

## INTERVIEW WITH GLORIA NAYLOR

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ANGELS CARABI: I understand that your parents migrated from Robinson, Mississippi.

GLORIA NAYLOR: That's right.

A.C.: And that your mother was in a state of advanced pregnancy when she moved to the north.

G.N.: Yes, my mother was eight months pregnant when she moved with my father from Robinson, Miss. to New York City. She decided to travel before I was born because she was adamant that none of her children would be born in the South. You see, we're talking now about the late 1940s. My parents were both raised in the South in the 1930's and they were poor people, they were farmers, share-croppers. This meant that you farmed somebody else's land and you gave 40% of the crops that you cultivated. My mother loved to read but she could not afford to buy books because at that time, books were a luxury for anyone. So the only access to reading were the public libraries whose entrance, due to the political and social situation in Mississippi, was forbidden to black people. To be able to buy books, my mother had to work extra hours. On Saturdays, which were her free days, she would go in somebody else's field and do day labor for which she would get 50 c. At the end of the month she would have about \$2.00 that she would send to book clubs. She was not a formally educated woman because schools went up to 9th grade and children were supposed to start working afterwards. Yet she was a kind of visionary and she wanted her children to grow up in a place where they could read, if nothing else. She was so determined to accomplish her goal that to anybody who wanted to date her, she would say: "If you marry me and if we have children, I want to leave the South."

So when she married my father she reminded him of the promise he had made to her. Besides, my grandparents had left the South a few months before and it was easier for her to make that move; she was going where her mother had already gone. They came to New York in 1949 and I was born in 1950.

A.C.: How did that move affect the whole family?

G.N.: It affected the family in some ways and in some ways it didn't. Often people ask me why I write about the South having been born in New York. The reason is that, in spite of living in the North, I grew up in a Southern home. A month after my parents moved, they were still Southerners. The food, the language I grew up with was from the South. It's called behavior. People change their geographical location but they don't really change. The difference was that they grownups no longer worked in the fields but did manual labor. My father, for instance, started working in the garment district and then he ended as a frame finisher. My mother did not work full time until the 60's, when my sisters and I were a bit older. We lived first in Harlem, then we moved to a housing project in the Bronx but we went back to Harlem. My parents wanted a nicer place for the children to grow up in and go to good schools but they discovered that, because of our race, we encountered the same silly things that were taking place in the South, except that in New York it was harder to figure out. Racism here was more subtle. When you were looking for a job, discrimination was not openly stated in the newspapers as it was in the South, but the truth is that, even though you were educated, you would not be able to find jobs or live in certain neighborhoods where the rents were very expensive. Only middle class black people fought against this policy because they were educated and they had money but, still, they were not able to obtain what they wanted. And I am talking about New York, about the North. As far as my folks is concerned, they knew which were their priorities, that is, to work extremely hard so their children would not have to go through what they had experienced in the South.

A.C.: Toni Morrison told me that, in spite of growing up in the North, she was surrounded by grandmothers, aunts who told stories from the South. Did you have a similar experience?

G.N.: Yes, exactly. I listened to them tell stories. So I heard about the fishing and going to the woods and picking berries. And I heard about working in the cotton fields and about the various people, the different characters who were in Robinsonville... the women who worked with roots and herbs... the guy who ran the church... the man who was always drunk. A whole microcosm of people lived in that little hamlet. I listened to all the stories because I was a quiet and shy child and I would be the one kid in the corner listening when they were talking about themselves. And I was a reader. Very much so a reader. So my mother got paid off with her oldest daughter in that way. I loved books with passion.

A.C.: You received your Master's Degree at Yale. Was it common among the women of your generation to pursue college education?

G.N.: I went to school later than the people in my generation. Normally the young women who were with me in high school went directly into college, they would enter their professions and a great deal of them married. But it was different for me because I was a bit of a rebel. I chose not to go directly to college and try my wings out in the world. I felt at that time that if I went into high education, I would be entering a system that I did not believe in. But the young women of my generation growing up in the 60's had opportunities that were opening up because of the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement. The black female profited from both to a certain degree. Those who were talented and determined could now push their way through. Before the 60's it was very different. No matter whether you were talented or not you always encountered a stone wall in front of you. Besides the assumption was no longer that your goal in life was to find a "good man" (Gloria laughs heartily) and take care of the home and the kids. Women were being shown that there were other options. You had a choice.

A.C.: How did you live the period of the 60's? How did it affect you as a person?

G.N.: It affected me because it showed me how deep the problems were, not only in my country but in the whole planet. The problems were so many and deep that they could not be solved with just marching and demonstrating. I believed that I had to rebuild all our social system. There was the war in Southeast Asia, a war for which I could see no reason, a war against children and women. I thought there was something wrong. Then in 1968 the assassination of Martin Luther King... I could not understand that. He was a man that had been preaching peace and love and brotherhood... When Malcom X was assassinated I was able to understand his death because his philosophy and his action posed a direct threat. But Martin Luther King was preaching about brotherhood. I thought that there was not much hope. So I decided I should not go to college and learn about what I think is rotten. Instead I went around with this religious group that preached about a theocracy, about the coming of the government by God. I became a sort of radical, praying for the Earth to be cleansed. I was with them during seven years. In 1975 this new theocracy still had not taken place, and I was 25 with no remarkable skills. I decided to go back to school.

A.C.: In the last two decades there has been an eclosion of Afro-American writers, specially of women writers. Can you talk about this phenomenon?

G.N.: The phenomenon basically lies in the exposure of what has been taking place for quite a while in this country. Because a writer will write, a singer will sing, a dancer will dance. You do that because you have no choice. It's either you create or you explode. Black women have been writing in this country for over a hundred years. And they began to proliferate in the 30's

during the Harlem Renaissance and they continued to grow and build on each other. In the mid 60's and the 70's we began to question what American literature is. Is it just simply the literature produced by the white upper-middle class male? Or are there other realities that constitute this country? Because you have to look at these other factions. Look at these invisible black people who make all that noise... at those invisible black females making all that noise. Do they have a history? Do they have a reality? And yes, definitely, they do. They slowly began to enter the institutions. I had read Faulkner, Hemingway, the Brontes, Dickens, Thackeray, Emerson, Melville, Poe, Hawthorne and it had been wonderful and fine. I loved that kind of literature and it taught me about language but it did not teach me about my reality. When the black Americans and the females found their way in the institutions, we realized that there were other books, that there was another history, another meaning. So that's how we started to change our vision of American literature. Then this trend infiltrated itself into the publishing industry finding space in journals and newspapers. So attention is now being paid to an effort that has always been made. I don't think that more black women are writing now. I just know there's a difference in perspective.

A.C.: The black woman is enriching American literature by bringing her unique point of view. Can you talk about some of the aspects that you consider specifically relevant?

G.N.: Oh my God! What the black woman is bringing is a whole hidden part of American history, a whole hidden part of the female experience. What is so rich about it, I think, is that the black woman brings both her history as a black and her living reality as a female. They make drama out of those called "small matters" of life. They bring the irony of what it's been like to have a dual existence in this country. And it becomes a celebration of the self, of transcending things. Yes, the black woman brings the merging of two hidden realities.

A.C.: I would like to talk about your books now. From the very beginning you create a sense of place, a sense of community where people interact.

G.N.: Yes, that's right. You know, you're asking good questions and it is not easy to answer them quickly.

I'm so drawn to this sense of community. I guess for various reasons. What makes a writer do what he or she does is so many rivulets of influences. I come from a very large closely knitted and extended family. My parents were both from families of nine children each and I grew up with about twenty cousins around on my mother's side (on my father's side they were in other parts of the country). I also come from the working class, the poor black American working class and in my generation they tended to converge in communities. So I grew up with that feeling of family community and class community. Besides, there is my communal history as a black American. Our survival today has depended upon our nurturing each other, finding our resources from within ourselves. The women in Robinson, Miss. who dealt with herbs, for instance, played a crucial role in our

community. They weren't just magical women but they had a definite medical purpose. Because, once again, you could not depend on the outside hospitals to take care of your needs. So people grew up within a community who birthed you, who laid you away when you died. And you took care about the other's illnesses between your birth and your death. That sense of self-determination, taking care of your own is in my racial blood, meaning just my whole history. It's in my personal life because of the type of family I had and the class of people that I grew up around with. I think that all those factors explain why I tend to work with communities. It's what I know and it's what I feel more comfortable with.

A.C.: Brewster Place in your novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980) is an urban island where only black people live. It seems to me that, by isolating the place from white people, you are more able to concentrate your attention on the black community, instead of analysing the effects of racism upon black people.

G.N.: That is a trend you can find when you look at black female literature in general, as opposed to the literature that black males produce. And I think it's a gender fact. Men have a need to somehow confront the world, to flex their muscles, if you will. The female confronts what is around her.

Personally, I knew that there was so much richness to be found within the black community. I'm not concerned with the reaction of white Americans to me. And that goes back to how I was raised in the 50's and 60's. At home we were told that no one can tell you who and what you are, whether you have a worth or not. You must tell that to yourself. I learned to look inwardly and explore the problems "we" have and what the realities are.

A.C.: To talk about the black experience is to engage yourself into a vast field. It seems that a way you deal with it is by providing a variety of characters who come from different backgrounds, with different problems that illustrate individual aspects of that experience. By bringing together these disconnected lives you try to focus on a unity.

G.N.: Exactly. By exploring the lives of different women in Brewster Place, I'm attempting to create a little microcosm of a certain experience, the black female experience in America. This is why the book is structured the way it is, with the women on different levels in those apartments buildings which are intentional. Where I placed them and how they lived meant something in relationship to the wall in Brewster Place.

People tend to talk about "the black experience" lumping it all as one mass searching for something to represent it. But there is nothing that can do that because it is indeed so rich and so varied. This is done for the sake of expediency and also because it's something that they don't want to think about much. So they pick one or two examples and they figure that they have thought about the whole problem. It's intellectual laziness and moral laziness. So yes, in *Brewster Place* I was hoping to give a little sample of different black females.

A.C.: Let's look at some of the distinct characters that you create in *Brewster Place*. For instance, Mattie Michael. To me she is a woman who retains the aromas of the South. When she arrives in Brewster Place it's the smell of the herbs that brings her the memories of the South. So a sense of the South is alive in her and maybe it is that sense that encourages her to live the idea of community. It is Mattie who holds the place together.

G.N.: Which is why she is the first to arrive. Yes, she does do that. The South has taught her that. Her personal experience is with her son. Mothering has taught her the bad and the good of it. Mattie, for me, overcame one of the most painful things a woman can overcome, the loss of a child. I'm talking about women who are not professional women, the traditional woman where the home is primary and the nurturing of the children is primary. She lost her home, she lost her son and by coming to Brewster Place she creates a new home and a new family.

I have never been a mother and I was worried about how my story would develop. I always worry about my characters coming to an experience that I had never had because I want to do justice. I know I have the power of the language and I know this can be abused so I worried about whether I could write about a mother. I have been mothered and I had mothers around but I lacked my own experience of motherhood. So I talked to several friends. One of them is Amanda, a single parent who has two children but one of them, the boy, I could tell that he was the heart. It's not that she loved one more than the other but she had that attraction for her son. We spoke about that and she thought about it for a long time. Finally she told me: "I think the boy is so special to you because you know that's the one man that could never leave you". And I never forgot that. This is how Mattie's story got structured. She lost her father, and Butch, her lover. But she could keep this boy and I think there's a line in the story when she realizes that her son Basil is empty and selfish and she says something like "she got what she prayed for, a little boy who would always need her, except that now he was a grown man".

A.C.: What is extraordinary about Mattie is that, in spite of having all these problems, she's generous, calm, almost magic and very human. She allows people to feel free in her presence, she embraces the community.

G.N.: Like an earth-mother, I guess.

A.C.: Your characters are dreamers.

G.N.: Yes, they are. And the book opens with Langston Hughes' poem "A dream deferred". Every single one is a dreamer. I have always been a dreamer, a day-dreamer. And I come from a family of dreamers. I'm of a nation of people who are dreamers and I speak of the black nation. Dreams are important to me. I had a dream about writing, I always dreamed that I would be a writer and now I know what it takes to have dreams come true. Now I'm dreaming to be a

producer and I will become one. But I know the work that goes into it. So in *Brewster Place*, each of the women has a dream of her own.

A.C.: However, some of their dreams are unattainable. Etta, for instance, dreams to achieve respectability by marrying the reverend; Ciel dreams that her husband will change; Kiswana is dreaming to become a revolutionary and change the social situation of the black community.

G.N.: I guess they all have a dream they never quite realize. The idea was just to see them attempting, to see them going after their dreams. You see, life often tells you “hey!, this is not for you!”, but there’s still validity in the fact that you do dream and you do try.

A.C.: Let’s talk about Kiswana. She’s from a bourgeois family, she’s a black poet activist, a social worker and she dreams that she will be able to help the poor people. However, at the beginning of the book, you present the image of a bird that is bent to fly to the center of the universe and this image is associated to Kiswana. The bird, of course, cannot fly that high. Can you talk about this?

G.N.: That was on purpose. And then, I think that there’s bird dropping or something on the fire escape. (Gloria laughs heartily) Yes, that was a sort of Kiswana. You know, she was doing all the bad dreaming that wasn’t going to be reality. The bird couldn’t fly that high. But she’s brought back to base, I think, in a softer way and she, ultimately, begins to work with what she has. And the people show that to her. They tell her that it’s not for her to tell them what to do, but that she should work with them. So yes, the bird image was intentional.

A.C.: And what about Ciel’s dream about her husband reforming?

G.N.: Yes, once again (Gloria laughs) she couldn’t, she simply couldn’t see the handwriting on the wall. Ciel dreams what women have been told to dream: that women have no choice but to believe that they only exist and have a meaning in the context of a home, a man and a family. This is how Ciel defines her identity. So, of course, she keeps on straining to make this real and it isn’t true. You know, it’s something like this in this country. You should look at the commercials and you would see the mother making a cake mix, or using the floor detergent and the father coming with the briefcase. Reality for American women had started to change back in the late 60’s, early 70’s. Now we have more females as households than we ever had before but the ideology is that the woman is still baking the cake and daddy is bringing home the cake mix. So many women who had to work, who were divorced and had children felt that there was something wrong with them or with their situation. It was not supposed to be like that. So Ciel, you see, had a reality that was really hers. That was the women’s reality and being unable to adapt herself to these changes, she gives up. She gives up her unborn child and, trying to keep him, she gives up the living child and ultimately she tries to commit suicide. She thinks that she has absolutely nothing to live for. Because she has no self. People who say “I have myself” do not commit suicide. And so, Mattie takes her on a metaphysical journey to show

her examples of female pain and how women have overcome that pain and had gone on living. Mattie takes her within and pulls out that sore and exorcises it. A baptism scene follows and after that, Ciel is born anew. She can mourn that but she will make it in the morning. And she, Ciel herself, will do that.

A.C.: Extraordinary, this scene is so powerful and so full of love and tenderness and friendship. Beautiful. Let me ask you another question about Kiswana. She changes her name, from Melanie to Kiswana, an African name.

G.N.: Often in the 60's people turned away from what they thought was oppression. Our names were associated with a past of slavery and people began looking at Africa for a sense of worth and pride. But actually, in the cotton fields and within the slavery system, there were many people who found strategies that kept them mentally and physically strong. This recent past has been given back a dignity and I believe that you take from what is really yours. We are not Africans, we are Americans of African descent. Therefore, one has to root oneself in this country and find pride in what happened here. And yes, there can be some pride in what happened in Africa, but there's so much glorious history here in black history.

So this is why Kiswana changed her name. She had every right to do so. But Melanie was not a bad name and considering the type of Melanie she was named after, a woman that would stand on her ground, she should actually be very proud of having such a name. And this is what her mother is trying to tell her.

A.C.: How about the rest of her mother's discourse? Telling Kiswana that the best way she can help the people in Brewster Place is by going to school and occupying a position of power.

G.N.: I think a woman from her background could say little else than that (Gloria laughs). I believe though that there are two ways of empowering people. You can be in a position where you can influence national policy or you can work at the grass roots. You don't need to be in such a power position. You can open a social center, teach people how to register and vote... so both ways are equally meaningful.

A.C.: Even though your characters don't always fulfill their dreams, they are able to react at some point of their lives and go on living with dignity. I'm thinking of Etta finding her way through Mattie's friendship, of Kiswana going to night school and helping the people, or Ciel cleansing herself with Mattie's help or Cora Lee taking her children to a summer school. So, I think that the message that you are addressing the women is very important; that they are not lost and that they are able to take responsibility over their lives.

G.N.: Yes, you are indeed able each day to decide how you will live that day. You can decide whether or not your dreams die. You really can. So you see them doing something which is what I saw women do all my life. The poor women that I grew up with knew it was Monday morning because they had to get up, get the kids bathed, get themselves dressed and go out to that laundry and

work for eight hours. And then they had to pick up a chicken on their way home and stretch it for six people... they had to sweep up, get homework done, go to bed that night, get up in the morning and do it all again. And each day when they would bathe their kids they would be dreaming of the day that the children would go to college and they would not have to work so hard. And there was laughter in all that. They had good times. I saw more people depressed in graduate school than in Harlem (Gloria laughs). Only the privileged people have the luxury of feeling depressed. My mother did not know such a word. She started using it when the children began to grow up and we would get depressed (We both laugh heartily).

A.C.: I think this attitude is reflected in your work, in the sense that your characters do not allow themselves to play the role of victims.

G.N.: You cripple yourself when you think of yourself as a victim. You could very well be victimized but if this were the case, you still could go on with your own life. Although now I see that things have changed. When I walk the streets of Harlem I think about the people with whom I grew up and about the people that are now there. They are very different. There were more men in the homes then, there were two parents in the houses with a sense of caring for the future of their children. There was more of a community. Those very streets are very different. I kept thinking what was lacking. What is it? I kept saying to myself. And I realized that there's a lack of hope. Because now what we have is women that younger and younger are having children, and those children are having other children and they stay right there in a sort of vicious circle. They see no way out.

A.C.: Is this happening primarily in Harlem?

G.N.: Oh no! It's happening in the inner cities all over America. I mentioned Harlem as an example of the situation. Young people don't have jobs and one thing is to be unemployed because you aren't qualified for certain jobs but now people are unemployable; this means that all your values, the way you think of yourself make you totally unable to work in any type of job. This has been the shift with the young black males. They have moved from being chronically unemployed to becoming unemployable. Where are the values? The work ethic is not there, the sense that if I work for this I'll get something in return and I'll take that and build on it, is gone. Besides, in my parents' time it was the female who instilled this kind of values. Now the mothers are so young, maybe 15, 16 years old, that you wonder what values they can instill to their children. And what do they have out there? Drug trade, a deteriorated school system so they drop out. It's an awful kind of cycle that is going on. America has moved from a manufacturing society to a service society. So these people don't have work and there's a pervasive mood of helplessness.

A.C.: How can the writer help to improve this situation?

G.N.: I want to be very honest. I think that writing, as all of the arts, is an

elite occupation that is reserved for a small group of people. I really do. When *Brewster Place* came out I said to myself how ironic for the women who I am celebrating and writing about because the majority of them would not read the book. However, I think that the writer as creator provides people with resources to help with the literacy as a way to improve this country. So the validity of writing books lies in going around the schools and different centers and telling the people: "Learning to read will open your imagination, you will see a way out of no way". The writer can also show the discipline it takes to do something.

A.C.: In *Brewster Place* you solve problems through female friendship.

G.N.: Women only had each other in our history. They would be around the kitchen table, at the laundromat, they would go to other women with their problems about children, about the men in their lives, about their jobs. And they would share that in places that were unimportant to the outside world. They would share their feelings and they would be cleaning together or they would be sitting at the kitchen table with their coffee and gaining strength from each other in these quiet kind of ways. Yes, I was celebrating this in my novel.

A.C.: Let's talk about the male characters in your novel. Most of your men are portrayed as being quite immature and trying to solve their problems using violence against the women.

G.N.: Interesting. One of the things I had to do when I decided who was going to be the focus of this work, who could be the heroines, was that I had to introduce conflicts into their lives so they could demonstrate what we have been talking about today. How their dreams had been interfered and how they transcended in spite of that. Well, with women of this social group, nine times out of ten, the conflict bearer will have to be a male. They're dealing with their fathers, their sons, their lovers... However, I had hoped the reader would see that there are two sides in most of my male characters. For instance, let's take the example of Mattie's father. Even though he rejects her, he loves her. But for a man like that, an old man, a hard man who is demanding obedience, it is not possible to accept disobedience. To him love equals obedience. So, when he beats Mattie, he's beating out the disobedience. I hoped that the reader would see that, this double dimension of the man. Most of my male characters are two dimensional, maybe Eugene, Ciel's husband, is the only one who is immature and can't take pressure. But I think he is the only one.

A.C.: Your chapter on the two lesbian women is impressive and very moving. The fact that the community does not help them hurts the reader who has been exposed him/herself with that communal sense. But then I thought that they were being rejected because the community itself was not ready to accept the presence of two lesbians.

G.N.: You're right. That was exactly what it was about. They could not reach over that difference. Just like the world had put a wall in *Brewster's place* for them, they had put a wall between themselves and Lorraine and Theresa.

A.C.: So when Lorraine dies the community's reaction is to have dreams.

G.N.: I must correct that. People often think that she has died. She doesn't. She just remains eternally insane. At the end she utters the word "please" and she will be repeating that word for the rest of her life.

A.C.: Mattie's dream at the end of the book is a dream of bondage between women. Is it a deferred dream?

G.N.: (Gloria laughs heartily). This is going to depend on the reader. When she wakes up the party is going to take place but the clouds are coming and you know it's going to rain. Is this going to be a deferred dream? Well, I decided to let each reader decide. Will they tear down the wall? Or they won't? They are not quite ready yet. It's an open ending.

A.C.: Let's move to talking about your second novel *Linden Hills* (1984). You begin, as you did in *Brewster Place*, by creating a sense of place but this time, the neighborhood is a middle class neighborhood that revolves around a central metaphor associated with Dante's Inferno. Can you elaborate on that and on the reasons to move from Brewster Place to Linden Hills?

G.N.: Well, in *Linden Hills* I wanted to look at what happens to black Americans when they move up in America's society. What do they lose? Well, the first thing is that they lose ties with the family because if you work for a big corporation you may have grown up in Detroit and end up living in Houston. So the first ties, the ties with the family are easily broken. Then there are the community ties, the kind of community we were talking about before. If you live in another place you create a whole different type of community around you, mostly of a mixture of other professional middle class people. Then you lose the ties with your spiritual or religious values. And ultimately, the worst ties, the most difficult ones to go are your ties with your ethnocentric sense of self. You forget what it means to be an Afro-American. And actually, when the black Americans have access to a higher social status they still have to confront issues of racism but they don't have none of the things that have historically supported the working class, like the family, the community, the church, or just their own sense of self.

So that's what *Linden Hills* was about in one level. And I used Dante's Inferno because I thought it was the perfect work for symbolizing when up is down, because Dante gives you that mere image of Florentine society and then slowly begins to move from the lesser sins to the greater sin. So that's what I did in *Linden Hills*. When you move down the hill you encounter what I consider to be a greater alienation, the repercussions from upward mobility.

A.C.: Let's move now to your last book *Mama Day* (1988). Again, from the very beginning there's a sense of place that is very carefully described.

G.N.: Yes, I think this is going to be my *modus operandi* until I die (Gloria laughs heartily).

A.C.: Willow Springs is another island, not urban, actually quite the opposite,

away from any civilization. In this novel you fuse the world of the supernatural and the realistic world of New York city. What inspired you to write *Mama Day*?

G.N.: It goes back to the stories I used to listen when I sat in the corner of the kitchen, and to the different ideas that my parents had regarding those old women who not only worked sort of full doctors, but used roots and herbs and had supernatural kinds of powers. My mother believed that there were things that happened in life that you could not question but my father was very reluctant to accept that. He thought that it was all superstition. So the structure of *Mama Day* came up because of this dual interpretation. Is it actually happening or is it not? Is magic real? So I wanted to explore that phenomenon as well as to look at women in history, specially at those women connected to the earth who could affect behavior. Until the Middle Ages, when the so-called “witches” were persecuted, the drugs were used by women. They were basically showing women how to have control of their process of creation. They were wise women who knew how to abort, how to stop conception. They were the first ones to invent birth control a power that men understood. The women who controlled their bodies could control their destiny. So these wise women were chastised and burnt for stepping over those bounds. The medical profession was then taken over by men who began to deliver the babies. So I wanted to look at the old phenomenon of women in communion with what the earth gave them and how they used its powers.

And *Mama Day* was about love and magic. A writer, I think, begins to exorcise demons with his work when he writes about what he fears as well as about what he dreams. I had to get rid of some demons with *Brewster Place*. I had first to confront what it meant to me to be a black woman and to celebrate it. In *Linden Hills* I had to come to terms with what it meant to change class which, actually, is what I did and what my parents had been working so hard for. But when it does happen, when a child from a poor class enters another class, there is tension. So *Linden Hills* was about to come to terms with that. When I got to *Mama Day* I wanted to rest and write about what I believed. And I believe in the power of love and the power of magic. And I think sometimes that they are one and the same. That’s what *Mama* is about. It is about the fact that the real basic magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles.

A.C.: Beautiful. You’re working on another book, *Bally’s Cafe*.

G.N.: Yes. *Bally’s Cafe* is going to deal with female sexuality. About the various ways females respond to sex.

A.C.: Where do you locate it?

G.N.: On the edge of the world and it exists within the music, the jazz and the blues of the 1940’s... the Duke Ellingtons, the Ella Fitzgeralds... those people. Bally has a juke-box in his cafe. As you walk down 125th st. towards the Hudson River you head west and if you don’t happen to pick up a few spare notes

coming out that juke-box, you would simply walk into the river. So you pick up those notes and you enter Bally's cafe. Because my characters are the music and each has some sort of song. So that's what the book is about.

A.C.: Music is a central element in your works as part of the Afro-American tradition.

G.N.: Yes, music is very much in my racial history.

A.C.: Before, music was the basic means to communicate among the people. Is it still today the basic means to establish connections or has the written word replaced the role of music?

G.N.: I think also the media, unfortunately, plays that role. But once again. If we go back to the working class level, the rap music, for instance, is something with which young kids identify themselves. It tells about their values, about themselves, about the political scene. But yes, once you talk about the middle class people, the music is no longer the major means of communication. So to say that we turn to books now is not too far from the tradition at all.

A.C.: In what direction is black American literature moving now?

G.N.: I think it's moving towards reflecting a middle class experience. The people that are now writing don't share my experience or that of Alice Walker's or Toni Morrison's. They haven't come from the South, or haven't had a nucleus of family that came from the South, or an extended family. They may be second or third generation, urban blacks and they speak about other aspects of life. Surreal novels, novels of the absurd are coming out and they deal with how to confront America being young black professional women and what it means. I think black literature is going to move to more experimentation of form and to experiences that do not tie us so much to the rural South. And they're coming with a reality that is black and I hope that the new authors give us a literature that is about what is happening now.

A.C.: When you write do you address your writing primarily to black people?

G.N.: To myself. I talk to myself and I talk to my characters and I let them speak to me. I feel that they have chosen me for whatever reason, to be the vehicle to get their stories out to the world. And I try really hard to listen internally. I often do things with my own life to make myself a more fitting vessel to communicate their stories. I always worry about this: "Am I saying the right thing?" Because I have the words and they have the story, so I see it as if I am recording my characters' story. The best writing comes out when you just are quiet and you let happen what must happen.

A.C.: Gloria, thank you very, very much.

This interview was held in New York in August 1990.

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