Nicole Viloria

Professor Sendin

African American Literature 1

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Parallels between Racism and Magical Realism in Gloria Naylor's Novels

In the racist society of the 80s in the US, Gloria Naylor conveys the inhumane treatment towards African Americans in America by exploring how they have assumed that living in a White society means they must prove their worthiness through success. Considering that she fuses fiction with elements of magical realism, it is essential to explore the question: What is the role of Magical Realism in Gloria Naylor's Linden Hills and Mama Day? Throughout this analysis, I focused on finding parallels between the pressure white mainstream America places on African Americans and supernatural elements present in *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day*.

However, it is important to remember that we are talking about literature. We see this word thrown around specifically at conferences and at prestigious universities. Nonetheless, what really is literature? When reading these stories, Naylor presents characters who laugh and make jokes, who have family problems, who experience grief, who fall in love, who are trying to understand life. Ultimately, literature is the written expression of humanity. Nonetheless, one might ask oneself why is Black History Month and the Black Lives Matter Movement relevant then, and still happening today? While Black stories demonstrate our shared human experience, they tend to be disregarded and deemed unimportant based on race. Some in the mainstream perceive Black people as foreigners, even as inhabitants of another universe. This is why racism continues to exist, thus, leading to violence, oppression, and ultimately the systematic attempts at erasure of a whole community. Thus, highlighting stories about Black people and written by

Black people is important for society to internalize that African American literature is also important and deserves a place in the literary canon. However, being equal does not mean cultural and racial heritage should be erased.

Gloria Naylor is an expert at portraying the universal human experience through her Black characters. With the help of *Gloria Naylor: A Critical Companion*, written by Charles E. Wilson, one can observe the influence of Naylor's life in her writing. In the first place, Gloria Naylor escaped from the segregated South with her family. Living in Mississippi, for Black families, meant experiencing "southern violence and political and economic disenfranchisement" (Wilson 2). Naylor took advantage of this traumatic experience, as she commented that "[her] conception in the South has played the more important role in shaping [her] life as a writer" (in Colby 636). Additionally, her race was not the only thing that alienated her from society. When she turned twelve years old, her family became Jehova's Witnesses. This made her different from other kids since she and her family stopped celebrating Christmas, among other things. Nonetheless, "[i]n this role as "other," Naylor strengthened her resolve to be true to her convictions." Precisely, this is one of the themes that her novels revolve around. Similarly, Naylor also learned from her parents that "no matter what life doles out, one must do his or her personal best to succeed" (Wilson 4). Staying authentic to one's roots and reaching success are two of the most important ideas Naylor aims to transmit in her works.

On the other hand, this author also submerged herself in social activism. After Martin Luther King, Jr. died, she said that "one of [her] teachers in high school cried in front of the class and said, 'You know there's a cancer spreading in this country and I want you to go home and think about what that means.' [She] went home and did that. And [she] said, the cancer's not only in this country, that cancer is in the world" (Wilson 5). After "set[ting] out on a seven-year

missionary excursion" in the name of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, Naylor started to write. Before going into her writing, however, let's look at one of the most famous African American magazines.

Essence Magazine is a lifestyle magazine, which was first published in 1970, for African American women. However, researchers Woodard and Mastin pinpoint the negative stereotypes the magazine portrays of Black women. Specifically, Black women tend to be categorized as "the mammy, the matriarch, the sexual siren, and the wel-
fare mother or queen" (266). Challenging these stereotypes, Gloria Naylor published her first story in the magazine in 1979, "A Life on Beekman Place," which would go against these societal images of Black women. Later on, Naylor continued to push against "the double standard forced on women in society" in her novels, such as *Linden Hills*, which is her second novel (Wilson 7).

While Naylor's novels serve as weapons directed to White America of the 80s for them to understand the role of Black people in society, she does not only use narration and characterization to express her ideas. With the help of supernatural elements, Naylor is able to highlight the level of pressure placed upon Black people in the United States that leads them to turn their back on their roots to achieve success. Upon the mention of supernatural elements, it is impossible not to think of magical realism, which may be more recognized as seen in Latin American novels such as 100 Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. However, just as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, as a pillar African American writer, uses the literary strategy of Magical Realism to accentuate the topics that make up the Black experience in America which are sometimes inconceivable to reason (Lobodziec). After all, Black people's history is so rich

because it is filled with myths, beliefs, food, language, but this literary strategy reinforces that African Americans are not required to explain their heritage and history to others.

It may seem irrelevant to analyze the author's background; however, it is key to do so in the case of Gloria Naylor because her life lessons translate to the themes in her novels. Once one understands the author better, the analysis of her works is richer by taking into consideration her possible influences and beliefs. The first aspect to consider, which is the backbone of Naylor's works, is the following quote featured in *Linden Hills*:

> Grandma Tilson, I'm afraid of hell.
>
> Ain't nothing to fear, there's hell on earth.
>
> I mean the real hell where you can go when you die.
>
> You ain't gotta die to go to the real hell.
>
> No?
>
> Uh uh, you just gotta sell that silver mirror God propped up in your soul.
>
> Sell it to who –the devil?
>
> Naw, just to the highest bidder, child. The highest bidder.

This quote drives the significance of the novel since it explains what happens as Black people give up their values and roots in exchange of achievement and social status according to the White society's standards. By selling "the silver mirror" in their souls or turning their backs on their morals and roots, Naylor believes that Black people lose themselves and criticizes this idea throughout her works.

To further criticize this idea, among others, Gloria Naylor deeply relies on her supernatural worldbuilding.

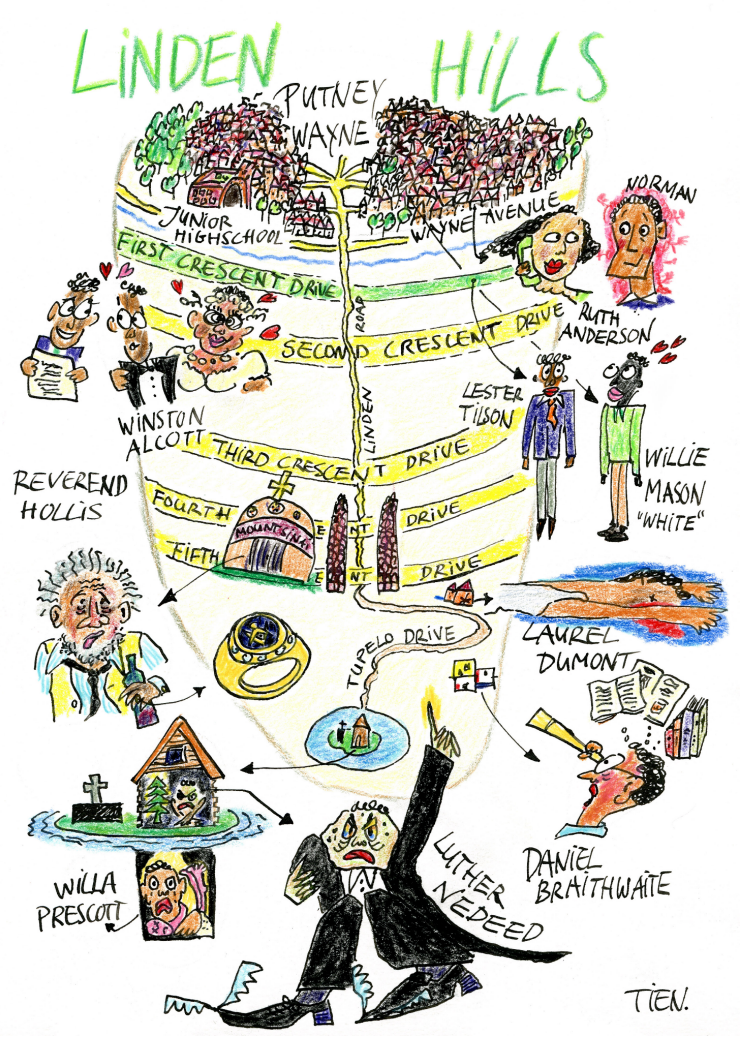


Fig. 1 The Landscape of Linden Hills. Drawing by Leontine Hoogeweegen.

On one hand, *Linden Hills*' topography resembles that of Dante's Inferno. As described in the novel, it is a "steep, rocky incline of brier bush and linden trees" or "v-shaped section" (*Linden Hills* 1). Further criticizing those people who "sell their souls," Naylor takes advantage of the circles of hell in the structure of Linden Hills because each "Crescent Drive" or circle of hell is designated for a type of sinner.

For example, Laurel Dumont lives in Tupelo Drive, which consists of the 7th, 8th, and 9th circles of hell. Specifically, she lives in circle 7th, or for those who commit suicide. There is

a supernatural aspect around her suicide the moment Luther Nedeed, the owner of Linden Hills, tries to kick her out of her house. Laurel tells him that "[they]'ll meet again in court" but Nedeed answers with "I don't think so, Mrs. Dumont" (*Linden Hills* 246). This weird encounter shows us that Nedeed knows she has sold the mirror in her soul by leaving her grandmother and forgetting about her roots when leaving to another state for a successful job and those who do so eventually leave Linden Hills.

In addition, there is Maxwell Smyth, whose house is never specified. Maxwell's view of life as "a race against the natural" in which "he was winning" shows his awareness that the only way to succeed in this world is by hiding his Blackness (*Linden Hills* 104). The unnatural control he has over his body accentuates how hard it is for African Americans to just exist in a society that judges them based on how Black they look and act like. In fact, Nedeed's desire to make Linden Hills a "black wad of spit" "in the white eye of America" is initially meant to make Black people be recognized by their success by making it into the community; however, this notion gets lost when it is not about proving white people wrong anymore (*Linden Hills* 9). Instead, being successful is a symbol of superiority to other Black people.

The worst sinner in the novel is Willa Prescott. By marrying Luther Nedeed, or the symbolic devil who lives in the lowest circle of hell, Willa turns her back on who she is. She is a hypocrite who does everything to live in the best house in the neighborhood, even if she experiences the evil atrocities of her husband such as making sure that "there was always space in Linden Hills" as sinners died (*Linden Hills* 18).

On the other hand, the geography of Willow Springs in *Mama Day* is completely different. The island, to start, does not belong to any state, as you can see in the map in figure 2, which is one of the supernatural aspects of this world. In addition to the supernatural geography,

the island has life of its own - it is a character in the novel. For example, some of the characters can listen to the island speaking, such as when Cocoa says, “So what could those voices possibly mean? The voices I told myself I hadn’t heard in the graveyard and did not hear when we got to the other place” (*Mama Day* 224). The island itself, after all, is magical as related to its origin. In fact, Emily Sendin, describes the island as “a post-colonial nation state which maintains a direct opposition to Western ideologies by establishing a close relationship with its African heritage” (18).

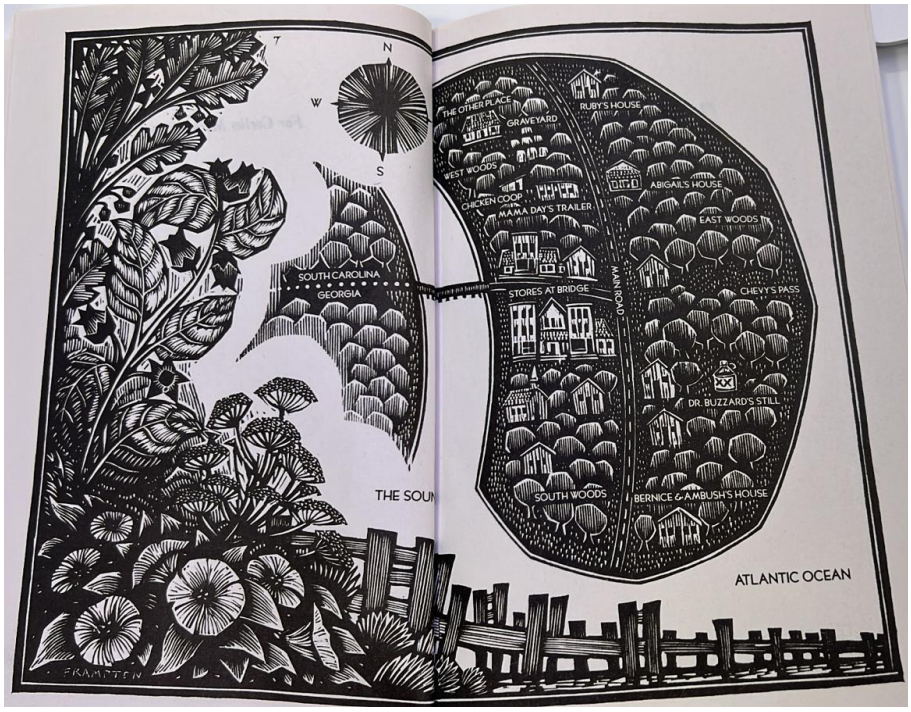


Fig. 2 Map of Willow Springs.

Going back to the origin of both worlds, Linden Hills and Willow Springs, one can notice similarities the author makes. With the help of magical realism to explain what does not make sense and religious allusions, Naylor defies the societal conventions of the time through both origins.

In *Linden Hills*, in the introduction or Genesis, Naylor writes that "[Luther Nedeed] sat there every day for exactly seven days…measuring precisely the depth and length of light that the sun allowed his wedge of their world" (2). Instead of creating the world in 6 days and resting the 7th day, Luther Nedeed just had to sit and envision Linden Hills. Precisely, Nedeed is playing God by acting superior to him. In a time when Black people could not own any property, Nedeed is a Black person who sells his wife and kids in order to buy Linden Hills, which is illogical and impossible, but magical realism helps it make sense.

Unlike Luther Nedeed in *Linden Hills,* Sapphira Wade, in *Mama Day,* is presented as a Goddess and as equal to God. As a Black woman in 1799, it would have been impossible to own land, however, she killed her husband and was able to own the land and pass it on to her descendants. In addition, we see the equality to God when Naylor writes that "God rested on the seventh day and so would she" (*Mama Day* 1). While it is easy for Nedeed to play God and act superior, the mere act of a Black woman being equal to God defies the norm and shows how Naylor uses a feminist approach.

It is impossible not to examine the parallels between the two novels.

First, the novels represent two religious allegories, hell and paradise. While we see Dante's Inferno in *Linden Hills*, it is clear that Willow Springs represents an imperfect paradise. However, this is foreshadowed at the end of *Linden Hills* when Willa, Luther, and their dead baby become one as the holy trinity and the house is on fire. This supernatural event is happening, nonetheless, it is symbolic that the two black men who see it happening are concerned about "two police cars" (*Linden Hills* 303). At the end of the day, a supernatural phenomenon may be taking place, but it will always be the Black person's fault. After that,

Willie and his friend Lester "walked out of Tupelo Drive," which means they arrived at paradise, which is an opening to *Mama Day* (*Linden Hills* 304).

In *Mama Day,* George talks about the crossing from civilization to the island when he says "I had to be there and see –no, feel–that I was entering another world. Where even the word *paradise* failed once I crossed over The Sound (*Mama Day* 175). Thus, this represents an allegorical paradise, but one that is not perfect as we see examples of evil, such as when Ruby attempts to kill Cocoa and George sacrifices himself to save her.

Another important detail is the contrast between Willa and Cocoa or Ophelia. While we previously discussed that Willa sold the mirror in her soul in exchange for success, Cocoa always remains true to herself. For example, we see this when she declines a job offer in New York since they are not letting her go back to Willow Springs for her yearly visit every August (31). She puts her roots first, unlike Willa. Thus, Cocoa is an example of how Black people can be successful while staying true to themselves. Nonetheless, Naylor reminds readers that it cannot be perfect as the supposed paradise that is Willow Springs is imperfect.

Besides that, the symbols of having "no name" and "clocks ticking" are key in Naylor's novels. For example, in *Linden Hills,* Naylor writes that "There is a man in a house at the bottom of a hill. And his wife has no name" (277). Aiming to highlight that Willa lost herself by turning her back on who she was in exchange of a superficial illusion, Naylor makes it as if no one remembers her name. Similarly, one sees this slightly differently when "prayers go up in Willow Springs to be spared from what could only be the workings of Woman. And she has no name" (*Mama Day* 251). Unlike someone who lost herself, Naylor is referring to this supernatural force as a goddess - Sapphira Wade. Thus, one sees how the author tries to push against societal norms

from a feminist approach by empowering women and equating their gifts to god-like powers. After all, God and Sapphira shake hands and he leaves her in charge of Willow Springs' creation.

Regarding the symbol of clocks, one can notice the constant appearance of "clocks ticking" in both novels in a subtle way. While this may be a small detail, it is Naylor's commentary about the limited time Black people have to make a change. In the 80s, Black people were getting killed, there was police brutality, and Black people needed to follow white America's rules in order to be considered worthy. This idea is still relevant today, since years have passed, and Gloria Naylor's prophecies are still true.

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