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"Retracing Our Steps": Storytelling, Time, and Traditional Referentiality in *Mama Day* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

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"Retracing Our Steps": Storytelling, Time, and Traditional

Referentiality in *Mama Day* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

(Title)

BY

Christine Ann Roth

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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2000

YEAR

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Abstract

Gloria Naylor and William Faulkner turn to the history and tradition of oral storytelling in their novels. *Mama Day* and *Absalom, Absalom!* especially present the concepts and techniques of the storytelling act. The complexities of the audience-performer dynamic and non-linear time in an oral storytelling event create obstacles for the teller (the writer) and confuse the role of the audience (the readers). Writers create the role of listening audience for the readers, changing the accepted rules of the readers by asking them to become participants. In *Mama Day* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Naylor and Faulkner create connections between audience and performer by anticipating and acting on the needs of the audience, both the readers of the novels and the audiences who are portrayed within the novels. Through their novels, both authors question and probe the world of orality and storytelling. How does it work and what is a literate world's reaction to it?

Naylor's and Faulkner's use and interpretations of oral traditions in their novels evolve from their own interpretations of the world and from which perspective they choose to look at the oral storytelling event. By choosing oral traditions as the basis of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner conveys the complexity of transferring the outside world on to paper. The jumps in time, stream-of-consciousness thinking, and the multiple perspectives create an almost indecipherable story when one tries to put them into words. Faulkner reveals the intricacies in an apparently simple world where people tell stories, and yet the complexity can be contained. Time in *Absalom, Absalom!* can be followed. If the readers can follow the changing perspectives, they can better comprehend the overall story. Faulkner gets so close to the storytelling event, that the readers must remove themselves from the individual words to realize that, despite the

density of the flow of narrators' words, there is order and explanation to the world he has created.

Naylor, on the other hand, presents a novel that apparently has great order. We follow Cocoa and George's relationship from the first time they see each other up through George's death (and beyond). But readers upon their first readings do not know the time frame of the story, if it is ever known. As the readers get farther into the story, they must separate themselves from the order of the "real" world and accept the sometimes allegorical world of Willow Springs. The events of the novel do not become less complicated as one reads the novel again, rather they become more so.

Looking at the two novels together we can see how storytelling is at once simple and complex. Both authors use the juxtaposition of simplicity and complexity in the creation of their novels. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner creates stories of seeming confusion, which in fact, can be solved; while in *Mama Day*, Naylor presents an apparently simple novel, which asks the reader to see more complexity in the stories than is readily apparent.

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WILLOW SPRINGS. Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four. It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies; it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge.

(*Mama Day* 3)

Gloria Naylor begins her third novel, *Mama Day*, by relating the story, or the stories, of the title character's great grandmother, Sapphira Wade. In one person's version, Sapphira is "satin black," while in another's she is "biscuit cream," while in yet another's she is "red as Georgia clay." Each person has her own vision and therefore her own story of Sapphira and her life. But Naylor reminds us that these stories are not about "right or wrong, truth or lies," but they are about what the stories mean to the town of Willow Springs and the part Sapphira Wade plays in the heart and soul of that town. The stories are much more than facts and words being spoken. They are the town itself.

Mama Day is Naylor's third novel. Her first novel, *Women of Brewster Place*, published in 1982, recounted the seven stories of seven women living in a housing complex at Brewster Place, a poor section of an unnamed city, presumably New York City. While this novel represents Naylor's first critical and popular success, Naylor considered this piece of work less a novel than seven short stories (Rowell 185). Her

second novel, *Linden Hills*, written as her Master's thesis and published in 1985, also followed the stories of several different characters, each living in a different section of the middle-class suburb of Linden Hills, which has been mentioned in *Women of Brewster Place*. But not until she wrote her third novel, *Mama Day*, published in 1988, did Naylor feel that she "was writing a novel in, at least, the traditional sense. Beginning, middle, and end" (Conversation 181). *Mama Day*, therefore, marks the beginning of Naylor's creation of her own style of novel. Since 1985 she has written two more novels, *Bailey's Café*, the final book in her original "quartet of novels," published in 1992, and *Men of Brewster Place*, published in 1998; both novels continue to relate the stories of several different characters, some of whom were introduced in the her earlier novels.

Gloria Naylor uses this multi-vocality in her novels to refrain from categorizing any of her black female characters as an archetypal black woman. Naylor says of her first novel, *Mama Day*, "One character couldn't be *the* Black woman in America. So I had seven different women, all in different circumstances, encompassing the complexity of our lives, the richness of our diversity, from skin color on down to religious, political and sexual preferences" (*Ebony* 123). Likewise, Naylor does not try to define places. In *Mama Day*, Willow Springs is an island filled with magic, but Naylor doesn't dismiss the island of Manhattan where Cocoa and George live. In the novel, the two islands act as a balance to one another. Gary Storhoff notes that, "for Naylor, 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). *Mama Day* reinforces this viewpoint at the end of the novel when she immerses herself in the culture of New York City. Each of Naylor's novels asks the reader to see the characters as encompassing more than one person's individual, limited experience. By creating these worlds of differing perspectives, Naylor diminishes the power of the words "right"

and “wrong,” and “truth” and “lies.” She brings the reader to a new reality, the island of Willow Springs, where the stories themselves carry more significance than the words that are used to convey them. Therefore, the written name “Sapphira” means less to the island and Mama Day than the spirit and stories that have arisen from her legend.

Naylor draws on a wide range of literary and oral traditions ranging from the *Bible* and Shakespeare, to Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, to African-American storytellers, as well as material and customary traditions such as quilting and voodoo. While Naylor has not directly acknowledged that William Faulkner had a direct influence on her writing, there is still an evident relation between the authors' works. For example, we see the use of multiple narrators in both Naylor's *Mama Day* and in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. In *Mama Day* we have Cocoa, George, and the collective voice of Willow Springs as narrators. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin, Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, and Shreve take the role as narrators. In both novels, the narrators tell the story in pieces, disregarding chronology. Additionally, both novels share similar themes of the strengths and weaknesses of a family in post-reconstruction Southern culture, highlighting issues of race, class, and gender. But perhaps the most apparent similarity, which often encompasses these other parallels, is their means of delivery—storytelling. Both authors use the act of oral storytelling to create unique, separate worlds in their novels.

In the twentieth century, writers have begun using oral storytelling more and more, especially in African American literatures. This practice played a great role earlier in the century in the works of William Faulkner, especially *Absalom, Absalom!*, and in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, as well as in more contemporary works such as Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and of course Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. Writers use storytelling toward their own end, creating unique worlds and environments using the act of storytelling in some form. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston relies on an anthropological

approach, focusing on the storytelling event and the magic of hoodoo as something to be studied. Morrison's *Jazz*, on the other hand, relates the storytelling event to music. These authors bring the storytelling event to their audience in unique ways, each approaching it from a different perspective.

Looking at Faulkner's and Naylor's novels in the context of an oral tradition, we may bring into focus both authors' fascination with the South. Despite the fact that Naylor has never lived in the South, she uses it as a place that encompasses a past with many traditions, including storytelling traditions. Faulkner also used the South to represent a complex past filled with stories and legends. Both authors create a story in which a twentieth-century character is somehow ruled by the actions of a character from the nineteenth century. The restrictions of time are crossed and the stories take on a life of their own, much like stories do in an oral storytelling tradition.

Naylor's and Faulkner's use and interpretations of oral traditions in their novels evolve from their own interpretations of the world and from which perspective they choose to look at the oral storytelling event. By choosing oral traditions as the basis of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner conveys the complexity of transferring the outside world on to paper. The jumps in time, stream-of-consciousness thinking, and the multiple perspectives create an almost indecipherable story when one tries to put them into words. Faulkner reveals the intricacies in an apparently simple world where people tell stories, and yet the complexity can be contained. Time in *Absalom, Absalom!* can be followed. If the readers can follow the changing perspectives, they can better comprehend the overall story. Faulkner gets so close to the storytelling event, that the readers must remove themselves from the individual words to realize that, despite the density of the flow of narrators' words, there is order and explanation to the world he has created.

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To understand how each author approaches these storytelling communities, it is first necessary to comprehend the mechanics behind oral storytelling itself. Only by doing this can we see the obstacles that the literary form must overcome, or try to overcome, when using *oral* narrative as a form in which to *write*.

Oral storytelling is much more than just words being spoken. It is a combination of story, environment, audience roles, performer roles, the passing of time, and social context. These aspects of storytelling come together to create the storytelling event. Robert Georges writes that "no single aspect of the storytelling event can be regarded universally as primary or dominant, and no one aspect can be studied without considering its interrelationships with the other aspects taken as a whole" (317). A storytelling event emerges through the exchange between audience and performer. Performers tell a story, often taken from their own lives, and choose what they will divulge by their desired reaction from the audience. They must know their audience in order to be effective storytellers and to achieve this desired reaction. By knowing their audience, they also know what stories they prefer and what their physical reactions signify. If they can tell that the audience is becoming bored, they may change the direction of the storyline or perhaps end the story altogether. If they can see that the audience enjoys a particular character more than another, performers may emphasize that character's role in the story. They must make quick decisions on the information

that the audience gives them. Therefore, the more performers know about their audience, the more likely they will be able to react effectively to the audiences' feedback.

Most storytelling events are created within a society or community in which people share the same values and ideas, so the performer will often know the audience well enough to acquire the means for effective communication. In a community storytelling environment, the audience members will often express their opinions, likes, and dislikes during the performance itself, thereby becoming a part of the overall storytelling event. Interruptions by the audience may arise when a well-known story is being told and something in the story has been omitted, or the audience may wish to give its opinion on the believability of the story or compliment or disparage the storyteller himself. Whatever the audiences' reasons for interrupting, the interruptions themselves become a part of the story. One must remember that the audience members will most likely have heard a version of the story being told. They will often know the outcome of the story before the storyteller has even begun. No two storytelling events can be exactly the same because the connection between the audience and the performer is constantly changing.

The roles that the audience members and performers play differ from the roles that they play in reality. The audience and performer must choose their roles as story listener and storyteller. The social roles that a person plays in "real" life can be altered during the storytelling experience. Storytellers can gain power through their performance, while the story listeners surrender their power to the storytellers. The more involved the listeners become within the story, the more power the storytellers have. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the storytellers is to wield this power over the listeners, even if their social identities in reality do not grant them power over those who play the role of listeners.

Storytelling itself has the power to withstand an ever-changing environment and ever-changing performers. Oral narratives do not simply display one version of a story, but rather encompass different times and traditions, and therefore different interpretations. Often fairy tales begin by setting the story far far away and a time long ago. By not specifying a date and time, storytellers keep the story accessible to everyone and yet keep the story at a distance, no matter when or where it is told. This kind of beginning also creates an air of mystery. The elusiveness of time and place becomes apparent, creating a new and intangible world for the audience. The storyteller then has the freedom to create a world in which rules can change from those by which the audience lives.

One of the rules most often broken in storytelling is chronology. Storytellers rarely tell their stories from the chronological beginning to the end. Richard Bauman states that, “temporal structures may be displaced (as in flashbacks, or beginning *in medias res*), the point of view and voice through which the event is reported may be managed in ways impossible in the real world (the narrative may be presented through the voice of an omniscient observer, or the eyes of a horse), and so on” (5). By disrupting the world’s accepted rules of time and place, storytellers invent stories that they could not otherwise tell. This technique relies on the audience’s willingness to welcome distorted points of view and perhaps strange gaps in time and place.

A storytelling audience is often search for what John Miles Foley calls the “immanent story” (Immanent 12). Oral audiences often would listen to the same story repeatedly. The immanent story encompasses all versions. Every time a story is repeated, it is done so in a different way and from a different angle. No two storytelling events are exactly the same. The audience will always be different, coming to the story from a different viewpoint, as will the tellers. The narrators’ ability to choose many different points of view and recount the story from many different places in time makes

the overall story more complete. With each version told, the story comes closer and closer to immanency, but perhaps never actually reaching it.

But is it possible to bring this flexible world of oral storytelling and immanency into the fixed world of literature? How can a writer effectively relate a story to his audience when we know the importance of direct communication between storyteller and story listener? Walter Ong writes that, “a distinctive feature of the textual utterance as against oral utterance is that its author cannot absolutely predict or often even discover who all will continue the discourse he or she has started” (Tradition 149). One of the most important aspects of storytelling is thus being denied to the writer as performer: knowing his or her audience. Without knowing one’s audience, the “performer” finds it impossible to react to the audience’s needs. The reader, therefore, must be willing to take on a different role than that of story listener:

Readers over the ages have had to learn this game of literacy, how to conform themselves to the projections of the writers they read, or at least how to operate in terms of these projections. They have to know how to play the game of being a member of an audience that “really” does not exist. And they have to adjust when the rules change, even though no rules thus far have ever been published and even though the changes in the unpublished rules are themselves for the most part only implied.

(Audience 61)

Orality in literature confuses the role of the audience—the readers—even more. Writers create the role of listening audience for the readers, changing the accepted rules of the readers by asking them to become participants. Without reaction or participation, oral storytellers will probably not continue their stories for very long. And while writers of stories may not have the power to stop telling the story when the readers have the text in their hands, their desire is to anticipate the audience’s needs and keep the audience

interested enough to participate. In *Mama Day* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Naylor and Faulkner create connections between audience and performer by anticipating and acting on the needs of the audience, both the readers of the novels and the audiences who are portrayed within the novels.

Through their novels, both authors question and probe the world of orality and storytelling. How does it work and what is a literate world's reaction to it? The written word has become as important, if not more important, to our culture than the spoken word. From the print that we encounter daily through the interactive world of the internet; to the newspapers that arrive at homes and business daily, weekly, and monthly; to the volumes of literature that have been written and will be written; we cannot separate our lives from the written word. Therefore, the oral storytelling event cannot be completely severed from literature. Naylor and Faulkner show how the integration of the two forms of storytelling creates a new form in and of itself.

The Reader as Audience

Despite their written forms, *Mama Day* and *Absalom, Absalom!* approach the possibility of orality blending with literature. These authors become interpreters of the oral storytelling event. We can almost imagine Naylor listening in on and transcribing the story of Cocoa and George, as we can imagine Faulkner doing the same with Quentin and the stories of the Sutpens. Perhaps by looking at these authors as if they were transcribers of stories they have heard, we can better understand how they came to the structures of their novels and what they were trying to accomplish.

The most crucial aspect of storytelling may be the audience/performer dynamic. In *Mama Day* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, at least two sets of audiences and performers are presented in both novels. One set consists of the narrator as performer and the reader as audience, while the other set consists of the characters within the novels playing the roles of audience and performers. Let us first look at the dynamic between reader as audience and narrator as performer. Naylor and Faulkner approach this aspect of their storytelling events in distinct ways. In fact, in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, very little, if any, "interaction" between the reader and the narrator takes place; while in Naylor's novel, the narrator actively asks the reader to join the storytelling event by defining their roles as narrator and audience member.

A great skill of oral performers is their ability to seize and maintain the attention of their audiences, creating a world so compelling in the opening moments of their stories that the audience is willing to take the time to listen to the rest of the story and become a part of the world that the storyteller has created. But the performer must still follow certain rules to create an effective beginning. Bruce Rosenberg states, "should a moment of high drama be presented immediately at the outset of any performance, it

would most likely be lost on an audience that is not prepared for it" (Folklore 18). The beginning of a story must entice the audience, but must also inform the audience and prepare them for what follows; performers must build a connection between themselves and their audience in order for the audience to want to participate in the storytelling event.

In Naylor's *Mama Day*, the story begins before the narrator says one word. The reader first encounters a map of Willow Springs. Immediately we can assume that much of the novel will take place on this small island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. The details on the map are sparse, but tell a great deal about the story to come. The audience meets the major players and the major places before any words are spoken, giving readers access to knowledge in the community that Naylor creates. The next piece of information that the author gives the audience is the genealogy of the Day family. All of the men are named after characters in the Bible, and the genealogy alludes to the legend of the seventh son of the seventh son. Each woman's name references either another author's work, such as Miranda (Mama Day) and Ophelia (Cocoa) referring to characters from Shakespeare plays, or spiritual words like Peace, Grace, and Hope. The readers at this point may begin to make these associations to the Bible and to Shakespeare, creating a knowledge base for the story they are about to read. Naylor does not throw them blindly into the story, but allows them to make these associations and perhaps inferences about the characters to come, thereby bringing them into the community of the novel. The readers may ask themselves how the roles of Shakespeare's Miranda and Ophelia relate to Naylor's use of these names in her novel. Gary Storhoff compares Miranda with Prospero, "Shakespeare's Prospero wields his magic to control and subdue the forces of nature, thereby epitomizing his 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every thing that moveth upon the earth' (Genesis 1:28). Naylor's Miranda, however, consistently cooperates with

natural forces” (37). Naylor wants her magic-wielding character, Miranda (Mama Day), to collaborate with nature rather than work against it.

The third piece of information that the reader comes across is the Conditions of Sale for Sapphira to Bascombe Wade. We have briefly met Sapphira in her role as the head of the entire Day family in the genealogical chart. The readers obtain a great deal of information on this page, even more than the narrators and characters in the novel have, and are able to begin to make conclusions about this bill of sale and the map and the chart. Naylor introduces even more information about Sapphira through the voice of the overall narrator or the collective voice of Willow Springs, once the story begins. All of this introductory material maintains an importance to the story as the reader begins the novel. Certainly it can be used as a reference during the reading of the story, but if Naylor simply created it to be referenced while it was read, she could have easily placed it at the end of the novel as a note. Naylor wants her readers to use this material *before* they read the story and continue to use it *while* they read the story, making this material the context of the novel, not a footnote.

This practice of including introductory material dates back many centuries. As Walter Ong notes, “often in Renaissance printed editions a galaxy of prefaces and dedicatory epistles and poems establishes a whole cosmos of discourses which, among other things, signals the reader what roles he is to assume. Sidney’s, Spencer’s, and Milton’s works, for example, are heavily laden with introductory material” (Audience 76). Naylor gives her readers this preparation by the placement of *Mama Day’s* “reference” material. Creating an air of familiarity before the reader begins the novel helps the readers enter the community to which a listening audience would already belong.

So if it is absolutely necessary to prepare the audience (or reader) for the story to come, how does Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* create a storytelling experience? *Mama Day’s* audience-performer connection is strong because of the first narrator’s reception

of the readers into the novel (10), and is strengthened even more by the information she gives to her readers to help them prepare for their roles as active audience participants. Naylor wants to recreate the storytelling experience from the perspective of the audience. She wants the reader to become the imaginary collective audience as she takes the role of performer. Faulkner, on the other hand, seems less interested in recreating the story listener's experience for a literate audience; rather, he tries to put into writing the overall feeling of the entire storytelling experience. As James Matlack notes, "*Absalom, Absalom!* is self-consciously devoted to an analysis of oral narration. It is not so much a book about a story as about storytelling itself" (343). The readers indirectly play the role of audience, as they play the role of performer. We know Quentin's thoughts about the storytelling event throughout the novel. Conversely, in *Mama Day* we only know what George and Cocoa actually say. As eavesdroppers on Quentin's thoughts, we see how he moves from audience to storyteller. Since we do see the stories from Quentin's point of view, we too move from audience to the storyteller's perspective. As audience members, we do not play an active role and nor do we play an active role as performer, but we do see the psychology of both audience and performer. We more directly see the motivations behind the storytellers and audiences as we continuously move between the two. Mary Wilson notes that "the search for the truth which is at the heart of *Absalom* lends itself to a circular motif—a multiple viewpoint retelling of the same basic story in an attempt to work backward from the end results to the motives" (97). Through the actions and reactions of the tellers and listeners in the novel, Faulkner conveys the motivations of his characters. Therefore, the stories of Thomas Sutpen reveal more about the "truth" that lies within his characters that tell and listen to the stories than the "truth" of Thomas Sutpen's life.

A narrator's placing of information often acts as an indication of the narrator's or writer's motivations. Looking at the placement of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s reference

material, we can see that Faulkner presents the reader with a chronology of the stories being told, a genealogy of its characters, and the map of Yoknapatawpha County, but unlike Naylor, he places this information at the end of the novel. Unless the readers look at the end of the novel before they begin to read the story, they will not know of this information until they have already read the entire story. This information, therefore, does not create the same kind of knowledge base that Naylor provides. Faulkner does not seem particularly concerned with whether the reader follows the story the first time through the novel. The original typescript of the novel did not even include the genealogy and the chronology (*Absalom, Absalom!* 311). The map which he included has more information about people and places of Faulkner's other stories and novels than it does of the people and places in *Absalom, Absalom!* In fact, there are only five references to the story in *Absalom, Absalom!* on the map: "Sutpen's Hundred," "Fishing Camp where Wash Jones killed Sutpen," "Church which Thomas Sutpen rode fast to," "Miss Rosa Coldfield's," and "The Compson's." By combining the characters of his many novels on one map, Faulkner asks us to think of all of his novels as part of the same story. Therefore, Faulkner's previous novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, also acts as reference material for the reader. While it is not necessary to read *The Sound and the Fury* to read and enjoy *Absalom, Absalom!*, information such as Quentin's feelings for his sister is available only to readers who have read it, creating an exclusive group of readers who will have more insight into the characters as they open the novel.

Just as Faulkner wants his audience to read or listen to the stories about this fictional south that he has created, he also wants them to try on many roles within the storytelling event itself. When we open the novel, we are barraged by a sentence that is nine and a half lines long. No introductions. No discourse with the audience. Faulkner does not try to mimic performance here. As Bruce Rosenberg confirms in his study of *The Sound and the Fury's* Reverend Shegog, Faulkner knows how to recreate an oral

storyteller's performance (Folklore 170). In his chapter, "The Literate Reading of Orality," Rosenberg compared Shegog's performance style to the styles of actual preachers, and found them to be strikingly similar. So Faulkner's ability to recreate the storytelling performance is not in question. That is simply not what he is trying to accomplish here. The narrator does not invite us into the story because the story has already begun. The stories of both Sutpen and Quentin are in medias res. Richard Forrer notes, "The reader, like Jefferson, first sees Sutpen in mid-career" (27). And as the novel begins, Quentin has already arrived at Rosa Coldfield's home and is in the process of hearing her story. The reader seems to eavesdrop on Quentin's thoughts upon the storytelling event that he is experiencing. Despite the fact that the novel begins in the third person, the reader feels what Quentin feels. The free indirect discourse used here resembles that of a person's thoughts, shifting from one thought or idea to another without any pauses or breaks or filters. We get so much information in that first sentence that we already begin to feel how Quentin must, trapped by a story before we know what has happened. We are not the audience, but we are witnessing someone else's experience as audience.

Faulkner's approach to the audience-performer dynamic may not immediately include the reader as audience, but through his presentation of the relationship, the reader can see how the dynamic works. Richard Bauman notes that, "from the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus laid open to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display" (3). Quentin is not very impressed with Rosa's performance of the stories, so he begins to make the story his own. Quentin's thoughts on the performance and the performance itself begin to meld, much like that of an audience at a live storytelling. Story listeners play as important of a role as the performer by bringing everything they have learned and their own beliefs to the storytelling event. Faulkner

shows in the following passage how Quentin makes the story of Thomas Sutpen his own:

And the voice not ceasing but vanishing into and then out of the long intervals like a stream, a trickle running from patch to patch of dried sand, and the ghost mused with shadowy docility as if it were the voice which he haunted where a more fortunate one would have had a house. Out of quiet thunderclap [Sutpen] would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatter-ran. Immobile, bearded and hand palm-lifted the horseman sat; behind him the wild blacks and the captive architect huddled quietly, carrying in bloodless paradox the shovels and picks and axes of peaceful conquest. Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing...

(4)

The passage begins with Quentin's thoughts on Rosa's performance. To Quentin her voice seems "not ceasing but vanishing into and then out of the long intervals like a stream, a trickle running from patch to patch of dried sand," and yet Quentin is pulled in to the story. He becomes immersed in the story; he even seems to "watch" Sutpen and his slaves. His own interpretation of the story that Rosa tells compels him to create his own version of the story. Throughout this passage we see how the storylistener's

thoughts wander from the reality of the storytelling event to his interpretation of the story itself. Up to this point, the words have not been directly spoken by Rosa, but filtered through the thoughts and feelings of Quentin, showing the reader how the storytelling event works within the mind of the audience.

Richard Forrer notes that “Communication between the narrators is difficult, if only because they use a dense, involuted language which strains and batters as discovering meaning in human actions. The harder these people struggle to communicate with each other, the more isolated they become, miring themselves in a quicksand of sentences” (25). Readers also “strain” to discover the “meaning in human actions” of the characters in the novel. In order to refrain from getting tangled in the language, as the characters within the novel often do, the readers must be able to remove themselves from the entangled words.

On the other hand, when Naylor begins the actual stories in *Mama Day* through the collective voice of Willow Springs, she shows a desire to make the reader an active “listener.” Patricia Lattin notes, “the narrator is openly inviting the narratee to participate in the creation of the text” (459). While the readers cannot talk back to or interrupt Naylor’s writing, we can question everything that is being read. Naylor asks the readers to have their own interpretation of the story of Cocoa and George:

Think about it; ain’t nobody really talking to you. We’re sitting here in Willow Springs, and you’re God-knows-where. It’s August 1999 - ain’t but a slim chance it’s the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own. But you done just heard about the legend of Sapphira Wade, though nobody here breathes her name. You done heard it the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car - you done heard it without a single living soul

really saying a word. Pity though, Reema's boy couldn't listen like you, to Cocoa and George down by them oaks - or he woulda left here with quite a story.

(10)

This passage depicts the sound and structure of an oral storytelling event. The repetition of the "you done just heard about" mimics the formulas of orality; while the words themselves say that we have just "heard" something. Nowhere in the passage can the words "reading" or "writing" be found. For the narrator, listening is much more than what is done with one's ears. By becoming a part of the story, the reader learns to listen. By responding to and questioning the story, and by accepting that most aspects of life cannot be absolutely defined, the reader begins to step into the story. Naylor clearly defines the readers' role as audience by asking us to "listen." Really "listen" to the story that unfolds between Cocoa, George, and the island of Willow Springs. She asks us to "cross over [to Willow Springs] from beyond the bridge"--open our minds to the possibility of the almost mythical world of the island and become a story listener rather than a reader (3). As Ong notes, the modern audience needs to learn to listen, as a Renaissance audience needed to learn to read (Audience 76). Naylor's instructions allow us in to this world of orality.

The narrator acknowledges the fact that a written work is not created and performed within a traditional storytelling environment, but the narrator has also changed the rules. Readers will "listen" to the stories, rather than simply reading and accepting what they read: "The only voice is your own." The story listeners can have great control over the storytelling event if they are willing to take it.

The act of storytelling is often about power or control--control over stories and control over the audience and the audience's perceptions. The storytellers use this power in order to gain some control over their world, whether it is a fictional world they

create or the world in which they live. Robert Georges states that, “as the storytelling event is generated, the social identities of storyteller and story listener become increasingly prominent while the other social identities coincident with these during the storytelling event decrease in relative prominence” (318). No matter what a person’s role is in society, as soon as she takes on the role of storyteller, she immediately gains more control as long as she can keep the audience interested in the story that she tells. Since the ultimate power lies in the hands of the teller, the audience must be willing to surrender some of its control, which may mean thinking about the world in a different way. For instance, if a horse speaks in a story, the audience must be willing to accept that phenomenon and suspend its disbelief for the period of the storytelling event. The audience must be willing to listen, hear, believe, if only for the moment of the storytelling.

The narrator in *Mama Day* grants some control to the readers, telling them that they will be the ones to understand; they will be able to listen, unlike George. When, in fact, the reader may have the same inclination that Reema’s boy has to uncover the mystery of Willow Springs or have George’s inclination to be doubtful of Mama Day’s approach to Cocoa’s sickness. George wants to remove Cocoa from the island in order to get her to a doctor who may be able to save her life, but Mama Day sends him to her chicken coop to find something that she herself cannot completely explain. When George goes to the “other place” to meet Mama Day, he says to himself, “I hated that old woman. And I hated myself even more for the weakness that had taken me into those back woods. A total waste – of time and energy” (296). George believes that if he gives in to Mama Day, he will be weak. George is not able to accept the world of Willow Springs until he is dead. Jocelyn Donlon notes, “George’s ability to hear the living after death is a revision of his own pre-existing belief of isolationism, a lesson that Naylor’s unbelieving readers participate in” (par. 14). As Mama Day asks George to let go of his desire to hold on to the rational and explainable, Naylor asks the reader to join the

Willow Springs community and accept all of the mystery that the island holds. Naylor tells the readers that they will be able to open their minds to the island as both Reema's boy and George could not. By complimenting the reader (or audience), the narrator creates a willing listener, someone who might be willing to believe that people tell stories from the grave, that legends are sometimes true, and that the magic of Mama Day is real. As in oral traditions, Naylor brings the reader closer to the natural world.

While the narrator welcomes the outsider, the reader, into this story, she does not explain the rules of the story's community. Rather, the reader must experience the whole story to understand the possibility of Cocoa and George's talks at the graveyard, much like George must experience Willow Springs. Cocoa does not tell George the "rules" of the island. His maps are useless, and his logical nature rejects the mysteries of the island. Readers, along with George, must look beyond the logical as they approach Willow Springs, and the narrator asks them to do so.

While the reader-narrator connection plays an important role in both novels, we must also consider the audience-performer relationships within the novels. Faulkner designed *Absalom, Absalom!* to highlight these relationships. We have already looked at Faulkner's use of character motivation and perceptions, but he also uses more obvious storytelling techniques such as audience interruptions. Perhaps the character that best demonstrates these acts is Shreve. Quentin has already told Shreve many of the stories he tells in the novel. The story of the South that Quentin presents to him involves Shreve in such a way that he constantly bombards Quentin with questions when in many cases he already knows the answers. The receipt of Mr. Compson's letter regarding Rosa's death especially prompts these questions by Shreve. For a moment, we see Quentin's thoughts again. To Quentin, Shreve's questions start to sound like, "*Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all*" (142). While these questions do not actually come from

Shreve directly, they convey Quentin's fear of them. Quentin doesn't know the answers, and he really doesn't even want to think about the questions. He begins to lose control over the story he tells, because in many ways he doesn't want to tell it. He doesn't want to be associated with the other characters in the story. When Shreve says, "Wait. Wait. You mean that this old gal, this Aunt Rosa," Quentin corrects him by emphasizing that she is just "Miss Rosa" to him. Shreve knows that this is a sensitive subject for Quentin and continues to call her "Aunt" Rosa. Quentin quickly responds again: "Miss Rosa, I tell you" (143). Shreve, as audience, wants to gain control over the storytelling event. His interruptions become one to one and a half page long questions, as Quentin's responses whittle down to "Yes." Shreve, story by story, takes on the role of storyteller, thereby, gaining control over Quentin's story.

While in *Absalom, Absalom!* there are some brief interruptions, questions from the "audiences," in *Mama Day* interruptions take shape as a new version of the story. Looking at the audience-performer relationship within the novel, most, if not all of these instances occur between George and Cocoa. George and Cocoa alternately play the roles of performer and audience. No brief interruptions occur between the two storytellers, however. Rather, their stories seem almost laid out like journal entries, each one carrying on where the other left off, with their own version of the story. This format is in some ways reminiscent of the epistolary novels of Samuel Richardson. The letters written back and forth in Richardson's *Clarissa*, for example, act as an on-going dialogue between the novel's characters, with many different views and perspectives being offered to the reader. Unlike the novels that follow Richardson's, the overall omniscient narrator is not present. Rather, the stories told in the letters tell the overall story, through the eyes of the perhaps unreliable narrators in the novel. Each letter acts as a separate story, and only together do they tell the whole story, creating the differing perspectives that the act of oral storytelling portrays.

By seeing the contrasting versions side by side in the novel, the reader is reminded that there never is but one side to a story. It would be nearly impossible to take one storyteller's side over the other's throughout the entire novel. The reader must understand that both George and Cocoa have rhetorical motivations behind the stories they are telling. Cocoa's last lines to George in the novel are as follows:

Would you believe it -- I'll be forty-seven next year. And I still don't have a photograph of you. It's a lot better this way, because you change as I change. And each time I go back over what happened, there's some new development, some forgotten corner that puts you in a slightly different light. I guess one of the reasons I've been here so much is that I felt if we kept retracing our steps, we'd find out exactly what brought us to this slope near The Sound. But when I see you again, our versions will be different still. All of that would have been too complicated to tell a child. Mama Day was right -- give him the simple truth. And it's the one truth about you that I hold on to. Because what really happened to us, George? You see, that's what I mean -- there are just too many sides to the whole story.

(310-311)

Cocoa recognizes the differences between their stories as well as among the stories told by one person over a period of time. As time and audiences change, so do the motivations of the storyteller. Cocoa originally thought that by going over and over their pasts that some day she may decipher what "really happened to" them, that somehow the truth would reveal itself completely. But the relationship between audience and performer is ever changing. Each time the story *will* be different, because no two storytelling events are ever the same. But how does this concept of the ever-changing

story carry over into literature? Each time an audience listens to or reads a story, they bring something new to it. Since the audience (or reader) plays such an important role in the storytelling event, the story changes over time even though the words may seem fixed on paper. Certain words have different connotations when seen from differing perspectives, and so do certain stories when looked at from different times.

During the fight that occurs between George and Cocoa the night of the party that Mama Day and Abigail throw for them, we can especially see the changing of perspectives throughout the shifting versions of the argument. We first see George's perspective of the argument and then move to Miranda and Abigail's perspective, and we finally see Cocoa's perspective. Each story presented gives us a more detailed view of the immanent or whole story. In George's version of the story little, if no, violence is spoken of. He ends his version of the story by saying, "but you had been married long enough as well to know how to push the right buttons to get me started" (231). He implies that a perhaps more violent argument follows, but we do not get the entire story. Not until we read Abigail and Miranda's version of the story do we understand the intensity of the argument. The narrator says, "The first crash catches her off guard so she jumps a little, the next string of words flying through that door meaning about the same in any language" (232). The argument has evidently turned violent. Eventually we see Cocoa's version of the story. Her version of the argument begins where George's trailed off, allowing us to understand how the argument escalates. While no actual violence takes place within her story, the last sentence of her story is "I swear to you, that vase materialized out of nowhere into my hand..." (235). Gradually the immanent story comes together, by allowing the reader to witness the confrontation from the three perspectives that were present. The readers' perceptions of the overall story, and therefore the readers themselves, change as they are presented with all versions of the story.

As we read Cocoa's account of the story, we already have in mind George's and Mama Day and Abigail's accounts, which helps us understand Cocoa's version but also makes us cautious in completely accepting any one version of the story. The multiplicity of all of the voices combined with the readers' own thoughts creates the whole story. By allowing the readers to see more than one version of the story, Naylor brings us into a world where the only true story can come from multiple voices.

Storytelling and the Transcendence of Time

There isn't any time. In fact I agree pretty much with Bergson's theory of the fluidity of time. There is only the present moment, in which I include both the past and the future, and that is eternity. In my opinion time can be shaped quite a bit by the artist; after all, man is never time's slave.

(Faulkner qtd in
Brooks 252)

By creating worlds in which several generations of stories and voices are revealed, Faulkner produces this eternal present. Ruth Van de Kieft states, “[*Absalom, Absalom!*] reveals not only [Faulkner's] obsession with time, but his battle against the oblivion which threatens all human achievement” (1100). As Faulkner argues, the present time is integrated with both the past and the future; therefore, present, past, and future cannot be removed from each other. The story of Thomas Sutpen is certainly about his race against time to accomplish the “design” that he sets out to construct. This anomaly of time is a central component to the oral storytelling experience. Since oral stories are often passed down from generation to generation, they have the ability to transcend time.

In *Mama Day*, Naylor also creates a world that does not rely on an ordinary concept of time. The people of Willow Springs do not play by the rules that time has imposed outside of their community, “across the bridge.” Before the mid-break in the novel, each narrator remarks on the elusiveness of time in Willow Springs. For example, the collective voice says that, “living in a place like Willow Springs, it's sorta easy to forget about time. Guess 'cause the biggest thing it does is to bring about change and nothing much changes here but the seasons” (160). Five pages later, Cocoa says that “I

don't think it would have mattered if we had come a year before or a year after. You and I would have been basically the same, and time definitely stands still in Willow Springs" (164). Both voices emphasize the cyclical nature of time on the island. Time in Willow Springs is like a story, and each generation has its new storyteller and new audience. The story stays the same, with the same arguments and problems. Only the "seasons" change; each new player in the changing seasons has the right and the ability to make of the story what she will. Each person plays a role regardless of the time she plays it, and only through the participation of all the storytellers can we, the readers, find the complete story.

George's observation of Willow Spring's time is from another perspective: "Time is a funny thing. I was always puzzled with the way a single day could stretch itself out to the point of eternity in your mind, all the while years melted down into the fraction of a second" (158). This statement echoes the storytelling act. In a story, the day is often stretched out while years are passed over with just a few words or even none at all. The stories a teller chooses to tell as well as how much emphasis she puts on them reflects both on her abilities as a storyteller and her motivations.

The nature of the storytelling event relies on the complexities and the development of time. Therefore, the time and timelessness of the stories become a part of the stories themselves. The tellers remove the listeners from "real" time, and ask them to enter the time of the story. Certain parts of the stories must be shortened or omitted because they are not integral to the story as a whole. For example, a story is not likely to include a character's evening of sleeping.

Nicolaisen looks at how time works within the folk narrative tradition. As a storyteller begins to tell her story, a sense of timelessness or "once upon a time" feeling often envelopes the story. No longer is the audience in the time and place of the "real" world. The storyteller must transport the audience to the fictional time and place of the

story in order for the performance to be effective. Once the storyteller removes the audience from its own reality and introduces it to the story's reality, she can manipulate time.

Nicolaisen sees time in the folk narrative as a layering of different kinds of time, each related to one another. He first recognizes the concept of "narration time." Narration time represents the time that it takes to tell and listen to a story. This aspect of time becomes more complex when the narration is a piece of literature because a writer will most often take longer to write a story than an oral storyteller will take to tell it, if only because speaking generally takes less time than writing. Langford notes that Faulkner wrote *Absalom, Absalom!* in approximately ten months (5). Conversely, a reader will most often read the story in much less time than an author takes to write the story, causing the narration time to be off balance. Therefore, for the purpose of this study I would like to define narration time in the novels as the amount of time it would take to read the novel, despite the fact that reading is faster than listening, because once the readers pick up the book and begin to read, they are essentially performing the story, if only for themselves.

The next type of time that Nicolaisen looks at is "narrative time." Narrative time is set in opposition to what Nicolaisen calls "historical" time, or time that can be measured in days and hours. This time begins when the narration time starts. As performers or writers introduce their audiences to the story, they begin the fictional time, the time where animals can speak and time is not always linear. By setting "narrative time" apart from historical time, the authors or storytellers have more authority over time in the novel and how it works because they are not restrained by the limitations of chronological time.

Finally, "recounted time" is part of narrative time and will be most of my focus. Recounted time is all of the time covered within the story whether narrated or not. What the narrators choose to tell, how much they choose to tell, and what narrators choose

not to tell at all in a story are all instrumental in uncovering the narrator's motivations for telling a story. Nicolaisen says that, "both the intentional selection and the relative amplitude of structurally meaningful days are in the long run more likely than any other aspect of narrated time to throw light on the organization of folk-narrative art" (424). How a story is organized represents the authors' or storytellers' own intentions, making their use of time especially important when looking at their approach to the storytelling event.

Absalom, Absalom! and *Mama Day* are loosely structured as frame tales. They both have omniscient narrators who tell a linear story that envelopes many non-linear stories. The frame itself, however, is linear. The frame of *Absalom, Absalom!* takes place over the recounted time of four months, September 1909 to January 1910, while the narrated portion spans only two days. The first day, Mr. Compson and Rosa act as tellers of the Thomas Sutpen story, and Quentin acts as audience member. The second day takes place several months later at Harvard with the story being told by Quentin and with Shreve as audience member/storyteller. Since the recounted time in the frame is relatively brief, it is possible that the narrated time could coincide with the "narration" or reading time of this novel. James Matlack concludes that the total recounted time of the outer frame of the novel is approximately 12 hours (335). It is also possible that a person could read *Absalom, Absalom!* in 12 hours, which creates a similarity and comparison between the novel and the reader's "real" time, thus creating a connection between the reader's world and the world of the story.

Faulkner rarely slows down or accelerates time in the outer frame; rather, the stories within the frame create a momentary suspension of time while opening a door to another recounted time. While we do not know Quentin's and Shreve's every movement in the second half of the novel, we can assume that they are telling or listening to the same story we are reading. As Quentin, Shreve, and the reader become involved in the

story of Sutpen in their roles as audience and storyteller, the outside world seems to vanish. Readers forget about their own surroundings as well as the “outside world” within the novel, Quentin and Shreve’s dorm room. Much like an oral storytelling event, the readers are asked to immerse themselves in the time of the story, to believe in the “once upon a time” of Thomas Sutpen, and distance themselves from their own reality.

However, Faulkner also keeps bringing the reader back to the present of the novel, allowing them to see that despite the seeming suspension of time the internal stories bring to the novel, time nevertheless is passing. At the beginning of Chapter six, Faulkner writes that “there was snow on Shreve’s overcoat sleeve, his ungloved long square hand red and raw with cold, vanishing” (141). Shreve has obviously just come inside from the Massachusetts winter. Quentin and Shreve begin their own versions of the stories of Thomas Sutpen. Then, at the beginning of Chapter seven, Faulkner writes, “there was no snow on Shreve’s arm now, no sleeve on his arm at all now: only the smooth cupid-fleshed forearm and hand coming back into the lamp and taking a pipe from the empty coffee can where he kept them, filling it and lighting it” (176). By bringing the reader back to this “present” time, reminding the readers that they are reading a story about two young men in a dorm room telling stories, Faulkner also emphasizes the internal audience’s and performer’s, Shreve’s and Quentin’s, reactions to the stories they tell and hear. The actions and reactions of storyteller and audience are quite central to the performance as a whole. We not only know Shreve’s interruptions and questions as audience throughout the storytelling, but now we also know the reactions of Shreve and Quentin as they hear and tell the tales.

The time shift in the frame of the story from Quentin’s summer of 1909 to the winter of 1910 must occur to continue the story because he begins to play a role in the internal story. He literally goes from simply being an audience member to becoming a part of the story itself when he takes Rosa to the old Sutpen house. He no longer can

regard the people in the stories as characters in a story, because he has come face to face with them, Henry, Clytie, and Jim Bond. The story's dynamic changes. As we connect to Quentin as his fellow story-listener in the first half of the novel, we also feel that we are coming closer to the people he meets in the second half of the novel. The characters are one step closer to the reader because they are one frame of the story closer.

In Chapter Seven of *Absalom, Absalom!*, there are many layers of time that are being told of Thomas Sutpen's life, and while reading each layer of the story we must also take into account the motivations of the storyteller. At the bottom of page 192, Quentin has just told a version of Sutpen's childhood and then goes on to say that "he went to the West Indies." For a moment, the time of the story moves back to the present, or the narrated time of the frame as Quentin is again described with "his hands lying on the table before him on either side of the book and the letter" (192). Then the story shifts to Quentin's version of the night Sutpen tells his story to Quentin's grandfather in the woods during the search for the architect. Quentin is perplexed by how Sutpen glossed over how he got to the West Indies. Therefore, Quentin spends much time rehearsing the story aloud and voicing his own disbelief of Sutpen's omission:

He went to the West Indies. That's how he said it; not how he managed to find where the West Indies were nor where ships departed from to go there, nor how he got to where the ships were and got in one nor how he like the sea nor about the hardships of a sailor's life and it must have been hardship indeed for him, a boy of fourteen or fifteen who had never seen the ocean before, going to sea in 1823. He just said, 'So I went to the West Indies,' sitting there on the log with Grandfather while the dogs still bayed the tree where they believed the architect was because he

would have to be there--saying it just like that day thirty years later when he sat in Grandfather's office (in his fine clothes now, even though they were a little soiled and worn with three years of war, with money to rattle in his pocket and his beard at its prime too: beard body and intellect at that peak which all the different parts that make a man reach, where can say *I did all that I set out to do and I could stop here if I wanted to and no man to chide me with sloth, not even myself...*

(193)

The story moves quickly from Quentin's reality to the story's reality of two men sitting on a log in the woods to Sutpen's story, or lack there of, of the West Indies. But we can also see a new layering of time, the time thirty years later in Grandfather's office. This later time creates an almost stagnant feel to Sutpen's story. He is still telling the exact same story thirty years later to Grandfather. Despite the fact that he feels he did all that he "set out to do," his life, or his story, stays the same. In the oral storytelling tradition, the stories that one tells and how he tells them, says as much about the performer as it does about the story. Over one's life, as time changes, so should the stories that the teller shares. Sutpen's repetition of the same story, therefore shows the little change that has happened in him over the thirty years that have passed.

This layer of time also accentuates and challenges the frame of the stories, moving the readers back and forth between two recountings of a story that Quentin tells. To take the reader from the woods to Grandfather Compson's office thirty years later, Quentin says that Sutpen told the story in the woods, "saying it just like that day thirty years later when he sat in Grandfather's office" (183). When Quentin narrates the story of Sutpen relating the story to Grandfather Compson, we see the shifting of time. Quentin takes us back to the woods when he says that Sutpen told his Grandfather the story in "that same tone while they sat on the log waiting for the niggers to come back

with the other guests and the whiskey” (194). Sutpen’s narration is framed by these two layers of time that existed thirty years apart and are yet held together by the story of Sutpen’s youth. These frames are clearly defined by Faulkner, but when Sutpen’s story resumes, it is easy for the readers to lose track of which frame they are in. Not until we hear that the “guests began to ride up” (197) or that Sutpen “came in the office” (198) do we know which frame we are in. By creating this parallel frame, Faulkner shows how the layers of time within a story can exist simultaneously.

The frame of *Mama Day* appears to begin and end on the same August day in 1999. The narrative shift of the novel as a whole is from the future in 1999, the collective voice of Willow Springs, looking back to the early to mid-1980’s which include stories of the nineteenth century, and then ending back in 1999 as the stories come to a close. While the chronology shifts as stories are told, the basic story of Cocoa and George is told in chronological order, from the time they first see each other in the restaurant to the time during which they speak to one another without using words in the graveyard of Willow Springs.

As in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the narration, or reading time, and the narrative time are very similar, creating a connection between the time of the story and the “real” time of the reader. This connection is especially important in *Mama Day* where the narrative introduces readers to “once upon a time.” The time and world of Willow Springs is so separate from that of the readers’ world that some connection must be made to the readers’ time in order for the readers to accept the stories before them.

The narrated time spans approximately 180 years. The recounted time, however, focuses primarily on the six years that Cocoa and George have known each other, with the second half of the novel focusing on Cocoa and George’s two-week vacation in Willow Springs.

The outer frame of *Mama Day* cannot be as easily defined as in *Absalom, Absalom!*. We can assume that the beginning and ending of the novel occur on the same day because both times the voice is similar and in both instances is said to happen in August of 1999. But the frame does not continue concretely, as it does in *Absalom, Absalom!*; rather, it must be implied throughout the novel. The collective voice that the readers hear at the beginning and ending of the novel is also heard throughout, but it is adapted to different time periods, depending on its location in the novel. The frame of this novel can be much more easily forgotten in the midst of the stories being told than the frame in *Absalom, Absalom!* because the frame is really nothing more than the stories themselves.

Unlike the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the actions of the narrators in *Mama Day* are never revealed to the readers. In fact, it is difficult to picture Cocoa's and George's actions even on a second reading. How does one picture the living and the dead holding a conversation? Cocoa's and George's stories keep us more in the present frame of the story. And while we can't be certain that their stories are the present time, they are close to being told in the year 1999. The collective voice in the introduction says that, "[Reema's boy] could just watch Cocoa any one of these times when she comes in from Charleston" (10). Cocoa and George tell their stories when Cocoa comes to visit, not necessarily during one visit or one performance. As quoted earlier, Cocoa says, "I guess one of the reasons I've been here so much is that I felt if we kept retracing our steps, we'd find out exactly what brought us to this slope near The Sound. But when I see you again, our versions will be different still" (310-311). Perhaps what we read is a conglomeration from many times Cocoa and George have told their stories, or just that single version in the summer of 1999.

Whichever it is, Cocoa and George still often remind us that a story is being told in the way that they speak to one another. We get pulled back into the outer frame, or

nearer the outer frame, by some of their phrases or comments which evoke the storytelling situation. For example, on page 33 George tells Cocoa to, "go ahead and laugh, you have a perfect right." George and Cocoa tell their stories in the past tense. When he jumps to the present time, as he does in this instance, he brings the reader with him for a brief moment. We also see this momentary glimpse of the "present" time of 1999 when Cocoa and George appear to respond to something the other has just said. Cocoa responds to one of George's stories by saying, "Yes, George, you tried hard" (223). The narrator not only brings us to the outer frame of the novel, but also begin shows us the dynamic between the two storytellers, each playing the role of teller and listener. But it is not only Cocoa and George who stop the suspended time of the story for brief moments. Despite the fact that the Collective Voice of Willow Springs seems to go back in time with the stories that Cocoa and George tell and often seems to play a role similar to that of the traditional narrator in a novel, it still often reminds the reader of invisible outer frame by speaking directly to the reader as she does in the introduction. On page 134 the narrator says, "See, we ain't paid too much attention to the change in Bernice Duvall." The word "see" in the sentence reminds us that this novel is a storytelling event without taking us completely out of the inner frame of the story.

The frame of the story, therefore, becomes buried within the inner stories. By structuring the novel in this way, Naylor emphasizes the importance of the stories over their storytellers. The readers only find out Cocoa's and George's physical appearances by the stories that they tell, while their reactions only come in the form of a story. By virtually eliminating the outer frame throughout the novel, Naylor allows the stories to speak for themselves. At the end of the novel, Cocoa's child by her second marriage asks to know what George looked like, but Cocoa cannot find a picture of him. Mama Day indeed has destroyed them. Her advice to Cocoa is that the "easiest thing to do is

to tell him. And remember, children need the simple truth” (310). Stories tell more about the person than a picture that freezes time. Storytelling is fluid and not easily defined, as is time itself. But what then is Naylor saying about the written word which, much like a picture, is frozen in time? Naylor doesn't appear to be attacking literature itself. Rather, she attacks literature that tries to define itself and make conclusions about the content it holds. *Mama Day* cannot be easily defined. How we read George's death and the power of Sapphira over the island is up to the individual. There is no “right or wrong,” no “truth or lies.” It is a story that must rely on the readers' conclusions to make it a whole, because no clear conclusions can be drawn within the novel.

Towards the end of *Mama Day*, the layering of time within the novel becomes readily apparent. The house at the “other place” represents the shifting of time; therefore, Mama Day goes to the house for the specific reason of remembering the past and bring it in connection with the present and future. The house also represents Cocoa's history: “All that Baby Girl is was made by the people who walked these oak floors, sat and dreamed out on that balcony” (278). Mama Day has flashes of memories of Abigail's and her childhood with her insane mother, and goes on to remember Cocoa's mother and her insanity. But she “stops herself,” and momentarily returns to the present of 1985. She then delves further back into her childhood “when her head didn't reach the top step of the verandah” (278). She remembers the feelings and the laughter of that time, but then questions the validity of her memory. “Was that really said by her mother, or did she just wish it?” (279), the narrator asks. Her memory becomes a mixture of fact and fantasy. She brings something new to her own history. Mama Day needs to know that her mother was not always insane, and by recreating the story in her head, she is better able to deal with her past. Like an oral storyteller, Mama Day caters to her audience, which in this case is herself, perhaps changing the story to satisfy her own needs.

Again Mama Day is brought back to the “present” time of the story. She goes up to the attic and is reminded of her childhood with Abigail again briefly, when she finds the black ledger that contains a past even longer ago. In the ledger she finds the piece of paper that not only mentions the past of 1800’s, but also brings the readers back to something they remember, the Bill of Sale that Naylor placed at the beginning of the novel. By putting that page first, she creates not only a reference for the readers, but also a past for them. The narration time, or reading time, the readers have taken to read the story becomes more apparent. Therefore, we are more able to clearly see the narration time of the reader, the narrative time of Mama Day at the “other place,” and the recounted time of Mama Day’s and Cocoa’s childhood, as well as a vague recounting of Sapphira in the early 1800’s, all in just one page of the novel. The next two sections of the book are from the perspectives of Cocoa and George, creating yet another layer of time, the undetermined layer of time during the telling of their stories. While we cannot be sure when Cocoa’s and George’s stories are being told, we can assume that it is not the same time as the others, thus, creating another layer of time. The overall story in the novel becomes more and more complex as we peel back each layer of time.

This intertwining of time requires the attentive reader to make a greater connection to the story because their narration time—reading time—becomes a part of the novel, thereby making the readers’ thoughts and reactions part of the storytelling event itself. The readers’ time begins to intermingle with the varying times of the stories, with the outer layer of time being that of the reader’s reality, allowing the reader to play a greater role in the storytelling process. In the next section of the novel the collective voice begins, “Miranda opens door upon door upon door. Door upon door upon door” (283). Naylor asks the readers to do the same, each door representing another layer of time. The first door opens from the readers’ realities into the narrative of the story, or the frame of the story, which begins in the year 1999 with the collective voice introducing us

to Willow Springs. The second takes us to the time when Cocoa and George are sharing their stories. The third door takes us from the time period of the late 1970's to 1985, Cocoa and George's courtship, marriage, and George's death. The fourth door takes us to Cocoa's childhood, as well as a door that opens to George's childhood. Then the fifth door opens to Mama Day's and Abigail's childhood, and then the final brings us to Sapphira Wade, who we actually learn much about at the beginning of the novel, thus, making a connection between the outer frame of the story and the inner story of Sapphira.

From the beginning of the novel, we as readers know the legend of Sapphira. But we only know the legend. Through the telling of the three narrators' stories, we get the "immanent" story, all versions of the stories from all times the story was told, even though Sapphira's name is mentioned only once throughout the rest of the novel, and that time comes only in a dream that Mama Day has. The stories of Candlewalk and magic evoke the memory of Sapphira. Although the narrator's within the story don't know Sapphira's name, the traditions of the island continually reflect on the "whole" story of the island.

As in many oral storytelling events, Naylor creates the stories of Sapphira based on a legend, albeit a legend of her own creation. The stories themselves make the legend accessible to the readers, or audience, by imitating a time and world similar to their own reality. The "doors" to the times in the story open slowly at first, moving gradually from one time frame to another, often with a preface such as, "[Mama Day] calls up one spring time" (278). These cues help the readers to "listen" the way the narrator in the introduction asks us to. But soon we must begin to open those doors alone, without any help from the narrator. When Mama Day goes out to remove the nails from the boards that cover the decaying well at the "other place," time begins to

shift more rapidly. Mama Day's thoughts are no longer linear, and the narration follows her stream-of-consciousness thinking:

She wants to run from all that screaming. Echoing shrill and high, piercing her ears. But with her eyes clamped shut, she looks at the sounds. A woman in apricot homespun: Let me go with peace. And a young body falling, falling toward the glint of silver coins in the crystal clear water. A woman in gingham shirtwaist: Let me go with Peace. Circles and circles of screaming. Once, twice, three times peace was lost at that well. How was she ever gonna look past this kind of pain?

And then she opens her eyes on her own hands. Hands that look like John-Paul's. Hands that would not let the woman in gingham go with Peace. Before him, other hands that would not let the woman in apricot go with peace. No, *could* not let her go. In all this time, she ain't never really thought about what it musta done to him. Or him either.

(284-85)

All of the times begin to blend into one another. This passage begins with a "screaming" that appears to be a screaming that comes from the many generations to the ears of Mama Day. The sound creates a vision at which she can "look." Through these screams, Mama Day "sees" the woman in the "apricot homespun" (Sapphira) and the woman in the "gingham shirtwaist" (Mama Day's mother), both seemingly searching for the same thing. The "circles and circles of screaming" represent the cyclical and repetitive nature of time. Despite Mama Day's desire to separate herself from this past, the past is so loud and such a part of her life that she cannot remove herself from it. These stories happen over and over again rather than happening once and ending. The three time periods begin to merge, creating one present in which Mama Day, Sapphira

Wade, and Mama Day's mother are all gathered around the well. Later, Mama Day sees Bascombe Wade and her father as somewhat interchangeable. She says that "she never really thought about what it must have done to him. Or him either." It is not possible to know which "him" represents Bascombe, which "him" represents her father, or perhaps even George himself. Time does not separate them because they are in this eternal present.

Naylor and Faulkner both create an eternal present by interconnecting past, present, and future through their use of storytelling. Naylor's approach to time, however, mimics the act of oral storytelling more convincingly than does Faulkner. Faulkner's more rigid use of the frame story creates a less authentic storytelling experience, but gives the reader more insight into the motivations behind the storytelling act.

The Nature of Traditional Referentiality¹

Despite the similarities in their works, Naylor's and Faulkner's methods of storytelling in a literate form create differing effects for the readers because of each author's approach to the narrative. The early twentieth-century modernist novel has the ability to depict the act of storytelling convincingly because of the common objectives shared by the two methods. The non-linear storylines, multiple narrators, and stream-of-consciousness writing all establish a departure from the linear structure and solitary omniscient narrator of the Victorian novels. Cantor writes that in a modernist text, the purpose of a story "is to achieve a breakthrough to a different self, through writing on the part of the author, and through reading on that of the reader" (53). Both the oral storytelling tradition and the modernist novel ask the audience or reader to take a more active role in the storytelling process than does the traditional nineteenth-century novel. Therefore, it is not surprising that Faulkner chose to illustrate the act of storytelling through the early twentieth-century vehicle of the modernist novel.

While the story within the story is about Thomas Sutpen, *Absalom, Absalom!* is not necessarily about his life. Contrary to the narrative techniques of the Victorian novel, the omniscient narrator does not focus on a large portion of Quentin Compson's life, but on just two days. And even then, the narrator's focus is not on a linear storyline, but on many different voices, thoughts, interpretations, combining to tell the stories of Yoknapatawpha County. Only through the eyes of the narrators within the novel do we hear Sutpen's story. While we are often privy to Quentin's thoughts and feelings in the first half of the novel, we don't really see Quentin in a traditionally narrated form until he becomes a part of the story he is telling, as when he comes face to face with Henry

¹ Term coined by Foley in *Immanent Art*, p. 7

Sutpen. The overall narrator of the novel acts as a reporter of feelings, thoughts, and states, rather than assuming the conventional role of storyteller as commentator.

While the modernist novel places more emphasis on the reader's contribution to the reading and understanding of the novel, it also alienates many of its readers through the density of its language that results from this reporting. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner stages many storytelling events, but rarely does one get the feeling that Faulkner is mimicking an actual storytelling event. In fact, as Forrer notes, "the omniscient narrator has traditionally always told a story as though he already knew the characters prior to the act of telling itself. This narrator, however, typically presents the characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* as though he were seeing them for the first time, and he often seeks to learn more about them by imaginatively becoming their way of seeing and experiencing life" (30-31). He seems more concerned with the psychology of what is happening to and around his characters, writing the story as he hears it. Cantor writes that, "The modernist novel is a study in frustration and disappointment. It rarely presents an epiphany, but is an examination of the disappointments of modern life, of the difficulty of achieving ambitions, fulfilling love, and even of communicating, which becomes a frequent theme" (55). Communication between narrator and reader is less important than conveying the "difficulty of" communication to the reader.

An examination of the storytelling process illustrates this difficulty. Not only do we see Rosa's struggle to convey her story to Quentin and his refusal to be a compliant audience, but we also struggle in our attempt to make sense of the changing perspectives throughout the novel. There is little, if no, direct communication from the overall narrator to the reader. Italicizing a passage or putting it in quotation marks denotes a change in perspective, but it is often not clear whether the narrator is speaking, remembering a time when he or she was speaking, or acting as an audience remembering a storytelling event. Chapter 5 in *Absalom, Absalom!* is especially

complex in this respect. The story is obviously Rosa's, but what exactly do the italics mean to the reader? Is it Quentin's memory of Rosa's telling of Bon's murder and Sutpen's return to Yoknapatawpha County, or is she actually in the act of storytelling? The lack of numerous audience interruptions, which occur frequently in other chapters by Quentin and by Shreve, along with the rather eloquent language, suggests that this chapter represents a memory of the storytelling event instead of the storytelling event itself. Not until the end of the chapter do we see any interaction between Quentin and Rosa and the italics are dropped and the quotations are used to denote the dialogue between Quentin and Rosa. As folklorist Elizabeth Fine shows how signs suggest changes in the demeanor and expression in an oral storytelling event, Faulkner uses signs such as changes in italics and quotation marks to note the changes in perspectives (Performance). He almost acts as an anthropologist in the recording of the stories told in *Absalom, Absalom*

Rather than being a recorder of what is happening, Naylor makes reference to the act of the storytelling, thereby preparing the reader for the stories to come, when she writes, "[Reema's boy] coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now. Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you. We're sitting here in Willow Springs, and you're God-knows where" (10). Not only does she impart to her readers that they are about to hear a story, but she in the same instant calls attention to the fact that the novel is not a traditional storytelling event. By exposing the inherent problems of trying to perform the event of storytelling in a literate form, Naylor is actually using a form of traditional referentiality that is used in oral storytelling events. She references the entire tradition of oral storytelling, rather than a specific novel or play.

The use of traditional referentiality in oral storytelling has the ability to create an eternal present. Foley states that traditional referentiality "signals an emergent reality. As keys to what is to happen, each of them marks a prolepsis, a connection from what is

present and explicit to what is immanent and implied” (Homer172). Traditional referentiality often comes in the form of repetition. For example, in the *Iliad*, Achilles is repeatedly referred to with the epithet “swift-footed Achilles.” The word “swift-footed” is used to recall the many stories and associations, with which the audience would certainly be familiar, that come with the mention of Achilles. These associations extend well beyond the attribute of swift-footedness. Through these associations, the storyteller is able to construct a story that transcends time by connecting many stories from the past, not one in particular, with that of the present.

Intertextuality plays a role similar to that of traditional referentiality in literature. However, the differences between these two terms become quite prominent when viewed together. References in intertextuality are more specific, connecting a piece of writing directly with another piece of writing. Intertextuality becomes a challenge to the reader to determine to what the author is referring, whereas traditional referentiality deals more with entire traditions and cultural referents and the connection of the writing to these traditions. We are, therefore, meant to think of all possible referents. Intertextuality thus appears more superficial and limited than the traditional referentiality used in oral storytelling.

Both Faulkner and Naylor use intertextuality within their novels. Perhaps the most obvious form of intertextuality is both authors’ tendency to incorporate references to their own works in their novels. In Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* we most notably see the connection between the Compson family in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. While Mr. Compson and Quentin are the only two characters brought over from *The Sound and the Fury*, the entire background of Quentin’s life, as well as his future, is known. By knowing the outcome of Quentin’s life and his feelings for his sister, we can see a connection between the incest and death in *Absalom,*

Absalom! and the incest and death in Quentin's life. Quentin's obsession on the story of Henry, Bon, and Judith becomes more apparent:

But Quentin was not listening, because there was also something which he too could not pass—that door, the running feet on the stairs beyond it almost a continuation of the faint shot, the two women, the negress and the white girl in her underthings (made of flour sacking when there had been flour, of window curtains when not) pausing, looking at the door, the yellowed creamy mass of old intricate satin and lace spread carefully on the bed and then caught swiftly up by the white girl and held before her as the door crashed in and the brother stood there.

(139)

By making allusions to Quentin's own desire for his sister, and therefore his demise at the end of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner plays a game with the readers. If they know the story in *The Sound and the Fury*, then they will better understand Quentin's inability to listen to Rosa's story of Thomas Sutpen's death. He is still thinking about the confrontation between Henry and Bon. This intertextual allusion lends much to the readers' awareness of Quentin's evident struggle in his listening to and retellings of the stories of Yoknapatawpha County.

Naylor's use of intertextual allusions to her other novels is not nearly as important to the psychology of her characters as they are in Faulkner's work. The consequence of her use of intertextuality does not require the readers to remember a specific moment from another novel. Rather, the characters or places in one novel act as connections to her other novels. For example, in *Mama Day*, we find out that the owner of Bailey's Café is the man that found George after he was abandoned as a baby. *Bailey's Café* followed *Mama Day* in Naylor's quartet of novels and George's story acts as prelude to the stories

that take place in *Bailey's Café*, but his story is not one of the stories in *Bailey's Café*.

Unlike Faulkner's novels, Naylor does not concentrate on the psychology of one person over the span of more than one novel. Instead, Naylor uses intertextual allusion in order to expand on or destroy an awareness of place. In her second novel, *Linden Hills*, she destroys the myth of the middle class subdivision that she mentions in her first novel, *Women of Brewster Place*. In *Mama Day*, she destroys the image of Mama Day that she created in her brief mentioning of her and Willow Springs in *Linden Hills*.

Intertextuality in Naylor's novels, then, acts as a way to destroy myths that she creates in earlier novels, but does not produce a significant connection between the lives of characters in one novel to those in another. An off-hand comment in one novel can become the central story in another. Naylor shows how her communities interact with one another, each community claiming significance and uniqueness in the world of her creation. Each story of each unique world and perspective must be told to get to the immanent story. Her allusions to her other works go beyond mere reference. Instead, she alludes to the entire community that she has created within and between all of her novels.

Both authors also make allusions to texts other than their own. The title *Absalom, Absalom!* makes a direct reference to the Old Testament and the story of David's sons, Absalom and Amnon. In this story, Amnon forces his sister, Tamar, to sleep with him. Absalom then kills his brother because of his actions toward their sister. This allusion brings with it the themes of fratricide and incest that are so prevalent in both stories. Even before the readers sit down to read the novel they may know the story of Amnon and Absalom, and that, in turn, will affect their reading of Faulkner's novel. In addition to the readers' knowledge of Quentin's incestual thoughts and suicide, this allusion to the *Bible* creates another layer of which the readers might be aware.

We can also see the allusion to Greek tragedy, in Faulkner's naming of Clytie, or Clytemnestra. This name brings with it the story of Agamemnon and the fall of his family. The readers' past readings and interpretations of the Biblical story of Absalom and Amnon, their readings of *The Sound and the Fury*, as well as their readings of the stories of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, create a past for the readers. In most nineteenth-century novels, the readers are expected to free themselves completely from their own lives and allow the narrator to take them to a place perhaps similar to, but having no connections with, their reality. Conversely, Faulkner's intertextual references ask the readers to rely on their past readings in order to produce a distinct interpretation of the novel.

The audience's past, therefore, becomes yet another layer of time within the storytelling event. The reader is no longer a lone bystander. However, this reference still relies on only one story. In an oral performance, allusions and references are often linked to an entire culture and community. In a community, a certain word or words offer the audience familiarity with a wide range of meanings and significance, in turn, allowing them a connection with the performer of the story and the story itself. This interaction between performer and audience is not possible in literature, so to try to create the present reality between the readers, the author, and the story, Faulkner incorporates intertextuality in the form of modernism.

Naylor's use of intertextual allusions to other writers' works creates a much different experience than does Faulkner's. Perhaps the most obvious intertextual reference is the connection between the story in *Mama Day* and the story in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Naylor takes the basic premise of the two islands, Manhattan and Willow Springs, the different communities and cultures that live on the two islands, and the imminent storm, to develop her own interpretation of *The Tempest*. But unlike Faulkner's use of intertextuality, Naylor seems to be doing more than recalling

one piece of writing by a single writer or teller. Rather, she evokes with her allusion to Shakespeare, the tradition of writers being white males. Shakespeare represents a community separate from Naylor's. So in one sense, in *Mama Day*, she wrote her own interpretation of *The Tempest*, and in another she is trying to rewrite the white male canon. Gary Storhoff notes, "[Naylor's] ambitious narrative project is in essence a declaration of independence—an acknowledgment of the academic canon's value, but also an assertion of her racial and gender difference" (35). By referencing and then rewriting Shakespeare's work, she suggests that it needs to be rewritten, another voice needs to be heard because she is writing for a new audience, one that is not primarily white males.

She seems to be doing the same with Faulkner. By using techniques similar to those that Faulkner uses and then distorting them, or reversing the distortion, she comments and critiques his modernist fiction. Naylor has said, "I don't believe that a text is written in beautiful language for its own sake—lovely language that is in itself enough...I think I have strong narrative drive, and I have a moral point of view" (Rowell 180). In modernist writing, the language itself is often enough. The narrative, or lack thereof, is not as important. Naylor, on the other hand, brings back the narrative. Although she uses non-linear time and multiple characters, her novel still has a narrative line, "beginning, middle, and end."

Henry Louis Gates' work conveys how African American oral traditions are expressed in the "speakerly" text. In his book *The Signifying Monkey* he talks about the "double-voiced" narrative found in many African American works and how the narratives speak to one another between texts. We can see how the storm scene in *Mama Day* intertextually refers to that in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but "speaks" to the storm scene in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. We can also see how

her novels speak to one another by having recurring characters or places show up in her novels.

Naylor draws on the oral storytelling traditions to tell her stories, as she does on Shakespeare, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison. Naylor, therefore, takes the traditions that came before her and reshapes them to her own end. Gates has written a great deal on how African American writers often borrow and redesign the works of other African American writers. He states that, “much of the Afro-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representation of the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called black experience” (Figures 248). Naylor has spoken about her own desire to destroy the myth of this “so-called black experience.” She has said that she changes the class structure of her main characters in each of her novels in order to convey the diversity among African Americans, and the impossibility of conveying the “black experience” from only one perspective (Rowell 186).

The term “signifying monkey” that Gates uses in the title of his book comes from the name of the “trickster figure of Yoruba mythology” (Figures 237). Therefore, there is a strong connection between the act of storytelling and the act of signifying. Gates writes that in one of these trickster tales, “the monkey speaks figuratively, in a symbolic code; the lion interprets or reads literally and suffers the consequences of his folly, which is the reversal of his status as King of the Jungle” (Figures 241). The act of signifying is actually speaking “figuratively” as opposed to literally. If readers open the novel *Mama Day*, and try to read it literally, as George would presumably do, they will have a much more difficult time in their reading of the novel.

In the opening pages of the novel, “18 and 23” acts as a signifier for many different things. Mitchell Kernan says that the African American “concept of *signifying* incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always

sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations” (Qtd in Figures 240). There can be an “18 & 23 summer,” or someone can “18 & 23” someone else, or “18 & 23” could stand for having a baby too early in one’s life. The signifier here cannot be classified because the signified cannot be defined.

Naylor’s use of signifying in her novels is more similar to the oral storytelling practice of traditional referentiality. Whereas Faulkner’s intertextual references lead the reader back to a particular book or story, Naylor’s tend to refer back to a culture. By referencing Shakespeare she references the culture of an all white male literary canon, and tries to change it. By referencing the works of African American authors, she references a community of writers who challenge and interpret each others’ writing. And by referencing folklore, quilting, and voodoo she references the coastal island culture that Willow Springs represents. The quilt that Mama Day and Abigail make for Cocoa and George represents how the generations that came before, the generations that are alive now, and the generations to come will all be a part of the quilt. Naylor speaks to Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use” when she writes that George wants to hang the quilt on the wall, as Dee wants to do in Walker’s story (Anthology 2393), and Cocoa’s response is that “it had been made to be used, and I also knew they hadn’t gone through that kind of labor just for me. I ran my hands along the multicolored rings. They had sewed for *my* grandchildren to be conceived under this quilt” (147). Pieces of the quilt represent the past of the quilt, but it can only become a part of the future generations’ lives if it is used. The quilt signifies how the generations come together and how traditions are more powerful than any one individual even if the past is not necessarily empowering. By including pieces of cloth from all aspects of Cocoa’s past, Linda Wagner-Martin notes, “Mama Day has increased the odds of Ophelia’ own unhappiness. But Mama Day insists on the full experience, on Ophelia receiving all that

her family has to offer, with the purpose in life being to make the best of that offering” (6-7). No part of one’s past can be dismissed, and Mama Day expresses this interconnectedness of past, present, and future through the integrated pieces of cloth within the quilt.

Foley states that a poet uses traditional referentiality to “denote a sign that points not so much to a specific situation, text, or performance, as toward the ambient tradition that serves as the key to an emergent reality” (Homer 171). Naylor’s allusions to non-literary and literary traditions demonstrate this use of traditional referentiality. Despite the constraints of the written word, she is able to create an “emergent reality” by not limiting the things she references.

Conclusion

In their novels, Faulkner and Naylor show a strong connection between the written and spoken word. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, it is Mr. Compson's letter regarding Rosa Coldfield's death that sparks the storytelling between Quentin and Shreve. At the beginning of Chapter Six, Quentin receives the letter and begins to read it. Each chapter that follows makes reference to Quentin sitting "quite still, facing the table, his hands lying on either side of the open text book on which the letter rested" (176). Not until the end of the novel does Quentin finish the second half of the letter. The letter itself seems to frame and to instigate Quentin's version of Sutpen's story, thereby combining the literary with the oral. Naylor's use of introductory material in *Mama Day* immediately conveys this connection. Sapphira's Conditions of Sale, especially, becomes central to the novel as Mama Day goes searching for the name of her great-grandmother, creating a relationship between the written and spoken word. Since both Naylor and Faulkner use literature to tell their stories, these connections within the novels confirm the correlation between written and oral stories, but also seem to admit the limitations of the written word. *Mama Day* especially illustrates this limitation by having Sapphira's name come to Mama Day in a dream rather than her ever finding the complete doctrine. To Mama Day, Sapphira is the soul of Willow Springs.

Despite Faulkner's complex language in *Absalom, Absalom!*, he presents a story that can be defined if analyzed closely. His story has a structure of time that is defined within a frame tale and we can see directly how his intertextual references lend to the stories he creates. However, as Richard Pearce states, "what we see in our experience of *Absalom, Absalom!* is not a clear or even an ambiguous picture of Sutpen of the events of his legend, and while the novel leads us to reconstruct the events and fit the

pieces of the picture puzzle together, to end at this point is to lose sight of the experience as a whole ” (54). Once the “puzzles” of the novel are “solved,” the novel really comes down to the motivations of the storytellers and the audiences, inside and outside the novel, that are revealed through the stories that they tell and listen to.

Mama Day's language and references, on the other hand, can be deceptively simple in order to communicate a more complex and natural world filled with traditions. In *Mama Day*, the stories themselves possess a similarity to the act of signifying. Because of her desire to recover the significance of nature, myth, and magic and that she does allude to signifying through her novel, Gates has stated that Naylor turns to the “resources of naturalism” in her work (Perspectives ix). Her writing appears conversational and straightforward, moving away from Faulkner’s stream-of-consciousness style. The language used and the premise of the storytelling is very believable—a husband and wife telling the stories of their courtship and marriage. But Naylor asks us to believe in something more. She wants us to see this relationship and the world from a different perspective by asking us to believe in story of a dead husband and his living wife holding a conversation. Through the narrative time of storytelling, Naylor accomplishes this feat.

Despite Naylor’s own skepticism toward happy endings, the story of Cocoa and George ends peacefully, perhaps because it is not final. The last three paragraphs of the novel begin, “some things stay the same,” “some things change,” and “some things are yet to be” (312). This last statement gives the reader the feeling of continuation. The stories do not end when the novel does; they “are yet to be.” Cocoa tells George that, “each time I go back over what happened, there’s some new development, some forgotten corner that puts you in a slightly different light” (310). The stories keep changing, allowing Naylor to suggest a conclusion not limited to the ending of the novel.

Faulkner and Naylor come from two very different worlds to tell their stories.

Faulkner, a white, southern male, writing in the early to mid-1900's, uses the storytelling event to mold his very modernist style of writing. The multiple narrators, shifting time frames and stream-of-consciousness writing separate his work from the accepted form of the nineteenth-century novel and yet alienate many of his twentieth-century readers. Ong says of frame stories, "a good narrator can bring it off pretty well when he has to" (Audience 70). Faulkner has done more than "pretty well," but the way time is expressed within a frame story still has its difficulties and is not readily accepted by many audiences, oral or literate. Perhaps this explains why Faulkner has not been read by popular audiences as much as his contemporaries.

Naylor, on the other hand, an African American woman, living in New York, and writing in the last two decades of the twentieth century, detaches her writing from that of the modernist. While we have seen that she does present her novel in a frame story, she does not rely on the frame throughout. Rather, the frame is subtle and not easily defined, making her story more reminiscent of an actual storytelling event. She uses multi-vocality and time shifts, as does Faulkner, to create the atmosphere of a storytelling event, but the time of the frame does not interfere with the stories themselves. The frame is only found within the actual storytelling. By denying the readers a verifiable frame to follow, she lays more of the storytelling responsibility on the readers, thus creating a more authentic storytelling event.

Since Naylor often uses several references to other works in her novels, she has been accused of being derivative, unoriginal. But her combination of so many complex and diverse traditions and pieces of literature challenges those same traditions and those same writings, never entirely qualifying any one tradition or book as the "right" or "wrong" one. As Mama Day says on Abigail, Cocoa, and her last Candle Walk in the novel, "Tradition is fine, but you gotta know when to stop being a fool" (307). Writing and

traditions must continually be challenged by new generations in order for the tradition to withstand time. As each generation changes, new voices must come to the forefront. Naylor has taken on the challenge to embrace and question the world around her through her own writing as Faulkner did before her, only Naylor has new questions ask.

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