

TRACING THE MOTHERLAND: AUTOBIOGRAPHY, MIGRATION, AND  
MATRILINEALITY IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY*

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Tuesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> Day August, 1819. Sold to Mister Bascombe Wade of Willow Springs, one negress answering to the name Sapphira. Age 20.

-Bill of sale in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

We are rooted in language, wedded, have our being in words. Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.

-bell hooks in *talking back: thinking feminist thinking black*

Gloria Naylor's 1988 novel, *Mama Day*, tells the story of the descendants of a black slave woman named Sapphira Wade, focusing primarily on the themes of cultural inheritance and ancestral belonging. The author examines these issues through the creation of Willow Springs, an imaginary island off of the U.S. coast owned by the descendants of ex-slaves. Sapphira Wade's descendants—sisters named Miranda (Mama) Day and Abigail—are the island's protectors. The novel tells us that, initially, in the nineteenth century, a Norwegian slave-master named Bascombe Wade owned Willow Springs and used black slaves to work his plantations. Wade bought and married his slave Sapphira Wade, who used conjure to convince Bascombe to pass down the land to his slaves; she also used conjure to kill him. With the tangled history of Willow Springs as the background of the narrative, *Mama Day* shows life for the black inhabitants of Willow Springs, living in 1999, as they incorporate Sapphira Wade's memory into their daily life. Naylor's character, Mama Day, the current matriarch of the Day matrilineal line and Sapphira Wade's great-granddaughter, is one of the protectors of Sapphira's memory. The story also focuses on the light-skinned Ophelia Day, the youngest descendant of the line who Mama Day also names Cocoa. The text suggests that Mama

Day does this so that Ophelia is constantly reminded of her blackness and ancestral heritage. Also, Cocoa's husband George, a black man who is a native of New York City, is integral to Cocoa Day's narrative. The novel starts with the voice of a resident of Willow Springs who shares the history of the island and paints a picture of Mama Day's daily life in Willow Springs. This recounting is found along with alternating passages, which, when combined, is a conversation between Cocoa Day and George. And yet, by the end of the novel, we realize that George is deceased, which means that he is speaking from the dead. Remarried and living in South Carolina, Cocoa Day travels to George's grave, where she recounts to George her life in Willow Springs, migration between her birthplace and New York City, and her private feelings about her late husband. Cocoa relives these memories as a means of making sense of George's death.

Cocoa's narrative also reveals how integral a part Sapphira Wade plays in Cocoa's identity and character, particularly in terms of Cocoa's definition of modern black femininity. Reading Cocoa's narrative as an autobiography underscores the multifaceted nature of her self-formation; in order to discuss her life, Cocoa Day must discuss the women who raised her. Sapphira's claiming of Willow Springs is at the foundation of Cocoa Day's ability to define herself and her experiences.

### **Historical and Cultural Context**

As a way of introducing this relationship between Sapphira Wade and Cocoa Day, Naylor uses paratextual documents at the beginning of the narrative. These documents help frame her novel within the history of black enslavement. They include a family tree showing Sapphira Wade's descendants. In particular, Naylor prefaces the narrative with a

bill of sale that advertises Sapphira Wade while also foreshadowing Bascombe Wade's downfall. A segment of the bill of sale reads, "Sapphira is half prime, inflicted with sullenness and entertains a bilious nature, having resisted under reasonable chastisement the performance of field or domestic labour" (1). Naylor's inclusion of the bill of sale gives the reader the first indication that the novel is situated within nineteenth century discourses on slavery— especially narratives written by black women. This bill of sale silences Sapphira's voice and ability to define herself. The reader sees the power and force of language to obscure the truth, to hide the horrors and irrationality of slavery through the criminalization of Sapphira.<sup>1</sup> This is seen in the line in the bill of sale that states that Sapphira's behavior is irrational considering her slave-masters' good treatment and "reasonable chastisement." These words subjugate Sapphira by criminalizing and pathologizing her behavior.

What the seller described as an infliction is really Sapphira's desire for freedom from slavery. Moreover, it is not in Sapphira's nature to be "bilious." In other words, Sapphira's behavior is not rooted in pathology or a "biological" defect. On the contrary, we are to understand the desire for freedom as the driving force behind her behavior. Mama Day poignantly describes Sapphira Wade's desire to return back to her native homeland, Africa, when she says, "she [Sapphira] left in a ball of fire to journey back home east over the ocean" (111). The phrase, "ball of fire," represents an intensity of emotion. In particular, fire is supposed to symbolize Sapphira Wade's strong desire to return home. It is this same desire that motivates Sapphira Wade to kill her slave-master and escape. Sapphira's desire for freedom is also described by George, who states, "No, there was something more, and something deeper than the old historical line about slave

women and their white masters. A slave hadn't lived in this house. And without a slave, there could be no master. What had Miss Miranda said—he [Bascombe Wade] had claim to her body, but not her mind?" (225). Speaking from the dead, George reacts against the notion that Sapphira was solely a victim under Bascombe Wade. On the contrary, Sapphira's desire to be free meant that she had agency over her slave-master. Therefore, although the bill of sale is meant to symbolize whites' control over Sapphira Wade's body and justify her subjugation, Sapphira's thoughts and emotions resist enslavement.

However, if the bill of sale is meant to represent whites' justification for black enslavement, the story of Sapphira Wade and her descendants counters this subjugation, especially of black women, by offering a view of black women that portrays them as human and as agents who desire freedom and self-determination. Nineteenth-century black women autobiographers such as Harriet Jacobs and Mary Prince used the slave narrative genre to show their humanity and agency.<sup>2</sup> As ex-slaves, both women recount personal horrors of slavery while detailing moments when they physically, linguistically, and mentally resisted and outsmarted their masters. Jacobs's and Prince's slave narratives generate a counter-discourse against whites' portrayal of black women as powerless, sub-human, strictly sexual, and non-intelligent, which are attributes that arise from Naylor's bill of sale. For instance, Prince displays her humanity and agency in her narrative when she exclaims, "Oh the horrors of slavery!--How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave--I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows..."(11). Here, Prince denounces slavery and caters to her audience's emotions in order to show how traumatic the institution is. The

exclamation at the beginning of the passage reveals Prince's humanity, chiefly the aspect of pain and grief.

Furthermore, Prince takes ownership of her particular experience of slavery and justifies her position as an author: because she was a slave, she has the agency to speak on the behalf of other slaves in order to end the institution. Prince calls her authorship a "duty," wherein she displays integrity and strength. In her essay, "The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave: *The History of Mary Prince*," Sandra Pouchet Paquet observes that Mary Prince "uses her individual life story to establish and validate a slave's point of view. Through her distinct voice, the slave narrative as evidence of victimization and document of legal history, is transformed into a triumphant narrative of emergent West Indian subjectivity in the gendered space of a black woman and slave" (131). Paquet understands Prince's slave narrative as a reflection of Prince's subjectivity since she shares with the reader personal experiences of her enslavement. Furthermore, Paquet demonstrates that the personal can be political, whereby Prince's personal testament of enslavement and agency comes to represent the humanity of all black slaves.

### **Autobiography in *Mama Day***

Cocoa Day's narration also counters stereotypes that dehumanize black women. Her narration reads as an intimate confession to her deceased husband. Given its intimacy and first-person perspective, Cocoa's narration can be read as an autobiography. Rita Felski writes in her article, "On Confession," that she defines confession as a "type of autobiographical writing which signals its intention to foreground the most personal and intimate details of the author's life" (83). As Felski argues, autobiography reveals the

innermost thoughts and feelings of the author. To “confess” ultimately means to “reveal,” in which case, Cocoa Day reveals what dominant society obscures: an interiority. This interiority includes human emotions such as happiness, sadness, and loneliness. In addition, interiority also includes one’s personal thoughts about herself and her relationship with the outside world. Naylor’s decision to narrate Cocoa’s story using first-person guarantees that the reader is able to develop a close relationship to this character and to sympathize with her. As a result, Naylor is able to showcase the humanity of black women and their ability to think critically about their relationship with the world.

Importantly, Cocoa’s personal narrative reveals her relationship with her matrilineal heritage. This essay argues that the autobiographical qualities of black women’s slave narratives are integral to *Mama Day*. Naylor borrows rhetorical devices from the slave narrative genre to shape Cocoa’s first-person narration. These devices include confession, signifying, self-construction, and self-confirmation. The imaginative possibilities of fictional black female autobiography offer Naylor a creative space to form a work that reveals how trauma, memory, culture, and tradition are passed down in a matrilineal family.<sup>3</sup> These imaginative possibilities of autobiography include the availability of literary tools that can be used to overlap varying temporalities and geographical spaces. This is possible because, as Naylor seems to be arguing, autobiography is inherently polyvocal. The voices of those who influenced and shaped the autobiographer will always surface in her personal narrative.

Cocoa Day’s reflection on her life reveals her personal feelings and thoughts about her relationship with her matrilineal heritage. In particular, the reader encounters how Sapphira Wade and the elders of the Day matrilineal line have provided Cocoa Day

with integral rhetorical devices and critical tools. This “inheritance” provides Cocoa with the agency to construct her own definition of black womanhood from her personal experiences. Discussing the issue of inheritance in regards to the relationship between nineteenth and twentieth century black women’s writing, Nellie Y. McKay writes, “The black female narrative tradition thus evolved from the process of reinventing the self out of the specificities of each black woman’s experiences” (McKay 100). McKay refers to nineteenth-century black women writers’ use of the personal to counter the universalizing discourse of proponents of slavery and black subjugation who simplified and caricatured the black experience. In resistance to this simplification, black women writers conveyed how particular the black experience was to each individual; they demonstrated this by writing about specific experiences and personal feelings. Challenging the persistent universalizing discourses, twentieth century black women writers also used personal experience to show the complex nature of the modern black female experience.

The autobiographical nature of the slave narrative is crucial to the genre’s success in combating these negative attributes assigned to blacks by whites. As Frances Smith Foster writes, “The slave narrative was a special kind of autobiographical writing” (xxx). Through autobiography, black ex-slaves could construct personal narratives of slavery that spoke to their own views of black subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> In the minds of whites, blacks did not have a subjectivity, which means that blacks were understood as not having either interiority or humanity. As Naylor’s bill of sale indicates, black slaves had no personality. They were never individualized: each enslaved black was not thought of as unique but rather as part of a black monolithic mass. Authors of slave narratives sought to counter this reductive perception by displaying a black subjectivity that included intelligence,



critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to feel. Authors were speaking against blacks being limited to their exterior. Black skin itself was pathologized and was made to stand in for the entire individual. Furthermore, during slavery, blacks were merely understood as commodities to be bought and used for labor and exploitation. As a consequence, blacks were viewed solely as objects to be managed rather than human beings who had their own thoughts and desires. As Lewis R. Gordon argues about the history of dominant discourses surrounding the black body, “This presence-absence dichotomy is constituted by a particular way of existing. The phenomenological tradition, both existential and transcendental, considers the locus of this dichotomy to be in the unsurpassability of the material standpoint of inquiry itself—the body” (71). Parks refers to the fact that the black individual’s identity has been strictly tied to his or her exterior. As such, the personality and individuality of the black individual was made invisible—which speaks to Parks’ reference of the presence-absence divide.

Saidiya Hartman, too, refers to this state of black invisibility when she defines the black slave existing in a “state of determinate negation” (52). Here, Hartman addresses whites’ move to evacuate blacks of desire, feeling, and emotion; this also includes whites’ erasure of black suffering and pain in order to justify enslavement. And yet, this negation has continued long past the period of black enslavement. For example, due to Jim Crow, black stereotypes such as the Sambo and Mammy figures have been perpetuated in order to paint blacks as being content with their positions in society. As a result, whites in power have been able to justify political, economic, and social discrimination. However, nineteenth century black women writers used their texts to bridge the constructed divide between body and soul in order to speak out against this

discrimination. “Soul” here refers to the presence of human thought and feeling. Hartman’s theory of the negation of blacks’ ability to feel speaks to the question of soul. Proponents of slavery justified this practice by denying blacks a soul and personality. And furthermore, slave-masters also justified sexual violence against black female slaves through the denial of their soul. This denial included depicting black women as overly sexual and physical beings. Also, as commodities, black women were viewed essentially as stock that could biologically produce more bodies that whites could enslave. Black women resisted these limitations to their exteriors through autobiography, whereby they could show their capabilities of self-reflection and self-determination; black women were more than just their bodies. Johnnie M. Stover articulates the political dimension of nineteenth century black women autobiography when she writes,

The typical nineteenth-century black woman’s autobiography is much more than a personal narrative that merely remarks on her personal growth; it is a social discourse that applies a unique black woman’s voice to the interpretation and recording of her life experiences within a historical context that saw black Americans attempting to establish their humanity and self-worth in the eyes of a dominant white American society that granted them neither (133).

Stover argues that the black female slave narrative is inherently oppositional in that black women’s act of writing troubles the notion that blacks had no personal stance from which to enter a discourse on slavery. On the contrary, black women ex-slaves shared personal

experiences of slavery and used these experiences to denounce the institution as a whole. As Stover articulates, through recording their narratives, black women writers affirmed their right to speak against slavery. And furthermore, the variety of black women slave narratives demonstrates the singularity of each woman's experience. In this case, the collection of slave narratives is a testament of the variety of opinions on slavery coming out of the black female experience. It is through this variety that each black woman's humanity is affirmed.

Reading Cocoa's first-person narrative as a fictional autobiography underscores the literary tradition Naylor follows. Nellie Y. McKay suggests in her article, "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black Women's Autobiography" that what twentieth century black women learned from their female ancestors of the nineteenth century was that "black womanhood was not static or a single ideal. The selves in stories of the early foremothers reveal black female identity as a process of ongoing reinvention of self" (100). McKay argues that at the root of nineteenth century texts composed [meaning written or oral] by black women was a resignification of black womanhood. In black women slave narratives in particular, we find authors using their personal experiences during slavery to create notions of black womanhood that counter dominant discourses that portray the black woman as inferior and pathological. What black women writers of slave narratives also offered was a wide range of definitions of black femininity and womanhood; Harriet Jacobs's text, for example, reveals the multidimensionality of black womanhood.<sup>5</sup> In this case, Jacobs's definition of black womanhood is constantly shifting to meet a wide range of needs and desires.<sup>6</sup> For instance, describing her feelings when Mr. Flint—her slave master—asks her to return to

him after she escapes, Harriet Jacobs writes, “I did not return the family of Flints any thanks for their cordial invitation—a remissness for which I was, no doubt, charged with base ingratitude” (120). Here, Jacobs desires to convey to her audience a sense of agency and confidence along with her ability to be comical. Jacobs displays literary creativity in her recounting of her resistance to enslavement and her attitude toward her ex-slave-master. And more importantly, Jacobs is assertive in the passage, making a clear decision not to return to her captor.

As a result of Jacobs’s rhetorical strategies, members of the anti-slavery movement who read her narrative would have been exposed to an alternative view of the capabilities of black women. Pro-slavery literature such as U.S. politician William J. Grayson’s *Hireling and the Slave Chicora, and Other Poems* sought to portray blacks as non-intelligent. Grayson writes,

Hence is the Negro come, by God’s command,  
For wiser teaching to a foreign land;  
If they who brought him were by Mammon driven,  
Still have they served, blind instruments of Heaven;  
And though the way be rough, the agent stern,  
No better mode can human wits discern,  
No happier system wealth or virtue find,  
To tame and elevate the Negro mind (35).

In this passage, Grayson expresses paternalism, arguing that whites have the responsibility of “elevating the Negro mind.” He implies that blacks are born without

intellect, only learning through whites; hence, Grayson refers to blacks as being blind, whereby whites must lead them. As a consequence, slavery itself is seen as an essential teaching tool. Grayson continues to argue that blacks will be happy to be enslaved in order to be led, which obscures how horrific, cruel, and violent slavery was. What Jacobs would have provided her white audience was a counter-argument to the notion that black women could not express themselves articulately or creatively. And as an autobiography, Jacobs's slave narrative reveals interiority and shows black women to be agents in the construction of constantly shifting definitions of black femininity. It is this agency to signify that had been historically denied to black women. For example, discussing her feelings while hiding from her slave-master, Jacobs writes, "But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look on their faces; but there was no hole, no crack, through which I could peep" (80). While in her previous passage she is strong and comical, in this passage, Jacobs expresses sadness because she is separated from her children. Jacobs's feelings resist Grayson's notion of a black subject who finds happiness in enslavement. On the contrary, Jacobs reveals the horrific nature of slavery, including black mothers' separation from their children.

### **Remembering Slavery**

In essence, Gloria Naylor follows in the tradition of nineteenth century literary black female ancestors like Harriet Jacobs. This is supported by a 2000 interview, where she points to black women writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker as being fundamental influences in her decision to become a writer.<sup>7</sup> When Ethel Morgan Smith

asks Naylor how she became interested in becoming a writer, Naylor states, “As an older student at Brooklyn College, I had discovered black women writers like Nikki Giovanni, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Discovering all of their work led me to believe that I could also add my own voice” (1432). For Naylor, writers such as Marshall, Morrison, and Walker foster a literary space that encourages intertextuality and dialogue. In particular, Naylor discusses twentieth century black women literature as a safe space, as she felt encouraged and empowered to contribute her views on black womanhood. Given that these specific writers inspired Naylor, it is important to note that both Morrison’s and Walker’s texts—*Beloved* and *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* for example—are shaped by the memory of slavery. In this case, Naylor’s interview communicates a trajectory that can be traced from nineteenth century black women writers on slavery to twentieth century black women writers remembering slavery and imagining alternative ways of writing about slavery. For instance, contemporary writers have incorporated the slave narrative genre as a means of theorizing and imagining the impact of slavery on the descendants of slaves. Naylor’s text, for instance, explores how Sapphira’s experience as a slave shapes how her descendants’ view themselves as black women.

Naylor’s text also explores how Sapphira’s descendants choose to remember Sapphira’s period of enslavement, which reflects the larger project of contemporary authors writing about slavery. Naylor’s characters understand Sapphira as having agency despite her enslavement and desire to apply her strength to their modern-day existence. Valerie Smith affirms in her essay as she looks both to the past and the future in regards to the neo-slave narrative genre that “there is every indication that black writers will

continue to wrestle with the legacy of slavery in contemporary culture...new perspectives on the institution of slavery are certain to emerge” (183). Both Valerie Smith’s theorization of the neo-slave narrative and Arlene R. Keizer’s work on what she calls, “contemporary narratives of slavery,” help to illuminate how the slave narrative genre and the memory of slavery shapes the aesthetics one finds in twentieth century African American literature. Their theorization also provides answers as to why contemporary writers of African American literature look to the slave narrative genre as an artistic framework.<sup>8</sup>

In Naylor’s text in particular, the author creates a collage, experimenting with what could be considered fragments of a family history, that, when pieced together, trace a trajectory from Sapphira Wade to the current matriarch, Mama Day, down to Cocoa Day. The collection of paratextual elements of the novel begins this trajectory. The map, for example, shows Willow Springs’ proximity to South Carolina, where Cocoa Day currently lives. Included in the map of Willow Springs are the Day family plot, the Day family house, Mama Day’s house, and Abigail Day’s house. The presence of a bridge in the map that connects South Carolina and the island symbolizes cross-cultural exchange between Cocoa Day and her relatives living in Willow Springs. Following this map is a family tree showing Sapphira Wade’s descendants. What makes this tree distinct is the absence of the men with whom Sapphira produced children; Sapphira Wade is the sole head of the tree. As a consequence, the genealogical tree indicates to the reader that the novel is rooted in matrilineality and the specific things Sapphira Wade passed down to her descendants. Sapphira Wade’s centrality to the text is expressed by the passage located at the bottom of the family tree, which reads: ““God rested on the seventh day

and so would she [Sapphira].” Hence, the family’s last name” (1). This passage alludes to the book of Genesis, which details God’s creation of the world in seven days. Thus, Sapphira Wade is established as a God-figure who has created her own geographical space and produced human beings that will be the “stewards” of this space. In this case, the family tree notes black female reproduction in two senses: the biological process and cultural inheritance.

And lastly, the bill of sale also reflects Sapphira Wade’s ties to her descendants, albeit the language pathologizes one of the qualities she passes down—her resistance. What all three documents share is the emphasis on connections, either physical or non-physical. The map indicates the importance of geography and place in this narrative, specifically the juxtaposition of different geographical spaces. Meanwhile, the tree references genealogy and the relationship between generations. The bill of sale ultimately integrates geography and genealogy: the document records that Bascombe Wade purchased Sapphira, whereby she brings her attitude of resistance to Willow Springs. This resistance alters Willow Springs, as the island is essentially “reborn” and becomes the property of Bascombe Wade’s ex-slaves, specifically the women of the Day matrilineal line. Furthermore, Sapphira Wade passes down this resistance to her descendants, who are constantly reminded of Sapphira’s strength as a black woman through the landscape of Willow Springs. Being next in line to become the matriarch of the Day matrilineal line, Cocoa Day’s migration between Willow Springs, New York City, and South Carolina encourages her to think about her evolving relationship with her birthplace. Simultaneously, the history of Sapphira Wade and Willow Springs surfaces in Cocoa Day’s reflection on place and belonging.



Through Cocoa's narration, Naylor demonstrates the integral part of Sapphira Wade's role in claiming Willow Springs and providing for the health and futurity of the Day matrilineal line. The island itself is inextricably tied to Sapphira Wade. Through Sapphira's labor, her line has the space and freedom to define black femininity and womanhood on their own terms. This freedom and power to signify is rooted in the geographical setting of Willow Springs. It is in this geographical space through which a discursive space can be grounded by the Day matrilineal line, whereby definitions of black womanhood can be both individually and collectively constructed, interrogated, and reworked. The resident describes Cocoa's relationship to Willow Springs at the beginning of the narrative, where he or she describes her journey to George's gravesite:

She [Cocoa] stops and puts a bit of moss in her open-toe sandals, then goes on past those graves to a spot just down the rise toward The Sound, a little but south of that circle of oaks. And if he was patient and stayed off a little ways, he'd realize she was there to meet up with her first husband so they could talk about that summer fourteen years ago when she left, but he stayed. And as her and George are there together for a good two hours or so—neither one saying a word—Reema's boy coulda heard from them everything there was to tell about 18&23 (Naylor 7).

Right before this passage, the narrator tells the story of Reema, a black mother living in Willow Springs in 1999. Specifically, the narrator describes Reema's son, who has migrated from Willow Springs to the U.S. for an education. Describing his growth, the narrator states, "Look what happened when Reema's boy—the one with the pear-shaped

head—came hauling himself back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder and a funny way of curling up his lip and clicking his teeth, all excited and determined to put Willow Springs on the map” (7). The narrator underscores the change that happens when members of Willow Springs migrate from the island. Considering Willow Springs’ position as not belonging to either Europe or the United States, the island is left out of discussions of geography, especially U.S. geography. In this case, people like Reema’s son who come from abroad desire to make Willow Springs legible to the outside world.<sup>9</sup> Reema’s son—for example, begins a study of Willow Springs, asking the residents about the meaning of “18&23.” This saying refers to the historical significance of the year 1823, when Sapphira Wade used conjure to deceive and kill Bascombe Wade. As a result, as part of the culture of Willow Springs, residents use “18&23” as a reference to any use of conjure.

The narrator argues that Reema’s son could learn more about the history of Willow Springs and 18&23 by listening to Cocoa in the graveyard, where she is having some form of communication with George. Cocoa’s act of putting moss in her shoes is part of the ritual of the Day matrilineal line when they visit the Day family plot. The narrator speaks to the importance of this ritual in another passage, which goes back in time to a point when Cocoa and Mama Day go to the family plot together: “They near the graveyard within the circle of the live oaks and move down into time. A bit of hanging moss to cushion each foot and they’re among the beginning of Days” (150). As part of the conjure tradition, the insertion of moss under the feet has the magical power of mentally and spiritually transporting Cocoa Day and Mama Day to the beginning of their genealogy, or to Sapphira Day. The book of Genesis resurfaces here, whereby Cocoa and

Mama Day's transportation to an alternative temporality not only brings forth Sapphira Wade, but her importance to Willow Springs. Mama Day evokes this history when she goes to her uncles' gravestones with Cocoa, stating, "All of them was born into slavery time, but they lived as free men 'cause their mama willed it so. She became such a legend that black folks, white folks, and even red folks in my time would only whisper the name Sapphira" (151). Here, the graveyard becomes a site for remembering Sapphira Wade, whose actions liberated her sons and other blacks from enslavement. By passing down the moss ritual, Sapphira allows Mama Day and Cocoa insight into her history. In this case, geography and natural landscape become crucial to remembering Sapphira Wade, and remembering Sapphira Wade becomes crucial to learning the history of Willow Springs.<sup>10</sup>

Cocoa Day's visit to George's gravestone evokes a layering of alternate temporalities: the moss calls forth Sapphira's memory, through which Cocoa is able to communicate with George. And essentially, Cocoa's communication with George motivates her to reflect on her personal history and experiences. Most notably, Cocoa reflects on her experience as a black woman migrating between Willow Springs and New York City and how she used the traditions Mama Day and Abigail passed down to her in order to survive. Concurrently, Sapphira Wade speaks through Cocoa's personal history. Cocoa expresses the ability of the moss to integrate both her personal history and the voice of Sapphira when she states, "As soon as I put the moss in my shoes, I could hear them all in the wind as it moved through the trees and stirred up dust along the ground" (223). Sapphira represents the whispers in this passage, which Cocoa expresses when she remembers her visitation to the family plot with Mama Day on another occasion:

“Sapphira left by wind” (152). The moss of Willow Springs and Sapphira’s voice become inextricably linked, which reveals, again, Sapphira’s ties to geography.

Within Cocoa’s memory of her life are occasions when Sapphira’s traditions and attitude helped her survive life in New York City. Essentially, Sapphira Wade’s work in redefining black female enslavement and claiming land is an embedded slave narrative within Cocoa’s memory of New York. Nicole Aljoe’s work on embedded slave narratives helps illuminate the importance of fragmented narratives about individuals’ experience in slavery. In her article, Aljoe writes that “The association with voice and singularity becomes a more complex matter when applied to Caribbean narratives. Rather than a single authorial voice, the mediated nature of Caribbean and other early slave narratives foregrounds multiple narrative voices” (8). Aljoe focuses on the importance of translation in embedded slave narratives, especially in regards to the role of the editor and amanuensis in recording an ex-slave’s story. Furthermore, Aljoe points to documents such as slave-masters’ journals as having embedded slave narratives. Thus, polyvocality is an important aspect of embedded slave narratives, and attention must be paid to how the voices of the ex-slave and those mediating her story both intersect and diverge. Naylor explores how the descendants of slaves mediate their ancestors’ experience of enslavement. The first passage of *Mama Day* expresses this notion of polyvocality as it relates to Sapphira’s story:

Willow Springs. Everybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. A true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red and Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She could

walk through a lightening storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightening in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her (3).

The narrator introduces the oral history surrounding Sapphira Wade using “Willow Springs” as the first sentence. This rhetorical move establishes the strong connection between geography and Sapphira Wade’s story. Following this connection, the narrator speaks to the one thing that is agreed upon by the residents of Willow Springs, which is the power of Sapphira Wade’s conjuring. However, the narrator also discusses the fragmented aspect of Sapphira Wade’s history; her physical appearance, for example, is described differently amongst Willow Springs residents. Moreover, Sapphira’s powers also vary amongst the residents, who focus on different ways that Sapphira was able to manipulate nature in Willow Springs, specifically lightening. However, despite the different understandings of Sapphira Wade’s power, the residents agree upon how in tune Sapphira Wade was with Willow Springs. In this case, the oral history surrounding Sapphira Wade is both unified and multidimensional. Discussing the “prismatic” nature of Sapphira Wade’s memory, Paula Gallant Eckard writes, “The legend of Sapphira Wade is passed along not by re-telling, but through intuitive, transcendent ways of listening and knowing. The knowledge of the past comes through daily living in the community” (129). Eckard’s use of “intuitive” suggests that Sapphira Wade’s memory is constructed. More specifically, each resident of Willow Springs has a memory of Sapphira that is shaped by his or her own life experiences.

From the narrator's point of view, Sapphira Wade's resistance against her slave-master and her redefinition of womanhood guaranteed Willow Springs' resistance against Western nations who seek to claim the island as their own. Naylor's choice to create a slave woman figure who uses conjure to create her own nation allows the author to refigure common conceptions of nation building. In this case, it is a black woman who not only creates a nation for blacks, but who also provides protection that ensures the island's independence. In a 1997 interview with Charles H. Rowell, where she refers to her use of fiction, Naylor states, "To think novelistically is to understand that you're in a fictive universe. And you understand that it is a mirror to reality, that it's not reality itself" (181). That Naylor refers to her work as "mirrors" of reality signifies that there are aspects of her stories that resemble reality while other aspects diverge from it. While Sapphira is a fictional character, she is also a testament to the endurance of black women during slavery. By positioning Sapphira as a founder of a nation, Naylor testifies to the boundlessness of black female resistance, capabilities, and creativity. In this way, Naylor constructs a politics of black female resistance that resists the limits on black women imposed by racism and sexism.

Bosteels, Mirella, and Schilling's analysis of the politics of magical realism in their article titled, "The Politics of Totality in Magic Realism," helps illuminate the importance of Sapphira Wade in expanding readers' notions of black political agency and the political capabilities of black folk tradition. They write:

To retrieve a political and ideological impetus behind magical realism, we evoke the Marxist idea of totality. The political function of magic realism

is to show that the various components of reality, which are often contradictory or incommensurate, can be made to add up to a totality, at least narratively. Magic Realism thus takes the lived experience of contradiction in a way that preserves and aestheticizes the dislocation without resolving it.<sup>11</sup>

The authors define magic realism as the integration of seemingly contradictory elements in the real world. It is through this juxtaposition of opposites that new theories of reality can be imagined. And more importantly, the authors note the political function of magical realism in breaking down the boundaries of hegemonic narratives; for instance, Naylor's novel pushes the reader to reconsider the political capabilities of black female slaves. Furthermore, readers are encouraged to see black folk tradition—symbolized by conjure—as a powerful tool that can reorganize dominant and subversive political systems. The narrator asserts in the opening of the novel that the “legend of Sapphira Wade” is about “a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge” (3). Willow Springs represents a space where slavery is remembered differently: Sapphira Wade becomes a testament to the agency of slaves in general and black female slaves in particular.

Sapphira Wade's story—a story that is at the root of Naylor's narration of Cocoa's life story—troubles the perception of the typical enslaved black women as lacking capabilities and imagination. For example, the year 1823 signals a crucial shift in Sapphira's position as the silenced. The narrator states:

And somehow, some way, it happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days. 1823: married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman's noose, laughing in a burst of flames. 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble, to go on and bear seven sons— by person or persons unknown (3).

The mystery surrounding the conditions of Bascombe Wade's end only heightens Sapphira Wade's heroism. This mystery is grounded in conjure tradition, which essentially is rooted in the magical. Additionally, as listed in the above passage, the catalogue of feats Sapphira Wade achieves in 1823 and her repeated attempts to defeat her slave-master adds to this heroism: not only does Sapphira Wade birth seven children in a thousand days, but she also has the strength to subdue her master. The reader gets the impression through the bill of sale that Sapphira is experienced with conjure—though the bill of sale states “witchcraft.” In this case, the tradition of conjure has transformative powers and capabilities, whereby Sapphira's use of it brings her self-determination to the forefront, as she is able to claim Willow Springs for herself and her community of ex-slaves. Bosteels, Mirella, and Schilling's analysis of the politics of magical realism helps illuminate Naylor's project of creating an imaginary space like Willow Springs. As stated previously, what is powerful about Willow Springs and the story of Sapphira Wade is the dislocation of dominant and hegemonic understandings of the black individual, especially



the black female. And it is conjure—considered magical or “un-real” by Western standards because blacks having power is unimaginable—that promotes this dislocation.<sup>12</sup> In particular, Naylor’s juxtaposition of enslavement and empowerment provides a liberating black female subjectivity through the friction between the two terms. In dominant narratives of slavery, those enslaved are often characterized as solely powerless beings at the mercy of their masters. And yet, Naylor provides an alternative narrative of a female slave who refuses to be powerless.

We are to understand Sapphira as a slave that breaks through confinement. Bosteels, Mirella, and Schilling write, “...magic realism has been shown both to engage with history, by manipulating narrative conventions as symbolic acts of cultural resistance or empowerment, and to reject history for a more static vision...” (112). As a “contemporary narrative of slavery,” *Mama Day* interrogates the dominant version of history, wherein Naylor uses her artistic vision and imagination to fashion a memory of enslaved blacks that defines them as empowered and creative in their resistance. Additionally, Naylor calls readers to think beyond hegemonic conceptions of black ability and imagine an enslaved black woman with the ability to find her own nation. As the “mother” of Willow Springs, Sapphira Wade uses conjure to fashion a territory whose very existence testifies to Sapphira Wade’s self-determination, power, and resistance. In regards to the United States’ failed attempts to claim Willow Spring, the narrator states:

So thanks to the conjuring of Sapphira Wade we got it from Norway or theres about, and if taxes owed, it’s owed to them. But ain’t no Vikings or anybody else from over in Europe come to us with the foolishness that

them folks out of Columbia and Atlanta come with—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 the 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 (5).

In this passage, the narrator explains why Western nations are not able to claim Willow Springs. The Vikings in the passage stand as a prime symbol of the history of European conquest and annexation. However, as the narrator indicates, by signing the will over to his slaves, Bascombe Wade—a symbol of the Vikings—relinquishes his authority over Willow Springs. As a consequence, Norway loses its authority over the island. And more importantly, the grand narrative of European conquest collapses, especially considering that the United States, too, cannot claim Willow Springs. Essentially, Willow Spring's geographical and political standing render it illegible to the dominant, Western discourses that would seek to claim the island as its own. In essence, Willow Springs defies Western territories, choosing on its own terms when and how it will relate to the spaces outside of its borders.<sup>13</sup> This illegibility is affirmed by the island's absence from maps in the text; for instance, on one occasion, George refers to Willow Springs as being, “nowhere” (174). Following in the tradition of its matriarch, Sapphira Wade, Willow Springs seeks to define itself apart from hegemonic and subjugating discourses and maintain its self-

determination. Here we see matrilineality and geography inextricably linked. To speak of Willow Springs' independence is to speak of the history of Sapphira Wade and her resistance against her master. In essence, Sapphira Wade's character is perpetuated by the landscape, and Willow Springs serve as a safe space and the political grounds for the Day matrilineal line to practice self-determination, independence, and creativity. As the youngest descendant of this line and next in line to become the matriarch, Cocoa Day certainly inherits these three attributes.

Similar to nineteenth century black women writers, Sapphira Wade essentially "writes her own story" through the claiming of Willow Springs from her slave-master. The freedom of Sapphira Wade and her matrilineal line is rooted in the geography and territory of Willow Springs. Discussing naming and the objective of reclaiming black femininity, Hortense Spillers writes, "...[T]he names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property *plus*. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness" (65). Spillers speaks to the history of the pathologization and obscuring of black femininity, understanding part of the project in redefining black femininity involving the dislocation and deconstruction of its existing definitions in the dominant public sphere. Likewise, Naylor uses Sapphira Wade as a tool to "strip down" definitions of black enslavement that removes any sense of agency and empowerment. And more importantly, Naylor uses Sapphira to show that, despite enslavement, blacks still had a sense of dignity. Discussing Naylor's creation of the fictional space of Willow Springs, Daphne Lamothe credits the author with examining

“different ways of conceptualizing, articulating, and representing our relationship with the past” (155). Naylor’s fictionalized setting expands the reader’s understanding of the enslaved black woman, adding to the reader’s imagination ways of rethinking slavery that complicates the very notion of enslavement. In particular, Sapphira Wade’s resistance and creativity shows her as not being a powerless black female slave. It is this power that Sapphira passes on to her descendants.

### **Mother-Daughter Narrative**

Cocoa Day’s personal narrative contributes to the prismatic nature of Sapphira Wade’s story. In other words, Cocoa’s experience of migration shapes her ancestor’s story of enslavement and resistance. Jo Malin’s work, *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth-Century Women’s Autobiographies*, focuses on how a daughter’s autobiography is inextricably linked to her mother’s story. Malin writes:

It is impossible to separate the autobiography of the daughter from the biography of the mother in the texts I have chosen. In them, “distinctions” between autobiography and biography, or text and intertext, blur, even disintegrate. The two life stories overlap, and the mother, the object of the biographical narrative, becomes a subject, or rather an “intersubject,” in her daughter’s autobiography. These texts become conversations or dialogues between a mother and a daughter (1).

Malin's theorization of the embedded maternal narrative illuminates Naylor's choice of narration if we understand Sapphira Wade as the "mother" of the Day line. Cocoa herself refers to Sapphira Wade as her mother; in this instance, George remembers Cocoa referring to Sapphira Wade as "[T]he great, great, grand, Mother—as if you were listing the attributes of a goddess" (218). In this case, Naylor embeds the "historical documents" and oral history surrounding Sapphira Wade within the narration of Cocoa.

Fundamentally, Sapphira's story is the intertext of *Mama Day*. Incorporated into the first-person narrative of Cocoa Day—as she details the events of her migration between Willow Springs, New York City, and South Carolina—is the constant resurfacing of Sapphira's history. This resurfacing points to Sapphira's central role in providing both material and psychological tools for Cocoa Day to become an agent in her definition of black womanhood and femininity.

This definition of womanhood takes place in the Day family cemetery in Willow Springs. Cocoa Day is essentially talking to George's burial ground, and George speaks back. In a sense, the narration between Cocoa Day and George reads as a call-and-response. Dorothy Perry Thompson mentions this rhetorical act in her article, "Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and the New Renaissance: Zora as Mother," where she writes that "Naylor's narrative strategy accomplishes two things: First it recalls the participatory, call and response tradition of African, thus African-American, orality. Second, it insinuates the necessity of participation for the true mediation of, the sharing of, cultural memory" (39). Thompson points to Naylor's use of call-and-response as an indicator of the novel's placement within the black rhetorical tradition. Furthermore, Thompson argues that Naylor's use of call and response evokes the importance of black collectivity

in preserving memory. As the exchanges between Cocoa and George demonstrate, George is crucial to Cocoa's ability to remember both her past and the history of Willow Springs. Cocoa gives an account of her life in Willow Springs in addition to her migration between Willow Springs and New York City, where she spent seven years. What makes her narrative interesting is that she is addressing George, who has long been deceased and whose remains lay in the Day family plot in Willow Springs; it is this island where he died of a heart complication during his vacation there with Cocoa to meet her family.

Cocoa seeks to retrace the moments and experiences leading up to her and George's trip to Willow Springs, wanting an explanation to make sense of his death. Discussing her purpose of visiting George, Cocoa states, "I guess one of the reasons I've been here so much is that I felt if we kept retracing our steps, we'd find out exactly what brought us to this slope near The Sound. But when I see you again, our versions will be different still" (310). Implicit in Cocoa's confession is the importance of the physical location to her process of memory: she has traveled frequently to George's gravesite to spur her memory. And furthermore, this retracing takes Cocoa back to her memories of childhood and growing up in Willow Springs. In a sense, Cocoa's narration is her way of coping with trauma, and her constant retrospection to make sense of this trauma always goes back to Sapphira and her matrilineal line. The fact that George's remains lay in Willow Springs only reaffirms the link between Cocoa's narration and her motherland. Cocoa is essentially speaking back to Willow Springs.

George's gravesite plays a crucial role in allowing Cocoa to think about and construct her autobiography, through which she also confronts her relationship with Sapphira. Mama Day says to George that,

He [Bascombe Wade] had freed 'em all but her [Sapphira Wade], 'cause, see, she'd never been a slave. And what she gave of her own will, she took away. I can't tell you her name, cause it was never opened to me. That's a door for the child of Grace [Cocoa] to walk through...And you'll help her, won't you?...she will learn about the beginning of the Days. But she's gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge. And I came to tell you not to worry: whatever roads take her from here, they'll always lead her back to you (308).

At the center of Mama Day's talk with George is the story of Sapphira Wade's will and her ability to redefine herself as a free woman. Considering that Cocoa Day is next in line to become the Day matriarch, Mama Day bestows the responsibility on her to continue Sapphira Wade's memory. And most importantly, George's memory becomes a way for Cocoa Day to keep Sapphira Wade's memory intact; Naylor's novel is essentially about Cocoa Day's "will" to move on despite grief and use this grief to preserve important memories about her past. As Mama Day stresses, Cocoa Day's migration from Willow Springs to Charleston is necessary for her to build her own life. And yet, as Cocoa Day will point out in her memory of life in New York City, the traditions and culture of the Day matrilineal line provide Cocoa Day with the tools to create this life. In essence, Mama Day reveals the process by which Cocoa Day can endure: through her

communication with George, Cocoa Day evokes Sapphira Wade's memory, which provides her with more tools to move forward and build her new life. And consequently, when Cocoa comes back to visit George, she realizes how her identity changes; hence Cocoa Day says to George, "...you change as I change" (310). Cocoa's life illustrates an evolving and shifting definition of black womanhood, particularly as it relates to her relationship with George. And by speaking to George at his gravesite, Cocoa herself is confronted with how her womanhood evolved during her migratory life between Willow Springs, New York City, and Charleston.

Understanding Cocoa's narration as an autobiography underscores her agency in constructing a life story that helps her make sense of a traumatic event. The fact that her story is a construction points to her agency in choosing which memories and experiences to preserve and which to discard. As Nellie Y. McKay states in her article on the black woman "narrative self":

The identity construction of black women in autobiography thus comes out of a separate tradition from black men's. For twentieth-century black women identity is grounded in models of nineteenth-century black women who passed on to their generations the most vital lesson of their experiences: black womanhood was not static or a single ideal.

The selves in stories of the early foremothers reveal black female identity as a process of ongoing reinvention of self (100).



McKay argues that nineteenth-century black women writers represented a black femininity rooted in personal experience, which disrupted the hegemonic construction of black womanhood as something that did not change from individual to individual. Contrarily, as Harriet Jacobs illustrates, definitions of what it meant to be a black woman shifted between different personal events and feelings. In this regard, a black woman could inhabit a wide range of definitions that cater to the way she negotiates her life circumstances. Jacobs, for example, was both mother and fugitive: to be a black mother meant that she had grief due to being separated from her children in order to hide. And yet, Jacobs also had a desire to seek freedom for both herself and her children. And moreover, although Jacobs does detail her experience being a victim of sexual violence, she also shows her resistance to this victimization. These complexities of black femininity are what Jacobs seeks to demonstrate in her slave-narrative as a way of deconstructing the notion that there is only one singular black female experience.

This move to reinvent the self is willfully chosen by Cocoa, who admits herself toward the end of the novel that there are many different ways to interpret and process George's death; she notes that "there are too many sides to the whole story" (311). Ultimately, different facets of her identity as a black woman elicit varying means of understanding her relationship with George. What her autobiography indicates is her choice to use the traditions she inherits from her matrilineal line to narrate her life experiences, through which she can begin a process of healing. The link between Cocoa's narration and her matrilineal heritage speaks to the fact that the "autobiographical I" is inherently polyvocal, meaning that through the autobiographer, the voices of the community that help constitute her surface. It is Sapphira Wade that has created a

“narrative safe space”— to use Farah Jasmine Griffin’s term— for the rewriting and reclaiming of a black female identity. This identity is self-determined, multi-faceted and constantly under a process of construction.<sup>14</sup> And furthermore, this safe space is rooted in the material, or Willow Springs. It is through the claiming of the land from her slave master husband— and putting an end to his existence— that Sapphira is able to produce a matrilineal line that is given the agency to define black female identity on their own terms. Cocoa is the youngest product of this Day matrilineal tradition of self-naming. And essentially, it is through Cocoa’s self –naming that the oral history and memory of Sapphira Wade surfaces.

### **Memory as a Survival Tool**

Cocoa’s memory of her experience living and working in New York City form the beginning of her conversation with George, where she details the difficulty in identifying the racism that she comes in contact with. Cocoa states:

There’s something hypocritical about a city that keeps half of its population underground half of the time; you can start believing that there’s much more space than there really is—to live, to work. And I had trouble doing both in spite of those endless classifieds in the *Sunday Times*. You know, there are more pages in just their Help Wanted section than in the telephone book here in Willow Springs. But it took me a while to figure out that New York racism moved underground like most of the people did (18).

In this passage, Cocoa relives her experience moving through New York City and uses the metaphor of the subway to describe how racism operates. Specifically, Cocoa notes the subtlety of racism in New York City; like the subway system, racism is also “underground,” which means that it is not overt but deeply ingrained in the structure of society. As a result, blacks like Cocoa become disoriented because of their inability to detect whether or not an individual is judging them because of their race. In particular, Cocoa is suspicious that racism is the underlying factor behind her ability to obtain employment. This suspicion is driven by the fact that there are numerous ads for work and yet Cocoa is unable to find a job. The type of racism Cocoa encounters in the city is addressed in both Farah Jasmine Griffin’s and Richard Wright’s analysis of black migration to the city; in particular, what made the racism in northern cities dangerous was its intricacy.

Remembering the differences between New York City and Willow Springs, Cocoa Day states, “God, I wanted to go home—and I meant home home. With all of Willow Springs’s problems, you knew when you saw a catfish, you called it a catfish” (22). Here, Cocoa Day begins to overlap differing geographies, juxtaposing New York City and Willow Springs. The bluntness and sass that Cocoa Day associates with Willow Spring ties back to the history surrounding Willow Springs and its inhabitants. In essence, the struggles of Sapphira Wade surface in a contemporary setting and context, where Cocoa Day is facing an alternative form of confinement. This confinement is noted by the constriction Cocoa Day feels when she navigates through the city; hence she refers to the fact that “you can start believing that there’s much more space than there really is.” Although Cocoa Day seems to be alluding to the physical confinement of the city, she is

also referring to the mental confinement of the city. In particular, her skin color counters her freedom to use her talents and capabilities in hopes to further her career in particular and her livelihood in general. Cocoa's experience essentially mirrors the bill of sale the reader sees at the beginning of the novel in that employers attach labels to her, which make her feel inferior and inadequate.

Additionally, Cocoa points to the patriarchy she encounters in New York City, which stands in contrast to Willow Springs, where importance is placed on matriarchy and black female empowerment. Describing her encounters at the bar—which stands in for the urban experience—Cocoa states,

I'd never graduated to the bar scene because I didn't drink and refused to pay three-fifty for a club soda until the evening bore returns. Some of my friends said that you could run up an eighteen-dollar tab in no time that way, only to luck out with a pink quarter creep who figured that because you were a black woman it was down to middrawer ethnic for dinner the next week. And if he was a brown quarter creep, he had waited just before closing time to pick up the tab for your last drink. 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 (17).

In this passage, Cocoa describes the difficulty black women have with navigating social spaces such as the bar scene. Specifically, Cocoa discusses how both white and black

men subjugate black women in this space. Symbolic of the city, the bar—for Cocoa—is both alienating and hostile to black women. Cocoa’s use of “graduating” in the first sentence refers to her inability to succeed in acclimating to New York City. Firstly, Cocoa is unable to afford the lifestyle necessary to spend money regularly on alcohol in the bar. More importantly, Cocoa remembers black men in the bar who characterize black women who refuse to be physically and sexually mistreated as the stereotypical Sapphire figure. This specific figure is meant to vilify a black woman who is assertive and frank. As Cocoa indicates, black women who refuse a suitor in the bar space are made to feel inferior to white women.

Despite the difficulty she faces living in New York, Cocoa Day is able to navigate the space through the help of her matrilineal line, particularly Mama and Abigail Day. For example, in one instance, Cocoa remembers being dismissed by her interviewer—who happens to be her future husband George—because of her unwillingness to work in mid-August so that she could travel back home to Willow Springs. Remembering her decision to return to Willow Springs despite the possibility of not securing the job, Cocoa states, “Mama Day and Grandma could forgive me for leaving Willow Springs, but not for staying away” (19). Here, Cocoa articulates her strong relationship with her grandmother and Mama Day. The passage also illustrates Mama Day and Abigail’s encouragement of Cocoa’s migration to New York City. However, as Cocoa states, her elders also expect Cocoa to return to Willow Springs in order to sustain her relationship with her relatives. In this case, Cocoa is encouraged to integrate two different geographical spaces into her life. Although Cocoa Day does have independence from Willow Springs—which is encouraged by Mama Day and Abigail—there is also the

sense that she remains rooted to her cultural heritage and Willow Springs. This rootedness is expressed by Cocoa's desire to return to Willow Springs and the importance she places on returning to her birthplace. In this case, Cocoa puts more importance on Willow Springs than finding employment.

In turn, however, Cocoa Day uses the traditions of her matrilineal line to claim the position she lost upon leaving for Willow Springs. When Cocoa does return to Willow Springs, jobless, Mama Day—skilled in the traditions of conjure—asks her to write a letter to apply for the position again. Subsequently, Mama Day covers the letter with a mysterious power and mails it to George. Speaking from the dead in a conversation with Cocoa—and essentially speaking back to her memory—George recalls when he received this letter, stating, “I frowned and retrieved the crumpled letter and envelope—it had been mailed from Willow Springs. Now, where had she said that place was again?—the only trace of extra powder was on my fingers...for some reason I felt uncomfortable about brushing it off...” (54). George speaks to the unexplainable attraction he had to the substance on the letter, alluding to its power. And interestingly, the letter does motivate George to hire Cocoa. Here we find Cocoa's ability to use the traditions of her matrilineal line to find a means of support in New York City.

Another poignant passage that attests to Cocoa's agency to name her own femininity is found in her memory of the earlier stages of her relationship with George. At one point, unsure about the status of their relationship, Cocoa remembers feelings of self-doubt yet the desire to stay strong regardless. Cocoa states:

Now, I'm gonna tell you about *cool*. It comes with the cultural territory: the beating of the bush drum, the rocking of the slave ship, the rhythm of

the hand going from cotton sack to cotton row and back again. It went on to settle into the belly of the blues, the arms of Jackie Robinson, and the head of every ghetto kid who lives to a ripe old age. You can keep it, you can hide it, you can blow it—but even when your ass is in the tightest crack, you must never, ever LOSE it. And I didn't, did I? I dug back to wherever in our history I had to get it...[italics and capitalization by author] (102).

The passage begins with Cocoa's affirmation of her voice. She recognizes her creative and artistic agency in defining what being "cool" means to her and uses the cultural memory of her community to help her shape her interpretation of the word. This self-confidence in her power to signify can almost be read as sass, an attribute that Joanne Braxton finds to be common in black women's autobiography.<sup>15</sup> Providing her own definition of what being "cool" means to her, Cocoa essentially gives a catalogue, tracing a tradition of black endurance and survival that extends from pre-slavery Africa to present-day urban environments like New York City. Cocoa constructs a history of the African American experience, understanding how blacks were able to survive in a range of dehumanizing spaces such as the slave ship and cotton plantation and in different temporalities, both past and present.

What is also significant in Cocoa's passage is her use of the term "cultural territory," which brings to mind notions of place and landscape. What is so fascinating about this abstract space that Cocoa's lays out is the fact that it transcends boundaries separating geographical spaces, past and present, and individual and community. It is this multi-faceted narrative space that Cocoa repeatedly returns to as an interpretative

framework in understanding the history and process of her constitution as a “cool” modern day black woman. And Cocoa understands this specific moment in her life as a moment of success that can be enfolded into the black collective memory of endurance. Cocoa’s statement, “And I didn’t, did I?,” is not a genuine question but a rhetorical one, a question that Cocoa does need to be answered by George or anyone else. It is a declaration of self-affirmation and “sass.”

What Cocoa’s autobiography offers, especially in the above passage, is a theorization of a modern black female identity. As Cocoa demonstrates, it is in periods of self-doubt when she depends on her cultural heritage the most. For her, modern black female identity is always rooted in the past. Furthermore, Cocoa shows us that to remember this past is a creative and laboring process; it involves participation, hence Cocoa refers to herself as “digging” back into history. She defines this black history on her own terms and in her own way. It is she who purposely chooses historical fragments and puts them together in a way that she finds powerful, liberating, and grounded in lived experience. Cocoa’s personal experience influences her artistic vision, whereby she sees endurance in “rocking slave ships” and in the arms of Jackie Robinson. It is through the imaginative possibilities of autobiography that these two scenes can be interlocked and become a backdrop for Cocoa’s self-construction.

Cocoa also resorts to the writings from her relatives as a means of self-sustainment. Remembering again another instance of a breakdown in communication between her and George, Cocoa states:



What did Grandma used to say? She was short on money but long on pride. My pride had to stretch a long way. November left, December came—no call. I was utterly depressed when I wrote home, and even more depressed when I got my Candle Walk package the next week. What in the hell was I doing in this city? It was cold and unfriendly. I took out the sweet orange rock Grandma had sent me and Mama Day’s eternal lavender water. Seven years away from the place and December twenty-second still didn’t feel right without my seeing a lighted candle. The same old news from home, but if those letters had ever stopped coming, I don’t know what I’d do. I got to the line “The last thing you need is a no-good man,” and started to cry (122).

In this passage, Cocoa recalls her complicated relationship with George, who breaks contact with her for several months after an argument. In particular, Cocoa remembers using the sayings of her grandmother, Abigail, in order to reclaim self-confidence and agency. George’s abandonment leads the protagonist to depend even more on the women of the Day matrilineal line, who offer what Farah Jasmine Griffin would term a “safe space” (111). The pride Cocoa attempts to sustain weakens the longer she must wait to receive any contact from George. It is when she receives the care package from her grandmother and grand-aunt that the protagonist begins to long for Willow Springs. In this case, the cultural products are inextricably linked to a geographical space and serve a mnemonic role in allowing Cocoa to remember her experience growing up in Willow Springs.<sup>16</sup> Hence, Cocoa remembers asking herself, “What in the hell was I doing in this city? It was cold and unfriendly” (122). The sweet

orange rock and lavender water become a direct link to Willow Springs in that Cocoa remembers the cultural activities that take place on the island during Candle Walk, a holiday in which the community members of Willow Springs walk through the space holding lighted candles and exchanging gifts. Discussing the history behind Candle Walk, the narrator records Mama Day's words:

[Mama Day] [s]aid people kinda worshipped his [her father John-Paul] grandmother [Sapphira Wade], a slave woman who *took* her freedom in 1823. Left behind seven sons and a dead master as she walked down the main road, candle held high to light her way to the east bluff over the ocean. Folks in John-Paul's time would line the main road with candles, food, and slivers of ginger to help her spirit along [*italics by author*] (111).

The narrator uses Mama Day's memory in this passage, showing how Candle Walk is rooted in the history of Sapphira Wade. Mama Day shows her affirmation of Sapphira Wade's agency through italics, wherein she stresses Sapphira's role in freeing herself from the bondage of slavery. The candle becomes a symbol of Sapphira Wade's freedom; in this case, the residents of Willow Springs essentially reenact Sapphira Wade's escape from Bascombe Wade, guiding her spirit toward the east bluff. In a sense, Sapphira's freedom becomes a collective experience and the memory of her freedom is passed down from generation to generation through Candle Walk.

It is this camaraderie that Cocoa finds is lacking in New York City, which George is meant to symbolize—he too is being both “cold” and “unfriendly” by ignoring Cocoa.

It is here that we see the overlapping of two geographical spaces, with Willow Springs represented by cultural artifacts and New York City represented by a love interest. We also find temporalities overlapping, as December both represents a time of momentary loss and a time to remember the Willow Springs holiday. Looking back on this experience, Cocoa understands the communication from her relatives in Willow Springs to be integral to her ability to endure the hardships she encounters in life. And as an event stemming from the liberation of Willow Springs from Bascombe Wade, Candle Walk serves as a tradition bringing Sapphira Wade's story to light in Cocoa's life.

### **Slavery, Autobiography, and Modern Black Female Agency**

In essence, Cocoa Day's memory of her migratory life between Willow Springs and New York reads as a form of autobiography that is rooted in the imaginative and transformative possibilities of black matrilineality. The imaginative possibilities of black matrilineality include the juxtaposition of alternate temporalities and geographical spaces to compose a family narrative. In particular, Naylor uses matrilineality to discuss how the history of slavery impacts blacks living in the twentieth century. Discussing the memory of slavery, Naylor states in an interview with Tomeiko R. Ashford that "... we're [the black community] still struggling under the scars of slavery, and I think that the Civil Rights Movement did not work... Okay, there are a few things that have changed and certain blacks have gained ascendancy. But for many, it remains the same if not worse" (75). Naylor theorizes the impact of slavery using the metaphor of scars: although slavery has been abolished in the U.S., its legacy still continues in the present through economic, political, and social disfranchisement. Naylor's use of "scar" also implies that there is

still room left for healing in the black community. Naylor uses her text to explore the repercussions of slavery in a range of spaces and how specific imaginings of slavery can aid descendants of slaves in resisting these repercussions.

Naylor fashions a memory of slavery that depicts the enslaved as empowered individuals with agency. Asked by Ashford as to how the Willow Springs community and the Day family is able to “shun the fracturing legacy of slavery,” Gloria Naylor states, “Because they turned it into a positive experience for themselves through this legend [of Sapphira Wade]...Sapphira Wade had no boundaries on herself. She elected in her own mind to be free. And once you decide that you’re going to be free, then people cannot imprison you” (7). Naylor suggests that the act of remembering is always subjective; the memory of a given individual or event is never static. On the contrary, the memory is fashioned in a way that caters to the specific needs and desires of the individual(s) doing the remembering. For the members of Willow Springs, remembering Sapphira Wade as someone who triumphed over slavery grants them the confidence and strength they need as black individuals living in the modern day. For the Day matrilineal line in particular, a positive memory of Sapphira Wade is crucial for them to promote black female agency.

Specifically, Sapphira Wade becomes the example of the empowered slave, and Cocoa’s memory of her resistance transforms the way she navigates through New York City. Describing black matrilineality, Chinosole writes that it is “...the capacity to survive and aspire, to be contrary and self-affirming across continents and generations. It names the strength and beauty we pass on as friends and lovers from foremothers to mothers and daughters allowing us to survive radical cultural changes and be empowered through differences” (135). The Day matrilineal line serves as a discursive space where

descendants are prepared with the necessary tools to survive and thrive outside of Willow Springs. In a sense, then, though Cocoa Day is free to move outside of the space where she grew up, Sapphira Wade—through Mama Day and Abigail Day—remains an integral force in her life. Cocoa theorizes this notion of simultaneous leaving and returning poignantly toward the end of the novel when she states, “But being so young, I didn’t understand that every hour we keep living is building material for a new world, of some sort.” That Cocoa includes “sort” is important, for it speaks to the fact that her new world—in both New York and South Carolina—is built upon the oral history and traditions of her ancestors.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the pathologization of the black body, see Fanon, Frantz, *Black Skin White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press, 1967). In particular, chapter 5, titled, “The Fact of Blackness” and chapter 6, titled “The Negro and Psychopathology” address the anxiety surrounding the black body and the pathologizing gaze of the white spectator.

<sup>2</sup> Joanne M. Braxton stresses the importance of critical analysis of black women’s slave narratives in her article titled, “Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: The Redefinition of the Slave Narrative Genre.” *The Massachusetts Review* 27. 2 (1986): 379-387. Braxton writes that “In order to balance our understanding of the slave narrative genre, we need first to read those narratives written by women (and read them closely, and secondly to expand the range of terms used in writing about those narratives” (383). In Jacobs’s narrative in particular, Braxton points to the trope of the “outraged mother” as a crucial dynamic of the slave narrative genre.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on matrilineality and the exchange of memory, see Bernice Johnson Reagon’s article, “My Black Mothers and Sisters or on Beginning a Cultural Autobiography.” *Feminist Studies* 8.1 (1982): 81-96. Reagon writes that, “we [black women] are, at the base of our identities, nationalists. We are people builders, carriers of cultural traditions, key to the formation and continuance of culture” (81). I argue that Reagon arguments aligns with what the reader sees in Naylor’s novel, which is Willow Springs’ independence beings passed down the Day matrilineal line.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to recognize that black authors of slave narrative did not have complete autonomy in their texts, especially considering that their stories usually had to be told through an amanuensis. And furthermore, black authors told their stories with a white audience in mind. In this case, the subjectivity they displayed was also shaped by what they believed the white audience wanted to hear.

<sup>5</sup> For information about the historical context of Jacob’s narrative, see Jean Fagan Yellin’s article, “Written By Herself: *Harriet Jacob’s Slave Narrative*.” *American Literature* 53.3 (1981): 479-486. In particular, Yellin discusses Jacobs’s decision-making in terms of authorship and publication.

<sup>6</sup> Braxton, Joanne M. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*. (Philadelphia: Temple University press, 1989) 16.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, Ethel Morgan and Gloria Naylor. “An Interview with Gloria Naylor.” *Callaloo* 23 4 (2000): 1430-1439. 1432.

<sup>8</sup> Keizer, Arlene R. *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) 2.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the subject of ethnography in Naylor’s novel, see Lindsey Tucker’s, “Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*.” *African American Review* 28.2 (1994): 173-188. Tucker critiques the field of ethnography because of its failure to, “ask the right questions” (173). For instance, instead of Reema’s son’s desire to collect information about Willow Springs in order to make it legible to the outside world, Tucker argues that he should concentrate on understanding the particularities of his island and embracing the mysteries of the island. Making the island “legible” should not be at the forefront of his project. The narrator at

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the beginning of the novel defies ethnography by keeping the mystery surrounding Sapphira's defeat of Bascombe Wade intact.

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen M. Puhr explores the subject of magic in *Mama Day* in her article titled, "Healers in Gloria Naylor's Fiction." *Twentieth Century Literature* 40. 4 (1994): 518-527. In particular, Puhr argues that healing in the novel evokes Sapphira Wade's memory, considering that both Mama Day and Cocoa inherit Sapphira's gift of conjure.

<sup>11</sup> Bosteels, Bruno, Loris Mirella, and Peter A. Schilling. "The Politics of Totality in Magic Realism." *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 112.

<sup>12</sup> Meisenheider, Susan. "'The Whole Picture' in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*." *African American Review* 27.3 (1993): 405- 419. 407.

<sup>13</sup> Walter-Wastl, Doris and Lynn A. Staeheli. "Territory, Territoriality, and Boundaries." *Mapping Women, Making Politics: Feminist Perspectives on Political Geography*. Edited by Lynn A. Staeheli, Eleonore Kofman, and Linda J. Peake. (New York: Routledge, 2004) 142.

<sup>14</sup> Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "*Who Set You Flowin'?*": *The African American Migration Narrative*. (USA: Oxford University Press, 1996) 121.

<sup>15</sup> Braxton, Joanne M. *Black Women Writing Autobiography*. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1989) 31.

<sup>16</sup> As Eckard notes, "[O]bjects hold and resonate the past much like the human mind stores the past in memory" (131).

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