

“WHEN THE INAUDIBLE VOICE OF IT ALL CAME TO HER”:  
THE MAGICAL RECOVERY OF FEMALE ARTICULATION  
AND COMMUNAL EXPRESSION IN HURSTON’S  
*THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*  
AND NAYLOR’S *MAMA DAY*

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council  
of Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

Heather N. Strain, B.A.

San Marcos, Texas  
December 2004

**COPYRIGHT**

by

Heather Noëlle Strain

2004

Dedicated to Jessie Westbrook and Lorene Strain

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

My interest in voice and its magical manifestation was sparked in an American literature class taught by June Hankins in the spring of 2002 covering African American women's fiction. Reading works by Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor moved me to delve further into how women of color uniquely address feminist issues--especially through the mode of magical realism.

I wish to thank my committee members, June Chase Hankins, Priscilla Leder, and Audrey McKinney, for their direction and expertise in this endeavor. Their interest and excitement in my subject matter was inspiring. Thanks also to my parents, Barbara and Darrell Strain, and my boyfriend, Paul Munguía, for their unwavering love and support, my coworkers at the Texas Legislative Council for their flexibility and patience, and my pets, Rocky and Zeus, for bringing such joy to my life. I would especially like to express my gratitude to Charlotte Norris and Margaret Ingram for their invaluable input and advice.

This manuscript was submitted on October 27, 2004.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER	
I. MAGICAL FEMINISM AND ITS ROLE IN THE REALIZATION OF VOICE .....	1
II. THE FEMININE QUEST FOR PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL VOICE .....	20
III. THE MALE CONSORT .....	30
IV. RECOVERING THE MAGICAL, GODDESS-CENTERED CONNECTION .....	47
V. NARRATION: CONJURING QUITE A STORY .....	62
REFERENCES .....	71

## CHAPTER I

### MAGICAL FEMINISM AND ITS ROLE IN THE REALIZATION OF VOICE

In *Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende*, Patricia Hart coins the term “magical feminism” and defines it as “magical realism employed in a femino-centric work, or one that is especially insightful into the status or condition of women in the context described in the work” (29). She poses that some literary scholars, and perhaps even Allende herself, call into question the legitimacy of magical realism in Latin American fiction. Magic within the texts is at risk of being perceived as “the opiate of the oppressed” (32)--a hazy escape from harsh realities rather than an illumination of truth. Citing her “bizarre little fantasies,” one critic contemptuously labels Allende’s novel *The House of Spirits* as “magically unrealistic” (33). Hart, however, describes Allende’s strategic downplaying of the fantastic in an attempt to reach a higher truth for her female characters in *Eva Luna*: the magic remains, but new connotations are created. At its fullest realization, then, magical feminism helps forge “a new brand of fiction--books that show women as they see themselves, not as men see them (whether as impossible ideals

or perhaps negative stereotypes), and books that try to outline new options, and give women new ways of looking at themselves and their problems” (171). True magic, she explains, “comes in the form of human love, storytelling, and tale-telling as a manifestation of love” (171).

Although Hart’s concentration is on Latin American women’s literature, her theories can provide focus for an exploration of the marginalized voices of African American women writers. Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor all use magical elements in their fiction to manipulate and enhance the black female experience: often, silence is transformed into speech and isolation becomes an impetus for love and community. This study examines how magical feminism communicates the crucial female attainment of voice and its culmination in collective resonance throughout Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*.

In Hurston’s novel, Janie’s relationships with nature, men, and other women spark a primal quest for self-revelation--one in which she is magically transformed by the power of love and the ability to pass along her story. The magic of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, though not strictly supernatural, fits easily into Hart’s definition of magical feminism and is also informed by Hurston’s commitment to folklore. In *Mama Day*, Naylor continues Janie’s quest with Cocoa--a woman who seems to already have voice, power, and self-awareness as an assertive single in New York, but whose journey has just begun. Through her relationships

with the pragmatic George and the women of Willow Springs, Cocoa crosses her own bridge to glimpse the forces of magic and love that shape her as a woman with a culturally informed voice. While *Mama Day*'s magic is explicit with images of witchcraft and conjure, it exists only to remind the reader of the true magic that lies within: "Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own" (Naylor, *MD* 10).

To employ Hart's meaning of magical feminism in a study of Hurston and Naylor, a few other definitions are necessary:

- "Feminism" and "female-centered" are best explained in Naylor's own words: "I define feminism as believing in social, economic, and political equality for all human beings. So a man has the same rights as I have. But to be female centered, I think, is to see the world 'gynecologically,' to see the world through the eyes of a woman. Women have to operate differently because of the way the power structure is. I think that feminism is a political term and to be female centered is more of a cultural term, a humanist term" (*Interview* 254). Both Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Naylor's *Mama Day* will be classified as female-centered novels for the purposes of this study. It is also helpful to adopt an expansive definition of the "feminist movement" as a "magicospiritual movement as well as a political movement. It is spiritual because it is addressed to the liberation of the human spirit, to healing our fragmentation, to



becoming whole. It is magical because it changes consciousness, it expands our awareness and gives us a new vision” (Starhawk 196). This “new vision” of transformation and wholeness is also privileged in both works.

- “Voice” is much more than simply an “Utterance or expression (of feeling, etc.)” (“Voice,” def. 1f); it is “To act as the mouthpiece or spokesman of, to express the opinions of (a body of persons)” (“Voice,” def. 6d). Recovering the singular female voice in order to speak toward the universal is the primary focus for Hurston and Naylor.
- “Magical realism,” as defined by Hart, is a practice in which “a fascinating conflict of both terms and literary traditions exists, with the attempt to truthfully mirror the working of a quotidian world vying with an idealistic desire to use literature for change, or to find in it something that transcends the banal and mundane” (19).
- “Magic” is identified specifically as “The use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the natural world, usually involving the use of an occult or secret body of knowledge” (“Magic,” def. 1a) and broadly as “An inexplicable and remarkable influence producing surprising results” (“Magic,” def. 2). *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mama Day* are both invested in the

attainment of power over natural forces and the belief in an “inexplicable and remarkable influence” at work in the lives of their female characters. I favor a more creative definition of magic: “the art of sensing and shaping the subtle, unseen forces that flow through the world, of awakening deeper levels of consciousness beyond the rational” (Starhawk 13). As artists, Hurston and Naylor weave tales of magic in every sense of the word: the supernatural elements and extraordinary influences in their stories signal and, ultimately, shape the awakening within the women in their novels and perhaps within the reader.

- “Conjure” holds a mixture of relevant meanings: “To affect by invocation or incantation” (“Conjure,” def. 7) and “to bring about as by magic or supernatural influence” (“Conjure,” def. 9a). The narration serves as a form of conjure in both novels--a story is invoked, characters and readers alike are drawn to listen, and a transformation occurs “as by magic.”

A review of recent literary theory on recovering female voice and the related role of magic and its transmutations in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Naylor’s *Mama Day* is also essential to this exploration of magical feminism within the novels.

### **Voice: Rejecting the Margins and Claiming the Collective**

In an early feminist essay titled “The Laugh of the Medusa,” French critic Hélène Cixous sheds some light on the dark, yet churning, margins where women have been exiled throughout literary history:

Now women return from afar, from always: from “without,” from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond “culture” [. . .]. They have wandered around in circles, confined to the narrow room in which they’ve been given a deadly brainwashing. You can incarcerate them, slow them down, get away with the old Apartheid routine, but for a time only. As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time they’re taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can’t see anything in the dark, you’re afraid. Don’t move, you might fall. Most of all, don’t go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark. [. . .] We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the bebies--we are black and we are beautiful. (348)

This marginal existence has defined female characters and female writers as the “other,” objectifying and silencing them. Recovering their voices is

a crucial aspect of the female-centered approach: the integrity, resonance, manipulation, or even absence of female articulation is key to realizing the power struggles at work within and without any text.

Although Cixous does not directly address the plight of the minority female writer when she speaks of “Africa” and the “dark,” her conclusions are fitting. If white and privileged women have been plunged irrecoverably into the depths, what of the ones who were black to begin with? For the African American woman writer, the notion of voice carries far more import than it does for their white counterparts. It is what Michael Awkward describes in his book *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women’s Novels* as “the problematic state of Afro-American double consciousness (and its discursive corollary, double voicedness)” (56). Divided in self and speech, African American females must join together to fuse contradictions, reconnect with ancestry and community, and find a voice that speaks from shared experience.

Through their writing, such artists as Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor challenge dividing dichotomies, break barriers, make models, and ultimately recover an honest, whole voice from the deeper, darker continent to which they have been banished as women of color. Hurston seems to answer Cixous’ call to action: Janie ultimately recovers her own voice to speak toward a unified vision of female experience and expression. Janie’s relationships with Nanny and Pheoby serve as models (sometimes flawed) for interpersonal communication and the

transference of cultural and female-infused knowledge. In “Mah Tongue is in Mah Friend’s Mouff: The Rhetoric of Intimacy and Immensity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” John F. Callahan observes, “[. . .] Hurston works out the relationship between her voice and Janie’s on grounds of cooperation and support--that condition of intimacy sought by women” (91). He explains that “Janie discovers early and repeatedly that others expect her life and her voice to conform to their text, however contrary it is to her experience and desires. To be free she must formulate her own scripture and learn to be articulate about it in a voice of her own” (98). But Janie’s individual voice prevails over other models offered in the novel because it is integrally connected to those in her community: “The novel presents Janie’s experience and perspective as realities perhaps not yet realized but aspired to on some submerged level of feeling, thought, and speech by black women, women generally, and--such is Hurston’s imaginative power--by men as well” (97). In “Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Jennifer Jordan substantiates this relationship and offers:

The attempts of black feminists to accommodate the often conflicting imperatives of individual transformation, feminine bonding, and racial communalism have had a powerful effect on the reinterpretation of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. [. . .] It is seen as a quest through which the heroine, Janie Killicks Starks Woods, achieves a sense of

identity as a self-fulfilled woman and, through her own self-realization becomes a leader of women and of her community. (108)

This connection is manifested in the narration of the text. In “Voice and Interiority in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Maria J. Racine notes that Hurston “[. . .] indicates that voice may be personal and yet move into the universal; at the end of the novel, Janie’s voice is heard and recognized by Pheoby, who will share it with her community. At last, there is a unity within Janie that allows her to share with others” (10). Alice Reich observes in her essay “Pheoby’s Hungry Listening” that “[. . .] Janie finds her self and her voice by working through and finally transcending the limiting images of woman as servant, as wife, as romantic lover. She finds herself through relationship with others and she finds her voice, finally, through ‘Pheoby’s hungry listening’” (163). Hurston’s novel begins where it ends, with Janie sharing her story with an intimate friend. In this symbiotic interaction, Awkward finds resolution to the fracture of “double-voicedness” he finds so troubling in African American women’s literature: “[. . .] communication in Black culture is best symbolized by the geometric figure of the circle. The barriers between speaker and audience erected in Western culture do not exist in Afro-American communication. Not only does the black audience listen to the text--it helps to *create it*” (*Inspiring* 49). Hurston expects the same intimacy

and participation from her audience: her narrative encircles the reader, drawing them closer so that they may take her words to heart and perhaps continue Janie's journey on their own terms. Hurston defies the margins to reach out and touch her reader, creating connections that exceed the text.

Trudier Harris explains in her book *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan* that Gloria Naylor "follows Hurston in asserting not only that southern soil is healthy for black people but that the traditions African Americans forged out of that once salted ground provide the resprouted fibers from which the very narrative structuring of *Mama Day* grows" (54). Like Hurston, Naylor takes her story one step further, for "the voice enters into the minds of the readers, finds fertile ground in a commonality of philosophies, characters, activities, and approaches to the world. Readers thus become voluntary extensions of the voice" (58). Harris continues:

The voice also establishes a certain amount of trust from the very beginning by being more humble than arrogant, capable of laughing at itself, recognizing that it records from a world and a way of life where flexibility is the norm, where a variety of ways of seeing and knowing are equally legitimate, and where it is one of the perceivers of reality--though it may

believe itself to be the representative or at least preferable one. (58)

Similarly, in her article “Return to Sender: Correspondence(s) in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*,” Kerry Regan explains, “The narrator of *Mama Day* is clearly communal, and thus introduces the possibility, indeed the necessity, of embracing multiple voices in order to tell the ‘true’ story” (171). She also says:

Crossing into Willow Springs, the reader of *Mama Day* leaves behind simple binaries of good/evil, truth/lie, right/wrong. Ruby’s venom is as necessary to the legend as George’s sacrifice, as Cocoa’s continued life, as Mama Day’s skill at healing. Each point of utterance within this correspondence--this assemblage of communication, this connection--remains essential as well as distinct within the whole discourse of which it forms a part. (179)

The mingling of voices in *Mama Day* beckons the reader inside the narrative--the situations and characters are familiar, even nostalgic. Naylor surpasses societal and textual confines to show that hers is a story of our own making--a work in progress. Every reader can relate on some level to the complexities inherent in relationships and also embrace the potential created with connection. Like Hurston, Naylor breaks the barrier of binary thinking to offer a circular model of communication and narration--one that is interconnected and unending.



### **Magic: Its Transmutations and Transformative Power**

The word magic evokes many connotations, both positive and negative, but there is one thing that connects them all: magic signals creation, manipulation, and change. In the “Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,” Starhawk explains that “To work magic is to weave the unseen forces into form; to soar beyond sight; to explore the uncharted dream realm of the hidden reality; to infuse life with color, motion, and strange scents that intoxicate; to leap beyond imagination into that space between the worlds where fantasy becomes real [. . .]” (109). The mode of magical realism, then, offers new or altered conceptions of reality. In his essay “Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature,” Luis Leal observes, “In magical realism the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts [. . .] the principle thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances” (121-2). He continues, “In magical realism key events have no logical or psychological explanation. The magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality (as the realists did) or to wound it (as the Surrealists did) but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things” (123). In this sense, Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor are magicians in their own rite (write) as they reconstruct realities for all African American women. In “Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real,

Morrison and Allende on Call,” P. Gabrielle Foreman notes, “Magic realism, unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected” (286). Indeed, through linking oral tradition and ancestry with modern female concerns in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mama Day*, both authors provide an alternative realm in which their characters can renegotiate reality. In her essay “Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* as Magic Realism,” Elizabeth T. Hayes observes:

The boundaries traditionally drawn in Cartesian epistemology between the rationally knowable world and the supernatural world are violated, blurred, or ignored so regularly in African American magic realist texts that both the boundaries and the rationalist ideology producing them are interrogated and subverted. Magic realism thus becomes a voice for long-marginalized nonrationalists [. . .]. Further, the magic realist mode allows African American authors to write, to the greatest extent possible, from within the alternative nonrationalist paradigm they are presenting rather than from within the prevailing Cartesian paradigm they are decentering. (178)

This subversion of rigid patriarchal confines validates magic and its fluid transmutations within the works of Hurston and Naylor, paving the

way for fictional and textual transformation.

Much contemporary criticism of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mama Day* tends to focus on the elements of folklore and conjure in the novels as adding to a richer negotiation of the real through shared truths. In "The Confluence of Folklore, Feminism, and Black Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Claire Crabtree notices:

Aspects of performance and folk culture are portrayed by Hurston as an expression of courage and creativity in the face of everyday realities such as poverty and deprivation, as well as catastrophe and imminent death. The book's title suggests that men and women, confronting "dark" unknowns such as loss and death, create or recognize a force behind reality that makes sense out of it. (65)

In "The Role of Myth in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Cyrena Pondrom expands on this idea: "Hurston suggests that god is the name cultures give to that which they cannot understand. To fix one's eyes on god is, by definition, to look into the dark [. . .] we will go on creating stories--myth, folk tale, literature--to confer meaning on the dark areas of our experience" (196). Magical realism offers a mode for Hurston to transcend reality through connections with folk culture. In "Remembering the Sacred Tree: Black Women, Nature and Voodoo in Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,"

Rachel Stein focuses on the female element to reason that “African-derived spirituality affords black women an alternative paradigm through which to recast oppressive social-natural relations [. . .]” (465). The collective realities of women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* require reconciliation in a realm that resists patriarchy--the sphere of magical feminism.

The narratives themselves also become a form of magic; conjuring up a story alters authorial authority and also affects the audience. In her introduction to *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, Marjorie Pryse eloquently explains that Hurston sees “magic as art and fiction as a form of conjuring” (2); furthermore, by writing down folklore and infusing her novels with it, “Zora Neale Hurston took conjuring a great leap forward--and with it, transposed the terms of literary authority for black women writers” (11). Hurston finds power in her pen to permit and privilege the presence of oral tradition in a text written by a woman. Daphne Lamothe affirms in her essay “Vodou Imagery, African American Tradition, and Cultural Transformation in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” that, “In contrast to those critics who read Hurston’s use of folk culture, such as Vodou, as a sign of nostalgia, I view it as her means of comprehending transformation. Within traditional cultural forms lies a structure that encourages and enables dynamic change” (166). Hurston’s informed voodoo vision allows her to discreetly manipulate reality in the novel to

offer an outlook infused with the magic of love, sisterhood, and the possibility for textual revolution. Janie rebels against the text that Nanny has saved for her--the harsh realities of women as mules and mothers--to wrest control of her sexuality, identity, and story. Lamothe continues, "[. . .] Vodou alludes to the heroic and the rebellious; reflects mundane jealousies, desires and hierarchies; illustrates the ravages of slavery on a collective consciousness; and provides a means of self-expression for that same collective" (167). Janie regularly rejects rigid confines and embraces the mutability of nature, perhaps herself embodying a voodoo goddess, to establish her own authority and speak for the disempowered.

While aspects of conjure and voodoo are celebrated in Hurston's work, there is still a "black magic" stigma that follows any alternate belief system (and I include in that the belief that women should have a voice of their own). Take the image of the conjure woman: often used in African American fiction as a trope for creativity and a higher knowledge, she is often dismissed as a representation of voodoo superstition. In her essay "Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," Lindsay Tucker points out, "the conjurer, *especially the conjure woman*, has existed mostly on the margins [. . .] and is therefore barely credible" (173; emphasis added). She continues that, with *Mama Day*, "the brand of realism that had come to define Naylor's work in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills* had suddenly, it

seemed, become contaminated with ingredients of magic and fantasy” (173). Gloria Naylor addresses this problem by infusing mystical elements into the ways women face the everyday--those things that just happen, those things you can’t explain away--perhaps what some might call a woman’s intuition.

It is this shared female experience that several critics see as the most magical. With Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Pondrom observes, “Even at the level of the universal, men and women are different, and the hallmark of the female is vision and creativity--first expressed not through the body but through the imagination” (187). Hayes comments of *Mama Day*, “From lore to foreknowledge to communication with the dead to supernatural connected knowing and intuitive thinking, the nonrational is consistently valorized [. . .]” (183). Given the skepticism of several of Naylor’s male characters, it is appropriate to conclude that it is not simply the nonrational, but the connected community of women in the novel that is valorized. Johnny Lorenz’s article “This Mumbo-Jumbo: Magic and Vocabularies in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*” furthers this assessment:

Gloria Naylor’s use of the fantastic in *Mama Day* functions as part of the novel’s general strategy to take--as well as encourage--an approach to history that is reverent and engaging. The presence of conjure in the book might make a case for conjure’s own extra-textual possibility, but more

importantly it functions as the manifestation of legacy and inheritance and, consequently, as a means by which characters recuperate histories and forge communities (153).

Indeed, Hurston and Naylor both use magical feminism to further their female-centered agenda--it is from their female fantasy that singular voices are recovered to speak for the collective.

Chapter II of this study, "The Feminine Quest for Personal and Communal Voice," will contrast and compare Janie and Cocoa as heroines of the feminine quest for voice and community. Cocoa picks up where Janie left off on the road to self-realization, but neither is alone on her journey: both characters are transformed by the powerful love they share with others. Contrasting this feminine connection, Chapter III, "The Male Consort," will analyze Tea Cake and George as sacrificial figures--outsiders to the communion of women in the novel. They are important in defining the female characters, but both men ultimately resist surrendering to forces they deem beyond their control--with devastating consequences.

Chapter IV, "Recovering the Goddess-Centered Connection," will explore the magical, female connection (indebted to countless cultures that place women at the core of religion and civilization) which both authors use to summon the forces of feminine creativity and expression within patriarchal society. Hurston's folklore-informed writing focuses on the natural world and re-orders it, in a sense, to fit her female-

centered agenda. Naylor's emphasis on myth, memory, and the power of the mind over matter gives rise to a revived female world view as a new century begins. The maternal archetype in both novels will also be examined: from Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Sapphira Wade and Mama Day in Naylor's novel. These women are destructive and creative, dangerous and nurturing. Mother Nature even makes an appearance as an alternate model, culminating in the form of the powerful hurricane in each work that clears the way for rebirth.

Finally, Chapter V, "Narration: Conjuring Quite a Story," will look at narrative form--the author's conjuring of the story itself, the sharing of experience with others, and the text's intimate conversation with the reader. For both Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Naylor's *Mama Day*, much of the magic is in the retelling.



## CHAPTER II

### THE FEMININE QUEST FOR PERSONAL AND COMMUNAL VOICE

From the first page of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston impresses upon her reader a dynamic image of women: "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (1). At least for females, memory, truth, and action are irrecoverably linked; furthermore, fantasy can become reality. In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston describes a recurring dream she has:

And last of all, I would come to a big house. Two women waited there for me. I could not see their faces, but I knew one to be young and one to be old. One of them was arranging some queer-shaped flowers such as I have never seen. When I had come to these women, then I would be at the end of my pilgrimage, but not the end of my life. Then I would know peace and love and what goes with those things, and not before. (42)

This image joins the female quest for voice and its culmination in

collective resonance. In her essay “‘This Infinity of Conscious Pain’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition,” Lorraine Bethel affirms that “Black woman-identification, the basis of Black feminism and Black feminist literary criticism, is most simply the idea of Black women seeking their own identity and defining themselves through bonding on various levels--psychic, intellectual, and emotional, as well as physical--with other Black women” (184). With this integral connection, Hurston’s dream becomes a reality in her novel: Janie’s ability to share her experience with a female friend brings her personal journey to an end, but signals a new beginning for the community of women as a whole.

The very act of writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a magical manifestation of this feminine fantasy. Pryse offers that:

By their combined recognition and mutual naming, based on magic, oral inheritance, and the need to struggle against oppression, black women writers enlarge our conventional assumptions about the nature and function of literary tradition. Focusing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised, black women writers affirm the wholeness and endurance of a vision that, once articulated, can be shared--though its heritage, roots,

survival, and intimate possession belong to black women alone. (5)

With Janie Killicks Starks Woods, Hurston creates a complicated character who is truly transformed by her experiences in life. She leaves home a divided soul, tortured by the stigma of racism and sexism, but she returns from her individual quest a whole person eager to share a new implication for voice. In her essay "Orality and Textuality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Elizabeth Meese describes Janie's journey:

She arrives as a witness to a new epistemology: "you got tuh go there tuh know there." Through Janie's story, Hurston presents an alternative conception of power as it operates in black female discourse [. . .] having gone there, you are changed, and the story you have to tell is a different story. The interpretations of the phallogentric hegemony are called into question rather than assumed. This move wrests the control of meaning from a sexist, racist culture and locates the potential for change within the individual. (69)

Janie learns that her ability to articulate her own story is indeed magical--speaking as a changed woman, she now has the power to change others.

So, just as Hurston ends with Janie rediscovering the fluidity of feminine expression between friends, Naylor begins with Cocoa--a woman with a jaded voice that has been tarnished by self-isolation. She

embarks on a journey to reconnect with the women in her life and learns to tell the truth in a softer, easier voice. Of course, that truth is that no voice, even her own voice, is an island--it is a complex weaving of myth, history, relationships, and bonds. With the female characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mama Day*, Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor have created a complicated chorus of voices that fuse what Susan Meisenholder calls "his side, her side, the inside, and the outside" ("Whole" 10). These texts are about women, black women, black women who choose to follow the voices that make them tremble, the voices they often fear most: a mingling of their own.

### **Janie's Journey from Silence to Speech**

Through Zora Neale Hurston's brilliant fusing of the said and the not-said in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's journey is revealed: eloquently traced through a series of relationships with mothers and men who mean to keep her quiet, she returns from the horizon a new woman. Janie finds a personal and collective voice that testifies to the power and magic of true love. She shares her thoughts, her dreams, her realities, her heartbreak, her story--Janie's voice defies judgment and pleads for understanding. In her article "Tuh de Horizon and Back': The Female Quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Missy Kubitschek notes that Hurston's work "[. . .] does not portray the artist as an individual of superior sensitivity who comes equipped with a portable pedestal, but as a middle-aged, blue-jeaned woman talking with neighbors.

Concentrating on the individual quest which secures the boon, the novel strongly implies communal enjoyment of, and benefit from, the quester's prize" (19). At the end of her voyage, Janie's prize is obviously her singular ability to speak--but there is a magic in her voice that is meant to unsilence a collective consciousness. Her knowing words have the power to bring people together, unlike the empty speeches of Nanny, Logan Killicks, and Joe Starks that mean to divide; Janie reevaluates the meaning of love and becomes the one who speaks "for change and chance" (*TEWWG* 29), after all.

Janie begins her quest for voice from within Nanny's "[. . .] basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight. Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought [. . .] this infinity of conscious pain [. . .]" (*TEWWG* 24). Janie often returns to this gulf of silence in her relationships with men. When silence is forced on Janie, her words become hardened weapons meant to emasculate; when silence is self-imposed, it becomes her retreat to think new thoughts and strengthen her resolve. Hurston writes, "She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (72). Janie arrives at a more meaningful voice, a way to mix her inner thoughts with her outer actions, with the help of Tea Cake's love and understanding. He encourages her to vocalize her thoughts and participate as a member of

the community--not as an outsider, passively watching life from the margins. In the end, Janie returns from the muck after Tea Cake's death to confidently communicate the trials and tribulations she has overcome in her interpersonal relationships. Through imparting her story to her best friend Pheoby, Janie articulates her desire to share what she has learned, but she also thirsts for response and understanding:

“Pheoby, we been kissin’-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah’m talking to you from dat standpoint.”

Time makes everything old, so the kissing, young darkness became a monstropolous old thing while Janie talked. (7)

This image of Janie and Pheoby cloaked in the night represents the depth of silence that Janie emerges from as she speaks. Together, they pierce the darkness to face buried burden and reveal personal triumph. Rachel DuPlessis points out in her essay “Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies” that Janie’s story in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “[. . .] constructs the female hero as narrating her own silences; she is unsilencing them in the specific context of testifying to Pheoby” (107). Janie does more than simply unsilence her own thoughts and feelings--she articulates a crucial call to action, urging her audience to experience things for themselves. With Pheoby’s genuine encouragement and participation, Janie is finally

free to speak her mind and influence others.

Through Janie's experiences in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the narration of the story itself, Hurston weaves a tale of a woman who first only dreams to assert her own voice in a time and culture that does not value that voice and, furthermore, forces women to fear that voice. Through the mode of magical feminism, this dream is transformed into reality: Hurston carefully crafts her story, bewitches her listeners, and, with Janie, creates a communion with women who also aspire to speak and be heard on their own terms.

### **Cocoa's Quest for Communication**

Gloria Naylor's character Cocoa may strut the streets as an independent and informed version of Janie, a woman who outwardly seems defined by her relationships with men, but her roots remain with the tender care of the women in Willow Springs. Bethel explains the importance of female connections for African American women:

Women in this country have defied the dominant sexist society by developing a type of folk culture and oral literature based on the use of gender solidarity and female bonding as self-affirming rituals. Black women have a long tradition of bonding together in a community that has been a source of survival information, and psychic and emotional support.

We have a distinct Black woman-identified folk culture based on our experiences in this society: symbols, language, and

modes of expression that specifically reflect the realities of our lives as Black females in a dominant white/male culture. (179)

Naylor, too, draws on this tradition to let the reader know early on that, with the feminine, there is a new certainty, an “inaudible voice of it all”: “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 [. . .] Sapphira Wade don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words” (*MD* 3-4). Like Janie, Cocoa must submerge herself in the depths of silence and tap into the primal power of the historically hushed to find her own, true voice.

Through ancestral connections with Sapphira Wade and Mama Day, Cocoa learns that she need never be a slave to any individual voice, even her own voice; it becomes evident that,

For Naylor, each individual voice that makes itself heard is only important in relation to its interlocutor, to the community which sustains the individual. Even as the potential of the individual’s manipulation of signs and language is acknowledged, spiritual discourse practices such as call and response and other sermonic legacies draw this conversation toward orality, toward communal or collaborative speakers and responders. (Regan 166)

In the essay “The Whole Picture in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*,” Susan



Meisenhelder expands on this idea with the image of the quilt: “The person who is part of the quilt, stitched next to but not absorbed by others, independent but not isolated, connected to but not doomed by history, achieves peace and meaningful freedom from the white world” (416). As Cocoa grows in her relationships she learns that, with connection, uncertainties are both created and resolved. With George, she says, “I’d felt a melting away of places in my body I hadn’t realized were frozen voids. Your touch was slowly making new and alive openings within me and I would lie there warm and weak, listening to you sleep, thinking What will I do when he’s not here? How will I handle all this space he’s creating without him to fill it?” (*MD* 119). With the women of Willow Springs, though, Cocoa speaks more confidently:

My bond with them was such that even if hate and rage were to tear us totally apart, they knew I was always theirs. And I sensed that knowledge dawning on you [George] from the moment we crossed over the bridge: you were entering a part of my existence that you were powerless in. Your maps were no good here, but you still came, willing to share this with me. [. . .] I was a very fortunate woman, belonging to you and belonging to them. (177)

Cocoa’s quest for communication spans and bridges two worldviews: the reality of New York (symbolized by George’s rationality) and the magical nature of Willow Springs (embodied by Mama Day). Her links to the

enchanted island, though, reveal a simple truth: “Some things stay the same. [. . .] Some things change. [. . .] And some things are yet to be” (*MD* 312). Employing magical feminism, Naylor and the women of Willow Springs triumph over human nature--dangerous, dividing drives like bitterness and jealousy--and Mother Nature to transform Cocoa’s detached voice into a singular voice that resonates in the collective consciousness. Like Janie’s transformation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the real magic of *Mama Day* is manifested in Cocoa’s embrace of change and connection.

Although heterosexual relationships do contribute to the attainment of voice in both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mama Day*, their male characters do not weaken Janie’s or Cocoa’s ability to find their own, authentic, communally shared voice. These connections are essential to Janie’s and Cocoa’s acquiring the life experiences that lead to self-actualization and a continuing affair with voice--an affair that defies death and lives on to tell the magical story of the making of a woman.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE MALE CONSORT

Zora Neale Hurston begins *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with a passive model of masculinity: “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men” (1). This description, with epic language reminiscent of Homer’s *Odyssey*, firmly places men and their dreams in the temporal, realist world: they are guided by natural forces that lie beyond their control (tide and time), and they are powerless to shape their fantasies into realities.

Going against common characterizations of men as dynamic forces in life, Hurston offers a flaccid, isolated image that immediately undermines masculine “truths” in favor of an active, encompassing magical feminism. This paradigm shift bolsters Hurston’s transformation of the traditional love story: a series of flat male characters function and, ultimately, fail so that Janie can achieve a superior sense of self and find an alternative “happily ever after.” In the end, Tea Cake may seem to be

the realization of Janie's dreams, but his story concludes so that hers may begin.

In a modern twist, Gloria Naylor mirrors Hurston's early experiences as an anthropologist in her introduction to *Mama Day*. Hurston failed on her first expedition to the South to gather folklore for Dr. Frank Boas because her approach was too academic--she had sadly forgotten her common connection with the folk she was studying and they were hesitant to help an outsider (*Dust Tracks* 143-4). Naylor portrays Reema's boy as an educated, yet naïve, ethnographer who has never learned to listen or actively engage in experience: distancing himself from the culturally transferred knowledge of Willow Springs, he favors the passive worship of books. His connections to the island's past and his heritage are severed when he decisively claims that "18&23" stands for longitude and latitude (when all of Willow Springs knows that 1823 was the year of Sapphira Wade's wrenching wrath). He misses the magically feminine connotation altogether and denies Sapphira her proper place in the history books. In Reema's boy's eyes, vision never leads to truth--and for this he is made the fool.

Naylor also attempts to go beyond predictable male depictions in *Mama Day* to address the important intricacies of the sex. In the essay "Serving the Second Son: The Men in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," Mark R. Hall poses that "Rather than traffic in simple rogue stereotypes, Naylor offers, instead, an assortment of male characters who reflect a

vast complexity of existence. [. . .] Naylor encourages us to read her male characters not as 'good' or 'bad,' but as forces which unify these binaries [. . .] (79). Hall goes on to remark,

For Naylor, either/or dichotomous thinking is both Eurocentric and masculinist, contrary to the African religious beliefs upon which the novel is based. With her feet planted firmly in the Old Religion of the Great Goddess, Naylor resists evoking a monolithic homogeneous representation of black masculinity. Instead, she weaves together an assortment of truths, a broad range of portraits essential for a full, rich story. (94)

Like Hurston, Naylor rewrites the traditional romance to challenge gender roles and redefine what it really means to love and be loved--all relationships must be natural and based on total acceptance. Although she succeeds in portraying men as complex creatures, her main character George fails to embrace contradiction and cannot continue with Cocoa on her journey toward a rounded life. Hayes affirms:

As a rationalist, George is a "separate knower" using a binary epistemological system. Hierarchical, either/or thinking characterizes this system, which lends itself to imperialist notions of the ignorant, childlike native and the enlightened, superior colonial power. When George is in Willow Springs, literally the only person there who does not

accept the ontological validity of the nonrational, he demonstrates the imperialist patriarchalism of the rationalist by persistently perceiving his own views as central and those of the Willow Springs community as “other,” misguided, and inferior. (185)

In both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mama Day*, the leading male must be sacrificed to signal the end of his story and the beginning of a new female conversation.

### **Janie's Quest for Love in *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

Hurston highlights the complexities of relationships throughout her novel: Janie's quest for love and acceptance takes significant twists and turns. In the end, Janie Killicks Starks Woods is molded by many men, but she is actually changed by loving her self. Kubitschek maintains:

Love *does* compose an essential element of Janie's--and Hurston's--vision. But neither that love nor that vision remains simple. Her guiding image of the pear tree in bloom bespeaks a more profound meaning for love [. . .]. Sexuality does not simply bind Janie to an individual man. Human life and love develop within the cycle of the seasons, assuming not only domestic and social but also a natural and transcendent meaning. (20)

Reich, too, observes of Janie that “She needs a man, but not just any

man. She needs a man who will not merely repeat what her first two husbands have done, to use her solely for their own ends; she needs a man who will free her by loving the hidden parts of her self. And along comes Tea Cake, who wants her to play, to sing, to tell stories” (166). Indeed, through her relationships with Logan Killicks, Jody Starks, and Tea Cake Woods, Janie transforms herself and learns to articulate the original “inaudible voice of it all” that beckons to her through the pollinated breath of Mother Nature:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of the bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.

(*TEWWG* 11)

This lively, idealized vision of love and marriage initiates Janie’s quest for a voice of her own through relationships with others. Unfortunately, she soon learns that there is often no room for female transformation within rational patriarchal definitions. Janie finally realizes that she must

become responsible for her own eroticism, her own passion, and create fulfilling connections that exist beyond the confines of traditional heterosexual unions.

### **Failed Marriages: Logan Killicks and Joe Starks**

With her first marriage to Logan Killicks, Janie grows unhappy and impatient in a loveless union. She retreats into her imagination and realizes that she is not living her dream--she must become a woman (tap into her female forces) and act on her situation:

So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things. What things? She didn't know exactly. Her breath was gusty and short. She knew things that nobody had ever told her. [. . .] She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether. She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up. It was wonderful to see it take form with the sun and emerge from the gray dust of its making. The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman. (25)

Her *first* dream may be dead, but then something magical occurs: Janie



becomes a woman, wrests control of her life, and transforms her dream. A few pages later, Janie seizes the opportunity for change and takes action: she throws away her apron (a symbol of traditional sex roles) in a show of defiance (32) and walks down the same road that appeared in her above reverie to join Joe Starks, who “[. . .] spoke for far horizon [sic]. He spoke for change and chance” (29). Janie’s next dream seems alive and well.

Another season passes, though, and Starks begins to show his true colors: he believes that his “big voice” (28) speaks for both of them and he silences Janie at every opportunity. Awkward points out that “By preventing Janie’s hearing and involvement in such Afro-American expressivity [porch talk], Starks strives to cut her off from her culture’s wisdom. [. . .] Attempting to confine her to the exclusive role that he has assigned, Starks forbids Janie to participate either in the communality or the orality of her culture” (*Inspiriting* 51). Janie feels trapped and disempowered, so she metaphorically kills Joe with words and then symbolically lets her hair down in a movement of strength and grace (*TEWWG* 87). Finally, at his funeral, Janie is freed: “She sent her face to Joe’s funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world” (88). Hurston’s language speaks toward a more natural union for Janie, one that renews her faith in the magic of voice.

### **Janie and Tea Cake--A Match Made in Heaven**

When Janie finally meets Tea Cake Woods, her description of him is revealing: "He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom--a pear tree blossom in the spring. [. . .] He was a glance from God" (106). This relationship is very different from Janie's previous marriages and seems to be more in line with her naturalized vision underneath the pear tree of a perfect union. Tea Cake seems an ideal fit, and Janie is eager and willing to take a gamble on him. When Pheoby warns that Janie is "[. . .] takin' uh awful chance" (113), Janie counters "No mo' than Ah took befo' and no mo' than anybody else takes when dey gits married. It always changes folks, and sometimes it brings out dirt and meanness dat even de person didn't know they had in 'em theyselves. You know dat. Maybe Tea Cake might turn out lak dat. Maybe not. Anyhow Ah'm ready and willin' tuh try 'im" (113). Not even Janie can predict a man's true nature, but, as it turns out, Tea Cake teaches Janie the maiden language all over (115) and helps her reconnect with her voice and her community on the muck.

Carla Kaplan observes in her essay "The Erotics of Talk: 'That Oldest Human Longing' in Their Eyes Were Watching God," that "[. . .] Janie and Tea Cake undergo various trials and redefine their lives outside the usual social constructs. Their relationship rejects ordinary conceptions of dominant and subordinate sex roles. Tea Cake is Janie's companion on her quest, not her master or mentor" (25). Although life

on the muck with Tea Cake is far from flawless, the experience is magical for Janie because it fosters her transformation. She is changed not only through her relationship with Tea Cake, but by her active involvement with the community. Awkward comments:

The fact that Tea Cake ultimately fails to achieve the status of ideal male as delineated by late-twentieth century literary critics does not detract from the effectiveness of his gifts. He offers Janie an active participation in the traditions and rituals of her culture. He also provides the means for Janie to create a sincere appreciation of her own physical and spiritual beauty. This knowledge allows her to experience, through the customs and lore of her people, her culture's power and beauty. (*Inspiring* 52)

The text substantiates Janie's physical and vocal transformation:

Sometimes Janie would think of the old days in the big white house and the store and laugh at herself. What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor! [. . .] The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself is she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest. (*TEWWG* 134)

Through her relationship with Tea Cake, Janie is able to laugh at herself, accept her mistakes, and move forward--she not only gains the authority to tell her story, but to share it with others and change it for the better.

Janie's newfound voice is interrupted, though, by the same Mother Nature that inspires her initial quest. Sadly, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* must end with a male sacrifice: the hurricane and Tea Cake's subsequent death simply signify the end of *his* story. Janie must return alone from the magic of the muck to pass *her* story on. As Reich puts it: "With Tea Cake, Janie finds a way to be herself, but it is not until she no longer has Tea Cake that Janie finds herself" (167). Kaplan continues,

At the emotional register, Tea Cake's death is of course a tragedy. But within the narrative logic of the novel, Tea Cake's death also liberates Janie to continue her quest and, ultimately, to satisfy her "oldest human longing--self revelation" with someone who *can* listen. As yet another in a long succession of failed listeners, his death is part of what we might call this poetic novel's erotic justice. (154)

In the end, Tea Cake is an integral part of the magical feminism that informs Janie's journey. As his swirling spirit and living memory surround her, Tea Cake brings the novel to full circle: to the horizon and back, where Janie can now create new connections and chart her own future. Pondrom asserts:

Lamenting his death and affirming his resurrection, Janie

manifests a cycle of endless creation. Pronouncing how she has perceived the meaning of life, and death, she affirms that the power [magic] to achieve vision lies within. The divine (and mythic) capacity for creation can be realized within the life of an apparently ordinary human woman. (199)

As Janie finishes relating her story to Pheoby, she again emphasizes the importance of action and experience for women: “[. . .] yuh got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh” (192). Through Tea Cake and through his death, Janie is finally able to take decisive action--she will experience life on her own and make her dreams a conscious reality:

Then Tea Cake came prancing around here where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn’t dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called her soul to come and see. (193)

Janie recreates herself: she seizes “her horizon,” her realm of experience, and adorns her image with its intricate weave. Furthermore, she

summons her soul to witness this transformation. Tea Cake's memory and Janie's feminine fantasy magically mingle to realize a vision and voice that is life-affirming and triumphant.

**“The Mind is Everything”: *Mama Day's* Cocoa and George**

Like Hurston, Naylor also focuses on complicated relationship dynamics between her characters. Cocoa Day speaks with a hardened, uncaring, jaded voice on the subject of men before she falls in love with George Andrews. Her take on dating oozes bitterness: “And if you didn’t show the proper amount of gratitude for a hand on your thigh and an invitation to his third-floor walkup into paradise, you got told in so many words that your bad attitude was the exact reason why he had come there looking for white girls in the first place” (*MD* 17). Yet this same voice, for George, “conjured up images of jasmine-scented nights, warm biscuits and honey being brought to me on flowered china plates as you sat at my feet and rubbed your cheek against my knee” (33). He finds himself grappling with the voice of reason and the spell of superstitious feeling:

My life was already made at thirty-one. My engineering degree, the accelerating success of Andrews & Stein, proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that you got nothing from believing in crossed fingers, broken mirrors, spilled salt--a twist in your gut in the middle of a Third Avenue coffee shop. You either do or you don't. And you, Ophelia, were the don't.

Don't get near a woman who has the power to turn your existence upside-down by simply running a hand up the back of her neck. (33)

George becomes bewitched by Cocoa, the image of her letter dusted with goldenrod serving as his ticket to the "other" side of superstition and destiny (54). And Cocoa, too, finds herself entranced: "I'd hear the sound of hummingbirds in the gardens at the Cloisters. And I'd try to remember if I'd said thank you when I left you that day" (99). She begins to articulate her apprehensions of losing herself in a relationship with George as she confides, "[. . .] I would be tempted to try and squeeze myself up into whatever shape you had calculated would fit into your plans. How long could I do it? The answer scared the hell out of me: I could have done it forever. You start out feeling a little uncomfortable, but then when you look around that's the shape you've grown into" (146). Ultimately, Cocoa and George must both negotiate the fact that a magical love boils down to an even more magical meshing of minds and sensibilities.

In her essay "The Whole Picture in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," Susan Meisenholder focuses on the issue of maintaining a distinctively black cultural identity in a white world. She observes of George and Cocoa, "The painful lack of communication they early experience is a function of their attempts to develop their relationship according to a white script" (*Whole* 408). In other words, they are attempting to

conform their voices to a culture that cannot speak for them.

Fortunately, Cocoa and Mama Day are of the same strong mind and speak with the same ancestral voice, that of the conjure woman Sapphira Wade. They also share a connection that lies deep beneath the island of Willow Springs: "Home. It's being new and old all rolled into one.

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 a total stranger" (*MD* 49).

Unfortunately, George is far from home and not so well prepared.

Meisenhelder continues: "Like his charts and graphs, his constant attempts to accommodate Willow Springs to white cultural myths make it impossible for him to understand its more complex reality. Nothing from the white world [. . .] can help him explain the female-centered place he enters" (409). An orphan, he lacks the maternal influence that might sway his practicality with the power of the truly feminine, with the power of Sapphira Wade. In his essay "Matriarchal Mythopoesis: Naylor's *Mama Day*," David Cowart observes,

A hundred and sixty or so years after Bascombe and Sapphira founded their troubled line, George Andrews strives blindly to connect with a woman who is the heir-designate of all the mysteries represented by this island of matriarchal power. This woman, Cocoa, is herself tragically blind to the precise dynamic that comes between herself and her



husband, who, as engineer and Republican, is a man wholly committed to the Logos, impervious to the matrifocal wisdom of the island and its current matriarch. (453)

Certainly, the reader realizes that George will never gain access to the close circle of Days as he misinterprets the family plot in Willow Springs:

The tombstones--some granite, some limestone--were of varying heights with no dates and only one name. You explained that they were all Days so there was no need for a surname. But what, as in your case, if a woman married? You live a Day and you die a Day. Early women's lib, I said with a smile. A bit more than that, you answered. [. . .] The closeness of all this awed me [. . .]. (*MD* 218)

George is made uneasy by the compelling female connections, even trivializing them with the label of "early women's lib." Instead of digging deeper and trying to truly understand Cocoa's relationship with her family, he leaves the graveyard mystified and overwhelmed.

Although he is a sympathetic character, George's own words tell us that he has always been an outsider in the dynamic of this novel and his communications with Cocoa and Mama Day will remain frustrated.

Describing Naylor's technique, Cowart explains, "The larger vision here involves recognizing and re-embracing a mother-deity displaced, in remote antiquity, by a host of unhealthy patriarchal alternatives [. . .] the usurping son or consort of the goddess must accept the immolation of

his rationality and return to his divinely subordinate role. [. . .] In our end, she suggests, is our beginning” (439-40). When Cocoa’s life is in danger, George risks his life in a final miscommunication:

His inability--or unwillingness--to trust in *Mama Day* renders her instructions meaningless; George can hear only “mumbo-jumbo.” These failures--not reconciling his own philosophy with the demands of Willow Springs, not accounting for the supernatural with the limited vocabulary of physics, not allowing interchange between experience and the way in which he speaks--all these failures of the imagination rob George of the strength he needs to withstand Ruby’s magic. He slips between the pieces of a reality he has constructed, but that can no longer sustain him. (Lorenz 163)

Like Tea Cake, George is sacrificed in the hurricane at the end of the novel because he is powerless to grasp the implication of Cocoa’s needs--his story ends so that hers may begin.

In an essay titled “The Magic Circle: Fictions of the Good Mother in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*,” Suzanne Juhasz substantiates that through George’s death, “[. . .] he has saved Cocoa. He has died so that she might live: died in the way of and on behalf of the patriarchy. His death returns her to the magic circle” (141). George’s memory serves to

help Cocoa find an authentic voice in an alternate realm--one that privileges the female community. Both Tea Cake and George become part of the magical feminism that ensures Janie's and Cocoa's survival and allows them to recover the goddess within to take action and tell the simple truth in their own voice--a voice that speaks with the wisdom of the ages and the foreknowledge of tomorrow.

## CHAPTER IV

### RECOVERING THE MAGICAL, GODDESS-CENTERED CONNECTION

In an interview with Michelle Loris, Gloria Naylor is asked, "What was inside of you that translated out into *Mama Day*?" (*Interview* 261).

She responds:

Oh, my belief in love and magic. That's what that book is about. I saw [it] with my nephew, because he was very ill--terminally ill when he was young--and I saw the power of love literally save his life. And so . . . I know that it can be tangible, that you can cut it and dish it out, you truly can. It has a texture a weight to it. I know that love can do that, I know that love can heal . . . (262)

Naylor and Hurston both believe in the real, transformative influence of love in the lives of their female characters. Although love takes on many manifestations in their novels (oppressive love, liberating love, self love, heterosexual love, family, friendship, love of community), these wide-ranging relationships incite action, bring change, and ultimately empower both Janie and Cocoa to recover and recreate constructive connections. Susan Meisenhelder's eight page essay "False Gods and

Black Goddesses in Naylor's *Mama Day* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" is one of the only published pieces of critical commentary to develop an analysis comparing *Mama Day* to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Citing the hurricane that occurs in both novels as the strongest link between the two, her essay analyzes the use of natural images and narrowly focuses on racial and gender identity in heterosexual relationships in the works--what Meisenhelder recognizes as the "female growth possible with supportive black men and the dangers to black women's identity in relationships with oppressive ones" (1440). Through her deconstruction and simplification of complex relationships in both Hurston and Naylor, though, Meisenhelder verges on destroying the integral female connections at work in the fiction. She warns of the female characters' "passive worship of men" (1442) and claims that "rigid masculinities" (1446) must die in deference to a primal goddess described as dark and dangerous. As she attempts to weave an analysis centered on dangerous dichotomies (black/white, men/women) and not, as Naylor attests, the healing and union that love brings, Meisenhelder fails to adequately address the intricate female ties that bind these novels. I see the strongest, most important connection between the novels in the way the women wrestle to restore what is really in danger of being lost--renewed relations with one another.

With the female characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mama Day*, Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor have created an

electrifying, multi-dimensional, magical feminine voice indebted to what I have termed a goddess-centered connection: they have summoned the forces of feminine creativity and expression (which have been historically silenced) to start a stormy revolution with Janie and Cocoa. Cixous exhorts that “If woman has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man [. . .] it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of” (356). Margins and boundaries are exploded, horizons start to blend, the hurricane subsides, and the female survives. The men might not matter as much once the ancient power has been reclaimed, but then they were always peripheral to these stories. I pose that the primal feminine forces in these novels are ultimately creative and decisive on their *own* terms, even if it does take a hurricane to drive the winds of change.

### **Archetypal Models of Maternity: Nanny and Mama Day**

In her book *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction*, Jacqueline DeWeever observes,

Myths of all cultures have produced the archetypes of the nurturing mother and the destroying mother [. . .].

Transforming and nurturing as well as stifling and destructive, the paradigm is the earth mother, who gives birth and sustains her children and to whom they return in

death [. . .]. At once reassuring and terrifying, complex and powerful, the portrayals are emanations of the universal mother, giver of life and taker of life. (133)

Starhawk eloquently expands on this analysis:

It is easy to respond to the concept of Goddess as Muse or Mother, to inspiration, nurturing, and healing power. It is more difficult to understand the Goddess as Destroyer. Judeo-Christian dualism has conditioned us to think of destruction as synonymous with evil [. . .]. Most of us live removed from nature, cut off from the experiences that constantly remind more “primitive” people that every act of creation is an act of aggression. To plant a garden, you must dig out the weeds, crush the snails, thin the seedlings as they reach toward the light. To write a book, you must destroy draft after draft of your own work, cutting apart paragraphs and striking out words and sentences. Creation postulates change; and any change destroys what went before. (80-81)

Magical feminism offers a mode in which African American women writers can employ and embrace both models of motherhood in a move to magically reconcile real conflict and incite change.

In the essay “Metaphor and Maternity in *Mama Day*,” Amy Levin notes:

[. . .] a review of novels by African-American women in the last half of this century reveals a multitude of texts that diverge from the “realistic” mode, with its negative depictions of maternity and its emphasis on the “black family’s internal contradictions.” The portraits of mothers in urban poverty are balanced by those of women in rural communities and small towns. The latter novels often combine two elements: a positive model of maternity (or female leadership) and a trace of magic or the supernatural. (71)

Both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Mama Day* (1988) rely on controversial female models to add perspective to the social and sexist implications in their stories. Although Zora Neale Hurston misses Levin’s mid-century mark by a few years, she strives to show that negative models of motherhood can and should be rejected in favor of a new generation’s possibility for rebirth and transformation. Bethel observes,

The image of Janie and Nanny as victims of oppressive forces neither of them can alter is powerful and moving. We are led to think of countless Black females coming of age, and countless Black grandmothers and mothers confronting them with the harsh realities of Black women’s lives in a racist, sexist society. In this sense Janie and her



grandmother illustrate the tragic continuity of Black female oppression in white/male America. (182)

Janie does manage a break with her oppressors, though: she recreates and reshapes her realities from society's and Nanny's scraps.

Nanny informs Janie and the reader of a black woman's state in society early on: "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything so fur as ah been able to find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks" (*TEWWG* 29). Later, she reveals her philosophy on love when she laments, "Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night. Dat's how come de ole folks say dat bein' a fool don't kill nobody. It jus' makes you sweat [. . .]" (41). Nanny takes all the romance out of love--she is blind to its natural and magical aspects and sees love as foolish and burdensome. Furthermore, she promotes a passive and detached acceptance of these facts. Awkward explains the reasons for her cynicism:

Nanny's degradation during slavery had, like a powerful storm, separated her from the type of natural view of existence witnessed in the pear tree trope. She seems to be

a poison that destroys what is natural. Her experiences as a slave have effectively severed her ties to her people and her culture. She believes that Afro-Americans generally are also rootless. (*Inspiriting* 23-4)

The reader sees Nanny's vision of marriage (the best match seemingly empty and loveless) as an escape into an elevated form of slavery: it can bring status, financial reward--and shackles you to the realities of a subservient life. Crabtree comments:

Nanny is paradoxical; the reader first views her sympathetically because of her devotion to the young Janie, the pathos of her history, and her powerful use of metaphor and vividly imagistic language. Later, however, Hurston forces the reader to reevaluate Nanny in the light of Janie's realization after Joe's death that Nanny's notion of what Janie should strive for is not only insufficient--it is *destructive*. [. . .] Nanny's aspirations derive from a distrust of life, a distrust of men both white and Black, and a negative attitude toward Blackness and femininity. (60; emphasis added)

Nanny does attempt to destroy Janie's dream, for she "[. . .] had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon--for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you--and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's

neck tight enough to choke her” (*TEWWG* 89). Janie longs to reach the horizon and actively shape her own experiences in life. Nanny’s sexist worldview is stifling and passive--a far cry from the magical marriage Janie imagined under the pear tree. This desecration, though, moves Janie to rise above Nanny and prove her wrong.

Nanny wants to “preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high” and she tells Janie “Ah said Ah’d save the text for you” (16). Her long-suffering words, though, do not fit Janie’s new thoughts: she must create her own content so that the cycle can be broken, her voice can be heard, and freedom can be found. One critic mistakenly observes that “By returning to Eatonville and the security it offers after her brief fling with the horizon, Janie is in essence returning to her grandmother’s way of thinking, or at least tempering her own romanticism with some much-needed realism [. . .]” (Howard 413). Janie’s connection with Nanny is significant because it gives her the insight to change; Janie returns home a triumphant and transformed woman, not a woman beaten down or reigned in by reality. It is crucial to understand that,

[. . .] Hurston makes Janie differ from Nanny in some important ways. Part of what the character learns is to place her grandmother’s words into perspective--to understand how Nanny’s recounting of experience shaped what Janie was later able to see. In this respect, Hurston stages a break

with the oppressor's culture and points to the sexual and racial liberation of women. [. . .] Janie's story can be read as a new (hi)story constructed out of love and passed from one black woman to another. (Meese 62-3)

As an early model of motherhood, Nanny seems a failure. Janie is reborn when she rejects this representation, though, and becomes a mother in her own rite: she recreates herself from Nanny's remnants and lives to tell a much different tale of what it means to be a woman.

Mama Day, although quite opposite from Nanny in her relationship with Cocoa, also comments on the sexist agenda:

You fear that sometimes for women, that they would just fold up and melt away. She'd seen it happen so much in her time, too much for her to head on into without thinking. Yes, that one time when she was way, way young. But after that, looking at all the beating, the badgering, the shriveling away from a lack of true touching was enough to give her pause. Not that she mighta hooked up with one of those. And not that any man--even if he tried--coulda ever soaked up the best in her. But who needed to wake up each morning cussin the day just to be sure you still had your voice? A woman shouldn't have to fight her man to be what she was; he should be fighting the battle for her. It weren't so in her time, though, and from what these young women

tell her, it's rare to find it now. So a lot of 'em is waking up  
like me, except they're waking up young and alone. (*MD* 203)

Even for Cocoa, a progressive and outspoken woman living in New York, Mama Day has a motherly concern for the silencing of her voice in patriarchal culture. Although also affected by a legacy of slavery similar to Nanny's, Mama Day does not see survival in dated prospects of marriage or escape. In fact, she advocates facing the fight and recognizes that a woman may fare better alone without a man. Unlike Nanny, who alienates Janie from her heritage, Mama Day invests herself in maintaining maternal binds. In the essay "Metaphor and Maternity in *Mama Day*," Amy Levin observes, "[. . .] as healer, advisor, midwife and conjurer par excellence, the old woman offers a model of mothering based not on biological kinship or the Freudian reading of the nuclear family, but on female solidarity and vision of women's leadership that can be traced to West African women's traditions" (70). Mama Day is a prominent leader and unifying force in her family and community. The women of Willow Springs are fiercely protective and nurturing, traits Nanny is almost incapable of demonstrating, but they have fostered connections and relationships in a paradise of their own making. In "The Maternal Aesthetic of *Mama Day*," Julie Tharp observes,

Willow Springs is utopian in the sense that it functions as an island of mother love, an island where, for generations, women have raised their children without interference from

the mainland culture. Naylor allows herself the indulgence, if you will, of imagining just what such a place would be like. In that sense it also functions as symbolic of a mythic African maternal presence in all of black women's lives. (122)

Although the microcosmic image of the island is infused with magic and myth, the big picture, far from an indulgence, focuses on the very real relationships that allow women to thrive. Tharp continues, "Mama Day links black mothering to a gender and ethnic identity which undermines, if not inverts, the destructive fragmentation of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. It restores memory of the past and hope for the future" (123). Modern models of motherhood like Mama Day, then, succeed in gathering strength from a collective past to feed the future for women. They retranslate Nanny's ancient text so that Cocoa can continue Janie's journey with the resolute knowledge of who she was, who she is, and what she can become.

### **Recovering the Goddess in Every Woman: Sapphira Wade**

To achieve such a complete story, Naylor reaches back as far as the folklore that merely informed Hurston's work to manifest the mother of all mothers in the image of Sapphira Wade. Cowart comments that in *Mama Day* "The single great source of disharmony [. . .] lies in an overturning, centuries ago, of matriarchal authority and its divine counterpart. The world still reels from this displacement of the Goddess, the Great Mother" (444). Starhawk states simply, "Since the decline of

the Goddess religions, women have lacked religious models and spiritual systems that speak to female needs and experience. [. . .] Women are not encouraged to explore their own strengths and realizations [. . .]” (8). She continues:

The importance of the Goddess symbol for women cannot be overstressed. The image of the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine, our bodies as sacred, the changing phases of our lives as holy, our aggression as healthy, our anger as purifying, and our power to nurture and create, but also to limit and destroy when necessary, as the very force that sustains all life. Through the Goddess, we can discover our strength, enlighten our minds, own our bodies, and celebrate our emotions. We can move beyond narrow, constricting roles and become whole. (9)

*Mama Day* begins with the complicated image of Sapphira Wade:

“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” (*MD* 1). The memory of Sapphira is magical because it is mutable--her image and connotation changes to fit the needs of her female followers. Dorothy Thompson explains in her essay “Africana Womanist Revision in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*” that “Sapphira is the ancestor/goddess, a recurring figure in the fiction of African and African-American women writers. She is the

conflation of the need for a new woman-centered spirituality and ancient African ancestor worship” (93). It is important to discern, though, that Naylor paints Sapphira as a goddess for every woman--black, white, and red included. Indeed, Juhasz sees the novel’s investment in the maternal archetype as coming from “a conjunction of the imperatives of blackness and femaleness, because the dominant white male culture would disempower both [. . .]” (142). Naylor invokes the ancient image and awesome power of Sapphira (which always serves as undercurrent in her novel) to address an urgent feminist agenda--that of recovering a lost voice and using it to communicate with other women.

In acknowledging the religious-like presence of Sapphira Wade, Mama Day voices her frustration that women are often forced to ignore connections to their past and misinterpret the importance of their dreams: “She goes to bed to get down on her stiffened knees and pray to the Father and Son as she’d been taught. But she falls asleep murmuring the names of women. And in her dreams she finally meets Sapphira” (*MD* 280). In her essay “Re-Writing Sacred Texts: Gloria Naylor’s Revisionary Theology,” Shirley Stave notes that Naylor “[. . .] returns the Goddess to the locus of origin but also situates Her in the present, suggesting Her return is the inevitable consequences of history” (98). Past becomes present: the legend of Sapphira and Bascombe Wade becomes the story of Cocoa and George becomes the story of every woman and every man. Naylor uses magical feminism to situate her



story outside of time and inside a changing collective consciousness--one that finds magic in the real and real in the magical.

### **Mother Nature as Dea Ex Machina?**

Both Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Naylor's *Mama Day* end with a devastating hurricane that clears the path for a new beginning. The swirling storm, often referred to as a "she," serves as a natural image of female force (Mother Nature) and shared experience within the novels. One critic observes that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "the narrative voice becomes strong and increasingly suggestive of a sort of collective, choric voice. Storm, flood, and death are personified. The effect of this shift is an emphasis on the universal nature of Janie's experience" (Crabtree 65). Another comments,

The hurricane, a trial generated by nature, threatens physical survival just as individual and social betrayals threaten psychic survival. Those caught in the hurricane shed their social roles: "The time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. Six eyes were questioning God." Under these circumstances, attempts to react to or protect another endanger oneself [. . .]. An elemental and divine force, the hurricane reduces the personality to its essential, forces a confrontation with physical limits. (Kubitschek 26)

While the storm in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* forces the

characters to come together to confront the fury of Mother Nature and beseech a Christian god, the storm is not necessarily personified. The hurricane in *Mama Day*, however, is a magical manifestation of woman's scorn. Stave describes the situation:

A ferocious storm blows in, "moving counterclockwise against the march of time" (249)--counterclockwise being the direction known in magic as widdershins, the direction of undoing, of unweaving, of destruction. The storm is narratively linked with Sapphira Wade: as it grows fiercer, Mama Day takes the Bible from her sister's hands and closes it, its named God useless in dealing with "what could only be the workings of Woman. And She has no name" (251). (102)

This storm represents the ruthless side of Mother Nature, but also signals the return of the goddess.

In both Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Naylor's *Mama Day*, Mother Nature seems the shortcut to resolution (a device termed *deus ex machina*, or goddess from the machine), but she ultimately serves within magical feminism to raze relations with the opposite sex and collapse certain models of motherhood so that Janie and Cocoa can bring forth their own creation--the story itself. Through narrating their experiences to others, they return to the community of women, offering words of renewal and the chance for change.

## CHAPTER V

### NARRATION: CONJURING QUITE A STORY

Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor rely on the collective resonance of storytelling to legitimate their stories, drive their narratives, and connect with their readers. Pryse poses that “In her best novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Hurston would write out from folklore or hoodoo as a source of power and would be able to find herself and invest her female protagonist Janie with the ‘magic’ of authority that makes storytelling--whether in oral or written form--possible” (12). She continues: “The black woman, in Hurston’s novel, finds her authority as storyteller both by her ability to ‘conjure’ up her past, and then to make storytelling itself serve as a connection between ‘kissin’-friends” (13). Harris observes that Gloria Naylor, too, takes sharing a story further and moves it into the collective:

The first voice we hear/read in *Mama Day* is in first person plural. In a mere *eight pages* of introduction, this voice establishes a broad range of possibilities for interacting with it, and it draws upon a variety of historical and folk patterns and subjects in claiming legitimacy for the position it

occupies in relation to “hearers” of the novel. It is a collective voice that makes assumptions about belief, human relationships, community, progress, and numerous other things. (57)

Storytelling, then, becomes the magical medium by which characters and readers (the novel’s equivalent to hearers) become an integral part of the narrative process: we react, respond, and, ideally, we retell and transform the tale so it ultimately transcends the text. Through the employment of magical feminism, Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Naylor entice their audience to share in overheard conversations--that “inaudible voice of it all” (*TEWWG* 11) that is articulated or understood not by just anyone--and compel them to “really listen this time” (*MD* 10). In the end, they both conjure a story of female growth and kinship--a story that is meant to make us think but, more importantly, makes us talk.

### **Janie’s Offering**

As the narration of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins, Janie returns from the Muck under the judgmental murmurs of the townsfolk, their “Words walking without masters” (2). Their gossip is unfounded, and typifies the kind of hollow voice that Janie has learned to discount. She ignores them, taking control of the novel and conjuring a story for her hungry friend Pheoby: “They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together. Pheoby eager to feel and do through Janie, but hating to

show her zest for fear it might be thought mere curiosity. Janie full of that oldest human longing--self revelation [. . .] so Janie spoke" (7). Immediately, the reader is beckoned into the circle where the true story will unfold and where we are privy to Janie's dreams through this bonding ritual with another woman. Near the close of the novel, Hurston returns to the porch to guide our understanding with Phoeby's reaction: "Lawd!' Pheoby breathed out heavily, 'Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this. Nobody better criticize yuh in mah hearin'" (192). Janie is quick to point out, though, that "[. . .] talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else" (192). Hurston impresses upon us the importance of action: females' forging their own personal journeys, loving themselves, and finding their own, true voice from deep within to tell their stories. As one critic puts it:

Janie has talent, experience, flexibility, and communal acceptance. Her participation in storytelling belongs to the Afro-American pattern of call and response; her narration of her own story functions as a call to adventure for other questers. Through Janie, Hurston merges the quest pattern with the Afro-American call and response to form a new experience, a group quest or ascent. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* intimates an Eatonville with Janie and a whole

group of Pheobys growing “ten feet tall,” traveling in company “tuh de horizon and back,” ever constructing and renewing both individual and community. (Kubitschek 33)

Pheoby offers just the sort of understanding and response that Janie and Hurston critically need. Still, Janie asks her not to be too harsh with those who don’t know any better: “Now, Pheoby, don’t feel too mean wid de rest of ‘em ‘cause dey’s parched up from not knowin’ things. Dem meatskins is got tuh rattle tuh make out they’s alive. Let ‘em consulate theyselves wid talk” (*TEWWG* 192). Pheoby has listened to the story and learned that there is hypocrisy in the wrong kind of voice--a voice that seems to speak, but is, in fact, empty, detached, and passive. Awkward expands on the importance of an active voice in his analysis of call and response between Janie, Pheoby, and even Hurston’s reading audience. He observes of Janie,

By the time she returns to Eatonville, she has learned that *individual* voice is either tyrannical or ineffectual. As a result, her own text--the narration of her life story in the novel--is situated in a self-determined space between pre-cultural and Afro-American cultural expressive practices. This situation has led the narrative strategies of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to exhibit not an independent voice such as Janie’s individual (first-person) narration, but, rather, a discourse derived from a commingling of the principles of

two distinct forms of communication: Afro-American call and response which demand a unity of voices, and “natural” communication in which action begets voice. This union allows Janie’s voice to be expressed not through her individual narration, but through the meshing of her (largely unheard) voice with the cultural voice of others. (45)

He goes on to offer that Hurston’s narrative style, often seen as faulty, actually leads to the “denigration of the novel as an expressive form” (48).

Crabtree continues this analysis:

Since Hurston was a skilled folklorist, it seems likely that her use of the storytelling frame is part of a rhetorical strategy through which she attempts to persuade her readers that the novel does in fact duplicate the experience of Black life, including oral traditions of specific Black communities. The novel both approaches and avoids the novelistic technique of the story within a story: it is self-reflexive in that it draws attention to the process of telling, yet deflects the reader’s attention from the writing process to the telling process and thus from an awareness of its fictional nature to an illusion of immersion in “real” folk experience. (56)

By engaging her reader in such a way, Hurston is able to push woman’s word not only out of the margins, but away from the pages of the text

itself. As Callahan comments: "By making storytelling and the narrative act collaborative and continuing, she simultaneously launches a new community of values and performs a revolutionary literary act" (92). Indeed, Hurston and Janie come full circle in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to create a new sphere where women can explore personal and communal voice.

### **Cocoa's Collective Consciousness**

Naylor's *Mama Day* picks up where Hurston left off, but her narrator literally exits the text to enter the reader's mind:

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 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 just 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. (10)

Speaking to us directly, the narrator's wise words let us in on the secret from the very beginning. Juhasz observes, "The Introduction, spoken not only in a different season but from another kind of knowing, offers the rudiments of a new way of listening and of reading, an invitation into the



world of Willow Springs” (131). The reader is urged to think for him/herself, listen for the truth between the lines, reclaim the lost voice, and then completely submit to the collective consciousness--as if we must first forget to remember.

Harris comments, “The power of orality reflects a tradition that transcends temporality as well as chronology. The link between narrative voice and audience, therefore, is one that cannot be broken by the physicality of the text itself [. . .]” (58). The omniscient narrator of *Mama Day*, and the conversations between Cocoa and George (who is dead), function within magical feminism to bring a deeper understanding of the real connections at work within and without the text. Janie reaches deep inside for her offering, just as Cocoa and the women of Willow Springs join hands to cast a spell meant to remind females of their legacy and the strength and unity that comes from self-realization. Thompson notes the success of Naylor’s narrative:

Naylor’s discursive strategy at the novel’s inception accomplishes several things. First, she establishes the collective voice of Willow Springs as having discursive authority. In the tradition of the speakerly text, which recalls African oral tradition, the reader becomes a listener, a participant in the discourse community. Second, Naylor effects (re)membrance--a recall of the cultural past that achieves its reality/validity as the individual mind envisions

it. [. . .] If memories of Sapphira are not spoken, she does not become static and one-dimensional. She may be as liminal or fractured as need be for a people whose history is not characterized by wholeness or one-dimensionality. Finally, what Naylor effects with the Sapphira story is a destabilization of traditional notions of myth. Once this is accomplished, then revision of a new order becomes possible. (93)

Naylor enchants her readers to join in the magic so that they, too, can create their version of the story and transform the rational boundaries of the text. As Cocoa meditates at the end of *Mama Day*: “[. . .] what really happened to us George? You see, that’s what I mean--there are just too many sides to the whole story” (311). What *really* happens is a *magical* mingling of voices: Sapphira knew it, Mama Day knows it, George fought it, and now Cocoa recognizes that “everybody wants to be right in a world where there ain’t no right or wrong to be found [. . .] all of it is the truth” (230). Lorenz argues:

Naylor’s use of the fantastic draws attention to something that is not fantasy: history is not dead. And while the recuperation of histories is an invaluable project to various communities under siege, Naylor’s book reminds us that history is not passive. It acts on us. [. . .] the importance of the fantastic in *Mama Day* cannot be appreciated fully if we

become enamored of this “other” world we suppose Naylor has constructed. The active hand of history, the haunted imagination--these are not aspects of some “other” world. (157)

Cocoa and Naylor come full circle to communicate the realization that women have always been and must always remain dynamically connected. It is only together that women can reflect on the making of their voice and how it should survive in an ever changing world.

So in the end, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mama Day* prove no ordinary pieces of fiction. Through the use of magical feminism in the narrative, Hurston and Naylor simultaneously create and crush the text so that their stories stay to resonate in the collective consciousness. They ultimately offer no illusions, no myth, no mumbo-jumbo, just the shared truth that no voice is ever simply the sound of your own.

## REFERENCES

- Awkward, Michael. Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro American Women's Novels. New York: Columbia UP, 1989. 15-56.
- - -. New Essays On *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Bethel, Lorraine. "This Infinity of Conscious Pain': Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition." All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies. Eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. New York: Feminist Press, 1982. 176-187.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.
- Callahan, John F. "Mah Tongue is in Mah Friend's Mouff': The Rhetoric of Intimacy and Immensity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Bloom 87-114.
- Cixous, Hélène. The Laugh of the Medusa. Feminisms. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. Rev. ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997. 347-362.
- "Conjure." Def. 7 and 9a. Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989.

Cowart, David. "Matriarchal Mythopoesis: Naylor's *Mama Day*."

Philological Quarterly 77.4 (Fall 1998): 439-459.

Crabtree, Claire. "The Confluence of Folklore, Feminism, and Black Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Southern Literary Journal 17.2 (1985): 54-66.

De Weever, Jacqueline. Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "Power, Judgement, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies." Awkward, New Essays 95-123.

Felton, Sharon and Michelle Loris, eds. The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997.

Foreman, Gabrielle. "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call." Zamora and Faris 285-304.

Hall, R. Mark. "Serving the Second Sun: The Men in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*." Stave 77-96.

Harris, Trudier. The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996.

Hart, Patricia. Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1989.

Hayes, Elizabeth T. "Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* as Magic Realism."

Felton, 177-186.

Howard, Lillie P. "Nanny and Janie: Will the Twain Ever Meet? (A Look at Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*)." Journal of Black Studies 12.4 (1982): 403-414.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.

- - -. *Dust Tracks on a Road*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996.

Jordan, Jennifer. "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 7.1 (Spring 1988): 105-117.

Juhasz, Suzanne. "The Magic Circle: Fictions of the Good Mother in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*." Felton 129-142.

Kaplan, Carla. "The Erotics of Talk: 'That Oldest Human Longing' in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Wall 137-164.

Kelley, Margot Anne, ed. *Gloria Naylor's Early Novels*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999.

Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. "'Tuh de Horizon and Back': The Female Quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Bloom 19-34.

Lamothe, Daphne. "Vodou Imagery, African American Tradition, and Cultural Transformation in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Wall 165-187.

Leal, Luis. "Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature." Zamora and Faris 119-124.

Levin, Amy K. "Metaphor and Maternity in *Mama Day*." Kelley 70-88.

Lorenz, Johnny. "This Mumbo-Jumbo: Magic and Vocabularies in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*." Stave 153-165.

"Magic." Def. 1a and 2. Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989.

Meese, Elizabeth. "Orality and Textuality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Bloom 59-72.

Meisenhelder, Susan. "'The Whole Picture' in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*." African American Review 27.3 (Fall 1993): 405-420.

- - -. "False Gods and Black Goddesses in Naylor's *Mama Day* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Callaloo 23.4 (2000): 1440-1448.

Naylor, Gloria. "Interview: 'The Human Spirit is a Kick-Ass Thing.'" Felton 253-264.

- - -. Mama Day. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1988.

Pondrom, Cyrena N. "The Role of Myth in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." American Literature 58.2 (1986): 181-202.

Pryse, Marjorie. "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the 'Ancient Power' of Black Women." Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and

Literary Tradition. Ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers.

Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. 1-23.

Racine, Maria J. "Voice and Interiority in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." African American Review 28.2 (Summer 1994): 283-292.

Regan, Kerry. "Return to Sender: Correspondence(s) in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*." Stave 166-181.

Reich, Alice. "Pheoby's Hungry Listening." Women's Studies 13 (1986): 163-9.

Starhawk. The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

Stave, Shirley. Gloria Naylor: Strategy and Technique, Magic and Myth. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2001.

- - -. "Re-Writing Sacred Texts: Gloria Naylor's Revisionary Theology." Stave 97-117.

Stein, Rachel. "Remembering the Sacred Tree: Black Women, Nature and Voodoo in Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Women's Studies 25 (1996): 465-482.

Tharp, Julie. "The Maternal Aesthetic of *Mama Day*." Stave 118-131.

Thompson, Dorothy Perry. "Africana Womanist Revision in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Cafe*." Kelley 89-111.



Tucker, Lindsay. "Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*." African American Review 28.2

(Summer 1994): 173-188.

"Voice." Def. 1f and 6d. Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989.

Wall, Cheryl A., ed. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: A Casebook. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris, eds. Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.

## **VITA**

Heather Noëlle Strain was born in Galveston, Texas, on December 6, 1974, the daughter of Barbara Westbrook Strain and Darrell Wayne Strain. Her family relocated to Austin, Texas, in 1991. After graduating from Westwood High School, Austin, Texas, in 1993, she attended the University of Texas at Austin on a full scholarship from the Fay T. Barnes Trust. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from the University of Texas in 1997. During the following years she was employed as an administrative assistant with the legal division of the Texas Legislative Council in Austin. In the fall of 2001, she entered the Graduate College of Texas State University-San Marcos.

Permanent Address: 13355 Hwy. 183 N. #827

Austin, Texas 78750

This thesis was typed by Heather Noëlle Strain.

