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## EXTENDING THE LINE From *Sula* to *Mama Day*

by Cheryl A. Wall

Lyrical, seductive, and justly celebrated, the prologue of Gloria Naylor's 1988 novel, *Mama Day* invites the reader into a fictive world that in its location, history, customs, and beliefs is a world elsewhere. Belonging to the United States, but part of no state, Willow Springs can be located only on the map that the front matter of the book helpfully provides. A place that has been black owned and self sufficient since 1823 when an enslaved conjure woman compelled her master to deed the land to her and her descendants, its existence is anomalous in the extreme. What renders this unfamiliar world accessible to many readers is the narrator's language. The use of black vernacular English and the direct address to the reader create an illusion of intimacy that is reinforced by the narrator's invitation to include readers in on a joke that is told at the expense of a resident of Willow Springs. "Reema's boy" is mocked as a classic example of an educated fool. Schooled on the mainland, Reema's boy, in the only identity the narrator grants him, has returned with a tape recorder and an addled brain. He has subsequently published his ethnography of Willow Springs in which he identified the island's "unique speech patterns" and specified examples of "cultural preservation." His "extensive field work" has yielded what seems to those on the island who read even the introduction of his book an inane conclusion. The "18 & 23s," the all purpose phrase that encodes something both of the island's history and its philosophy, he has determined, is actually an inversion of the lines of longitude and latitude on which Willow Springs was once located on maps. From this observation, Reema's boy has extrapolated the conclusion that inversion is the key to the worldview of Willow Springs, a place where in order to assert their cultural identity, people had "no choice but to look at everything upside-down" (8). Such a conclusion may impress his fellow academics, but the people of Willow Springs dismiss him and his findings. They wonder "if the boy wanted to know what 18 & 23 means, why didn't he just ask?" (8). Then they go on to admit that they would not or could not have told him. Had he learned to "listen," however, he would have found out for himself.<sup>1</sup>

Reema's boy is not the only butt of this joke. The buzz words that the narrator attributes to the ethnographer are at least as common among literary critics. Indeed, the narrator's words might be taken less as a joke and more as a warning to those who would reduce the complexity of the author's vision to catch phrases. But, just as the residents of Willow Springs have had fun with Reema's boy, misleading him as often as telling him "the God-honest truth," Naylor seems to be having some fun of her own. Critics have been attentive to the many allusions in *Mama Day* to *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*,

and *King Lear*; they have discerned as well intertextual connections to William Faulkner's "The Bear," Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Henry Louis Gates asserts that, "in the history of the African-American literary tradition, perhaps no other author has been more immersed in the formal history of that tradition than Gloria Naylor" (ix). Like all of Naylor's novels, *Mama Day* is studded with allusions. A primary intertext that has seldom been cited is Morrison's *Sula*.

*Sula* is more than "a point of reference," as one critic terms it, that suggests a first name for two of the dead daughters of the Days ("Peace") as well as a female centered family structure. Not only its characters but its sense of place, its perspective on history, its representation of ritual and its language are in sustained dialogue with Morrison's second novel. Perhaps not coincidentally, critics have frequently interpreted *Sula* as a novel of inversion: a novel where the Bottom is in the hills, the Peace women know no peace, and the (W)right women are wrong.<sup>3</sup> In *Mama Day*, Naylor pays homage to her precursor, but she does so by revising—indeed almost inverting—Morrison's complex vision to offer a challenging vision of her own. *Sula* is, preeminently in the African-American tradition, the representation of "home" as already and forever lost. To this representation *Mama Day* responds with a loud and forceful rebuttal: "Home. You can move away from it, but you never leave it. Not as long as it holds something to be missed" (50). It cannot be lost. The vision of *Mama Day* is congruent with bell hooks's concept of "homeplace." "Drawing on past legacies," hooks writes, "contemporary black women can begin to reconceptualize ideas of homeplace, once again considering the primacy of domesticity as a site of subversion and resistance" (48). Naylor's novel does not simply assert the value of recuperating African-American cultural legacies; it seeks to dramatize their utility in the contemporary world.<sup>4</sup>

Both novels participate in a project of cultural reclamation that I call "worrying the line," a trope that refers to literary tradition as well as lineage. On the cusp of a new century, black women's writing has been preoccupied with the recuperation and representation of the past three hundred years of black peoples' lives in the United States and throughout the African diaspora. Alongside Morrison and Naylor, a striking number of novelists and poets explore both the significance and the elusiveness of the past by reconstructing family genealogies. Among the authors and titles that come readily to mind are Lucille Clifton, *Generations*; Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*; Paule Marshall, *Daughters*, and Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, to cite a few of the best known. Genealogies in these texts are woven together out of individual and collective memory, as encoded in stories, songs, recipes, rituals, photographs, and writing. At those moments when the genealogical quest is thwarted, protagonists frequently rely on what Morrison describes in "Rootedness," as "another way of knowing" (342). If, on the one hand, the construction of these genealogies requires a sifting through familial legacies, their representation requires a sifting through literary legacies. Representing a past that is largely unwritten, remembered only in fragments of music and memory, demands of writers both a visionary spirit and the capacity for dramatic revisions of form. These writers appropriate what they find useful in multiple literary traditions in addition to the

African-American: from African and European mythology to the King James Bible to Anglo-American modernism. As they “worry the line,” they revise, clarify, subvert, or extend the traditions they appropriate. By repeating and revising, clarifying and inverting the themes and metaphors of *Sula*, *Mama Day* extends the line of African-American literary tradition.

In “A Conversation,” the often-cited Naylor/Morrison interview published in 1985, Naylor expressed her gratitude for the example of Morrison’s work because “it said to a young black woman, struggling to find a mirror of her worth in this society, not only is your story worth telling but it can be told in words so painstakingly eloquent that it becomes a song” (568). The metaphor of the mirror recurs throughout the novel. Perhaps the most critical example occurs when the young female protagonist Cocoa suffers hallucinations so severe that her grandmother Abigail covers the mirrors in the house to spare her pain. When Cocoa looks into Abigail’s face, she recognizes that it is the true mirror, “a mirror that could never lie” (287). In both the conversation and the novel, mirrors suggest the link between identity and ancestry. Cocoa can confirm who she is because her grandmother and great aunt, “her living mirrors,” show her.<sup>5</sup> As a young black woman writer, Naylor found similar confirmation in Morrison’s work. With Morrison she entered into what Mae Henderson calls “familial, or testimonial discourse” as one black woman writer to another. Yet, just as the cultural inheritance that is thematized in the novel is only of use if it can be adapted and transformed, the literary legacy is constantly in the process of revision.

*Sula* is a loving elegy to a way of life that sustained African Americans from the Emancipation through the Civil Rights Movement. With an understanding as prescient as its prose is lyrical, Morrison’s 1974 novel mourns the passing of the segregated communities that nurtured generations of black folk in the United States. It mourns their passing some years before most of those who had called places like the Bottom home began to miss them. From the images of destruction that introduce the text, through a series of deaths by fire and water, in rituals to stave off fear and to bury the dead, to the “circles of sorrow” that close it, *Sula* is suffused with sadness. Leavening a sadness that would otherwise be all but unbearable is the novel’s precise rendering of the impromptu ceremonies of everyday life, its sassy talk, and raunchy humor. Despite racism so unyielding that it seemed another force of nature, or perhaps because of it, the community’s elders bonded together out of kinship and necessity. As the novel begins and ends, their legacy has been destroyed root and branch. White capitalism, cavalier in its indifference, is the agent of destruction; it provides the money and the perceived need for the Medallion City Golf Course that sprawls over what was once the neighborhood called the Bottom. But it is the forgetfulness of young blacks, a new generation of “deweys” in the novel’s cruelest insult, that threatens to obliterate even its memory.

Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* is a fable for the 21st century, one that replaces history as “a nigger joke,” with history as liberating myth. It offers a heritage, both to those African Americans who, like the novel’s male protagonist, George, are culturally orphaned, cut off from any traditions other than those of mainstream America, and to those like Cocoa, who are linked genealogically to the wellspring of black American culture. Yet it emphasizes that anyone who can hear the sound of that culture can

partake of its balm. Instead of rituals of death, it fashions rituals of life and giving. Unlike Eva Peace, a mother whose love for her children is so fierce that it destroys those it cannot save, the titular character of *Mama Day* has no biological children; she is “everybody’s mama.” In her vocations as midwife and conjure woman, Mama Day specializes in bringing and sustaining life. Her given name Miranda, “worker of wonders,” bespeaks her power to assist even in the creation of life. Mama Day mediates between the cultures of Willow Springs and Manhattan, as she does between the past and the present. From Willow Springs she mails a letter, fragrant with lavender, that sparks the romance between George and Cocoa in New York. When Cocoa is in Willow Springs, Mama Day tutors her in the family history. Emulating Mama Day’s example, the residents of Willow Springs reject lucrative inducements from developers and refuse to allow their property to be turned into a vacation paradise with the requisite golf course. As a novel whose present is the future—the prologue and epilogue are set in 1999—*Mama Day* is optimistic about the prospects of the young.

*Sula* begins with the future already foreclosed. Only the remembered landmarks of the Bottom attest to the fact that black people defined the character of life there. What was most memorable was the pleasure they created for themselves and shared with each other whether it was ice cream at Edna Finch’s Mellow House, the singing of the Mount Zion male quartet, or pool at the Time and a Half. White people were barely present. Yet the one road that connected the Bottom to the valley—and that as the River Road and New River Road threads its way throughout the text—is the sign of their invisible power. Theirs is the power that determines when, where, and at what black men can work, that determines in turn when black men like Jude Greene decide to marry black women like Nel. In face to face confrontations, white men like the conductor on the train can turn a weak black woman like Helene Wright to custard. But it is in part the more insidious because it is the unseen power of the white world that reduces men to boys (“BoyBoy” is aptly named) and causes a strong black woman like Eva Peace to lay her leg on a railroad track and mutilate herself.

The map of Willow Springs is itself a sign of black self-sufficiency. If, as Franco Moretti avers, “a map is . . . a connection made visible,” the map of Willow Springs visualizes its disconnection from the United States (3). A bridge that the text reveals to be fragile is the only link to the mainland. Drawn to a scale that makes the island dwarf the states of South Carolina and Georgia, the map reflects the islanders’ sense of their world and the relative lack of importance of the world beyond the bridge. Apart from the dense woods that cover much of the landscape, the map charts relationships in a community that finds its primary connections between each other.<sup>6</sup> Mama Day’s trailer sits across the road from her sister Abigail’s house which is north of Chevy’s Pass, a key location in the history of their ancestor Sapphira. Their antagonist Ruby has a house at the northern tip of the island, just across from the Other Place. The original homestead of Bascombe and Sapphira Wade, the Other Place is a site of transition, both for the ancestors of the Days who are buried there and for their descendants who are attuned to its soundings. The map establishes the relation of the residents of Willow Springs to each other and to the past. Although relations among the residents of Willow Springs are not always benign, their relationships to

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each other are far more important than any interaction with outsiders. Inspired by Mama Day's example, they feel confident that they can repel the threat from those who want to buy up their land. The property at the southern-most point in Willow Springs belongs to Ambush and Bernice Duvall. "Steady," "genuinely kind," a "virtuoso" at his work, and a man of "infinite patience," whose rectitude is softened by a sly humor befitting his name, Ambush becomes the novel's exemplar of manhood.

The past is an ever-present presence in both novels. But the representation of history and the relationship of the primary characters to it could not be more different. The prologue of *Sula* evokes a place that despite its destruction is so alive in the narrator's memory that the recollection of landmarks—the Time and a Half Pool Hall, Irene's Palace of Cosmetology, and Reba's Grill—seems to set the long gone habitués into motion. But the attitude of the novel's central characters to the past is at best uncertain, at worst dismissive. Moreover, while the music, the dance, the carved spoons, in other words the expressive culture of the Bottom, haunt the outsiders who encounter them—the valley man who happens upon the scene of "a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of 'messaging round'" to the accompaniment of an harmonica played by a man in "bunion-split shoes" is an example—their meanings are ineffable. Neither characters nor readers, particularly insofar as they are implicitly identified with the valley man, have much hope of unraveling them.

The history of the Bottom begins as "a nigger joke." A white farmer strikes a bargain with his slave, that he will grant him his freedom and a piece of bottom land in exchange for his performing particularly difficult chores. When the white man's promise comes due, he persuades the slave that the land up in the hills is bottom land—because "when God looks down it's the bottom." Not only does the slave accept the story, he pleads for the hilly, infertile land. The white man keeps the rich, fertile valley land for himself. The black man is the butt of the joke, in that he is foolish enough to believe the white man, even when he can see with his own eyes what he is being offered. The storytellers know—and imply that the protagonist of their story should have known—that white men do not keep the promises they make black men. And yet, the black man did get the freedom he was promised. It just turned out to be the freedom to do backbreaking work. The laughter that the joke occasions—"a shucking, knee-slapping, wet-eyed laughter"—resonates with the proverbial laughing to keep from crying.

*Mama Day* opens with the intoned name "Willow Springs." The narrator, through whom the communal voice speaks, makes it clear immediately that the truth of anything about the place will be difficult to discern. Everything depends on "which of us" is doing the telling. But if none can agree on how to describe Sapphira Wade's complexion ("satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay") or her powers, if none in the present generation can even call her name, all are certain that in 1823, a slave triumphed over her master and secured freedom *and* highly desirable land for her children and their children and *their* children. Sapphira's progeny own the land "clean and simple" (5). A conjure woman, Sapphira is not buried on the island her cunning acquired and her spirit pervades. According to one version of her legend, she

has flown back to Africa, “some say in body, some say in mind” (206). Bascombe Wade, the Norwegian who purchased her, married her, and perhaps fathered one or more of her seven sons *is* buried in Willow Springs, sent to his grave by Sapphira. Dispossession and slavery have defined the African experience in the New World; the history of enslavement from Jamestown to the Emancipation Proclamation is more than a century longer than the history of freedom. Yet *Mama Day* opens with a myth of ownership and freedom.

Rituals in these fictive communities likewise reflect contrasting worldviews. Both texts depict the funerals of children: Chicken Little in *Sula* and Charles Kyle Duvall (Little Caesar) in *Mama Day*. Both wrench the heart, the former because of the intensity of the emotional release, the latter because of its emotional austerity. The service for the drowned child in *Sula* becomes the occasion for each congregant to get in touch with her own pain. Nel and Sula mourn separately, their grief deepened by their shared guilt. But the communal response is inscribed in “the hands of women unfolded like pairs or raven’s wings [that] flew high above their hats in the air.” As the Reverend Deal delivers his sermon, the women “did not hear all of what he said; they heard the one word, or phrase, or inflection that was for them the connection between the event and themselves” (65). Once that connection is made, the response is visceral: the women stand, speak, sway, dance, and scream. Narrated by George, the outsider best positioned to draw attention to its uniqueness, the ritual in *Mama Day* is not called a funeral, but “the standing forth.” A ritual without adornment—no flowers, music, or ceremonial dress—the “standing forth” calls on each participant to bear witness to the life of the dead child. The focus is on the mourned, not the mourner. The minister’s query “Who is ready to stand forth?” echoes the biblical Jesus who in defiance of the Pharisees offered healing to a man on the Sabbath (Mark 3:3). But the healing that is implicit in this ceremony defies Christian belief “in an earthly finality for the child’s life” (269). Bernice, who is the last to speak, addresses her son and asks for his forgiveness, even as she expresses her conviction that she will see him again. Her neighbors share that faith, and the stoicism of the ritual is its fruit.

Two annual rituals, National Suicide Day and Candle Walk, define the character of these fictive communities more completely. The roster of the dead in *Sula* begins with the soldier whose exploding head traumatizes Shadrack. Absent the angel who watched over his biblical namesake and delivered him, Meshach, and Abednego out of the fiery furnace, the novel’s Shadrack is compelled to deliver himself from fear. He cannot do so immediately, but after his return from the French battlefield and his release from the military hospital, Shadrack comes home to the Bottom and “institutes” National Suicide Day. Concentrating his fear of unexpected death on a single day—the third of January—Shadrack is able to face the rest of the year. His ritual becomes a way of “making a place for fear as a way of controlling it” (*Sula* 14). Calling people together with a cowbell and a hangman’s rope, he announces that on this day and this day alone, they can kill themselves or each other. Although they resist Shadrack’s invitation and his logic, his neighbors absorb the ritual into their lives. National Suicide Day becomes a more significant marker of time in the Bottom than the historic events toward which the dates that differentiate the sections of *Sula* gesture.

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That the characters of the Bottom accommodate themselves to National Suicide Day is hardly surprising, even if it is only Shadrack in his madness who can articulate a fear that is omnipresent. The unnamed soldier is the first of the novel's many dead. Cecile Sabat, Plum Peace, Chicken Little, Hannah Peace, Sula Peace, Tar Baby and the others who die commemorating National Suicide Day in 1941 are among the rest. Most die unnatural deaths; few die in the expected order. Only Cecile and Sula die in their beds. Eva outlives her daughter by forty years and survives her granddaughter by twenty. The fear that Shadrack expresses then—not of death or dying “but the unexpectedness of both”—is a fear that all of the novel's characters know well.

This fear spurs the conviction of the women at Chicken Little's funeral that “the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it” (*Sula* 66). But it is not assuaged by Christian orthodoxy. The ethic of the Bottom accepts the existence of evil. No one trusts that evil can be overcome with good. Yet, evil is not simply a force to which people resign themselves. In a passage that occurs just before the narrator describes Sula's return to the Bottom, the narrator limns the Bottom philosophy. “The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance” (*Sula* 90). Residents of the Bottom see no reason to distinguish between natural and manmade phenomena, between dangers that one might predict and resist and those that are random. The clear-eyed belief that survival *is* triumph is sustaining. If, however, adherents to this creed see no point in seeking solutions, they enjoy identifying scapegoats, a role that Sula fulfills once she arrives. At the very end of the novel, the residents of the Bottom join Shadrack's procession, and for the first time focus their energy on the symbol of their oppression: the New River Road that black men were never hired to build that led to the just excavated tunnel for which their labor would again be denied. When the tunnel collapses on them and Shadrack is left to commemorate the moment by ringing his bell, the futility of resistance seems confirmed.

Held three days before Christmas, Candle Walk is as local a holiday as National Suicide Day, but its ethic is communal rather than solitary. Going from house to house, their way lit with the candles they hold, the residents of Willow Springs offer gifts to each other; many use the occasion to repay debts of kindness. The practice allows people to help those in need without making them objects of charity. The history of Candle Walk is interwoven with that of Willow Springs, but the details of both are fragmentary. Only a folktale and an aphorism connect the holiday to Sapphira Wade, the island's ancestral figure. Her descendants whisper farewells to each other that repeat Sapphira's promise to God that she had only her poor black hands, but she could “Lead on with light.” Egalitarianism is one value implicit in the folktale; spiritual heterodoxy—God shakes hands with “the greatest conjure woman on earth”—is another. The power one has in one's own hands is sufficient not only to provide for one's self, but to inspire others. Sharing is of course a value in the Bottom as well. Mrs. Suggs keeps Eva's three children for a year and the only thing that surprises either woman about the arrangement is that Eva gives Mrs. Suggs' ten dollars when she retrieves her children. But, the precarious existence of the Bottom motivates people to honor their fears, while the free history of Candle Walk encourages people to honor their best impulses.

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As befits a traditionally agrarian society, the custom at Candle Walk is to give gifts people have grown or made—cured meat or potatoes, candies and cookies made of orange and ginger. Those young people most rooted in the ways of Willow Springs like Ambush and Bernice adhere closely to the tradition, respectively carving a rocking chair or tatting lace for a dress. But, many of their peers exchange store bought gifts, much to the chagrin of their elders. Mama Day, who has witnessed many variations in the holiday since her girlhood, is unfazed. Her recollections of the changes illustrate how the figure of Sapphira Wade has gradually been forgotten. Even in Mama Day's girlhood, people referred to the ancestor obliquely in their farewell: "Lead on with light, Great Mother." In John-Paul's recollections of *his* childhood, the ritual was dedicated to Sapphira: "a slave woman who *took* her freedom in 1823" (111). Although the reason for the tradition as been forgotten, the practice continues. What the novel shows across its several representations of Candle Walk is that living traditions continually yield new meanings. When they cease to do so, they die. "'It'll take generations [Mama Day says of Candle Walk] 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 kind 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).

Even among the singular characters of the Bottom, the "magnificent" Eva Peace stands out. Her magnificence inheres in the greatness of her achievement (she keeps her children alive despite the societal odds), the grand scale of her expenditures (she is "creator and sovereign of [an] enormous house"), the splendor of her appearance (her dresses stop at mid calf "so that her one glamorous leg was always in view"), and the arrogance of her ambition (she takes it upon herself to choose death for her son). Her neighbors stand in awe of her; they turn her life into legend. Tales about her lost leg circulate: "Somebody said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for \$10,000—at which Mr. Reed opened his eyes and asked, 'Nigger gal legs goin' for \$10,000 a *piece*?' as though he could understand \$10,000 a *pair*—but for *one*?" (31). Not only in the neighborhood legend but in the novel's exquisitely drawn vignettes of Eva in the outhouse easing her child's pain and years later in his room releasing him from the adult pain of addiction in a baptism of fire, Eva's sacrifices defy comprehension. As Hortense Spillers aptly observes, "Eva behaves as though she were herself the sole instrument of divine inscrutable will" (314).

Least of all do her children, on whose behalf the sacrifices were made, understand them. Hannah, grown and a mother herself, wonders aloud to Eva "Mamma, did you ever love us?" Eva is quick to label this "an evil wonderin' if ever I heard one." In the conversation that follows Eva and Hannah continue to speak past one another:

"Mamma, what you talkin' about?"  
"I'm talkin' about 18 and 95 when I set in that house five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets, you snake-eyed ungrateful hussy. What would I look like leapin' 'round that little old room playin' with youngins with three beets to my name?"

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"I know 'bout them beets, Mamma. You told us that a million times."

"Yeah? Well? Don't that count? Ain't that love? . . . (69)

Eva has repeated her story numerous times, but her daughter has never understood it. Eva cannot explain it, because to her the explanation is self-evident. Her once starving daughter is now bountifully fed. Tellingly, the scene is framed by Hannah's entering her mother's room with "an empty bowl and a peck of Kentucky Wonders." When she gets up to leave, the bowl is full. The sound of the beans snapping provide the scene's background music. The riffing on the word "wonder" adds to its poetry. "Kentucky Wonders" works metaphorically as well as musically. Pole beans, that in the process of growing, wrap themselves around a stalk, are an image of interdependence. Eva is baffled by Hannah's failure to see her own survival as proof of her mother's love. In "Maternal Narratives," Marianne Hirsch identifies a pattern of missed communication in the novel. "Mothers and daughters never quite succeed in addressing each other directly; mothers fail to communicate the stories they wish to tell" (419). When Eva leaps from a second story window in a vain attempt to save Hannah's life, her actions bespeak the fierceness of her love. But it is too late.

Mama Day's larder is always full, as is her sister's. Mama Day chides her great niece for doing nothing "with your grandma's pole beans doubling over to the ground" (149). The young woman her elders call "Baby Girl" has never doubted their love. Mama Day does not assume an intimidating posture. Indeed at eighty-five, she is diminutive and frail enough that she needs her father's cane to lean on as she makes her way through the woods she knows so well. She lives in a trailer. Compared to Abigail, she has a quick temper and a sharp tongue. But Mama Day is feisty, rather than fierce like Eva. Skilled in the domestic arts, she bakes, quilts, and gardens. In each of these arts she excels, but only gradually does it become evident how extraordinary her talents are.

She is a midwife who has delivered generations of babies in Willow Springs and a practitioner of herbal medicine so accomplished that she has the professional respect of the physician from the mainland. "Being a good doctor," the young African American Dr. Smithfield "knew another one when he saw her" (84). Her knowledge of the healing properties of plants is extensive: ground raspberry to tone the insides, choke-cherry bark for pain, foxglove to regulate the heart. She perceives "differences in leaves of trees, barks of trees, roots" (207). The domestic and the medicinal arts are as closely linked as the gardens that she plants and the tonics, poultices and healing teas that she makes up in her kitchen. When she cannot find a cure in her pharmacy, she knows enough psychology to "disguise a little dose of nothing but mother-wit with a lot of hocus-pocus" (97). In *Workings of the Spirit* Houston Baker provides a more elegant explanation of the conjurer's trade when he writes that its secret "is imagination, which can turn almost anything into a freeing mojo, a dynamic 'jack,' or a cunning conjure bag" (99). Readers discern the quality of Mama Day's gifts from the respect her neighbors accord her. The daughter of the seventh son of a seventh son, she has been so attuned to nature as a child that her neighbors called her "a spirit in the woods" (79). Later having found her vocation as midwife, she is recognized for

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“gifted hands” (88). The gift has come at a price. Forced to raise her sister after their grieving mother committed suicide, she becomes “little mama,” when she is still a child. As “Mama Day,” she is the island’s most respected elder.

Her vocation is more midwife than conjurer, but in the latter capacity the character recalls a character from *Sula* that Morrison never brings on stage. The mother of Ajax and the only interesting woman her sensual, foul-mouthed, and irresistible son had ever met in his life is a conjure woman. Indeed, she is an evil conjure woman and the mother of seven sons; Ajax is the eldest. The novel limns her portrait in a paragraph: she is “blessed with seven adoring children whose joy it was to bring her the plants, hair, underclothing, fingernail parings, white hens, blood camphor, pictures, kerosene and footstep dust that she needed, as well as to order Van Van, High John the Conqueror, Little John to Chew, Devil’s Shoe String, Chinese Wash, Mustard Seed and the Nine Herbs from Cincinnati. . . .” With the utmost economy, the novel gestures to the mixture of the mundane and the supernatural, the homemade and the exotic that define the conjurer’s art. Readers may latch on to whatever details seem familiar and use their imaginations to understand the work that the character performs. Additionally, readers are told that this woman “knew about the weather, omens, the living, the dead, dreams and all illnesses and makes a modest living with her skills” (126). The dissonance created by her possession of this profound, if subjugated knowledge and the modest living it affords encapsulates the novel’s political critique. But the character herself makes no further appearance in the text.

Miranda Day is her lineal descendant, and she is frequently on center stage. Yet, the challenges a character like “Mama Day” poses for a novel are serious. On the one hand, the character threatens to turn into an icon of virtue and endurance and thus a bore. On the other hand, the emphasis on her beneficence when coupled with her magical power could render the character incredible. In the main, *Mama Day* avoids these pitfalls. Most of the character’s miracles are explained by her intimate knowledge of her environment and by her psychological insights. For example, she describes the assistance she initially gives Bernice: “The mind is a funny thing, Abigail—and a powerful thing at that. Bernice is going to believe they are what I tell her they are—magic seeds. And the only magic is that what she believes they are, they’re gonna become” (96). Later, of course, Miranda does perform “supernatural” deeds. Two in particular stand out: the ceremony during which Bernice conceives, a ritual that is represented as unrepresentable, and the destruction by lightning of Ruby’s house. By the time these scenes occur, the very qualities that render Miranda unthreatening have led most readers to a willing suspension of disbelief. As to the first pitfall, Miranda’s humor and the testiness of her relationship with her great niece prevent her from turning into a plaster saint. She is no saint at all. The revenge that she takes against Ruby reveals that Miranda can use her power to destroy as well as to create.

Both strong-willed women, both inheritors of Sapphira’s mantle, Miranda and Cocoa/Ophelia have a fractious relationship. Miranda recognizes in Cocoa what she cannot see in herself. She believes that she and Abigail “take after the sons . . . the earth men who formed the line of Days, hard and dark brown. But *the Baby Girl* brings back the great, grand Mother. . . it’s only an ancient mother of pure black that one day spits out this kinda gold” (48). Cocoa/Ophelia can “read between the lines,” but her

perception is limited by the immaturity that her pet names connote. Her elders have shielded her from the work that Miranda does. She knows that her great aunt possesses “second sight,” but beyond that her knowledge of conjure as of her history is limited. Chafing under Mama Day’s protection during a visit to Willow Springs, she calls her “an overbearing and domineering old woman” and protests that she is not a child anymore. At twenty-seven, she is not. Gradually she negotiates a new respect from Miranda, who appreciates in turn Cocoa/Ophelia’s deepening apprehension of their past. Tellingly, over the course of the plot, the young woman earns a degree in history, a goal she seeks because “coming from a place as rich in legend and history as the South,” she is “intrigued by the subject” (126). Mama Day scoffs at the young woman’s naïveté. “Baby Girl did have something lost to her, but she weren’t gonna find it in no schools” (150). Cocoa/Ophelia has not yet learned to read the texts of her own family, inscribed for example in the walking stick that John-Paul has handed down to Miranda and the quilt that Miranda and Abigail send Cocoa and George for a wedding present. But before the novel ends, she learns how to “listen” to texts of a different kind.

History as well as legends of the South inform Naylor’s novel. The history of the Sea Islands suggests alternatives to the dominant stories of segregation—the black bottoms, the Buttermilk bottoms, the black sides of U.S. cities in the South and North—that are the factual counterparts to the setting of *Sula*. Stretching almost four hundred miles from the southern border of North Carolina to the northern border of Florida, the Sea Islands by virtue of their geographical isolation became repositories of African survivals and New World creativity. Johns Island and Hilton Head, St. Helena and Daufuskie, Sapelo and St. Simons are among the islands that for generations were accessible only by sea. Just since the 1930s have many of the islands been connected to the mainland by bridges or causeways. Some, like Daufuskie and Sapelo, remain rural and largely inaccessible. As Twining and Baird point out, that lack of access and the concomitant barriers to outside influences made the islands “a matrix of African American family tradition” (1). Extended families established compounds or communities of kin, and after the Civil War, acquired ownership of their land. Indeed, Jones-Jackson identifies the custom of “heir’s land,” an unwritten contract that allows land, if it must be sold to relatives, to be sold for a charge of only one dollar. The practice in *Mama Day* of willing land to the second generation stems from a similar impulse. In the preface that Charles Joyner contributes to Jones-Jackson’s *When Roots Die*, he observes “for generations folk medicine of both the pharmaceutical and the psychological varieties continued to heal the sick on the Sea Islands, and natural phenomena continued to serve as signs foretelling the future, whether changing weather or impending death” (xii). Naylor’s healer is one with this tradition. Trudier Harris, Valerie Lee, and Lindsey Tucker explore other connections between the historical Sea Island culture and the fictive culture of Willow Springs. Strikingly, even historians like McFeeley acknowledge the difficulty of separating legend from fact. History in places like Sapelo has been preserved in legend. This is a truth that Miranda Day divines for herself.

Even without knowing the history of Willow Springs, Mama Day understands it intuitively, in part because it is so deeply intertwined with the history of her family.

The great granddaughter of Sapphira Wade, Miranda Day has learned the family genealogy from her father. When saving Cocoa/Ophelia's life requires her to learn the older communal history, she uses her heightened power of perception to apprehend it. At the Other Place, the realm of unearthly time and space, she is able to divine the historical knowledge she needs. The written record is inadequate. The ledger she finds in the attic has only fragments of fact. "Water damage done removed the remainder of that line with the yellowish and blackened stains spreading down and taking out most of her others as well" (280). "Line" here gestures both toward Sapphira's name and her legacy. Enough of the damaged bill of sale—reprinted in full in the novel's front matter—is intact to confirm that a "negress" was sold to Bascombe Wade. But only the letters "Sa" remain of her name. Mama Day tries in vain to guess the right name: "Sarah, Sabrina, Sally, Sadie, Sadonna—what?" The inadequacy of the written record is an insuperable obstacle for the rationalist. George has doubted even the existence of the woman sometimes described as the great great grand mother. "Places like this island," he maintains, "were ripe for myths" (218). Mama Day cannot give up. Her mission is to save her great niece. She "falls asleep murmuring the names of women. And in her dreams Miranda finally meets Sapphira" (280).

Even before she does, Mama Day extracts all the meaning she can from the written record. She revises the bill of sale so that it relates something of who Sapphira was: a nurse, who was tender and kind. Along with the land, Sapphira has bequeathed an ethical legacy in which healing, nurturing, and kindness are values to be passed on.<sup>7</sup> Armed with this knowledge, Miranda pursues other fragments of her family history and in so doing she learns how to look past pain, to assuage the hurt that has led her sister Peace and her niece Peace to their graves, and to devise a strategy that will save Cocoa's life.

The dream work that this process requires ("Miranda opens door upon door upon door") offers further evidence of the intertextual connections between *Mama Day* and *Sula*. Mama Day has to revisit the sites of her ancestors' loss. Looking down the well in which her sister has thrown herself after losing a child, Mama Day sees "circles and circles of screaming." But unlike Nel's cry that ends *Sula* ("a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow"), the pain of the past here inspires resolve rather than mourning. Not only does Mama Day resolve to save Cocoa/Ophelia; the lesson that she intuits from her male ancestors—"those men *believed*—in the power of themselves, in what they were feeling"—is embraced by the community of Willow Springs. In sharp contrast to the inhabitants of the Bottom, the characters who dwell in Willow Springs refuse to be defeated. Taking control of their future, the men of Willow Springs band together to rebuild the bridge to the mainland. Despite George's importuning, they insist on building it on their own terms. Figuratively, the bridge the novel builds is, as Tucker asserts, "between the scientific and the intuitive, the rational and non-rational, the secular and the sacred" (182).

As the prologue's repeated invitation to the reader "to listen" suggests, the knowledge of Willow Springs is available to anyone who is willing to make the effort to acquire it. It is significant that the island is separated from the mainland by The Sound. While the noun "sound" is defined as a relatively narrow passage of water between larger bodies of water or between the mainland and an island, it has other

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meanings: 1) the sensation produced by stimulation of the organs of hearing by vibrations transmitted through the air or another medium, 2) auditory effects, and 3) spoken utterances. All of these meanings resonate in the novel.

At many points in *Mama Day*, characters instruct readers in the art of listening. Readers are advised to listen to noises made by wind, water, birds and other denizens of the woods that define the landscape of Willow Springs. Mama Day becomes the model for this kind of listening. "She can still stand so quiet, she becomes part of a tree" (81). She can hear approaching storms. Listening "under the wind," she can hear the movements of history: "the sound of a long wool skirt passing. Then the tread of heavy leather boots . . . And the humming—humming of some lost and ancient song" (118). These sounds compel her to search her memory for the stories her father has told, the stories that have conveyed the history of Willow Springs. At the climatic moment, they prepare her to meet Sapphira. The novel suggests that the ability to hear not only words, but vibrations, is a necessary life skill. George, for example, has become expert in decoding the sounds of his own heart. Sounding is also a necessary interpretive strategy. As a verb "sound" means to measure or try the depth of, or more broadly, to examine or investigate, seek to fathom or ascertain. Readers are invited, then, to "sound" the world of Willow Springs

In order to do so, they must pay close attention to the speech of those characters, who, like the narrator of the prologue, seem to speak barely above a whisper. One is reminded of the comment Naylor made to Morrison regarding the latter's use of language: "Your books just whisper at the reader and you move in, you move in and then you finally hear what's being said, and you say to yourself, 'Oh, my God.'"<sup>8</sup> For example, when Miranda and Cocoa/Ophelia visit the family graveyard, they put moss in their shoes to facilitate their ability to "listen" to the voices of their ancestors who tell Cocoa the stories of two women who are not buried there, Sapphira and Ophelia, the great grandmother for whom she is named. Later when Cocoa/Ophelia returns to the "family plot" with George, she hears the "whispers" in the wind that predict that she is destined to repeat the fate of those two women, who broke men's hearts and were unable thereafter to find peace. Her response is to grow agitated and despondent. But when Mama Day hears the same message, she is determined to intervene, to revise the "family plot"; as a result of her intervention, only the first part of the prophecy comes true. Listening in this novel is not a passive activity.

Indeed, the novel confirms that both George and Ophelia learn to be active listeners. Although George cannot surrender to the ways of Willow Springs in time to save himself, he learns to listen after crossing over, so that his spirit remains on the island and from there carries on the dialogue with Ophelia that structures the text. George has become another of the voices of history which Ophelia has learned to heed. Willow Springs makes those voices and that history tangible in a way that commands attention. Given a "heritage intact and solid enough to be able to walk over the same ground that your grandfather did" counts for something, as George attests. Ophelia, having heard the stories of the past, is able to move past her own pain and the pain of her ancestors. Heir of the Days, both female and male, she will extend the line.

NOTES

1. Valerie Lee's interpretation of "18 & 23" is suggestive: "Whatever happened between Bascombe and Sapphira Wade in 1823 is but an historical springboard for an 18 & 23 epistemology. '18 & 23' is many things: the history of Willow Springs; the way blacks manipulate the system; a type of deep black skin color; a rite of passage, anything the community wants it to be and to mean. . . 'the God-honest truth: it was just our way of saying something.' This floating, unstable and changeable trope certainly qualifies as a type of hieroglyph," [. . . a term that Barbara Christian identifies as] "'a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative'" (138-39).
2. Erikson, Kubitschek, Saunders, Storhoff, and Traub explore Naylor's allusions to and revisions of Shakespearean texts. Awkward, Fowler, Kubitschek and Saunders analyze intertextual connections between Naylor's fiction and texts in the African-American literary tradition.
3. Kubitschek cites *Sula* as a "point of reference" for *Mama Day* before exploring the novel's "expanded appropriation of *Song of Solomon*" (78). In "Aesthetic and Rapport," Barbara Johnson observes that Morrison manages to hold out so strong a promise of "home," precisely because she presents it "as always already lost" (166). De Weever is one of several critics who analyze inversion in *Sula*.
4. Michael Awkward has argued that Morrison's work is for Naylor an "inspiring influence," whose "texts are celebrated even as they are revised, praised for their insights even when those insights are deemed inadequate to describe more contemporary manifestations of Afro-American women's peculiar challenges in a racist and sexist society" (8). Awkward analyzes Naylor's revisions in *The Women of Brewster Place* of Morrison's narrative strategies in *The Bluest Eye* to illustrate his point.
5. Mirrors are a recurrent trope in Naylor's fiction. In the epigraph to *Linden Hills*, Grandma Tilson tells her grandson Lester that to experience real hell he has only to "sell that silver mirror God propped up in your soul." He glosses the meaning of the metaphor as "giving up that part of you that lets you know who you are. . . . So you keep that mirror and when it's crazy *outside*, you look inside and you'll always know exactly where you are and what you are. And you call that peace" (59).
6. Christol makes a complementary point when she writes, "in *Mama Day*, especially, topography and genealogy are the two essential elements that determine the stance of the narrative voice and allow Naylor to reconstruct a parallel black history, to reinvent America by subverting its historical and mythical elements" (348).
7. In a 1996 interview, Naylor described a projected novel in which Sapphira would be the "cornerstone." Set in the early 19th century, the novel would depict the relationship of a Fulani woman, Sapphira, and the Norwegian Bascombe Wade (Felton and Loris 255-56).
8. In "A Conversation," Naylor goes on to cite as an example the line from *Sula*, "All along I thought I was missing Jude." "The impact is then tremendous," Naylor observes. "And I believe writing is at its best when it's done that way" (579).

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