Gloria Naylor's Fiction

Gloria Naylor's Fiction:

Contemporary Explorations of Class and Capitalism

Edited by

Sharon A. Lewis and Ama S. Wattley

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In Memoriam

Gloria Naylor
1950-2016

and

for Sharon’s parents, Catherine and Arthur Anderson

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INTRODUCTION

SHARON A. LEWIS AND AMA S. WATTLEY

> The politics of class is the deepest, largest challenge.
> (bell hooks 116)

Across her collection of five novels, Gloria Naylor requires her readers to painstakingly contemplate African Americans' relationship to social class, economics and capitalism. By no means is Naylor the first or only Black American female writer to do so. Her contemporaries, Toni Morrison, Andrea Lee and Paule Marshall, for example, published fiction representing African Americans, across regional and historical settings, and their involvement in a corporate capitalist nation. Moreover, in 1993, Michelle Cliff, introduced the literary establishment to 19th century African American entrepreneur, Mary Ellen Pleasant, who was "no stranger to capital, respectful of it…as if born to the making of money…careful, knowing that commerce was not considered her concern… . She began her empire building by embodying Mammydom… taking care of guests in *her* hotel, washing their linen in *her* laundries, satisfying them in *her* restaurants" [emphasis ours] (*Free Enterprise* 105). The title of Naylor's novel, *Bailey's Café*, echoes the title of Michelle Cliff's novel, *Free Enterprise*. While Naylor's title expresses an individually owned, for-profit business (although the Café is a magical place, and Bailey is the nominal owner/cook), in particular, Cliff's title signals commercial, unregulated competition. "Competition" links these two economic systems. Referencing the *Free Enterprise* quote above, we call attention to the italicized "her" with its connotations of ownership: Pleasant's hotel, laundries, and restaurants linked in capitalistic commerce with Bailey's Café and neighboring Eve's Place.

African American Studies and feminist scholar Barbara Christian supports our thinking about the healthy number of recent African American women novelists who are attentive to race in connection with class, capitalism and economics. Christian reminds us that "Naylor's novels have been preceded . . . by an increasing concern among these writers, Morrison in *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1980), Paule

Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1982), Andrea Lee in *Sarah Phillips* (1984) and Ntozake Shange in *Betsey Browne* [1985] on the issue of a distinct Afro American middle class and on the implications of such a dimension in the Afro-American worldview" (107-108). Readers of Naylor's works by necessity grasp the multiple ways in which her fiction manifests the theme of capitalism, class and economics. It isn't so much that this theme is more prevalent in Naylor's work than in other African American literature. Rather, Naylor either integrates or foregrounds the motif of economics, class, and capitalism in a more complex, intricate way. Her novels explore not just one social class but the place (regional and/or psychic) where different classes converge, are antagonistic, or wherein her characters over a lifetime experience more than one social class. As Charles Rowell indicates in his interview with Naylor, she has "allow[ed] the whole spectrum of socio-economic classes to appear in African-American literature" (183), just as she herself, growing up, moved within several different classes.[1]

We believe that the Black American community is no less diverse than the nation in which it resides. As Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison and Makeda Silvera, to name a few, remind us in their non-fictional and fictional works, respectively, African Americans are a community marked by both sameness and difference, this latter across, at least, ability, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, religion, and, for our purposes here, social class. That is to say, the community is marked by divergent and often competing experiences and voices.

We, the editors of this volume, decided to write this book for four reasons. First, we are convinced that social class and capitalism remain delicate, often power-keg and habitually circumvented topics of conversation, matters about which most people in the United States are mis- and/or uninformed. For some, the mere mention of social class hints at a lack of decorum. Discussions about social class across social class resonate with the taboo of discussing race across race. Studies evidence that the privileged Others frequently experience shame and/or anxiety for the advantages of their race and class status. For the United States, a putatively democratic nation, the existence of a hegemonic order of power and privilege rings oxymoronic. Not only does a class system in connection with equality and social justice seem contradictory, but discourse about capitalism often cultivates charges of anti-capitalism. How, one queries, is it possible to negotiate extremes of wealth and poverty in a society institutionally underpinned by ideologies of cultural-economic equality? Social class, like race, and the economic system of capitalism are highly sensitive, generally off-limits dialogic topics. This volume and Naylor, herself, raise awareness of that otherwise dismissed or oversimplified component of economics within a nation marked by intersecting oppressions.

Second, a refusal to concede the multifaceted existences of Black life in the United States reinforces and perpetuates stereotypes and leaves false and inadequate images of African American reality. Third, unlike her literary foremothers, for example, Jessie Fauset, Dorothy West and Nella Larsen who captured the Black American middle and upper class life as marked by skin-color or complexion politics and/or embattled with racism, exclusively, Naylor proffers a more developed analysis of the Black middle class by situating her characters within a corporate/capitalist/for-profit economic framework. Finally, Naylor's fiction, in interweaving portraits of race, social class, economics, and capitalism fiercely rejects mainstream, popular, cross-race representations of African Americans. Among academics, it is common knowledge that subjectivities cannot be studied in isolation. Therefore, this volume spotlights one subjectivity, social class, interwoven with race and gender, and theorizes the affiliation between class and capitalism, especially as fictionalized by an African American female author who has confirmed throughout her oeuvre her interest in the mechanisms of capitalism as these relate to African Americans, at large, and African American women, in particular.

Naylor realizes that social class within a capitalist system, like all social categories, is convoluted and complicated, hardly a stringent bifurcation of good/evil, moral/immoral, superior/inferior. Naylor's fiction, as our contributors articulate here, includes and extends the exploration of middle and upper middle class African American existence, raising such questions as what it means for Black Americans to inhabit a capitalist nation. Christian agrees that most "Afro-American writers have tended to portray black communities as distinct from white society. . . [W]hen contrasts in class are discussed in these novels, they are usually in relation to the white world" (107). On the contrary, Naylor, through her fiction, insists that readers acknowledge and imagine the range of social classes within the African American community. Not only has she referred to herself as a womanist "foremother"[2] to black women writers whose creative work fictionalizes the intricacies of the bridge between race and social class in the United States, but her novels realize that social class is merely one element within the system of capitalism.

Naylor's novels apprehend the ways in which North American capitalism was launched by the enslavement of African Americans within an agricultural milieu which evolved into an industrial, now service and market economy.[3] In her interview with Nikki Giovanni, Naylor comments that "every nation marches on the shoulders of its merchants, and Black Americans have gotten into a service economy . . . . They will be the new drones, to replace the scriveners of Dickens's time" (Giovanni 1396). Naylor's works realize how capitalism as an economic system traps all Americans with the lure of consumerism, how systemic racism and misogyny continue to empower white supremacist corporate patriarchy, at the same time that she concedes that property and wealth do not necessarily or must not necessarily equate with greed and self-interest. We would even venture to say that Naylor's *Mama Day* proffers the possibility that community and the fruits of capitalism can co-exist. As Cliff's Pleasant uses her wealth to fund abolitionist efforts and to subsidize the Underground Railroad, several of Naylor's characters across novels are property owners of diverse classes and regions, all engaged in some form of enabling and empowering others. Before opening Naylor's fourth novel, readers are aware that Bailey is a proprietor, one who owns and/or manages a business. Before reading the novel's opening line, then, we safely assume that character, Bailey, claims a stake in a capitalist economic system. Later in the novel, we meet Eve, a property-owner of Eve's Place, a brownstone brothel, another place of commerce that, while illicit, provides shelter, a living and sense of community to the women residents. Mama Day, the title character of Naylor's third novel, is a coastal property-owning matriarch. *Linden Hills* centers on the Black upper class. Linden Hills is a Black American class-stratified community, its residents either self-employed or employed at Fortune 500 corporations. Brewster Place is an urban landscape of poor residents until Kiswana Brown(e) arrives which calls for a cross-class analysis. It is also equally important to include in a class analysis of the novel, Lorraine and Theresa, two lesbian characters, who have middle-class jobs, and reside on Brewster Place because of their sexual identity rather than their economic situation.

Naylor on Class, Capitalism, and Economic

We took the liberty of reading several interviews in which Naylor discusses her personal encounter with and evolving thoughts about social class, Western capitalism, and economics as these concern African Americans. It is apparent that Naylor repudiates strict dichotomies about social classes; that she comprehends both the detriments and benefits of a profit economy; and that her fiction scrutinizes and develops the assumptions of her literary predecessors and contemporaries. For example, Naylor reveals that she was born into a working-class family and, over time, with formal, advanced education and access to the publishing world, ascended the social class ladder. She shares with Bonetti that her birth family was

> so poor that [they] aspired to be working class, in an odd kind of way. But it was a different kind of poverty for them in the thirties and forties. You knew you you were poor . . . There was always hope that you could do better and your children could do better. And, indeed, that has been the case. (Bonetti 43)

With Rowell, Naylor goes on to discuss her personal experience of that transition as it is represented in *Linden Hills*:

> I am myself from a working-class family, and so my perspective is always going to include characters from that class. My family came out of the Mississippi Delta where they were tenant farmers. And in one generation they saw me graduate from Yale University with a [M]asters degree. (Rowell, 183-184)

Naylor differentiates material and spiritual poverty. She claims the former and was spared the latter. She tells Bonetti that "there was no impoverishment of the spirit when my parents were in Mississippi and when we stayed in Harlem. And that's what you have now. You have impoverished spirits along with the financial poverty" (43). Naylor remains deeply conscious of and concerned about the evolving economic conditions of African Americans as she continues to capture those experiences in her fiction.

But, how Naylor would name her social class identity today remains undetermined. In that interview with Bonetti, Naylor reveals that she is not disingenuous about her occupation as a renowned author and her status as a recipient of several prestigious literary awards and fellowships. Situating her work within a capitalist economic system, Naylor maintains that "we have to be honest that literature is a very bourgeois activity. It comes out of the middle class and is read primarily by the middle class. So you are preaching to the converted. Any true social change, and especially if you are talking about revolution, won't necessarily come through the arts. And this small cloistered world of the arts will not bring about true revolution" (Bonetti 42). Naylor understands, as well, that property-ownership financially advances and safeguards the proprietor as her grandmother owned a house in Harlem. Speaking with Ethel Morgan Smith, Naylor professes that she "ascribe[s] to what Malcolm X said: 'no one has a true revolution by integrating a lunch counter. A revolution is about land and power'" (1430). Her words recall the land owned by the early Nedeeds in *Linden Hills* which empowered the family and provided them with a certain degree of autonomy. Naylor also historicizes—by means of race and gender—her assessments of capitalism and social class. During her interview with Morgan Smith, Naylor concedes that "there is no simple answer" about Black upper class individuals, but she is concerned about the results of their participation in a corporate economy wherein they are forced to cede their blackness (1430). However, Naylor's fiction does not necessarily suggest that immersion in a capitalist economy forces all Black Americans to cede "community," "family," or "memory" as she clarifies in her conversation with Bonetti:

> GN: I'm not saying that every Black person, every affluent Black would live in a Linden Hills. A special type of affluent Black lives in that community.
> KB: Well, what is that special type?
> GN: It's the type who is willing to give up anything in order to succeed; that's it. People who have lost those ties that I talked about before, because there are many successful Blacks who have not lost those ties, those who revel in ties of family and community and religion. (Bonetti 47)

According to Donna Perry, Naylor seeks to "expose the hollowness of the American dream of success" (77). Naylor realizes that capitalism as an economic system is an entrenched, categorically oppressive system which may be modified but not dismantled. As a result, her works seem to suggest, awareness of capitalism's false ideologies is critical to African American cultural survival.

Moreover, Naylor says, quite candidly, that she is not, as a novelist, in the business of prophesizing or moralizing. She tells Toni Morrison: "I just don't agree with some people that books should make a statement… . I don't think art should be didactic… . And, if readers want to extrapolate a message, then they can do it on their own; I haven't put one in there for them. That's not my responsibility as a black or as a black woman" (Morrison 22). She similarly informs Pearl Cleage that she does "not feel [her] art should serve some political end. [She] can do that with [her] checkbook" (97). Nevertheless, Naylor draws a few revealing distinctions about what she believes her role as an author is when she says: "I'm not good about the solution. I'm better about the problem" (Cleage 69). Hence, although rejecting the function of prophet, Naylor is not averse to diagnosing some of the issues facing African Americans, nor is she shy about voicing her opinion about what has failed the

African American community, and what might work to save the Black American middle class. For example, she tells poet, Nikki Giovanni:

> I believe we should try self-determination. We tried integration, and that didn't work. And at some point people have got to start realizing that. It has not worked. Integration hasn't worked. So, where do we go from here? But we never get into that conversation. We just get into the conversation, how many more of us can we squeeze into this opportunity? How high can some few of us go? And just totally missing what's going on in the whole community. We do not have a true backbone, that I believe. Maybe it's the church, to some small degree, and maybe some businesses, but to me every nation marches on the shoulders of its merchants, and Black Americans have gotten into a service economy, you know. (1396)

Having read history, Naylor concedes integration remains a failed corrective to the lingering socio-economic struggle, across-class, of African Americans in the United States. Naylor also disparages the service function to which African Americans have been consigned, or in some cases, undertaken. Subsequently, Naylor proffers an alternative solution to integration, one which embodies all classes within Black America and one which would include a large independent collective of merchants making "distinguishable" contributions to the larger American capitalist system, and in turn, strengthening the African American community as a whole.

Rereading Naylor's novels, we were curious as to how she would respond to the question of whether it is possible for African Americans to dwell within a corporate/capitalist economic system without assimilating, without "selling one's soul," or foregoing one's culture and community. In an interview with Donna Perry, Naylor confirms that *Linden Hills* is

> about the stripping away of your soul when you move toward some sort of assimilation. . . . The novel was a sort of cautionary tale about that, about attempting to do the impossible – especially the accoutrements of success, you go to all the right schools, you wear the right clothes, you have all the right vocabulary, and you go as high as you possibly can, you still get that ceiling. You come up close to the fact that you are always going to be the Other; you will always be black (89).

While she converges discourses of race and class, Naylor's "sort of" hedges and raises the question of the nexus among her phrases "cautionary tale" and "prophetic" or "didactic," as expressed in her conversation with Morrison. But, Naylor concentrates on "assimilation" as opposed to class climbing. That is, while Naylor may, in fact, struggle with how to demarcate the classes about which she writes, she makes an unambiguous distinction between scaling and assimilating.

Definitions of Social Class

Recognizing that social class is difficult to define and measure, we have been vigilant in our analysis of Naylor's works. Naylor herself and several of her interviewers and theorists use the terms "middle" and "upper middle," loosely and interchangeably, to refer to the residents of her fictional Linden Hills. They are not to be criticized as social scientists—anthropologists, economists, sociologists—Marxist theorists, the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, all struggle within and across disciplines to identify which tools most accurately define and determine class within North America. For example, in "Social Class and Social Status," sociologist Carmi Schooler explains the subtle distinction between the two terms in the essay's title:

> The term "social class" is often used almost interchangeably with the term "social status." Most sociologists who deal with stratification empirically, however, distinguish between the two. They reserve the use of "social class" to reflect the types of societal divisions envisaged by Marx. Thus, Kohn and Słomczyński 1990 describes social classes as "groups defined in terms of their relationship to ownership and control over the means of production, and their control over the labor power of others" (p. 2). This definition can be amended to also include ownership and control over the means of distribution …. A further important distinction between the formal usage of "social class" and "social status" is that in many usages, including here, the former is categorical and the latter is linear. Consequently, in most formal sociological usages the characteristics that make up a class are categorical (e.g., controls the labor power of others) and not measured by points along a linear continuum (e.g., annual income, years of education). More generally, social class is commonly considered an ordered categorical variable with a limited number of classes (typically five) in which part of a class's definition is its relationship to other classes.

In his 1992 groundbreaking and sardonic description of class markers and class dynamics in the United States, Paul Fussell maintained that not only were Americans utterly class conscious but hopelessly unable to determine the number of social classes demarcating the United States. Fussell determined that the United States was stratified across nine social classes ranging from top to bottom out of sight. More theoretical commentators maintain that, steeped in the ideology of the American Dream bootstraps myth, Americans, ever striving, seem trapped in the hypocrisy of a democratic, egalitarian nation visibly divided by social class stratification. Even the U.S. Census Bureau grapples with how to demarcate class as factors such as occupation, income and education are class-based elements yet fluctuating. For our purposes here, we cautiously employ the following definitions of middle and upper middle class, respectively, from Business Dictionary.com:

> (Middle Class)
> Social class usually comprising of white-collar (non-manual) workers, lower-level managers, and small business owners, often constituting about one-third of the employed population of a country. The income of this class is higher than that of the working-class but lower than that of the upper-middle class (doctors, engineers, lawyers, middle-size business owners) and upper class.
>
> (Upper Class)
> Social class that can be distinguished from the classes beneath it (middle class and working class) by its influence, power, and wealth. Commonly only one percent or less of the population belongs to the upper class but it often controls one-third to two-thirds of the national wealth.

We are ever mindful, however, that ongoing scholarship has proven that social class as a subject position is fluid, amorphous and cannot be theorized in isolation of identities like age, ability, sexuality, gender and race.

Since the Civil Rights Movement, social science scholars and literary writers continue to offer provocative, albeit contradictory research and reflection on the African American middle class. Debates and disagreements within and across the social sciences wrestle with not so much the existence of a Black middle class but with, instead, that social class's involvement with systemic racism. While current data evidences a quirky expansion of the middle class, there is equal evidence pointing to 1) Blacks not on economic parity with their white class counterparts; and 2) a disappearance of the middle class, at large.

If we are to accept the statistics generated from economists and African American Studies scholars, middle and upper middle class Black Americans as demographic groups have grown since the Civil Rights Movement. However, surveys and research conducted by the Pew Research Center, the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, for example, mandate caution and penetrating interrogation of such promising assertions. Taking into consideration the assorted language and tools used to measure class (income, wealth, quantiles, household, poverty line, for instance), the notion of social class advancement is often misleading.

The Present-Day Necessity for the Book

Our collection's focus on social class and capitalism is timely given the United States' recent economic recession and slow, steady recovery. Not surprisingly, the Great Recession of 2008 disproportionately impacted African American communities of all economic classes, beginning with the housing crisis that led many African Americans to lose their homes or have them foreclosed. According to Gilliam White's article in *The Atlantic,* "The Recession's Racial Slant"*:*

> predatory loans . . . put owners into homes with high-interest mortgages and unaffordable balloon payment structures—where they then defaulted as home values collapsed—a practice that was disproportionately perpetrated against the poor and communities of color. Even for upper-income black households, subprime financing was still much more common than it was among low-income white households. The ACLU points to a report from the Department of Treasury which found that black families living in upper-income neighborhoods were two times more likely than white households in lower-income neighborhoods to have refinanced their homes with subprime loans. The report also notes that black and Latino households were nearly 50 percent more likely to face foreclosure than their white counterparts.

Naylor, a staunch proponent of property and business ownership in the African American community as a means of economic security and power would find this situation troubling, to say the least.

Also, as a result of the Great Recession, the gains African Americans had made economically in the early 2000s have been curtailed and, according to the American Civil Liberties Union, this trend is likely to continue, as "black families will continue to suffer the effects of this [recession] disproportionately for decades to come: By 2031, . . . [f]or black households, wealth will be 40 percent lower, which will leave black families about $98,000 poorer than if the recession hadn't taken place" (White). White points out why this forecast is particularly troubling for African Americans, noting that

> black households have always trailed significantly behind their white counterparts when it comes to wealth accumulation, and the recession expanded that gap. In 2013, the net worth of white households was 13 times greater than that of black households, the largest the gap has been since 1989, according to_Pew Research. Wealth often determines not only how well families can provide for themselves when it comes to basics like food and shelter, but it is a safety net for emergencies and helps to set up

> future generations for education, home ownership, and other opportunities that improve people's lives.

In many ways, therefore, the economic situation of many African Americans today is not very different from what it was when Naylor was writing her novels in the 1980s and 1990s. Unemployment rates among African Americans, for example, continue to be almost double that of whites. According to the Pew Research Center, "The unemployment rate has steadily fallen for all major racial and ethnic groups since 2010, but black unemployment has been at least twice as high as white unemployment in 47 of the past 54 years for which data are available, according to Current Population Survey data" ("On Views of Race and Inequality . . .").

Additionally, a stark economic divide between extreme wealth and extreme poverty has grown, and from reliable sources we learn that the middle class is shrinking. Karl Marx critiqued capitalism as a two-class system, the owners and the workers. Anyone following the latest economic pronouncements about class in the United States is aware of the prediction of the nation's disappearing middle class, that is, a socio-economic evolution toward a two-class structure, the wealthy and the poor. In short, according to numerous statistical reports, the United States is becoming a two-class (owners and workers) nation. Paul Mason declares that "the middle class is shrinking. A report from the Pew Research Center . . . found that, for the first time since the 1970s, families defined as 'middle income' are actually in a minority in the US – squeezed from both ends by an enlarged poverty-stricken group below them, and an enriched group above them." Mason finds agreement from Badger and Ingraham who claim that "[T]he great shrinking of the middle class that has captured the attention of the nation is not only playing out in troubled regions like the Rust Belt, Appalachia and the Deep South, but in just about every metropolitan area in America." Pew reported in December that "a clear majority of American adults no longer live in the middle class, a demographic reality shaped by decades of widening inequality, declining industry and the erosion of financial stability and family-wage jobs" (quoted in Badger and Ingraham). In addition, the data evidences that the children of Black middle class parents are not sustaining or improving upon their birth class. White believes that "perhaps what's most unsettling about the current economic climate in black America is that when black families attain middle-class status, the likelihood that their children will remain there, or do better, isn't high." In short, the United States is becoming a two-class (haves/have nots) nation, and all of this has led to greater skepticism about the ability of people to achieve the American

Dream, since the hallmark of that idea is that the next generation will do better financially than the previous one.

However, according to Chris Matthews, economists "are divided on what the data tell us about the financial health" of the United States' middle class. They want us to beware the current rhetoric about the "shrinking middle class," arguing that "blanket statements [about this group, like the group itself], are dangerous" as the very "concept of the middle class is nebulous to begin with."

Critical and Theoretical Approaches

This volume utilizes Marxist literary criticism as its primary interpretive tool. As Naylor's works are situated within the Black American literary tradition, Marxism and Black Feminist/Womanist theories are converged toward a deepened, more meaningful analysis. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan provide a most advantageous definition of Marxist literary criticism:

> Marxism considers literature and culture to be inseparable from the politics of class relations. According to Marxism, those with wealth in society also control the means for making wealth, from factories and corporations to the private schools that separate those destined for wealth-accruing professions such as law and medicine…from those destined for low-pay manual jobs. Literature and culture, according to Marxism, can occur only within this scheme or structure, this lay-out of class relations. (Rivkin and Ryan, 231)

While textual interpretive strategies are constantly amended over time, today, among literary scholars, it is generally accepted that humans are socially and historically constructed. That is to say that social and historical circumstances influence or shape who we are, what we value and believe, and to some extent, how we perceive the world. Consequently, texts must be studied from the socio-historical, economic and political milieu in which they are inscribed, set and read.

Barbara Christian sketches the points of class contrast typically found in the tradition of African American literature. She maintains that, for the most part, "the primary points of contrast in terms of class are decidedly the white world that tragically imposes its values on black people as a race" (107). Christian would agree, however, that Naylor complicates the reality of property as power in a capitalist nation. Christian submits that Naylor poses the question: "How does one fight power without taking on the values of those who have power"? (120).

While we agree with Christian that Naylor "demonstrates the effects of class distinctions on the Afro-American community" (117), we contend that Naylor complicates "the solution of money and status as a means to empowerment" (122), by introducing the Marxian concept of property and land ownership, at least. Recall, for example, Etta Mae's material existence once her son has squandered her life savings in *The Women of Brewster Place*.

In essence, heretofore, African American literature seemed glued to the oppositionality of romanticizing the impoverished and demonizing the Black middle and upper middle classes. The works we bring together here, however, recognize Naylor's acknowledgement of and social class differences within Black America. The contributing writers 1) apply Marxist literary theory and Black feminist interpretive strategies in order to critique Naylor's fiction as it examines the intersectionality of race, gender, class and capitalism; and 2) reveal the ways in which Naylor undermines, rejects, or dismantles an oppositional class model and, alternatively, constructs a different set of social class-related questions for readers of her fiction to scrutinize.

Chapter Essays

Anita August's essay, "I Need a Prince to Watch Over Me. *Really?!* Re-Visioning "Happily Ever After" in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*," examines Naylor's black womanist- feminist reworking of the social script of literary fairy tales in *The Women of Brewster Place*, namely, its idea of "happily ever after" for women and how this motif extends and perpetuates patriarchal notions of submission and obedience. August argues that the isolating, alienating presence of the wall on Brewster Place makes "happily ever after" impossible to attain in its original construction. Focusing primarily on the *Little Red Riding Hood* fairy tale, August notes that the male characters like Eugene, Basil, C. C. Baker, and Reverend Wood play the role of the predatory wolf in the novel to the women of Brewster Place's naïve Red Riding Hood. August argues that rather than advocating for marriage and a husband for the women of Brewster Place, as one would in a fairytale, Naylor advocates for the destruction of the economic and political barriers that keep these women oppressed and for the re-fashioning of "happily ever after" from a male-female relationship to a women-centered sisterhood. August's essay brings out the feminist ideas that influenced Naylor's first novel. For example, in an interview with Angels Carabi, Naylor states that

> women growing up in the 1960s had opportunities open up because of the Civil Rights and Women's Movements. The black woman profited from both to a certain degree. Those who were talented and determined could push their way through; the assumption was no longer that your only goal in life was to find a "good man" and take care of the home and the kids. Women were being shown that they had a choice. Before the 1960s, it was very different. Whether or not you were talented, you encountered a stone wall in front of you" (112).

Hence, a character like the middle-aged Etta Mae Johnson who is still looking for a prince charming to sweep her off her feet so that she can live "happily ever after" is told lovingly by her best friend Mattie that seeking a job would be a better choice. Mattie's response reinforces the need for women to rely less on a man for their financial and emotional needs, and more on themselves and one another.

While August's essay focuses on the oppressive, fictional environment of Brewster Place, Shamika Mitchell's essay, "Cut the Check: Commodity, Capitalism and Commerce in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," examines the fictional island of Willow Springs in Naylor's *Mama Day*, ancestral land that the residents resist selling to interested developers. Interspersing her analysis of Naylor's novel with historical and present-day examples of economic dispossession and displacement of African Americans due to land loss that leads to economic instability, Mitchell notes that the novel serves as a harbinger of the significant gentrification that was beginning at the time of the novel's publication and continues to occur in major urban cities throughout the United States, as well as on the very Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina that the fictional Willow Springs evokes. Likening the enslavement of African people and the exploitation of their labor to the more current land-grabbing of African American property, Mitchell argues that both involved the "commodification of Blackness" for commercial gain, just as other land-grabbing efforts throughout the years have been used to disenfranchise and economically disempower African Americans. The residents of Willow Springs must always remain alert to capitalist machinations from the government and land developers so as not to be duped into having their land taken from them. Mitchell notes that while the novel ends optimistically, the residents of the real-life Sea Islands are in a more precarious position when it comes to the preservation and control of their land.

Both August and Mitchell, in their respective essays, point out the importance of property ownership to Naylor, with August arguing in regard to Mattie Michael's purchase of Miss Eva's home in *The Women of*

Brewster Place: "Naylor implies that closing the political and economic gap that mitigates the oppression and subjugation of black women's lives is more important than any relationship with men." Likewise, Mitchell argues that the residents of Willow Spring recognize their ownership of their ancestral land as economic and communal empowerment. In various interviews throughout the years, Naylor has emphasized the need for African American ownership of property and businesses, arguing that integration curtailed this important means of empowerment.[4] The Willow Spring residents' refusal to sell the land they own is Naylor's way of bringing about, in fictional form, her strong belief in Malcolm X's statement that a true revolution must involve land and power.

Just as Mitchell places *Mama Day* and its focus on land-grabbing in the context of slavery and the exploitation and commodification of black bodies and labor, so too, Maxine Montgomery, in her essay, "Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*: Selling Sex in the Cultural Marketplace," places the issue of black female sexuality in the context of slavery and the sexual exploitation and objectification of the slave woman's body, which was bought and sold as much for its reproductive and sexual value as for its labor. Moreover, both Mitchell and Montgomery address the question of the role women play in Naylor's novels in terms of economic and financial empowerment under capitalism, with Mitchell examining how it is women who act as agents in becoming land owners (Sapphira Wade) and maintaining that land ownership (Mama Day) for future generations. Similarly, Montgomery looks at Eve's role in not only becoming a self-made woman and establishing her own business, but in providing a safe space for the women who reside at her boardinghouse/brothel, as well as a place for the reclamation of their identities and sexual selves. Thus, Eve serves as an example of the level of autonomy one must achieve in order to exist outside of "masculine hierarchy." Montgomery argues in her essay that the women who find their way to Bailey's Café and Eve's brothel often find prostitution to be an inevitable means of employment given the harsh economic circumstances from which they have come and given the societal notion of viewing women's bodies as "articles of exchange in a consumer-driven, for- profit system." These women, therefore, attempt to use their sexuality to subvert the capitalist system. Montgomery points out, however, that Naylor complicates this issue of the commodification of women's bodies as an exclusively male practice by having Miss Eve, a woman, serve as the madam in her own brothel. Yet, Eve's brothel also serves as a place of healing for the prostitutes who work there; her dwelling becomes a Garden of Eden for wayward outcasts. As such, Naylor overturns the traditional notion of the Garden of Eden as a place where sinful behavior and disobedience led to banishment and exile. On the contrary, in Naylor's novel, it is a place for restoration. Hence, Montgomery shows how these marginalized women seek to own and control their own sexuality and wrest if from the male gaze and its association with oppressive capitalism and adherence to traditional gender and sexual roles.

The next two essays examine Naylor's second novel *Linden Hills*, the one to which she devotes much discussion in interviews, especially as it relates to the theme of economics and class. Of the novel, Naylor says in an interview with Angels Carabi:

> In *Linden Hills* I wanted to look at what happens to black Americans when they move up in America's society. They first lose family ties, . . . 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. Black Americans with a higher social status often have to confront issues of racism without the things that have historically supported the working class, like the family, the community, the church, or just their own sense of self. (120)

In his essay, "In the Shadow of *Cosby*: Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* and the Postintegration Black Elite," Terrence Tucker contrasts the presentation of upper middle class African American life in Naylor's *Linden Hills* with the popular television sitcom *The Cosby Show* that premiered in 1984, a year before the publication of Naylor's novel, and continued its run until 1992. Tucker points out that Naylor's novel presents a more grim picture of life for blacks within this elite social class, one in which the farther down on Linden Hills the residents live, the wealthier they are, but the more they seek to separate themselves from their poor and working class racial counterparts, as well as from one another and their cultural identities, and to assimilate into white society; it is, basically, a descent into hell, á la Dante's Inferno, with Luther Nedeed in the role of Satan. Despite the purpose for which Linden Hills was originally built—to defiantly rectify the racial exclusion blacks faced from whites in terms of where they could reside, Nedeed has become a slave to capitalist ideas of profit and to mimicking white attitudes and behavior, not the least of which is exclusionary measures of keeping out blacks who do not have the status or conform to the white Western ideals to which he aspires.

On the contrary, *The Cosby Show* portrayed a more optimistic view of the black elite with the Huxtable family, who, while materially wealthy and having a number of multicultural friendships, are grounded within

African American expressive culture, comfortable in their skin, and involved with the working class through a community center. While the show had its share of critics who were skeptical that black families headed by a physician and a lawyer even existed—that is, a black elite, the show also received criticism for its failure to address racial subject matter as part of its plot. Tucker argues that the contrasting views of Naylor and Cosby are complementary, and anticipate the continuing tension that exists for the black elite, as well as serving as forerunners for subsequent portrayals of upper middle class African American life. Tucker also contends that *Linden Hills* serves as a critique, not just of the black elite, but of the American Dream of material success as a whole, and especially integration into the mainstream, which Naylor believes has been ineffective and has weakened black communities (see Bellinelli interview, 107-108; Nikki Giovanni interview, 1396). While the original intent of the founders of Linden Hills was to create an all-black elite community in defiance of white exclusionary practices, the ironic reality is that while maintaining an all-black façade, the residents of Linden Hills have sought a colorblind success and conformity to white Western ideals. This reading of *Linden Hills* is in keeping with Naylor's own thoughts about the struggles of upper class blacks, as she writes that the black upper class was "so eager to integrate into the white world so they could make believe that their good work would make them colorless. After all, that's what America is all about" (Morgan Smith 143). Hence, Tucker's essay examines the utopian vision of upper class black life on *The Cosby Show* against the more ominous view in Naylor's novel where success comes at a psychic and cultural cost.

The psychic and cultural cost of upward mobility is at the heart of Sharese Willis's essay, "The Price of Identity in *Linden Hills,*" which looks at the topic of names and naming in *Linden Hills*. In an interview with Sharon Felton and Michelle Loris, Naylor comments that she would like to see a literary scholar examine the way she uses names in her texts, saying:

> I would like someday for someone to look at. . . the whole act of naming, names themselves within my work because that's real conscious when I play certain games with that. I think the naming of characters and what place names play and how they play out. That would interest me to read about my work. And especially I think because I get names first and when you asked me about the creative process the first thing I did were names. Named the book, named the character, then the other stuff gets filled in later. (148-149)

While Naylor names the women in *Bailey's Café* after biblical women, her use of naming in *Linden Hills* is more subtle. Willis analyzes the similarly named Willie and Willa as complimentary figures; Luther Nedeed's surname as a play on the term "de-Eden," which befits his role as both godlike and satanic figure; the meaning of Laurel Dumont's name, which suggests victory, an identity she has lost touch with in becoming someone's rich wife; and the British-spelled surname of Maxwell Smyth that gives him a sense of refinement and power in challenging others' assumptions of his racial identity and his self. In addition to naming is unnaming, or the failure to name, which is consistent with lacking an identity. Willis looks at this in relationship to the Nedeed wives, all of whom are known only by their marital designation, Mrs. Nedeed, as well as to Luther's failure to name his son, and thus, his failure to acknowledge and approve him as the next in line to acquire Linden Hills. Equating the motif of naming with identity, Willis argues that in the pursuit of greater wealth and status, the residents of Linden Hills are as willing to surrender their racial and cultural identities as they are to relinquish, change, or forget their name and its power.

Finally, in "The Economics of Identity in *The Men of Brewster Place,"* the issue of identity—male identity—is at the forefront. Charles Wilson examines Naylor's fifth novel, which explores the lives of the black male characters who readers first encountered in her debut novel, *The Women of Brewster Place,* looking at how, as black men, these male characters have been circumscribed by capitalism, as well as by racism. Wilson shows how these men struggle with a sense of emasculation and inadequacy that derives from their economic oppression and the strategies they use to survive the psychological toll these emotions inflict upon them and in their relationships. Those who survive are the men whose strategy involves internally defining their manhood and self-worth for themselves, rather than accepting negative definitions of black men or prevailing images of manhood that exist under capitalism, men such as Ben, who lives within himself rather than according to external forces, and Basil, who defines manhood as the maturity to accept responsibility for his actions rather than flee from his obligations. Those who fail are the men who internalize capitalistic, patriarchal notions of manhood, such as Eugene, who uses his failure to be a good provider as an excuse to leave his marriage without divulging his homosexual urges, the Reverend Moreland Woods who cares more for his own selfish desires for political and economic advancement than about the needs of his congregation or community, and C. C. Baker, who finds satisfaction in usurping his stepfather's role as financial provider in the family, despite the illegal means by which he supplies for their needs. Those who thrive are men who reject capitalist ideals of material consumption and seek the betterment of others, such as Abshu, who works with the youth and takes bold action against those who would betray and displace members of the community. Wilson argues that, with the exception of Reverend Woods and C. C. Baker, the other men, to varying degrees, seek to reform themselves and positively impact others rather than focus on material and capitalist ideas from which others derive definitions of manhood.

Notes

1. As a child, Naylor moved from Harlem to the more middle class borough of Queens (Bellinelli 106).
2. In an interview with Charles Rowell, Gloria Naylor acknowledges her role as literary foremother when she says:

   > [W]hat is going to happen increasingly as we move into the 21st century is that we're going to see a lot of young writers who have never had a connection, no direct connection, to their Southern roots. These writers are coming out full blown and middle-class. And it's fascinating to see some of the things they will hold on to . . . . Maybe I am sort of the foremother of that happening, because I'm old enough to be their mother. That's for sure. (184)
3. We are indebted to Bob Herbert's timely documentary, *Against All Odds: The Fight For the Black Middle Class*, which strengthens our fundamental premise that any critique of the black middle class must be a mitigated critique, one which takes into account that the African American experience begins with slavery, in particular, centuries of free labor; that a marginalized community must provide for itself with a host of professional occupations (for example, doctors, teachers, realtors/landlords, entrepreneurs, small business owners, bankers, lawyers, funeral directors, clergy, etc.); and that the desire for property and jobs as security/equity has been a frustrated and forbidden desire through the injustices of segregation, Jim Crow, and sweeping systemic racism.
4. In Naylor's interview with Ethel Morgan Smith, for example, Naylor remarks:

   > Now if the Civil Rights Movement had brought black folks big land ownership, then I'd say fine, it worked. But the older I get the more I believe in the spirit of Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey. Don't be running after white folks for a few crumbs; build your bakery. Build your own house. Get yourself some land and a basic profession so that people will have to come to you. If black folks had taken that advice, the texture of the black community would be very different today. It would be stronger . . . But what I see is a huge gap for black Americans . . . . I see few in the merchant class-like mom and pop stores. I've seen that transfer of power from Jewish Americans to Pakistanis, Indians and Koreans, who now make up the merchant class. Black Americans have resorted to selling

> their labor to the government, which is the largest employer of the black middle class. Black Americans also sell their skills to corporate America who only use them as drones. That's how I feel about integration. I think it’s time to reexamine it (1430).

Also, see Bellinelli interview, p. 107-108 and Nikki Giovanni interview p. 1396.

Recommended Reading List (to increase understanding of Marxist Literary Theory)

- Marx, Karl - (with Friedrich Engels) *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848; *Das Kapital*, 1867; "Consciousness Derived from Material Conditions" from The German Ideology, 1932; "On Greek Art in Its Time" from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859
- Trotsky, Leon - "Literature and Revolution," 1923
- Benjamin, Walter - "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1936
- Lukács, Georg - "The Ideology of Modernism," 1956
- Althusser, Louis - *Reading Capital*, 1965
- Jameson, Frederic - *Marxism and Form, The Political Unconscious*, 1971
- Eagleton, Terry - *Marxism and Literary Criticism, Criticism and Ideology*, 1976
- Habermas, Jürgen - *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 1990
- Adorno, Theodor W. - *Notes to Literature*, 1991 (series)
- Purdue Online Writing Lab https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/05/

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“African American Income.” *Black Demographics*, www.blackdemographics.com/household/african-american-income/ Web. July 2016.

Against the Odds: The Fight For a Black Middle Class. Writ. & prod. Bob Herbert. PBS. WNET, New York, 6 March 2017. Television.

Badger, Emily and Ingraham, Christopher, “The Middle Class Is Shrinking Just About Everywhere In America,” *The Washington Post*, 11 May 2016.

Bellinelli, Mateo. “A Conversation with Gloria Naylor.” 1992. In *Conversations with Gloria Naylor*. Ed. Maxine Lavon Montgomery. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004. 105-110. Print.