Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*: Magical realism as the site of black female agency and empowerment

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Abstract

Magical realism has been commonly identified as a subversive and discursive narrative technique widely used by ethnic-identified and postcolonial authors around the world. Although the origins of magical realist literature are largely associated with Latin America, such tendencies to territorialize this narrative mode have proved to be inadequate due to its wide use across geographical and cultural boundaries. This study aims to demonstrate how African-American author Gloria Naylor aptly employs magical realist narrative technique in her novel *Mama Day* (1989) to affect black female agency and empowerment with which black women can give voice to the silences and gaps in official history writing. The co-existence of two distant narrative discourses in the novel’s very structure, one magical and mythical, the other rational, deconstructs Western systems of knowledge and representation, replacing them with a matrilineal, mythical/magical system of signification, with which black women can rehistoricize and articulate their communal histories by drawing upon myths, legends, orality, folklore, and other non-Western practices.

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Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988) resorts to magical realist narrative techniques to affect black female agency and empowerment.
and empowerment which have always surfaced as absences in official history writing(s) as well as in white-male dominated systems of representation. Through juxtaposition of two distant worldviews, one magical and mythical, and the other realistic, Gloria Naylor creates, both at the narrative and the thematic level a liminal territory where plurality of worlds, views, and spaces, and heterogeneity are valorised. This liminal territory situated between the “real” and the magical dismantles the distinctions between the ‘real’ and the magical, opening up a space where the unrepresentable is represented and the unrepresentable is spoken. Yet, it is very important to note that in doing so magical realism never distances itself from realism. Rather, it entails us, as Brenda Cooper writes, to “see with a third eye” (2004, p.1) into the totalizing systems of knowledge, oppression and representation.

The co-existence of an African-based, matrilineal past, myths, cosmology and cultural practices with the contemporary realities of a black community enables their constant reconstruction, resignification, and transformation in accordance with the exigencies of the present. Mama Day’s setting is the sea-island of Willow Springs, located between the borders of South Carolina and Georgia. Unmapped and uncharted, Willow Springs is in no state, no map, connected to the mainland by a wooden bridge that is rebuilt by the islanders after every big storm:

. . . Willow Springs ain’t in no state. Georgia and South Carolina done tried, though-been trying since right after the Civil War to prove that Willow Springs belong to one or the other of them . . . the only thing connects us to the mainland is a bridge . . . and that even gotta be rebuilt after every big storm. (pp. 4-5)

The mythical, magical aspects of Willow Springs are traced back to the maternal ancestor Sapphira Wade, the founder of Willow Springs, whose story recalls the African American legend of Igbo Landing. In the antebellum days, the Sea Islands off the coast off Georgia and South Carolina were the sites where thousands of slaves imported from Africa were landed. Igbo Landing, according to the legend, was one of those small Sea Islands off the coast of Charleston, where, in 1858, the American slave ship The Wanderer arrived with a cargo of slaves. The moment the slaves realized what was to be their fate in the New World they walked across the ocean back to Africa, back to their native land (Igbo Landing). The slave woman Sapphira Wade, great-grandmother of Mama Day, the matriarch, the shaman, the conjurer of Willow Springs, is said to have killed her master Bascombe Wade, father of her seven children, forced him deed the whole land to his slaves, and returned back to Africa walking across the ocean. All these mythical events are “marked back to the very [mythical] year” 1823 (p.3), which is still well and alive in the mundane realities of Willow Springs people. According to the ancestral myth, the legendary Sapphira Wade did not bear children after her seventh child. She gave all her children the last name Day because she, “like God, ‘rested on the seventh day.’ The birth of the island community is encoded as both historical (the year 1823) and mythical (the seven days/Days of the creation), casting similarly mythical overtones to most of the events in the novel” (Benito, Manzanas & Simal, 2009, p.132).

At this point, it is important to note that the magical reality of the island is embedded not in a static, unchanging, passive, nostalgic past; it is constantly re-articulated and adapted to temporal and social changes. “Memory need not be a passive reflection, a nostalgic longing for things to be as they once were; it can function as a way of knowing and learning from the past . . . ,” writes bell hooks (1990, p.40) in her essay “The Chitlin Circuit.” Even the mythical date 18&23 has been accommodated to the needs and exigencies of the present, which has earned it the status of an active, dynamic system of signification. Although deeply rooted in the events dating back to 1823, the islanders are constantly re-signifying its meaning(s) to have sense of communal identity amid encroaching modern forces. The collective voice of the novel makes it clear from the very beginning that 18&23 “was just [their] way of saying something” (p.7). The year 1823 holds different meanings each time it is invoked. As the narrator says, “the name Sapphira Wade is never breathed out of a single mouth in Willow Springs” but everybody knows that the “manager at the Sheraton Hotel beyond the bridge offer[ed] Winky Browne only twelve dollars for his whole boatload of crawdaddies—‘tried to 18&23 him’” (p.4). The opening lines of Mama Day hints at this non-static, active aspect of a cultural past constantly re-conceptualized in varying contexts: “. . . 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” (p.3).

Even Candle Walk, the ritual held by the islanders since the beginnings of Willow Springs, has gone through change. As Mama Day explains, “time does march on,” yet “there is nothing to worry about.” She is well aware that “things took a little different turn with the young folks having more money and working beyond the bridge,”
yet even their complaints “about no Christmas instead of this ‘old 18&23 night’” (p.111) do not upset Miranda for she has witnessed that Candle Walk has changed slowly with each succeeding generation’s increasing contact with the mainland. Yet, Miranda sees change as healthy rather than as the encroachment of external forces coming from the other side of the bridge. The islanders constantly cross over the bridge to find better jobs or education in the mainland. Yet, they also have the mythical 18&23, “shifted down through the holes of time” (p.3), which has been woven into the cultural texture of the island.

Willow Springs, then, emerges a liminal space, where transculturation and hybridization are brought about by the co-existence of two distant discourses, one magical and mythical, and the other rational. Situated between two distant realities, one represented by the mainland Western rational, empiricist worldview, the other by an African-derived cosmology and mythology, *Mama Day* straddles the border between imaginary and real worlds inasmuch as it creates real communities, though with large doses of legend, magic, and fantasy” (Benito, Manzanas & Simal, 2009, pp. 130-31).

According to the family tree Naylor provides at the beginning of the novel, Mama Day and Abigail are granddaughters of Sapphira Wade’s seventh-son John Paul, with Cocoa, being Abigail’s granddaughter and Mama Day’s grandniece, representing the last member of the matriarchal lineage of the Day family. A direct descendant of the legendary Sapphira Wade, Miranda, whom the islanders call as Mama Day, represents the last of a line of conjurers dating back to the legendary mother Sapphira Wade, “a true conjure woman,” who “could walk through a lighting 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 . . .” (p.3).

Mama Day, I would argue, is too a liminal character, who traverses borders between the mythical, the magical and the real, past and present. A conjurer, a root-worker, a shaman with her healing abilities, Miranda can command natural forces with a single motion of her walking stick; she can foresee the coming of natural disasters. Yet, her supernatural faculties do not derive from a mythical past only: her “timeless experience of Willow Springs,” as Benito, Manzanas and Simal (2009) would define it, “her communion with nature, reflected in her acute sense and perception of all aspects of the movements, sounds and changes in nature are also part of her mysterious, supernatural powers” (p.140) : “A wave over a patch of zinnias and the scarlet petals take flight . . . Winged marigolds follow them into the air . . . A thump of the stick: morning glorias start to sing” (p.152). Miranda’s ability to read the signs and sounds of Willow Springs connects her to the African-derived tradition of divination, which is generally allied with the conjurers and trickster figures. As Benito et al explain (2009), “[t]hese generally double-sided characters act as mediators between this world and the other, between men and gods, and between the rational and the intuitive” (p.143). That’s why the narrator, early in the novel, warns the reader “to listen carefully,” so that we, as readers, won’t be end up like Reema’s boy, or like the assimilated African American professional George from the other side of the bridge, from the mainland.

Reema’s boy returns to Willow Springs from the mainland, from the other side of the bridge, to conduct an ethnographic field work on the island to seek for the true meaning of 18&23. Depending heavily upon white parameters of signification, he concludes that “18&23 wasn’t 18&23 at all-we was really 81&32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map,” and this turning things upside down was a way for the islanders to “assert [their] cultural identity,” in the face of ”hostile social and political parameters” (pp.7, 8). Educated in the values of the white world, “determined to put Willow Springs on the map” (p.7), Reema’s boy fails to comprehend the true meaning of the island’s central myth of 18 and 23 for he tries to decipher its meaning recoursing to Western scientific, rationalist paradigms of signification. In fact, to understand 18 and 23 necessitates to listen to the stories of the islanders, and thereby to understand how the foundational myth of 18&23 pervades all aspects of the islanders’ present conditions, and how that very mythical year has been re-appropriated and then reinscribed within their daily material lives. If Reema’s boy really wanted to discover the true meaning of 18&23, he should have asked the islanders and listened to their stories rather than “running around sticking that machine [tape recorder] in everybody’s face” (p.8):

He coulda asked Cloris about the curve in her spine that come from the planting season when their mule broke its leg, and she took up the reins and kept pulling the plow with her own back. Winky woulda told him about the hot tar that took out the corner of his right eye the summer we had only seven days to rebuild the bridge so the few crops we had left after the storm could be gotten over before rot sat in. Anybody woulda carried him through the fields we had to stop farming back in the ’80s to take outside
jobs-washing cars, carrying groceries, cleaning house-anything-'cause it was leave the land or lose it during the Silent Depression. (p.8)

The real estate “developers” from the mainland, who view Willow Springs as “pic-ture-ness . . . vacation paradise” (p.4), are afflicted with the same white myopic point of view that conceives Willow Springs as a profitable piece of land that can be controlled and ordered according to the mandates of white capitalism and consumerism. As is the case with Reema’s boy and the white “developers,” George’s attempts to understand Willow Springs according to white rational scripts prove futile and elusive. The narrator, the communal voice of Willow Springs, early on warns that such attempts to rationalize and order Willow Springs is inadequate “soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge,” because “[i]t 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 [Willow Springs] . . .” (p.3).

George Andrews, a black orphan raised and educated in a government shelter for boys in the values of the white world, constantly fails to grasp the true nature of Willow Springs. A “white” urban professional sophisticate, George is the epitome of Western rational, empiricist worldview, who relentlessly struggles to impose “an all-encompassing and logically consistent narrative” (Faris, 2004, p. 98) upon the sounds, people, customs, and myths of Willow Springs. Logocentric discourse with its empirical assumptions becomes the yardstick with which George attempts to rationalize Willow Springs’s mythical, magical dynamics.

It is Mama Day’s magic powder inserted into Cocoa’s letter of job application which leads George to secure a job for Cocoa, and ensures their future relationship. Although the job Cocoa has applied for is already taken, Mama Day’s magic powder makes George retrieve “the crumpled letter and envelope” from the trash basket and remember Cocoa as “a movie being played in reverse frame to frame.” Unable to cope with this sudden reversal of events, George says, “I worked especially late that night, never allowing myself to think about a rationale for any of this. There wasn’t any” (pp.54, 56). Upon his arrival on the island with Cocoa on her annual visit home, George faces the greatest challenge to his rational mind-set. George’s failure to locate Willow Springs on the map before their departure for Willow Springs is a hard blow against his intelligible, tangible perception of reality:

It’s hard to know what to expect from a place when you can’t find it on the map. Preparing for Willow Springs upset my normal agenda . . . Where was Willow Springs? Nowhere. At least not on any map I had found. I had even gone out and bought road maps just for South Carolina and Georgia and it was missing from among all those islands dotting the coastline. What country claimed it? Where was the nearest interstate highway, the nearest byroad? (p.17)

Crossing over the bridge, George senses that he “was entering another world” (p.175), a world where, as Cocoa says, “[h]is maps were no good” (p.177). George, who reads and admires Shakespeare, who takes pride in his piping systems, scientific experiments, and individual achievements back in the mainland is not well-equipped, with “his solid grounding in analysing problems of conflict” (p.210), to listen to the sounds of the island. George’s constant failure to “listen” and “hear” stems from his inculcation in Western values, ways of seeing, and knowing the world. Instilled with dominant American values of individualism, George cannot bring himself to understand the dateless tombstones in the Days’ family graveyard which were grouped by generational ties:

The seven brothers and then the seven before them. The sizes of the headstones represented the missing dates-but only in relationship to each other. There was a Peace, who died younger than another Peace and so her stone was staller. There was [Cocoa’s] mother’s stone-Grace- and she obviously died younger than her sister Hope . . . The closeness of all this awed me-people who could be this self-contained. Who had re-defined time? No, totally disregarded it. (p.218)

George, who has been indoctrinated by the mottos “The only voice is your own” and “Only the present matters,” is deeply enmeshed in the cult of American individualism, of the self-made, self-reliant man. That is why he inaccurately interprets the intra-generational communal bonds, family histories as irrelevant to one’s sense of self. The tombstones with the only name “Day” upon them are incongruous with George’s white scripts of signification. Teasing Cocoa, George asks, “But what, as in your case, if a woman married?” Cocoa’s profound response, “You live a Day and you die a Day,” is trivialized by George as “Early women’s lib” (pp. 208, 218). A
stereotypical “white” male, George is capable of understanding the unique history of Willow Springs women only in terms of white feminist activity, from which black women have always been excluded. Melting the diverse stories, struggles and lives black women in the pot of white feminist activism can neither capture Sapphira Wade’s story, 18&23, nor Mama Day’s magical powers.

George’s attitude toward the central myth of Willow Springs, that of Sapphira Wade, is no less condescending than his reading of the family name Day. George is confused whenever his inquiries about Bascombe Wade, who once symbolized the patriarchal order on the island, are answered with Sapphira Wade’s story: “Who exactly was he? And I got the same legend. The unnamed slave woman. The deeds to Willow Springs. [Bascombe Wade’s] vigil by the ocean bluff. Except that you told me that woman had been your grandmother’s great-grandmother” (p.218).

George’s discontent springs from his failure to adapt the history of Willow Springs to white patriarchal order. Unable to see into the significance of Sapphira Wade’s story, the first break in a long line of black female oppression, George cannot go beyond othering Willow Springs as exotic, primitive enough to accommodate such myths. Only official records can make him believe the existence of such woman named Saphira Wade. However, Saphira Wade’s story cannot be contained and rationalized in accounts of male history writing for it is a dynamic, ever-evolving story, rearticulated with the changing times and conditions of Willow Springs. Nevertheless, George arms himself with his “scientific,” rational tools to seek for the “reality” behind what he perceives as sheer “myth”: “The whole thing was so intriguing. I wondered if that woman had lived at all. Places like this island were ripe for myths, but if she had really existed, there must be some record. Maybe in Bascombe Wade’s papers: deeds of sale for his slaves. Where had his home been on this island? Did he have a family? Who erected his tombstone? (p.218, emphases added).

As is the case with white official accounts of slavery in which black women have always been an absence, George, like a white historian, wants to erase Saphira Wade, and to replace her story with the white master’s story, namely that of Bascombe Wade. George’s desire to pigeonhole Saphira Wade into the master’s texts reaches to the point of romanticizing master-slave relationship: “Had he built it (the house) so he could come out here (the other place)? Sit on that verandah and watch her pruning roses that grew as large as my fist, snipping springs of mint for his tea?” (p.225). George’s most demeaning understanding of Saphira Wade is materialized in the racist-sexist stereotype of the bad black woman, the ungrateful, un-trustworthy, dangerous image of the slave woman, who struck back at his “well-meaning” master: “Just look at that poor slob buried there—he gave her a whole island, and she still cut out on him” (p.247). Even George experiences “the workings” of Saphira Wade during the hurricane, he just dismisses her as a woman who “has no name,” and mocks the islanders who have been praying to be spared from “what could only be the workings of Woman. And She has no name” (p.251).

When George Andrews’s “scientific” formulas, his early experiments with a nuclear steam generator cannot rationalize the awesome powers of “the winds coming from the corners of [the] house,” he inappropriately interprets the hell-like storm as God’s workings (p. 252). Having cast God in place of Saphira Wade, George now imagines the aftermath of the insurmountable storm in the shape of a Victorian novel: “I expected the sun to be shining, thought really that we deserved to have it shine after a night like that. Wasn’t that the way in those Victorian novels? A wild tempest, and then the calm of a gorgeous sunrise. Well, we were hardly going according to the script” (p.256).

Continuing the same line of thought, George feels utterly disoriented when Cocoa suddenly becomes fatally sick as a result of Ruby’s black magic. Assuming the role of the traditional, heroic white male, George makes up futile schemes to save Cocoa. As an engineer, George plans to save Cocoa as a matter of priorities: “I knew what I was going to do. It was an issue of priorities. I am getting up at daybreak, I thought, and I am going to repair that boat. I’m going to put the oars into the oarlocks and begin to row across The Sound. That much I can do for her” (p.282). Now that the bridge has been destroyed by the storm, there remains nothing to connect Willow Springs to the mainland. George’s offer for voluntary assistance in the re-building of the bridge cannot go beyond his scientific, rational schemes: “. . . I could calculate it for them, making a diagram, to ensure them that the boards wouldn’t gap. But no, that wasn’t the way things were done here” (p.263). When George’s “rational” endeavours to speed up the construction of the bridge fail, he comes up with another scenario to save Cocoa: to repair a leaking boat, row across the Sound and fetch a good doctor for Cocoa.

George’s failure to capture the complexity of the magical, the historical, the cultural, and the mythical make-up of Willow Springs reveals itself once again when Mama Day conjures double lighting on Ruby’s, causing it to...
explode. This time George’s logical line of analysis concludes that “it was highly improbable that it would happen naturally” because double-lighting could only be realized in a specific scientific experiment (p.274). George’s electrons, electrical charges, short circuits will not suffice to comprehend the truth and the motive lying beneath this “supernatural” phenomenon.

Being “the last of the womenfolk come into the Days,” Cocoa’s survival is paramount to the active reconstruction and rehistoricizing of black women’s history and cultural memory through storytelling, quilting, root-working, the Candle Walk and other popular fashions. Cocoa is the medium for the transmission and continuity of a cultural memory having its roots in the Other place, in 18&23, and in the matriarch Sapphira Wade. And her survival cannot be assured by George’s Western-based schemes. To save Cocoa George must follow Mama Day’s inscrutable ways, to which he furiously opposes. When Doctor Buzzard advises George to go and see Mama Day in the Other place, George’s response resonates with the very American myth of the self-made man. Confident that his self-reliant individualism can overcome any obstacle coming in his way, George says, “We’re going to be fine. I believe in myself” (p.292). In reply, Dr. Buzzard says to George,

That’s where folks start boy—not where they finish up. Yes, I said boy. ’cause a man would have grown enough to know that he ain’t be gotta afraid to admit there’s some things he just can’t do alone. Ain’t nobody asking you to believe in what Ruby done to Cocoa—but can you, at least, believe that you ain’t the only one who’d give their life to help her? Can you believe that, George? (p.292)

George cannot “hold on to what [is] real” any longer (p.291); what he has to do is to step out of his male, Western, individualistic notions of self and step into the matrilineal, magical, mythical world of Willow Springs. When Miranda tells George that he will go through a ritual quite different from his heroic quests marked by Western rationality, romanticism, and individualism. Miranda’s schemes hit George as nothing but mere “mumbo-jumbo”:

I can’t believe you’re saying this?
It’s the only one I got.
Then I’ll find my own.
I pray to God you don’t.
And I came to you for help-
And I’m giving it to you.
All that walking for this-this mumbo-jumbo? (p.295)

Although the ritual Mama Day fashions for George never fits Western conventional scripts of heroic quest which largely surface in American movies, he is finally compelled to follow Miranda’ “mumbo-jumbo.” Miranda gives George Bascombe Wade’s papers for the purchase of Sapphira Wade and John Paul’s (his father’s) walking stick, then sends him to her chicken nest to “search good in the back of her nest, and come straight back . . . with whatever [h]e find[s]” (p.295). Ultimately, what George embarks upon is a rite of passage, from which, Mama Day hopes, he will eventually emerge leaving behind his Western, male, rational, individualistic cultural luggage, and thereby entering into the female, communal, mythical order of Willow Springs. Mama Day’s chicken coop, which has symbolized female fertility and power throughout the narrative, becomes the site where George’s intense male individualism and rationalism are put to test. What Miranda expects him to do is to leave back in the coop the ledger and the cane, both of which are symbols of patriarchal order, and come out of it with empty hands. Nevertheless, Mama Day’s walking stick, “a thing of wonder” in Mama Day’s hands, becomes a phallic instrument in the hands of George, who kills the hen (read the feminine). Unable to enter the matrilineal, supernatural order of Willow Springs, George dies of a heart attack. His death symbolizes the devalidation of his Western worldview in the face of an African-derived matriarchal community where magic and myth become the outlets for female agency, empowerment.

To conclude, magical realism in Gloria Naylor’s novel becomes the narrative tool with which Gloria Naylor asserts black female voice which has always been an absence in Anglo-American accounts of history as well as in black historiography. The magical, the mythical, and the supernatural in the novel effect a black mythical, matrilineal history and cultural lore with which black women can constantly write themselves and their
experiences into the gaps, silences of history. Yet, as noted earlier, regression to an older, static, mythical past is not the route to black female empowerment and agency in *Mama Day*. The mythical, the cultural aspects of the past are re-conceptualized, re-signified with the flow of time, with the ever-changing socio-economic conditions. Storytelling together with other female cultural practices as root-working, quilting, cooking, conjuring ensure the transmission as well as the transformation of a communal past that will sustain and empower black women through temporal and cultural changes. As Cocoa says by the end of the novel, “Measuring your new against old friends, old ways, old places. Knowing that as long as the old survives, you can keep changing as much as you want without the nightmare of waking up to a total stranger” (p.49).

References


