscilla had, "scrawled across the empty hole in lilac-colored ink…*me*" (249). Priscilla Nedeed is nothing more than a shadow of what was once there; a fate that is certain for all Nedeed wives.

While these mothers have been physically there, they have had no influence in their son's lives. Their sons have been complete duplicates of their fathers, which connects back to the Gothic themes of duplicates and the sins of the father. These boys grow to be men that have their fathers' names, look exactly like them, and continue their work of creating an "ebony jewel" (*LH* 9). The absence of these mothers' influence is crucial for the community of Linden Hills to exist as the Nedeed men wish it to be. However, their sins come back to haunt them in Willa. She is the first Nedeed mother to not be effaced by her husband. She has maintained an influential relationship with her son, one that is both emotional and physical. He is the first child to look like his mother instead of his father, which helps mother and son bond and keeps the father at bay. While Willa and her son are locked in the old morgue (the basement of the house) her son

dies, she mourns, and learns of her predecessors' histories, gaining the strength to exit the basement and end the cycle of sin. She carries her dead son to her husband and the confrontation they engage in leads to the Nedeed house to burn down with the last three Nedeeds inside (*LH* 300-04). Christopher Okonkwo discusses Willa's actions in his article, "Suicide or Messianic Self-Sacrifice?" which was published in the African American Review. Throughout his article he claims that Willa acts as a martyr as she is, "a vehicle to help nullify the Nedeed plan for a tyrannical, millennial dynasty" (Okonkwo 122). At one point he even compares Willa's death to Jesus' (124) and uses the Bible imagery and the fact that she emerges from the basement on Christmas Eve to help support his claim. While I do not fully accept his comparison, I do think it is interesting to consider. Even though the birth of her son was the catalyst for the end of the Nedeed line, ultimately, it is Willa who destroys Luther and ends the sins of the father that were being perpetrated by the fathers of Linden Hills.

The absent mother is represented differently in *The Women of Brewster Place*, as many of the mothers have good intentions, but in the end cannot help their children. Along with the theme of absent mothers, there is the fear of motherhood. While in the nineteenth century, when the Gothic was very popular in the United States, motherhood was dangerous as many women did not survive the delivery of their child, this is not the reason for the fear of motherhood in either of Naylor's texts. Labor and delivery are no longer as dangerous in the 1980s with the advances in technology, however, there are still fears these women have in relation to motherhood. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the fear is being trapped by and only defined through motherhood and the ability to be a mother. This could very possibly connect to how motherhood was seen during slavery.

Female slaves were valued based on how well they could produce more slaves for their owner. Mothers also did not raise their own children in slavery, as they needed to work. Many times it was the older women who no longer had the physical strength to work in the fields who would take care of the children until they could work. Interestingly, while Mattie raises her son, she worked while he was very young and the elderly Miss Eva took care of him, and Mattie cares for many of the younger women on Brewster Place now that she is older. While Ciel stays home and raises her daughter, she ends up childless, which completes devastates her and leaves her on the brink of death. Cora Lee is the final character trapped by motherhood as she is obsessed with having babies to the point that she can only function with a baby.

When Mattie becomes a mother, she wraps her whole life around her son, as she no longer has a relationship with her parents, and is on her own until she meets Miss Eva who helps her. However, she refuses to have relationships with other men, and has limited female relationships as well. In fact, the reader is never introduced to any of Mattie's friends until she has lost everything and is living on Brewster Place. She says that she is content with the relationship she has with her son and has a sense of fulfillment with that; however, in the end the reader sees she is left empty. Her life derives a fuller meaning when she is around the other women of Brewster Place, as she has healthy relationships with the people around her, though she still takes on the mother role to those who need it in the community, such as Ciel.

Lucielia Louise Turner (Ciel) is also trapped by motherhood. She has one child, a daughter, whom she absolutely loves and is pregnant with her second. While she is happy about this, her husband is not, and after many fights, Ciel decides to have an abortion in

hopes that this will keep her husband from leaving her (95). However, all this does is leave her feeling empty and over-protective of the child she already has. She would not leave her alone with anyone and, "found herself walking into the bedroom several times when the child napped to see if she was still breathing. Each time she chided herself for this unreasonable foolishness, but within the next few minutes some strange force still drove her back" (96). She has had one of her children ripped from her and is scared to lose the other, however, this is consuming her and is hindering her from living a productive life.

Ciel's period of mourning eventually fades and she settles back into normal life, until her husband decides to leave. It is during this last fight that their daughter ends up electrocuting herself by sticking a fork in an outlet. Ciel figuratively dies with her child as she didn't cry during the funeral and stopped eating, drinking, and bathing herself. Naylor writes: "Ciel was not grieving for Serena. She was simply tired of hurting. And she was forced to slowly give up the life that God had refused to take from her" (101). Ciel is trying to will herself to die. Her child was her life, and since she no longer exists, Ciel does not want to exist. The feminist Gothic theorist, Roberta Rubenstein writes in her article, "House Mothers and Haunted Daughters" that, "The tensions between 'mother/self' and between 'home/lost' connote a young child's ambivalent desires and fears: both to remain merged with the mother (who becomes emotionally identified with 'home') and to separate from her, with the attendant danger of being 'lost'" (309). Naylor inverts this idea; instead of the child being lost without the mother, the mother is lost without the child. Ciel is unsuccessful in her attempt to die, however, she cannot move past what has happened, and leaves Brewster Place forever.

Cora Lee is the final character who is trapped by motherhood. She is a woman who unfortunately, can only function when she has a baby. However, she cannot handle her children once they grow past infancy. Her house is a mess, her children run around all day causing trouble, and she sits on her couch watching soap operas all day (112-13). She lives in the fantasy world of the shows she watches, and almost has a panic attack when Kiswana keeps her from them longer than she would like (118). Cora Lee is upset that her normal routine has been broken and that Kiswana is silently judging her. However, Cora Lee is incapable of doing anything different. She cannot understand her children once they are no longer babies, nor does she want to understand them. She likes that, as babies, they are easy to care for and love her no matter what (113).

All three of these women are trapped in some way because of motherhood. They are bound by their role of mother and are hindered from living in some capacity. This is one of the fears associated with motherhood; that one will not be able to live in other ways. All of these characters are also suffering from another one of the black community's problems of women raising children on their own. Even though Mattie leaves home, her son's father would not have acknowledged him if she stayed. Ciel was also facing raising her child on her own, as her husband was in the process of walking out on them when their daughter died. Even when he was there, he was not the one who was taking care of the child, as the two would split up and get back together on a regular basis. Cora Lee even tried to make a relationship work with two of the men she had children with, but when they were abusive, decided she was better off on her own, continuing to have children with faceless and nameless men.

The trap of motherhood does not only afflict those who are mothers; all of the female characters are trapped by motherhood. Since these books were published in the early to mid-1980s, the second wave of feminism of the time is seen as society still expects that women become mothers and remain in the domestic sphere; therefore, women who do not conform to this are seen as transgressing against society. The French feminist critic, Luce Irigaray states in her essay, "Women on the Market," that, "[a]s commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value" (802). The value that women bear are the children they produce. In a patriarchal society, that is a woman's role; to produce (preferably male) children who are going to continue the work of the society, which is explicitly seen in *Linden Hills* through the Nedeed family.

There are, however, several characters that do not have children in *The Women of Brewster Place*; Etta Mae is childless, and seen solely as a sexual object by the men she encounters, even the minister she meets. Lorraine and Theresa also do not have children, and are seen as deviant because their relationship is one that their patriarchal society cannot understand. All of these women are trapped because of motherhood. Society wants them to be mothers in the traditional white patriarchal understanding of motherhood; however, they cannot conform to this ideal. None of these women particularly want children and they live in a world where they need to work. They are dealing with the, "…the moral and social imperative to inculcate female virtues and domestic values [that] conflict[ ] with the fact that working in the world involves some transgression of the accepted position and role for women" (Botting 59). They are

choosing lives that their community does not understand, and therefore, they are wrong or deviant.

Kiswana sees all of this around her and is the only one who does not want that life. She wants to help these women live in better conditions, have better jobs, and enable them to have better lives overall. She has an intelligent, well-educated boyfriend, is educated herself, comes from money, and while she likes children, she has no desire to have them at this point in her life. Perhaps it is her understanding of the role of motherhood during slavery that results in her trepidation of having children of her own. However, it is interesting that she tries so hard to connect with her African roots, but does not acknowledge the importance of motherhood in African culture. Kiswana's struggle to embrace her African heritage is seen through her relationship with her own mother when Mrs. Browne visits her and tries to give her advice to help her cause.

Mrs. Browne does not believe that Kiswana (whose given name is Melanie) needs to throw away her money and live in a ghetto (Kiswana grew up in Linden Hills) in order to help Black women. She reminds her daughter of her strong foremothers, one of whom she was named after saying, "I gave you my grandmother's name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shotgun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for 'not knowing his place.' Yet you needed to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud" (*WBP* 86). Mrs. Browne is hurt that her daughter cannot see the strength and sacrifice her ancestors showed, while living within the constraints of white patriarchy. She believes that one can work within the system that is in place to change things. However, that is extremely slow, which frustrates Kiswana. During their visit, her mother also tells her that:

> …black isn't beautiful and it isn't ugly – black is! It's not kinky hair and it's not straight hair – it just is…I swore…that I would use everything I had and could ever get to see that my children were prepared to meet this world on its own terms, so that no one could sell them short and make them ashamed of what they were or how they look…that's not being white or red or black – that's being a mother (86).

Kiswana sees herself removed far from where her mother is and where Mrs. Browne wants her daughter to be, however, in the end, Kiswana finds that she is not much different from her mother as, "…she looked at the blushing woman on her couch and suddenly realized that her mother had trod through the same universe that she herself was now traveling. Kiswana was breaking no new trails and would eventually end up just two feet away on that couch. She stared at the woman she had been and was to become" (*WBP* 87). With this new knowledge, Kiswana feels a sense of comfort, a feeling she was not expecting from this visit.

All of the women in both books are figuring out how to live in a patriarchal society, where they are constantly confined by their sex and gender roles. Hogle writes in his book that:

> The confinement of woman by patriarchy in a great deal of Gothic, we ultimately find, is based fundamentally on an attempt to repress, as well as a quest to uncover, a potentially 'unruly female principle' that antiquated patriarchal enclosures have been designed to contain and even bury… (Hogle 10).

Perhaps then Naylor is exploring the "unruly female principle" that men, both black and white, are afraid of. *Linden Hills* has shown an influential mother destroy a line of men who lived and measured their lives through white patriarchy.

Religion vs. Science:

Religion versus science, or in these novels, the state, is also a classic Gothic element. The Gothic warns against straying from religion, a message that can be seen throughout these two novels as well. In *Linden Hills* it is obvious that there is a power struggle between Reverend Hollis and Luther Nedeed. As the Reverend is getting ready for Mrs. Parker's funeral, he thinks about Luther and the people of Linder Hills. The narrator tells the reader:

> …he had no say about what went on in Mount Sinai or this house. He was the only one in Linden Hills who didn't owe the Nedeeds a thing. The church gave him his mortgage. And Nedeed couldn't touch him for a thousand years and a day…But [Luther] needed Michael Hollis as much as the rest … [the Parker funeral]…was to be held in his church and not some godforsaken funeral parlor…He had him over a barrel on that one…Luther Nedeed might see himself as the omega, but Reverend Michael T. Hollis was the alpha (*LH* 165).

This passage displays the Reverend's point of view, as acknowledging the power struggle between the two men, but believing he is stronger. However, the rest of the chapter shows the reader the struggle as it plays out. When the Reverend gets to the church he sees that, "…Nedeed had parked his hearse in the spot assigned for the minister. Hollis double-parked so that the hearse couldn't be moved without getting his keys" (*LH* 174). Each man tries to make things difficult for the other. Nedeed is trying to send the

message that he, not the Reverend, is the spiritual leader of the community, and Hollis fires back by trapping Nedeed so he cannot escape with his permission.

This power struggle continues through the actual funeral service as well. In order to show his power, Reverend Hollis decided to change up the service. He has his organ player, Sister Wilson, play songs that are more traditional at a Baptist ceremony, such as "Amazing Grace." The two then engage in the tradition of call and response, becoming more and more passionate as they go. At one point Sister Wilson responds, "'I know, I know'… [however] Apparently, she was the only one. The others sat there stunned by the performance unfolding in front of them" (*LH* 181). The only other person to be moved by the service is Mr. Parker, however, things calm down as Luther Nedeed begins the eulogy. As he speaks, "[t]here was a sigh of relief in the chapel as Luther's even monotone soothed their ears. His voice droned on and on" (*LH* 184). Reverend Hollis tries to bring the congregation back to the traditional call and response of the black church, however, Luther Nedeed, the undertaker (science), wins the battle as the congregation is more comfortable with his calm eulogy than with the Reverend's service. It is obvious through the funeral service that the Linden Hills residents have lost their religious way and are more concerned with materialism, and appearances. They have to keep Luther happy in order to stay.

While the Reverend may not be bound to the Nedeed family as the rest of the residents of Linden Hills are, he has succumbed to the temptation of materialism just as the rest have. Lester and Willie are hired by the Reverend to clean out his garage and Lester explains why he stopped going to church:

> I just had a hard time accepting all those things they were supposed to be doing in the name of God. The name of which God? The God of the U.S. Treasury if you look at this place…I just can't get all chocked up over some joker giving a kid a Tonka truck once a year when his garage is almost as large as my house… The only thing I can remember them telling me Jesus ever rode was a donkey (*LH* 155).

Lester is disheartened by the hypocrisy he sees in people like the Reverend who preach about things like helping those who are less fortunate, but who live in excess, especially when those people are supposed to be living modestly like Christ. Lester also is disgusted by the fact that, "members of Sinai were expected to give a tenth of their incomes to the church – before taxes…" (*LH* 155). His sister wanted to join Mount Sinai, since being Baptist seemed "more black than being Episcopalian" (155), however decided against it because it was difficult to afford.

The characters of *Linden Hills* are lost in trying to find meaning from the material world. They have traveled away from religion, and only go to church for appearances. As Reverend Hollis states: "'They're so concerned beyond those brick pillars about making a heaven on earth, it never dawns on them that it won't be forever in spite of those deceptive mortgages'" (*LH* 171). The Gothic warns against replacing religion. Perhaps then, their punishment is the bond agreement they have entered into with the Nedeed family when they signed the thousand year and a day lease.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* the reader sees a conflict between the religious Mattie and the secular Etta Mae. In the Gothic, the fear of straying from religion and the battle between the secular and religious is seen in various texts. While the struggle is

seen in this text, the opposite sides are less polar and extreme than in earlier texts. Religion is important, however, the characters live in a secular twentieth century society; therefore, Naylor uses the Gothic theme as a mode to explore these black women's experience, but does not take it any further.

In one scene Etta Mae attends a church service with Mattie who, "…was stunned with a barrage of colors. A huge white straw hat reigned over layers of gold and pearl beads draped over too much bosom and too little dress" (*WBP* 62). She does not go to the service with Mattie because she is trying to find her way to religion; rather she is trying to find a nice man, preferably with some money, to finally settle down with. While at the service, Etta Mae sets her sights on Reverend Woods, a visiting minister. When Mattie sees what Etta has in mind she says, "'Etta, I meant a man who'd be serious about settling down with you…Why, you're going on like a schoolgirl. Can't you see what he's got in mind?'" (*WBP* 69). Mattie can see clearly that Reverend Woods' intentions are not pure, and that Etta Mae is only going to be hurt in the end. Mattie's prediction is correct, as Etta Mae and Reverend Woods have a one night stand, leaving Etta Mae feeling defeated (*WBP* 72). Here the text is not necessarily warning against straying from religion as a religious leader is full of corruption and sin. Perhaps Naylor is trying to warn against every individual person's weakness. Mattie does comment to the Reverend that she enjoyed the part of his sermon, "'about throwing away temptation to preserve the soul'" (*WBP* 67). In this situation the temptation is a sexual one, however, throughout the text various characters struggle with their own temptations.

Throughout these texts the Gothic elements help highlight the struggles the women of the two communities face. Some of those struggles are economical, emotional,

and social. They are trying to find their way in their society and to make the best of the situations life has put them in. The next chapter is going to explore this idea more as it will discuss more specifically the racial, social, and gender issues of the two novels.

Chapter 2

Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* and *The Women of Brewster Place* show two parts of the black experience, particularly for women. Through these novels, the reader can understand a little more about the challenges black women face in both the upper-middle and working classes, and how those challenges affect the female characters' relationships with one another. Naylor addresses gender issues as well as the class differences in the black community as her novels tend to focus on the female characters, even in *Linden Hills* where there are many important male characters. Through exploring gender roles and relationships between black men and women, black men with other black men, and black women with other black women, Gloria Naylor explores homosexuality and homophobia.

All of these issues help create two complex worlds and characters for these novels, yet represent possible realities for the black community. Even though slavery is over in the twentieth century, it is obvious through these novels that the social effects of slavery still persist. White society makes the rules of success and what is acceptable in society and everyone else needs to try to fit into those rules. Even the characters that try to change their circumstances, and to better their communities, need to do so by working within the oppressive white standard.

It is because the characters in these novels need to work within the oppressive system that is in place, that some of them try to deny their black heritage, such as Maxwell Smyth and Roxanne Tilson. Maxwell and Roxanne try to live their lives through stereotypes of what it means to be white. For Maxwell, it means getting straight As and excelling in everything he did at school, while for Roxanne, it means

straightening her hair and lightening her skin. It is denying their culture and heritage that one can read as the transgression against the community that will eventually be punished. Other transgressions explored are those against the traditional home with traditional gender roles. Under this umbrella one can explore women's rights, the relationship between black men and women, and homosexual relationships. These transgressions are fears of society that are being punished in these texts, however, Naylor does not use the Gothic to warn against these issues, but to only highlight how society handles them. By highlighting these issues, she educates her readers about them and allows them to make their own choices of how to make changes.

Saidiya Hartman's book, *Scenes of Subjection,* discusses that the end of slavery in America meant change particularly in the economic and social spheres. However, humans are creatures of habit and therefore many fear change. It is because of this white America pushed their ideals of being American and free onto the black community. One of the most important points in this book is in the chapter entitled, "Fashioning Obligation." It is here that Hartman discusses how white society pushed their values on to the black community through "how-to" books that were designed to keep the black community held back. It is through understanding these teachings that one can begin to understand the community of Linden Hills and why they are so consumed with success. Through understanding these books, I am going to explore Linden Hill's residents' motivation for wanting success to the degree they do. This obsession, however, is also tearing the characters in this community apart. It is this downfall that Christopher Okonkwo says Willa Needed pays for when she sacrifices herself at the end of *Linden Hills* to help save the community in his article, "Suicide or Messianic Self-Sacrifice?".

Kathryn Stockton also touches on this in her book, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame,* when she quotes an interview in *Time Magazine* from the 1980s about a black family who would fit perfectly in Linden Hills. They are a nuclear family with the parents at good jobs and the kids in good schools. The husband in this family jokes that they are a normal white family, but are black. This sentiment is clearly reflected in Maxwell's character, which is discussed later in this chapter.

More importantly in Stockton's book is her discussion about homosexuality in the black community in connection to Sigmund Freud's theories of homosexuality. She goes into depth about Freud's theory in general and uses the part of his theory of giving up anal pleasure for monetary value well. It is this point of hers that explains the outcome of Winston and David's relationship in *Linden Hills,* as Winston is too afraid of the consequences of choosing a life with David, and instead chooses a financially secure life.

Audre Lorde is another critic who discusses homosexuality in the black community; however, she deals primarily with lesbians. As a black, feminist, lesbian critic her vantage point of the black community's feelings toward homosexuality is important, particularly when she discusses how straight, black women treat black lesbians and why. Her experiences and observations are imperative in understanding the reason Lorraine and Theresa are treated the way they are in *The Women of Brewster Place*, and why Naylor punishes both gay couples in her novels. The question though, is why does Naylor include a gay couple in both of her novels, to only punish them? Through further examination of the two relationships and what happens to the characters later in the chapter, it is clear that Naylor is commenting on the treatment of gay and lesbians in the black community.

Through using these critics, I am going to explore the transgressions the characters make, how they are punished for them, and why. I believe that Gloria Naylor uses the Gothic genre to show that some of the characters' transgressions really are just that, while others are not as bad as the communities of Linden Hills and Brewster Place believe them to be. After reading both novels, it is clear that the universal message is the importance of holding onto one's heritage and being proud of that.

Legacy of Slavery:

The characters of these novels struggle through race, class, and gender issues brought about by white patriarchy. As slavery ended in the United States, there was an effort by whites to maintain their social status and social conventions. Due to the fears of white America,

> … self-proclaimed 'friends of the Negro' took to the South. Through pedagogical manuals, freedmen's schools, and religious instruction, teachers, missionaries, and plantation managers strived to inculcate an acquisitive and self-interested ethic that would motivate the formerly enslaved to be dutiful and productive laborers (Hartman 128).

This education was a calculated way for white people to maintain control by passing off their ideology as an attempt to help freed slaves. At this time there were so many forms of oppression established by white America that the black community had little choice, but to buy into these teachings. Many of the books discussed religion and were published by:

> ...the American Tract Society, an evangelical organization established in 1825 'to diffuse a knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of sinners, and to

> promote the interests of vital godliness and sound morality, by the circulation of Religious Tracts, calculated to receive the approbation of all evangelical Christians (Hartman 128).

Former slave owners knew that many slaves had a very strong faith, which these missionaries took advantage of once black people were freed. Christianity has always been a form of oppression against disadvantaged people, especially slaves in the United States. Therefore, this was an opportunity for whites to use former slaves' faith as a spring board to "teach" them about free life as:

> The textbooks, designed to impart practical advice to adults as well as children, focused primarily on rules of conduct that would enable the freed to overcome the degradation of slavery and meet the challenges of freedom. These texts shared lesson on labor, conduct, consumption, hygiene, marriage, home decorating, chastity, and prayer. Most important in the panorama of virtues imparted by these texts was the willingness to endure hardships, which alone guaranteed success, upward mobility, and the privileges of citizenship (Hartman 128-29).

However, all that was promised was a lie. These missionaries taught to endure hardships, not because that would give freed slaves the lives they wanted, or deserved, but because they wanted to cultivate, "…a rational, dutiful, and acquisitive laboring class and submissive and orderly black citizens" (Hartman 145). These books taught how to fit into white patriarchy and, ultimately, set up many of the problems the two communities of Naylor's books face. Linden Hills is consumed by achieving the standards of success set by white patriarchy and Brewster Place is held down by those standards.

It is obvious that in *Linden Hills*, the second Luther Nedeed understood the teachings of these freedom books, as well as the true purpose for them, as he used the teachings against his own people. He saw that he could gain money and power by creating an all-black community and became obsessed with this as money and power were not options for him in the mainstream white society of his time. He knew that the world around him was all white and that in order to succeed, one needed to fit into that mold. He knew, "…the very sky would be white. He didn't know exactly how, but it was the only place left to go. And when they got there, they weren't taking anyone black with them – and why should they?" (*LH* 8). So, Luther saved and was patient in order to get more. An example of this is when he bought an expensive hearse, but, "knew he would have to wait until the poorest white family in Putney County owned an automobile before even dead blacks rode in mahogany and silver" (*LH* 5). He did wait and eventually was driving black people to their final resting place in a mahogany and silver hearse. He also built up the properties in Linden Hill until, "…every black in Wayne County wanted to be a part of Linden Hills. There were other black communities with showcase homes, but somehow making it into Linden Hills meant 'making it.' The Tupelo Realty Corporation was terribly selective about the types of families who received its mortgages" (*LH* 15). In Linden Hills, it is of the paramount importance to do "all the right things" – have the right job, the right spouse, the right clothes, and of course the right address. Each person tries harder to accomplish and have more. As the residents of Linden Hills accomplish and get much of what they strive for, they lose more and more of themselves in the process, however, most of them never realize this and proceed to look down upon those, particularly other black people, for not rising to their status as well. As the narrator of the

novel states: "Linden Hills wasn't black; it was successful. The shining surface of their careers, brass railings, and cars…reflected the bright nothing that was inside of them" (*LH* 17). All of the Nedeed men know that the people who live in Linden Hills are empty, yet that is what gives them power, as their emptiness allows them to do whatever they need to in order to be able to stay in Linden Hills.

This parasitic attitude toward the people of this community is the Gothic sin that the Nedeeds (fathers) commit. It is a classic Gothic element as they take advantage of the fact that these people have bought into the teachings of white patriarchy for their own need to feel powerful. Instead of trying to really help other black people, the Nedeed men are driven by greed to be the most powerful and wealthy family in both Putney and Wayne Counties. This greed and misdirected motivation is what causes the family's downfall, and leads to the community allowing the Nedeed house to burn down with them inside (*LH* 302-04).

However, by the time the book takes place, the attitude of the second Luther Nedeed has been deeply engrained in the residents of Linden Hills. This notion of the community not being "black; [being] successful" that the Nedeed men have fostered, is clearly seen through Maxwell Smyth and Roxanne Tilson. Maxwell tries his whole life to not be identified as black, but instead as successful. As a child he corrected his teachers on how to say his last name and, "[h]e relished the feelings of power and control as his blackness momentarily diminished in front of their faces – an ordinary name had turned into the extraordinary and taken its owner with it in the transformation" (*LH* 103). This situation gave him a sense of power and this feeling becomes addicting for him, for until that moment he had been powerless. Not wanting to feel powerless and

insignificant any longer, Maxwell does his best to live in such a way that can only demand respect. The narrator chronicles Maxwell's time in school as he grew older by stating that:

> …his blackness began to disappear behind his straight A average, and…heading the student government, editing the school newspaper and the yearbook…he kept them all wondering how it was done, so there was little time to think about who was doing it…although most of his friends were white, that wasn't a conscious choice on his part. Maxwell neither courted nor shunned the other black students; he liked to think of himself as gravitating toward humans who shared his inner temperament, and anyone – black or otherwise – who he thought wanted to be around him because of something as inconsequential as the pigment of his skin he dismissed as shallow (*LH* 103).

Yet, Maxwell himself is shallow, as he only wants to be around people who are successful. One's personality is secondary to how successful one is in his mind. To have his own success, Maxwell has spent so much of his time trying to control every aspect of his life in order to achieve perfection, which, to him, means losing his blackness and being successful (according to white patriarchal standards). His need to fit into those standards caused others to accuse him of trying to be white to which, "He [finds] the comments … totally bizarre. Being white was the furthest thing from his mind, since he spent every waking moment trying to be no color at all" (105-06). This goal, however, is impossible to achieve, leaving the reader to wonder what else comprises Maxwell's life besides his struggle to be less black and more successful.

Like Maxwell, Roxanne also struggles with racial and class issues, but she has the added struggle of gender issues associated with being a woman. She, like Maxwell, tries to be less black and she relaxes her hair to make it straighter, and bleaches her skin to lighten it. She, like her Linden Hills peers, is trying to fit into what American society has deemed successful and beautiful. The narrator tells the reader that:

> Roxanne felt comfortable with the fact that she had paid her dues to the Civil Rights Movement by wearing an Afro for six months and enrolling in black history courses in college. These courses supplied her with the statistical proof that black men were further behind white men than ever before, and that the gap would keep widening. It was only a minority of that minority who were ever going somewhere and she was determined that one of them take her along on that ride (*LH* 53).

While she tries to lessen her physical African characteristics, she does not deny or try to lessen her heritage the way Maxwell does. She is extremely conscious of the statistics associated with her race, and is frustrated by her brother, who barely graduated from high school and refuses to go to college, which causes her to try even harder not to also become one of them. However, in doing this, she looks down upon black people if they do not conform to the Linden Hills standard.

She and the other residents of Linden Hills have fallen for the teachings of the how-to books published after slavery. While they try to put themselves in a position to have successful lives, they do nothing to help other black people who are not as fortunate to have the opportunities they have. They have turned their backs on them, and therefore

have transgressed against their people. In this sense, they are no better than the Nedeed men who have fostered these attitudes and committed the original sin.

Through these characters and the community as a whole, the reader sees how connected race and class are. The people of Linden Hills try as much as they can to "lose" their blackness as Maxwell and Roxanne do because they want to be "successful." Kathryn Stockton quotes a *Time* article from 1989 about a black family who is very successful, send their children to good colleges, have nice cars, and live in a community like Linden Hills. The husband, "jokes, 'We're a typical white family that happens to be black'" (Stockton 84-85). This is the mentality of the people in Linden Hills, which is very much seen in Maxwell as he tries not to focus on this race, but only about being successful.

Gender and Class:

Even many of the gender issues in the text are connected to the race and class issues. Part of being a successful black woman for Roxanne is to find a successful black man to marry. The African American studies classes she took in college focused on the success or failures of black men. They did nothing to empower her as a black woman, but instead made her feel as if she has limited opportunities to find a successful black man to share her life with because, according to her classes, most black men are not successful. If she fails at finding an acceptable man to marry she cannot follow the gender roles that are prescribed for her – wife and mother. According to the gender roles she lives her life by, she should have a life like Mrs. Parker or Mrs. Browne, who spend their time doing charitable work that promotes the standard of living in Linden Hills they are accustomed to.

The struggle Roxanne is facing could also be connected to the gothic element of the fear of motherhood. Society is going to dictate that once she gets married, she should have children, however, the fear of them becoming a statistic she has learned about in school could be very real for her. The other fear, and one that Laurel Dumont faces, is motherhood means giving up the career she has worked so hard for. However, Laurel is not happy in her career, or life in general, and it is the lack of children that causes her to lose her home because the law of primogeniture cannot be fulfilled, as described in chapter one. This news pushes her over the edge and causes her to commit suicide (*LH* 248-49).

Similarly, Willa Nedeed struggles with these issues as well. She saw herself as a failure as she was still single at thirty and married her husband more for that statue of being a wife than any other reason. It was more important to her at that point in her life to be married than to live a life she really wants. The reader learns that she has a college education, but since marrying, does not have a career (*LH* 67-68). As the Nedeed women before her, her sole purpose has been to produce a son who looks like the father. Once that is done, these women have very little purpose, as their husbands do not give them much power. It is obvious that she has no power in the relationship as her husband locks her in their basement because he doubts her fidelity.

It is clear here, that male is valued over female, as it is important for the child to be male and the Nedeed men find little use for these women once a son is born. The community of Linden Hills is a patriarchal society in which women need to be successful, but are not as important or powerful as men. It is because of this, that these women suffer a type of "death." This is seen the most prominently in Willa Nedeed as

her, "'self-sacrifice' not only envisions cleansing of the (original) sin wrought on the world (of Linden Hills) by a male, Luther Nedeed, but also, in a larger racial/political sense, it (re)establishes the presence of and (re)locates strong Black womanhood at the center of Black liberation struggle and discourse" (Okonkwo 118). She is a character who literally suffers death, a death that Okonkwo reads as suffered for the community. He compares her "sacrifice" to that of Jesus's sacrifice. While Willa's death may save the community, it is not certain that it will, and even if it does, she does not sacrifice herself for them, like Jesus did, she does it for her dead son. However, Laurel is another character who suffers a literal death, but one that is a result of the pain and emptiness she feels because of the racial, class, and gender struggles she is facing. Instead of dealing with these issues, however, she decides to end her life. There are also figurative deaths, as seen in the character of Roxanne. She has been sucked into the mentality and life style of Linden Hills and has lost pieces of herself along the way. She is the younger version of Laurel Dumont in many ways, and one may wonder what will happen to Roxanne if she stays on the path she is currently on. Will she end up like Laurel? It seems that she will if she stays on this path. However, she could still choose the path that Ruth and Kiswana took, and leave Linden Hills behind. These two characters have equal relationships with the men they are involved with, and therefore are safe from the same kind of death the other characters face. It is clear that Naylor is saying that women need to have an equal relationship with men, especially when one looks at the female characters of both novels. The women that survive are all the ones who are strong both on their own and with a man.

Although many of the female characters in *The Women of Brewster Place* are stronger than their counterparts in *Linden Hills,* they too struggle with race, class, and gender issues. Instead of the economic success that the people of Linden Hills have, the people of Brewster Place are consistently struggling. As Willie of *Linden Hills* argues with Maxwell, "'You wanna know why most black people aren't gonna move anywhere? Because this man' government is ruled by the few for the few. And I don't know how they taught you to spell progress in the school you went to, but on the streets you spell it W-H-I-T-E'" (*LH* 114). Unlike Willie, the residents of Linden Hills don't want to see this because then all their hard work doesn't really mean much as they will always be behind. While they can improve their situations, they will never have the status of the rich, white Americans who really have all the power, and will always be held back from attaining that power. This is all too clearly seen on Brewster Place as all of the people who live on this block rent run-down apartments that the landlords never come to fix. Instead, Ben was hired as a custodian for the community. He tries his best to fix any problems that the residents have, however, he can only do so much. In fact, he lives in worse conditions than most of the residents of Brewster Place. He lives in a small basement apartment with a broken screen door, single light bulb, and roaches (*WBP* 147). While these people work hard, there is a sense of defeat they all feel as they know that their landlords don't care about the conditions they are living in.

Maxwell sees this defeat in Willie when he argues his point about progress being white, and states, "'…it's that sort of an attitude that will keep some people cleaning out garages for the rest of their lives. Being black has nothing to do with being poor. And being poor doesn't mean that you have to stay that way'" to which Willie replies, "'Then

I guess it's just a coincidence…that the majority of black folks in this country are poor, have been poor, and will be poor for a long time to come'" (*LH* 113-14). The residents of Brewster Place are representative of the population that Willie is talking about. They struggle and work hard, yet for many of them, will never find the success that the residents of Linden Hills have. This connects to Willie's quote about progress being white; because of their race, they will always have obstacles put in front of them, making it that much harder to succeed financially. An example of this is seen in Mattie's story. While on her own, she can't save money fast enough to move out of the boarding house and into a nicer apartment. She thinks about going to night school to help get a better job, but decides against it because she would never see her son and it has already hurt her to miss his first steps and hear him call someone else "mama" (*WBP* 28). It is this cycle that Willie is referring to. If Mattie had never met Miss Eva she would never have been able to get herself out of poverty. Although she was able to save enough money, to eventually buy the house she was living in, and sustain it and herself, with one financial problem, it was all lost, demonstrating the instability that many Americans face, particularly the single women of the text.

The poor are not the only ones who deal with issues related to class; there are also class issues between the upper and lower classes within the black community. This is clearly exemplified in the relationship between Mrs. Browne and her daughter, Kiswana. The Browne family is from Linden Hills, a life that Kiswana has rejected. She dropped out of college, works menial jobs, and tries to help the other residents of Brewster Place. However, Mrs. Browne does not believe this to be the right path for her daughter since she is not from a poor family. At one point Mrs. Browne tells Kiswana that she is not

poor and Kiswana replies, "No, Mama, *you're* not poor. And what you and I have are two totally different things" (*WBP* 83). Kiswana cannot understand why her mother does not seem to see the importance in what she is doing. When Mrs. Browne realizes this she says:

> 'Melanie, [Kiswana] I'm not saying it wasn't important. It was damned important to stand up and say that you were proud of what you were and to get the vote and other social opportunities for every person in this country who had it due. But you kids thought you were going to turn the world upside down, and it just wasn't so. When all the smoke had cleared, you found yourself with a fistful of new federal laws and a country still full of obstacles for black people to fight their way over – just because they're black. There was no revolution, Melanie, and there will be no revolution' (84).

While Mrs. Browne is proud of her daughter for her part in the Civil Rights Movement, she knows that the change in laws does not mean that society has changed. She understands that change happens slowly and it is an uphill battle. She continues her conversation with her daughter explaining:

> 'But you're going to have to fight within the system, because it and these so-called 'bourgie' schools are going to be here for a long time. And that means that you get smart like a lot of your old friends and get an important job where you can have some influence. You don't have to sell out, as you say, and work for some corporation, but you could become an assemblywoman or a civil liberties lawyer or open a freedom school in this very neighborhood. That way you could really help the community. But what help are you going to be to these people on

> Brewster while you're living hand-to-mouth on file-clerk jobs waiting for a revolution? You're wasting your talents, child' (84).

It is this that finally makes Kiswana see that she does not need to be ashamed of her comfortable middle class background and though she stays on Brewster Place to help the poor black people of this community, she realizes that one does not have to be poor in order to help poor black communities. She may be trying to help in a different way than her mother, but she is doing nothing new.

Ciel also struggles with gender and class issues, which is highlighted through her relationship with her husband, Eugene, who is in and out of the picture. He, like Kiswana, is unemployed and bounces from job to job. It is because of this that he struggles to support Ciel and their daughter. This makes him bitter and resentful toward Ciel for putting these financial burdens on him. However, when Ceil tells him, "'I'll get a job. I don't mind, but I've got no one to keep Serena, and you don't want Mattie watching her'" (94), he gets even more angry. Ceil sees that things with Eugene are not good, and in an attempt to keep him from leaving, she aborts her current pregnancy, hoping that with the financial burden staying the same instead of getting worse things will improve. Of course this does not help their relationship or their financial troubles.

As Naylor explores gender issues in *Linden Hills*, so too does she explore gender in *The Women of Brewster Place.* Brewster Place, on the other hand, is very much a matriarchal society in which men are present and important in changing the fate of the women, however, they are not the center of the community. It is here that Naylor explores the relationship among black women and the sisterhood that their poverty creates. It is here that women need to both work within and outside of the domestic

sphere, whereas in Linden Hills, once a woman becomes a mother, she is expected to focus on the domestic and forget about working.

This becomes problematic for Ciel. She is a stay-at-home mom who is struggling to keep her family together. Her husband cannot support them and eventually cannot handle the situation. It is his inability to handle his frustration of not being able to fulfill his role as a man and support his family that makes him run from it, even though Ciel tries everything she can to keep him from leaving her. Even while he is packing, she tries to convince him to let her go with him and he shouts: "'No, and that's it!'" and "None of your damned business!'" when she asks him how he got this new "job" (*WBP* 99). He is the dominant one in the relationship and she is left to beg him to stay with her instead of abandoning her and their child to no avail.

Another instance of a relationship with a dominant man is the situation between Mattie and her father. Although this situation is different in that it is a father-daughter relationship instead of a husband and wife relationship, the reader can still see very clearly that much of their relationship is the way it is because Mattie is female. He is overprotective and controlling, as he does not allow her to see certain people. Butch Fuller comments on this saying, "'if I had a pretty black gal like you for a daughter, I wouldn't have her nigh on twenty-one years old and not keeping company so she's so dumb she don't know her ass from her elbow? What he savin' you for – his self?'" (*WBP* 13). Butch is a man who Mattie's father does not approve of. Mattie, knowing this, tries to keep a safe distance from him; however, she eventually succumbs to him, becoming pregnant. When Mattie tells her father about the pregnancy, he admits: "'Could be, I should have let you marry that Harris boy you was sweet on once, but I wanted better for

you than some wanderin' field hand and him wanting to drag you all the way to Arkansas, away from your family and all…'" (21). Mattie has always been the obedient (female) child as she did not run off with the boy she wanted to marry once, but instead listened to her father's wishes. It is because of this history of obedience that he assumes the baby belongs to Fred Watson who "was the only man in the church that her father thought good enough for her" (13-14). However, the baby does not belong to Fred and Mattie's father experiences a fit of rage when he finds out that his daughter has gone against him. His anger is only fueled when Mattie disobeys her father again by not telling him who the father is.

It is clear through examining these relationships that the men of this story have the power to change the women's lives with very little effort. They are the ones who leave or push the women away. Mattie and Lorraine's fathers disown them, and Eugene and Basil abandon the women in their lives. All of these men have altered the fate of the women in their lives. Out of these three women, Mattie, Lorraine, and Ceil, Mattie is the one who is the strongest and "survives" this. She doesn't let these men's actions break her, the message that Naylor wants the reader to walk away with. Women need to be strong, independent, and equal to the men in their lives in order to really live.

Homophobia:

Gender roles are very important in book communities and are something that the two worlds have in common. Another issue present in both novels that stems from the gender issues is homophobia. Homosexuality turns all the prescribed gender roles in both communities upside down, which is unsettling to the characters. In America, from the time of slavery, there have always been very distinct gender roles for men and women,

and homosexuality challenges that. It is also different from mainstream society, and these characters are trying desperately to fit in to the mainstream, thinking that will make their lives better. If they accept anything other than mainstream, they will never be able to be a part of the society they crave to be in.

Homosexuality as a challenge to mainstream society's standards is clear through the relationship of Winston and David in *Linden Hills.* Winston denies his love when his father is sent a letter about his relationship with David. The sender of the letter also threatens to send another one to the high profile law firm Winston works for, notifying them of his homosexual relationship, which will ruin his career. When his father confronts him about the situation, Winston denies his relationship, stating that he and David are just friends. Mr. Alcott then suggests Winston start seriously thinking about marriage, which he does, ultimately marrying. Kathryn Stockton discusses homosexuality in terms of Freud in her chapter, "Bottom Values: Anal Economics in the History of Black Neighborhoods," where she quotes:

> The outer world [Freud says] first steps in as…a hostile force opposed to the child's desire for pleasure…To induce him to give up these sources of pleasure he is told that everything connected with these functions is 'improper,' and must be kept concealed. In this way he is first required to exchanged pleasure for value in the eyes of others. His own attitude to the excretions is at the outset very different…Even after education has succeeded in alienating him from these tendencies, he continues to feel the same high regard for his 'presents' and his 'money' (Stockton 80).

Winston has been told outright that his relationship is wrong and that it needs to end in order for him to continue to be successful and live in Linden Hills. Instead of fighting for it, he exchanges it to feel valued by society.

Throughout his wedding day, Winston is described as having a "frozen grimace that was passing for a smile" (*LH* 87) on his face. His expression does not change even when Luther Nedeed presents him with the lease to a property on Tupelo Drive (the most prestigious block in the community), one of his previous goals (87). It is obvious to Willie, who is watching this from the kitchen, that Winston is completely miserable. It is especially clear when David gets up to give his best man speech and reads from a Walt Whitman poem written about another man. Although David changes the words from "he" to "she," Winston knows that this is David's final goodbye to him. Willie notices that this is what changes Winston's expression. He notes that, "the guy reading that poem wasn't aware of anyone else in that room but the dude behind the bridal table" and "those words spoke of something pretty deep just between two people" (89). Willie also notices, "that dude was sitting out there among all those folks and no one could see that he was drowning. And when he finally raised his glass to return the salute of the guy on the bandstand, he was no longer wearing that pasted-up smile. It had been replaced by a mouth that looked like it was shaping itself to drink poison" (90). In that moment, Winston realizes what he has lost is his pleasure that he repressed and exchanged for what the outer world values (Stockton 80). This is what Audre Lorde, a black feminist critic who is also a lesbian, calls, "…a *mythical norm*…usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society" (Lorde 855). Obviously, Winston

can never be white, but he can be all of the rest of the requirements to fit in to this "norm" that his society is trying so hard to conform to.

The relationship between Lorraine and Theresa in *The Women of Brewster Place* is different from Winston and David's in that they do not deny their love for one another. However, Lorraine, like Winston, tries to conform as best as possible to what society wants from her. She wants nothing more than to be accepted by her community, but unfortunately, she never will, because as human beings,

> …we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human difference between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals (Lorde 854-55).

All Lorraine wants is to feel like she belongs somewhere and to be accepted. Yet this does not happen because of her sexuality. Other black women do not know what to do with this difference, and therefore, try to destroy it. This is evident at the community meeting. When Lorraine offers to be the secretary and take the minutes, Sophie gets upset and starts making a scene. At one point Sophie and Lorraine are head to head and Lorraine, "stood like a fading spirit before the ebony statue that Sophie pointed at her like a crucifix. 'Movin' into our block causin' a disturbance with your nasty ways. You ain't wanted here!'" (*WBP* 145). Neither Lorraine nor Theresa have started any disturbance, however, Sophie is deeply homophobic to the point that she thinks she sees "nasty" things going on. For instance, she thinks Lorraine is buying odd things at the grocery store when she goes through Lorraine and Theresa's garbage and sees cookie boxes

(132), that they are doing nasty things and using too much water because the faucet broke (132), and that Lorraine is horrible because she saw her come out of her shower naked (146). Unfortunately on Brewster Place there is a lot of "...homophobia among Black women...[because] Black lesbians are a threat to Black nationhood, as consorting with the enemy, are basically un-Black" (Lorde 858-59). For the black community it is important that men and women stay united in order to be strong. However, if black women are united with other women romantically, where does that leave black men? Does it mean that they are against men? If they are, what does that mean for the black nationhood Lorde refers to? This is a threat that the people of Brewster Place are not willing to chance and therefore, they feel the need to get rid of the threat.

Ultimately, what does this in *The Women of Brewster Place* is the homophobic act of the young men who gang rape and beat Lorraine, which ends her quest to find a community in which to belong. While Mattie comforts Lorraine while she is dying in the alley, the women of the community do not come together to support Theresa. They only come close to supporting her in Mattie's dream when they all break down the wall by which Lorraine was attacked. While in Mattie's dream the characters feel remorse for what happened to Lorraine, in the real action of the book, there is no sisterhood between the straight women of Brewster Place and Theresa.

In both texts, these homosexual relationships are seen as deviant. They threaten the social constructs of the home, inheritance, and traditional gender roles. Therefore, they must be destroyed; Winston is forced to choose between financial success and happiness, and ultimately is not strong enough to follow his heart. Lorraine and Theresa,

on the other hand, are forced apart involuntarily with Lorraine's death. With these relationships over, the two communities can go on with one less threat.

Throughout both novels, the reader can see the fears that these communities share. Though they are of two different classes, they still struggle with finding their place within the society white patriarchy has created. They also fear anything that can comprise any progress toward that goal. The black men in these texts seem to need to be more powerful than their female counterparts, perhaps mostly due to the power they are looking for in society. Homosexuality threatens, not only this, but their place in white society, as the nineteenth century "how-to" books would have been against it. These books were also published in the 1980s, a time when homosexuality is being talked about in relation to AIDS. Because of this, there is a stigma to being gay (in particular) or lesbian in both white and black communities. The Gothic tries to warn the reader not to transgress against society and expresses and explores that society's fears. Naylor is definitely expressing and exploring the black community's fears through her texts, and while one can argue that she is warning against transgressing against society, I believe she is trying to show something different. The characters in her novels that end up "surviving" in the end are not perfect, however, they are proud of their heritage, focus on trying to be good people, and try to help others. Traditionally in the Gothic, any transgression needs to be punished and is not seen as being severe; however, Naylor digresses from this and portrays some of her punishments as being severe and unfair. She is showing that not all of the actions that are seen as transgressions should be punished, as they are not really hurting the development and survival of the black community. In

the end, the message is clear: stay true to one's self and hold onto one's roots in order to truly succeed.

Chapter 3

Through *Linden Hills* and *The Women of Brewster Place,* Gloria Naylor is exploring fears, such as losing one's cultural identity and being held back, that have plagued the black community in America for a long time. Some of the fears that are expressed in these novels and explored through these critical texts raise the questions: "What does it mean to be black and financially successful?" "Black and living in poverty?" "What does it mean to be successful in non-financial terms and black?" and "What are the challenges the two sexes have with these questions?" All of these questions together amount to the overall question of what does a black community, outside of white patriarchy, look like? Through this chapter I intend to explore some possible answers to these questions using these critics and the Gothic as the Gothic genre identifies fears, explores them and establishes why they are fears, punishes transgressors, and warns against transgressing against society. Gloria Naylor uses the Gothic to explore all of this in both texts.

In order to gain a better understanding of the above questions I have used Virginia Fowler, Mary Sisney, Charles Toombs, and Charles E. Wilson's texts, which place *Linden Hills* and *The Women of Brewster Place* within historical and present societal contexts. While many of their texts summarize plot, characters, and themes in the beginning, they raise interesting points that help me answer the questions I have as to why Gloria Naylor chooses to represent the black community the way she does in these two texts. Reading these novels together gives the reader a better understanding of the other as well as a better understanding of the problems Naylor highlights in her two communities. While there are important male characters in each text, the women of these

stories are very much the focal point, and reading the books together helps clarify the black woman's experience that Naylor is representing as a whole. These critical texts also help my argument that Naylor chose to use the Gothic genre to highlight the economic, emotional, and social struggles the female characters face, as well as some of the fears of the black community as a whole by discussing these novels within real life examples and applying the characters' experiences to real situations in the critics' own lives and history instead of staying solely within the fictitious communities of Linden Hills and Brewster Place.

Virginia Fowler looks at each of Naylor's novels in each of her chapters of *Gloria Naylor,* and breaks down the main characters and themes of the novels. Chapter three, "Selling the Mirror in your Soul," in particular was helpful as she applied Grandmother Tilson's advice to the different characters, and showed how they could not do what she tells Lester to do: to look inside yourself and find peace. While Fowler uses Grandmother Tilson's advice to discuss the theme of mirrors in *Linden Hills*, I am applying this reading to *The Women of Brewster Place*, which she does not do in her book. There are characters that have lost this in *The Women of Brewster Place*, but are not seen that way in critical texts. However, seeing them this way helps reading this text through the Gothic, a lens that has not been used a great deal with this novel, unlike *Linden Hills*. This helps the reader gain a new understanding for the characters' motivations and outcomes in the text.

The article, "The View from the Outside," by Mary Sisney, discusses the background of the novel of manners and black novels from the time of abolition to present and how *Linden Hills* is the new novel of manners. She focuses on the women in

the novel and concludes that the best place for a woman to be is outside of the mainstream society. As a whole, though, Sisney says, "[c]learly, Gloria Naylor is taking the novel of manners in a new direction. Her novel rejects the value system of the society depicted and affirms the values of the individual, the nonconformist" (Sisney 74). While those characters who do not conform to the values of Linden Hills survive in the end, I do not agree that Naylor is saying the individual is more important than the community as community is extremely important in *The Women of Brewster Place.* As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the two communities of Naylor's novels, particularly Linden Hills, are trying to conform to the standards of white patriarchy. I believe Naylor is trying to convey that conforming to these standards is what is causing these characters to suffer death. It is because they are conforming to white society and losing their ties with the black community that they are losing themselves, and therefore, cannot survive.

Charles Toombs's article, "The Confluence of Food and Identity in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills,*" discusses, like other articles, how the characters of *Linden Hills* lose their identities in their pursuit of wealth. What is interesting is that he links this loss of identity to a cultural starvation and looks at how the residents of Linden Hills feed themselves both literally and figuratively. While I did not find the discussion of literal food in the book helpful to my argument, the figurative food (material things) is very much applicable, as the characters constantly want more wealth and things in their lives. Any time there is the slightest possibility of losing their status in Linden Hills, they stop whatever behavior is jeopardizing this and conform. The characters are feeding their souls with material things as a parasite might feed on blood, however, these objects can never take the place of cultural and spiritual food, so the characters are left starved.

Charles E. Wilson discusses how racism affects the relationship between men and women, particularly seen in *The Women of Brewster Place*, where the men tend to be cruel and even sometimes violent to women. These observations and his reading of the male-female relationships in *The Women of Brewster Place* can then be used to examine the male-female relationships in *Linden Hills*. While the men there are not violent to the female characters (with the exception of Luther Nedeed) one can see that here too, the men are not always the nicest to the women in their lives.

What does it mean to be black and financially successful?

Gloria Naylor explores this question in her novel, *Linden Hills,* through the characters who live in the prestigious community and those who want to live there. It is clear while reading the novel that the residents of the community are consumed with fitting in to what the mainstream, white society has deemed successful. Through her article, "The View from the Outside: Black Novels of Manners," Mary F. Sisney, discusses the idea and history of "passing." She states that, "[t]o pass is to deny one's true identity – family, heritage, class" (Sisney 64). According to Sisney, passing does not necessarily mean trying to be white, but rather is simply trying to pass yourself as something or someone other than who you really are (84). This is rampant in *Linden Hills* as all of the characters, with a couple of exceptions, are trying to fit themselves into what they believe they need to be in order to be successful. This is clearly seen, and discussed in chapter two, with Maxwell Smyth, and Roxanne Tilson. Each of them tries to change their appearance and behavior to what mainstream, white America has deemed appropriate. These characters are in Linden Hills, yet they continue to be something else in order to maintain that status. However, the reader feels uncomfortable while reading

these characters' stories, particularly Maxwell's. His life is described as unnatural. He is obsessed about controlling everything in his life so he is never unprepared. He controls his food intake and is on a strict diet so he can control his bowel movements, and even dislikes sex because it disturbs the consistency of his body that he has tried so hard to maintain (*LH* 104-05). Roxanne, on the other hand, is trying to pass as the woman of a successful black man's dreams. She has the attitude of marry well or don't marry at all (*WBP* 53), and tries desperately to relax her hair and lighten her skin in the hope that she will attract a "worthy" man to marry.

However, Virginia Fowler quotes from an interview with Gloria Naylor in her book that:

> …what happens to black Americans when they move up in America's society. They first lose family ties, because if you work for a big corporation, you may have grown up in Detroit but may end up living in Houston. Then there are the community ties. You can create a whole different type of community around you – mostly of a mixture of other professional, middle-class people – but you lose the ties with your spiritual or religious values. And ultimately, the strongest and most difficult ties to let go of are your ties with your ethnocentric sense of self. You forget what it means to be an African American (qtd. in Fowler 59-60).

Linden Hills is one such professional, middle-class community that Naylor refers to in the interview and Maxwell and Roxanne, being products of growing up in Linden Hills, are forgetting what it means to be African American. They instead, are trying to fit in to the white standard society has created. Maxwell does not even see the true message the *Penthouse* pictorial of the black model. She is pictured in a jungle as the prey of a white

hunter, bound to him with a chain. However, Maxwell sees her as triumphing over the white man in the last picture (she has her foot on his back), yet Willie and Lester see she is still chained and bound to him. They also see the pictures as a reference to the jezebel image that so many black women were trapped by during slavery, while that never registers for Maxwell. All he wants to see in the pictures is progress, but by doing that he has forgotten the history that Lester and Willie see (*LH* 115-16). Willie tries to explain this to Maxwell when he says that progress is "spelled W-H-I-T-E" (*LH* 114), however, Maxwell's refusal to see how the model is truly being depicted is the attitude that keeps him bound to living according to white America's standards.

Maxwell and Roxanne are not the only characters to be swept up in trying to pass. Laurel Dumont is also trying to pass, but for a different reason than Maxwell and Roxanne. While they know who they want to be, Laurel is still trying to figure it out and in the meantime tries to fake it. Her attitude has always been "fake it till you make it," however; she is realizing that she is not really making it. Fowler writes in her book,

> In Naylor's allegory, material success is identified with white culture, and its single-minded pursuit leads to the destruction of the human soul. A part of that destruction for the African American people who pursue this white dream is the loss of their ethnicity…There are numerous specific allegorical meanings in Naylor's tale, but its underlying concept is the death of the (black) human souls occasioned by pursuit of the (white) American dream of material prosperity (69).

Although Laurel has one of the most prestigious addresses in Linden Hills, a successful career, and just about anything else she thought she ever wanted, deep down she knows her life is really empty. This knowledge sends her into depression and in search to find a

place where she feels at home again. She goes to her grandmother, Roberta, in hopes to find just that, however, she can no longer relate to her grandmother as she, "…epitomizes the heritage that Linden Hills has destroyed…" (Collins 85). Roberta is very much like Grandmother Tilson: in touch with her cultural roots and proud of her background. Both women understand who they are because of their heritage and hold onto that. Laurel has lost the ability to do what her grandmother has and look within herself and be content, which is the reason she commits suicide.

What does it mean to be successful in non-financial terms and black?

The characters, who are able to resist the temptation in *Linden Hills* of selling the mirror in their soul, are the ones who are able to have real relationships. These relationships are the successes Naylor celebrates in her novel. These characters understand what Margaret Whitt states: "…what the fifth Luther Nedeed banks on nobody knowing – that 'they've lost all touch with what it is to be *them*. Because there's not a damned thing inside anymore to let them know (LH 59)" (Whitt 71). Ruth Anderson, a former Linden Hills resident divorces her husband and marries a poor man who suffers from a debilitating condition, the pinks, that occurs once a year. She has chosen poverty and true love over wealth, and therefore is happy. She knows that the residents of Linden Hills are empty and chooses to live a different way. Laurel, one of her friends from Linden Hills, used to pity her, but now thinks that Ruth pities her instead and sees why that would be. Laurel has finally realized what Ruth did years ago, yet does not know how to get out of the state she is in (*LH* 241).

Kiswana Browne, from *The Women of Brewster Place,* is also originally from Linden Hills and grew up on the same block as Lester and Roxanne Tilson. She too, sees

the emptiness of the residents of Linden Hills and that many of them have forgotten what it means to be African American. This is the reason she leaves Linden Hills and changes her name from Melanie to Kiswana. While she may be trying too hard to get back to her African roots and in doing so forgetting about her other backgrounds (her mother's ancestors were also Iroquois) (*WBP* 86), she has resisted the temptations of Linden Hills and, like Ruth, is happy. When the world gets crazy around them, both of these women can look at themselves and be content, knowing that they are living lives with real meaning and purpose.

These characters struggle financially, but the ones that are seen as successful have healthy relationships with others. Through Mattie Michael's interactions with the other characters on Brewster Place, it is clear that she has found peace within herself and her life, though she may not have financial success. She is able to be a mother figure to Ceil and a friend to Etta Mae, two relationships that fill her with joy and love. Though her life has not turned out the way she probably thought it would have, she is content with herself and the relationships she has with others. She is the central figure of the novel and is seen as the most successful of all the other characters. Etta Mae, on the other hand, is constantly searching for something. She has always searched for a successful black man to settle down with, just like Roxanne is now. She even thought Reverend Woods could be that man, however, realizes during their sexual encounter that he is no different than any of the other men she has ever been with. She then goes home to Mattie, who is waiting for her, which helps her realize that she already has what she is looking for: a home. (*WBP* 72-74). Through their friendship, each understands that they need to be happy with themselves first, which helps them find fulfillment and meaning to their lives.

As one continues to read the novel, it becomes clear that most of the characters are living on Brewster Place due to the relationships they have had with others in the past, however, they find peace with the new relationships they have with one another. For these characters, "[w]hat promises to make their lives richer than their environment would portend is the love and friendship they offer each other" (Fowler 35). These characters feed their souls with relationships instead of material goods. The lessons that have been learned and the new relationships that have been formed are what make these characters successful. Though they may not have much, they are truly living their lives and feeling real emotions, as they understand Grandmother Tilson's advice to Lester. Lester explains her advice to Willie stating:

> She would often say, 'Child, there's gonna come a time when you'll look at the world and not know what the blazes is going on. Somebody'll be calling you their father, their husband, their boss – whatever, And it can get confusing, trying to sort all that out, and you can lose yourself in other people's minds. You can forget what you really want and believe. So you keep that mirror and when it's crazy *outside*, you look inside and you'll always know exactly where you are and what you are. And you call that peace' (*WBP* 59).

Grandmother Tilson's advice is reminiscent of Roberta's attempt at helping Laurel. Roberta tries to get her to listen to blues music instead of the classical music she has been playing around the house, to bring her back to her roots; however, it does not work. Laurel has lost her mirror, and when she looks inside herself, she sees nothing. However, when the characters of *The Women of Brewster Place* look inside, they can see their roots and what makes them who they are.

What does it mean to be black and living in poverty?

While it seems as if Naylor is praising the characters in both books that live in poverty and have real relationships and feelings over those who have chosen material success and personal emptiness, she does not glorify living in poverty. There are many characters that live on Brewster Place who do not feel fulfilled and are still searching for what makes them feel content. Cora Lee is the perfect example of this. She is only content when she has an infant in her arms, but as soon as the child begins to grow up, she no longer feels happy and longs for another one. This has put and kept her in the state of poverty that she lives in. She did not finish school and cannot seem to hold down a job because of her need to have more children.

Like Cora Lee, Naylor depicts people who are looking for something and who have many different problems; there are gang members, drunks, and victims of violence, just to name a couple. The community and characters of the novel feel very real to the reader and could be representative of many sections of any major city in the country. While these characters' lives are filled with struggles due to their economic status, many of them are able to focus on the importance of relationships. While characters such as Ben, Lorraine, and Ceil, are still searching to connect with people, even though they have some real connections, many of the other characters realize what they have and are content with that. Those characters who are not content in their relationships with others are the ones who do not survive in the end.

Some may read these texts as Gloria Naylor saying that it is better for the soul to be poor instead of financially comfortable; however, I do not think that is her message.

Naylor is trying to break stereotypes of poor versus rich black communities and the people in those communities. What she is trying to show is the importance of what kind of person one is and their relationship to the community. While Naylor sets general rules for each of her communities, there are always exceptions. Not all of the residents in Linden Hills are shallow people; just as not all the residents of Brewster Place are good either. Kiswana and Cora Lee's families are from Linden Hills, and neither family, seem to be as shallow as many of the other Linden Hills residents. There are also mean spirited people on Brewster Place, like Sophie, the neighborhood gossip, and of course the gang members like C.C. Baker. Naylor shows that these communities are not completely one or the other. There are multiple layers to each place as Naylor is simply trying to show two different sides to similar issues. Fowler quotes Naylor in an interview saying in her book that, "…[Naylor] says, she not only 'had to get rid of some demons' but also was impelled 'to confront what it meant to be a black woman and to celebrate it'"(qtd. in Fowler 21). Naylor is referring to writing *The Women of Brewster Place* in this part of the interview, and while she explores being a black woman in this text, she does so also in *Linden Hills*. While *Linden Hills* may be more male-centric, she does focus on women as well as the relationship between the two sexes.

Challenges men and women in both novels face:

Each sex faces their own problems in these texts, which in turn effects the relationships the characters can have with one another. However, both sexes are suffering from and dealing with the consequences of racism in the texts, which is the most important factor in their relationships with one another. Charles E. Wilson discusses this in relation to *Linden Hills* and says:

> The paradox implied here is the focus of the text. If blacks succumb to racism, they are doomed; yet when they resist oppression they are fated for pain as well. Very subtly Naylor suggests that when fighting the evil of racism, by whatever means, one is destined to partake of a measure of that evil, especially when one loses focus of the purpose of the fight (Wilson 76).

The residents of Linden Hills are molding themselves after their white counterparts; the same counterparts that about a century before were publishing the "how to" books for recently freed slaves to adapt to living in "free" society that are discussed in chapter two. While their lives may be easier because of their financial success, the evil they are partaking in is turning away from their African roots and toward the white, racist society. Roxanne and Laurel are characters that are in two different stages of this. Roxanne is starting out and, "[i]nstead of gathering information that would deepen her self-pride, she remembers what will help her to understand the difficulty of obtaining a husband – and relegates her own identity to a secondary role (Whitt 82). Laurel, on the other hand, has already sold the mirror in her soul and is now trying to find her way back to her roots, but is so far gone, that she cannot (Toombs 96). Looking at these women side by side, one can only wonder if Roxanne is going to suffer a similar fate as Laurel, or will she see what is happening around her and leave like Ruth and Kiswana do?

Other women, however, like Mrs. Parker die in Linden Hills completely oblivious to the evil they have lived in for years. In fact Mrs. Parker was a valued and influential member of the community, so much so that Luther Nedeed read her eulogy. Even Willa Nedeed was complicit in the evil around her, completely blind to it, until her husband locks her in the basement and she is introduced to her fore-mothers-in-law through their

journals, Bibles, and other books. While many of the women in the community may not be as influential as these two and are not as directly involved in turning the community away from their roots, they do not fight against it, or even question it; they simply go along with everyone else.

The men in *Linden Hills* partake in this evil as well. Xavier is in love with Roxanne but will not marry her because she is not "good enough" according to Maxwell. While she did grow up in Linden Hills, she only lives on First Crescent Drive, the furthest block from the Nedeeds, which will not help Xavier's journey to success, according to Maxwell. While this may not seem particularly gendered, he is making the decisions of where the relationship is going to go, while Roxanne just hangs onto him. He even takes another woman to Winston's wedding, while he is still in a relationship with Roxanne. He cannot seem to move forward in their relationship, yet he does not want to let it go either.

Maxwell, a character discussed at length in chapter two, is also a clear example of someone who has turned his back on this culture in order to experience financial success. Of course, the character to partake in the evil of racism the most is Luther Nedeed. He, like his forefathers,

> …have lost all sense of who they are as African Americans (or as people, period)…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 part of this self-effacing proves, Naylor reminds the reader that the first Nedeed even helped the Confederacy during the Civil War and literally owned his wife Luwana (Toombs 96).

The present Nedeed comes from a line of men who have only cared about their financial success, and have turned their backs on their culture and anyone who has held onto their roots. Charles Toombs put it perfectly when he said, "[c]entral to 'making it' for the Linden Hills residents is the elimination of anything overtly connected to positive African-American life and culture" (Toombs 94). In order to deal with the racism they experience, the characters of *Linden Hills* try to move away from their culture and conform as much as they can to white patriarchy.

However, this cannot happen for the characters in *The Women of Brewster Place* who are in such a different economic situation, and therefore deal with the racism they experience differently. Through the characters of Eugene, C.C. Baker, and his gang the reader sees how, "Naylor grapples with the notion that black women ultimately become sacrificial lambs when black men battle the demons of white racism outside the home; they receive the brunt of the anger that black men, for various reasons, cannot bent on white men and a larger racist society" (Wilson 77). Eugene struggles with the feelings he has about not being able to take care of his family financially. This causes him to pick fights with Ceil on a regular basis and for their repeated break-ups, until he finally leaves her for good for what he says is a job opportunity (*WBP* 99-100). C.C. Baker and his gang struggle with becoming men in a society where they are always seen as less than and the inadequate feelings those experiences leave them with. White society does not let the male characters feel like men in many ways. As Naylor writes right before Lorraine's rape:

> [b]orn with the appendages of power, circumcised by a guillotine, and baptized with the steam from a million nonreflective mirrors, these young men wouldn't be

> called upon to thrust a bayonet into an Asian farmer, target a torpedo, scatter their iron seed from a B-52 into the wound of the earth, point a finger to move a nation, or stick a pole into the moon – and they knew it. They only had that three-hundred-foot alley to serve them as stateroom, armored tank, and executioner's chamber (*WBP* 169-70).

Once one looks past the phallic imagery Naylor chooses to use to set up the rape scene, one will see that she chose important parts of American history that black men were not allowed to participate in. Many of these images are from World War II where black men were still not able to serve with white men, and only a select few were able to be Tuskegee Airmen. The other images are Neil Armstrong landing on the moon and the presidency. While they were born male and therefore should have power according to many cultures, because of their race, they have none. The only power they have is over black women, which these characters exert, as, "Helen Fiddyment Levy observes, 'Through the brutal gang rape of Lorraine, Naylor connects violence against women directly to the cultural ideal that privileges male aggression, acquisitiveness, and dominance'" (Fowler 53). These boys are trying to reclaim their power over Lorraine, a woman who has rejected them because of her sexuality. Because the boys' sexuality is their last place of "power," this rejection was too much for them and they feel the need to prove their masculinity. This is not seen in *Linden Hills* as most of the male characters don't need to express this dominance in the same way because they have some power in their workplaces as they are very successful.

How does the Gothic connect with these questions?

The Gothic is primarily about expressing a society's fears. In these two novels Gloria Naylor is exploring the fears associated with losing one's cultural identity. While discussing the scene with Kiswana and Mrs. Browne, Charles Wilson comments that, "[t]o limit blackness to a narrow definition, according to Mrs. Browne, is to live in the past" (Wilson 54). This is what I believe Naylor's message through her novels is. Through these two particular novels, she is showing the black experience in two different socio-economic situations and the dangers of people trying to fit themselves into specific stereotypes. Mary Sisney writes that, "the black novel and the novel of manners share at least three fundamental and related concerns – the fight for acceptance, the loss of identity, and the sense of oppression" (Sisney 64). All three of these concerns are explored in these novels through the Gothic elements that Naylor uses such as the sins of the father, absent mothers, and religion versus the state. The residents of Linden Hills are fighting for acceptance from the Nedeeds (who are the fathers of the community) and many of the women in *The Women of Brewster Place* are fighting for their father's acceptance. The absent mothers in these texts causes there to be a loss of or alters the development of other characters' identities, and the state in many ways causes much of the oppression the characters in both novels experience.

While Gloria Naylor is warning her black readers against white patriarchy and alerting her white readers to the dangers of white patriarchy, she does not offer any concrete answers to any of the questions her novels raise. While in *Linden Hills*, "Naylor suggests that any alternatives to the soul-destroying values of patriarchy must reside in a feminized, working-class…the novel's ending does not suggest any real solutions or the

building of any kind of new society…" (Fowler 88). Willa destroys the Nedeed dynasty freeing Linden Hills from their power and oppression, allowing them the opportunity to really create an all-black community free from white patriarchy (at least while in Linden Hills). However, there is no indication that this is going to occur. Naylor has given them the opportunity, but what will they do? It is an interesting concept to think about in terms of reality. If Linden Hills were real, would the residents choose to continue to live on the path they are on or would they choose something different?

While working class women seem to be the key in *Linden Hills*, they too have their own obstacles in *The Women of Brewster Place*. The last chapter of the novel presents an interesting dilemma:

> The concept of collective support, or interdependence, functions as the ultimate theme to be developed. Instead of individuals struggling to survive alone or instead of allowing the past to circumscribe even their modest efforts, by the end of the novel, key characters are working together in a countermaneuver against the various obstacles that impede their progress. And even though this theme is pursued in a dream sequence, the narrative point is clear: inroads into societal improvement are made more easily and more permanently with communal support. When the women decide to dismantle the wall at the end of their dead-end street, they are working collectively to liberate themselves, both physically and mentally (Wilson 54-55).

While Naylor is making it clear through Mattie's dream that in order to really succeed, the community needs to come together and work as one, the characters of the novel never actually do this. Mattie wakes up and shrugs off the dream, not even telling Etta Mae

about it. Again, the reader is left with the question "what if?" What if the community did really work together to break down that wall? What if they worked together to break down all the invisible walls around them? Although it is naïve to think it is that simple, I do believe that Naylor is trying to say that the black community needs to work together to succeed. They need to hold onto their culture, whether that is African, Jamaican, Haitian, or any other culture. It is clear for the characters in these two novels that trying to fit into the standards of white patriarchy is holding the black community back, even the ones who are financially successful.

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