

Klara Szmańko

Defamiliarizing Blackness and Whiteness in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*

Abstract: Gloria Naylor defamiliarizes in *Linden Hills* (1985) both white and non-white racial categories, in this case blackness and whiteness, both of which emerge as largely performable identities. The defamiliarization of blackness is fairly direct, unfolding mostly through the predominantly negative portrayal of Linden Hills residents and the male line of the Nedeed dynasty, especially Luther Nedeed IV. The defamiliarization of whiteness is mostly indirect, taking place primarily through the exposure of Linden Hills residents' imitation of whiteness, in particular, the pursuit of what is presented as the negative paradigm of the white materialistic success and the disastrous consequences that stem from it. Upper class African Americans from the well-off neighborhood of Linden Hills are of ethnographic interest to less prosperous African Americans, many of whom envy Linden Hills residents and some of whom look down on them as presumable sell-outs and traitors of black people. Much of the defamiliarization of prosperous black residents of Linden Hills by lower class African Americans happens through visual exchanges between both groups. While whiteness is not on most occasions a part of these exchanges, it is still alluded to time and again as a pivotal factor that comes into play and that determines the rules of the game.

Keywords: blackness, whiteness, defamiliarization and construction of racial categories, mimicry, vision

Gloria Naylor defamiliarizes in *Linden Hills* (1985) both white and non-white racial categories, in this case blackness and whiteness, both of which emerge as largely performable identities. The defamiliarization of blackness is fairly direct, unfolding mostly through the predominantly negative portrayal of Linden Hills residents and the male line of the Nedeed dynasty, especially Luther Nedeed IV. The defamiliarization of whiteness is mostly indirect, taking place primarily through the exposure of Linden Hills residents' imitation of whiteness, in particular, the pursuit of what is presented as the negative paradigm of the white materialistic success and the disastrous consequences that stem from it. Upper class African Americans from the well-off neighborhood of Linden Hills are of ethnographic interest to less prosperous African Americans, many of whom envy Linden Hills residents and some of whom look down on them as presumable sell-outs and traitors of black people. Much of the defamiliarization of prosperous black residents of Linden Hills by lower class African Americans happens through visual exchanges between both groups. While whiteness is not on most occasions a part of these exchanges, it is still alluded to time

and again as a pivotal factor that comes into play and that determines the rules of the game. The chosen African American characters of the novel are endowed with privileged insight, but the white eye of America also does the watching, fixing black people with its panoptic gaze. One of the ironies brought out by the novel is the fact that prosperous residents of Linden Hills imitate whiteness in its surveillance of underprivileged African Americans.

Naylor focalizes most of the narration through Willie's and Lester's point of view, supporters of the black cultural movement. Proud of their own blackness, they shun whiteness, white standards and norms. Willie's nickname "White" is a pun on his very black skin color, so black that in his childhood he is afraid that the sun will make him white. Most of the defamiliarization of blackness takes place through Willie's and Lester's eyes. They look down on the Linden Hills black bourgeoisie that does its best to emulate whiteness, even at the cost of cooperating with the racist Citizens Alliance of Wayne County in order to "keep those dirty niggers out of their community" (135). The posh black neighborhood of Linden Hills becomes something else than its founder, Luther Nedeed II, originally envisioned it to be. Luther Nedeed II donated the land to humble working and middle class African Americans drudging for every penny predominantly in white houses or businesses: "digging another man's coal, cleaning another man's home, rocking another man's baby" (9). Luther II challenges property relations, which envisioned white people as owners of the best land. Reserving the best and most expensive land in the county exclusively for African Americans, Luther at least partly undermines the status of African Americans as objects of property. By effectively banning white people from the neighborhood through the caveat enclosed in each lease contract that the land will be inherited exclusively by African Americans, he also chips away at the self-created exclusivity of whiteness. It is no longer the "exclusive club" created by whites (Harris 1736), but a kind of exclusive club created by the Nedeed dynasty exclusively for African Americans. Discovering belatedly the potential of the Linden Hills location, whites try to re-appropriate the neighborhood for themselves. Yet Nedeed defeats them with their own weapon, that is, the law. Luther II's intention is to cross white people's design, to "be a fly in that ointment, a spot on the bleached sheet" (8), to make Linden Hills "a wad of spit—a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of America" (9). The visual metaphor of the "white eye" effectively renders whites' position in Luther II's design because envious as they are, they can only watch the Linden Hills property as they drive by, being "waved at by the maids, mammies and mules" (9).

Luther III upgrades Luther II's vision—Linden Hills is not just to be "a sore" in the "white eye of America." It was to "fester and pus over" (9). Linden Hills is to be transformed into "a jewel," "an ebony jewel that reflected the soul of Wayne County [the neighboring white residential area] but reflected it black" (10). "Reflect" entails a mirror reflection, looking for the source of one's strength outside rather than inside. Luther III's design also goes against the moral life force of the novel captured by

Grandma Tilson's statement: "when it's crazy *outside*, you look inside and you'll always know exactly where you are and what you are" (59, original emphasis). Rather than nourish itself on the resources derived from decades of African American experience, in Luther III's design Linden Hills is to be patterned on white materialistic success, "reflect it black," ostensibly showcasing the untapped potential of black people, but in reality gnawing away at their inner strength and vitality.

If Nedeed's model community of Linden Hills is to be based on white materialistic success, then its source is quite suspicious, considering that the roots of white materialistic success in the United States often had their grounding in the exploitation of African Americans and African American suffering. The imagery of the passage depicting Luther III's design evokes whiteness that Nedeed wants to imitate: "ebony jewel," "shining bright—so bright," "brilliance" (10). Under Luther III's design the glittering Linden Hills is to "spawn dreams of dark kings with dark counselors leading dark armies against the white god and toward a retribution all feared would not be just, but long overdue" (10). On the surface, the passage may bring up distant echoes of W.E. B. Du Bois's appraisal of black prowess conjured up by the vision of "the shadow of a mighty Negro past flit[ting] through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx" (*The Souls of Black Folk* 6) as well as of "the darker world that watches" ("The Souls of White Folk" 936). Yet if one delves deeper, it becomes apparent that Luther III Nedeed's goal is primarily building up and showing off his own personal power: "a brilliance that would force a waking nightmare of what the Nedeeds were capable. And the fools would never realize... that it was nothing but light from a hill of carbon paper dolls" (10). The imagery of the passage exposes the vacuity of Luther III's design, being a far cry from the founding father, Luther II's vision: "nothing but light from a hill of carbon paper dolls" (10). The pursuit of materialistic success strips the inhabitants of Linden Hills of moral, ethical fiber and their connection to African American tradition. Like paper dolls, they are empty inside. The fact that carbon paper serves as the cornerstone of the vehicle for the doll metaphor amplifies the sense of vacuity and imitation.

Can Linden Hills residents' imitation of whiteness be classified as mimicry? Homi Bhabha defines mimicry as a repetition with a difference (88), "almost the same but not quite" (89). Drawing on Homi Bhabha, Parama Roy characterizes mimicry as an "imperfect doubling" (195). In "(Post)Colonialism, Anthropology and the Magic of Mimesis," Graham Huggan expands on the findings of earlier scholars—Adorno, Taussig,¹ Bhabha—and draws a clear distinction between mimicry and mimesis (91). While mimicry is a "mischievous," "disruptive imitation," mimesis is a "symbolic representation" (94-95). Huggan notes a clear difference between "mimicry of the white man" and the "mimicry of the white man's mimetic representation" of marginalized people (94). Since mimesis approximates the latter,

1 The works in question are: Huggan cites Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses; Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* and Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*.

it is safe to say that Linden Hills residents imitation of whiteness has nothing to do with mimesis. If one assumes Bhabha's definition of mimicry as a repetition with a difference, then the elements of mimicry can be traced there. The crucial difference that cannot be surmounted is that, however close to whiteness Linden Hills residents are or want to be through their lifestyle, their Tudor mansions, their mentality and in some cases their disregard for underprivileged African Americans whom they call "dirty niggers" (135), they are phenotypically black. They may mean everything inside their safe space of Linden Hills, but outside their status is often inferior to that of whites. The prestige of living in Linden Hills counterbalances the denigration of blackness that they may experience outside Linden Hills: "In Linden Hills they could forget that the world said you spelled black with a capital nothing" (16). Everything "around them" in Linden Hills shows that "they were something" (16). In many ways Linden Hills is the symbol of possibilities, of what African Americans can represent if they are not impeded by the color bar. Linden Hills is the space of opportunities, while the space outside marks the world of curtailed possibilities, of "someone else's history about what you couldn't ever do" (16). According to the narrator, white people are in charge of history outside Linden Hills, whereas the Nedeeds are in charge of history inside Linden Hills. In light of this statement, it is also essential to look at another crucial element of mimicry, that is, the element of "recalcitrance" and "double articulation" (Bhabha 86), identified by Lacan as "the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare" (Lacan qtd. in Bhabha 86). Still, is there any element of recalcitrance in the Linden Hills residents' imitation of whiteness? Applying the term mimicry in reference to African American inhabitants of Linden Hills, Henry Louis Gates emphasizes in his article "Significant Others" the potential for subversion in mimicry (619). In particular, Gates finds traces of possible subversion in the ending of the novel, in the fact that the residents of Linden Hills offer no help to the Nedeed family when their house is consumed by fire. Christine G. Berg and Hanna Wallinger offer a similar interpretation of the ending, also noting that signs of hope for the transformation of the neighborhood can be read into the fact that no help is proffered to Luther Nedeed when the house apparently "condemn[s] him" (Naylor 285). The basis of this interpretation derives from the repetition of the sentence "They let it burn" five times in the closing section of the novel (Naylor 304). The sentence is uttered twice by Willie, twice by Lester and finally it is repeated one final time by the narrator, who italicizes the words: "*They let it burn*" (304). The uttered words clearly have a different coloring while spoken by Willie and a different one once spoken by Lester. In Willie's mouth they are a sign of dismay at the indifference of Linden Hills residents. The second repetition of the words by Lester: "No, don't you see—they let it burn" (304), suggests that Lester has a different interpretation of Linden Hills residents' refusal to interfere in the fire of the Nedeed family house. Christine G. Berg argues that Lester reads it as a sign of hope for the community that they did not help Luther Nedeed IV (5). According to Berg, for Lester their refusal to intervene may signify the residents' willingness to reject

Luther Nedeed's vision of reality and of the neighborhood. Hanna Wallinger goes so far as to claim that "in death, it seems, the Luther Nedeeds of this world have no friends" (185). Wallinger seems to place the onus of responsibility on Luther, at least partly absolving the inhabitants of Linden Hills. It is also worth mentioning that the inaction of Linden Hills residents is preceded a few days earlier with his own inaction when he passively watches the suicide of Laurel Dumont.

Cathartic as the fire of Luther's house seems to be, there is no evidence in the narrative to indicate that Linden Hills' refusal to help stands for anything else than dehumanization, the lack of empathy and the moral and spiritual extinguishment. Willie's agonized and dismay-filled repetition "They let it burn" intensifies the effect of spiritual and emotional coldness hovering over the Linden Hills neighborhood. His reaction is a follow-up on his window smashing that manages to break Linden Hills residents' inaction. It is strange that Lester suddenly sees the sign of hope in the residents' failure to intervene since throughout the novel woven mostly around Willie's and Lester's journey through Linden Hills, he has been nothing but critical of the residents and he has seen nothing that could produce any positive response or foreshadow any shift in Linden Hills' set ways. At stake during the fire is not only the help extended to Luther IV, but also to the wife, Willa Nedeed, and the child. The same people who two days earlier bend over backwards to flatter Luther IV at Lycentia Parker's wake, two days later abandon him at the most critical moment.

The dehumanization and the lack of empathy displayed during the fire is consistent with inaction and indifference to human suffering evinced by Linden Hills residents before the fire. On all previous occasions when they deliberately fail to react, they wash their hands off other people's suffering, approaching it as a given, as a personal drama that should play itself out solely within the narrow circle of one's family. The mindset of Linden Hills residents tells them to place the responsibility for any suffering exclusively on the shoulders of the afflicted person and their relatives. The philosophy of standing on the sidelines in the face of human drama is best encapsulated by the Linden Hills historian, Dr. Braithwaite, who openly speaks to Willie and Lester about his dispassionate attitude. To Willie and Lester's horror, he is a moral relativist, claiming that there is no point in trying to prevent tragic events because they are bound to happen. Therefore Braithwaite undertakes no steps to prevent the suicide of Laurel Dumont, but passively watches her progressing mental collapse. Braithwaite's response to Willie and Lester's indignation at his failure to act is a lecture on history and history writing. According to Braithwaite, "*History is a written photograph*" and a historian should be a dispassionate observer, a passive witness to the unfolding events. Both in history writing and his observation of the most immediate events Braithwaite is interested in asking the question "what happened" rather than "why," neglecting the causes and possible solutions (266, original emphasis). The vision of history writing in which everything, including Adolph Hitler, is ambivalent (261) is juxtaposed in the narrative with the quest for the truth pursued by Willie and Lester. The above cited Hanna Wallinger notes that Braithwaite's moral and ethical degeneration is expressed

through the barrenness of the immediate environment in which he lives (Wallinger 178). The imagery employed to depict Braithwaite's surroundings also evokes clear connotations of coldness, death and crippling brought about by old age: "The split-level ranch house was surrounded on three sides by *gnarled willows*, their branches trailing the ground like *bleached skeletal fingers*. They approached the house between low *stone benches* and the *dwarfed* bonsai trees of a Japanese garden holding intricate patterns of *rocks and boulders* that pushed through the *snow-covered dirt*" (Naylor 252, emphasis added). Braithwaite consciously creates and sustains the landscape of barrenness in which he dwells by killing off the willow trees that might partly block his view of the neighborhood.

Braithwaite's and Luther IV Nedeed's cynical, uninvolved approach to reality contrasts sharply with the moral core of the novel constituted by Willie and Lester. As mentioned before, most of the narration is focalized through Willie's point of view and he is endowed with a higher level of sensitivity, a more comprehensive outlook upon reality and more courage to react in critical situations. Willie is the one to be spiritually connected to Willa through his dreams about her and through the voice that he can hear and interprets as pleading for help already before releasing Willa from the basement. Unlike Lester, who is helpless and scared, Willie wants to claim justice for Willa and her dead child rather than simply walk away and leave her behind. He is also the only one to take constructive action to finally elicit a response from passive residents of Linden Hills when Nedeed's house is on fire. The tone for the moral fiber of the narrative is set up during the conversation between both characters, when Lester remembers Grandma Tilson's afore-cited words:

'Somebody'll be calling you their father, their husband, their boss—whatever. And it can get confusing, trying to sort all that out, and you can lose yourself in other people's minds. You can forget what you really want and believe. So you keep that mirror and when it's crazy *outside*, you look inside and you'll always know exactly where you are and what you are. And you call that peace.' (59, original emphasis)

Grandma Tilson claims that in order to live in the most luxurious section of Linden Hills, one needs to sell their soul to the devil whose avatar is the father of Luther Nedeed IV, Luther III. Both Willie and Lester focus on the inside, casting away the veneer of the luxury saturating Linden Hills, tempting as it is to them:

Willie glanced over his shoulder and the sight almost made him stop walking. Infinite rows of rectangular and round windows were sending a mellow glow out into the night. All of Linden Hills stretched up in a magnificent array of colors. The snowy incline was blazing with reds, blues, and greens forming designs everywhere, from circles to each pattern of the constellations.... A lump formed in Willie's throat. God, it was so beautiful it could break your heart. (283)

On the outside, Linden Hills does shine, basking in a dazzling array of lights and colors, overawing a casual passer-by with its external brilliance. Yet a careful observer is quick to notice that this brilliance is nothing but glitter stripped of inner, spiritual light. Dispassionate and uninvolved as Luther IV and Braithwaite are, they still note that there is nothing inside those Linden Hills residents who are steeped in the greatest luxury. According to Luther IV, white Wayne County and black Linden Hills are indistinguishable from each other. Instead of reflecting the soul of Wayne County black, as Luther III intended, Linden Hills becomes “invisible,” reflecting nothing but materialistic pottage:

Linden Hills wasn't black; it was successful. The shining surface of their careers, railings, and cars hurt his [Luther IV's] eyes because it only reflected the bright nothing that was inside of them. Of course Wayne County had lived in peace with Linden Hills for the last two decades, since it now understood that they were both serving the same god. Wayne County had watched his wedge of earth become practically invisible—indistinguishable from their own pathetic souls. (17)

The state of affairs encountered by Luther IV is a fulfillment of the prediction that the neighborhood will be “nothing but light from a hill of carbon dolls” (10), black on one side and white on the other.

Imitative as Linden Hills is of whiteness, it still inverts the visual and spatial representation of success usually portrayed as rising and moving up. In Linden Hills moving up means moving down, towards the most luxurious and prestigious location in the neighborhood known as Tupelo Drive. Not only do the Linden Hills residents invert the popular model of rising towards success, but also the model of African American signifying proposed by Henry Louis Gates. In *The Signifying Monkey* Gates claims that black people signified “nothing on the *x* axis of white signification, and everything on the *y* axis of blackness” (47). A good literary illustration of Gates's theory is the Invisible Man's internal monologue in which he observes: “And that lie that success was a rising *upward*. What a crummy lie they kept us dominated by. Not only could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downward as well; up *and* down, in retreat as well as in advance, crabways and crossways and around in a circle” (Ellison 385). The problem with Linden Hills residents is that, unlike African American signifying figures, they do not just play the game, but wholeheartedly believe in it and therefore become lost in the process. The pursuit of success in a traditional sense of the term not only desensitizes them to the suffering of others, but also drains them of vitality and humanity. As Dr. Braithwaite notes, by the time Linden Hills residents reach the most prestigious location of Tupelo Drive, most of them no longer know what they are really striving for: “Moving in here has simply become the thing to do, the place to be. But to be *what?*” (260, original emphasis). Braithwaite contradicts Grandma Tilson in her statement that Linden Hills residents sold their souls. According to him, “Pieces of themselves were *taken away*” (260,

original emphasis). The narrator is much harsher in her evaluation of Tupelo Drive residents, claiming that moving down in Linden Hills signifies a retreat from humanity, severing of the ties with humanity: “And whenever anyone reached the Tupelo area, they eventually disappeared. Finally, devoured by their own drives, there just wasn’t enough humanity left to fill the rooms of a real home, and the property went up for sale” (17-18). There seems to be much more humanity in the run down, underprivileged district of Putney Wayne although Willie has no room of his own. It is strange for Luther IV that no one ever ponders on the availability of space in Linden Hills as well as why and how earlier residents left.

The neighborhood of Linden Hills invites multiple critical comparisons to hell. Naylor herself states that *Linden Hills* is a “refashioning of Dante’s *Inferno*” (Loris’s Interview with Naylor 254). She also claims to have imitated in *Linden Hills* a terza rima pattern of Dante’s *Inferno*: *aba bcb cdc* with images in her book (Loris’s Interview with Naylor 262). The most overt comparison of Linden Hills to hell appears at the end of the expository section when the narration is focalized through Luther IV’s point of view: “It took over a hundred and fifty years to build what he now had and *it would be a cold day in hell* before he saw some woman tear it down” (Naylor 20, emphasis added). The passage is followed by the narrator’s follow-up comment that closes the expository section and foreshadows the opening of the proper action of the novel: “It was cold. In fact, it was the coldest week of the year when White Willie and Shit [Lester] slapped five on Wayne Avenue and began their journey down Linden Hills” (20). According to Christine G. Berg, consecutive drives of Linden Hills represent consecutive circles of hell—the further away from Nedeed’s house, the higher the location and the lower the number of the address, the lesser the sins of the residents and the greater the chance of being saved (4). The lowest lying and the most luxurious section of Linden Hills, Tupelo Drive, closest to Nedeed’s house located at the very bottom of the neighborhood represents the very bottom of hell from which there is no escape. Berg notes that “Luther Nedeed’s burning house only adds to the final infernal image of the Linden Hills community” (16). Catherine C. Ward shifts the focus from the spatial imagery to the psychological and spiritual ramifications evoked by Naylor’s narrative: “Naylor’s *Linden Hills*, like Dante’s Hell, represents not so much a place as a state: the consequences of man’s choices” (68). K.A. Sandiford indirectly compares Linden Hills to hell while speaking of Willa’s ordeal and the conclusions that she arrives at as a result of her traumatic experiences. According to Sandiford, by declaring that “There can be no God,” Willa “defines Linden Hills as a moral universe from which the principle of regular order has removed itself” (135).

At least in some respects the “principle of regular order” might be absent from Linden Hills, but it does not change the fact that its residents follow many of the rituals sanctified by the upper class and the middle class. Naylor’s novel presents almost an ethnographic portrayal of Linden Hills. Its residents are definitely of ethnographic interest to street smart Willie K. Mason, who lives in a lower class, if not an underclass area of Putney Wayne. Linden Hills tantalizes him with its luxury and

repels him with its coldness, distance and triteness. The ethnographic description of Linden Hills residents is reinforced by the employment of synecdoche, for which the narrator reaches while defamiliarizing both blackness and whiteness. A synecdochic approach to blackness is visible in the feast scene focalized through Willie's point of view. Watching the residents of Linden Hills in the process of consumption, Willie pictures a tribe of cannibals feasting on "human heads" (123). He does not see whole human beings at the table but merely their body parts: "the utensils worked their way from center to edge, exposing an ear here, a chin there. Parts of a mouth, a set of almond-shaped eyes" (133). Significantly, while fixing the wake guests with an ethnographic gaze, Willie is placed strategically above them, in the spatial position which renders his moral superiority. Rather than be the occasion of commemorating the deceased and comforting the husband, the wake turns into a hot political debate. Willie's impressions of Linden Hills' residents are triggered by their vociferous objections to the new housing project in the vicinity of Linden Hills. The Linden Hills residents objecting to the project declare that an eminent representative of the community, deceased Lycentia Parker would "do everything [in her power] to keep those dirty niggers out of [their] community" (133). Unlike Lester, who is livid after hearing those comments and who conveys his indignation to Willie, Willie does not respond verbally, but simply rewinds in his mind an excerpt of Wallace Stevens's poem "Cuisine Bourgeoise": "These days-of-disinheritance, we feast on human heads" (Stevens qtd. in Naylor 133). Notably, the wake guests feast on "brown and bloody meat" (133), implying that Linden Hills residents have a cannibalistic attitude to other African Americans, those who happen to be less privileged than themselves. A clear act of betrayal is not only the refusal to build the housing project in the proximity of Linden Hills, but also the striking of a deal with the white Wayne County Citizens' Alliance, which includes open racists and Ku Klux Klan members. Cannibalistic tendencies of Linden Hills residents can also be traced in the closing lines of Wallace Stevens's poem in which the I-Speaker poses a question: "Is the table a mirror in which they sit and look?/Are they men eating reflections of themselves?" (Stevens cited in Naylor 139). A similar, more covert reflection on the predatory nature of Linden Hills residents is made by Willie earlier in the narrative when he also secretly watches Linden Hills residents during the wedding feast: "They might look like birds of paradise, but they sure ate like vultures" (84).

The imitation of whiteness pursued by Linden Hills and its obsession with making it accounts for an air of artificiality hovering over the neighborhood. Imitating whiteness, it fits into the design of the neighborhood founder, Luther II, who professes the existence of "white money," "white power," "white earth," "white god," "white silver," "white coal," "white railroads," "white steamships," "white oil," "white sky" (8). Linden Hills residents live in imitated Swiss chalets, British Tudor and Georgian town houses (10). They are interested in marrying lighter and they do not find black waiters good enough to serve them at a party. The presence of exclusively white waiters at a black wedding indicates that black residents of Linden Hills

approach whiteness as a valuable commodity to be pursued and flaunted. Therefore black men invite white companions to the afore-mentioned wedding although on other occasions they date black women. Such behavior time and again earns Linden Hills residents in the narrative the categorization of artificiality. According to Ruth Anderson, “those folks just aren’t real” because their life revolves around “making it” (39). Lester concurs with Ruth’s portrayal of Linden Hills residents, claiming that “They’ve lost all touch with what it is to be *them*” (59, original emphasis). The lack of their spontaneity is the most visible at Winston’s wedding when all moves of the guests seem to be scripted, prompting Willie to conclude from behind the scenes that he was “watching them watch themselves” (83). Their artificiality is further accentuated by the lack of ease with which they wear their genteel clothes. Having listened to Linden Hills residents defensive argumentation supposed to cover up their prejudice towards underprivileged African Americans, Willie concludes that “these people can’t seem to find the guts to be honest about anything” (193). The narrator reflects on Linden Hills propensity to pay homage to appearances by declaring that “If anything was the problem with Linden Hills, it was that nothing seemed to be what it really was” (274).

Ironically, the prosperous residents of Linden Hills imitate whiteness in its surveillance of underprivileged African Americans as well, which is why they immediately notify the police when spotting Willie and Lester walk in the neighborhood, both of whom they identify as strangers. As in the case of upper class white communities, no one is supposed to walk in Linden Hills and no one is supposed to enter uninvited and thus to break trespassing laws. The encounter with the white policemen highlights the panoptic power of whiteness and its ability to control the neighborhood of Linden Hills even though the area is at least to some extent off limits to whites since no whites are allowed to live there by the Nedeeds. The only unstated way to settle in the neighborhood would be to marry into the black family already residing there. The encounter with the police also brings to the fore the ability of whiteness to elicit in African Americans double consciousness. Yet the ethnographic, supervising gaze of whiteness does not remain unchallenged. Drawing the scene, the narrator once again employs synecdoche, but this time in reference to whites, not African Americans. As on the previous occasion when synecdoche was employed, the events are again focalized through Willie’s point of view. Stricken with terror, Willie can see only fragments of the policemen’s whiteness: “the pale lips,” “the white knuckles,” “the blue eyes,” and the “reflection of his own dark face in those blue irises” (195-196). The eyes of the white policemen receive the greatest attention. They are the instrument of surveillance, but they also become the object of particular scrutiny from Willie. What is the most frightening to Willie is the “reflection of his own dark face” in the “blue irises” of the policeman (195). The policeman’s gaze sets in motion Willie’s double-consciousness. Mature and thoughtful as Willie is, he has not found yet the inner peace that Grandma Tilson speaks about in her life motto that she passes down to future generations. Double-consciousness and a fear of literally

losing his face plague Willie throughout his dreams. In one of his nightmares he is afraid that he will see an empty space in the mirror instead of his face. Reflecting on the encounter with the police, Willie retorts to belligerent Lester, who, as a resident of Linden Hills, refuses to fit into the role of a cooperating, obedient subject and dares to talk back to the policeman: "It wasn't what he [the policeman] thought he was, but what he thought we were... a couple of unidentified niggers" (199). Significantly, the policeman sizes up Lester's material worth, paying special attention to his "sheepskin coat, suede gloves and leather boots," all of which contrast with Willie's pea jacket, implying Lester's higher social standing. Ultimately, the policeman's gaze of surveillance is successfully returned by Norman Anderson, who claims liaison to the District Attorney's office and who deliberately stares at the officer's badge number.

White policemen's gaze of surveillance is not the sole source of double consciousness experienced by Willie. Black individuals of higher social rank than himself have equal power to shatter his confidence and trigger a measure of discomfort. Willie becomes the object of ethnographic interest from other African Americans primarily because of his extremely black skin color. His nickname "White" is a pun on his very black skin, so black that in childhood he is afraid that the sun will make him white. On the one hand, as a member of the black cultural nationalist movement, he is proud of his phenotypic features, yet on the other, he is clearly discomfited by the stares that he receives from other African Americans. He feels his blackness intensified in the presence of yellow-skinned Mrs. Tilson: "Willie always felt big and awkward and black around this delicate, yellow woman" (48). He also "grow[s] uncomfortable under [Dr. Braithwaite's] bland stare" (251). The most problematic for Willie is the gaze with which he is fixed repeatedly by Luther Nedeed IV. First he is under an impression that "he had been caught watching" Nedeed surreptitiously in the chapel while the latter was seeing to Lycentia Parker's body (185).² At his own home Nedeed is "content to sit and watch Willie" (291). On one occasion Nedeed is metaphorically X-raying Willie's body: "It seemed to take a slow age for Luther's eyes to move over Willie's body. No, it was more like moving through his body, well beneath the tissues that covered his internal organs" (214). Gates discerns overtones of homoeroticism, going to the point of calling it an "ocular rape" ("Significant Others" 611). Like his ancestors, Luther Nedeed IV indeed seems to treat his marriage to Willa instrumentally, approaching sexual encounters mechanically, mostly as a source of impregnation in the right phase of the Moon and hence procuring an heir who will be a copy of himself. Yet considering that Nedeed's efforts go awry and the child is phenotypically white, his visual fascination with Willie may be interpreted

2 It is never stated what Willie saw in the chapel, but there is a strong hint that Nedeed might have committed some necrophilic acts upon Lycentia Parker's body. The hint is corroborated by Grandma's Tilson's earlier claim that one of the older Nedeeds was interested in purchasing catfish heads from her, but she would not sell them to him because she knew what he needed them for. K.A. Sandiford speculates that he placed catfish heads inside female vaginas (124-125).

as a gaze of envy and appreciation for a “darker-hued gentleman” (192), representing his dream son, an external inversion of his own son, whom he disclaims because of his whiteness. It is not without significance that Nedeed’s intense gazing upon Willie takes place when he is preoccupied with the fate and legacy of the Nedeeds because his son’s whiteness equals for Nedeed the “destruction of five generations” (18).

Analyzing blackness and whiteness in *Linden Hills*, it is impossible to omit the dynasty of the Nedeeds and their relation to whiteness and blackness. Luther Nedeed II, the founder of Linden Hills professes the existence of “white money,” “white power,” “white earth,” “white god,” “white silver,” “white coal,” “white railroads,” “white steamships,” “white oil,” white sky (8). His father, Luther I, builds a white clapboard house, which symbolically amplifies the Nedeeds’ relation to whiteness and is a further manifestation of the association of whiteness with power, which all of the Nedeeds crave. All of the Nedeeds in the dynasty also falsely believe that the earth belongs to them rather than they to the earth: “They looked at the earth, the sea, and the sky ... and mistook those who were owned by it as the owners” (16). Unlike his ancestors, the last Nedeed in the dynasty, Luther IV, claims that God is colorless, not white, because the Almighty is nothing more but the “will to possess” (16-17). Therefore according to Nedeed, God knows no color bar because the will to possess is common to all human beings.

Luther Nedeed IV’s own relation to whiteness is ambivalent. As mentioned earlier, he is fascinated with Willie’s very dark phenotypic features. Unlike his ancestors, who chose octoroon light-skinned wives, Luther marries a woman “a dull brown shadow” (18). Equating whiteness with invisibility, Luther IV claims that his ancestors married light-skinned women because they would easily disappear “against the whitewashed boards of the Nedeed home” after giving birth to a male heir (18). All of the Nedeed women become figuratively nameless and invisible after entering the Nedeed family. The same fate would encounter Willa Nedeed if not for the fact that her story is articulated in the narrative. Willa also recuperates the stories of other Nedeed wives and mothers, exercising considerable agency at the end of the novel by inadvertently putting an end to the Nedeed dynasty and thus debunking Luther IV’s claim that “there must always be Nedeeds” (288). Patriarchy of the Nedeeds’ household is one of the cornerstones on which they build the neighborhood of Linden Hills. So is their ostensibly unswerving commitment to heterosexuality. Hence Luther IV’s staunch opposition to Winston’s homosexual relationship with David and the role that he plays at Winston’s wedding. Only after formalizing an arranged heterosexual relationship, does Winston become worthy of living in the “promised land” of Tupelo Drive.

While for Luther Willa eventually becomes a “shadow floating through the carpeted rooms,” his phenotypically white son also “faded against the [white] clapboards of Tupelo Drive” (19). As in the case of William Faulkner’s Thomas Sutpen, Luther Nedeed IV’s envisioned heritage and design go awry. Luther’s son is depicted as “ghostly presence that mocked everything that his fathers had built” (18). Considering

that “ghost” is the term often applied by black people in reference to white people, “ghostly” reinforces the son’s relation to whiteness. If Nedeed’s son is to guarantee the Nedeeds’ legacy, it is quite significant that the son is born phenotypically white because that is in fact what the Nedeeds end up creating—the neighborhood that, through Luther IV’s own admission is “indistinguishable” from the white residential area of Wayne County (17). In the Nedeeds’ design the son was to be the visible sign and guarantor of the Nedeeds’ heritage, power and legacy—“the stamp and will of the father” (18). It is not without significance that it is Luther IV, rather than any of his ancestors, that has a phenotypically white son because he is the one to strip his ancestors’ vision of whatever idealism it originally entailed and to put a final stamp of uniformization of Linden Hills with equivalent white residential neighborhoods. He is also the one to forge an alliance with the racist Citizens’ Alliance of Wayne County. Luther’s nameless son is by no means the only instance of a phenotypically white child in African American literature. One of the earliest examples of the trope dates back to Sutton Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1889), a black nationalist novel. Like Luther Nedeed, one of the two major protagonists of the novel, Belton, the African American father of the white born child, also displays ignorance which tells him to suspect his wife’s infidelity rather than blame the phenotypic whiteness of the child on the genetic mischief. While devastated Belton leaves the family, sadistic Luther imprisons the wife together with the child. Different as both cases are, both exemplify narrative irony and can be read as a tool employed by the narrators of both works, a tool that is supposed to cast a shadow of doubt on their protagonists’ professed commitment to “blackness” and “black identity.” The knowledge of such white births to exclusively black parents was well established in black communities and was passed down from one generation to another. It was common knowledge in African American communities that phenotypically black parents could have a phenotypically white child, but phenotypically white parents could not have a phenotypically black child.

As *Linden Hills* conjures up the associations of hell, Luther IV invites connotations of hell, the devil and death. Seeing the Nedeeds’ house for the first time, Willie perceives it as a dead place, finding it difficult to imagine the site as vibrant with life, children’s play or laughter (266). The interior of the house prompts Willie to think of Heathcliffe’s mansion: “it was like walking into a movie set for *Wuthering Heights*” (290). Lester maliciously associates Luther exclusively with the funeral: “you sorta surprised us this time since there’s no funeral going on” (212). The most overt references to Luther IV as the devil appear in connection with the suffering inflicted on Willa and their child. The most explicit public comparisons of Luther to the devil are made by his chief antagonist in the narrative—Reverend Hollis. Barely stopping from calling Luther the devil directly, Hollis claims that if one ran a rope from his house to that of the Nedeeds, it would have to “be fireproof when it gets to the end of Tupelo Drive [the location of Luther’s house]” (171). Luther clearly derives a necrophilic pleasure out of the contact with dead bodies, especially from surveying the final product of his work: “Even now, in the chapel, looking at

the results of his labor sent a pleasant sensation through the base of his stomach. She [Lycentia Parker] was perfect. And what was the point in living if a man didn't love his work?" (185). According to Nedeed, he elevates the job of a mortician to the level of art, priding himself on learning the minutiae of the discipline from his ancestors who cherished the arcane of their knowledge, never trusting external sources. Luther also pictures himself as a kind of demiurge-like figure that creates a woman anew: "it took gentleness and care to turn what was under your hands into a woman" (185). K.A. Sandiford calls Luther "the consummate gothic technician" (125), noting at the same time that he represents the real hell that Grandma Tilson apothegizes by telling Lester that there is hell on earth (136). Wallinger designates the dynasty of the Nedeeds as "the Satans or anti-Christ of Linden Hills" (174). Berg calls Luther a "modern-day Lucifer" (4), a label with which Moore concurs by identifying Luther as Lucifer of Eden (1414). Moore arrives at the above mentioned classification through the etymological analysis of Luther's last name. Spelled from the end, "Nedeed" results in de-Eden, which Moore reformulates as Lucifer de Eden.

The analysis of the defamiliarization of whiteness and blackness in *Linden Hills* would not be complete without noting the correspondence between the whiteness to which Linden Hills in various ways aspires and the narrative imagery of the work that time and again invokes whiteness. Quite significantly, the season of the year in which the events unfold is winter, the time of all enveloping whiteness. Linden Hills is presented as hidden behind a "solid white wall" of snow. The "white wall of snow" is evocative of the relation of the neighborhood to white privilege and its physical and mental separation from the rest of the black community. It also stands in opposition to Kenneth Clark's "invisible walls" of the ghetto. The "solid white wall" of snow and haze fortifies the fence of the most affluent section of Linden Hills—Tupelo Drive (194). Whiteness enfolding Linden Hills is indicative of aspirations of its inhabitants, who were "constantly painting and whitewashing" (11), running over their past instead of building on it. The neighborhood of Linden Hills begins with the Nedeeds' white clapboard house and when the Nedeeds' personal, family design in the end goes up in smoke, "the Nedeed home was a pile of charred wood" (303). Whiteness also appears in the narrative imagery in reference to Willie and Willa, both of whom are rendered as to some extent akin to each other. White fingers lure Willie "White" to eat Nedeed's cake in his dream. Like all Nedeed women, Willa is presented as fading into the background and out of the picture in the family photographs. When she emerges from the basement, she is "wrapped in sheer white lace" (298). While staying in the basement she wraps up the family Bible in the white wedding veil worn by one of the preceding Nedeed women. Later she wraps the body of her child in the same veil. When Willie and Lester follow Luther's command in their bewildered fear and leave Luther and Willa alone in the house, wondering what to do, the narrator comments tersely that "there would have been no question of smashing in that door if their world were still governed by the rules of cowboys and Indians, knights and dragons—black and white" (299).

Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* complicates the view of blackness, illustrating what happens to the African American community that desperately tries to match the norm set by whiteness. Although white people barely appear in the narrative, whiteness still wields enormous power to exert a controlling influence on the Linden Hills neighborhood that ostensibly bans whites from permanent residence. African Americans residing in the area may bar whites from legally sharing in their property, but they help to sustain the self-created normativity of whiteness through the fetishization of white standards and norms as well as by participating in the ostracism of underprivileged African Americans. For some inhabitants of Linden Hills the imitation of whiteness turns out to be literally fatal, for others it is figuratively fatal, destroying their moral and cultural underpinnings. Most are oblivious to the fact that there is a third way, the space in between what came to be figuratively labeled as "black" or "white," the "middle ground" that Lester speaks about to Willie: "Maybe there's a middle ground somewhere.... I don't know why it must be one or the other—ya know, ditchdigger or duke. But people always think that way: it's Linden Hills or nothing. But it doesn't have to be Linden Hills and it doesn't have to be nothing.... There *are* other places to live" (283, original emphasis). In their relative immaturity Willie and Lester are still mature enough to know that the Nedeeds and their followers have an illusion of controlling reality while they really become trapped in someone else's design, seemingly pursuing their own. The open-ended structure of *Linden Hills* does not clearly articulate the "middle ground" Willie and Lester are striving for, but it clearly points to what they are going to reject.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man. The Ambivalence of Colonial Difference." *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 85-92. Print.
- Berg, Christine G. "Light from a Hill of Carbon Paper Dolls:" Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* and Dante's *Inferno*." *Modern Language Studies* 29.2 (Autumn 1999): 1-19. Print.
- Clark, Kenneth. *Dark Ghetto*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965. Print.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903]. New York: Penguin, 1989. Print.
- . "The Souls of White Folk." W.E.B Du Bois. *Writings*. Ed. Nathan Huggins. New York: Library of America, 1986. 923- 938. Print.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man* [1952]. New York: Vintage, 1972. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis. "Significant Others." *Contemporary Literature* 29.4 (Winter 1988): 606-623. Print.
- . *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989. Print.
- Griggs, Sutton. *Imperium in Imperio* [1889]. Milwaukee, WI: Greenbook Publications, 2010. Print.
- Harris, Cheryl. "Whiteness as Property." *The Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993):

1709-1791. Print.

- Huggan, Graham. "(Post)Colonialism, Anthropology, and the Magic of Mimesis." *Cultural Critique* 38 (Winter 1998): 91-106. Print.
- Loris, Michelle C. "Interview: 'The Human Spirit is a Kick-Ass Thing.'" *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*. Ed. Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Lorris. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. 253-263. Print.
- Moore, John Noell. "Myth, Fairy Tale, Epic, and Romance: Narrative as Re-Vision in *Linden Hills*." *Callaloo* 23.4 (Autumn 2000): 1410-1429. Print.
- Naylor, Gloria. *Linden Hills* [1985]. New York: Penguin, 1986. Print.
- Roy, Parama. "Oriental Exhibits: Englishmen and Natives in Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*." *boundary 2* 22.1 (1995): 185-202. Print.
- Sandiford, K.A. "Gothic and Intertextual Constructions in *Linden Hills*." *Arizona Quarterly* 47.3 (Autumn 1991): 117-139. Print.
- Wallinger, Hanna. "Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*: The Novel by an African American Woman Writer and the Critical Discourse." *Moderne Sprachen* 37.3 (1993): 172-186. Print.
- Ward, Catherine C. "Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*: A Modern 'Inferno.'" *Contemporary Literature* 28.1 (Spring 1987): 67-81. Print.