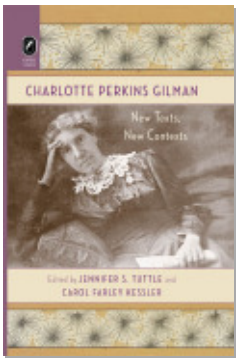
10. The Madwoman's Other Sisters



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The Madwoman's Other Sist[er]

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Gloria Nay[lor,] and the Re-Inscription of Loss

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> [W]e have painfully and laboriously evolved and carefully main[tained among] us an enormous class of non-productive consumers,—a class which [is half the] world, and mother of the other half. We have built into the constitu[tion of the] human race the habit and desire of taking. . . . We have made fo[r ourselves] this endless array of "horse-leech's daughters, crying, Give! give!" To consume food, to consume clothes, to consume houses and furniture and decorations and ornaments and amusements, to take and take and take forever,—from one man if they are virtuous, from many if they are vicious, but always to take and never to think of giving anything in return except their womanhood,—this is the enforced condition of the mothers of the race.
>
> —Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (118–19)

> When I put Willa in that basement my overall idea was to have this very con-servative upper-middle-class black woman through her discovery of all those remnants from the past wives who'd lived in that house, just get up, walk out of there and say, "No, this is shallow. This is not for me." I wanted her to learn from those lessons in history. But what eventually evolved through all the pain that she went through was the discovery that she liked being where she was—a conventional housewife. And there is this moment when she says not only to the reader, but to me—"I was a good wife and a good mother. And I'm not going to apologize to anyone for that." That was a real surprise to me; I hadn't planned on the character doing that.
>
> —Gloria Naylor, "A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison" (Montgomery 16)

I.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the nineteenth-century narrator, effectively locked in an attic suite of a colonial mansion as a part of her treatment for neurasthenia, suffers a psychic collapse. She is fed to indulgence, forced into a state of physical idleness, socially isolated, and forbidden to do what she loves most—write. Her husband teases her with infantilizing nicknames and promises her freedom once she allows her health to improve. Bored, she fixates on the dizzying wallpaper that symbolizes her captivity, ultimately imagining herself as the woman she perceives trapped behind its bars. Her physician husband has instigated and supports her treatment.

In the twentieth-century novel *Linden Hills* by Gloria Naylor, Willa Prescott Nedeed has been locked in the basement of the family mansion by Luther, her precise and emotionally withholding husband. Enraged that the chocolate-complexioned Willa has given birth to a pale-skinned son, a child who, in fact, bears the traits of the anonymous female ancestors of his paternal line, Luther decides to get rid of the child and discipline its mother. Willa consequently is starved, forced into a state of physical idleness, socially isolated, and taunted with promises of release once she admits her guilt and rehabilitates herself. Luther is a well-respected, though secretly loathed and feared, leader of Linden Hills, the upper-middle-class, African American enclave founded by his forebears.

I open with these two strikingly similar though distinctive texts in order to meditate on how writers create conversations across place and time. A central struggle in twentieth-century women's literature and letters of the United States has been the search for intellectual foremothers, the remapping of a vast network of traditions, the fostering of new conceptions of how they are constructed. More than a search for identity, which assumes an isolated, though valid, undertaking, a search for artistic genealogy permits a wider understanding of the individual thinker in relation to community, of community itself, and of the ideology that informs its rituals and structure. For women in the United States, the traditions that intersect to form our literary and intellectual canons have often been products of the same entrenched forms of stratification and divisions, including around race, class, and sexuality, that trouble a multiplicity of other often more immediate interactions. The reality in the United States for black and white women, in particular, is that the experience of self and community has largely taken place within intraracial paradigms. Or as Hazel Carby stresses in warning against an essentialized feminism:

> in order to establish the common grounds for a unified women's movement, material differences in the lives of working-class and middle-class women or white and black women have been dismissed. The search to establish that these bonds of sisterhood have always existed has led to a feminist historiography and criticism which denies the hierarchical structuring of the relations between black and white women and often takes the concerns of middle-class, articulate white women as a norm. (17)

Nevertheless, the larger record reveals the ongoing interactions, alliances, and antagonisms—political, economic, cultural, and personal—that have marked this collective history.[1]

Distinctive authors each, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Gloria Naylor are profoundly marked by era, place, and race. There is nothing inevitable in their juxtaposition. But I believe that creating a dialogue between their respective works permits the emergence of a conversation that ponders the specificities, intersections, and fault lines of how we envision the larger literary tradition and feminism itself. Borrowing from Ann duCille, I want to acknowledge the complexity of these oftentimes elusive and ephemeral exchanges. For as she argues about the framing of an African American literary tradition, we cannot

> continue to claim an African American literary tradition as an island, entire unto itself, separate from and uninfluenced by so-called white cultural constructs and Western literary conventions. Intertextuality cannot be defined as movement solely from black text to black text, from one black author to another. Rather, such resonances must be viewed as cutting across racial identities, cultural spaces, and historical moments. (9)

For instance, one could easily place Gloria Naylor in the chain of artistic descent arising from nineteenth-century black women novelists, their modern-day successor and literary progeny. Yet, when Naylor refers to works by postbellum black women writers, her reticence feels instructive:

> black women in our literature were continually depicted as overly chaste and virtuous. Novels such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins's *Contending Forces* had light-skinned heroines whose sterling morals were instruments in the cause of racial uplift . . . [;] always at the center of the issue were black women, whose sexuality was believed to reflect upon the entire race. And black female sexuality was therefore whitened and deadened to the point of invisibility. (Naylor, "Love and Sex" 22)

As well documented by contemporary scholars,[2] for African American women writing in the postbellum era, gender was by necessity subordinated to race, particularly in the increasingly discriminatory world of the United States of the post-Reconstruction era. Referred to as the "nadir" of African American history, these postbellum/pre-Harlem Renaissance decades were "characterized by the emergence of increasingly virulent racist ideologies, disenfranchisement, denial of public services, and white mob violence" (Peterson 36). With the internationalism and economic power of the Gilded Age, African Americans were further sacrificed to the cause of white, nationalistic unity; scapegoated as degenerate perpetrators of violence; and portrayed as the incarnation of a debased sexuality. In an era in which African Americans were consumed by issues revolving around economic survival, political enfranchisement, and social justice, a desperate need developed for images of strength, endurance, and triumph. Thus emerged the often creaky prototypes of which Naylor complains—an earnest but suspect goodness, an idealized black woman purified by her relative whiteness.

I believe that Gloria Naylor's ambivalence is in part linked to the fact that her agenda arises from a political position related, though far from identical, to Gilman's. While their heroines are duly conflicted and hedged in by pressing social obstacles, both authors write from a space of assumed freedom and theoretical—if not lived—equality. Gilman is a product of the New Woman movement, which challenged the limited socioeconomic opportunities and political conservatism of the previous generation. On the other hand, Naylor's own convictions are the result of her experiencing tangentially the black liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Even more insistently, they may reflect her conflicted response to both civil-rights gains, which further eroded black cultural and political unity, and the women's rights movement.[3] As a result, Gilman's and Naylor's protagonists embody a fraught agency that is easily eroded by those oppressive forces that would seem to nurture and sustain them. While race informs the challenges experienced by their characters, their characters' positions are overwhelmingly determined by their gender status and class privilege, which neither character is prepared to relinquish.

Yet Charlotte Perkins Gilman is admittedly a controversial figure to read in relation to Naylor. Although a feminist committed to politically progressive principles and reformist causes, Gilman exhibited the tensions of the epoch. As Susan Lanser explains:

> If we locate Gilman's story within the "psychic geography" of Anglo-America at the turn of the century, we locate it in a culture obsessively preoccupied

> with race as the foundation of character, a culture desperate to maintain Aryan superiority in the face of massive immigrations from Southern and Eastern Europe, a culture openly anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, anti-Catholic, and Jim Crow. . . . Across the United States, newly formed groups were calling for selective breeding, restricted entry, and "American Protection" of various kinds. White, Christian, American-born intellectuals . . . not only shared this racial anxiety, but . . . "blazed the way for ordinary nativists" by giving popular racism an "intellectual respectability." (425–26)

These assumptions inform Gilman's assertions about human culture and the relative worth of different social systems and racial groups. In *Women and Economics,* for instance, she argues that so important is the civilizing influence of Anglo-American society that "it would be better for a child to-day to be left absolutely without mother or family of any sort, in the city of Boston . . . than to be supplied with a large and affectionate family and be planted with them in Darkest Africa" (180). Relying on the logic of social Darwinism, she also insists that the purpose of motherhood "is to reproduce the race by reproducing the individual; secondarily, to improve the race by improving the individual. The mere office of reproduction is as well performed by the laying of eggs to be posthumously hatched as by many years of exquisite devotion; but in the improvement of the species we come to other requirements" (178). Whether one reads Gilman's assertion of "race" to mean humanity as a species or as a particular biological category based on phenotypic divisions of humankind supposedly reflecting more deeply inheritable traits—and the two are fairly fluid—what is striking in her argument is how simultaneously radical it is in its feminist rejection of the inevitability of maternity and reactionary in its racialism and ethnocentrism. Inflected by the pseudoscientific doctrines of the nineteenth century, it is less informed by the logic of either nature or nurture than the influences of racialist and ethnocentric notions of cultural value. Her ideology reveals profound fears of individual, and thus social, degeneration resulting from contamination by inferior cultural influences: "Human functions are race-functions, social functions; and education is one of them" (180). Or as Lanser further points out, in spite of her "socialist values, her active participation in movements for reform, her strong theoretical commitment to racial harmony, her unconventional support of interracial marriages, and her frequent condemnation of America's racist history" (429), Gilman's firm belief in the superiority of white, upper-class, Protestant culture influenced her often visionary politics. As a result, she exhibited the intellectual contradictions of a radical political agenda that was unable to divest itself of its own forms of privilege.

On the other hand, few critics have examined Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* along with texts by non-black women writers.[4] Naylor herself has not commented on those connections. A generous interviewee who has written several articles on her work and the works of other writers, she has not acknowledged Gilman's influence and, as mentioned, has only referred to black, postbellum women authors ambivalently and in passing. Still, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's and Gloria Naylor's literary paths cross in telling ways, particularly in both women's embrace of their role as intellectual activists committed to feminist principles, if not always adhering to all aspects of its ideological tenets. Most strikingly, both women came into intellectual and artistic maturity at revolutionary moments for women writers; for each, the written word, and the career allowed by it, permitted a kind of intellectual and emotional salvation.

Gilman, though experiencing childhood economic deprivation when her family was abandoned by her father, possessed the cultural capital of her racial status, ethnic and regional identity, and family connections, particularly her relationships to her paternal Beecher aunts of the powerful New England clan. Investing in an idealized vision of domesticity, she ignored her misgivings and abandoned her earlier artistic training for the role of wife and mother; as is well documented, the restrictive medical treatment and subsequent emotional collapse provided the biographical material for her seminal work of short fiction, "The Yellow Wall-Paper." Gilman's rejection of the enforced passivity symbolized by her status as a conventional wife and mother allowed her the courage to pursue a utopian feminism; her subsequent career included work as a sociologist, novelist, poet, short-story writer, journalist, and lecturer for social reform. Rather than an isolated individual experience, her career was made possible by earlier generations of female activism and a potent wave of woman's suffrage agitation that permitted her to fill an important cultural niche and thus to craft a professional identity.

Naylor, the child of working-class, segregated New York City, is one generation removed from rural, Jim Crow Mississippi. The oldest of three daughters, hers was a close family deeply bound to Southern black culture and the warmth of extended family networks. Unlike Gilman, she did not have an easily bartered cultural capital; like her, however, she had important role models in strong, authoritative female relatives. As significantly, a shy child and adolescent, literature became an intellectual refuge for her. After having devoted her young adulthood to work as a missionary with the Jehovah's Witnesses, she was disillusioned with institutional religion and realized she had few marketable skills. In addition, a brief marriage ended in divorce. She thus decided to pursue a higher education. In the process, she wrote *The*

Women of Brewster Place, which won an American Book Award for First Fiction in 1983. *Linden Hills,* her second novel, was her MA thesis at Yale University. For Naylor, writing functioned both as a balm and a form of political engagement: "It pulled me out of a severe depression [and] symbolized me finally taking hold of myself and attempting to take my destiny in my own hands" (7). As with Gilman, Naylor's career can be viewed within a larger trajectory of African American women's literary participation. As with Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, her most immediate and well-known predecessors, a niche was being created for black women's authorial voices. While in no small part a response to aggressive marketing on the part of the publishing industry and the mainstream hunger for novelty, it also mirrored the increasingly assertive presence of black women as political agents and consumers.

Thus, not only are Gilman and Naylor the first generation of women authors in their respective cultural categories to have an extensive and ongoing presence as self-supporting writers, but they accomplished this by using a strategic feminism to interrogate the role of women in their own marginalization. Specifically, each offers an unsparing critique of unchallenged patriarchal dominance. Yet, in doing so, both expose women's often contradictory relationships to masculine power. Through the trope of madness, both writers explore the damage sexist systems cause individual women. Gilman exposes the psychological havoc produced by a supposedly well-intentioned, but profoundly misogynistic, condescension. Intriguingly, however, by contrasting the white woman locked in the relative opulence of the attic with black women hidden in the obscurity of the basement—the figurative space traditionally assigned to African Americans in the United States—Naylor not only makes a statement on the relative worth of each but is forcing a reenvisioning of the lives of black and white women themselves, creating intertextual references that force the rethinking of each tradition and the larger social systems informing them. Class is a central factor in this equation, particularly its nuances, inconsistencies, and pointed ironies.

In focusing on middle-class black women in *Linden Hills,* Naylor disrupts discourses in which blackness is equated with poverty, including the urban poverty depicted in *The Women of Brewster Place.* Just as significantly, she demystifies the aura of economic privilege as the inevitable site of racial aspiration, forcing an acknowledgment of how the political use of race obscures the multiplicity of African American identity. Naylor's middle-class blacks, contemporary professionals, perform an elaborate show of self-satisfied achievement in order to fully prove their realization of the American Dream. Yet the hollowness of their lives reverberates as if in an echo chamber. In a

similar manner, the frustrated yearning and sorrow at the core of prior generations of Mrs. Luther Nedeeds is unearthed by Willa in her basement prison. As she stews in her own anger turned to anxiety and then capitulation, Willa discovers the anguish that informs the existences of several generations of Luther's foremothers, all simply referred to as Mrs. Luther Nedeed—which diminishes the reality of the distinct woman beneath the honorary title. Like Willa, these women are buried in the basement. The vague, spectral presences whose works include cookbooks, a journal, and photos—the paratexts of their family and larger community—they whisper and howl but remain largely ignored save for Willa, who refuses to identify with their pain and loss, which she resentfully translates as failure.

And here I return to Gilman's anonymous narrator who drives herself mad. Ignored by her husband and forbidden to work, her restless brain manufactures drama. She first writes, "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (30). Later, "Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able—to dress and entertain, and order things" (33). Then, "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time" (37). She is in a position that many would envy. In the United States of the Gilded Age with its extremes of rich and poor, the latter vastly outnumbering the former, she is married to a member of the professional elite who dotes on her. But his regard is conditional. A symbol of his class status, revealing that he is able to support a spouse whose only form of labor is the engendering of children, she is expected to expend rather than produce; her primary function is the generating of desire. Consequently, he both showers her with affection and refuses to acknowledge either her intellectual competence or her adult status.

Similarly, the Nedeeds refuse their spouses true regard or affection. But here, Naylor carefully reenvisions the inscribed history of the black middle class (W. E. B. DuBois's "talented tenth") of bodies and temperaments disciplined, supposedly having transcended what Toni Morrison calls the "funk" of sexual desire and working-class culture.[5] Committed to morally upstanding behavior and charitable concern for the folk, these are the individuals who promise, in the words of Paula Giddings, to lift the impoverished even as they climb to further heights of professional and social achievement.[6] Naylor's women, material traces of their lives locked in the basement with Willa, ever in the process of disintegration, reveal their rage, thwarted desire, and aborted potential in their private and forgotten papers. This portrayal becomes a necessary corrective to the strong black women, invariably beautiful mulattas, who triumphed over social obstacles and united politically with their darker brethren, whether in the pages of fiction or the propaganda of

the political leadership. The willful Iola Leroy of Frances Harper's pen and the vulnerable but spirited Sappho Clark fashioned by Pauline Hopkins morph into *Jane Eyre*'s Bertha Mason, *The Awakening*'s Edna Pontellier, and the anonymous narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper." As with the postbellum black heroines of African American fiction, Naylor's women are made vulnerable by a racism exacerbated by their gender status, leading lives distorted by the need for pressing racial and social change. Significantly, however, they are less menaced by rapacious white men, whether slave owners, the brutal and resentful working-class mercenaries in their hire, or two-faced members of the Euro-American, postbellum bourgeoisie, than by their own loved ones, whether husband, son, or neighbor. They, unlike the characters created by earlier generations of African American women writers, face, much more immediately and insistently, emotional terrorism within the confines of their own homes. The home, the sacred domestic space of the Victorian True Woman, leisured and indulged, becomes a prison that obscures her isolation and psychic alienation.

Luwana Packerville, the teenaged wife of the founder of the Nedeed dynasty, bought out of Southern chattel slavery by her husband only to be reenslaved by him as both legal wife and bondswoman, writes in a journal to express her growing bewilderment, boredom, and disillusionment. For her, her journal becomes her only form of companionship. Tellingly, it is written in a Bible, an intensely patriarchal text that she feminizes through her confession, putting phallic pen to the "blank page" of female creativity (Gubar 292–313; Gilbert and Gubar, 89–92). Her entries are placed carefully in specific sections, reflecting the evolving stages of her life with Luther. Between Genesis and Exodus, she writes: "We are going north in a fortnight to a place called Linden Hills. I leave this state with rejoicing. A new land. A new life" (*Linden Hills* 118). Before Leviticus, she describes the confusing rules given to her by Luther about housekeeping and diet (118). Between 1st and 2nd Kings, she weans the two-year-old Luther, Jr., understanding the awfulness of her situation: "He told me to prepare a special supper because, when he returns, he wants to celebrate his son's manumission. . . . And if the love of God and all that is right cannot move this man, how can I hope to? So it is a bitter meal that I must cook to help celebrate the fact that I am now to be owned by my own son" (119). Eventually she performs a parody of wifely duty: she has no friends, feeling a pariah to both the black and white women in the local communities; she is not trusted to cook for her husband and son in this era of slave poisonings of masters' food; and she is almost deprived of her sole pleasure, her garden, which she can only tend in the warmer months anyway. Thus, her isolation and superfluousness lead her to

write long and empathetic letters back and forth to herself, her soul literally fracturing to provide the companionship she craves: "My Dearest Luwana, Your words grieved me sorely. . . . " / "My Dear Luwana, Thank you for being so prompt in your reply. . . . " (122) / "My Dear Luwana, I have not written in a year because I could see that you were growing impatient with me. I know that to continue in that vein would cause you to tire of writing to me so I needed to find some way to prove to you that what I said were not the delirious fantasies of a foolish woman" (123). Her grief ends in her Bible's first pages, realizing that her prayers will never be answered: "There can be no God" (125). Her pain consumes her, and she is lost to the silence of anger and hopelessness.

The metaphor of consumption is embodied quite literally in the cookbooks of Evelyn Creton Nedeed. The testaments of her life exist in endless recipes for excessive quantities of food, from potato casserole to walnut bread, which Willa realizes could not humanly have been eaten by so small a family. But the recipes become her testament to a life of desperation, the performing of a futile femininity that reveals "the relentless accuracy with which this woman measured her anguish" (190): musk and civet in orris root and mint for perfume; lemon juice and olive oil for hair; glycerin, almond paste, and pigeon fat for lotion. Ultimately creams to darken skin lead to potions to awaken sexual desire, then laxatives to combat earlier binges, and finally the prussic acid that marks her last entry on Christmas Eve. Her quest for perfection becomes a heartbreaking enactment of despair, repeating the earlier pattern.

The last recorded Mrs. Luther Nedeed, Priscilla McGuire, records her life in photographs, a lively and alluring young woman whose expression declares, "I knew you would come, and I'm so pleased to meet you" (205). She is captured standing stylishly with her Packard as a single woman, full of verve and daring. From a newlywed, erupting in laughter and mischief, she becomes a proud young matron with her husband and infant son. Year by year, her son is photographed maturing from his position on his mother's lap to her side, opposite his father. While Priscilla eventually receives a mother-of-the-year award, Willa notices that she is somehow overshadowed by both son and husband, becoming an increasingly nebulous presence in her meticulously arranged photo albums and scrapbooks: Priscilla "was no longer recording the growth of a child; the only thing growing in these pictures was her absence" (209). It appears inevitable that the performance of maternity and domesticity begins to take its toll: photo after photo is damaged. Priscilla's face is violently erased until at last, scrawled over the hole that used to be her face, appears the word "*me*" (249).

In all three cases, performing the role of the model wife, an undervalued and unappreciated activity that exists primarily to sanction the conception and birth of the next Luther Nedeed, leads to spiritual suicide. Unlike with Gilman's narrator, these women are given free reign to explore their creative potential. However, creativity ignored and unnurtured exists only to allow the continuation of the mirage of marriage, whether in recording its routines and irritations, using it to please a chilly and distant spouse, or permitting the persistence of the heteronormative status quo. The women cannot or will not leave and thereby remain trapped. What results is that imaginistic creativity becomes bodily self-destruction: self-scarring as tattoos that mark the days Luwana is verbally addressed by husband and son; Evelyn's excessive laxative use to hide obsessive eating that dulls the pain of sexual and emotional longing; Priscilla's damaged photos erasing her physical presence and mirroring her grief. As in "The Yellow Wall-Paper," social performance morphs into madness, most evocatively represented in each woman's embattled negotiation between speech and silence. Or as illuminated by Mae Gwendolyn Henderson:

> In their works, black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma, that is, their works have consistently raised the problem of the black woman's relationship to power and discourse. Silence is an important element of this code. . . . In other words, it is not that black women, in the past, have had nothing to say, but rather that they have had no say. (24)

Entering the Western discursive tradition as an overdetermined signifying presence, her labor and progeny stolen within slave regimes, legally denied the privilege of reading and writing, in effect, of self-representation, she became a site of unintelligible, defeminized hypersexuality, exiled from the very discursive tradition that portrayed her and hers as hopelessly inferior. Naylor's exceedingly literate informants articulate the other extreme, which is the contradiction of female entitlement within patriarchy. Furthermore, pale-skinned, educated, and economically comfortable, these fictional creations are the recipients of a normative, though unseemly, preference and are thus both objects of masculine desire and rejected for the very intransigence of that desire. Their surveilled and silenced bodies become the manifestation of one of the fundamental tensions at the core of African American history and culture: the persistence of and relation to a colonizing whiteness in the midst of blackness. Yet, for Naylor, it is not simply the presence of a racially informed patriarchal desire, a desire that simultaneously denies its own existence as it constructs a supposedly pure and authentic black-

ness, which is under scrutiny. Rather, it is how women themselves become implicated in this desire, responding to, mobilizing, and narrating it. And here Gilman and Naylor most saliently intersect. Instead of simply passive victims, both authors create vivid portraits of women who, though actively victimized by sexist husbands and social systems, are nevertheless complicit in their own marginalization. Central to this is the performing of gender that women submit to in order to attain the status allowed by social acceptance and economic security within patriarchal systems of control. Writing this paradoxical privilege through gendered terms that reflect who is allowed to speak, how he or she will be heard, and when that individual will be silenced, Naylor and Gilman provide haunting portraits that destabilize the terms of the very equation they are in the midst of deciphering.

II.

In *Linden Hills,* Gloria Naylor describes Luther Nedeed at work:

> His women were always like this. The lips were set barely parted with a clear gloss that highlighted their original color. She was so still lying there on her back. She had come to him that way, and he had treated her as he'd been taught. . . . With the proper touch, you could work miracles. Their skin wouldn't remain rigid and plastic if the fluid was regulated precisely. Just the right pressure and resistant muscles in the face, neck, arms and legs gave themselves up completely to your handling. Moved when you made them move, stayed where you placed them . . . ; it took gentleness and care to turn what was under your hands into a woman. (185)

Although respectful of the body and painstaking in his preparations, there is a disconcerting possessiveness influencing Luther's interaction with the cadaver. The elderly Lycentia Parker's corpse becomes an object of erotic intensity as he rehabilitates rotting tissue, transforming inanimate flesh to his feminine ideal. Incapable of responding, reacting, she has become an object of his chilly ardor. The subject of his artistic vision, she is easily subjugated to his will.

The five generations of Linden Hills's Luther Nedeeds have all served as the community's mortician, passing their particular skills from one generation to the next. Exploiting the segregation experienced by African Americans from birth to death, they not only created a thriving undertaking business that, like those of many other black families, allowed them to enter

the African American bourgeoisie, but they built a financial empire. Craftsmen fanatical about detail who are impassioned only by their entrepreneurial zeal and ambitions for the next generation of Luther Nedeed, they pride themselves on their unique ability to cultivate life without inordinate female interference. Or as Luther V reflects, casually enacting the ritual moment of female eradication as his own wife remains a prisoner in their basement, "He actually had to pause a moment in order to remember his mother's first name, because everyone—including his father—had called her nothing but Mrs. Nedeed. And that's all she had called herself" (18). Tellingly, his pregnant pause delivers only further anonymity. For Luther, absence becomes assent and his supposition authoritative history.

As Luther lingers over the body of Lycentia Parker, his latest client, I have decided to pause to contemplate the complementary sets of images provided by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Gloria Naylor in their respective explorations of female madness. In both Gilman's compact short story, driven by a first-person narrative, and Naylor's sprawling, polyglossic novel, the drama of female silencing becomes a metonym for a diversity of sexist behaviors not only condoned by the larger social system but fundamental to its efficient operation. In this gendered drama, spanning almost a century of national development, women, seemingly convinced of the sagacity and authority of their husband's perspective, eventually lose faith in the efficacy of their own reason. Struggling to be heard by insensitive spouses, they are increasingly rendered mute and eventually driven to either a state of psychotic folly or enervating depression. At the core of this encounter, however, remains an image of the female corpse. As the Luthers appear unmoved by living women—women discerning, flawed, and emotionally complex, women yearning for spontaneous interaction and demanding to be heard, so John, the physician husband of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," emerges as more invested in his wife's simulacra, her potential once she has submitted to the rest cure. This treatment becomes not only a form of rebirth into the potential of the True Woman via her symbolic infantilization, as noted by Elizabeth Ammons (36), but also a death of her more multifaceted, defective self. In both texts, the dead woman, angelic, vague, and frozen in an artificial perfection, embodies the seductive allure of the purely ornamental, that which all of the women will eventually be rendered. But mobilizing the production of the ornament, as underscored by David Cannadine, informing its beauty, iconic appeal, and seeming superfluity, is a systemic violence that must be exorcised and cleansed before it is then reintegrated into the body of the family and nation.[7]

Elizabeth Ammons identifies this violence in the regularizing role of medi-

cine, revealing how it is used in the subordination of women:

> From the point of view of the physician, the male architect of the narrator's resocialization, the concept of the space in which she is confined is very simple. It is a jail; it allows an extremely limited view of the world; and it has at its center a bed. Site for a woman not only of birthing, dying, and sleeping but also, and probably most important for the story, of sexual intercourse and therefore a potent reminder in late nineteenth-century America of male sexual privilege and dominance, including violence, a bed, to the exclusion of all else, dominates the room in which the narrator has been confined and forbidden to write. (37)

Significantly, not only is John, her husband, a physician, but so is the narrator's brother, from whom she appears emotionally estranged. Dr. Weir Mitchell, the well-respected physician perceived by Gilman as the instrument of her near psychic collapse and the target of her textual critique,[8] is briefly mentioned by the despairing protagonist as her ultimate destination should she fail to thrive under her current circumstances (36). For Ammons, the "reactionary power" (40) of the nineteenth-century medical establishment was built on the assumption of the biological inferiority of women, particularly as this new and increasingly liberated woman threatened preexisting gender hierarchies. Consequently, when John interacts with his progressively more agitated spouse, it is not simply as a husband; it is as a medical authority who has the power to determine the course of her treatment and its outcomes. His words therefore possess a social weight that easily undermines the credibility of his wife's anxieties, making them appear trivial and arbitrary. That he disciplines her, mixing veiled threats with erotic display, signifies the insidiousness, the coerciveness, of his position, an ambiguous blend of personal concern and institutional power.

Nothing could seem further from this medical authority, with its investment in the achievement of mental and physical equilibrium, than the mortician, preparing the dead for interment into their earthly wombs and passage to the afterlife. Yet the Luthers, like John, rigid and status oriented, reduce their spirited wives to the living dead, their self-confidence eroded, their rage dissipated by intellectual torpor and excessive isolation. Made objects of empty display once they give birth to the requisite son, they are not essential to the performance of domesticity. Rather, they are largely ignored by their husbands and expected to maintain their predetermined status in the grand scheme of Linden Hills, fulfilling the tenets of the leisure ethic with a killing vengeance.

However, as the men of science rely on medicine to preserve gender roles and justify female subordination, producing discourses that are disseminated, received as wisdom, then reproduced in turn, so the men of Linden Hills comprehend the vital role of historical knowledge. In *Linden Hills,* history is alive and malleable; as Luther insists, "Just stay right here; you step outside Linden Hills and you've stepped into history—someone else's history about what you couldn't ever do. The Nedeeds had made a history there and it spoke loudly of what blacks could do" (16). This process serves as the engine fueling the scholarly texts published by Dr. Daniel Brathwaite, the novel's historian. Works that function as what he refers to as a "written photograph," they are allegedly objective and devoid of his or any external interference: "Put your subject too much in the shade, too much in the light, dare to have even a fingernail touch the lens or any evidence of your personal presence, and you've invalidated it" (261). Because Brathwaite relies on documents provided by the Nedeeds, "survey reports, official papers from the Tupelo Realty Corporation, even the original bills of sale that date back to 1820" (259), as well as those from other sanctioned sources, he asserts that he has the "whole story, the real story if you will" (263). Yet he refuses to acknowledge the implication of his being "placed on this very spot as soon as [he] graduated from school" (264), and provided his ideal home with its unique bird's eye view of the neighborhood, by the Nedeeds. Although he assumes he has somehow avoided complicity because his ambitions, unlike those of the vast majority of the community's residents, have been intellectual and not material, he refuses to acknowledge his own embeddedness in the project of Linden Hills: "Yes, I've moved among them, eaten with them, laughed with them, but I've known my purpose here from the beginning and I've never let myself get too involved" (264). For Brathwaite, the official archive is enough, and history is exactly that: his/story—chronological, monologic, hierarchal, and transparent. A masculinist metanarrative effacing difference through a benign neglect that hides more distressing motives, history, like Linden Hills community members, is forced to perform the function of authenticating a suspect regime, a regime that because of its blackness and wealth asserts an unearned legitimacy and influence. That which Brathwaite most tellingly overlooks is the existence of the Nedeed wives. Their unofficial archives, which testify to the complexity of their lives and agency, remain unknown to him. Documents forgotten, ignored, or hidden by the Luthers themselves, these texts could render more multidimensional and perplexing the chronicle of African American history, culture, struggle, and achievement. Like the diary of the heroine of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," an endeavor eventually forsaken as she descends into obsession and psychosis, these products elu-

cidate the silences of lost lives, speaking truth to the falsehoods fabricated by those with institutional authority. They reveal how women are victimized by patriarchal social systems, hushed by discursive traditions they do not control. Luther's abusive disciplining of Willa is merely a variation of the psychological torture experienced by her antecedents, which in turn opens to scrutiny the medical treatment imposed on Gilman's distressed narrator. Though supposedly diametrically opposed—the former a criminal act leading to the murder of a child, the latter a psychological intervention condoned by the medical establishment—both have as their goals the regimenting and modifying of behaviors and personalities deemed unacceptable, revealing the misogyny at the root of patriarchy. Yet perhaps what I find most notable is not the sadistic sexism that both texts unravel in such unexpected and memorable ways but how each work demonstrates the compound strategies through which women become implicated in those systems that so assiduously diminish and disempower them.

In most respects, Willa, the last Mrs. Nedeed, and Gilman's narrator could not be more different. The latter, a nineteenth-century homemaker and new mother, descends into a hysteria precipitated in part from what appears to be postpartum depression. Young and full of intellectual aspirations, she longs for the self-expression and sense of vocation allowed by her writing. Reared to be a lady, through her breakdown she ultimately revolts against the domestic sphere and the intellectual inertia that it cultivates. Willa, in her mid-thirties, had a career and relationships with other men before she married Luther. From a working-class family, she enjoys the advantages conferred by being an economically comfortable wife and mother and appears contented with her life: "She cleaned his home, cooked his meals. His clothes were arranged, his social engagements organized. When he chose to talk about his work, she listened. And she was careful not to bring him petty household problems that might overburden him more than he already was" (279). While John lavishes his wife with affection and endearing soubriquets, Willa is troubled by Luther's reserve and perfunctory attentiveness, aware of a subtle emotional distance between them. Whereas Gilman's narrator feels indifferent to and overwhelmed by the need "to dress and entertain, and order things" (33), Willa embraces the catharsis of consumer excess: "So easy to put faith in the fact that she could well afford the biannual trip to New York and that walk down the miracle mile. . . . She had just enough time to fly back from New York and throw her purchases on the dresser before picking up the natural rhythms of her day, confident that Lancôme had told her to 'believe in the magic,' so that change was definitely on the way" (149). Even as one woman is locked in the oppressive domesticity of

economic and emotional dependence, her latter-day counterpart experiences the self-determination of the mature, late-twentieth-century woman who chooses marriage and family over career, having ready access to both private and public spheres and an easy mobility that permits her fluid integration of both.

Yet, as Naylor and Gilman take pains to show, both women suppress their misgivings in order to function within the conjugal parameters determined by their spouses. The narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" confesses, "I get so unreasonably angry with John sometimes" (31), while Willa, before her imprisonment, discloses, "Perhaps it was natural to feel that, somehow, she was being unreasonable for thinking she needed more than that. What else could explain his shrinking away, his look of injured bewilderment when she suggested he still wasn't doing enough?" (149). Both women reproach themselves for their immoderate needs, the excessiveness and volatility of their emotions. In both instances, they perceive themselves as "unreasonable," irrational. As a result, they grow suspicious of their intuition, actively colluding with the person they most resent: "It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so" (40). Or as Willa insists, denying kinship with earlier generations of women, similarly victimized: "She wasn't like the other women, she had coped and they were crazy. They never changed. . . . That's why Luther never talked about them: there wasn't a normal one in the bunch. But there was nothing wrong with her" (204). In the end, both Gilman's and Naylor's characters are driven mad, but, even in the midst of it, adhere to the identities and concomitant gender privilege that shackle them. As Gilman slyly reveals of her narrator's squeamishness:

> I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try.
>
> But I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued. (49)

Or as Willa admits, preparing to walk up the stairs and back into Luther's life: "Now, she wanted the name Willa Nedeed. She wanted to walk around and feel that she had a perfect right to respond to a phone call, a letter, an invitation—any verbal or written request directed toward that singular identity" (278).

In both situations, the heroines silence themselves in order to permit their marriages to continue according to established patterns. When John croons

infantilizing nicknames to his spouse, it is to pacify her and prevent her from further verbalizing her dissatisfaction. In the end, it works because she does not want to be unpleasant. Though she comes to resent her husband's presence as intrusive, preventing her from further fixating on the wallpaper, she is secretive and subversive in her scorn, wryly expressing her contempt as she crawls over his prostrate form once he faints from the shock, finally realizing the extent of her psychological deterioration. She can express neither her rage nor her resentment to her spouse because she is so invested in propriety and self-censorship. These can only be channeled into the fierce presence of the once caged inmate of the wallpaper who has found her freedom in the narrator's compliant body and dissociative psyche. It is this persona who has the courage to sneer: "I've got out at last . . . , in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (50). If Jane is, in fact, the narrator and not a misappropriation of Jennie's name, her freedom comes only once she has destroyed her prior identity and claimed a problematic freedom. As a mad woman, she is unencumbered by the stifling decorum and sexist mores of her culture and can finally claim a circumscribed victory over her husband. Her voice and body have been paradoxically liberated by the boundlessness of insanity.

Willa's psychic unraveling takes a disparate form. Rather than stage a rebellion against Luther's oppressive tenets, her revivified double becomes their deranged incarnation. Her husband's goal accomplished, he has succeeded in breaking Willa's spirit, preparing her for her unsettling resurrection into faithful wife and birthing canal to the next Luther clone. However, Luther's calculations are off. Thus Willa pushes open the unintentionally unbolted basement door, determinedly stepping out of her crypt and back into Luther's life too soon. Carrying the corpse of their emaciated child, prepared to function as the perfect wife, and obsessed with cleanliness, she is an automaton who fulfills his macabre ambitions with a vengeance:

> If she took it a millimeter beyond that, her thoughts would smash the fragility of that singular germ of truth. . . . That action was hers and hers alone. The responsibility did not lie with her mother or father—or Luther. No, she could no longer blame Luther. Willa now marveled at the beauty and simplicity of something so small it had lived unrecognized within her for most of her life. She gained strength and a sense of power from its possession. . . .
>
> Upstairs, she had left an identity that was rightfully hers, that she had worked hard to achieve. Many women wouldn't have chosen it, but she did. With all of its problems, it had given her a measure of security and content-

> ment. And she owed no damned apologies to anyone for the last six years of her life. (280)

In emerging from her involuntary captivity, Willa knocks down everything that might obstruct her path to a pristine home, whether candle-laden Christmas tree or Luther himself. As Luther attempts to subdue her, she resists, propelled by her sense of domestic urgency. The house erupts into flames and the bodies of mother, father, and son meld into an unholy union. Tellingly, Willa never reproaches her husband; her only words to him are, "Luther . . . your son is dead" (299). Instead, her misplaced rage is diverted into a superhuman strength that refuses to permit him to once again lock her in the basement, an act that ironically would prevent her from her paramount directive as über-wife.

Like that of Gilman's narrator, Willa's triumph is a contradiction of terms. She has brought an apocalyptic end to the corrupt reign of the Nedeeds, but the cost has been her own psychic and physical annihilation. Perhaps even more alarmingly, while she comes to perceive the horror at the heart of the Nedeed myth, her words, her discoveries, will be forever erased. Although there are stunned spectators to the ensuing events, the larger context has vanished. For Willa, her precursors were quite literally the women caged in the wallpaper who stepped out of their historical confinement to bear witness to her. She, in turn, rejects them. First blaming them for their tragedies and attempting to destroy their effects, she then repacks these belongings in a symbolic reburial. She finally destroys their material history as she prepares to collaborate with Luther to regain her lost status. Willa's is ultimately a tale of denial, including the denial of a resistant voice. While Willa defeats Luther, it is a compromised victory. In fact, it can just as validly be claimed that Luther has brought about his own violent destruction through his unmitigated hubris.

Yet the two texts by Gilman and Naylor create an intriguing dialogue on power, complicity, and the inability to subjugate another without perhaps being crushed in turn. Through the metaphor of marriage, both writers examine social injustice and document its larger toll. However, what does become both increasingly evident and troubling is their complementary query as to who will ultimately bear witness to the events of the past and thereby determine truth. In "The Yellow Wall-Paper," John appears the ultimate arbiter of Jane's fate, her discarded diary to be found by descendants or historians, perhaps hostile, perhaps sympathetic, perhaps indifferent. In the case of *Linden Hills,* however, the definitive legacy of the Nedeeds will most likely be recorded by Daniel Brathwaite, retired scholar and official community historian whose project has been the reembodiment of the past—a

past, as far as he is concerned, that is not only dominated by but indebted to generations of Nedeed men, founders, patriarchs and visionaries. In seizing the word, however, both Naylor and Gilman allow their own audiences to pursue a radically alternative agenda.

NOTES

1. The works of Elizabeth Ammons, Paula Giddings, and Vron Ware provide compelling insights on cross-cultural encounters between black and white women in a variety of nineteenth-century social contexts.

2. Elizabeth Ammons, Hazel Carby, Ann duCille, Paula Giddings, and Claudia Tate, among others, do important scholarly work historicizing the dilemma faced by African American women in relation to claiming greater political unity around racial as opposed to gender classifications.

3. In *Conversations with Gloria Naylor,* edited by Maxine Lavon Montgomery, Naylor explicitly acknowledges her ambivalence toward these movements in several interviews. For instance, in an interview with Matteo Bellinelli, Naylor states:

> What we have found out since the Civil Rights Movement is that integration does not work. New York City, for instance, is a classic example of that. What we need to do is some backtracking and begin from the cradle to build self-esteem in our young. We should go grassroots in the community and build up our own organizations. So I believe assimilation can be extremely dangerous. It does not exist in fact in America and to buy into it is to hinder your own psychological health. (108)

In a separate interview with Pearl Cleage, who asks, "Are we in terrible shape, we Black women who are marooned in America," Naylor says,

> Yeah, we are. We are in terrible shape and the gap between women like you and I and women like my aunt is growing. It is because we are no longer living in the same places that at one time we did. But then I also see hope because we have indeed survived and slavery was meant to destroy us as a people. We were supposed to come here and work and do our thing and then die off the face of this earth. And the whole Black problem came about because we didn't die off. . . . But to survive is one thing and the quality of your life is something else. (69)

4. See Monika Kaup's *Mad Intertextuality: Madness in Twentieth-Century Women's Writing* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1993), in which she interprets Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in conjunction with Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills.*

5. In *The Bluest Eye,* Toni Morrison contrasts the bourgeoisie to working class blacks: "they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful

funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (68). Thus, the talented tenth adopts the creed of republican motherhood.

6. The motto of the NACW (National Association of Colored Women) was "Lifting As We Climb" (Giddings 97–98).

7. In his *Ornamentalism,* Cannadine writes that he is attempting to subvert Edward Said's *Orientalism* by revealing how Britain relied on her empire not simply to create an exotic Other that becomes a feminized repository of cultural difference and danger, but by showing how Britain, in fact, used her colonies to reproduce herself abroad (xix, 4), actively nurturing ties to the elite whom British elites viewed as their equals. While there is some validity in the argument, I am less invested in this dimension of *Ornamentalism*'s rhetorical structure (after all, it can easily be argued that there have always existed a limited number of privileged elites to make the administration of empire possible, and these elites have been purchased with pomp, titles, and stolen resources), but the implication that to permit a culture of ornamentation to flourish requires the mobilization of hierarchy, coercion, and violence.

8. Elizabeth Ammons quotes Gilman's autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* "Her purpose [in writing the story], she explained, 'was to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell and convince him of the error of his ways'" (39).

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