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**Magical realism in Literary Quest for modern  
Afro-American Identity: Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*  
and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day***

The local colors which I have chosen for my paper are the colors of the Caribbean, the threshold of the New World. I want to discuss two novels: Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, both of which are set on fictive islands of the so-called "extended Caribbean."<sup>1</sup> "The extended Caribbean" is a term coined by Immanuel Wallerstein to describe a stretch of land on both continents, from Maryland in the United States to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, with the Caribbean as its center. As Paule Marshal puts it in her novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, also set in the Caribbean, the islands of the Caribbean are "the stepping stones that might have been placed there long ago by some giant race to span the distance between the Americas, North and South."<sup>2</sup> They mark the birth of America — they are the place where different cultural realms meet. They are

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, vol. 2: *Mercantilism and the Consolidation of European World Economy* (New York: Academic, 1980), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> Paule Marshall, *The Chosen Place. The Timeless People* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), p. 47.

also the initial site of the displacement and subjugation of Africans. As Gordon K. Lewis observes, it was in the Caribbean "sugar islands" that "the agrosocial system of slavery developed in its fullest and most harsh form"<sup>3</sup> "The extended Caribbean" signifies therefore societies developed on the basis of cotton, sugar or coffee plantations that were supported by slave labor. Consequently there are many reasons why Afro-American women writers (and not only Toni Morrison or Gloria Naylor, but also the earlier mentioned Paule Marshall or Gayl Jones) turn to the Caribbean while searching for their "mothers' gardens,"<sup>4</sup> that is their African roots, their myths and cultural identities.

This quest for a new meaningful identity has taken a prominent place on the cultural scene of the United States, which in the last two decades witnessed many fierce debates over the issues of multiculturalism and ethnicity. Not only Afro-Americans but also Native Americans, Latin Americans, Asian-Americans, in short Americans of all colors and backgrounds, to whom access to the mainstream American culture has been constantly denied have started to look for more specific forms of identification. As a result, the doors have been opened for a wide scope search in the areas of American culture which have been so far disparaged and neglected. Also writings by Afro-American women writers have come all the way from the margins to the very center of attention of the American reading public.

In my paper I want to explore some aspects of this relatively new phenomenon. I would like to concentrate on what I consider to be one of the most important developments on the contemporary American literary scene: that is an unprecedented popularity of fiction by black women writers and its extraordinary affinity with magical realist fiction produced by South American writers.

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Walker, *From an Interview*, in: *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York, 1983).

I wish to argue that awarding the Nobel Prizes for Literature to Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1982) and Toni Morrison (1993) not only bears witness to this new extended versatility of literary circles and the reading public itself, but also proves that these two parallel developments, that is magical realism and fiction of such writers as Toni Morrison or Gloria Naylor, represent the same mode of writing, and furthermore that this mode of writing is used with the same intention. In other words I want to demonstrate that magical realism can be instrumental in recreating peoples' identities — in this case identity of contemporary Afro-Americans.

Multiculturalism is something that North and South America have in common. Apart from the heterogeneous structure of their societies they also share the experience of colonialism, slavery and racism. The two hemispheres are equally multicolored and equally white-dominated. In view of this fact they can both be regarded as belonging to the post-colonial tradition. The same concerns animate writings of post-colonial writers, South American writers and Afro-American women writers, and these are: "the need in nations and groups which have been the victims of imperialism to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalistic or Eurocentric concepts or images."<sup>5</sup> Post-colonial writers, as well as South American writers and Afro-American women writers, strive to free themselves from "the imperial center,"<sup>6</sup> and from Western civilization.

Nowhere is the identity crisis more conspicuous than in Morrison's novel. Jadine, the central character in *Tar Baby*, is a beautiful, orphaned, "yellow" woman. She is a middle class person who wants to "make it" in the white world. Educated in

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<sup>5</sup> Simon During, *Postmodernism and Post-colonialism Today* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 125.

<sup>6</sup> Aschroft, Bill, Gareth Griffith, Helen Tiffin, *Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in the Postcolonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 4.

Paris in the history of European art, she is an example of a black person constantly exposed to Western culture and its values. She identifies with Western civilization and adopts indiscriminately its attitude towards other "lesser" civilizations, including her own African one. But the process of white acculturation which Jadine underwent in Europe sometimes seems incomplete. She feels lonely, confused and inauthentic in spite of her degree in art history and her success as a model. She finds it hard to ignore her African background or to accept it. Jadine cannot reach a compromise between two different and conflicting sides of her personality. Orphaned at young age and brought up in isolation, away from the black community Jadine is cut off from the core of African culture.

Conspicuously absent from Jadine's life is the tradition of storytelling rooted in myth and folklore. For Morrison, as for Marquez, Carlos Fuentes or Octavio Paz, storytelling is a communal practice — it has to do with recuperation of history and mythology which constitute the core of a nation's identity. Marilyn Sanders Mobley notices that these writers put themselves in the position of African griots — village storytellers, elders whose task was to pass on to the younger generations their history and cultural identity, "to clarify the roles that have been obscured, to identify those things in the past that are useful and those that are not."<sup>7</sup> As Alice Walker puts it, these stories are "accumulated, collective reality... dreams, imagery, rituals and legends that constitute the subconscious of a people."<sup>8</sup> Telling them again and again brings the community together and keeps the culture alive by constantly reaching to its roots and re-visioning its uniqueness. It also frees the history of a nation from the constraints of

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<sup>7</sup> Marilyn Sanders Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1991), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Walker, *From an Interview*, in: *In search of our Mothers' Gardens*, (New York, 1983), p. 62.

the dominant culture, creating perspectives for the future outside the homogenous social system. Unlike Morrison who dedicated her novel to "culture bearing"<sup>9</sup> women from her own family all of whom knew their "true and ancient properties," Jadine has never had a mother, a grandmother or an aunt who would put her in touch with her ancient heritage. Uprooted, she wages a solitary war to achieve a personal integrity and a power to assert herself in the multicolored and multicultural world.

Naylor, on the other hand, explicitly shows in her novel how the consciousness of an individual can be transformed through the narrative act of storytelling. One of the main characters of *Mama Day* is Ophelia, usually addressed by the pet name Cocoa, who like Jadine is a yellow woman, but unlike her, she is reverent of her people's past and mindful of her African heritage. She is the last living heir to the line of the Day women which was founded centuries earlier by a slave woman, Saphira Wade. According to the legend passed on through generations Saphira Wade was a conjure woman who persuaded her master, Bascombe Wade, to deed every inch of his land to his slaves; then she killed him and, finally free, flew back to Africa. Many versions of the legend circulate among the islanders and though nobody except the narrator, the voice of the island, remembers her name, everybody agrees that Saphira Wade was a great spiritual leader. Cocoa, brought up by two shrewd old women, her grandmother and grandaunt, is always aware of her rich family history. She does not go through an identity crisis because she knows where she belongs. The tradition of oral telling of the stories, of cultivating the memory of the past and elaborating the family sagas give Willow Springers roots in their land and helps them to fend themselves against exploitation, loss of cultural memory and misguided education. Unlike Jadine, Cocoa does not replace folk tradition with an alien version of her own culture.

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<sup>9</sup> Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: New American Library, 1981), p. 156.

Both *Tar Baby* and *Mama Day* blend folk history and the miraculous in a manner typical for magical realism. *Tar Baby* leaves rapidly its realistic premises towards the world of magic and myth when Son, a dark black stranger, appears in the novel. The heart of this magical world lies on the other side of the island where the ancient and the natural still survive in the black thick swamp, and where the legendary blind horsemen wander at night. The island takes its name, Isle de Chevaliers, from the horsemen. According to the legend they are slaves who, in colonial times, three hundred years ago, fled from a sinking French ship to the island that struck them blind the moment they saw it. Ever since they have lived in that part of the island mating with mysterious swamp women who gave birth to their children, also blind. For the indigenous inhabitants of the island Son is one of the horsemen who saw Jadine from the hills and came to get her. His mission is to save her from "the blinding awe"<sup>10</sup> that she has for the white civilization. Son represents the most serious challenge in Jadine's quest for psychic wholeness. Another challenge is sent by the swamp women, the "ancestral mothers" evoked in figures such as Thérèse — an archetypal mother whose breasts give milk even though she has no children. All the women recognize Jadine as a "runaway child,"<sup>11</sup> but then seeing her contempt for them, they turn away from her. Similarly Son turns away from Jadine, "a gate keeper, house bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road trap,"<sup>12</sup> a trap into assimilation with the respectable white culture. In the magical and bewildering resolution of the novel, guided by blind Thérèse, Son abandons his dreams of Jadine who "has lost her ancient properties"<sup>13</sup> and returns to his fellow horsemen. The imagery of "lickety-lickety-lickety-split," of running "looking neither to the left or to the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 189.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 155.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 189.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 263.

right" implies clearly Son's escape from "the briar patch," "the tar baby,"<sup>14</sup> Jadine.

Thérèse is the most tangible proof that magic is still alive among genuine Afro-Americans. In her essay "Rootedness," Morrison says: "I blend the acceptance of the supernatural and the profound rootedness in the real world at the same time, with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which black people look at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accept what I suppose could be called superstition and magic which is another way of knowing things."<sup>15</sup> Thérèse is one of such people, and so is Mama Day, the titular heroine of Naylor's novel.

Mama Day is a descendant of the seventh son of Saphira Wade and her white master — Bascombe Wade. A worthy and reputable heir to powerful Sapphira Wade, Mama Day performs numerous functions in the small community of Willow Springs. She is not only her community griot whose task is to keep the tradition alive, but she is also a healer, conjurer and clairvoyant. Dr. Smithfield, a local physician, bears a grudging respect for her medical achievements and validates her skills as a healer, while her position as a matriarch and community leader is validated by the whole population of Willow Springs. She is a profoundly ethical human being who uses magic in the service of her people. She performs a fertility rite on Bernice and a healing rite on her niece, Cocoa, she fights the dark and disruptive forces of the island represented by her neighbor Ruby who, driven by jealousy and hatred, "the most powerful hoodoo of all,"<sup>16</sup> can actually accomplish some evil aims with rootwork. Finally Mama Day is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 264.

<sup>15</sup> Idem, *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation*, in: *Black Women Writers (1950-1980) A Critical Evaluation*, Marie Evans, New York (1984), p. 121.

<sup>16</sup> Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, INC., 1988), p. 51.

endowed with the power of clairvoyance. She has not only premonitions about what is going to happen in her immediate vicinity, but also is able to pass accurate judgments on the distant demoralized world of mainland America. While watching a Phil Donahue show she can read from the faces in the audience which ladies gave their children up for adoption and which are beaten by their husbands, which homes have been shattered by Vietnam, drugs or the alarming rate of divorce.

Though the two novels discuss the problem of identity in a different manner, similarities between them are more than superficial. They both belong to the magical realist tradition of epic storytelling because they blend the sober reality of racial and economic abuse in the South, its painful and haunting history, with its folklore and the miraculous. Like magical realists, the two Afro-American women writers explore the paradigm of cultural clash and consequent dilemmas with identity formation. In both novels the cultural clash takes the form of a conflict between man and woman. In *Tar Baby* Son and Jadine fail to make their relationship work because they are deeply separated by their various preconceived ideas about race and identity. In *Mama Day* Cocoa's husband, George, "a stone city boy,"<sup>17</sup> brought up in a shelter for boys, in reverence of rationalism and in profound distrust of superstition, dies because of his inability to believe that genuine magic exists.

*Tar Baby* is rich in magical realist techniques of writing. There is the theme of alienation of a modern emancipated woman, Jadine; there is also the motif of a quest, as both Jadine and Son try to find a place in the world where they can belong together. Finally there is the bewildering intrusion of myth and legend into the proper action of the novel, when the magical world does take precedence over reality. *Mama Day* on the other hand, is a story of witchcraft and conjuration which explores the dichotomy between supernatural ways of knowing and healing and rationalistic

<sup>17</sup> Naylor, *Mama Day*, p. 9.

and empirical ones. The miraculous, which manifests itself in voodoo rituals, changes the tack of characters' lives and their perception of reality. The book is related to magical realism in its emphasis on popular roots of contemporary culture and its use of myth and folklore. The folklore is captured through orality, which gives black people roots in their land and helps them to protect themselves from the loss of cultural memory and assimilation. The story is narrated alternatively by Cocoa and George, and their interactive performances form, as Thudier Harris observes: "a call and response pattern"<sup>18</sup> long recognized in Afro-American folklore. The orality is also brilliantly depicted by the island's voice, which while narrating the events that take place on the island, uses black vernacular, indicative of the region and the levels of formal education of the speakers. It displays a robust sense of humor, tells the story in a leisurely manner, and amicably challenges the reader.

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<sup>18</sup> Thudier Harris, *The Power of the Porch* (Athens and London: Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lectures Number 39, The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 91.