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Daphne Lamothe

Smith College, dlamothe@smith.edu

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Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*: Bridging Roots and Routes

I. Introduction

A sense of historical continuity pervades Willow Springs, the fictitious Gullah island that Gloria Naylor depicts in her 1988 novel *Mama Day*. On Willow Springs, the Day family, a community of women, preserve their cultural memory through the repetition of material practices that include cooking and weaving, and through the transmission of personal and communal stories. Naylor privileges the dynamism of the island's living memory over the representations of the past attempted by inhabitants of the Western-oriented mainland. History, ethnography, and other institutionalized discourses prove to be little more than what historian Pierre Nora has called "sifted and sorted historical traces" (285). Naylor's intricate exploration of history and memory coincides with and challenges Nora's work on *lieux de mémoire* in that both authors examine different ways of conceptualizing, articulating, and representing our relationship with the past. Nora writes, for example, "Our interest in *lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (284). Nora considers the power of written, state-sanctioned history to overdetermine understandings of the past, against a background in which, he argues, pre-industrial, traditional societies that have typically produced living memories that counter such authoritative discourses are passing away under the forces of modernity. *Mama Day* displays a similar preoccupation, with the crucial difference lying in Naylor's conviction that traditional ways and the communities that maintain them have the resilience to survive and adapt to temporal and social changes. Naylor's complex portrayal of Willow Springs, its inhabitants, and its visitors suggests that it is both a site *and* an environment of memory, which challenges Nora's assumption that the latter must be eradicated before the need for the former arises.

According to Nora, *lieux de mémoires* emerge out of a sense that "we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally" (289). One could argue that Willow Springs functions as a site of memory in

Daphne Lamothe is Assistant Professor at Smith College, where she teaches African American literature. Currently she is completing a book entitled *The Ethnographic Imagination in the New Negro Renaissance*. She would like to thank Theresa Tensuan, Juana Rodriguez, Chris Chism, and the Rutgers University junior faculty writing group for analytic insights and sustaining friendship.

the contested and problematic way that Nora proposes for the novel's two urbanites, George and Cocoa (née Ophelia). Naylor constructs Cocoa's and George's understanding of the island as symbolizing home in order to query the effects of modernization, historical rupture, and social fragmentation on African Americans. Her work posits a sense of home as resistant to the destruction of memory, striving to remain an environment of memory and indifferent to the archival and ethnographic pigeonholes into which both outsiders and their own errant children store them. Naylor does not explicitly foreground the Gullah island as a site of resistance to colonial domination by alluding to the myth of Africans/Ibos who reject their enslavement by flying or walking back to Africa. Rather, the locus of resistance in Naylor's text lies in the island inhabitants' retention and transmission of African-derived traditions and values, such as orally conveyed folklore, quilting, and herb and rootwork, in the face of cultural forces that would efface them. These are the very attributes that Cocoa and George admire, at the same time that each hesitates to engage.

Their reasons for hesitating will form the basis for my reading of the novel, because they illuminate two sets of dynamics that prove central to Naylor's examination of cultural memory in African American communities. The first dynamic, symbolized by George's skepticism of the validity of the islanders' "country" ways, comprises a hierarchical and oppositional relationship between whites and blacks, Western and African-derived cultures, cosmopolitan urbanites and isolated country folk. In such an environment representatives of the "mainland," most often men, and the values they hold pose a threat to the validity and continuation of Willow Springs' cultural memory. The importance of the island women in the transmission of such memories illuminates the second dynamic, which is symbolized by Cocoa's refusal to return home or to its

more conservative ways. Her reluctance to be the kind of tradition-bound woman symbolized primarily by her friend Bernice, but also by many other of the women on Willow Springs, suggests that the traditions embraced by Willow Springs, or at the very least, the manner in which they are expected to be retained, are implicitly patriarchal and therefore problematic. Hence, while the island is "feminized" in relation to the mainland, we find the reinscription of normative gender roles within the island.

Nonetheless, Naylor depicts nostalgia, the longing for a lost connection with a past place and time, as central to and even crucial to the construction of modern, urban African Americans' identities. bell hooks explains in "The Chitlin Circuit: On Black Community" that the agrarian South conventionally symbolizes community, even community without the ostensible homogeneity of small town life. hooks argues that it is possible to construct communities based on "relational" love, that would enable black people no longer (or not ever) rooted in black folk traditions to resist "the internalized racism or alienated individualism that would have us turn away from one another, aping the dehumanizing practices of the colonizer" (39). This possibility is enabled by a radical, activist politics of nostalgia that hooks contrasts with more conventional manifestations of nostalgia: "Memory need not be a passive reflection, a nostalgic longing for things to be as they once were; it can function as a way of knowing and learning from the past. . ." (40). Naylor implicitly juxtaposes active and passive forms of nostalgia through her depiction of Cocoa's and George's reflections on Willow Springs, a home space that exists in memory, in imagination, and in its material reality. These characters' nostalgia for tight knit communities and feelings of kinship that are difficult to forge in the city result in romanticized images of a mythic home, symbolized by the archetypal Willow Springs. Yet there also exists in the

novel a strong impulse to resist the presupposition in Nora's theory that the destruction of "traditional" ways is inevitable under the forces of modernization and industrialization, that a place like Willow Springs is no longer viable in a contemporary world except through memory and imagination.

This resistance can be found in Naylor's weaving of the mythic and the real in her depiction of the island. On the one hand, the island is mythic in that it is a place of almost complete political, cultural, and economic autonomy, erecting a successful resistance to Anglo-American cultural supremacy and economic imperialism. Willow Springs is characterized by its independence from the controlling and commodifying grasp of the mainland and the mainstream: from the legendary maternal ancestor, Sapphira Wade, born in Africa and, according to legend, murderer of her slaveholding owner, to the islanders' refusal to sell their land to real estate developers, to their reluctance to build a bridge stronger than the wooden one that provides an impermanent connection to the mainland. Yet, as Lene Brøndum remarks in "The Persistence of Tradition," "Naylor implicitly creates an island community different from the real Sea Island communities of the late twentieth century, many of which have been, or are being, partly destroyed by tourism and commercialization" (158). While Brøndum is right in identifying Willow Springs as a utopian community, she mistakenly describes the island as unique because it "survives, whereas many of the Sea Islands have not" (158). Willow Springs is similar to the actual Sea Islands in that it too accommodates historical change. Its uniqueness lies, perhaps, in the inordinate amount of agency held by its inhabitants, who not only absorb the normalizing forces of mainland culture, but also actively resist being torn apart by them or relinquishing their rights of ownership. Naylor's narrator declares, "So who it belong to? It belongs to us—clean and

simple" (5). To say this, however, is not to conclude that Willow Springs remains static and unchanged.

Brøndum's notion of the impossibility of actual cultural survival is grounded in the assumption that traditional practices and behaviors must be unchanged and unaffected by "modern" and outside influences in order to retain their integrity and authenticity. This is a different, certainly less extreme, expression of the same fundamental idea articulated by Nora, who expresses regret over the inability of "peasant cultures" to remain insulated and isolated.¹

Despite the indications that Naylor shares this assumption of a necessary isolation, aspects of the novel point to an understanding of cultural integrity less reliant on the notion of the static and isolated village, and more invested in ideas of cultural memory that do not obscure or deny the existence of cross-cultural exchange. The wooden bridge comes immediately to mind as symbol of Willow Spring's willed isolation, yet it also allows for the passage of goods and people across the sound that separates the two communities. This possibility is hinted at in the first pages of the novel when the communal narrator comments sarcastically on an ethnographer's refusal to listen to and comprehend the villagers' logic for inventing the phrase "18 & 23": "Not that he called it dumb, mind you, called it 'asserting our cultural identity,' 'inverting hostile social and political parameters.' 'Cause, see, being we was brought here as slaves, we had no choice but to look at everything upside-down. And then being that we was isolated off here on this island, everybody else in the country went on learning good English and calling things what they really was—in the dictionary and all that—while we kept on calling things ass-backwards' " (8). The irony of this passage resonates on two levels: first in the fact that the ethnographer's analysis is accurate but undercut by his refusal to allow his "informants" to assign their own

meanings to their traditions. Second, the narrative will go on to reveal the multitude of ways in which the islanders move back and forth between home and mainland (for school, for work, for commerce), disproving the perception that they are “isolated off here on this island.” Naylor focuses on the social and psychic conditions that foster a need for Willow Springs to be a site of memory (i.e., mythic, static, symbolic); yet she simultaneously takes pains to lift the island out of the realm of transcendent myth and places it firmly back in the provenance of the real by representing it as marked by physical trauma, historic rupture, and social and cultural transformation. *Mama Day* imagines not only the power of nostalgia, but also its limitations.

My emphasis, then, is not exclusively on the island’s symbolic value; rather I interrogate the politics of nostalgia that can lead to a naïve romanticization of the island and of the politics of racial and cultural supremacy that assign the island the status of at worst primitive and at best irrelevant to modern life except as a resort getaway. In addition, I interrogate the gender politics implied by conventional ideas of tradition and transmission. Naylor’s focus on Willow Springs as a site of multiple meaning and interpretation allows such critical work to be done. For in this novel, mythology is everywhere, it moves in multiple directions and coexists with some kind of “real.” Naylor illuminates not only the process by which myths of cultural and familial roots are constructed, she also underscores the competing myths about and contested claims to places, like Willow Springs, with particular significance as sites of memory.

The complex topography of the island itself—with its marshes and

swamps, woods and quasi-sacred/quasi-haunted grounds (i.e., The Other Place)—hints at its complexity. The characters’ navigation of this landscape, the weaving together of places as they travel both around the island and between it and the mainland, becomes a metaphor for the constitution of memories,

for the weaving together of narratives about those memories. The multiplicity of routes taken and memories formed is embedded in the novel’s structure, which recreates an act of collective re-

Naylor’s attention to historicizing “the black experience” critiques traditional notions of motherhood but never devalues the figure of the mother.

memory and storytelling. Miranda/Mama Day, Cocoa, George, and an anonymous voice that represents the collective view of the Willow Springs folk all narrate the same events from slightly different—their respective—points of view. Their memories combine to offer a unified yet internally differentiated account of the past, a narrative form modeled on oral traditions of storytelling that challenge the monolithic histories theoretically produced by literate societies. Internal contradictions (such as the multiple meanings assigned to Willow Springs) are an inevitable part of such a heteroglossic approach. This insistence on the multiple experiences and symbolic meanings of any location enlarges our understanding of the relationship between roots and routes, revealing them to be both mutually constitutive and always in process of being reconstituted. And because, in Willow Springs, women travel multiple routes in order to construct their roots, we find that they do more than merely embody or transmit static cultural norms. Naylor and her readers are therefore able to reimagine and redefine the work of both genders, as women and men participate in the continual, mutual construction of and adaptation to culture and history.

II. Myths of Place, Myths of Race

Through the graphic representation of tropes conventionally used to signify a cultural nation—a family tree, and a map of the island on the novel's inside covers—Naylor signals her interest in the ideas of traditional rootedness and collective identity. The anthropologist Liisa Malkki argues that botanical metaphors, metaphors of kinship, maps, and family trees present the “national order of things” as the “natural order of things” (26). Like the roots discourse, the narrative preoccupation with dating, marriage, and childbirth carries with it connotations of the existence of an organic, natural, and homogenous community. Paul Gilroy argues, for example, that the trope of kinship, the use of the family as a figure for cultural nation conveys essentialist notions of cultural and racial authenticity, and deals inadequately “with the obvious differences between and within black cultures” (194). The formation of Cocoa's family is an ongoing concern for herself and the matriarchs in Willow Springs. The novel is a modern day romance novel that takes us through courtship, marriage, and its aftermath. Cocoa's concern with the lack of availability of eligible black men, and her aunt and grandmother's desire for her to have children once she finally marries can all be read as a metaphor for nation formation. But Naylor also unwrites the romance genre by foregrounding the aftermath of romance, by making a large portion of the narrative a dialogue between a couple after death has already separated them. Furthermore, she resists the tropes of nation formation when she shows that George's rootlessness gives him a kind of joy and that the island community is where he meets his death. She does not uncritically celebrate the idea of kinship because it is so fraught for women who bear the burden of birthing and raising the chil-

dren. Childbirth in this novel is neither natural, nor simple, nor easy; it is another site where the active pursuit of one's desire for self-propagation can beget tragedy and disaster. And the family narrative one plans can take on an unpredictable direction of its own. Thus, Miranda's intervention on behalf of the infertile Bernice, which she suspects may be “changing the natural course,” is met with what seems to be divine retribution when the child she helps to conceive meets an untimely death (139).

I will return to the feminist implications of Naylor's cultural politics below. Here, I focus on how her depictions of Cocoa as rooted and of George as rootless erect, at first, the notion of an irreconcilable opposition between cultural integrity and alienating modernity. On the one hand, Cocoa's grounding in a specifically African American values system, history, and tradition supplies her with a fortitude that is formidable. When, for example, early in their courtship, George tells her about his continued interest in a former girlfriend, Cocoa reacts with composure and then reflects on it: “Now, I'm gonna tell you about *cool*. It comes with the cultural territory: the beating of the bush drum, the rocking of the slave ship, the rhythm of the hand going from cotton sack to cotton row and back again. It went on to settle into the belly of the blues, the arms of Jackie Robinson, and the head of every ghetto kid who lives to a ripe old age. You can keep it, you can hide it, you can blow it—but even when your ass is in the tightest crack, you must never, ever, LOSE it.” This meditation on cool delves beneath the surface of posture and style, and it grounds Cocoa's self-awareness in a collective history of dispossession, hardship, endurance, and transcendence. Cocoa's definition of *cool* echoes in many ways the islanders' flexible use of the phrase “18 & 23” to refer to the myriad of physical, emotional, familial, and economic hardships they suffer: “If the boy wanted to know what 18 & 23 meant, why didn't

he just ask? . . . He coulda asked Cloris about the curve in her spine that came from the planting season when their mule broke its leg, and she took up the reins and kept pulling the plow with her own back. Winky woulda told him about the hot tar that took out the corner of his right eye the summer we had only seven days to rebuild the bridge so the few crops we had left after the storm could be gotten over before rot sat in" (8).² The respective passages about *cool* and "18 & 23" suggest that cultural memory is grounded in a collective history that is encoded on bodies that bear the physical and psychic scars of trauma. This memory is carried by black bodies as well as on the tongue through orality.

This emphasis on the way memory is written on the body allows Naylor to historicize, to render the changeability, of a notion of racial identity based on a language of kinship, blood, and essence. For example, when George plays cards with Dr. Buzzard, a figure who exemplifies "local color," he finds himself awestruck when Buzzard begins to sing, and thinks, "I didn't understand the rhythm and I refused to spoil it by attempting to join in. Perhaps if I had known that I only had to listen to the pulse of my blood—" (214). It's not entirely clear whether this reference to a cultural memory that resides in the blood represents Naylor's point of view as much as it does George's, but clearly the character with essentialist notions of racial identity is also the one with the fewest discernibly "black" characteristics. George, the orphaned son of a prostitute, who loves Shakespeare's *King Lear* and prides himself on individual achievement and scientific rationality, has tenuous connections to any community. The text ascribes his cultural amnesia, his purported inability to "listen" to his blood, to inculcation with Western values resulting from his institutionalization in an orphanage that instilled him with mainstream, dominant American values of individualism. His personal history can and

should be read, therefore, as a signifier of his status as a cultural orphan. But the possibility that the essentialism articulated above may not be fully endorsed by the author lies in the fact that the most romanticized views and distorted perceptions of the island are attributed to George; Cocoa, as I discuss later, is the character most likely to challenge his point of view.

George imagines Willow Springs to be an edenic place of origins, a mythical, ancestral home. Upon first arriving on the island with Cocoa on her annual visit home, George reflects, "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" (175). Although he increasingly grows more ambivalent about and even hostile toward the island, at first, even its inhabitants seem mythic to George, who describes Mama Day and Abigail (Cocoa's grandmother) as appearing eternally young. The mythical rendering of Mama Day is deliberate when contrasted to her depiction in Naylor's earlier novel, *Linden Hills*. In that work, Mama Day makes a brief appearance as Willa Nedeed's aunt, come North for a visit. Willa remembers her as homespun and unsophisticated, a woman spouting unwanted folk wisdom, "Coming with her cardboard suitcases, loose-fitting shoes, and sticky jars of canned whatever" (147). This decidedly unflattering description of Miranda reveals more about her niece (upwardly mobile and self-satisfied at the time of the visit), than it does about Mama Day. Likewise, George's description of Miranda and Abigail speaks more to his state of mind than it does to their actual condition. His visceral response to the island arises from his rootlessness. He makes this contrast between himself and Cocoa: "I was always in awe of the stories you told so easily about Willow Springs. To be born in a grandmother's house, to be able to walk and see where a great-grandfather and even a great-great-grandfather was born. You had more

than a family, you had a history. And I didn't even have a real last name" (129).³ George's investment in viewing the island in mythic terms is the fulfillment of his desire for the recuperation of a lost and fragmented identity.

But to conclude that the novel's sole focus is on George's immersion into "authentic" cultural blackness would be to overlook Naylor's simultaneous concern with cultural transformation and hybridization. The opposition between Willow Springs and Mainland values can be understood as signifying a binary between African American and Euro-American values, but to attend exclusively to this reading privileges cultural purity as an ideal and suggests that cultural hybridity should only be viewed as a type of mongrelization. Susan Meisenholder's reading of the novel exemplifies an approach based on the notion of the South as site of cultural purity and racial authenticity.⁴ In "'The Whole Picture' in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," she argues that "a measure of both Cocoa's and George's alienation from their black roots early in the novel is their extensive use of white cultural norms to define themselves and to understand their relationship." Meisenholder offers a number of examples of this alleged alienation from "racial roots"; among them are George's love of Shakespeare and his invitation of Cocoa to dinner by sending her roses and a note, a gesture she reads as his playing "the role of white urbane sophisticate" (407). The labeling of certain behaviors as "white" and others as "black" is clearly problematic. Yet Meisenholder's attention of both characters' appropriation of a common cultural script of languages and behaviors to direct their actions is necessary, for we see that a layer of artifice to their behavior does exist. The problem is not, however, that Cocoa and George are "acting white," but that they suffer from a self-alienation and an alienation from others that is symptomatic of urban living. Yet while Naylor implies that they must shed the neurotic need

to filter their experiences through the hegemonic narratives of the dominant culture, this discard cannot be articulated through stereotypical notions of what is authentically white or black.

The strength of Meisenholder's argument lies, however, in her observation that both Cocoa and George suffer displacement, for that contention deviates from the critical norm, reads George as the one who suffers most from fragmentation. Such an interpretation assumes that those who stay closer to home are more authentically black, and that mobility is an exclusive prerogative of whites. This notion of migration is a fallacy that Naylor rejects. While it is certainly true that Cocoa is more grounded in African American traditions than George is, she is like him in her negotiation of geographic and social mobility and of the cultural changes that result from it. She chooses to live in large urban centers like New York and Charleston; accordingly, her connection to an ancestral home is maintained primarily through memories that ground her shifting subjectivity: "Measuring your new against old friends, old ways, old places. Knowing that as long as the old survives, you can keep changing as much as you want without the nightmare of waking up to a total stranger" (49). One can argue that if for George the attraction of Willow Springs lies more in its mythicism than its reality as "home," then in some respects, for Cocoa, the island is more desirable as memory than as living space. This preference emerges, in part, because the traditions preserved by the island include a set of patriarchal norms that privilege women's roles as child-bearers and caretakers, illustrated primarily through a subplot in which Miranda enables Bernice to realize her feverish desire for motherhood, and secondarily through Miranda and Abigail's preoccupation with, first, Cocoa's marital status and then with her procreative status. Cocoa's resistance to these norms illustrates how her geographical distance from the island enables a criti-

cal distance that allows her to imagine other possibilities.

Nonetheless, Cocoa's nostalgia for the island buffers her from an urban experience marked by "change and difference," offering her the reassurance of the familiar in the face of a "nightmare" of instability (63). Yet elsewhere, Naylor suggests that change and rootedness are not necessarily in opposition, and in fact can be found in specific bodies (of people, or land). Cocoa's fair complexion and reddish gold hair, for example, is evidence of a history of miscegenation even as Mama Day looks at her and sees "pure black." She thinks, "but the Baby Girl brings back the great, grand Mother. We ain't seen 18 & 23 black from that time till now. The black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun" (47-48). Cocoa, like Willow Springs, is transformed by time and history, while Miranda perceives in Cocoa a mythic and transcendent self-possession. Like the island, Coca bears the evidence of a long history of cross-cultural encounter and exchange.

This definition of blackness that acknowledges hybridity is nonetheless viewed through a historical lens ("18 & 23 black") that refuses to erase the memories of violence and the misuse of power integral to African Americans' new world racial and cultural identity. This point of conflict at the site of cross-cultural encounter is where the tearing of memory (in Nora's terms) is liable to happen. But on Naylor's terms, it is also where the most energetic reconstructions and reconceptualizations of individual and communal identities can occur because that is where subjects try to assert themselves most forcefully. Naylor's vision of cultural hybridity is far from utopic, and the kind of encounters between mainland and African American cultures is often marked by conflict, miscommunication, distrust, and the abuse of power. She exemplifies the latter, for example, by discord between villagers and the ethnographer (Reema's Boy), and by their distrust of the corrupt real

estate developers who offer to buy their property.

Reema's boy, a Willow Springs' native who returns as an ethnographer intent on recording and preserving the island's folkways, symbolizes one (failed) model for modern African Americans who bridge the gap between mainland and folk (or urban and rural, black and white) societies. Typical ethnographic narratives foreground the intellectual's view of the folk, but the novel turns this dynamic on its head by presenting the perspective that the folk hold about the ethnographer. We learn that Reema's boy was born in Willow Springs, educated on the mainland, and "... came hauling himself back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder and a funny way of curling up his lip and clicking his teeth..." (7). Burdened with assumptions and expectations, this outsider represents the reader, who is cautioned through Reema's Boy to listen attentively to the folk. He also figures both cross-cultural exchange and an African American sense of being adrift from home with the longing to remember and preserve it. He thus stands as a cautionary figure for individuals like George and Cocoa, who also want to reclaim and reconstruct their origins.

By problematizing both cultural essence and the dynamics of cultural change, Naylor considers the possibility of an African American identity that is rooted in a communal identity, yet not restricted to a particular geographical location or homogenous idea of blackness. A similarly expansive idea of racial and cultural identity can be seen in her depiction of George in New York. While George epitomizes cultural impoverishment from the vantage point of the ethnic purist, another point of view recognizes that he has cobbled together an identity firmly rooted, or more appropriately, routed, in Manhattan. His constitution of identity through memories accumulated and combined in the act of walking the city

streets mirrors the mobility of Miranda, whom Naylor also depicts as a traveler, constantly walking around the island and marking through ritual its numerous sites of memory. This alternative perspective allows us to view George's familiarity and comfort with a mix of ethnic influences as a strength that he passes onto Cocoa when he encourages her to familiarize herself with the city's diverse neighborhoods. This dynamic undercuts the notion that Cocoa's cultural and racial authenticity is superior to his rootlessness, because in fact he is better equipped on some levels than she is for dwelling in the city. Rather than privileging one location over the other, Naylor localizes strength in the character—Cocoa—best able to adapt to both environments. Gary Storhoff argues that, "Manhattan is not the antithesis of Willow Springs but its complement. Seen in the proper perspective, Manhattan is as wondrous as Willow Springs, and one place cannot be entirely appreciated—or loved—without a full understanding of the other" (38). Storhoff's view of city and village as complementary rather than competing highlights that the spaces are both subject to mythification by newcomers and strangers and also stand in for a history of colonial domination that results in the kind of antagonism discussed above.

Early in the novel George chides Cocoa for "following [the] myth" of New York as fast and impersonal. He teaches her to appreciate the city as a native would by taking her to the outerboroughs, the parts of the city that are like Willow Springs in that they are not "on the map." He tells her, "My city was a network of small towns, some even smaller than here in Willow Springs. It could be one apartment building, a handful of blocks, a single square mile hidden off with its own language, newspapers, and magazines—its own laws and codes of behavior, and sometimes even its own judge and juries" (61). Because the outerborough neighborhoods do not occu-

py any real space in outsiders' minds as significant places, they are like Willow Springs in that they are, at least figuratively, unmapped. Manhattan's mythical status mirrors that of Willow Springs; and George and Cocoa's relations to these places undergo similar transformations.

George opens Cocoa's eyes to the existence of the village in the city. According to Donald Gibson, this approach, introduced by Toni Morrison, "avoid[s] dichotomizing, and therefore simplifying, the issue. [Morrison's] brilliant analysis allows recognition of the negative aspects of the urban experience of blacks without defining the very nature of that experience as wholly negative and of necessity pathological" (41). Naylor shares with Morrison an aversion to demonizing the urban experience at the same time that her characters' lived experience of city and country challenges the desire to idealize them. Nonetheless, her depiction of the urbanized George is, if not pathological, then certainly problematic because his thorough inability to claim or own a cultural identity makes him the only character in the novel unable to carry any trace of identifiably African American culture with him as he travels. It is his lack of personal history that makes George's only recourse to collective identity the essentialist discourse of race as biologically determined.

Naylor's theorization of change, movement, and loss manifests not only in the portrayal of her characters, but also in her challenge to the relegation of the rural South to the mythic past.⁵ Naylor marks the supposedly idyllic Southern space with its own traumas and transformations, geographical and historical. Although Willow Springs is imbued with the language of myth, its inhabitants wrestle with its gradual transformation. For example, its inhabitants celebrate Candle Walk each year before Christmas: "Over here nobody knows why every December twenty-second folks take to the road—strolling, laughing, and talking—hold-

ing some kind of light in their hands. It's been going on since before they were born, and the ones born before them" (110). This annual event ritualizes continuity even as the practice slowly changes with each succeeding generation's greater contact with the mainland: "There's a disagreement every winter about whether these young people spell the death of Candle Walk" (*Mama Day* 111). The young people carry sparklers and lanterns instead of candles, they exchange store-bought not handmade gifts, and they measure others' generosity in the gifts they themselves receive. Consumerism and display replace communal sharing and individual creativity. Once again the island's agrarian, communal economy clashes with the materialism of the capital-driven mainland. Although the movement of the young folk "beyond the bridge" and their importation of mainland values and technologies (electricity, automobiles) is met by most island elders with fear and distrust, Miranda, "known to be far more wise than wicked," views change as inevitable, and "says there's nothing to worry about" (111). Her powers as conjure woman and herbalist, her intimate knowledge of every corner of the island, and her affinity for nature make her the novel's central figure for African American folk traditions, so her acceptance of cultural transformation is both significant and ironic: "And even the youngsters who've begun complaining about having no Christmas instead of this 'old 18 & 23 night' don't upset Miranda. It'll take generations, she says, for Willow Springs to stop doing it at all. And more generations again to stop talking about the time 'when there used to be some kinda 18 & 23 going-on near December twenty-second.' By then, she figures, it won't be the world as we know it no way — and so no need for the memory" (111).

The transformation that some regard as ruinous assimilation, Miranda views as healthy and

inevitable. She recognizes that aspects of tradition remain and mingle with the new; that a hybrid culture is, and has always been, developing. Moreover, her thoughts about her father, John Paul, imply that even the complaints of elders who resist change are a ritualized part of the celebration. Thus, storytelling during and about the Christmas ritual is the vehicle of continuity, as opposed to the actual form that the ritual takes. This view of cultural memory privileges an active reconstruction and recreation of tradition, rather than a passive acceptance and transmittal. This difference authorizes Cocoa's attempt to re-imagine black women's roles from mother (biological reproduction) to storyteller (oral reproduction) and archivist (cultural preservation).

As for Cocoa's narrative counterpart, anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt's conceptualization of the figure of the castaway elucidates George's forced and protracted interlude on the island when a hurricane wipes out the bridge to the mainland. Pratt defines the castaway as the "utopian self-image for the ethnographer," for it describes a person who belongs to a society (if he's been stranded long enough), yet at the same time who does not really belong. She writes: "The authority of the ethnographer over the 'mere traveler' rests chiefly on the idea that the traveler just passes through, whereas the ethnographer lives with the group under study. But of course this is what captives and castaways often do too, living in another culture in every capacity from prince to slave, learning indigenous languages and lifeways with a proficiency any ethnographer would envy" (38). For Pratt, the fundamental difference between castaways and ethnographers is that castaways must adapt to a group's social and economic practices, whereas ethnographers "establish a relationship of exchange with the group based on Western commodities" (38).

Black women writers have consistently recognized the castaway's power as an image of acculturation; thus the castaway both literally and figuratively appears with persistence in their fiction—from Avey in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* to Son and Jadine in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* to George in *Mama Day*. It is no coincidence that, with the exception of Son, these literary castaways are also upwardly mobile, cosmopolitan, and therefore "rootless" individuals. The implication of their sojourns in "folk" places is that they must reclaim their lost cultural identities, but all of these texts imagine the possibility of at once setting down roots and delighting in movement, change, and difference.

Reema's boy allows for a different, perhaps more compelling line of analysis. For his failure as a "castaway" lies not so much in his refusal to establish or to return to traditional roots, but in his abandoning his assumption of cultural superiority due to his class and educational privileges. In other words, the problem is not so much in the failure to reclaim his roots, but in the patronizing and dismissive stance with which he approaches those who *represent* his roots even as he attempts to preserve their culture through his scholarship. Reema's boy produces an ethnography like the historiography critiqued by Nora. He attempts to institutionalize and sanctify a *lost* culture as site of memory, on the one hand, and environment of memory, on the other hand, a project that the island ridicules. Naylor demonstrates the reversal of the ethnographer's self-alienated gaze in the way the islanders look ironically back at him: "And then when he went around asking us about 18 & 23, there weren't nothing to do but take pity on him as he rattled on about 'ethnography,' 'unique speech patterns,' 'cultural preservation,' and whatever else he seemed to be getting so much pleasure out of while talking into his little gray machine. He was all over the place—What 18 & 23 mean? What 18 & 23 mean? And we all told him the God-

honest truth: it was just our way of saying something" (7). The collective narrative voice, then, proposes a different approach, which demands a willingness to challenge the hierarchies imposed by social norms; this process involves attentive listening to and respectful treatment of his guests. The path traced in this imagined encounter involves an actual movement downward from house to trailer, down a slope to the graveyard that is the novel's most potent site of memory.⁶ This encounter, then, is not about a natural realignment with an essential and authentic racialized identity, but about cross-cultural communication facilitated by the willingness of those in a position of privilege and dominance to relinquish their assumption of cultural and/or racial superiority.

III. Transmitting Tradition: Agency, Voice, and the Female Body

Told by multiple narrators about vastly different individuals, Naylor's novel operates on the principle that "there are just too many sides to the whole story" (311). The irony, ambivalence, and contradictions (the competing suggestions, for example, that race and culture are both matters of biological essence and shared experience) in *Mama Day* exemplify the author's commitment to capturing and conveying the complexity of human truths. Naylor explores the question of the gender politics of tradition in *Mama Day*, for example, who, unmarried and childless, embodies the idea of tradition as constructed through and conveyed by oral communities. Her designation as "everybody's mama now," an honorific given because of her multiple roles as midwife, healer, and community leader, expands traditional ideas of motherhood (89). Yet she is also instrumental in counseling the high-strung Bernice, whose obsession with becoming pregnant borders

on the pathological. Bernice proves unable to imagine a woman's worth beyond her reproductive capacity, a notion that throws into relief the problem with using kinship as a figure for cultural nation and that Mama Day explicitly challenges. Naylor waxes ironical as Miranda reminds Bernice that her value lies in more than her womb as Miranda dispenses her knowledge of folklore, herbs, and magic to help Bernice conceive. The conjurer devises a remedy for infertility comprised of cooking, churning butter, weaving, and other domestic arts, a recipe, in short, for "natural" womanhood (75).

For Naylor these domestic activities illustrate both a rich folk tradition and threats of constraint on women with more cosmopolitan aspirations. When Cocoa leaves the island for the mainland, her choices expand beyond different types of mothering to include a myriad of other opportunities. This development becomes clear, for example, when after marrying George, she invests more in educating herself than in raising a family (144). The opposition between feminism and patriarchy seems unambiguous when George demands that Cocoa put aside her college brochures to make him a fresh-cooked meal. It becomes less clearly defined, however, when the continuity of tradition is at stake. While walking to *The Other Place* with George, for example, Cocoa finds herself at a crossroad, having a decide whether to follow a tradition that brooks no questions, indeed a tradition based on unquestioning acceptance. The incident is recounted from George's point of view:

There was a short cut through the family plot. I didn't understand why we had to put moss in our shoes before entering the graveyard.

"It's a tradition," you said.

"But what does it mean?"

"I don't know—it's just something we've always done."

"Well, what would happen if I didn't?"

(217-18)

Although Cocoa balks at querying tradition, as George would like, she shifts when the topic explicitly moves to the role that she must play. In the same conversation, they discuss the mandate that the land be passed on "two generations down," creating an imperative to procreate in order to ensure that the land stay within the family's possession (219). For Cocoa this appears to be unproblematic: she jokes with George about his performance in bed so that they can maintain the tradition and elsewhere expresses concern about her fertility.

Yet Cocoa refuses a motherhood contingent on subordinating women and fetishizing land. When George imagines that they might hold onto the land ("too beautiful to let go") by settling on the island and taking up as farmers, Cocoa is skeptical: "A successful farm takes backbreaking work. Look at the condition you're in just from weeding a few rows of beans." He retorts, "So you wouldn't stay here with me?" Her unambiguous reply: "No. You would not chain me down here while you played at growing tomatoes and corn." The conversation revolves for George around his fantasies of genteel landownership, but Cocoa immediately understands that his pastoral fantasy would demand her silence, passivity, and diminished opportunities. In an ironic tirade she smashes George's fantasy of agrarian patriarchy: "Okay, George. This is what you want to hear: anywhere in the world you go and anything you want to do, I'm game. I'll freeze myself, starve myself, wear Salvation Army clothes to be by your side. I'll steal for you, lie for you, crawl on my hands and knees beside you. Because a good woman always follows her man" (221). George engages in a nostalgia that looks passively back to the past and conjures up a scenario that reifies patriarchal gender politics and reproduces conventional notions of women's domestic space. In contrast, Cocoa's nostalgia engages in the active reconstruction of memory suggested by

hooks in "The Chitlin Circuit," allowing her to redefine notions of black female domesticity and to construct the "homeplace" as a "site of resistance."

Ultimately, Cocoa follows both models of cultural transmission, forming part of the storytelling matrix of the narration and promising to preserve George's memory for her sons. She is, in other words, the bearer of cultural memory through womb and tongue. Cocoa's motherhood shouldn't be read, however, as a retreat from her feminism. For as bell hooks reminds us in "Homeplace," African Americans have believed historically "that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension" (42). Moreover, hooks argues, "since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination" (42). Naylor's attention to the necessity of historicizing "the black experience" results in a depiction that casts a critical eye on traditional notions of motherhood while never devaluing the role of the mother. This compromise is one of a series in the conclusion of the novel. It is accompanied by Cocoa's decision to remarry and settle in a Southern city, Charleston, rather than New York, after George's death.

George's death forms another compromise, Naylor designs to stir critical inquiry as much as to bring her novel to closure. The character suffers a fatal heart attack while following Mama Day's instruction to enter a chicken coop and bring back the unidentified cure for Cocoa, herself suffering illness brought about by the evil rootwork of a jealous woman. Naylor constructs an episode to be read in several different ways. First, George's death, like Cocoa's illness that precipitates it, figures as an incident in which the "cast-

away" must relinquish his values and accept "native" beliefs, even when they seem counterintuitive and irrational to a Westernized mind. Therefore, although George wants to take Cocoa to the mainland to have her examined by a conventional doctor, a hurricane and the ensuing disappearance of the bridge prevent him from leaving the island and compel him to follow Miranda's inscrutable ways. Arguably, his death signifies his failure as cast-away because his differences can't be erased or assimilated into that collective's values. George's death also signifies the defeat of his Western, masculinized rationality to the African-derived matriarchy that rules over the island. George smashes the hens' eggs, symbols of fertility, in a futile and destructive attempt to control a situation that he cannot fully grasp; he loses the battle when his heart gives out. And finally, George's death can be read as a ghastly reminder of the dangers in, as Malkki puts it, territorializing identity. For this violent eradication of the individual who most represents rootless modernity reinforces on some level the assumption that his cosmopolitanism is pathological. This is an assumption implicitly conveyed by critics who read the death as evidence of George's integration into the community.⁷ The notion that literal burial could be a satisfactory resolution to the "problem" of rootlessness is particularly unsettling.

To occasion violent death is not, however, the only way to interpret Mama Day's logic for sending George on this mission. Rather, her thoughts make clear that his personal history—for some, his lack of history—can be understood in positive, even necessary terms:

And now there is that boy. Miranda looks down at her hands again. In all her years she could count on half of her fingers folk she'd met with a will like his. He believes in himself—deep within himself—'cause he ain't never had a choice. And he keeps it protected down in his center, but she needs that belief buried in George. Of his own

accord he has to *hand* it over to her. She needs his hand in hers—his very hand—so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before. A single moment was all she asked, even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place. So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over.

Mama Day recognizes that George, too, has a self-possession, different in form and origin from Cocoa's "cool," but just as vital as her own strength and resources to the salvation of her niece. Mama Day sagely assesses that George "had his own place within him," and finds in him a quality from which she needs to draw (285). Through this critical lens, we see that the emphasis is not on an unbridgeable distance between mainland and village, or routes and roots; rather it's on the struggle over who sets the terms of the relationship. George's empirical mind doesn't see the value in herbalism or in a wooden bridge that must be rebuilt after every major storm, but both human and supernatural forces refuse his attempts to dictate the terms on which mainland and island interact.

Ultimately, the real achievement for all characters whether "rooted" in the Southern home space, or routed in the Northern metropole is the construction of community through storytelling. By linking the tracing of routes—moving, visiting, and so on—

to the construction of memory and the process of storytelling, Naylor expands our understanding of cultural memory by making routing/mobility a way to make memory live. Through orality, the dichotomy between city and countryside, between perceptions of nurturing soil and indifferent pavement, breaks down as the characters carry their traditions with them on their travels. In an examination of storytelling's function in the novel, Paula Gallant Eckard underscores the urban melancholy that makes the need for connection to tradition acute. She writes, "Given the social and familial fragmentation in contemporary American society, there is often no grand sense of family or place to provide identity, stability, or belonging for succeeding generations" (134). Orality offers a dynamic medium for the transmission of cultural memory because it presents a model of both continuity and transformation as it passes through the mouths and views of each individual. Routing, or mobility, certainly in the post-Civil Rights era, offers the possibility of an agency that enables women and men to reinscribe and actively to recreate their culture.⁸ In *Mama Day*, Naylor imagines the possibility of cultural integrity even when the actual ground that the characters stand on is always shifting and changing.

Notes

1. Nora writes, "Consider, for example, the irrevocable break marked by the disappearance of peasant culture, that quintessential repository of collective memory whose recent vogue as an object of historical study coincided with the apogee of industrial growth. . . . We have seen the end of societies that had long assured the transmission and conservation of collectively remembered values, whether through churches or schools, the family or the state . . ." (284).

2. The phrase "18 & 23" refers literally to the year in which Sapphira Wade murdered her master, and thus claimed her independence.

3. George's ignorance of his "real last name" signifies his lost identity and places him within a long literary tradition of African American individuals, starting with slave narrators, who associate identity with naming.

4. Meisenhelder is certainly not unusual or unique in making this assumption. Even at the turn of the century W. E. B. Du Bois identified the rural South as the region of authentic blackness when he concentrated on the Black Belt in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

5. In *Who Set You Flowin'*, Farah Jasmine Griffin discusses the social circumstances of the post-civil rights era that result in the relatively recent construction of the South in narratives of return as a simpler place and time. Griffin notes that contemporary fiction tends to mythologize Southern roots and as a consequence ignores the racial horror of the past.

6. I would like to thank Chris Chism for this valuable insight.

7. Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon argues, for example, "As a dead-yet-living person, he has family members who know his name (Cocoa has even named one of hers sons after him), and can allow him to continue speaking and hearing from the grave" (24). And Paula Eckard reiterates this line of thought, stating, "He ends up sacrificing his own life, but in doing so George ironically becomes fully assimilated into the community. Although he had no personal history of his own, through death George contributes to the collective history of Willow Springs and becomes part of its lore and memory" (132).

8. I am suggesting here that mobility does not always carry with it, for peoples of African descent, the implications of choice and agency. One need only think of the transatlantic slave trade to complicate such a perception.

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