January 2009

African American Whiteness in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*

Tim Engles

Eastern Illinois University, tdengles@eiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eng_fac

Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Engles, Tim, "African American Whiteness in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*" (2009). *Faculty Research & Creative Activity*. 49.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eng_fac/49

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research & Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

African American Whiteness in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*

In the last decade or so, “critical whiteness studies” scholars have produced articles and books virtually without number on the supposedly unexamined center of American racial formations. Unsurprisingly, most of these scholars have been white, but as African American philosopher George Yancy writes in his introduction to a collection of essays on “the whiteness question,” while whiteness studies has produced valuable, potentially liberating insight, “it must remain open to those nonwhite voices that continue to reveal the extent to which they actually suffer and feel terrorized by whiteness” (17). As recent work in the field has begun to acknowledge, African American voices have been observing and writing about whiteness for centuries—out of necessity, but also with largely ignored acuity. In terms of literary scholarship and pedagogy, the rise of multiculturalism has greatly elevated the status of some minority authors and their works, but there has also been the disadvantage of pigeonholing, a delimiting insistence on a matched correspondence between an author’s racial identity and that of his or her characters. Nearly every minority writer’s work accorded significant attention features central characters from his or her racialized group, and works that do otherwise, such as the “white-life” stories and novels by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, or Ann Petry have been until just recently either continually overlooked or pointedly dismissed.¹

Thanks in part to the rise of critical whiteness studies, and especially to the great deal of such work in literary studies, several African American white-life novels are receiving their due, both in scholarship and in the classroom.² This overdue interest credits the writers with perceptive and instructive insight into the ways of white folks, insight that whites tend to lack about their own racialized selves and communities. While such literary commentary commonly arises from the studied observation of white people themselves, I want to highlight African American thought that illuminates the workings of whiteness at a broader hegemonic level, particularly the ways in which whiteness now works as a veiled and insidious set of social processes that affect the lives of all Americans.

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is one novel that has already received widespread credit for this sort of insight. By depicting white hegemony’s powerful ability to infiltrate and degrade black identity, *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates that twentieth-century whiteness functions as a veiled, unspoken process that partially organizes the consciousness of all Americans. In another sense, Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* also examines the subtle workings of whiteness, and again without the use of significant “white” characters. Published a decade or so before the coalescence of academic whiteness studies, Naylor’s novel anticipates several of its key insights and hermeneutics regarding the workings of whiteness. Both *The Bluest Eye* and *Linden Hills* deal with more abstract and insidious workings of whiteness as a set of forces that shape black lives. However, while Morrison delineates in painful detail the internalized effects of its relational denigration of seemingly indelible black subjectivity, Naylor reveals its broader workings as a social process that encourages the opposite—the deracination of seemingly transcendable black subjectivity.³

While Morrison depicts a desire to shed blackness and become white, Naylor dramatizes a desire to shed blackness and become rich. While the latter seems more a matter of class than of race, it nevertheless entails a “whitening” process that parallels the workings of white racialization.

Naylor offers a prescriptive statement on the corrosive, “whitening” effects of materialism by openly adopting the narrative structure and didactic thrust of Dante’s moral allegory, *The Inferno*. In addition to creating a space that replicates in many ways the multi-leveled Hell posited by Dante, Naylor adopts her model’s general thematic emphasis on the individual’s responsibility for exerting his or her will in order to resist worldly temptation and to make better choices in life (thus the suggestively similar names of the novel’s dual protagonists, Willa Nedeed and Willie Mason). Naylor enriches her schematic framework with an intricate symbolic network of color motifs, with various figurations of whiteness primary among them. In portraying the troubles and foibles of the residents of a wealthy, entirely black neighborhood, Naylor’s repeated use of white imagery would seem to represent white people and their values. Yet Naylor’s use of whiteness is much more subtle, highlighting instead the naturalized state of several modes of subjectivity. By depicting Willie’s dialogic interactions with various Linden Hills residents, and Willa’s with the fragmented remnants of the former Nedeed wives, *Linden Hills* closely examines African American identity in terms not only of race, but also of class, gender, and sexuality. For each category, a norm wields its power by passing as the unmarked, and thus as the “natural,” and it does so by highlighting the implicitly denigrated difference of its opposite. In this article, I will focus on how Naylor uses whiteness as a motif throughout the novel to illustrate a normalizing *process*, one that is always concurrent with the replication of this same process in other categorical terms. In doing so, she offers a critique of African American “whiteness” as a generally repressive mode of thought and behavior that paradoxically bleaches away both communal ties and individual distinctiveness.

Allegorical Geography and Oppositional Subjectivities

Linden Hills opens with a detailed description of its carefully mapped, allegorical setting and of the shifting conceptions of that setting held by five successive generations of proprietors, the satanic Luther Nedeeds. Generally, the eight circular streets within its “V-shaped section of land” wind downhill toward the “white-washed” house of Nedeed. The financial status of the community’s residents rises as they move downhill, ever in pursuit of the more luxurious homes located on the lower streets. As Naylor herself has said of *The Inferno*, “I saw that it would be a perfect fit for what I wanted to say about the black middle class, and to say about life in America for the black middle class” (Fowler 149). Virginia Fowler succinctly summarizes what this novel has generally been taken to say on this topic: “There are numerous specific allegorical meanings in Naylor’s tale, but its underlying concept is the death of the (black) human soul occasioned by pursuit of the (white) American dream of material prosperity” (69). Yet, Fowler begs a question here—what exactly is it that is “white” about a black person’s attempt to rise in class terms? After all, such people do not consciously and actively imitate something explicitly “white” about white people—they seek instead material security and success. By addressing this question, *Linden Hills* deserves even more credit than Fowler gives it, for it reveals not only that what is commonly framed as racial mimicry should instead be figured in terms of social class, but also that there are similar processes at work with both categories. Rising in terms of race (as ethnic Europeans have been allowed) or in terms of

class (as ethnic Europeans and other races have been allowed) both entail erasure of that which marked one as Other. Naylor effectively metaphorizes this process as a washing-away or bleaching-out, a “whitening” as it were, of what one was before. It is this parallel process, one that middle-class blacks primarily undergo in terms of class rather than race, that Naylor scrutinizes throughout the novel, with figurations of whiteness that signify in terms of more categories than just race.

For the early nineteenth-century Nedeeds, the blunt conception of materialistic pursuit as strictly “white” is as straightforward as is the American white self-conception at the time of its own inherent superiority. The second Nedeed’s thoughts on “the future of America” reflect his understanding of this overtly racialized paradigm: “the very earth was white—look at it. . . . Under the earth—across the earth—and one day, *over* the earth. Yes, the very sky would be white. He didn’t know exactly how, but it was the only place left to go” (8).⁴ While overt declarations of white supremacy gradually fell out of favor during the next century, their underlying presumption did not disappear. It became instead a set of directives at once less visible and less “pronounced,” silently infiltrating and shaping social and economic relations across all color lines.⁵ Discerning parallels between what used to be called the “white way” and what now passes as the “right way” helps to explain why contemporary race relations have come to feel for many less like a clearly discernible set of racist mores and practices and more like a persistent malaise. As white middle-class rules for propriety and superiority become more presumed than spoken, they become whitened in a different sense, “bleached out” as they pass for something else. The doxic workings of this bleaching process are also further complicated, less easy to discern, label, and counteract in terms of race, because they commonly happen in terms of class as well as race.⁶ Precisely what is still wrong with this bleaching process has thus become more difficult to detect, and thus to resist, difficulties continually underscored and illustrated in Naylor’s color-coded allegory.

Living more or less in the 1980s, the novel’s current Nedeed begins to think through this malaise of race and class when he reflects that despite the opulent success signaled by his internationally renowned African American community, something has gone wrong. Like Milton’s Satan, the early Nedeeds had worked with a determined passion to build their own empire as an overt gesture of defiance to a punishing God; in their case, the god they worked against was figured as the “white” community that had refused to incorporate them because they were “black.” But now that African Americans have been allowed limited access to the American Dream, their material success, however limited relative to white success, registers not as defiance but instead as agreement, or at least consent. In addition, the acceptance of a white definition of success as that which can be measured in material terms is not the only form of assent to unspoken premises of preferred norms. The process also happens at the individual level, in terms of one’s communal identity. Just as ethnic Europeans shed whatever marked them in ethnic terms as “the price of the ticket” for full American citizenship, so, Naylor suggests, are African Americans asked to bleach out or leave behind that which marks them as different from the norm.⁷ In general, then, as Luke Bouvier puts it, Naylor suggests in many ways that “whiteness has insidiously, ‘treacherously’ entered the community” of Linden Hills, and thus the community, such as it is, of middle-class African America (146). The current Nedeed’s mood of despair is grounded in recognition of this invading element within his supposedly pure black community, and thrusting his wife and suspiciously light-skinned son into the basement represents in part his desperate desire to repress it.⁸

In this allegorical warning about the effects on middle-class African Americans of the material possessiveness of a larger, and more largely white America, Naylor portrays the current Nedeed as able to see that in perceiving a need for a separate space for their black community, his ancestors had accepted the white conception of space itself as an emptiness to be possessed:

His dead fathers [had] looked at the earth, the sea, and the sky, Luther thought sadly, and mistook those who were owned by it as the owners. They looked only at the products and thought they saw God—they should have looked at the process. . . . [W]hen men begin to claw men for the rights to a vacuum that stretches into eternity, then it becomes so painfully clear that the omnipresent, omnipotent, Almighty Divine is simply the *will* to possess. . . . His fathers had made a fatal mistake: they had given Linden Hills the will to possess and so had lost it to the very god they sought to defy. (16-17)

The current Nedeed realizes that his forefathers had admirably asserted their own “wills” in defiance of white denial of their agency. He also sees that in hoping to own and develop a separate space that would defy the god of whiteness, the early Nedeeds had developed this plot of land in order to assert their blackness. Most significantly for Naylor’s thematic framework, they had also accepted the notion of individualistic possession itself as the terms by which the success of Linden Hills should be measured.⁹

Pausing to compare the early Nedeeds to the nineteenth-century black separatist Martin Delany helps to interpret Naylor’s warnings about threats to African American identity and its relation to some sense of community. In his written call for black emigration to a proposed black American state in Africa, Delany also recognized the pervasive whiteness of America:

Caste [*sic*] our eyes about us and reflect for a moment, and what do we behold! [E]very thing that presents to view gives evidence of the skill of the white man. Should we purchase a pound of groceries, a yard of linen, a vessel of crockery ware, a piece of furniture, the very provisions that we eat,—all, all are the products of the white man. (qtd. in Takaki 128)

Ostensibly, Delany and Nedeed would seem to echo each other’s sentiments, but a crucial difference lies in the motives driving their efforts toward black separatism. Delany’s focus was communal; for instance, as one of the first observers to recognize the phenomenon of internalized racism, Delany wrote that black children could not “be raised in this country without being stooped shouldered” because white America constantly reminded them of their supposed inferiority (qtd. in Takaki 128). As he focused on various details of black struggle, Delany also called for the financial self-reliance called for by Nedeed. Unlike Nedeed, however, Delany’s expressed purpose was to elevate the overall pride and self-esteem of all black Americans, not merely his own. Another difference lies in the depth of their perceptions of the extent to which the favoring of white skin makes its impact. The early Nedeeds conceived of it as covering virtually everything in sight, but Delany recognized some of its *invisible* effects, such as the way it can creep into people of all races and colors, adversely affecting the very ways members of racialized minorities tend to think of themselves.

Within a moral allegory that emphasizes the assertion at the individual level of one’s “will” in resistance to various forms of temptation, the Nedeed defiance of the dominant order is an admirable assertion of one’s black self in the face of a white social order.¹⁰ Indeed, the “white race” in part established itself (in both conceptual and material terms) by denying the agency of “blacks.” Again, it was precisely by perceiving in blacks a *lack* of will and self-governing capabilities that whites justified their enslavement of the blackened Other in paternalistic terms. Thus, in order to build on her portrait of the Nedeeds’ admirable defiance of these terms later in the novel, Naylor carefully notes a measure of respect in the early white response to the Nedeeds, even before black emancipation: “There was something in Luther Nedeed’s short, squat body that stopped those men from seeing him like a nigger—and something in his eyes that soon stopped them from even thinking the word. It was said that his protruding eyes could change color at will. . . .” (3). To some extent, then, the Nedeed assertion of a willful self is portrayed as an admirable defiance to a dominant force. Overall, however, in this opening section of her novel, Naylor establishes not only the intricately detailed, entirely symbolic setting, but she also

establishes in the collective Nedeeds a primarily negative model of black subjectivity that counters the more laudable figurations of self eventually pieced together by the novel's protagonists, Willa and Willie. In particular, while the Nedeeds reject the white conception of ownership as an exclusively white province, their thoughts and actions reflect their acceptance of the negative valuation of blacks and blackness by which whites justified the exclusion of blacks. Also, while the Nedeeds do work to build a "successful" black community, they gradually exert their "will" for entirely selfish reasons, doing so merely in order to assert themselves as successful individuals, rather than to uplift their community or their race as a whole. The American "will to possess," then, also constitutes a willful repression of one's communal ties, in favor of a strictly materialistic individualism. It is this process, by which the most "all-American" people are the atomized and ironically individualized white ones, that Willie and Willa eventually come to resist.

Having established Linden Hills as a representative site constructed both in opposition to and in unwitting acquiescence to whiteness, Naylor goes on to critique various aspects of the African American pursuit of materialism and class status by depicting Willie's interactions with various Linden Hills residents. Prior to depicting Willie's encounters with these residents, who demonstrate to various degrees their materialistic avarice and their consequent loss of both black communal ties and personal potential, Naylor carefully builds on her description of Linden Hills by establishing the potency of materialistic temptation as a threat to those aspects of Willie's identity that would both mark him as a distinct individual and as "black."

The Doxic Allure of White(ning) Materialism

Naylor's depictions of various Linden Hills residents repeatedly suggest that African Americans who attempt to enter the competitive fields of mainstream society tend to "whiten" themselves by repressing or dropping supposedly black characteristics, and adopting various "proper" and "correct" modes of thought and behavior. They are also depicted as repressing their individual tastes and desires in accordance to what used to be called "bourgeois" rules of propriety. Naylor thus offers a nuanced depiction of the potential pitfalls faced by the black middle class, updating that offered by such codifying critics as Nathan Hare. In his influential 1965 work, *The Black Anglo-Saxons*, Hare wrote of upwardly mobile "blacks" who "eagerly ape . . . white norms" (16). Like Naylor, Hare depicted such people as envious, but he described their envy as more actively mimetic in racial terms:

[Black Anglo-Saxons] relate to, and long to be a part of, the elusive and hostile white world, whose norms are taken as models of behavior. White society is to most of them a looking-glass for taking stock of their personal conduct. In this way, they acquire what sociologists call a "looking-glass self," an image they must keep on grooming to make what they think white society imagines itself to be, accord with what they themselves would like to be: like whites. (15)

Although the residents of Linden Hills often think and act in ways that resemble those of upper-middle-class whites, they by and large do not consciously think of themselves as doing so. Whiteness became a doxic, unmarked norm by racially marking the supposed norms of other groups, while leaving the norms established by successive generations of middle- and upper-middle-class white people unmarked *as* white. Notions of "correct" and "proper" behavior in largely white settings have thereby come to function as code words for an invisible adjective, "white." Precisely because these notions are doxically coded as "correct" and "proper" behavior, rather than as "white" behavior, many blacks who aspire to

financial success by entering professional, largely white occupational and social fields readily adopt such behavior, downplaying and even trying to ignore or forget their own blackness by suppressing its supposed cultural markers.¹¹ But as Linden Hills residents demonstrate throughout the novel, whites in predominantly white environments do not let them forget that they are nevertheless perceived largely in racial terms.

Just prior to Willie's decision to seek work in Linden Hills, Naylor establishes a white(ning) materialism as his primary temptation as he considers what to do with

Naylor critiques African American whiteness as a generally repressive mode of thought and behavior that paradoxically bleaches away both communal ties and individual distinctiveness.

his life (and therefore how to define himself). The suggestion that Willie seek work in Linden Hills is made by Ruth Anderson, a woman whom many consider unfortunate because she chose to marry a man with a strangely recurring illness. Norman Anderson is at most times a capable, normal man, but whenever a fit of something he calls "the pinks" comes over him, a phenomenon only he can see, he goes berserk trying to "scrape" them off, smashing in the process nearly every material possession in his and Ruth's home. When Willie and Lester accept an invitation to the home of the financially destitute Andersons, their visit is overshadowed by their awareness of Norman's periodic bouts with this odd, disabling illness. The Andersons live perpetually on the brink of financial desperation because of biennial onslaughts of the pinks. It is important to note here that Naylor inlays her allegory with numerous vivid and representative colors. As she once remarked in an interview, "I'm really waiting for people to go to *The Inferno* and go to my work and see what I did as far as images and the terza rima. No one has gotten it yet . . . [especially] the colors, and how I play with colors, no one has gotten it yet" (Fowler 155). In Naylor's color scheme, pink is among the most significant. As Virginia Fowler has shown, pink imagery appears at several key moments in the novel:

For example, Xavier Donnell, whose ambitions make him fearful of loving a black woman, wears "pink silk ties" . . . pink and white crepe paper decorate the limousine that takes Winston Alcott to his wedding. . . . Lycentia Parker, who fought hard to prevent construction of a housing project to benefit poor blacks, is buried in a pink dress. (75)

Having established a connection between Norman Anderson's bouts with the pinks and his consequent inability to acquire material goods, Naylor goes on to suggest with such subsequent uses of the color that various characters in Linden Hills have succumbed to the worldly lure of a white(ning) materialism.

Again, readers may be tempted to interpret Naylor's use of the color pink to suggest whiteness and its mimetic adoption in strictly racial terms. Fowler, for example, notes that the novel recalls racial associations with the color pink as encoded in the African American vernacular. Clarence Major's *Dictionary of African-American Slang* might lead one to emphasize the racial overtones associated with the color when it notes that the word "pink" has been used as a noun by blacks to refer to a "a white girl or young woman" and a "white person," and "pink chasers" to "any black person who aggressively or deliberately cultivates friendships with or seeks the company of white people" (351-52). For instance, Naylor particularly stresses the color pink during Willie and Lester's first day of work in Linden Hills, when they help a caterer at the wedding of Winston Alcott. Winston has renounced

his true, homosexual desires by getting married to a woman. Winston has decided to deny his sexual preference because, as his father reminds him, acknowledging it would destroy his promising, lucrative career as a lawyer. Naylor figures Winston's pursuit of materialism in racial terms by having Lester refer to a white woman at the wedding as a "pink job." He may do so because of the color of her dress (which is never actually mentioned), but also because she is racially white. The color pink, then, would seem to be associated here with white people, and white people in turn with the obsessive pursuit of material gain.

By this reading, as Fowler writes, Norman Anderson's "pinks" malady "express(es) the materialism entering the Andersons' lives, which Norman rightly experiences as a threat to his very being and to his marriage, both of which he preserves by destroying the material possessions he and Ruth have acquired. The pinks thus constitute a powerful trope for the sickness underlying African Americans' embrace of white values" (75). However, Naylor's use of colors in this scene, as throughout the novel, allows for more than a strictly racial reading, whereby her depictions of the black middle class simply warn black readers against directly imitating white people. The notion of whiteness itself instead represents the denial of some aspects of oneself—be these cultural and communal ties or individual capabilities—just as it generally has in the assimilation process. In this scene, Winston Alcott denies a fundamental part of his being, his sexuality, in order to advance his career with a socially appropriate marriage.

From this perspective, Willie's careful attention to the elaborate wedding cake is particularly suggestive: "The four-foot wedding cake," Naylor writes, "held miniatures of the bridal party on two sets of golden stairways that ran up each of its sides. A tiny spray of liquid sugar rose mysteriously from its center and sprinkled the small bride and groom at regulated intervals. . . . [Willie] secretly felt a bit proud that someone black could afford all this" (82). Naylor's description here of "liquid sugar" rather than water, a distinction invisible to Willie, goes beyond a strictly racial coding of whiteness as a motif. As Winston Alcott marries a woman in order to continue his progress toward the lower streets of Linden Hills, he pursues that which is "sweet" (material gain and status) but ultimately less "nutritious" or fulfilling than the relationship he gives up with a man. Naylor thus highlights here the doxic status of heterosexuality; that is, in agreeing to society's naturalized positing of heterosexual marriage as the status one "naturally" assumes in order to gain social acceptance, Winston painfully denies his true self. To most observers (although significantly, not to the sensitive Willie), the inapplicability of this social norm to Winston goes unrecognized, its social constructedness remaining, like the whiteness of the sugar, doxically invisible. The whiteness here represents, then, both the repression and bleaching-out of a fundamental part of Winston's true self, and the assumed, "correct" normality of heterosexuality.¹² In addition, as with Norman Anderson's "pinks," which also represent in their invisibility the unremarked, bleaching "whiteness" of materialism, Naylor suggests with her description of the wedding cake that this couple will pursue the sweet, "whitening" temptation of material success, and that this element arises "mysteriously from [the] center" of an ostensibly black community. Finally, by focusing Willie's admiration for the results of this pursuit on the invisibly white sugar that sprinkles the miniature bridal party, Naylor suggests that his struggle to resist such temptations will not be an easy one.

After Willie and Lester visit the Anderson home, where "love rules" because Ruth and Norman have learned to resist self-centered pursuit of materialistic gain and social status, they go to Lester's house in Linden Hills. Lester and Willie live on opposite sides of the border between Linden Hills and Putney Wayne, and their relationship is thus depicted as a discouraged alliance across class boundaries. Naylor carefully highlights Willie's exposure to the expansive love in the Anderson home by depicting his reactions to the self-centered, cramped propriety of the

Tilsons. Not that Willie himself pays much attention to such qualities. As in the Anderson home, where Willie is lustfully mesmerized by Ruth, his attention in the Tilson home is focused elsewhere, mostly on its material comforts. Naylor particularly emphasizes that the majority of the Tilsons' furnishings are of one particular color: green. As one of the emblematic characters within the intricately mapped and detailed space of Linden Hills, Lester's mother has chosen this color as the overwhelmingly predominant element in her home's decorative scheme.¹³ As Willie talks with Mrs. Tilson, he feels "big, and awkward and black around this delicate, yellow woman" (48). Willie senses that his actions often strike Mrs. Tilson as improper, and he thus often has difficulty while in her presence "finding something to do with his hands" (48). Having been raised in a family less concerned than Mrs. Tilson is with distinguishing itself from a perceived lower order, Willie feels acutely self-conscious before her discriminating gaze. During dinner with the Tilsons, "the starched linen kept slipping off [Willie's] lap . . . he spent the entire evening cringing every time the thin plate or his teeth clicked against the fragile Norwegian crystal" (54). Like the Linden Hills residents who live in denial of their connections to the lower-class residents of the Putney Wayne housing projects, Mrs. Tilson, and subsequently her Wellesley-educated daughter Roxanne, are portrayed as actively whitening the connections commonly drawn between themselves as African Americans and a multitudinous set of associations drawn in the mainstream American Imaginary between "blacks" and the lower class.

As Willie joins the Tilsons for a fried chicken dinner (referred to as "peasant" food by Mrs. Tilson), Willie too finds himself repressing those aspects of himself that stand out as inappropriate in such a setting. Lester, set in active opposition to his mother's sense of propriety, eats heartily and noisily, picking up the chicken with his fingers and sucking on the bones. By contrast, Roxanne, an avid social climber interested in marrying rich, actively "whitens" her natural appetites and those aspects of herself that are commonly associated with blackness. Roxanne is determined to marry an African American man with a promising financial future, but like her forays during college into assertive modes of blackness, this embrace of her race is depicted as superficial and hypocritical. Although she has "paid her dues to the Civil Rights Movement by wearing an Afro for six months and enrolling in black history courses at college," Roxanne actively denies her own blackness by repressing those aspects of herself that have come to be associated with black women. Roxanne's body gives "the impression that it (is) just one good meal away from being labeled fat," but she conforms to the dominant order's conjunction of beauty with thinness by eating next to nothing at meals, only to succumb at other times to the resultant urge to binge (53). In addition to suppressing her appetites and the fuller figure that would result, Roxanne has repressed her genetically inherited physical features with "a decade's worth of bleaching creams and hair relaxers" (53). Finally, like her mother, Roxanne represses in her speech the words, phrases, and rhythms that would stand out as "black," a form of repression she has trouble maintaining when her temper rises in debate with her brother.

In this scene, the first of a series set inside Linden Hills homes, Naylor establishes in such ways the threat posed to Willie's identity by highlighting not only the tempting comforts of materialism, but also the difficulty of perceiving behind the veil of middle-class propriety its anti-black, classist bias. Naylor indicates that because classist discrimination tends to be coded as propriety, African Americans can all too easily lose a sense of themselves *as such*, as they adopt, often unconsciously, the predispositions appropriate to new social fields, repressing many of those instilled within different fields. Naylor emphasizes these doxic modes of anti-blackness as an antagonistic force for Willie during his journey through the temptations of Linden Hills. Because these modes are coded as forms of thought and behavior that can hasten access to material gain, Willie is tempted by the results of material pursuit, rather than by the

repression of signs of racial blackness. Thus, after retreating with Lester to the relatively relaxed shelter of Lester's bedroom, Willie expresses disgust with his friend's disdain for the material comforts that he and other residents of Linden Hills enjoy.

In the narrative economy of Naylor's novel, then, as in mainstream American society at large, a social order established and maintained by generations of people who have been labeled white fosters the belief that to live well, to succeed in life, means to acquire as much as possible. However, Naylor does not employ whiteness as a motif to suggest black people's imitation of white people and their values so much as their bleaching-out, via suppression or denial, the various aspects of themselves. Although the early Luther Nedeeds originally established Linden Hills as an explicit affront to white America, their acceptance of its self-aggrandizing possessiveness demonstrates that they do not manage to "scrape off" whiteness entirely. As Willie commences his journey into the temptations of Linden Hills, he too demonstrates that even when met with active resistance, whitening forces have an uncanny ability to insinuate designations of the commonsensical into the depths of American consciousness. In her portraits of other characters, particularly black corporate executives Maxwell Smyth and Laurel Dumont, Naylor strives to suggest that happiness eludes Linden Hills residents largely because they have separated themselves from a sense of their "true" selves, and from a sense of their membership in a black community. These portraits often also suggest that black professionals tend to monitor their actions very carefully, downplaying any of their own supposed markers of blackness because "success" seems to require their accession to the dominant order's denigration of them. Naylor thus suggests, paradoxically, that while in a sense they unconsciously repress characteristics and habits associated with "blackness," such people also tend to be highly aware of being *taken* as "black." These characters indicate that what they have in common is not a sustaining notion of the African American communal past, but rather a set of difficulties brought about by being continually labeled or perceived as "black." Thus, Naylor depicts such characters as suffering not only from a loss of sustaining communal ties, but also from their nearly constant awareness of the dominant order's perceptions of their blackness and its supposed significance. In depicting Willie's interactions with some of these characters, Naylor offers insights into the influence of exterior forces on American minority subjectivity, adding such lessons to his education to his suggested future role as a community builder and leader.

"Being Black" Versus Being Labeled Black

Like the Nedeeds, Willie consciously responds to a dominant order he perceives as white by affirming his blackness. That his doing so is an ironic acceptance of the dominant order's conception of himself in racialized terms is suggested by the explanation of his paradoxical schoolyard nickname, "White Willie." Willie's foregrounding of blackness within his identity is echoed in his having been "the darkest boy" in school. He was so dark that the other children called him "White Willie" because "if he turned just a shade darker, there was nothing he could do but start going the other way. . . . [I]f Willie got any darker, he'd just have to turn white" (24). Naylor represents here a paradox within the efforts of racialized people to affirm their overtly racial identities as oppositional responses to a white dominant order. That is, if notions of racial whiteness and blackness were initially fictions created by supposed "whites" who arrogated to themselves the right to define other races, then to accept and assert one's own blackness is to accept the white conception and subsequent emphasis of oneself as definable first and foremost in racialized

terms. As Henry Louis Gates has noted, this is a “nagging paradox” for all “minority” individuals: “to affirm our cultural identities, our subjectivity, is to affirm the very instrumentality of our subjection” (606). In this sense, as is appropriate in the upside-down world of *Linden Hills* (where “moving up” means moving down the hill, and where the address of the satanic tempter is “999”), the more aggressively Willie affirms his black identity, the more white he ironically becomes.

Willie stands in opposition to white society because he considers it the source of most black problems, including the fact that, as he puts it at one point, “the majority of black folks in this country are poor, have been poor, and will continue to be poor for a long time to come” (113-14). Given his recognition that white society continues to make life difficult for himself and for other blacks simply *because* they “are black,” Willie’s affirmation of his own blackness in opposition to whiteness does not seem unreasonable. Nor does what I read as the novel’s ultimate suggestion that African Americans band together with other African Americans to maintain healthy communal bonds that can help in the struggle against such difficulties. This communal experience is not that of “being black,” but rather, that of being marked as such by a social order, solely on the basis of one’s appearance, and then treated accordingly.¹⁴ As Naylor’s novel often suggests, doxic whiteness in part does its work this way, not only by positing “proper” (white) behavior, but also by positing a supposedly separate and homogenous “black race,” and by conceiving of black individuals as potential or probable bearers of supposedly black traits. At the same time, it paradoxically encourages a whitening repression of such traits that do exist when African Americans seek acceptance within certain social spheres largely defined by financial success. Naylor eventually adds to her portrait of Willie’s growing self-awareness germinal inklings of such insights into black subjectivity, suggesting that they too will fuel his future efforts as a communal builder.

One *Linden Hills* resident whom Willie meets on his fourth day there is depicted as doing his best to distance himself not only from membership in a black community, but also from any notion of himself as “black.” Willie and Lester have found work cleaning out a garage owned by Xavier Donnell, the suitor of Lester’s sister. As they work, Xavier frets about how to ask his friend, Maxwell Smyth, whether he should continue pursuing a relationship with Roxanne. In her subsequent portrait of Maxwell, an ambitious African American executive in a largely white workplace (General Motors), Naylor satirizes middle-class blacks who try to repress aspects of themselves, all the while trying as well to ignore the white world’s perception of themselves as “black.” As Naylor meticulously depicts Maxwell’s painstaking efforts to regulate every aspect of his existence, it becomes clear that he is hypersensitive to any perception of his slightest imperfection. Having trained himself to sleep three hours a day, Maxwell has time to perfect even such minutiae as the depth of the breaths he takes and whether or not to smile at his secretary. He also attempts to regulate every movement, each bodily hair, and even his bodily secretions. He does not do so with the conscious understanding that society conceives of him as “black,” and that he therefore should do whatever he can to overcome such a perception. Instead, he believes that these extreme efforts are simply forms of self-improvement that will hasten his movement up the corporate hierarchy. Maxwell believes that his blackness makes no difference whatsoever, but Naylor’s depiction of him suggests that African Americans who hold such a belief while working in predominantly white environments fool themselves: in such cases, their efforts to be simply “the best” actually display their recognition of the dominant order’s continual perception of their skin color, because their efforts result in the repression of outward displays of what amount to supposedly black characteristics.¹⁵ In Naylor’s satiric treatment of Maxwell Smyth, she highlights the significance of a black response to the white *perception* of blackness. Again, however, the target of her satire is not the white world’s imposition of a black identity on such people. Instead, true to the instructive terms

set by her adoption of the form of a moral allegory, she warns such African Americans at the individual level against becoming, in terms of repression rather than of imitation, white.

Maxwell regards with patience his primary goal, GM's "executive chair," firmly believing that "the board of trustees wouldn't think twice about giving the best man the job. And that's the only kind of man he was" (28). However, because he has entered a competitive environment established and dominated by white people, the "best" behavior will be that which is not recognizably "black," nor recognizably "white," but rather that which has been consensually designated as "correct" or "proper," and also established as such by white people. When Willie and Lester emerge from Xavier Donnell's garage after cleaning it, Willie realizes that talking with Smyth provokes in him "the same feeling that you got talking to some white people. He suddenly felt very invisible to this tall, impeccable man. . ." (113). At this point Lester finally gives voice to the text's insistent suggestion that Maxwell has attained such heights by whitening himself: "I don't know how they taught you to spell progress in the school you went to, but on the street you spell it W-H-I-T-E" (114). Given Naylor's portrait of Maxwell's efforts to repress various aspects of himself, if Lester's implication is that Maxwell has become what he appears to be by imitating white people, he's a bit off the mark. Instead, Naylor suggests that Maxwell and others who seek financial gain tend to succeed more quickly when they enact those modes of behavior doxically established as "naturally" appropriate. In this sense again Naylor encodes whiteness, in terms that are not strictly reliant on the racial black and white binary, as repression rather than imitation.

At the same time, Maxwell does not acknowledge that in doing his superhuman best as a black professional in a predominantly white environment to monitor his every move, he is actually responding directly to perceptions of his "blackness." That is, such African Americans as Maxwell often believe, no doubt much more so than do their white counterparts, and no doubt *because* they are continually perceived as "black," that being "the best" requires monitoring every single movement, gesture, and word, every impression that they might make on others. Ironically, while Maxwell prefers to think that he can separate himself from the black race and become through his actions "no color at all," the very extremity of his actions is a direct, moment-to-moment acknowledgment of the fact that to the others in his workplace, he nevertheless "is black."¹⁶

As Maxwell exchanges views with Willie and Lester on current prospects for black advancement, his habit of ignoring the mainstream impositions of black stereotypes onto black people becomes fully apparent when he asks Xavier to fetch the current issue of *Penthouse* magazine. Opening it to photos of a naked black woman posed in chains within a jungle setting, he declares it a "perfect example" of how "doors are opening" for blacks (114). Maxwell claims that this woman's very presence in the magazine is proof of this change, but he entirely overlooks the racist dimensions of the demeaning photos. In addition, accepting as he is of doxically entrenched gender relations, Maxwell also ignores the sexist imposition of submissiveness onto the women in such photos, whatever their "color," prone as they are before a lecherous male gaze.¹⁷ Naylor vividly portrays here an extreme instance of a black individual's acceptance of a denigrating conception of blackness. Because Maxwell has seen only white women in *Penthouse* before, the presence of one black woman in its pages strikes him as evidence that blacks are progressing in white society. Naylor generally suggests, however, that because racialized Others appear in such limited numbers in predominantly white settings, they tend to be taken as representative members of a monolithic racial and cultural group. The more significant point that Naylor also touches on here is that such representations as those in the magazine, and the more general representation of such a person as Maxwell as being, first and foremost, "black," are imposed from outside this supposed minority group, rather

than arising from within it. Maxwell does not acknowledge that the mere, token presence of both this woman and himself in predominantly white settings does not in itself mean that blacks can function in such environments on the same individualized basis that whites enjoy. Because whites continue to constitute the majority in such settings, they are not marked (for each other) as “white,” and are thus relatively free to conceive of themselves on a more individual basis. On the other hand, the blackness of blacks tends to accompany them whether they like it or not, and the stereotypical associations accompanying mainstream notions of blackness are often imposed upon them, as the background of the jungle and slavery props in the *Penthouse* layout suggest. Naylor focuses on this magazine as an extreme example of the power of mainstream conceptions of black femininity to influence popular representations of it, pointedly suggesting that representation of the wrong sort does not constitute a positive step toward adequate representation. After depicting these men staring at this magazine, Naylor focuses on Willie’s reaction, suggesting that he will incorporate his impressions of this scene as well into his circumspect considerations of the residents of Linden Hills. After viewing the *Penthouse* photos and listening to Maxwell’s declaration of their significance, Willie feels his blood “throb[bing],” not with “desire but a whisper of shame” (115). Willie has just argued about the tokenism such people as Maxwell represent, but he finds himself confused by his shame over the magazine. He finally decides that “it was more than just the heavy, iron chains . . . that woman was a dead ringer for his baby sister,” suggesting his growing sensitivity to both gendered and racialized aspects of societally constructed identities (116).

Dreaming of a Black Christmas

On their fourth day in Linden Hills, Willie and Lester have worked their way down to the lower streets, where the houses are larger because the residents have successfully pursued a white(ning) materialism. Again, whiteness does not represent here the direct imitation by upwardly mobile blacks of white people, but rather the repression and smothering of certain supposedly objectionable aspects of themselves. Accordingly, the farther Willie goes down the hill, the more the residents he meets have stifled their own various desires and proclivities. Willa Nedeed’s spatial position in her husband’s basement, and thus at the very lowest point of Linden Hills, signals her repression upon marriage to Luther Nedeed of virtually all that defined her as a unique individual. Ultimately, then, Naylor uses images of whiteness to suggest that the American process of social climbing entails the suffocation of life itself. Thus, upon reaching the lower streets of Linden Hills, Willie contends directly with another symbol of whiteness by struggling to clear the heavy snow that covers the immense driveway of the Dumont residence. This suggestive snow soon encroaches also on the desperate consciousness of the lonely resident of this house, Laurel Dumont. As another corporate climber, Laurel has focused obsessively on her career as an executive at IBM, thereby contributing to the breakup of her marriage. Willie and Lester’s efforts to clear her driveway are interrupted when they hear an older woman calling Laurel’s name from a window of the Dumont’s house. Naylor’s narrative then solidifies its conception of an alternative, maternalistic black past by shifting to a description of Laurel’s happy childhood in rural Georgia with this woman, her grandmother Roberta Johnson.

The rural backdrop for Laurel Dumont’s childhood is emphasized immediately. As the child entered her grandmother’s home, “the wind was sending damp gravel spinning down the Georgia dirt road, and the tops of the sycamores and pine trees were already bending over” (216). Young Laurel is pulled almost instinctively toward

water, an element she loves; as she tells her grandmother, “once you get [in the water] and hold still, it lifts you right up, sorta like it was a pair of warm hands or arms” (224). This repeated emphasis on the cradling effect of water signals its function as a symbol for the idealized space of the rural South itself, where women like Laurel’s grandmother spontaneously hug their grandchildren and tell them instructive folk tales about “Brer Fox and Brer Bear” (222). Laurel is an especially talented swimmer, and she eventually goes to school in California in pursuit of “a shot at the Olympics,” but she soon represses this talent by accepting the temptation of a lucrative career with IBM (226). Naylor indicates that Laurel’s status is doubly marked as Other in such an environment in both racialized and gendered terms by writing that her six-foot stature prompts Laurel’s co-workers into dubbing her an “Amazon,” the “one joke she allowed them” (228). As before, Naylor envisions the rural South here as peopled by nurturing, maternal elders. Earlier, Lester’s grandmother, Mamie Tilson, had fulfilled this role by giving Lester caring advice about the “mirror in your soul,” and by being the one particularly obstinate hold-out among Linden Hills residents against the temptations proffered by the Nedeeds. During Laurel’s childhood, Roberta Johnson enacts this caretaking role by carefully fretting over her young granddaughter, and by promoting Laurel’s talents. Worried at first about the danger of Laurel’s obsession, Roberta “had realized that it was impossible to keep Laurel away from the water, [so] she made sure that she learned to swim” (218).

Laurel’s movement away from these nurturing comforts towards the allure of a white(ning) materialism begins early in her life. Her father has left the South, married twice, and makes a good deal of money. However, as Laurel laments to her grandmother during summer stays with her, while her father does provide her with many material objects, he offers little direct parental affection. As an adult, Laurel travels as far away from the South as Cleveland and California, finally arriving on Tupelo Drive in Linden Hills. Having never “had time to think about who she was and what she wanted,” Laurel now feels empty, leading “a life that had no point” and trying in vain to put together with her husband “that nebulous creation called a home” (228). Laurel was born into a nurturing communal tradition, of which her grandmother is a symbol, and she seeks an answer to her problems by physically returning to the site of her rural Southern past. Naylor has established by this point the novel’s contention that the severance of upwardly mobile African Americans from the nurturing connections figured in this imagined community contributes to their acceptance of the dominant order’s recasting of it in financial terms. Accordingly, the severity of Laurel’s detachment from the rural setting of her childhood is emphasized by her virtual inability to recognize the landscape itself *because* she surveys it from the moneyed comfort of her “silver Mercedes”:

Landmarks that should’ve been familiar took on a different shape and size through the tinted glass and over the circular hood ornament. The only way to tell when Clover Road changed into Bennett’s Pass was the texture of the ground, when gravel becomes clay. But the cushioned springs made it all the same, and she’d almost missed turning right at the crucial third pine. (227)

Naylor here prefigures Laurel Dumont’s doom. As the current Nedeed realizes, once Linden Hills residents achieve as much material “success” as Laurel has, they lose all contact with the sustaining power of concrete, communal love. They do so because they accept the prevailing classist conception of the African American rural past as most notable in terms of financial impoverishment, and therefore as something from which to dissociate oneself. Laurel indicates her full-fledged acceptance of this degrading conception when she decides that her husband “was finally right about one thing: Atlanta was the only civilized section of Georgia” (227).

When Laurel finally finds her grandmother’s home, Naylor makes another direct connection between enveloping, divisive whiteness and the reconnective power of a communal orientation that can work to “scrape off” whiteness. As she

opens the gate to her grandmother's home, "the rusty latch grated against the wooden post, stripping away tiny flecks of white paint" (228). As with the image of Ruth Anderson reaching out sympathetically to her husband by telling him to scrape off "the pinks," Naylor suggests here that the divisive effects of whiteness can be countered by such direct expressions of love as those Laurel once enjoyed with her grandmother. However, now that she is a resident of the lower streets of Linden Hills, it is too late—she has in effect sold her soul to the satanic Luther Nedeed. The "rusty latch" of the gate that would open to her past manages to scrape off only "tiny flecks" of the white(ning) materialism that engulfs her. Having immersed herself nearly to the point of drowning, Laurel soon leaves Georgia because she can no longer find emotional sustenance in her grandmother's presence.

When Laurel returns to her house in Linden Hills, she tries to make it feel like a home after Roberta and Ruth Anderson manage to rouse her from her sense of impending hopelessness. Like the snow piling up outside, however, the whiteness is too deep. Again, Naylor suggests that the residents of the lower reaches of Linden Hills have repressed so much of themselves and of their former, sustaining communal connections that they are beyond recovery. As Norman Anderson suggestively remarks at one point while driving through Linden Hills, "everybody knows it's almost impossible to turn around once you enter Tupelo Drive" (198). The narrator thus reports that Laurel "tried unbelievably hard—until the day that the snow began to fall. Opening up 'that place where she was supposed to be at home' was terrifying when she discovered the weight of its emptiness" (238). Laurel tries to fill this emptiness with Roberta's stories and "endless chatter about childhood friends," but she has lost all contact with her internal "mirror": "She was taking in the sight of an old woman, the sound of old stories, and the smells of an old tradition with nothing inside her to connect up to them" (239). As Laurel retreats to her bed, she imagines the snow "empty(ing) into her as she stayed awake all night. . . . She had tried her best, but—despite all of her efforts and on top of everything else—it was going to be a White Christmas" (242). Naylor represents black women as doubly subject to difficulties that are doxically imposed in racialized and gendered terms when Luther Nedeed pays Laurel a final visit. Laurel is finally driven over the edge by Nedeed's reminder that since her husband has left this house, she must leave as well, because the homes in Linden Hills are only leased to the men of any family. Donning her swimming suit and wrapping herself in a "white canvas," Laurel goes out into the cold and climbs the ladder stretching high above her empty swimming pool. Ironically, Laurel uses her repressed and abandoned talents, swimming and diving, to kill herself.

Toward the Reconstruction of Black Communal Relations

The narrative shifts back to Willie's perspective when he climbs down into the pool and turns over Laurel's corpse. The next line, "Her face was gone," then appears as the first line of another section devoted to Willa Nedeed, who has discovered a photo album in which a previous Nedeed wife has removed all of her own facial images from the photographs. It is clear, of course, that Laurel's face is also "gone," both literally and figuratively, standing as one of many emphases throughout the novel on faces, or the lack thereof. Earlier, Willie has a nightmare in which he is trying to buy a camera, but a saleswoman won't sell him one: "she was terrified when he walked into that store and had kept screaming over and over, 'You can't use my camera because you have no face'" (211). As the face is so central to one's sense of uniqueness, this dream represents Willie's unconscious recognition that his individuality is threatened by the option figured for him in the materialistic lives he witnesses in

Linden Hills. In conjunction with the motif of mirrors, the network of facial images again suggests that when black Americans lose contact with “the mirror in their souls,” they lose not only a connection with a larger community, but also a “true” sense of themselves, as figured in their own particular (and perhaps God-given) talents. Laurel has lost her “face,” or her true self by being tempted away from competitive swimming into work at IBM. Laurel’s face is literally “gone” after diving into an empty swimming pool, but because white(ning) materialism has tempted her away from her own talents and from a truer sense of herself as an African American, her uniqueness actually disappeared long ago. Similarly, Willa Nedeed eventually finds a reflection of her face in a bucket of water before deciding, naively, to march upstairs to claim her rightful position as a wife in her own home. While Willa Nedeed finds a reflection in the water, it is not her true visage; like Laurel, Willa has already “sold her soul” by coveting and pursuing at such length the position of a rich, respected man’s wife.

When Willa Nedeed asserts her own selfhood by finding her reflection in a pool of water, she would seem to have recovered a connection to her “real” self by imaginatively reconstructing a woman-centered community of the previous Nedeed wives. Yet, as Margaret Homans notes, when Willa starts the Nedeed house on fire by knocking over the candle-draped Christmas tree, she “literally brings down the house of patriarchy, [which] is an act of negation . . . since it destroys her even as she destroys it” (172). Echoing other critics, Homans puzzles over the death of a figure who would seem to have reached the status of heroine:

Although Willa’s mirror promises the recovery of identity and self-knowledge and the establishment of a heroine, the novel is either unable or unwilling to fulfill that promise . . . whatever the reason, it is striking that the novel institutes no countertradition of strong womanhood to oppose the destructive legacy of patriarchy. (172)¹⁸

I would argue, however, that Willa Nedeed does not escape the house of patriarchy because, like Laurel Dumont, she represents a person who has gone too far down the road of vain self-aggrandizement to ever come back; she is depicted as seeing a literal reflection of herself in a bucket of water, but not the figurative (and paradoxically more genuine) image she could see inside herself if she hadn’t lost the self-affirming “mirror in her soul.” To blame Willa’s current situation on her own choices in life is not to refrain from criticizing the patriarchal abuses of the Nedeeds as well. But in the moral universe proposed in Naylor’s allegorical text, people are responsible for exercising their “wills” by resisting forms of temptation that are corrosive in terms of individual and communal identity, and for suffering the consequences if they fail to do so.

As in Laurel’s case, Willie’s challenge in Linden Hills has been figured in part as the assertion of his own will against the potential loss of his own particular talent, poetry. As noted earlier, his poetic inclinations include oral delivery of poems for a black audience about social issues. His particular talent is thus uniquely wedded with a communal orientation, making him a “natural” leader. When Willie turns over Laurel’s corpse to see that she has no face, he forms a link between this “faceless” woman and two others who have similarly lost their identities, Priscilla McGuire, the earlier Nedeed wife who obliterated her own face from her photo albums, and Willa, who finds these faceless photos. Again, Willie’s swift efforts to help this woman resonate with his characterization elsewhere as the one man who is particularly curious about Willa’s absence. He also repeatedly strives to learn Willa’s name, and even begins a poem about her.¹⁹ Similarly, Naylor embellishes her characterization of Willie in terms that challenge an ostensibly rigid binary, that established between the sexes. Although Willie is male, he repeatedly registers within himself various traits and predilections commonly perceived as unmanly. He and Lester both hide their interest in poetry because they worry that others would consider it “fruity,” and

Willie has long hidden for similar reasons the pleasure he finds in carefully wrapping Christmas presents. These facets of Willie's character constitute hints that his broader sense of empathy and compassion—a traditionally feminine trait that Naylor figures more fully as such in the novel's Edenic counterspace grounded in the rural Southern past—is in danger of repression in the face of doxic conceptions of appropriate masculine behavior as figured in most of the men living in Linden Hills.²⁰ Among the novel's final questions, then, is whether Willie can retain and develop his talents toward becoming in some way an empathetic builder for the black community. If he were to do so with his poetry, he would not be the first to inspire others with compassionate, eloquently stated ideals.

Willie repeatedly rejects the anti-communal pursuit of white(ning) materialism during his progress through Linden Hills, maintaining his interest in genuine, caring connections with other African Americans. Having been inspired by his intuitive concern for the nameless, oddly absent wife of Nedeed to start his 666th poem, Willie has recognized the satanic impulse at the base of Linden Hills, and he decides to reject the life it offers. Rather than accepting the divisions and erasures imposed by materialistic pursuit, he signals his readiness to assume instead the "builder" role suggested by his last name. This novel's closing images, of the fall of the house of patriarchy and of two alternatively inclined men escaping Linden Hills to walk off into a new year, also suggest a fresh start in terms of resistance to several forms of anti-communal pressure. Willie has asserted his will by affirming aspects of himself that he has been tempted to repress or "whiten." The socially radical content of Willie's poetry also suggests that he will maintain a positive self-image in racial terms, and that he will also clearly maintain, like Naylor herself, his admiration for members of an ostensibly white literary canon.²¹ By depicting in the process of material pursuit the potential for "whitening" of various aspects of self, Naylor offers lessons for readers of any race or gender regarding the effects of class ascendance on individual and cultural identity.

Linden Hills insists that a healthy individual African American identity includes some sense of communal membership, and that an individual's attempt to suppress or deny this element of one's identity (a suppression encouraged by "the American Dream") will entail many costs. Middle-class whites are members of a racial community as well, one in which being classified as white also has innumerable effects on their lives—they just don't like to think so. Most of them have bleached out this constitutive element of their individual identities, and the beckoning class ladder implicitly asks that blacks do so too, while also telling them that ultimately, they cannot. Naylor thus illuminates a mode of African American "whiteness" that functions as a metaphor for a process, one that happens as much or more in terms of class than of race. African Americans who strive for and achieve success in middle-class and higher settings largely populated by whites are no longer exhorted to imitate in racial terms, but rather in class terms. Nevertheless, the assimilation process does have a persistently racial component to it, and the demands that one bleach out that which one (supposedly) was before entail a similar process to that undergone earlier by European ethnics who became white. African American whiteness both is and is not a matter of race.

Notes

1. The more prominent among these works include Hughes's *The Ways of White Folks*, Wright's *Savage Holiday*, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, and Petry's *Country Place*.

2. Among such studies, the most useful for me have included Lâle Demirtürk, "Mapping the Terrain of Whiteness: Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday*," *MELUS* 24.1 (Spring 1999): 129-40; Laura Dubek, "White Family Values in Ann Petry's *Country Place*," *MELUS* 29.2 (Summer 2004): 55-77; Stephen P. Knadler, *The Fugitive Race: Minority Writers Resisting Whiteness* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2002); Delia Caparoso Konzett, "'Getting in Touch with the True South': Pet Negroes, White Crackers, and Racial Staging in

Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*," in *White Women in Racialized Spaces: Imaginative Transformation and Ethical Action in Literature*, Samina Najmi and Rajini Srikanth, eds. (Albany: SUNY P, 2002), 131-46; Rafael Pérez-Torres, "Tracing and Erasing: Race and Pedagogy in *The Bluest Eye*," in *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Nellie Y. McKay, ed. (New York: MLA Publications, 1997), 21-26; Claudia Tate, "Hitting 'A Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick': *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Zora Neale Hurston's Whiteface Novel," in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, Christopher Lane, ed. (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), 380-94; and George Yancy, "Desiring *Bluest Eyes*, Desiring Whiteness: The Black Body as Torn Asunder," in *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008): 183-226.

3. This is not to say as well that Naylor presupposes in the novel particular elements or modes of subjectivity as common to all African Americans. To suggest, as I think the novel does, that a black communal sense exists, and that it is rooted in both a widely shared ancestral past and in ongoing encounters with white racism, does not necessarily also suggest that every black American shares such experiences, nor that among those who do, they are shared in the same ways.

4. Nedeed echoes here W. E. B. Du Bois in his essay "The Souls of White Folk":

I am quite straight faced as I ask soberly, "But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?"

Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! (30)

5. As geography scholar Schein writes, *de facto* white supremacy continues to structure the physical landscape in ways that bear out Nedeed's predictions, and in ways that most white observers fail to see as racialized: "[W]hiteness . . . is largely (and historically) invisible—at least to the hegemonic readings of race and landscape that presume white to be normal and everything else to be racialized. In this sense . . . all American landscapes can be seen through a lens of race, [and] all American landscapes are racialized" (4; original emphasis).

6. I use the term "doxic," in Bourdieu's sense, to refer to "that which is taken for granted" in any society. Bourdieu further defines doxa as "the established cosmological and political order [which] is perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned. . ." (166). Bourdieu's coinage distinguishes doxa "from orthodox or heterodox belief [which imply] awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs" (169). Whiteness can thus function as a form of doxa by means of what Bourdieu calls a "primal state of innocence," an acceptance of its own terms as *not* terms that have been established in the course of human interactions, but rather as the way things just "naturally" are and ought to be. For a discussion of when racial whiteness does and does not function as doxa, see Ruth Frankenberg, Introduction to *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Ruth Frankenberg, ed. (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 16-17.

7. Baldwin writes in explanation of his well-known formulation on costs paid by those who became white:

The price the white American paid for his ticket was to become white. . . . This incredibly limited not to say dimwitted ambition has choked many a human being to death here. . . . I know very well that my ancestors had no desire to come to this place: but neither did the ancestors of the people who became white and who require of my captivity a song. They require of me a song less to celebrate my captivity than to justify their own. (842)

8. By suspecting Willa of having an affair with someone light-skinned, Nedeed fails to acknowledge his own racial whiteness. For several generations, his foremothers have been light-skinned, resulting in the resurgent whiteness of his own son's color. Naylor thus suggests in another way the invisibility of problems brought about by "whitening" materialism, how even when people detect something is wrong with the money game, the naturalized status of its presumptions and rules, and thus their precise effects, can be difficult to discern.

9. In addition, as the current Nedeed does not pause to consider, the Nedeeds had automatically extended the doxic masculine notion of ownership to "their" women as well, reducing them to birthing machines and house servants. Again, and as several critics have noted, Naylor's initial construction of Linden Hills is also figured in gendered terms, exposing the unspoken male presumptions intertwined with American racial and economic development. Christian notes, for instance, that: "Naylor's use of a V-shaped piece of land suggests the female body even as Nedeed's house situated at the entry suggests the male who wishes to take possession" (114).

10. For description of the close parallels Naylor draws between the sins of the residents of Linden Hills and those depicted by Dante in his *Inferno*, see Catherine C. Ward, "Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*: A Modern Inferno," *Contemporary Literature* 28.1 (Spring 1987): 67-81. Naylor repeatedly emphasizes the word "will"

throughout the novel, most prominently, of course, in the names of her dual protagonists. Indeed, the openly didactic thrust of her allegory is grounded in the responsibility it ultimately places on individuals to assert their own wills by making morally sound choices in life. Naylor stresses in this novel, as she does throughout her work, the importance to individual growth and health of connections to a nurturing, sustaining community. In order to make this point, Naylor places characters not only in a Dantesque dystopia peopled with selfish and isolated sinners, but also in its counterpart, an idyllic communal space based in the rural black past and presided over by emblematic, maternal figures.

11. Such an assimilative process occurs in class terms as well, of course, for those whites from rural and/or working class backgrounds who also seek entry and acceptance in professional social and vocational spheres. The homological resemblance between these raced and classed processes is precisely what Naylor's novel succeeds in exposing.

12. At other points in the novel, as Costino points out, Naylor also challenges the terms of this sexualized binary in her portrayal of Willie's relationship with Lester, and with Willie's eventual embrace of certain of his own "fruity" (as he terms them) characteristics. For an extensive analysis of racial whiteness in relation to sexuality, see Mason Stokes's analysis of white supremacist texts in *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001).

13. The suggestion that the love so evident in the Anderson home is absent here as a direct result of such acquisitiveness is made as Lester explains how his father died. Openly disdainful of materialistic pursuit, Lester has "refused to have anything green in his room" (56). According to him, his mother "killed" his father by pushing him to earn more money, demanding that he work two jobs because "so-and-so had a finished basement, and so-and-so sent their daughter to Brandeis" (52). In addition to the green emphasized in this scene, Naylor incorporates images of whiteness. This imagery includes the "green-and-white" vases, the home's white walls (which bring to mind other literally "white-washed" homes in Linden Hills, including Nedeed's), and Mrs. Tilson's skin itself, which in normal light is like "the milky skin of a canary" (48). These accents of whiteness suggest that the Tilsons' envy not only the residents further down the hill, but also that they deny both their communal connection to other blacks and their own more natural pleasures and inclinations in exchange for acceptance in a more "proper" social sphere.

14. Naylor's novel thus affirms a point succinctly stated by visual artist and philosopher Adrian Piper, who writes of her own decision to affirm her black identity: "What joins me to other blacks, then, and other blacks to another, is not a set of shared physical characteristics, for there is none that all blacks share. Rather, it is the shared experience of being visually or cognitively *identified* as black by a white racist society, and the punitive and damaging effects of that identification" (267; original emphasis).

15. Homans makes a similar point: "What [Maxwell Smyth] does not realize is that, in the world of corporate America, the absence of color *is* whiteness, because neutrality is impossible where hierarchical thinking prevails" (166).

16. As Feagin and Sikes note: "One way that African Americans consume personal energy is in determined efforts to succeed in the face of racism, including overachieving to prove their worth in the face of whites' questioning black ability and competence. . . . Several [black] respondents felt that it was common for black employees trying to prove themselves in white settings to overachieve, doing more than white employees with similar resources and credentials would have to do" (296-97). In his delineation of nine different "negative personas" that management-level blacks often fall into, Graham describes "the colorless dreamer" as if Maxwell Smyth were his model. Graham paraphrases this type's "favorite statement": "I've always believed that I'm the kind of person who can make others forget that I'm black. When I walk into a room, people see a professional. It's much later that they even think about my race. Since I don't focus on color, neither do they" (79). Graham notes that despite such claims, one such person he knows "has intentionally picked his surroundings, his affected British accent, and the subject matter of his conversations to counteract his blackness," not realizing the futility of his efforts to overcome his blackness by denying it: "If he is light enough to 'pass' as white, then he's correct that whites will probably pay little mind to his skin color, but if he's clearly black, he may need to accept the fact that ours is still a race-conscious society that will focus on, and draw certain conclusions from, his black features" (80).

17. Even the final image of this particular "layout"—of the black slave having broken from her chains to stand with her foot on the white man's chest—only further serves other masculine sexual fantasies.

18. In her reading of Willa as stopping just short of this status, Goddu expresses similar bewilderment, then blames Willa's unsatisfying demise on "Naylor's essentialism," her supposed tendency to see her female characters as driven to maternal actions by biological forces: "Her essentialist model of womanhood, centered in a biological self-determination . . . errs in the same way Luther's mythic model does," that is, by not recognizing the determinative influences on itself of social forces (226). For an argument that finds hope in Willa's demise, see Simpson-Vos, who writes that "the burned ruins of Nedeed's home are a fitting emblem for what Naylor accomplishes in *Linden Hills*; self-discovery and growth may suffer setbacks, but the novel works hard to make such projects easier in the future" (29). See also Okonkwo, who writes of

Willa as “a gendered reification of both Moses and Christ. Willa’s messianic death . . . promises emancipation from Nedeed bondage for Linden Hills’ erred citizenry, particularly the subdivision’s abused women” (118).

19. As Andrews writes regarding the significance of this moment for the part Willie plays as a bridge of sorts between the sexes, Naylor portrays in Willie “a sensitivity to women’s suffering that suggests potential communication between the sexes. . . . In juxtaposing his and Willa’s scenes Naylor suggests an intuitive bond between them. He is the link between the crushed ‘no face’ of Laurel and the ‘no-face’ of Priscilla in Willa’s thoughts. . . .” (295).

20. On this point my reading is much in line with that of Costino, who in her extensive discussion of “compulsive heterosexuality” in Naylor’s work, writes: “Naylor manages to complicate the relationships between sexual identity and capitalism . . . by elaborating a spectrum of sexuality that defies the strict binarism of hetero-/homosexuality and highlights the instability of such categories. This effort creates a crack in the link conjoining capital success with heterosexual performance. . . .” (53-54).

21. This cross-racial embrace is another indication that the rejected “whiteness” in the novel is not racial whiteness nor white people per se, but rather a whitening process that occurs in other categorical terms as well. For explication of reference in Naylor’s work to literature by writers and works markable as “white,” see Peter Erickson, “Shakespeare’s Naylor, Naylor’s Shakespeare: Shakespearean Allusion as Appropriation in Gloria Naylor’s *Quartet*,” in *Literary Influence and African American Writers*, Tracy Mishkin, ed. (New York: Garland, 1996), 325-57; John Noell Moore, “Myth, Fairy Tale, Epic, and Romance: Narrative as Re-Vision in *Linden Hills*,” *Callaloo* 23.4 (Fall 2000): 1410-29; Gary Storhoff, “‘The Only Voice Is Your Own’: Gloria Naylor’s Revision of *The Tempest*,” *African American Review* 29.1 (Spring 1995): 35-45; Valerie Traub, “Rainbows of Darkness: Deconstructing Shakespeare in the Work of Gloria Naylor and Zora Neale Hurston,” in *Cross-Cultural Performances: Differences in Women’s Re-visions of Shakespeare*, Marianne Novy, ed. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993), 150-63; and Ward.

Andrews, Larry A. “Black Sisterhood in Naylor’s Novels.” Gates and Appiah 285-301.

Baldwin, James. “The Price of the Ticket.” *Collected Essays*. Ed. Toni Morrison. New York: Library of America, 1998.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. 1972. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.

Bouvier, Luke. “Reading in Black and White: Space and Race in *Linden Hills*.” Gates and Appiah 152-81.

Christian, Barbara. “Naylor’s Geography: Community, Class, and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*.” Gates and Appiah 106-25.

Costino, Kimberly A. “‘Weapons Against Women’: Compulsory Heterosexuality and Capitalism in *Linden Hills*.” *Gloria Naylor’s Early Novels*. Ed. Margot Ann Kelley. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*. New York: Harcourt, 1920.

Feagin, Joe R., and Melvin P. Sikes. *Living with Racism: The Black Middle-Class Experience*. Boston: Beacon, 1994.

Fowler, Virginia C. *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary*. New York: Twayne, 1996.

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. “Significant Others.” *Contemporary Literature* 29.4 (Winter 1988): 606-23.

—, and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993.

Goddu, Teresa. “Reconstructing History in *Linden Hills*.” Gates and Appiah 215-30.

Graham, Lawrence Otis. *Member of the Club: Reflections on Life in a Racially Polarized World*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Hare, Nathan. *The Black Anglo-Saxons*. New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1965.

Homans, Margaret. “The Woman in the Cave.” Gates and Appiah 182-94.

Major, Clarence. *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*. New York: Puffin, 1994.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. 1970. New York: Plume, 1994.

Naylor, Gloria. *Linden Hills*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1985.

Okonkwo, Christopher N. “Suicide or Messianic Self-Sacrifice?: Exhuming Willa’s Body in Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills*.” *African American Review* 35.1 (Spring 2001): 117-31.

Piper, Adrian. “Passing for White, Passing for Black.” *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Ed. Elaine K. Ginsburg. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 234-69.

Schein, Richard H. “Race and Landscape in the United States.” *Landscape and Race in the United States*. Ed. Richard H. Schein. New York: Routledge, 2006. 1-21.

Simpson-Vos, Mark. “Hope from the Ashes: Naylor, Faulkner, and the Signifying Tradition.” *Gloria Naylor: Strategy and Technique, Magic and Myth*. Ed. Shirley A. Stave. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2001. 17-43.

Takaki, Ronald. *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1993.

Yancy, George. “Introduction: Fragments of a Social Ontology of Whiteness.” *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*. Ed. George Yancy. New York: Routledge, 2004. 1-24.

Works Cited