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From Staten Island to No-State Island

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"I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's" (William Blake)

The title of Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day*² clearly suggests a profound concern with the origins not only of a family but of a whole group. It suggests a difficult quest for African-American identity, staged in Willow-Springs, a unique island off the coast of Georgia and South-Carolina that strangely belongs to neither state and thus appears as a modern version of Thomas More's *Utopia*,³ a place that has to be discovered with the help of a mediator who wields the traditional wisdom of the old African sorceress as well as the modern judgment of the psychoanalyst. The *Mama* who looks after the family and the Day dynasty is first of all a Day, from this family of seven sons now reduced to one single

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². Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (Vintage Contemporaries).

³. "Noplacia was once my name, That is a place where no one goes. Plato's *Republic* now I claim To match, or beat at its own game; For that was just a myth in prose, But what he wrote of, I became, Of men, wealth, laws a solid frame, A place where every wise man goes: Goplacia is now my name." Thomas More, *Utopia* (Penguin Classics) p. 27.

heiress. Moreover, she is dangerously threatened first by her “modern” way of life that keeps her away from motherhood, then by a voodoo charm that is meant to destroy her both physically and mentally. Significantly, Mama Day's first name echoes Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: Miranda celebrates “a brave new world” which she wants to present to her grand-niece, Ophelia, who must escape the tragic destiny of her Shakespearean counterpart who died while singing the song of the willows.

The story — told in “amoebean” verse, two voices answering each other — is like a dialogue between a large and tight texture of references to European literary culture and to the oral tradition of African slaves, thus offering a new version of the African-American heritage. A fairly precise presentation of the island from a geographic and historical point of view sets the background for a story that the reader will all the more accept as a certain version of truth — the testimony given by the outsider, the husband from Staten Island — introduces comments and questions that the reader could well have produced himself. The comparison with a more familiar reality as well as the interruptions set in New York underline the complexity of this literary universe; they point out the necessity to reach a sound sense of identity as a person and to re-write the history of the black community beyond the problem of racism, or rather to mark out the limits of a “cultural territory” (*MD*, 102) that the author tries to define throughout her work, away from the standard interpretation of the past, “to forge in the smithy of [her] soul the uncreated conscience of [her] race.”⁴ The island becomes an enclosed stage on which all debates are given concrete existence, as it allows the exteriorization of mental conflicts and reaches back to the mythical *Utopia* that is first of all the *I*-land.

Before the text itself, the book offers a map of Willow Springs that seems to forestall the hero's objection when he later complains about the absence of any document that could help indicate the location of this place, thus rendering the traveler more comfortable:

But where was Willow-Springs? Nowhere. At least not on any map I had found. I had even got out and bought road maps just for South Carolina and Georgia and it was missing from all those islands dotting the coastline. What county claimed it? Where was the nearest interstate highway, the nearest byroad? ... I wanted to know exactly *where* I was going. (*MD*, 174)

⁴ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Triad Panther Book) p. 228. Mama Day who can call thunder resembles the artificer evoked by Joyce at the very end of his novel as well as Prospero in *The Tempest*.

The reader is given some clues as to where *he* is going, for the reading process may be compared to traveling to a new place, to discovering an unknown country, whereas the hero is pioneering, treading on a land that is strange to everybody but the natives.

This map focuses on the island itself and the continent only appears on the side as a mere landmark, just as it serves as a mere — albeit necessary — reference in the text. The very shape of the island recalls that of a cell scrutinized through a microscope, as is fitting for the background of a *microcosm*. The study of life is also suggested by the map itself: it announces the vegetal luxuriance of the place, imitating a figure on a piece of bark and suggesting the shape of a humming bird gathering nectar from the poppies and hibiscus flowers.

However, the map also refers to the traditional pattern of town planning in America, along a single main street, here called “main road,” as if it were leading to some other place. Few of the official buildings appear on the map; the church, for example, is seen but not named. Rather, the attention is drawn toward the various stages on which the scenes are to take place and toward “the other place” by the graveyard that may be seen like a kind of spiritual center suggesting mystery and hinting at a world “beyond” and some form of otherness.

The precision of the names reinforces the feeling of a close community occupying a limited space where everyone is bound to know everyone else and where people help one another. Nature has kept a large place on the island though its presence is not seen as a threat, for the houses are scattered rather than clustered for self-defense. The stores are gathered along the main entry, like in all American towns, but this is for merely practical reasons. We are told later in the novel that the roads are left in rather bad repair, staying closer to the original trails than to modern roads. As a matter of fact, roads are a major problem for this remote island. The hero's first questions show that roads are no use if you do not know where to find them and which one to choose to reach the island. He refers to the extensive American system of roads that criss-crosses the whole continent and federates the nation. The isolation of the island implies some kind of irregularity toward the federal organization of the land. To be able to discover this hidden face of the country, the hero must accept guidance and give up autonomy, and so will the reader: “In the end I just threw up my hands and depended on you to make the arrangements.”(*MD*, 174)

Ophelia can be the guide to take one to the island but once on the territory one must accept the laws laid down by Mama Day whom everybody looks up to as a leader, a person endowed with historical knowledge and supernatural power.

She masters the geography of the island completely and can even walk across it at night, recognizing each twig, even venturing where nobody dare tread, near the graveyard. Some of her power rests on her acceptance of the past and of death as being part and parcel of present day life:

It's too near the other place, and even in broad daylight, they not gonna make it much past the graveyard. Where do folks get things in their head? It's an old house with a big garden, that's all ... Folks can get the craziest things in their head. But then again there *was* the other place where she was gonna bring Bernice in the spring. (*MD*, 117-18)

This "place" full of memories is also the setting for her magic: she picks up herbs in the forest or in the garden she planted herself and her spells combine the observation of a naturalist with the knowledge of the historian. But first of all, she has the power to read nature itself:

She tries to listen under the wind. The sound of a long wool skirt passing. Then the tread of heavy leather boots, heading straight for the main road, heading on toward the east bluff over the ocean ... Miranda's head feels like it's gonna burst ... And the humming — humming of some lost and ancient song. Quiet tears start rolling down Miranda's face. Oh, precious Jesus, the light wasn't for her — it was for him. The tombstone out by Chevy's pass. (*MD*, 118)

She tries to understand the message of nature which conveys snatches of history and provides glimpses of the future which only a close knowledge and the humble observation of the place can conjure up: "Listen to the wind from The Sound. Maybe it would come to her. Yes — it just might come to her." (*MD* 118) The use of standard English to confirm thoughts expressed in the vernacular emphasizes the prophecy. Miranda manages to transgress the limits set for everybody else and to become one with nature.

The island is significantly divided into three woods that one has to cross before reaching a higher level of knowledge symbolized by the "other place" overlooking the ocean in which Miranda's mother met "her muddy death."⁵ It stands like a sort of outpost toward the old continent where the slaves came from and toward the unknown world to which Sapphira, the creator, escaped. Although the island lies in the middle of an archipelago, it remains apart from its sister-islands: *they* can be spotted on the official maps. Thus, it belongs more to the sea world than to the land. Its very existence hangs upon its tenuous limits and its fragile link with the mainland:

⁵ . Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, IV, 7.

The only thing that connects us to the mainland is a bridge — and even that gotta be rebuilt after every big storm ... But anyway, all forty-nine square miles curves like a bow, stretching toward Georgia on the south end and South Carolina on the north, and right smack in the middle where each foot of our bridge sits is the dividing line between them two states. (*MD*, 5)

Any understanding of the identity of the island is to be found not in the accounts of history books or the data on maps, but in its unique history and geography shaped by its violent climate. The choice of the *utopia* provides an alternative to the challenge of the official version of the history of the black community as it can be found elsewhere, while avoiding a dangerous political debate: “So who it belong to? It belongs to us — clean and simple. And it belonged to our daddies, and our daddies before them, and them too — who at one time all belonged to Bascombe Wade.” (*MD*, 5)

Identity is first defined in terms of independence, which is a revolutionary declaration, meant to serve as a starting point for any further reflection. References to keydates in American history are used ironically and emphasize the ideological parallels. The point is not to criticize the American domination but to state a difference, to show that usual standards do not apply. A complex form of reasoning is detailed that mocks the arguments usually developed and stresses the contradictions commonly accepted in official history; the use of the vernacular underlines both the irony and the degree of integration of this revised version:

We was being un-American. And the way we saw it, America ain't entered the question at all when it come to our land: Sapphira was African-born, Bascombe Wade was from Norway, and it was 18 & 23'ing that went down between them two put deeds in our hands. And we wasn't even Americans when we got it — was slaves. And the laws about slaves not owning nothing in Georgia and South Carolina don't apply, 'cause the land wasn't then — and isn't now — in either of them places. (*MD*, 5)

Therefore new landmarks must be set and explained, with a specific chronology that, unlike textbook history, stresses the links with various cultures. Besides, these connections are presented as deeply integrated values that cannot be divorced from the modern perception of identity; this refers to the unconscious cultural soul to be uncovered by the conscious enterprise of modern historians.

As the first recorded owner of the island, Bascombe Wade is the only reference that can be accepted: “And when they tried to trace him and how he got it, they found out he wasn't even American. Was Norway-born or something, and the land had been sitting in his family over there in Europe since it got explored

and claimed by the Vikings — imagine that.” (*MD*, 5) The heritage is denied any American value. On the contrary, it refers to an ill-defined ancient culture whose echoes pervade the text indirectly. No real European specificity is claimed but we can notice the barbarian connotation and the allusion to the first European discoverers of the new world. Even the first settler is an outsider with vague references. The Viking heritage is subtly perceived through the references to *Hamlet* and Ophelia's name, to create a new system of references.

The next landmark is extremely precise — 1823 — even if presented in a somewhat puzzling way. It corresponds to the introduction in December 1823 of the Monroe doctrine of no foreign entanglement “emphasizing the separation of the Old World and the New.”⁶ So the date symbolically chosen claims the independence of the island while directly referring to a year of deep crisis in the cotton trade: in 1823 prices collapsed, threatening the new economic order relying on slavery, after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 in Georgia, leading to the very economic pattern that was to lead to the Civil War, the next landmark chosen in the story.

The emancipation of Willow-Springs's slaves predates the Civil War, so they feel no debt toward the Yankees, which justifies the rejection of the Union soldiers who tried to draw the island into mainstream America to get money out of it, but gave up after a long legal battle that went as far up as the Supreme Court; the fight is also a financial quarrel so that the islanders accept to pay what they owe but nothing more. Their way to win is to discourage the enemy: “We guess they got so tired out from that, they decided to leave us be — until them developers started swarming over here like sand flies at a Sunday picnic.” (*MD*, 6)

This leads us to present day exploitation of the land which also poses a certain threat, if the example of the nearby islands is anything to go by:

'Cause it weren't about no them now and us later — was them now and us never. Hadn't we seen it happen back in the '80s on St. Helena, Daufuskie, and St. John's? And before that in the '60s on Hilton Head? Got them folks' land, built fences around it first thing, and then brought in all the builders and high-paid managers from mainside — ain't nobody on them islands benefited. And the only dark faces you see now in them “vacation paradises” is the ones cleaning the toilets and cutting the grass. (*MD*, 6)

⁶ Blum, Morgan, Rose, Schlesinger, Stamp, Woodward, *The National Heritage, A History of the United States* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1981) p. 201.

As the twentieth century battle takes up the financial theme and reintroduces the debate about the exploitation of race, it also underlines the possible continuation of the conflict in the future.

Following the laws of the genre, this *utopia* proposes a legal system meant to ensure its survival and to transcend the degradation brought about by time. The system reveals a deep cunning and a complex organization that also sets limits to the foolishness and greed of man: "Some kind of crazy clause in our deed. It's always owned two generations down. That's to keep any Day from selling it." (*MD*, 219) This obsession already framed the black community described in Naylor's *Linden Hills*⁷ as if mistrust was the basic reason for forging a literary black *utopia* that guarantees strength in a way black politicians cannot provide in reality. This dream is, somehow, more real than Martin Luther King's because it belongs to an untouchable world, far from the world of successful Blacks who may forget the ideals that originally motivated them and which got lost in the mainstream American dream. The hero, George, represents here the well-meaning but useless self-made man who only comes to understand his duties fully when he is faced with an all-black community.

So the island is the necessary artifice to the building of a myth that encompasses the various realities of the black population. It does not exist officially but it contains enough elements borrowed from the real world to make it plausible. The two voices heard in the text aim at producing a type of reality that transcends the limits of time and space, giving meaning to signs that would otherwise not be understood. The text opens up a new dimension by setting the writing process beyond its usual boundaries, in a timeless space: the date indicated — 1999 — sounds fictitious to the reader and deprives him of his familiar environment. Consequently, past, present and future must be redefined. Such a reference baffles the reader into accepting the transcription of an oral tradition that defies time. The choice of a date that still belongs to this century underlines the wish of the author that his work should not be read as science fiction but as a recollection of a past that had never been told in traditional American literature; the turn of the century could then be perceived as a possible turning point in the black consciousness, when myth may meet a new reality.

The introduction of a reflection upon the perception of time is the element that allows action to take place. The inhabitants of the island are too engrossed in their every day reality to grasp any change taking place on the island:

⁷ . Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986).

So time's doing what it's always done, standing still this summer here in Willow-Springs. We might as well be a picture postcard as Dr Buzzard's blue pickup comes wobbling over the bridge with Cocoa this mid-August. No different this August than the last, even though he's got an extra passenger. We're finally gonna see this new husband, while he ain't gonna see nothing new at all. (*LH*, 163)

The visitor brings a new point of view that cannot even be contemplated by the natives who do not imagine that reality can be perceived from a different angle. This pseudo reasoning strikes the reader as a sign to be deciphered: postcard reality can only be an illusion the visitor has to uncover; he brings in a notion of comparison — refusing immobility — as he asks questions about all that seems natural and taken for granted. Even Cocoa, the girl who has moved to New York, cannot resist the engulfing power of the place:

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 to a total stranger. (*LH*, 49)

Travel changes one's perception of reality. Cocoa can feel various levels of consciousness in herself but the island quickly numbs her intuition. However, the idea of measurement suggests the interference of the intellect with the feelings. She leaves behind a world of innocent enjoyment to turn toward an intellectual appreciation of existence. She also senses the importance of familiarity and of a community feeling in the shaping of a stable personality.

Her experience of a totally different life in New York illustrates the author's obsession with the emergence of consciousness. The background chosen recalls home in so far as the image of the island is present. Staten Island and Manhattan offer both the urban setting of an anonymous existence and the gentle familiarity of a place that combines the charm of the sea-world with the security of the land. The pervasive flow of the water soothes the atmosphere and recalls the theme of the voyage to an unknown and fascinating world where the wealth of the landscape provides enough food for thought for individual personal fulfillment:

And since I'd been over much of the city many times it was fun showing it to someone new, seeing it all over again through their eyes. And it had been loads of fun, watching you change. You weren't becoming different, you were going back to the way you were. (*LH*, 100)

However, she must be introduced to the real charms of this new place and only someone who appreciates it can guide her beyond her prejudices. The girl came to New York to start an independent life but through her fear of herself and of the others she misses all the pleasures and magic of the place:

You have to stand in the middle of the George Washington Bridge on a clear day to really understand the low sweeping coastline from the south, creeping up into the rocky Palisades on the north end with the Hudson glimmering along its side — the sailboats, the rowers, the gulls. My first reaction was where in the hell did all this water come from? Water that changed from a muddy brown into fingertips of real blue as it wound past the north Bronx into upstate. Standing there under and over all that incredible space, I saw how small and cramped my life had been. (*LH*, 98)

This moment of epiphany illustrates the importance of serious observation, of an internal voyage that can take place thanks to the contemplation of the external beauties of nature or of civilization we tend to ignore. It is more difficult for Cocoa to understand the beauty of New York than to give up the easy physical comfort offered by her native island.

Similarly it may be disquieting for the hero to submit to the power of the tropical island and to be engulfed in the depths of a totally different universe:

I had to be there and see — no, feel — that I was entering another world. Where even the word *paradise* failed once I crossed over The Sound ... But how do I describe air that thickens so that it seems as solid as the water, causing colors and sounds and textures to actually float in it? ... And if someone had asked me about the fragrance from the whisperings of the palmettos, or the distant rush of the surf, I would have said that it all smelled like forever. (*LH*, 175)

Again first hand experience is presented as the key to the discovery of a deeper level of existence that transcends everyday experience and reaches to an almost religious understanding of reality, of the universality of all elements, and a taste of the pleasures of eternity.

The fullness of reality can be reached only under specific circumstances once you have crossed the bridge. The enclosed space of the island is where the complex soul gropes for an identity that can withstand all attacks. The “being” then experiences a moment of crisis and physical destruction becomes necessary in a purification process; time is abolished like in the tradition of the Shakespearean tragedy as the protagonists become part of a historical chain that they would otherwise have forgotten: “I was marooned on an island in the middle of the twentieth century. At least I thought it was the twentieth century until I saw Ber-

nice Duvall drive up to that silver trailer.” (LH, 175) The worst experience in the history of black slaves fighting for freedom serves here as an echo to that experience of a loss felt on the deepest personal level: the death of a young child eventually born after a long yearning. This death reminds us that the intensity of existence lies beyond the fulfillment of desire; Bernice had the child thanks to Mama Day's knowledge, but even she cannot overcome destiny.

Simultaneously, another drama is developing on the devastated island: Ophelia is the victim of a voodoo charm and her body is rotting while her mind is deteriorating. The image of herself reflected in the mirror materializes this gradual destruction

The flesh from both cheeks was now hanging in strings under my ears, and moving my head caused them to wiggle like hooked worms. I stepped away from the mirrored image with my hands on my cheeks. There was nothing wrong with my face. But I couldn't stand to see myself clutching that stringy flesh in front of me. (LH, 276)

Only her own image matters now, beyond what she feels to be real, and it becomes the only truth for her. Her tortured reflection expresses her inner fight for survival. The mirror itself is a metaphor for the enclosed space of the island and of the mind; only the husband still feels obsessed with escape and keeps running to the bridge

You were edgy and short-tempered in a way I hadn't known before. Finishing the bridge. Finishing the bridge. A constant obsession when you left in the morning, came back for lunch, and returned again in the evening. No one was working fast enough, no one was working long enough. (LH, 272)

The accelerating rhythm only leads to a vicious time circle, in which repetition expresses failure and time becomes a trap.

This is what Mama Day clearly understands when she retires to “the other place,” beyond time; she tries to reach back to the past because no medicine from the continent can cure hate. Ophelia is not the victim of circumstances: she just takes her place in the chain of the women of the family condemned to bring destruction to the men who love them.

I had to stay in this place and reach back to the beginning for us to find the chains to pull her out of this here trouble. Now, I got all that is in this hand but it ain't gonna be complete unless I can reach out with the other hand and take yours. You see, she done bound more than her flesh up with you. And since she's suffering from something more than the flesh, I can't do a thing without you. (LH, 294)

Mama Day's power is that of a mediator who can call up memories that are necessary to understand what is going on — namely the memories of all the women in the family who died because they could not find peace — and in doing so, she ensures the survival of the family itself whose last representative is Ophelia, the Baby Girl. The husband represents the hope for a different culture as he refuses to believe in fatality. Nevertheless, his identity is not complete because he lacks the knowledge of his past and can only find it through his wife. So, the two characters appear complementary and when he becomes one of the family his existence reaches its fulfillment and he can disappear. Mama Day hands him the book containing the first recording of the woman-creator-of-the-race and the symbolic stick, before he can set out to find the unknown object to save his wife. He literally dies of a “broken heart,” as in the prophecy, because in spite of his self-reliance he must yield to “pure power.”

What a magnificent ending to an insignificant existence. But remaining untouched with the relentless winds keeping on and on, the realization of my insignificance caused a lump in my throat. (*LH*, 252)

In fact, by reaching his limits and sacrificing his life to his wife, he reaches eternity and his voice can for ever be heard in the graveyard, blowing in the wind as the reader knows from the first pages of the book. He becomes part of the legend about the origins of the Days, which can be understood only if one pays attention to the right details. All the tiny elements of history and of myth scattered along the text can be stitched together into the pattern of life. The metaphor of quilting makes us see the writing process as an attempt at clarification: Miranda and Abigail — whose name suggests that her role is to serve — make a magnificent quilt as a wedding present for Ophelia. Under this quilt, whose size is symbolic, children will be conceived to perpetrate the Days — or simply life:

After I unfolded the quilt, all seven square feet of it, we stood there in awe for a moment. You wanted to clear a wall in the living room and hang it up. But it had been made to be used. (*LH*, 147)

The two old women used scraps of material belonging to all the previous generations and Miranda, while working at it, could see the legend of the family taking shape.

Thus folk art expresses the same complexes as the myth, so that it must be accepted as a form of folktale reaching far beyond a simple story. The name of the family refers to the origins of the world as they are described in the Bible; the

first names of the seven boys refer to characters in the Bible as well, their seven sons allude to the New Testament and the three girls to the image of the Trinity. The legend has mixed religious elements with black beliefs and the image of the woman flying back to Africa. Cultures are reconciled into a complex new mythology that transcends space and time and quilting is the clearest illustration of the work of the woman artist who is seen searching bags containing fragments of the past. She is responsible for the pattern and the choice of the colors; but beyond certain limits, the past cannot be undone, so that the author is a prisoner; like her characters, she can only bring meaning and beauty to outward chaos. While sewing *Mama Day* hears the voices of the past, even gets glimpses of dead ancestors and while listening to the ticking of the clock she starts to understand the past and foresee the future. The creating process is useful to the creator herself who is forced into opening her mind to what disturbs her peace.

She tries to put her mind somewhere else, but she only has the homespun, the gingham, and the silver flashing of the needle. *Or the next*. ... It was too late to take it out of the quilt, and it didn't matter no way. Could she take herself out? Could she take out Abigail? Could she take 'em all out and start again? With what? Miranda finishes the curve and runs her hands along the stitching. When it's done right you can't tell where one ring ends and the other begins. It's like they ain't been sewn at all, they grew up out of nowhere. (*LH*, 138)

The figure of the overlapping circles evokes the structure of the book written like a dialogue between two voices telling the same story from different points of view, speaking beyond the limits of death in a perpetual present that is an everlasting contemplation of a past shared or inherited. Thus, the text is another world, a *utopia*, in which the ritual of Candle Walk ensures the link with the myth. The metaphor of the walk suggests the progression toward a truth that can be perceived only piecemeal through repetition and slight changes, like in the quilt.

The final image of an object of art open to admiration sets a pattern of communication in which only the time of the exchange matters. The two voices can be heard anywhere, at any time:

You done heard it without a single soul living soul really saying a word. Pity, though, Reena's boy couldn't listen, like you, to Cocoa and George down by them oaks — or he woulda left with quite a story. (*LH*, 10)

The experiences of the two islands converge to shape this new time; Cocoa's heritage provides a strong sense of identity whereas George's motto "Only the present has potential" (*LH*, 23) has come to encompass the past identity of his race, such as a strong legendary woman bequeathed it to the people of her mythical island.

