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**Magical Realism in Literary Quest
for Afro-American Identity**

in selected works by

Gloria Naylor
Randall Kenan
Toni Morrison
and Paule Marshall

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Preface

Jean Weisgerber makes a distinction between two types of magical realism. The first, the ‘scholarly’ type “loses itself in art and conjecture to illuminate or construct a speculative universe.”¹ The second is a mythic or folkloric type mainly found, in her opinion, in Latin American literature. Roberto González Echevarría,² an influential Latin American critic, makes a similar distinction between different versions of the mode. He calls the first type epistemological, i.e. concerned with questions of knowledge, and the second type ontological, i.e. concerned with questions of being. In the first category, the marvels stem from the observer’s vision, while in the second the land and reality are marvelous. For the purposes of this study, the second type of magical realism is of utmost importance. It is directed against the Euro-American rational canon and it criticizes claims to universality of European philosophical systems.

North American civilization epitomizes the Age of Reason and realism, its prevailing literary mode, with its restrictive conception of mimesis, still remains strong in the contemporary fiction in the United States. Realism is the main European export in literature. Its pretensions to convey the most accurate portrait of the world have in some instances tended to converge with imperialism, which endowed it with an implicit authority. In his essay “The Realist Floor-Plan,” Fredric Jameson

¹ Jean Weisgerber. “Le Réalisme magique: La locution et le concept,” *Revista di letteratura moderne e comparate* 35, fasc. 1 (1982): 27–53.

² Roberto González Echevarría. “Isla a su vuelo fugitiva: Carpentier y el realismo mágico,” *Revista Iberoamericana* 40, 86 (1974): 35.

perceptively maintains that realism achieves “the emergence of a new space and a new temporality”. Its spatial homogeneity abolishes the older forms of sacred space, and its time flow replaces “older forms of ritual, sacred, or cyclical time.”³

Magical realism operates as a corrective to traditional tenets of mimesis. It questions hegemonic models promoted by the metropolitan centers, be it Europe or the United States, and intentionally deviates from the mimetic program of realism. It abandons Western empirical attitude towards reality for the sake of a magico-mythic approach. The metaphysical revisionist agenda of magical realism can reverse the process of annihilation of sacred time and space by dismantling the code of realism and challenging its confining dogma. Wendy B. Faris asserts in her comprehensive essay “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction” that such dismantling enables “a broader trans-cultural process to take place, a process within which post-colonial Latin American literature established its identity.”⁴ In other words, she declares that magical realist fiction abolished the hegemony of metropolitan values, institutions and concepts, thus becoming the national literature and a crucible for Latin American idiosyncratic identity. Therefore in the case of Latin American culture, magical realism, with its emphasis on the community and its lore, proved an effective strategy for the discursive construction of national identity.

In my thesis I want to demonstrate that magical realism, as a discourse of identity, can do for African American culture what it previously did for Latin American culture. The central idea of this work then is that magical realist techniques of writing have been deliberately used in contemporary Afro-American fiction to reinvent modern Afro-American identity.

Behind this conception there is a belief that magical realism as a cultural practice is very closely allied with the perception of living on the margins of mainstream literary traditions. The cultural situation of African Americans is unquestionably in many ways similar to that of Latin American peoples, and I will maintain that major themes and narrative strategies of some Afro-American works of fiction bear affinity

³ Fredric Jameson. “The Realist Floor-Plan.” *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky, p. 374.

⁴ Wendy B. Faris. “Scheherazade’s Children.” *Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, p. 165.

with the Latin American model of magical realism. To this end I plan to focus on a few texts by contemporary African-American writers—three novels: Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* and Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, and two short stories by Randall Kenan: “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” and “Clarence and the Dead.” I have chosen these texts because it seems to me that they best carry the argument. All of these narratives emphasize cultural specificity and difference; all are concerned with the meaning of cultural identity and complexities of its construction. The major bridge between them is the similar interpretation of the essence of African American culture and of the dangers that the dominant Euro-American tradition poses to the well being of Afro-American communities. Their basic thematic concerns are such as those of their Latin American colleagues’: history, myth and community, to which the concept of cultural identity is inevitably linked.

Regarding the writers’ varying perspectives, I decided to divide my analysis into two sections. I begin by discussing *Mama Day* and the two stories from Randall Kenan’s collection. In those works of fiction the Afro-American rural community is the major subject matter, the corollary of which is the authors’ interest in folklore and orality. In my study of the two writers, I will attempt to clarify how they recover Afro-American cultural identity by means of magical realist devices, such as ontological subversion of Western philosophical dogma, and formal and linguistic subversion of canonical conventions. The works discussed in the second section—*Tar Baby* and *Praisesong for the Widow*—are united by a cluster of interrelated issues that can be expressed in this way: how a culturally uprooted African American individual, whose ties with the ancestral past and rural community have been impaired, can reconstruct his or her identity in the multiracial and multicultural reality of modern America? In this section African American community and folklore fade into the background, and the tradition of oral storytelling, native African cosmology and its sustaining myths are ostensibly absent from the protagonists’ lives. This causes their profound confusion and crisis in the process of their identity formation. Therefore, these novels primarily deal with the main characters’ quests for psychic integrity and cultural authenticity. My argument is that what points to the novels’ literary affiliations with

magical realism is the authors' belief that a truly meaningful identity can be achieved only through resuscitating myth and ritual, which reestablish the bonds between individuals and the Afro-American community's ancestral belief system. Thus in the case of all four writers my focus will be on magical realist narrative strategies of identity construction.

Gabriel García Márquez, the most famous practitioner of the mode, whose remarkable novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the paragon of the type of magical realism that mostly interests me in my analyses, often refers to the African Caribbean as the source of his marvelous real. This adds an additional importance to the fact that the region surrounding the Caribbean Islands is also the setting for all the works of fiction that are the subject of this thesis. The confluence of races and cultures and the rift between Western civilization and indigenous cultures accounts for the exceptional cultural ambiance of the region. Although the Caribbean figures in some of the examined narratives more prominently than in others, still it always hovers somewhere on the fringes of the writers' imagination and functions as a reminder of the New World's cultural hybridity and amalgamation.

Taking all this into account, I will argue that magical realism has powerful ideological dimensions. It can overturn the dichotomy between Western civilization and Afro-American culture. Euro-American civilization is imbued with centuries of culture and therefore perceived as superior. On the other hand, the indigenous African culture in the New World, based on a totally different cosmology, is often considered 'primitive' and evolving on a lower plane of cultural refinement. African American literature receives now as many accolades as the canonical WASP literature of the United States used to. In my study I hope eventually to contend that magical realism has been a considerable contribution to that success because it is such an effective strategy of dissent from the dominant and oppressive culture.

Introduction

In the last two decades of the 20th century, the United States witnessed many fierce debates over the issues of ethnicity, multiculturalism and cultural syncretism. The United States has always been a country of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, and the question posed in 1789 by Hector St. John Crèvecoeur: “What is this American, this new man?” has not lost its validity. As the illusions about the unified character of American culture can no longer be successfully sustained, now—at the turn of the century—the United States seems to have finally embraced quite a new concept of national identity.

Eugene E. Leech points out that:

the United States was born in revolution and chose at birth to clothe itself in a revolutionary kind of national identity, a ‘civic nationalism’ based not on ethnicity, language, religion or other traditional matters, but on the universalistic ideology of the Enlightenment: the ideas of liberty, equality, government by consent, reason, progress.⁵

Nevertheless, to be American was to be white, English speaking, of British descent and Protestant. But the population of the New Republic was neither exclusively white, Protestant nor British in origin, and, in the course of time, the liberal immigration policies resulted in even greater ethnic and racial diversity.

No wonder that finally Americans of all ethnic backgrounds, to whom access to the mainstream American culture had been constantly denied,

⁵ Eugene E. Leech. “Multiculturalism and Mass Society in 20th Century American Social Thought,” *American Studies*. Vol. XVII. Warsaw 1999: 69.

started to call to task the Constitution, or search for more specific forms of identification based on ethnic heritage rather than lofty ideas of the Enlightenment. The numerous quests for new meaningful ethnic identity aroused heated controversy over the nation's cultural destiny: will the United States yield to "cultural degradation and social decomposition" that the adversaries of multiculturalism profess, or will ethnic cultures be "Americanized to death"⁶ and the threat that they allegedly pose to the dominant WASP culture be obliterated?

Whatever the outcome of the strife may be, the anxiety it causes is extreme. Never before in the history of American culture have readers, critics and academic circles more closely scrutinized ethnic writing. The haunting nature of Crèvecoeur's question seems to have opened the door for wide scope research in the areas of American culture, which have been so far disparaged and neglected. Literatures of Latin Americans, Asian Americans, and Afro-Americans finally have come all the way from the margins to take place at the very center of attention of the American reading public.

In my dissertation, I want to explore some aspects of this new prominence of ethnic writing. I would like to concentrate on what I consider to be one of the most remarkable developments of the contemporary American literary scene: the immense popularity of fiction by black writers, especially women, and its extraordinary affinity with magical realist fiction produced by South American writers. Both Afro-American fiction and magical realism not only contribute to the discussion about the role of ethnicity and multiculturalism in shaping the future of American culture, but also give a relevant response to Crèvecoeur's question concerning the complex, many-sided nature of American identity. I wish to argue that awarding Nobel Prizes for Literature to Gabriel García Márquez (1982) and Toni Morrison (1993) not only bears witness to this new extended versatility of literary circles and the reading public itself, but also shows that these two literatures, i.e. Latin American and Afro-American, represent, in fact, the same mode of writing. Moreover, I want to demonstrate that this mode of writing is used with the same intention, that it is instrumental in recreating peoples' identities; in this case, the identity of contemporary Afro-Americans.

⁶ Eugene E. Leech, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

The increased visibility of writings by Afro-American women novelists may also be seen as a result of the intersection of two movements from preceding decades—the Black Power Movement and the Women’s Movement. Many African American writers such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker or Toni Morrison were active participants of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement, and the fact immediately helped to draw public attention to their novels, as they had already been public figures.

The Black Power Movement of the 1960s influenced not only the themes but also the form of their writings. The Black Arts Movement, the cultural arm of the Black Power Movement, emphasized black folk forms as bases for Afro-American art. A campaign was launched to legitimize Afro-American culture as a separate culture with its own ideas, forms and styles rather than a mere derivation of Eurocentric culture. This resulted in a renewed interest in primitive African cultures, whose cosmologies and mythologies have been incorporated to Afro-American literature in an effort to re-create black identity.

However, soon it turned out that there were many concepts of what in fact ‘black identity’ means. The cultural nationalists’ idea of Afro-American identity was not only conceived in purely male terms but also confined to the realities of the Northeast United States, and such exclusiveness incited a lot of criticism. Several major writers such as Ishmael Reed critiqued the Black Arts Movement for its shortsightedness in ascribing to all black people the same backgrounds, anxieties and ambitions. Some writers such as June Jordan condemned the movement for its chauvinism. Southern writers such as Alice Walker reminded readers that black people live in the South as well, while homosexual writers such as Audre Lorde wondered at the fact that lesbians and gays were altogether omitted in the nationalistic definition of ‘blackness’. Finally immigrant writers such as Paule Marshall postulated that the formation of Afro-American identity should not be accomplished exclusively on the basis of the U.S. blacks’ experience but should also include voices of all black people living in the diaspora on both American continents.⁷

⁷ This fragment of my work is based on the “Introduction to Literature since 1970,” written by Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Norton Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, p. 2011.

Thus Afro-Americans not only undertook their quest for recognition and equality but also acknowledged the fact that identity is the outcome of many different determinants. They inspired Native Americans, Latin Americans and Asian Americans, all the peoples so far marginalized in the ideal of a seemingly homogeneous WASP nation, helping in this way to forge the debates over cultural syncretism. As a result, the United States of today can no longer be perceived as a melting pot of nations, races and cultures, obliterating permanently and irrevocably any diversity in the process of producing a homogenous nation. It is rather a multicolored, pluralistic and polyphonic nation in which ethnicities remain in dialogue with the dominant WASP culture and with one another.

Multiculturalism and syncretism are something that North and South Americas 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 and, in the view of this fact, they both can be regarded as belonging to the postcolonial tradition. Although the term “postcolonialism” usually applies to the cultural condition of countries which were under British or French colonial rule,⁸ it often refers to nations and people within nations who are perceived as different in traditional Western narratives. The term “postcolonial” has thus come to signify all cultures affected by some kind of imperialism. “It is most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years.”⁹ Not only Black Nationalists but also many cultural activists tend to consider black communities in the USA as “colonies” and describe them as “postcolonial” or “Third World” nations.¹⁰ This seems to be a corollary of the United States’ current position of power and the neo-colonial role that it has played.

Latin American and Afro-American literatures seem to share a lot of the concerns that animate the writings of postcolonial authors. Among these concerns the most important one appears to be “the need in na-

⁸ Bill Aschcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in the Post-colonial literatures*, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹⁰ Elliot Butler Evans. *Race, Gender and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*, p. 28–29.

tions and groups which have been the victims of imperialism to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalistic or Eurocentric concepts or images.”¹¹ Therefore, both Latin and Afro-American literatures can be described as postcolonial as “they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tensions with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial center.”¹² This explains the reason for the uneasy relation to the “imperial center,” “white America” and “Western civilization” that people of color in Latin America and in the United States have in common. As in the case of other postcolonial societies, the process of construction of their identities has often taken the form of a negative response to white European customs, traditions and principles. Therefore, the mission of black writers is comparable to that of Latin American writers. With their writing they can help their people to realize the potency of the Afro-American culture, the existence of rich cultural heritage which is much older than that of the United States or even Europe. The works of Latin American and Afro-American writers not only describe economic destitution and racial discrimination of their people but also their struggle for creation of meaningful identity, free of restrictions imposed by the dominant culture.

What seems to be particularly striking is that the two literatures share not only their interest in reviving their peoples’ identities but also their approach to writing as storytelling grounded in folk traditions and beliefs. The syncretism of such writing can be seen in blending Catholic and “hoodoo” traditions as well as history and myth. The magic and the mystery of voodoo, in African American writing, are often linked with the miraculous occurrences from the Bible, while institutionalized history is viewed through the prism of black mythology, which tampers with the traditional treatment of time and space, and which challenges ideological forces that propose a single, authoritative and supposedly universal reading of history.

Universality makes a pretence of neutrality and objectivity, and that is why it must be defied by idiosyncratic cultural representation. The

¹¹ Simon During. *Postmodernism and Postcolonialism Today*, p. 125.

¹² Bill Aschcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, op. cit., p. 4–5.

formula for such representation draws in and binds history, religion and magic and situates such writing in a much larger and older tradition. For Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Randall Kenan and Toni Morrison, as for Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes or Octavio Paz, storytelling is a communal ritual—it has to do with recuperation of history and mythology, which constitute the cornerstone of a nation’s identity, through the tradition of telling stories inherited from mothers and grandmothers—“the culture-bearing black women.”¹³ These stories, as Alice Walker puts it, are “accumulated collective reality dreams, imaginings, rituals and legends” that constitute the “subconscious of a people.”¹⁴ Telling them again and again means going back to one’s roots to re-vision the uniqueness of one’s culture. It breathes life into the culture, consolidates the community and insulates it from crushing forces of the mainstream culture. It illuminates the destructive progress of history and helps to recapture and clarify the past in order to construct sound foundations for the future outside the homogeneous social system. In other words, such storytelling attempts to reclaim and collect all the parts of cultural heritage disparaged by that system and the larger culture. Such storytelling “combines subjectivity and objectivity, employs the insights and passions of myth and folklore in the service of revising history.”¹⁵

Folklore is a vernacular expression of beliefs, customs and traditions that identify a particular people. Myths are its manifestation, a “usable past” that the writers can consciously draw on in order to subvert middle-class values and aesthetics, and to give coherence to the new type of discourse that they are trying to forge. Myth becomes a mode of discourse that heals the split between past and present. The present is made one with the past through ritual, i.e. the systematic repetition of the inherited cultural gestures, which in a non-verbal way perpetuates the ancestral pattern of beliefs, and binds the members of the tribe in a common purpose, in a sense of well-being. Even Ralph Ellison, whose books calculatedly feed on the conventions of the American literary canon, asserted that folklore and myths are the basis of black literature and of all great literature:

¹³ Toni Morrison. *Tar Baby*, p. 127.

¹⁴ Alice Walker. *In Search Of Our Mothers Gardens*, p. 62.

¹⁵ George Lipstiz. “Myth, History and Counter-Memory.” *Politics and the Muse: Studies in the Politics of Recent American Literature*, p. 162.

For us [Afro-Americans] the question should be what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning. The clue to this can be found in folklore, which offers the first drawings of any group's character. It preserves mainly those situations that have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners and customs, which ensure the good life, or destroy it; and it describes those boundaries of feeling, thought and action that that particular group has found to be the limitation of human condition. It projects the wisdom in symbols, which express the group's will to survive. These drawings can be crude, but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. It's no accident that great literature, the products of individual artists, is erected upon this humble base.¹⁶

Therefore, the use of folk tradition in the works of black writers goes far beyond a purely romantic evocation. As in magical realist fiction, it serves to revise preconceived ideas about race, class and gender, which were generated by ideological, economic and political transitions in American life. For Morrison, Naylor, Marshall and Randall Kenan the survival of the community depends on establishing relevant links with the past. The meaningful identity of a modern Afro-American person in the context of great cultural variety can be created only through reinvention of culture from fragments of an ancient African past and the more recent history of the African Diaspora in the New World. Thus, as Marilyn Sanders Mobley¹⁷ observes, these writers put themselves in the position of African griots—village storytellers, elders whose task is to convey and pass on to younger generations their history and cultural identity. This is how Toni Morrison describes the cultural mission of her fiction:

I think long and carefully what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have been obscured, to identify those things in the past that are useful and those that are not; and to give nourishment. The novel tells about the city values, the urban values. Now my people, we 'peasants' have come to the city, that is to say, we live with its values. There is a confrontation between old values of the tribes and new urban values. It's confusing. I am not explaining anything to anybody. My work bears witness and suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why, what was legal in the community and what was legal outside.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 172.

¹⁷ Marilyn Sanders Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison*. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1991.

¹⁸ Thomas Le Clair, "The Language Must Not Sweat, A Conversation with Toni Morrison." *The New Republic*, 21(1981): 26.

To put it another way, the works of such writers as Kenan, Morrison, Marshall or Naylor help Afro-Americans to bridge the gap between their rural past and urban reality in which many of them presently live. All four writers discussed in my thesis emphasize that contemporary African American culture has its roots in folklore, and that the present cannot be meaningful without the past. Toni Cade Bambara describes such writers as “cultural workers,” while Marilyn Sanders Mobley calls Toni Morrison a “cultural archivist” or a “redemptive scribe.”¹⁹ In her opinion:

the label redemptive scribe refers to [her] desire to bring about cultural transformation. [Morrison] object[s] to or resist[s] the presumption that the past cannot coexist with the present, that cultural disjunction or discontinuity is a given, that the past must be discarded in the name of the progress. As a cultural archivist, [she] seem[s] consciously to present situations in which the oral tradition of telling the stories is central to the well-being and survival of the self and the community.²⁰

In short, the writers assume the role of anthropologists, ethnographers and folklorists whose aim is to record and to preserve the folk origins of their culture.

Consequently, in the case of Afro-American novelists, writing becomes a process of political and historical re-interpretation of their own culture and its troublesome relation to the authority of the Eurocentric tradition. Their task of asserting the difference from the imperial center is particularly difficult, as it can be accomplished only through the seizure of the power of writing, which is a form of expression alien to their own oral culture. Adaptation of literacy is a veiled and subtle strategy of resistance, by means of which the writers can shed the marginality imposed on their culture. Briefly, they strive to wrest control over literacy and to acquire the power of the dominant culture in order to empower their own. They balance between the two cultures, on the intersection of two radically different discourses: orality and writing. Morrison, for example, claims:

Here are things I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics

¹⁹ Marilyn Sanders Mobley. *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison*, p. 11.

²⁰ Ibid.

of Black art, one of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well.²¹

The writers' task is also a dangerous one as the intrusion of the written word into the oral world almost always brings destruction of oral cultures. Numerous conquests of the European states in the colonial era offered indisputable proofs of the vulnerability of oral society to the invasion of literacy. However, the advantages of the introduction of literacy into oral society are also numerous and unquestionable. As the authors of the already cited study—*The Empire Writes Back*—observe, literacy leads to development of a different kind of consciousness, which they call “historical.” They claim that

by recording particular facts and making the past specific, literacy does not allow the major mode of temporal meditation in oral culture to eliminate facts that are not consonant with or useful for contemporary needs.²²

Thus literacy permits a more conscious and more critical attitude towards the past and the present. Thanks to it, historical events can be endlessly re-interpreted and new conclusions can be drawn. In this way, transformation of oral culture into the written form becomes a performance of the self-assertion of the ability to reconstruct the world as an unfolding historical process. As a result, literacy produces a sense of change, of progress, and a distinction between history and myth. This, they remark, does not imply that oral cultures have no sense of history. Their tendency to create “mythic” rather than “historical” accounts of their communal past does not mean that they cannot reason logically. It simply suggests that the logic of oral cultures is more “magical” while those of literal cultures is more “rational” and “empirical.”

The contrast between those two models of societal communication is designative of the basic distinction between the Afro-American culture and the WASP culture, so it makes a good starting point for the comparison of the Afro-American use of language and form and that of the American canon's. The corpus of contemporary Afro-American

²¹ Robert Stepto. “Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison.” *Chant of Saints*, Eds. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, p. 229.

²² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, op. cit., p. 8.

writing is replete with attempts to reclaim the oral tradition by linguistic and formal subversion of the canonical texts. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. claims:

the privileging of vernacular speech and vernacular literary forms in written literatures, through direct speech as well as free indirect discourse, has characterized many close readings... Conventions (call-and-response), genres (signifying, rapping), and forms (code-switching, repetition) have also been identified as cultural elements marking a formal difference between a hyphenated text and its Euroamerican cousins.²³

In case of Afro-American writers, the development of creative language is not striving for competence in the dominant tongue but striving towards its appropriation. Language is a medium of power through which conceptions of truth, order and reality are established. The emergence of Afro-American writing challenges such power. Writers such as Morrison, Naylor, Kenan or Marshall try to wrest the language and the writing with their signification of authority from the Eurocentric culture. In order to construct the identity of their own culture, they must capture and remold the language to adopt it to a new usage. In practice, this means the refusal to use the language in its standard normative or “correct” version. In their hands, language becomes much more than a means of communication—it becomes a performance and a token of identity. Its authenticity reveals itself through lexis, variable orthography, unorthodox grammar and syntax, and vernacular transcription. Those techniques endow the language with metaphoric power to signify the presence of “Otherness.”

The subversion of “empirical” or “rationalist” discourse is also achieved through the adaptation and evolution of the main culture’s genres. Afro-American writing very frequently combines mimetic and verifiable aspects of realism with magical effects we habitually associate with myths and folktales. It endows ordinary people, places and stories with mythic grandeur, with larger-than-life quality and significance by incorporating mythic patterns of ritual and quest. The crucial feature of such writing is, then, its duality, and its most distinctive aspect is the clash between two different cultures and their cosmologies, without

²³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “‘Ethnic and Minority’ Studies.” p. 294.

their differences being resolved. The domination of each worldview is suspended, and the traditional notions of time, place, and identity are challenged are lured away from certitude. The African culture is “primitive,” and hence in touch with magic, while the WASP culture is “civilized” and “realistic,” i.e. committed to science and wary of superstition.

Thus Afro-American writing engages not only in generic but also in ontological subversion. It defies the conventions of literary realism, but also the basic assumptions of modern positivistic thought. Realism is based on rationalism and empirism, the central dogmas of Western civilization, while magic undermines universalistic belief in rational or empirical explanations of the world, thus constituting a continual threat to Western thought.

The term “magical realism”²⁴ was used for the first time in 1928 by a German art critic, Franz Roh, with regard to painting, not to literature. He found the term useful in describing tendencies in works of certain expressionistic painters, such as George Grosz, Otto Dix, Christian Schad, Carl Grossberg, Alexander Kanoldt, Max Beckmann and Franz Radziwill. He defined these tendencies as clarification and purification of the painted object, which gave “magic insight into an artistically produced unemphatic clarified piece of reality.”²⁵ The first person to introduce the term into literary theory was an Italian short story writer, Massimo Bontempelli, who mentioned it in his journal *900*. In his opinion, the term designated exploration of the magic quality of everyday life through the evocation of the supernatural.

The first writers who embraced in their writings this earliest form of magical realism were German Ernst Jünger and Belgian Johan Daisne. Two years after the term was coined, the Spanish translation of Roh’s book made it extremely popular in Latin America. Alejo Carpentier, a Cuban novelist, found the term helpful in describing the impact of the confrontation between two cultures, European and indigenous, on the mentality of Latin Americans. In the prologue to his famous novel *The*

²⁴ I am indebted to my colleague Magda Delicka for sharing with me the information she collected on the history of the term “magical realism.”

²⁵ Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism: An Annotated International Chronology of the Term. Essays in Honour of Frank Dauster*, p. 19.

Kingdom of This World, he claimed that people of Latin America do not distinguish between the real and the supernatural, as ordinary life is profoundly infused with myths, legends and superstitions which shaped the native perception of the world long before the colonization of the continent. According to Carpentier, contrary to Europe, the Latin American version of magical realism, was not a mere extension of the surrealist technique of writing, which simply explored alternative layers of reality, such as dream or the subconscious. He saw it rather as a literary foundation on which the collective identity of Latin American nations could be based. As a matter of fact, Carpentier's ideas proved very influential, and between 1949 and the late 1960s Latin American literature overflowed with magical realist novels such as Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Men of Maize* (1949), Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955), Mario Vargas Llosa's *La casa verde* (1966) and finally Gabriel García Márquez's Nobel-Prize-winning novel—*One Hundred Years Of Solitude* (1982).

All of these writers, and many others, such as Cortazar, Fuentes and Octavio Paz, relied heavily on Carpentier's concepts. In their works, they incorporated myths, legends and folklore of the indigenous people of their countries. They pictured the clash between the native Neolithic religions and Christianity, and between cultures based on oral and written traditions. This confrontation and the hegemony of Christian religion and Western civilization brought about the loss of native identity, while reaching back to the roots of indigenous culture and re-visioning its ancient mythology liberated nations, communities and individuals from the alien intrusions. In other words, Latin American magical realism accommodates mythic archetypes to modern realities in a process which Toni Morrison called "dusting of the myth" to use it as a "fully accredited mode of ordering human experience."²⁶

Magical realism is not, however, a phenomenon confined to Latin American literature. Nowadays it is recognized as a significant international mode whose origins go back to the epic and chivalric traditions and the precursors of modern prose fiction—*Decameron*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Don Quixote*. As Zamora and Faris observe:

²⁶ Thomas Le Clair. "The Language Must Not Sweat, A Conversation with Toni Morrison," p. 26.

the widespread appeal of magical realist fiction today responds not only to its innovative energy but also to its impulse to reestablish contact with traditions temporally eclipsed by the mimetic constraints of 19th- and 20th-century realism. Contemporary magical realist writers self-consciously depart from the conventions of narrative realism to enter and amplify other (diverted) currents of Western literature that flow from the marvelous Greek pastoral and epic traditions to medieval dream visions to the romance and Gothic fictions of the past century.²⁷

Thus looking back to the earlier periods of literary history may suggest “that magical realism is less a trend than a tradition, an evolving mode or genre that has had its waxings and wanings over the centuries and now is experiencing one more period of ascendancy.”²⁸

It is interesting to notice that the setting for the four pieces of fiction that I want to deal with in my dissertation is the so-called “extended Caribbean” — “a stretch of land on both continents, from Maryland in the United States to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil with the Caribbean in its center.”²⁹ The extended Caribbean is also sometimes called “Afroamerica” and is defined as a “black zone situated basically on the Atlantic coast of the two continents,” extending “from the North-American state of Virginia to the city of Rio de Janeiro.”³⁰ Paule Marshall writes it in her novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* that 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.” They are not only the place where different powerful cultural realms meet; they mark the birth of America—they are the initial site of the displacement and subjugation of Africans.

As a matter of fact, the entire population of the West Indies suffered displacement in one way or another. The indigenous people: Caribs and Arawaks were exterminated within a century of the European invasion, so the population is composed exclusively of exiles not only from Africa but also from India, the ‘Middle East’ or Europe. Those of African

²⁷ Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris. “Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s.” *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, p. 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁹ A term coined by Immanuel Wallerstein. *The Modern World System*, vol. 2, *Mercantilism and the Consolidation of European World Economy*, p. 103.

³⁰ Julio Le Riverend. “Afroamerica,” *Casa De Las Américas* 6, (May–Aug. 1966), p. 23–31.

descent experienced the violence of slavery, while others had to bear slavery's legal succession—the 19th century system of indentured labor. Consequently, the reality of the Caribbean is very complex as individual racial groups continue to maintain the legacy of non-Western cultures brought from their original societies.

There are many African features in the contemporary Caribbean culture; however, a complete reconstruction of the ancient cultures is problematic, as the slaves were deliberately separated from other members of their ethnic group to facilitate their exploitation. But the syncretism of the Caribbean culture accounts for the particular ambiance of the region. The extended Caribbean is a territory famous for its connections to conjuring traditions. Gabriel García Márquez discovered in the Caribbean coast of Colombia and Brazil a somewhat magic way of looking at reality: “The Caribbean coast of Colombia where I was born is together with Brazil and the Latin America a region where African influence is most deeply felt.”³¹ He came to the conclusion that this country is not just Spanish as he had been taught to believe, but also African.

It was also in the Caribbean “sugar islands” that “the agrosocial system of slavery developed in its fullest and most harsh form.”³² The extended Caribbean signifies slave societies developed on the basis of cotton, sugar, or coffee plantation. Consequently, there are many reasons why Afro-American writers turn to the Caribbean while searching for their “mothers’ gardens,”³³ that is, their African roots, their myths and cultural identities. It is also no pure coincidence that in some of their narratives they blend folk history and the miraculous, as magical realism seems to be a mode of writing most typical of the region.

The following chapters of my dissertation will focus on three novels: *Tar Baby* by Toni Morrison, *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor, *Praisesong for the Widow* by Paule Marshall and two short stories by Randall Kenan “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” and “Clarence and the Dead,” all of which are set in the extended Caribbean. Especially Randal Kenan’s stories and

³¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *El olor de la guayaba: Conversaciones con Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza*. Barcelona, Edytorial Bruguera, 1982, p. 73 (qtd. in Stelamaris Coser *Bridging the Americas*, p. 43).

³² Gordon K. Lewis. *Main Currents in American Thought*, p. 2.

³³ Alice Walker. *In Search Of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, p. 62.

Gloria Naylor's novel exemplify a prevailing regional aesthetics rooted in the cultural and historical reality of the extended Caribbean—their works in the fullest degree present aesthetic responses to the cultural context of the extended Caribbean, which partially overlaps with the American South. In *Tar Baby* and *Praisesong for the Widow* the region is not so prominently depicted, but still its legends and myths figure distinctly in the narrative texture.

I want to emphasize that my analyses of the five works of fiction are not so much dedicated to presenting their “interpretations” as to symptomatic readings, which reveal the ideological forces behind thematic parallels, and discursive formations traversing the texts. I want to show that on the thematic level the novels explore the paradigm of cultural clash and consequent dilemmas with identity formation. The thematic issues at stake are the problems of alienation, dislocation, authenticity, and origin in culture. I also want to identify the recurrent formal patterns of magical realism, which lead to the formal subversion of the canonical discourse. None of the texts operates fully within the existing categories of the genre, such as realistic representation or unfolding linear narrative. All of them have both mimetic and mythic levels of interpretation. My assumption is that through the abrogation of the formations of realism the identity of Afro-American culture is liberated as a ‘subject’.

PART ONE

**Affirmation of the community
and cultural identity through ontological,
linguistic and formal subversion
of the text in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*
and Randall Kenan's short stories**

Introduction³⁴

Gloria Naylor's "Mama Day" and Randall Kenan's "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" and "Clarence and the Dead" expose a proximity between fiction and anthropology. The authors' roles as anthropologists and folklorists intermingle with their literary projects. The result of this folkloristic approach is their interest in the rural community, its cosmology and mythology that are essential tools of identity construction. Ancient belief systems and local lore undermine the texts discussed in this section, proving that indeed "magical realism has tended to focus on rural settings and to rely on rural imagination."³⁵ The three texts contain "irreducible elements of magic,"³⁶ which cannot be explained according to known and familiar laws of the universe. At the same time these elements are grounded textually in a traditionally realistic, even explicitly factual manner, which places these works of fiction in the very canon of magical realism.

Those texts do not acknowledge the division, typical for Western logic, between past and present, the living and the dead. They reflect

³⁴ My analysis of ontological, formal and linguistic subversion is partially indebted to the editors of a groundbreaking study, *The Empire Writes Back*. I borrowed from them not only the terms to frame my discussion but also the whole concept of a text as a battleground for self-representation and self-empowerment. They also mention the fact that magical realism is one of techniques to appropriate Western narrative and the English language in the project of creating a national literature.

³⁵ Wendy B. Faris. "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction." *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, p. 182.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

a belief common in rural communities that life and death are not separate conditions. Therefore, they all are connected by a sense of the presence of the deceased. Talking ghosts frequently invade the world of the living, sharing with them important information or acting as a corrective to their progeny's errors and transgressions. "Ghosts are liminal, metaphoric, intermediary: they exist in/between/on modernity boundaries of philosophical and spiritual, magical and real and they challenge the lines of demarcation."³⁷ Ghosts unsettle our notions of progressive and linear history, "they float in time not just here and now but then and there, eternal and everywhere."³⁸ Gloria Naylor and Randall Kenan's fictitious worlds, where ghosts are habitual inhabitants, question our received ideas about time and space. Ghosts are not only instrumental in rejecting rationalism and empirism that are at the core of our ontological understanding, but they can also tell a great deal about their community's metaphysics. Naylor's and especially Kenan's ghosts dissent from the psychological assumptions about a self-constituted identity and instead propose a collective model of the self. They reorient our sense of identity by linking it to archetypal images and myths of the collective unconscious.

Mama Day, "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" and "Clarence and the Dead" are also united by their status as performance. The process of storytelling is foregrounded because the tradition of oral storytelling, of active listening/reading is a fundamental survival ritual of the Afro-American community. Those works of fiction demonstrate that the power to subvert Western myth is situated not only in ancient African cosmology but also in the power of speech. They are constructed in such a way as to mime oral narration. They employ the call-and-response pattern, typical of Afro-American sermons, spirituals and blues as a means of formal subversion of the text. They also use phonetic spellings, unruly syntax and grammar, speech patterns, proverbs and neologisms, repetition and vivid imagery in an attempt to render the variety and vitality of African American speech. In those texts, protagonists verbally construct their identities. The richness and clarity of black folk English make us

³⁷ Lois Parkinson Zamora. "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction," p. 498.

³⁸ Ibid.

understand that the true self of a person cannot be truly known except through the protagonists' language.

But language is also a vehicle for a cognitive system, which enables us to articulate the representation of reality. In their effort to construct a truthful representation of their communities, the writers had to struggle with language and literary form of expression, superimposed on their oral culture. Mikhail Bakhtin observes that:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to its own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language... but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from here that one must take the word, and make it one's own... Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the privacy of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.³⁹

Thus wrestling the language and the form from the dominant culture and appropriating them in the service of one's own community is as essential to the process of identity formation as the earlier mentioned ontological and formal subversion.

In conclusion, in this section I will be primarily interested in how history, myth, and magic interact in the process of ontological subversion of the logocentric tradition of mainstream thought. I will also be looking at formal and linguistic subversion in those texts to see how they contribute to the act of creating a unique African American identity.

³⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 293–294.

Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*

Gloria Naylor's novel—*Mama Day*—is a story of witchcraft and conjuration set on a mythical island of Willow Springs which is situated off the Western coast of South Carolina and Georgia, on the Georgia Sea. The island is not marked on any map, and it belongs to neither state:

Willow Springs ain't in no state. Georgia and Carolina done tried, though—been trying since right after the Civil War to prove that Willow Springs belong to one or the other of them,⁴⁰

but without much of a success. The only connection to the mainland is a bridge, and

each foot of [the] bridge sits right smack in the middle where is the dividing line between them two states. (MD 5)

The bridge is strong enough to last till the next big wind, and the hurricanes scourge the region pretty frequently. The islanders built it of wood and pitch themselves, as neither Georgia nor South Carolina are eager to build a steel and concrete bridge for people who pay them no taxes.

The island's total isolation has its advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages are that the inhabitants of the island have to cope by themselves with all adverse circumstances that befall the island, and these have always been numerous:

Malaria. Union Soldiers. Sandy soil. Two big depressions. Hurricanes. (MD 4)

⁴⁰ Gloria Naylor. *Mama Day*, p. 4. Hereinafter cited parenthetically as MD..

The advantages are the islanders' extraordinary resilience to the lures and traps of American capitalism, which most frequently take the form of real estate developers. They have plans to buy up the shore and turn it into "a vacation paradise," to which the local people would surely be denied admission, except "cleaning the toilets and cutting the grass" (MD 6). The potential sales turn into a cat-and-mouse game, with Willow Springers taking gifts from the developers and taking their sweet time about selling:

Well, them developers upped the price and changed the plans, changed the plans and upped the price, till it got to be a game with us. Winky bought a motorboat with what they offered him back in 1987, turned it for a cabin cruiser two years later, and says he expects to be able to afford a yacht with the news that's waiting in the mail this year. Parris went from a new shingle roof to a split-level ranch and *is* making his way toward adding a swimming pool and greenhouse. But when all the laughing's done, it's the principle that remains. And we done learned that anything coming from beyond the bridge gotta be viewed real, real careful. (MD 7)

Not only property developers evoke a mixture of gnarled skepticism and lingering suspicion. Also American politics, justice system and education stir up bitter irony. The people on the island do not take part in local elections "cause there was no place to go, us being neither in Georgia or South Carolina. And them local politicians couldn't do nothing for Willow Springs that it wasn't doing for itself," though they have participated "in every national election since President Grant" (MD 80). They do not seek justice in American courts either:

The nearest courthouse is fifty miles beyond the bridge on the south Carolina side, and over a hundred on Georgia's. The folks here take care of their own, if there is a rare crime, there is a speedy judgment. And it ain't like the law beyond that bridge that's dished out according to likes and dislikes and can change with times. (MD 79)

Finally, those who decide to make a foray into mainland schools are spoiled by American education. A good example of the threat that American indoctrination poses to the well-being of the Willow Spring community is Reema's boy, a proverbial educated fool, who, after a time spent in an American college, returns to the island to describe its folklore. The narrator of the novel, the mysterious 'we' representing the collective consciousness of the islanders, makes fun of his misguided education. After "extensive field research" ("he ain't never picked a boll of cotton or

head of lettuce in his life—Reema spoiled him silly,” the voice mocks), he publishes a book which makes the Willow Springers look “damned dumb.” The book reveals that his corruption by American training is so complete that he has lost his ability to communicate meaningfully with his own people, and has replaced folk traditions for an external version of his own culture. Therefore, the narrator condemns him, the institution that molded him and

the people who [run] the type of schools that could turn our children into raving lunatics—and then put [their] picture on the back of the book so we couldn’t even deny it was [them]. (MD 8)

All this, the narrator observes, “didn’t mean us a speck of good” (MD 8).

Willow Springers hold on to their land and customs owing to the fact that they are deeply respectful of the past. They inherited the island from their fathers and grandfathers, who paid dearly to keep it in their possession. According to the legend, they, in turn, received the island from Bascombe Wade, a Norwegian, whose family owned it since the times “it got explored and claimed by Vikings” (MD 5). In 1823 Sapphira Wade, his slave mistresses, persuaded him

to deed to his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs. (MD 1)

Naylor includes in her novel a bill of sale for Sapphira Wade, which informs the reader even before the proper story starts that she

served on occasion in the capacity of midwife and nurse, not without extreme mischief and suspicions of delving in witchcraft.

Now only the narrator, the timeless spokesman of the island, remembers her name, but everybody on the island knows her deeds. She was

a true conjure woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay; depending upon which of us [the island’s inhabitants] takes a mind to her. She could walk through the lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start kindling going under her medicine pot. She turned the moon into slave, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four. (MD 1)

But above all, Sapphira Wade is remembered as a great spiritual leader. According to another legend,

the island got spit from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down to scoop them back up, and found himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. "Leave'em here Lord," she said. "I ain't got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light." (MD 110)

This "enlightened" woman convinces Bascombe Wade to give his land to her people, and then kills him the same year (by smothering, stabbing or poisoning; the legend does not say exactly) and returns home to Africa. Here the legend has also a couple of versions, as some maintain that she flew or swam back to Africa, while others believe that she died or was even burned at the stake.

However, all the beneficiaries past and present are sure that she left behind seven sons by Bascombe Wade or "by person or persons unknown" (MD, 1). The descendants of the seventh son, Jonah Day, are still living on the island and the most prominent among them is an old lady Miranda Day, called by everybody Mama Day, the titular heroine of the book. A worthy and reputable heir to powerful Sapphira Wade, Mama Day performs numerous functions in the small community of Willow Springs. She is a figure of power and mystery, "known to be more wise than wicked" (MD 111), respected and feared by all, but filled with love for her people and always reaching out to those in need of her knowledge. She is a matriarch and a griot, who holds a vibrant and pivotal place in her family and community, and who is entirely devoted to serving them. The characterization of Mama Day as a fragile, toothless, arthritic and fussy old woman is at variance with the rumors of what she is capable of doing. Her skills fall under three categories: those of a healer, conjurer and clairvoyant.

It is clear that Mama Day considers herself to be more a healer than anything else. She is adamant to use her talents only in accord with nature, and she is very cautious not to overstep its boundaries. She cures the sick, delivers babies, prepares all kinds of remedies and gives all kinds of advice. She has lain bare secrets of nature, and knows which foods are beneficial and which are poisonous. She can cure baby croup with herbs, as she does with Carmen Rae's son; assist in the healing of any injury or provide a painkiller when someone is in intense pain. Dr. Smithfield, a physician from the mainland, endorses Mama Day's skills as healer:

For years Miranda and Brian Smithfield have had what you'd call a working relationship—some seasons it worked better than the others. But each knew their limitations and where to draw a line. Since he married a gal from Willow Springs and Miranda was his age, he had a measure of respect for the way things was done here. It just saved him a lot of aggravation. No point in prescribing treatment for gout, bone inflammation, diabetes, or even heart trouble when the person's going straight to Miranda after seeing him for her yea or nay. And if it was nay, she'd send them back to him with a list of reasons. Better to ask straight how she been treating 'em and work around that. Although it hurt his pride at times, he'd admit inside it was usually no different than what he had to say himself—just plainer words and a slower cure than them concentrated drugs. And unless there was no other choice, she'd never cut on nobody. Only twice in recollection she'd picked up a knife: once when Parris got bit by a water moccasin, and the time when Reema's oldest boy was about to kill 'em both by coming out hind parts first. Brian Smithfield looked at Miranda a little different after that birth. Them stitches on Reema's stomach was neat as a pin and she never set up a fever. Being an outsider, he couldn't be expected to believe other things Miranda could do. But being a good doctor, he knew another when he saw her. (MD 84)

Mama Day shares her survival skills out of a sense of responsibility, generosity and compassion, and out of respect for her gift, she never charges money for her services. Instead, people whom she helped use Candle Walk to thank her. Candle Walk is a ceremony taking place on December twenty second, during which people of Willow Springs walk with some kind of light in their hands on the Main Road, laughing, talking and exchanging small gifts which came from the earth and the work of their hands. It is an opportunity to show to Miranda their gratitude and appreciation for her efforts on their behalf:

Folks use that night to thank her. Bushels of cabbage, tomatoes, onions, and beets. A mountain of jams, jellies, and pickled everything. Sides of beef, barrels of fish and enough elderberry wine to swim in. The ginger cakes are not worth mentioning—the ginger cookies, pudding and drops. And from the younger folks, who don't quite understand, new hats, bolts of cloth, even electric toasters. (MD 108)

Yet Miranda's gift comes with a high price. First, she devotes herself to her family after her mother, Ophelia, goes mad when Miranda's youngest sister, Peace, tragically dies in a well.

No time to be young, Little Mama. The cooking, the cleaning, the mending, the gardening for the woman who sat in the porch rocker, twisting, twisting on pieces of thread. But I [Miranda] was your child too. The cry won't die after all these years, just echoes from

the place lower and lower with the passing of time. Being there for mama and child. For sister and child. Being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. Gifted hands, folks said. You have a gift, Little Mama. (MD 89)

But her hands “gave to everybody but [herself]. Caught babies till it was too late to have [her] own” (MD 89).

Mama Day has no children of her own, but also she has no regrets:

even Abigail [Mama Day’s sister] called me Little Mama till she knew what it was to be one in her own right. Abigail’s had three and I’ve had—Lord, can’t count ‘em—into hundreds. Everybody’s mama now. (MD 89)

What earns Mama Day her position of the community leader are, above all, her supernatural powers. Mama Day resorts to paranormal acts whenever any other possible course of action has failed her and her aims are always laudable. In the magic realm, she proves herself to be as skillful and efficient as in herbal healing. The most spectacular of her achievements is helping Bernice to conceive a baby by putting her through a fertility rite. With Bernice, the distinction between her natural and extranatural skills is again very clear. First, Mama Day gives her ordinary advice about proper food, exercise or a way to handle her obnoxious and unsympathetic mother-in-law. However, she is extremely reluctant to take Bernice to “the other place,” an old family house where she performs her magic. She concedes finally when it becomes clear that Bernice is too desperate to wait any longer, but her decision to aid Bernice in the creation of new life carries a lot of weight:

Yes, Spring was coming. Would God forgive her for Bernice? But she wasn’t changing the natural course of things. She couldn’t if she tried. Just using what was there. And couldn’t be anything wrong with helping Bernice to believe that there is something more than there is. (MD 139)

The ritual is pure magic. The connections between chickens, eggs and fertility are explicit, but the language is purposefully misleading. The surrealistic presentation of the ritual does not help to understand how this unusual, artificial insemination is accomplished, but anyway, it seems to be not about understanding but believing. The sole aim of the ritual is to build up Bernice’s belief in her ability to become mother and to awaken and release the natural power dormant in her body.

“The mind is everything” (MD 90) is the premise on which everything Mama Day does operates:

The mind is a funny thing and a powerful thing at that. Bernice is gonna believe that they [the pumpkin seeds Mama Day gives her as protection against the evil aura her mother-in-law casts about] are what I tell them they are—magic seeds. And the only magic is that [if] she believes they are, they are gonna become. (MD 96)

Consequently, the only source of magic is belief, while the mind of the believer does the rest—makes the magic work, makes it a lot more than a mere “hocus-pocus.”

Yet Mama Day’s decision to take Bernice to the other place proves to be injudicious and her reservations regarding the manner in which her aid is implemented turn out to be well-grounded. Little Caesar, Bernice’s son, dies, and his death serves as a reminder to Mama Day of the evil consequences of tampering with nature. With hindsight, she concludes:

You play with people’s lives and it backfires on you. (MD 261)

It confirms her earlier conviction that the best course of action is to leave things to God’s providence:

The past was gone, just as gone as it could be. And only God could change the future. That leaves the rest of us with today, and we mess that up as it is. Leave things be, let ‘em go their natural course. (MD 138)

Naylor makes Mama Day a profoundly ethical human being. Although she practices voodoo, she frequently calls on the Lord and always thinks how he would assess her actions. She not only makes distinctions between worthy causes and frivolous ones (e.g. she refuses to use her magic to help Frances to get back her wayward lover, Junior Lee), but she also has intelligent objections even when her power is wielded with the most noble intentions:

Can’t be nothing wrong in bringing on life, knowing how to get under, around and beside nature to give it a slight push. Most folks just don’t know what can be done with a little will and their own hands. But she ain’t never, Lord, she ain’t never tried to get over nature. (MD 262)

Finally, Mama Day is also endowed with a kind of clairvoyance. The air of Willow Springs is filled with the otherworldly and fantastic and

it is “telling her things” (MD 86). She has not only premonitions about what is going to happen in her immediate vicinity, but she can also intuitively pass accurate judgments on the distant and demoralized world of mainland America. For example, when she watches the Phil Donahue Show, she is not interested in “fascinating topics that could be summed up in two words: white folks” (MD 117).

She is interested in faces from the audience, from which she reads:

which ladies in the audience have secretly given up their children for adoption, which fathers have daughters making pornographic movies, exactly which homes have been shattered by Vietnam, drugs or the ‘alarming rate of divorce.’ (MD 117)

The reason why she pays so much attention to the outside world is to get the idea of the kind of people Cocoa is living around since she has moved North.

Cocoa, called also Baby Girl, is the last living heir to the line of the Day women. Her proper name is Ophelia, and it was given to her after her great-grandmother who drowned herself in The Sound. Consequently, the name bears too much sorrow and pain, of which the young woman is still largely unaware, and so it is quickly exchanged for a pet name—Cocoa. The pet name refers to the color of her skin, which is that of a “buttered cream.” Her “complexion [is] washed out” (MD 34), and Mama Day frequently calls her a “silly yellow thing” (MD 34). This “jaded colored girl” (MD 32) with reddish, gold hair harbors a hidden complex of being half way between black and white, of having “no tits, no ass, no color” (MD 20). However, the all-knowing and all-seeing Mama Day recognizes in her a direct descendant of Sapphira Wade:

Me and Abigail, we take after the sons, Miranda thinks. The earthmen who formed the line of Days, hard and dark brown. But Baby Girl brings back the great-grandmother. We haven’t seen the 18 & 23 [the date to which the legend of Sapphira Wade is ascribed] from that time till now. The black that can soak up all the light, can even swallow the sun. (MD 48)

One must admit that Cocoa is an excellent and deserving successor to the tradition that bore her. She is reverent of her people’s past and mindful of her cultural identity, which she simply calls “cool:”

It comes with a cultural territory: the beating of the drum, the rocking of the slave ship, the rhythm of the hand going from cotton sack to cotton row and back again. It went to settle in the belly of the Blues, the arms of Jackie Robinson and the head of every ghetto kid who lives to ripe old, age. You can keep it, you can hide it, you can blow it—but even if your ass is in the tightest crack, you must never, ever lose it. (MD 102)

Born underweight and saddled with a history of dying children, she herself fought valiantly to stay alive. Endowed with a big temperament and a will as strong as Mama Day's, she is characterized as a "little ball of pale fire" (MD 39). Stubbornly emancipated and defiant, and still not aware of the full range of Mama Day's and her own possibilities, quite ironically she finds a husband thanks to her great aunt's conjuring. The man on whom Mama Day casts a spell is George Andrews, "a stone city boy" (MD 9).

The contrast between George and Cocoa is striking. While two old, 'shrewd' women brought up Cocoa, George is a man with no family. He was raised in the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys, where all the boys took the surname after the patron, and nobody bothered to remember their first names. Thus, he is truly envious of Cocoa's rich family history:

I was always in awe of the stories you told me so easily about Willow Springs. To be born in grandmother's house, to be able to walk and see where a great grand-father was born. You had more than a family, you had a history. (MD 129)

Whereas Cocoa relies on her family guidance, George relies on a formal education based on books and Mrs. Jackson's teachings. Mrs. Jackson, who ran the boys' shelter, was like Mama Day, a strong-willed, committed and fear-evoking woman who had an enormous influence on the boys' lives. But, unlike Mama Day, she could not give to the boys she raised any affection, pride or hope—her guidelines boil down to two axioms: "Keep it on the now," and "Only the present has potential."

Therefore, it is not surprising that where Cocoa follows intuition, George applies cold and clear logic. While she acts on emotions, he thinks everything over; while she throws tantrums to get her way with him, he reaches for books about women in an effort to learn to deal with her because "living with the female" is a "day-to-day balancing act" (MD 143). He is a perfect example of a modern man, wary of illusions and deprived of basic human rites such as, for example, baptism. Still he tries to arrange his life around daily rituals to impose order on his life.

As Cocoa puts it: “[he] operated by rituals. A place for everything and everything in its place” (MD 129), but, contrary to Mama Day’s rituals, George’s lack meaning.

Thus, George and Cocoa represent two opposite ends of spectrum, and their relationship explores the dichotomy on which the whole story centers, that is the clash between rationality and magic, between non-belief and extranatural ways of knowing. Needless to say, it comes as no surprise that falling in love with Cocoa is for George “a confrontation with fate” (MD 28). From the moment she appears in his life, he almost starts to believe in predestination though he “would have never called [himself] a superstitious man” (MD 20). There is a sense of impending menace that George experiences in the presence of Cocoa, and the reader also anticipates some terrible calamity to happen to George. More than once it is alluded in the novel that women in Cocoa’s family break men’s hearts. The reader knows it from the legend about Sapphira Wade who killed the man who gave her love and freedom, and he knows about Miranda’s mother and father, Ophelia and Jean-Paul, who “would not let the woman in apricot homespun go with peace” (MD 284). One is, in a way, prepared that George will suffer too, and this impression grows stronger each time George’s “congenital heart condition” (MD 26) is mentioned. The very fact that it takes George four years to visit Cocoa’s family adds some additional importance to his being there, and enhances superstitions that Willow Springs and its weird ambiance are going to affect Cocoa’s and George’s lives.

All of Mama Day’s powers are tested when Cocoa is conjured by a jealous neighbor, Ruby. Ruby represents evil conjuration, some dark and disruptive forces of the island. She is driven by insane and blind jealousy, owing to which she can actually accomplish certain objectives with “rootwork.” Rumors spread through Willow Springs that Ruby has “worked roots” on Frances and Junior Lee, the object of her affection. According to some folks she has “stuff” much stronger than that of Dr. Buzzard, another adept of wizardry on the island.

Some say she’s even as powerful as Mama Day. And it ain’t no secret what she done to Frances, no, ain’t no secret at all. Frances went clear out of her mind, wouldn’t wash or comb her hair. Her city folks had to come shut down her house and take her to one of them mental hospitals beyond the bridge. (MD 112)

Another of Ruby's rivals does not get so lucky. May Elen, after she is seen in the company of Junior Lee, dies in torment. When Mama Day thinks of "May Ellen's twisted body," she concludes: "Ain't no hoodoo as powerful as hate" (MD 157). Ruby's jealousy increases in direct proportion to her inability to control Junior Lee, which puts every woman in Willow Springs in danger:

[Ruby] done accused every woman in Willow Springs with the exception of Mama Day—of fooling around with [Junior Lee]. Where Junior Lee is sneaking it ain't to a single house in this place. Ain't nobody over seven and under seventy that desperate. No, even the ones who might find it challenging to try to tame a good-looking, no-good man wouldn't come within a mile of Junior Lee. He's driving that Coupe de Ville Ruby bought him beyond the bridge to where some unsuspecting woman ain't heard about the way May Ellen died. Where they ain't had the night's rest broken by piercing screams echoing from that birch house on the edge of the South Woods. Uh, uh, them that believes in roots and them that don't, all know that child died a painful death. And that is a fact enough to leave anything Ruby says is hers alone. (MD 162)

It is a fact of which Cocoa is completely unaware when she comes to Willow Springs for her annual visit with her husband. Mama Day tries to steer clear of Ruby and keep her family out of her path, but when Ruby's murderous hatred turns against Cocoa, the conflict between the two women is inevitable. After Ruby lures Cocoa to her house and applies poison to her hair, the line of descent from Sapphira Wade seems to be coming to its end. The suffering inflicted on Cocoa is intense. It involves hallucinations and consciousness of one's mind disintegrating; being aware of the serpents gnawing at the body and of the terrible stench of deterioration. As Mama Day cuts the poisoned braids from Cocoa's head,

she runs her fingertips over one and it causes her to shiver. She ain't really understood what it meant till now that killing is too good for somebody. Now, death is peace. Ruby deserved to burn in hell which don't exist. (MD 264)

The killing of Ruby is an impressive display of Mama Day's supernatural powers. She casts the spell on Ruby's house by striking it with Jean-Paul's walking stick and applying a silvery powder. Immediately afterwards a lightning storm comes, it hits Ruby's house twice, and the second time the house explodes. The manner in which Mama Day kills

Ruby highlights her links with Sapphira Wade. Sapphira left by wind, and when she returns, she returns in the form of a hurricane:

it starts on the shores of Africa, a simple breeze among the palms and cassavas, before it is carried off, tied up with thousands like it, on a strong wave heading due West. (MD 249)

When the hurricane reaches its destination

prayers go up in Willow Springs to be spared from what could only be the working of a woman. And she has no name. (MD 251)

But when the vengeance is wreaked and the anger is spent, the fact remains that Cocoa is dying. With the bridge being torn down by the storm, George has no other way to save Cocoa but to turn to Mama Day for help. In this way he finds himself in a situation foreshadowed by a prophetic dream which both he and Cocoa kept dreaming. In his dream, George is trying to swim across the sea because he hears Cocoa's desperate cries, coming from the opposite shore. In her dream, she is crying because she is in some kind of trouble, but he is swimming in the opposite direction, and she tries hard to stop screaming so that he can make it back safely to the shore, but she cannot.

George's dream is not as sinister as Cocoa's. There is a hope in it, and it is associated with Mama Day:

In my struggles I saw Mama Day leaning over the Bridge. Her voice came like thunder. No, Get up and Walk. She is a crazy old woman, I thought, as I kept harder towards the receding shore. A wave of despair came over as I began sinking, knowing I would never reach you. Get up and walk. I was fiercely angry with her for not helping us. With my last bit of strength I pushed my shoulders out of the water to scream in her face: 'You're a crazy old woman!' And I found myself standing in the middle of the Sound. (MD 183)

When, in the end, George hears about Mama Day's way of saving Cocoa, this is exactly what he screams in her face: "You are a crazy old woman" (MD 296).

Faced with circumstances defying logic, George feels driven "up the wall" (MD 274), and tries to do what Mama Day wants him to. She summons him to the old house in the other place and sends him on an errand to her chicken coop. But George finds there nothing that in his opinion could bring relief to Cocoa, and instead of going back to Mama Day, he goes to Cocoa's bedside where he dies. His quest is aborted because

his rationalist mind makes him an outsider to what everybody knows intuitively—that otherworldly phenomena are happening before his eyes and that Mama Day has some degree of control over them.

He fails also because of his inability to put trust in anybody but himself. George is a man who never in his life believed in anything but himself, and when he thought: “God help me,” what he really meant was: “Let the best in me help me.” Therefore, he views his participation in Cocoa’s healing ritual as a “total waste of time and energy” (MD 296). It seems to him ‘numbo-jumbo’ rather than any real deliverance, and though at the moment of extreme despair he tries to fulfill Mama Day’s wishes, in the end he decides to do it his own way:

and [Miranda] sees there is a way that he could do it alone, he has the will deep inside to bring Baby Girl peace all by himself, but, no, she won’t even think of that. Her head was filled with too much sorrow, too much loss. No, she would think of some way to trust her, by holding his hand; she could hold him safely through that extra mile where the others have stumbled. But a mile was a lot to travel when even a step becomes too much on a road you ain’t ready to take. (MD 285)

She needs “that belief buried in George so she could connect it up with all the believing that had gone before” (MD 285). In other words, Mama Day wants to establish a connection between George and the world of African American myth and ritual, but George is not ready to trust her, to build with her “the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over”. And above all, he is not ready to acknowledge that “there are two ways anybody can go when they come to certain roads in life—just two ways” (MD 292), and that believing in oneself is “where the folks start, not where they finish up” (MD 292).

Like Bascombe Wade and Jean-Paul, George refuses to let Cocoa go. Sapphira Wade killed Bascombe Wade and flew back to Africa. Ophelia, incapable of relishing her grief over her dead daughter, drowned herself in the Sound in spite of Jean-Paul’s efforts to keep her among the living. George’s death seems to break this pattern. This time the death of a man instead of a woman ensures the continuation of the Day line, though George’s heart is just as broken as that of Bascombe Wade’s or Jean-Paul’s. His sacrifice opens the way for Cocoa to reach maturity, to appreciate fully her family history, and to get a full insight into occurrences beyond the empirical.

Bringing George home to Willow Springs is a turning point in Cocoa's life. It starts with Mama Day calling her Ophelia, her given name, instead of her nickname, Cocoa. In this way, she seems to say it is time for Cocoa to start her initiation into family heritage. First, the narrator hints, Mama Day shares with the young woman some stories about family history on their trip to the other place. Then during a walk through the cemetery, for the first time the gift of clairvoyance is conferred on Cocoa—she starts to hear the silent voices that portent her future: she will break George's heart; she begins to see images of her great grandparents and becomes more and more thoughtful.

After his death, George is transformed into one of the mysterious 'speaking' presences, ghosts of the past, that Miranda talks to in the other place. "He is gone, but he ain't left her" (MD 308), says Mama Day about George and Cocoa, "and one day [Cocoa] will hear [him] like you [the reader] are hearing me [the narrator]." It is not difficult to believe because though George is dead, his voice is alive, and it is a powerful counterpoint in the narrative frame of the novel. The brilliant composition of the novel makes the impact of this extranatural component of the tale all the more jolting. In the introductory section the narrator maintains that George and Cocoa came to the island fourteen years earlier, and that she left but he "stayed." As it is not immediately clear that George actually dies, the reader learns fairly late in the novel that the voice, which relates the story of this romantic relationship, with such virtuosity and vitality, belongs to a dead man. In this way Mama Day bears witness to the traditional African cosmology, which recognizes no radical divisions between the world of the living and the world of the dead.⁴¹

The story is revealed in such a way as to replicate orality and emphasize the dichotomy between extranatural ways of knowing and rationalistic and empirical ones. The story of the relationship between George and Cocoa is alternatively narrated by each of them in the first person singular. Each narrative voice provides his/her own version of their dating and marriage, and presents the events of the story from their

⁴¹ By the same token, traditional African cosmology recognizes no familiar dichotomies between past and present—John S. Mbiti describes this aspect of African cultures in Chapter 3 and Chapter 8 of his book—*African Religions and Philosophy*. I will discuss it more fully in the following chapter of my thesis.

separate and divergent points of view. The perception of each speaker is determined by the place from which they derive their cultural identity, New York for George and Willow Springs for Cocoa. This accounts for the fact that their discourses reflect alternative values of the two worlds, ostensibly placed in opposition. Trudier Harris calls this technique “call-and-response pattern” or “co-performance.”⁴² In her opinion “call-and-response, is an interactive pattern long recognized in Afro-American culture” (PP 91). For example, a preacher who delivers a sermon is calling to his congregation to get them to respond to him; similarly the tellers of the tales encourage their audiences to voice their approval, disbelief or skepticism. This black folk technique is one of black America’s major cultural art forms that reinforces a dynamic relationship between the individual and the group.

As Trudier Harris observes, as a literary technique, the “call-and-response” pattern shows how literature responds to the call of folk, oral culture. It presents a conscious effort on the part of the writer to erase a barrier between the written word and the reader. Gloria Naylor, claims Trudier Harris, “expands our definition of the pattern by lifting conversations between Cocoa and George in *Mama Day* to the level of interactive performances” (PP 92).

In this way, Naylor subverts the most fundamental principles of the traditional organization of the text. Instead of the traditional linear and straightforward narrative, the action of the novel reveals itself through two centering consciousnesses: George’s and Cocoa’s, whose accounts are not only subjective but also contradictory. According Trudier Harris:

Even as they call and respond to each other within the text, the overall interactive pattern of the narrative enables the narrator to call to us as readers/hearers and for us to respond. (PP 93)

Naylor seeks to include the readers in the experience of the text. As Cocoa and George challenge each other’s worldviews, the readers themselves negotiate between the two different perspectives and decide what conclusions to draw while the story slowly unfolds. In this way, by identifying with or rejecting different narrative personas, readers can also

⁴² Trudier Harris. *The Power of the Porch. The Storyteller’s Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor and Randall Kenan*. Hereinafter cited parenthetically as PP.

get actively and imaginatively involved in the “call-and-response” structuring of the novel. The text reaches out to the audience, pulls them in, fills them with anticipation and gets them to respond in a unique way.

Even the island’s voice, which meditates between the action and the reader, like the chorus in ancient plays, is engaged in this dynamics of presentation and response. It resorts to imperative voice and second person, addressing the reader directly and in a politely challenging manner:

Think about it: ain’t nobody really talking to you. We’re sitting here in Willow Springs, and you are God-knows-where. It’s August 1999—ain’t but a slim chance it’s the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own. But you done just heard about the legend of Sapphira Wade, though nobody here breathes her name. You done heard it the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of the car—you done heard it without a single living soul really saying a word. (MD 10)

This counter-discursive strategy, argues Harris, allows multiplicity of perspectives and multiplicity of interpretations, and above all renders immediacy of oral account. The leisurely manner of narration and a healthy, robust sense of humor of the island’s voice also suggest the oral telling of the story. As Harris puts it: “the voice establishes the porch connection that serves as the interactive metaphor for tellers and listeners” (PP 97) even though the hearers may be beyond the porch, separated by geography and time, it manages to maintain the immediacy of personal, oral contact. In this way, “the power of orality transcends temporality as well as chronology” (PP 97), which is perhaps the greatest magic of all.

The island’s voice—the mysterious “we”—is the first narrative voice in *Mama Day*. Its collectivity endows it with a great authority which suggests that whatever the voice reports is verifiable, that it can be validated by many people whom it represents. Right away at the beginning of the novel, the voice introduces a number of issues that it considers important. It talks about family, community, politics and progress and, finally, about believing and non-believing in otherworldly phenomena. Though it is always authoritative and self-confident, the voice is not self-righteous or condescending. It is always inclusive and open-minded; for example, it admits that there are as many versions of the legend of

Sapphira Wade as there are inhabitants of Willow Springs. Also instead of one “objective” and “detached” tone, the voice assumes many tones. It can be respectful, jeering, cynical, humorous, sympathetic or tragic, as it pleases. This not only enhances the impression of immediacy between the reader and the text but also makes the reader more willing to identify with the views that the voice puts forward. It is extremely important as the voice unveils an unfamiliar reality. It ‘works roots’ on the audience to make them change their sceptical or maybe even denigrating attitudes towards black folk tradition and the clandestine knowledge of ‘hoodoo’ practices. It also succeeds in convincing the reader that the people of Willow Springs, who would normally be perceived as uncouth and uncultured, can actually be seen as superior to the educated and refined in the light of a different, yet equally valid, system of values. Moreover, the voice’s leisurely response to the events of the story resonate, with typical Southern lack of haste. As the voice relates the legends, family sagas and the present action of the story, it seems to have a lot of time on its hands. In effect it creates the impression that the life on the island has its own rhythm, its own mythic time.

The oral character of Afro-American culture is reproduced also by means of language appropriation. Here the language has an important ethnographic function—it imbues the text with the flavor of the local culture. Naylor’s language strives to enliven the culture from which it derives. It is an example of how literature can seize the language and, by means of different strategies, adopt it to the needs of the unprivileged people. Naylor inserts patterns of vernacular speech and neologisms to render the texture, sound and rhythm of Afro-American English. Common phrases such as: “ain’t,” “he’da,” “would’a,” and such expressions as: “done sifted through the holes of time;” “done just heard,” etc. enhance the sense of orality of the language. Although they may be attacked by such dismissive terms as “colloquialisms” or “idiom” they are undoubtedly more than that. It is an oversimplification to treat such forms as merely linguistic mistakes, as they constitute a separate and genuine linguistic system with a coherent system of inscription, orthography, grammar and syntax. Their function is to highlight the tensions between Standard English and Afro-American English and to generate political energy. All the parts of the novel where Mama Day and her world are

in focus are written in black vernacular, which is a counter-weight to Standard English that George uses in his discourse. The descriptive, figurative prose of passages centered on Mama Day and the brilliant vivid conversations she has with her family and neighbors put stress on feelings, sensations and intuition. On the other hand, George's discourse and the parts of the novel which take place in New York are always intellectual, rational and logical.

Thus, in the novel, standard English and the black vernacular, with their attendant cultural and psychological implications, exist side by side. They are two codes in which different parts of the novel are narrated. Such a code-switching belies the apparent uniformity of the language, highlights cultural distinctiveness and sets boundaries between the protagonists' identities. There exists an irrefutable interdependence between language and identity—you are the way you speak—and George seems to be the most obvious example that language is a corollary of identity. Therefore, the two opposed modes of speaking and the consequent cultural identification that they disclose, reflected in the novel by George and the rural community of Willow Springs, outline the tension between mainstream and Afro-American cultures.

Furthermore, the employment of language in Naylor's description of Bernice's fertility rite sends a warning that the literary a discourse is not a place where our own cultural identity can be temporarily shed. In this particular passage it becomes evident that sharing a text does not necessarily entail sharing a cultural experience. With the language, the writer is trying to "conceal" what she is "revealing." It seems that the full meaning of the rite can be grasped only by those with the same set of presuppositions, as understanding the rite requires from the reader knowledge reaching out beyond the given context. By leaving in her writing something inaccessible, Naylor constructs the "Otherness" of her culture and a gap that cannot be easily abridged. In this way she compensates for the fact of adopting the language and the form of the dominant culture.

In consequence, Naylor shows that writing can have powerful ramifications for the identity of marginalized communities, but only if it appropriates the language and genre of the main culture so that they reconstruct the world according to a different pattern of experience. She

proves that literature can create an alternative reality by departing from the normative standards of the mainstream culture. Language becomes the tool with which this new reality can be constructed, a tool to produce difference, division and deviation from the norm. Thus Naylor puts herself in a position of ethnographer, anthropologist and folklorist who wishes to reconstitute Afro-American reality through an act of writing, and though she uses the devices of Eurocentric culture, she is also highly successful in discovering her own.

She is adept in getting readers to accept the aspects of African American culture that the rational majority might want to discard as unfit for literature. She defies in this way the assumption that only certain kinds of experiences can be turned into literature, and that literature can offer only one vision of reality, as it is perceived by the privileged culture. Naylor's vision of reality is pluralistic and syncretic—it involves two worlds, whose territories abut rather than overlap. The island voice tries to persuade us that we can cross these territories freely. When it relates the legend of Sapphira Wade, it parallels it with the story of biblical creation. Just as God created the world in which He is the supreme authority, so did she create her own world in which she has been seen as Goddess. By situating magic in the context of religion, Naylor breaks the reader's resistance to belief and the barriers between the territories.

Gloria Naylor's novel demonstrates that the interests of the black American women's writing reach far beyond the US society and culture to various literatures concurrent with them. *Mama Day* and magical realist novels bear more than superficial resemblance. It can be seen in the setting of the novel on a mythical island in the Caribbean, the nodal point for both Afro-American and Latin American fiction. It can also be seen in the choice of subject matter and the manner it is tackled. Like in the best classical magical realist fiction, also in *Mama Day* the real merges with the magical. Historical facts and recognizable socio-economic reality of life in the South are spiced with idiosyncrasies of the Caribbean culture. In this peculiar region, where folk traditions, myths and legends still have a vital impact on culture, a new type of narrative has been conjured. It is related to magical realism in its emphasis on the folkish roots of contemporary culture and its use of myth and folklore. It blends folk history and the miraculous in the tradition of epic story-

telling. The miraculous, which manifests itself in voodoo rituals and conjurations, changes the tack of characters' lives and their perception of reality. And so does folk history. By cultivating the memory of the past and elaborating on their family sagas, Willow Springers manage to hold on to their own, true interpretation of their history and culture. The tradition of oral telling of the stories inherited from ancestors and passed on through generations, is instrumental in the process of remembering and re-visioning. Orality gives Willow Springers roots in their land and helps them to fend themselves against all that Reema's boy represents—exploitation, loss of cultural memory, misled education. Therefore, it seems that the intrinsic merit of this new type of narrative lies in its power of reinventing Afro-American identity by grounding it in folklore that is the repository of the culture's most cherished values.

Randall Kenan “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” and “Clarence and the Dead”

Unlike Gloria Naylor, Randall Kenan is a Southerner by birth—he was raised in Chinquapin, in North Carolina by a great-aunt and a great-uncle. North Carolina is famous for its connections with magic; it is “perhaps the upper South counterpart to New Orleans for its belief in conjuration and encounters with extra natural phenomena.”⁴³

Brought up on such fertile ground, which he knows by heart, Randall Kenan is exceptionally skillful at rendering the peculiar ambiance of the region. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls him “a fabulist of our times” while Terry McMillan claims: “Randall Kenan is a genius; our black Márquez. He weaves myths, folktales, magic, and reality like no one else I know and doesn’t miss a beat.”⁴⁴

Indeed when we enter the fictional world of “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” we seem to be stepping into a different spatial and temporal dimension, one where the past and present somehow converge and where the dead are still among the living. The fictional territory of this remarkable collection of short stories is the town of Tims Creek, and ten of twelve stories are set there. Tims Creek is “a small southeastern farm community”⁴⁵ with white and black people, both rich and poor, where

⁴³ Wayland D. Hand. *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*. Ed. Wayland D. Hand [vols. 6, 7.] The two volumes mentioned here concern the folk beliefs and superstitions in the South of the United States.

⁴⁴ Those quotations appeared on the cover of the book.

⁴⁵ Randall Kenan. “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” p. 277. Hereinafter cited parenthetically as LDBD.

church going is a must and porch sitting is the most favorite pastime. It may look to outsiders like a dull North Carolina backwater peopled with descendants of slaves and slaveholders, now farmers, shop owners, factory workers or forlorn misfits and quirks. However, beneath this surface of the parochial and mundane, life is palpating with mysteries and unearthly wonders. In “Tell Me, Tell Me,” a white rich widow is haunted by a ghost of a black boy whom her deceased husband, a judge, killed long ago before they were married. In two stories: “What are Days” and “Things of This World” angels come to grant the wishes of the main protagonists. Sometimes the secrets hidden in some dwellings are more extraordinary, or even more dreadful, than supernatural occurrences in other stories. In “The Strange and Tragic Ballad of Mabel Pearsall,” a middle-aged mother unravels to the point of infanticide. “Cornsilk” and “Things of This World” tackle taboos of incest and interracial homosexual couplings respectively. To put things briefly, Kenan “continues his bid to shock the somnambulant out of their complacency.”⁴⁶

Kenan is set apart from Gloria Naylor by his alliances with a new generation writers’ intent upon exploring certain difficult subjects such as gay life in a small Southern town, hypocrisy of some ambitious national leaders and the not always positive impact of Christianity on the mentality of Afro-Americans. However, Randall Kenan’s Tims Creek is as rife with otherworldly and fantastic as Gloria Naylor’s Willow Springs, and Kenan is as accomplished as Naylor in getting the readers to accept aspects of African American culture that their rational minds might wish to reject.

The title story—“Let the Dead Bury Their Dead”—concludes the collection as a historical account of the origins of Tims Creek. It is a playful reproduction of a scholarly oral history, called “the Annotated Oral History of the Former Maroon Society called Snatchit and then Tearshirt and later the Town of Tims Creek, North Carolina [circa 1854–1985].”

From the title page of the story, we also learn that it was written by a Reverend James Malachai Green, abridged and edited after his tragic death by Reginald Gregory Kain, who allows Kenan to reprint the history alongside his stories. In this way Kenan disguises his authorial

⁴⁶ Trudier Harris. *The Power of the Porch. The Storyteller’s Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan*, p. 109. Hereinafter cited parenthetically as PP.

presence, creating the impression that within this collection of short stories we get one piece of writing, which is not his short story but a Baptist minister's "extraordinary oeuvre" (LDBD 279) on the history of the town of his birth.

The introduction, which precedes the proper story, tells us more about this extraordinary man and his work. We discover that for decades Reverend Green had acted as the town's self-appointed historian quietly chronicling "Tims Creek of the past and the present, of public and private, of mythic and real, of virtue and vice" (LDBD 277).

He was "observing, interpreting, compiling, researching, and writing" to produce this most compelling of [his] works... an amazing trove of papers: essays, oral histories, diaries, poetry and footnotes" (LDBD 278–279) on the subject of

his family slave past; the intermingling of the two Cross families, black and white; folklore and the supernatural; thanatology, issues of community leadership and decay. (LDBD 279)

Interestingly, the introduction is signed with initials—RK, which brings to mind Randall Kenan the author, rather than Reginald Kain, the alleged editor.

So let us say that Randall Kenan—and not a Reginald Kain, specifies the form of the "document" as the *Annotated Oral History*. As if it was not odd enough, he makes the form even more eclectic by

taking great liberties with the established patterns of oral history and documentation. (LDBD 280)

In practice, the story has a form of a dialogue between the man who relates the story of Tims Creek to a boy (we never hear the boy) and a woman who occasionally voices her disbelief in what the man painstakingly is trying to reveal. The woman challenges the man, repeatedly calling him an "old fool" and his tale a "lie." She does it first of all because such is the tradition of southern oral storytelling. Secondly, unlike the reader, she is not able to see the whole raft of elaborate footnotes, pertaining to miscellaneous real and fictitious historical and anthropological studies, whose purpose is to confirm the veracity of the tale. She cannot see either that the story is interpolated with extracts from letters and diaries, which also imbue it with a sense of authenticity.

In an interview with H.B. Grace, Kenan says that “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” “underscores how all fiction is lies and hopefully a lot more.”

H.B. Grace explicates what Kenan only hints at:

Readers too will find it interesting that the author cites books yet to be published, footnotes regional names and uses for the persimmon tree, and tells additional stories along with the characters’ accounts.⁴⁷

The annotations of Reverend Green and Reginald Kain are clearly delineated, but just how much of the story is Randall Kenan’s conjuring and how much reality is hard to say. The story becomes “an artful trope of itself, raising big questions how much history is fact and how much fiction.”⁴⁸

In this way, at the very beginning of the tale Randall Kenan introduces a wide variety of grand themes and issues, ranging from history and myth to the Southern tradition of oral storytelling. By making the form so heterogeneous and diverse Kenan demonstrates how history and myth interweave in oral culture in the process of producing contemporary Afro-American identity.

Elaborating on the themes from history and myth requires from Kenan both narrative modes—realism and fantasy. References to specific historical events appear in the tale itself but are amplified in the footnotes that precisely situate those events in the historical continuum. Those shreds of history are debris from which Kenan conjures, with the aid of the community’s collective memory, his own counter-myth. In other words, Kenan reclaims the past from the fragments of official records and from the so-called “Tims Creek Menes Legend,” which is the mythic history of the town’s past. This is a process of imaginative, not factual recovery. The mythical and the historical coexist in the text, sometimes supporting and sometimes subverting each other. As the plot slowly unfolds, historical facts that make the base of the story succumb to the narrator’s mythical rendering.

⁴⁷ H.B. Grace. “Meet Randall Kenan: Southern Writing is Changing; It Has to Change,” 1997, Promotion, inc., www.bookpage.com

⁴⁸ Ibid.

History is no longer understood as a constraining chronicle of events, interpreted and evaluated by the privileged culture. It is rather an imaginative process of picturing those events from the point of view of the silenced, marginalized and dispossessed. This imaginative reconstruction seeks to recuperate the most crucial fragments of the past, which are gaps and silences in the official records but milestones in the collective mythic memory of the community. Randall Kenan's mythical counter-narrative destabilizes historical realism by infusing it with supernatural occurrences and inimical ghosts who have the power to incite a political upheaval. Therefore the supernatural is an important ingredient of the tale, one that is responsible for the defection from the realm of historical realism and the consequent clash between the forces of history and myth.

"Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" starts in a specific time and place of American history—"as what they called a runaway or a marooned society" (LDBD 283) in the swampy regions of southeast North Carolina. The pretext to tell the story is a mysterious mound located nearby the town. The lengthy footnotes inform us that according to many geologists the mound came to being as a result of a collision with a meteor. Others claim that the area is a natural formation dating back to Mesozoic age. There are many more scientific theories, none of which is plausible to the local people. Some of them believe that the mound is an Indian burial ground, while others claim that it is indeed a burial ground but it contains not the bodies of Indians but of runaway slave girls who were burned alive in a church by some white folks. The footnotes suggest that in all those beliefs there may be a grain of truth; however, the narrator, unaware of their existence, believes what his father told him, and what the majority of the townspeople hold to be true. In their opinion the mound contains the vestiges of the marooned community of Snatchit, founded by an old slave named Menes or Pharaoh.

Pharaoh, like Sapphira Wade, is the embodiment of an ancient ancestor. He is a mythological presence—an epitome of a communal legend. He is a universal archetype of an Afro-American man whose fate has been allegorized in the story. Therefore Pharaoh is not a fully developed character but a type. However, Kenan does not get carried away with his impulse to universalize, and places his 'everyman' in the known and familiar world of Afro-American history and folklore. He combines his

preference for archetype with ‘local color’ realism to make Pharaoh a universal Afro-American man.

Pharaoh is a figure of mystery and the narrator tells us only the rumors that have been collected and retained through the activity of storytelling. Pharaoh is said to have been brought straight from Africa, where

he was some kind of a chief or witch doctor or medicine man or wizard or something over there and knew a whole hell of a lot. Could work magic, they say. Had a hoop in one ear, scars on his face. (LDBD 295)

According to the footnotes, which give a full account of his story, Pharaoh was brought to New Orleans on December 17, 1848 on the pirate ship *Hell's Bane*. The ship was taken by the Louisiana government, which set the crew free but kept the cargo, including the blacks who were deemed the property of the state. João Ubaldo Piñon, one of the crew members, wrote later about the incident, mentioning

an exceptional African who claimed to have been a Yoruba king or *oba* and also a shaman (*babalawo*), an unusual confluence of power as the two offices were normally kept separate, and even more unusual as he was extraordinarily young to have been appointed to either position by a council of elders. (LDBD 295)

Furthermore, according to Piñon,

the African claimed to have been the Oni of Ife, which is ‘the first among equals’ among Yoruba chieftains. He was taken prisoner in a war and sold to Dutch traders. (LDBD 295)

He arrived in the West Indies on a ship *Jesus*, which perished in a hurricane upon arriving in Kingston. The captain of the pirate ship, the one that was later captured by the Louisiana government, saved him.

The confiscated slaves were auctioned off in Baton Rouge and according to the government’s documents, the slave answering to Piñon’s description was sold to an owner in Louisiana. Both the footnotes and the oral story agree that Pharaoh was “one of great recalcitrance and intractability” (LDBD 296).

He was prone to running away, was always caught just to run away again. Once, the story goes to say, he stayed for one year with Waccamaw Indians, from whom he learned not only the topography of the state but also some powerful magic. Caught again he was sold to the Crosses, one of the most distinguished families in North Carolina

(The footnotes again bear witness to the Crosses' prodigious holdings and prominent position.) Some other versions of Pharaoh Legend say that Owen Cross's wife Rebecca bought Pharaoh as a present for her husband, on the occasion of his being elected a senator. Yet another version states that he was won by Owen Cross in a poker game, which is corroborated by an excerpt from Rebecca's diaries, incorporated later on in the story.

That was when Pharaoh got his name by which he was to be remembered among his people, and when he decided to change his tactics. He started to "play a good slave" and was promoted from the fields to the household. More and more impressed, or rather conjured, by Pharaoh's knowledge, Senator Cross made him "his Number One Nigger." Finally Pharaoh "got so much power over Cross he could give orders to the white overseers" (LDBD 300) and had the whole estate in his keeping.

Pharaoh was in a prime spot, playing that game for years, keeping that juju on Owen Cross, but all the time plotting and plotting behind his back. (LDBD 300)

He bid his time, the narrator says, figuring "who was strong. Who was weak. Who would betray him. Who would help him. They say he was a good judge of a man or a woman" (LDBD 301).

Then one day during a hurricane which Pharaoh conjured himself, (and it was not the first time in the story when forces of nature in the form of a hurricane came to his aid), he decided it was time to take action. Pharaoh and his followers instigated a riot, killed Owen Cross's eldest son and as many overseers as they could; they set the house on fire and then they were "gone like that storm, leaving death and destruction behind" (LDBD 301).

The footnotes again authenticate that such a riot was recorded on March 12, 1856. Senator Owen spent a fortune "looking for the darky who made fool of him" (LDBD 302).

For a while Pharaoh was the most wanted man in America but "he died that-a-way. Ole Senator Owen still looking and mad" (LDBD 304).

In the meantime Pharaoh hid with his people in the swamps of North Carolina, establishing a marooned colony, which they called Snatchit. They hunted and they raided nearby plantations and "they thrived on them swamps" (LDBD 304).

In allegorical terms, Snatchit represents the mythical release from the historical domination. The settlement was an isolated place, free from the harrowing exigencies of history. It was a mythical oasis, where the African cosmology flourished owing to Pharaoh's magic and rituals. The narrator reports:

They use to have big funerals in Snatchit, strange rituals with animals and smoke and mess. They say ole Pharaoh would preside, talk in his African tongue... where nobody could understand him. There would be a procession, you know, folk had to do this and that, you know, when somebody died. See, he claimed, ole Pharaoh did, when the time was right, he'd call all of them back, you know, back from the other side to join em in the fight. (LDBD 304)

After the emancipation, the name of the town was changed to Tearshirt, and this was the turning point in the history of the place. The emancipation brought white men from the North. They encouraged black people to vote and even sent some of them to Congress. The town completely changed its appearance:

Folk commenced to build. They got a post-office, cleared land. Drained parts of the swamp started farming, cotton, corn and indigo. Raised livestock. (LDBD 304)

Strangely enough, from that point on, the footnotes no longer back up the story with historical data. The story itself grows more and more eerie, departing now more frequently from the realistic premises in which it was rooted. Though, for example, the narrator admits that those were very turbulent times and mentions the terror wielded by the Ku Klux Klan and many lynchings, he is not bewildered by the fact that the town was never the destination of the raids. From that moment on, the story loses any pretence of historicity and becomes a pure fantasy, a mythical vision rather than a historical account.

The community of Tearshirt, though apparently making a slow advancement towards modernity, still remained strongly grounded in African tribal ontology, inculcated by Pharaoh. Pharaoh was still the community leader, a wiseman and a healer. He was:

still looked up to, if somebody got sick or had a problem, they'd come to Pharaoh and he'd work roots and such on em, keep em healthy, talk to em in groups and tell em to keep themselves ready, to look out for one another, not to be like the white men, reaching and grabbing and trying to own everything, even people. Told em that they come

from a great land and a great people and such-like. Wont preaching he done, more like learning, learning em to love themselves and the world round em. Said a time gone come when they'd all reclaim their glory. And the town kept a-growing. (LDBD 305)

In other words, what Pharaoh tried to teach his people was the feeling of pride in their African origins and a feeling of devotion to their community. He attempted to warn them against white man's predatory capitalism and against pursuit of individual aspirations, which could strain the links with the community. What Pharaoh's teachings seemed to boil down to was the simple truth that as long as they drew their concept of cultural identity from the nurturing and sustaining African cosmology their growth was certain and their glory imminent.

Ten years later Pharaoh died, leaving his community instructions not to look in his book. The book functions in the story as Pharaoh's attribute of power. Nobody knew what the book contained, but the footnotes from the earlier pages of the story, when the book was first mentioned, imply that "the book may have been an Arabic version of the Koran," and Pharaoh must have been a Muslim captive from West Africa. Other accounts suggest that the book contained a text dating back to Zoroastrianism, and some Creation myths as well as an account of the origin of the

albino race. Most reports favor a book of spells, the Book of Life, the Book of the Dead, a time-travel device, and other lexicon of supernatural capabilities. (LDBD 287)

It may have been as well

a translation from one of the traditional Yoruba oral libraries, somehow transcribed into a book for North American posterity, either in English or an approximation of the Yoruba tongue. (LDBD 287)

But most of the Yoruba would have considered the act dangerous and heretical, and this was obviously what Pharaoh thought himself, when he forbade his people to look into his book.

Whatever was the content of the book, in symbolic terms, the book introduces quite a new problem to Kenan's narrative, one that concerns advantages and threats that literacy poses to the culture that is oral by nature. Kenan's ideas about the impact of literacy on an illiterate culture spring from the conviction that writing has an ontological power and thus

can be an instrument of wielding cultural domination, Pharaoh's personal story shows that mastering of "polished English and the art of reading and writing" (LDBD 326) was a great step forward towards self-empowerment and self-liberation. But to the community as a whole, the threats of literacy may outweigh its benefits. On the one hand, literacy brings a dawning of historical consciousness through recording individual and collective pasts, and Pharaoh's teachings show beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was a historically conscious man. On the other hand, literacy fixes the past, obliterating the need for memory. The construction of a positive cultural identity then depends on whether literacy creates the group's truthful representation because if it does not, it puts the whole culture in jeopardy—by bringing in alien ontology and worldviews, it threatens to annihilate the very spirit of that culture.

The problem of literacy is connected in the story with another issue, the extremely difficult subject of religion. The influx of religious doctrines that are alien to African cosmology can be even more dangerous than literacy itself. Religion proved invaluable in advancing and justifying slavery. In the second part of the 19th century the conversion from protestant to revivalist fundamentalism took place. It celebrated piety and obedience, and emphasized spiritual rewards of life after salvation. This religious revival provided slaves with a sense of dignity but it also strengthened the slaveholders' authority and control.⁴⁹ In the essay entitled "Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression," its author Cornel West explains how the ideology of institutionalized religion justified racism:

The Judeo-Christian racist logic emanates from the biblical account of Ham looking upon and failing to cover his father Noah's nakedness and thereby receiving divine punishment in the form of blackening his progeny. Within that logic black skin is a divine curse owing to disrespect and rejection of paternal authority.⁵⁰

Judeo-Christianity buttressed then the alleged superiority of the white race, its domination and exploitation of other races. In the post-slavery era Christian indoctrination became a form of imperialistic re-colonization.

⁴⁹ These facts are cited after Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 73–76.

⁵⁰ Cornel West. "Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, p. 22.

The evil of institutionalized religion that presents God as a white patriarch is embodied in the story in the person of the “devil-eyed preacher” who came to the town of Tearshirt one year after Pharaoh’s death. He was not a black man like the whole community, he had light-green eyes “clear as colored water” and “light skin like a mulatto” (LDBD 314). He seemed as powerful with respect to magic as Pharaoh, and was just as charismatic. He easily slipped into the place left by Pharaoh and brought the community under his control. “It was as if the town had a new Pharaoh, though thisen was a bit different than the lasten” (LDBD 314).

People were awed by his appearance (“he dressed all the time in white, all the time pretty, light-skinned man, they say, handsome enough to make girls just go pitty-pat in they hearts and men folk to do all kinda out of the way favors”) by his gaze (“say, he fix you with them eyes you don’t know what to do”), and by his preaching (“Lord he could preach. Make you fear the earth was gone split open that very moment and suck down the wicked”) (LDBD 314). His sermons on sins and depravity based on the church doctrine and dogma were totally different from the teachings of old Pharaoh’s. The preacher said:

He’d been sent by the Lord thy God. Said he heard a bunch of Negroes living way out in the backwoods like animals wallowing in they heath ways and he’d been sent, Praise Jesus, to deliver they souls to make thee worthy vessels for the Lord thy God, who will smote thee with his left hand and pull darkness over thee with his right and look no more upon ye lest ye repent and serve him. (LDBD 315)

This new ideology and rhetoric were in sharp contrast with Pharaoh’s philosophy. Pharaoh had taught his people that: “God is everything, everything, everywhere in the trees, in dogs and cats and birds, even in them” (LDBD 315), and that to love the world and to love themselves was tantamount to worshipping God. The preacher-man repudiated these ideas:

That a lie, the preacher say, God is high above and looking low, to believe otherwise, well, Preacher-man say that’s the sure way to hell and damnation. (LDBD 315)

Gradually the preacher succeeded at obliterating Pharaoh’s teachings from the community’s collective memory.

That was when the first portents that not all was going well in the town started coming. Young girls and boys were going mad and killing themselves; similarly domestic animals started to go crazy and had

to be shot. “The rumors were that [they] had sexual congress with the Preacher-man” (LDBD 318).

Although different citizens were giving evidence to the fact and also to some other weird dealings of the preacher (talking to a black snake, walking on the creek or the church ceiling,) but they were not able to break up the community’s blind trust in:

 this shinny, pretty, light-skinned man, talking about the End of Time and the Salvation of the Saints and the hundred forty-four thousand, dressed in white with them light-green eyes, hypnotizing they were. (LDBD 318)

Another aspect of the Preacher’s sermons is the belief in material progress, in affluence as a sign of God’s blessing. One day during the mass, the preacher chose Pharaoh as his subject:

 Pharaoh wont nothing but a charlatan, a thief, a heathen a ole faker. Said he was evil. Sent; from the devil. Why otherwise would he take the name of the king, who held the Lord’s people in bondage for years upon years? And in that sermon he said he had a dream and in that dream the Lord said: Get ye hence to the grave of the charlatan, for with him he hath buried the keys to a great treasure more bountiful than that of the white men of the North, seek it and give it to my people for they are pleasing in my sight and worthy of my love; These riches are the proof of my love. (LDBD 319)

So great turned out to be the preacher’s power of persuasion that he actually managed to convince his congregation that the book was a map of a place where some incredible treasures were buried. With the aid of Puritan oratory, the Preacher inflamed the townspeople with greed, against which all of Pharaoh’s knowledge was directed. Yielding to the Preacher’s persuasion and orthodox Puritan doctrine, with its vision of divinity as a distant and materialistic white God, caused the community’s spiritual death. “That’s when the Horror was let alose” (LDBD 319). The dead got out of their graves to lay claim on their spiritually dead posterity. They wreaked terrible havoc in the town, killing, raping and setting fires to houses, stores and the church itself. They were fierce, unforgiving and relentless in their revenge.

The scene is apocalyptic, as not only the dead but nature itself rose to take revenge for the community’s betrayal:

 wolves [were] walking on they hind legs, buzzards eating people alive, red demons with bats wings put bits in women’s mouths and rode em, beating em with a thunderbush branch. (LDBD 331)

The climax of the apocalypse came when Pharaoh himself appeared in the ravaged town, beheaded the Preacher and declared the reason of the community's downfall: "Damnation and Ruin. What began as good has ended in evil. We are not ready" (LDBD 332). "Then fire rained from the sky, just as the fire the Lord sent to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and none of the wicked escaped" (LDBD 332).

The only survivors were an old woman and a boy, who set up a new town of Tims Creek, a few miles from the place where the old town burned for days turning into a mound which "goes all the way down to hell" (LDBD 332).

In this way Kenan depicts the apocalypse of the community, caught between the indigenous African and alien American cultural and meta-physical modes. As the community grows to value American dreams of prosperity more than its own mythology, finally it is forced to face its own spiritual and then physical extinction. The agents that exterminate them are their dead ancestors who come to make the living pay for their cultural transgression. The climactic act of the beheading of the Preacher symbolizes denouncement of Protestant ideology with its crippling conception of God as a manipulative, white patriarch. The killing of the Preacher and the perishing of the whole community is also a release from the enslavement to religion.

By employing in his story the motif of apocalypse, Kenan establishes intertextual links with Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The rising of societies and apocalyptic visions of their falls are recognizable motifs of Latin American magical realism; therefore, the fact that Kenan shares with Latin American writers this thematic concern also places his short story in the mainstream of magic realist fiction.

Kenan's portrayal of the process of cyclic subjugation and liberation of his people reflects a continuous fight between forces of history and myth which endeavor to lay claim on the consciousness of Afro-Americans. The mound that is a burial ground for the community is a tangible proof that the past that still exists in the present. The story resists the commonly accepted American idea that the indigenous past is no longer visible, that historical discontinuity is a given. Kenan refuses to resign himself to the fact that African American ancestral cultural identity has

been irrevocably erased. “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” views history from the bottom up and reconstructs it to include the collective mythical voice of his people. It wrenches history from the hands of people who were the enemy of Afro-Americans and combines official historical accounts with myth in the effort to put Afro-Americans in touch with their true cultural identity.

In “Clarence and the Dead,” the first story in the collection, Kenan imagines the reestablished community of Tims Creek after the disruptive cultural transitions and political abuses portrayed in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead.” The story focuses on a boy named Clarence Pickett, who at the age of three began receiving messages from the dead. That is not the only supernatural occurrence in the story, as his gift is linked with the hog’s named Francis’s ability to speak. The nature of the relation between the boy’s and the hog’s capabilities is not revealed, neither in this nor in any other story. Nevertheless, the hog’s owner Wilma firmly maintains that Francis started talking on the day Clarence was born and stopped five years later, on the day Clarence died. The circumstances of Clarence’s death are also very uncanny—Clarence practically gave birth to himself, as his mother died in labor, long before he actually got into this world. Throughout his short life, Clarence is an extremely strange child, causing a lot of anxiety to his grandparents, Miss Eunice and Mr. George Edwards. Unable or simply unwilling to utter a single word, he starts speaking in full sentences at the age of three, and what he has to say spreads panic in the whole community of Tims Creek.

In “Clarence and the Dead,” like in *Mama Day*, there is a strong sense of community. In fact, the story sounds as if the community narrated itself. The collective first person plural ‘we’, reminiscent of *Mama Day*, indicates that the narrator is with the community and wholeheartedly embraces its values. He tells the story of Clarence and the dead in the traditional third person, but the tone of narration is not, as we might expect, objective or self-erasing. On the contrary, the narrative voice is nosy, gossipy, frivolous and playful. It seems to know that the Southerners relish good stories, so even though at times the events it narrates are tragic, the voice maintains its comic tone and an exhilarating sense of humor.

But what is also important for Kenan’s purposes here is that the voice is not all knowing but limited, and in consequence it frequently is at a

loss while it relates the events of the story. It relies on testimonials of many people who are witnesses to supernatural phenomena surrounding Clarence, and at times their evidence seems so incredible that the narrator himself wavers between belief and disbelief, between a sense of awe and profound skepticism. Therefore Kenan makes his narrator a mediator between the community of Tims Creek and the community of readers. His task is to enhance the credibility of the tale. In order to accomplish it, he wants to have both communities on one side, so that the point of view of the inhabitants of Tims Creek should become identical with that of the readers'. Such is Randall Kenan's strategy to break our resistance to belief in the supernatural, and to pull us more deeply into the world of Afro-American folklore, where we have to give up our preconceived ideas about how the world is constructed, and surrender to the writer's imagination.

When Clarence becomes an intermediary between the dead and the living and starts to make disturbing pronouncements on his neighbors' affairs, the narrator, looking at the event with hindsight, says:

Of course folks said they knew of strange thises and thats to have occurred... but we didn't believe none of it case we hadn't heard tell of any of it at the time; we didn't believe any of it except what happened after he turned three and commenced to talk, which we did believe cause we were witness to most of it—unlikely though it seems. (LDBD 4)

In this way the narrator tells us at the very beginning of the story a few very important things. First of all, he realizes that what he has to say cannot be taken without reservations; and secondly, that there is a whole bunch of 'seers' and 'sayers' who would have joined the reader in his or her total disbelief, had they not been witnesses to what the narrator is telling.

The first tentative evidence is provided by Ed Philips, who, woken up in the middle of an after-dinner nap, sees Clarence 'play' with eight buzzards in the cow pasture. But then, when Clarence turns four and a half, all people start 'seeing things'. One person sees a dog killed one year earlier talking to Clarence; another sees him talking to some cows; yet another sees him in the company of Miss Maybell, his great grandmother, who died twenty seven years before the action of the story takes place. A neighbor visiting Miss Eunice and Mr. George Edwards hears a number

of male voices in the kitchen. When they enter the kitchen, they see “six hands of cards set in a mid-game of poker, with Clarence sitting at the head of the table holding a hand” (LDBD 9–10).

Clarence claims the voices belonged to the dead friends who come to keep him company or give messages to their living kin.

The messages are shocking and embarrassing, as the dead do not make their speech too polished and civilized, and Clarence repeats what they say word for word.

One time Emma Chaney stopped by to say hey to Miss Eunice and Mr. George Edward and just before she left Clarence walked into the room and said: ‘Your mama says Joe Hattan is stepping out on you with that strumpet Viola Strokes. (LDBD 5)

Clarence gets a beating for telling lies (“Miss Ruella been dead”), and for using foul language; but the narrator, people in the story and of course the reader wonder “how on earth the boy’d come to know about a woman long dead before Clarence was even thought about” (LDBD 7), where could he possibly pick up such bad language; and finally how would he know about Joe Hattan’s infidelity, which turns out to be a fact. There are many other revelations which dumfound the community:

Clarence would tell the people who happened by the Pickett place that this or that person was out to get them; that this woman was going to have twins; that that man has prostate cancer; that that woman’s husband intended to give her a cruise for their wedding anniversary. He was good for getting up in the morning and announcing: ‘Such and such a person is going to die today,’ or ‘Such and such a person died last night.’ He told one person where they had put an old insurance policy they’d lost, another where they mislaid their keys. (LDBD 6)

On the surface, everybody voices their disbelief in Clarence’s declarations but secretly they check out, as Emma did, if they are true. And as they always turn out to be true, skepticism gives in to reluctant belief:

Of course we all hear and all have heard about children born with a sixth sense or a clairvoyance or ESP or some such, out of the mouths of babes and all that; but we being good commonsensical, level-headed, churchgoing folk, we didn’t have to truck with all that nonsense and third-hand tales. But the evidence kept accumulating and accumulating till you’d have to be deaf dumb, blind and stupid to whistle, nod your head and turn away. But that’s what actually most of us did anyhow. Ain’t it strange how people behave? (LDBD6)

The incident that sways the narrator towards belief is Mr. Edward's accident on a tractor. This is the only instance in the story when Clarence and the talking hog Francis are brought together. In the episode Mr. Edward is almost killed by a ghost of a man called Fitzhugh Oxendine, whom he betrayed in the past and who now has come to take his revenge. Though Clarence warns Mr. Edwards of the impending danger, Mr. Edwards, the most stubborn skeptic of all, makes nothing of it. Surprisingly it is Wilma and her hog Francis that come to his rescue. Francis not only launches the rescue party but actually plays a major role in dispatching with the ghost. The hog is

caterwauling and squealing and rolling about and biting in the dirt, like it was fighting with something or somebody. After the ruckus she emerges with a look of contentment on its face. (LDBD 13)

It is only later that the narrator discloses that Fitzhugh Oxendine died in prison a day before the assault. The narrator reports the news in a matter-of-fact tone, making no apparent connection to the accident in the field. He rather hints at the connection but still cannot quite bring himself to wholeheartedly voice his belief in the truth of it. The narrator seems to be in turns in opposition to, or in unison with his witnesses. He appears unable to make up his mind about the veracity of the tale he is presenting. He thoughtfully admits that his belief cannot stand in the face of common sense, so he cautiously withdraws as if afraid to be challenged by the rational "hearers" of his tale. His inclination towards rationality is obvious. He does his best to give an impression that he is a commonsensical and rational man who would like his story to remain within the conventions of realism, but then under the burden of proof he grudgingly relents and endorses the truthfulness of the facts he relates. He wants us to believe that he is a no-nonsense person who precisely weighs all the arguments for and against Clarence's gift of clairvoyance. He meditates the events in such a way that our faith in the credibility of the evidence clearly grows much quicker than his. Thus the narrator tries to suspend our disbelief by using his storyteller's skills to make the ghosts thinkable. In this way Kenan's readers are granted the same status as the narrator. They have no privileged relation with an omniscient narrator but learn in the same way, as does the narrator—they are in turns intrigued, skeptical and bewildered. The readers are treated as members

of the community—they are porch sitting and listening to a fabulous tale. In such a position, they are more willing to imbibe the cosmology of this Afro-American rural community, to experience the magical world of talking ghosts and magical animals.

Clarence's gift isolates him from the community. People start to avoid the Picketts' house and some believe Clarence's gift is evil. Some inhabitants of Tims Creek bring bloody dead chickens onto the threshold of the Picketts' house to protect themselves from Clarence's "black magic." However all those preventive measures are harmless. Although some members of the community are vexed by Clarence's weird behavior and the continuous appearance of ghosts, only the preacher seems convinced enough of Clarence's inherent depravity to advocate having him burned at the stake. In the midst of the supernatural, with ghosts popping up everywhere, normal life still goes on and everybody tends to their business. But that changes when the news spreads that the Picketts' house has become a site of "crimes against nature" (LDBD 19). When Clarence passes a message to Ellsworth Batts from his beloved dead wife Mildred, he suddenly becomes the focus of Batts's frenzied passion. After their first meeting, Ellsworth Batts visits Clarence every day, talks to him on the porch, cries and occasionally holds his hand. The narrator reconstructs the episode from Miss Eunice and Mr. Edward's point of view. They "say" that "in their opinion" Ellsworth Batts has started believing that Clarence is a reincarnation of his dead wife, and that is why Ellsworth Batts comes "courting and sparking" (LDBD 19).

Nothing like talk of crimes against nature gets people riled up and speculating the way they did when word got out about Ellsworth Batts unnatural 'affection for Clarence Pickett!' The likelihood of him conversing with his dead Mildred through the boy paled next to the idea of him fermenting depraved intentions for young tender boys. (LDBD 19)

In this way, as Trudier Harris observes, the intersection of a ghost story with the theme of homosexuality gives the tale an unexpected twist. The issues of the otherworldly phenomena get backgrounded and we enter the world of a rigid taboo. Extraordinarily the community receives the news about Ellsworth Batts and Clarence with a renewed sense of enthusiasm, for it is clear that it is much easier to take a stance against worldly sins than

otherworldly phenomena, which are completely beyond the community's control. Finally the community can take action, and this becomes for Kenan a wonderful occasion to explore a small town mentality, profoundly hostile to all sexual irregularities, especially same-sex relations.

Kenan tackles the subject with humor and irony, which find their vent in the form of slapstick narration. Such an approach not only helps to dispel the fear that the taboo usually arouses, but is also more revelatory of the narrator and by implication of the community itself. The citizens organize a party of seven men, who are obligated to keep Ellsworth Batts away from Clarence, but their joint efforts initially prove Herculean. In spite of their unceasing lookout in the Pickett's house, Ellsworth Batts manages somehow to stealthily get in, kiss and embrace Clarence on one occasion, and once even "slip under the covers with the boy" (LDBD 20). In the end, when he tries to kidnap Clarence, he is shot in the foot and caught by Clarence's "escort." Facing his ultimate defeat, Ellsworth Batts escapes and commits suicide by diving into the river and breaking his neck. Throughout the episode until its fatal end, comic narration overcomes serious and tragic events. Ellsworth Batts's death is not dramatized, and the narrator downplays it by saying:

We were all mostly relieved seeing what we considered a threat to our peace and loved ones done away with; a few of us—the ones who dared put one iota of stock in believing in Clarence and his talking dead folk—figured it to be a kind of happy ending, seeing as Ellsworth would now be reunited with his beloved beyond the pale. But the most of us thought such talk a load of horse hockey, reckoning if that was the answer why didn't he; kill himself in the first place and leave us off from the trouble. (LDBD 21)

Here again the narrator emphasizes the fact that he speaks from the perspective of townspeople, with whom he seems to have discussed the matter more than once. He quotes different voices from the community indiscriminately, without giving them a thought and without trying to present them in brighter colors. What therefore emerges from his comprehensive relation is a sweeping picture of an un-idealized and un-romanticized Afro-American community. But although the townspeople's responses to Ellsworth Batts's death are a far cry from what we would deem decent or even moral, we nevertheless refrain from being judgmental and disapproving. It is because we see real people with all

their virtues and vices, and their humanity engenders our acceptance and sympathy.

Humor is instrumental in forming our positive reaction to this not always flattering portrayal of the community. “Holy Hog” Francis is a prominent character in the story not because it figures as an element of the uncanny, but because its owner Wilma’s eccentricities are the story’s main source of humor. Wilma makes a “canopy bed with frills and ruffles for the pig, feeds it with ‘top shelf Purina Hog Chow’ ... Spanish omelets and tuna casserole. She forebode to give it fork,” the narrator adds as an afterthought, “because that would be cannibalism” (LDBD 3). She takes her hog to church and one day even sets out on the project to start a church for Francis. The situation becomes even more comic when after Clarence’s death, as the hog refuses to talk, Wilma butchers it and gives it “a semi-Christian burial with a graveside choir and minister and pallbearers, all made hungry by the scent of the barbecue” (LDBD 23).

We may wonder at the duplicity of Wilma’s neighbors and tenants, who have never heard the hog utter a single word, but anyway nod their heads in a mock belief, not daring to say a word since she may well of kicked them out of their houses or called in mortgages they owned her” (LDBD 3).

But when they indulge in making fun of Wilma behind her back, we join them willingly, regardless of our possible objections to their insincerity.

In spite of the fact (or perhaps due to the fact) that the community is not perfect, we enjoy our position of disinterested voyeurs; the feeling of proximity between the townspeople and ourselves; the sense of being among friends, of gossiping about not-quite-well-known but interesting people. Although the story pretends to be about Clarence and the ghosts, it actually turns out to be a tale about the community. Clarence’s predictions fall on different people whose lives become the focus of the narrator’s attention. Therefore the apparitions are just a pretext to present a number of intriguing characters and their responses to different problems of everyday life. As soon as Clarence makes his pronouncement, the story concentrates on its aftermath. Clarence serves in the story as a catalyst that triggers the action to remain in the background as it unfolds. The character of Clarence is not developed in the story because the things he sets in

motion are more significant than the boy himself. The townspeople, “the seers and sayers,” who forward the action, are the true heroes of Kenan’s story. Like the character of Clarence they are superficially individualized because they figure not as individuals but as community. Their mentality and worldview, however parochial they may appear, are affirmed by the author, who is at the same time the community’s critic and supporter.

Folklore is lovingly depicted in the story. Kenan presents folk beliefs and superstitions that are typical of rural communities of South Carolina. For example, generally folk communities believe that children born with caul over their faces will have the ability to communicate with the dead (PP 131). The narrator of “Clarence and the Dead” recounts that though caul was not on Clarence’s face it was everywhere else: his head, hands and belly. The story is also based on the common belief for rural Afro-American communities of the South that children, before they are “contaminated” by the process of socialization in communities, are closer to the other world, “have direct contact and heightened sensitivity to it” (PP 131).

Even such little sayings as “the sun shone while the rain poured... the folk say that’s when the devil beats his wife” (LDBD 1) give us a flavor of Afro-American folklore.

Moreover, it is the sense of immediacy between the narrator and his audience that renders the Afro-American folklore alive. The narrator tries to position himself as a disinterested reporter of events. He pretends that he aims at objectivity of his relation by constant hesitation about the nature of evidence and of Clarence’s extranatural skills. He weavers between belief and non-belief until Clarence’s death at the end of the narrative when he mediates in a pseudo-philosophical tone:

We figured there was more to it than that, something our imaginations were too timid to draw up, something to do with living and dying that we, so wound up in harvesting corn, cleaning house, minding chickenpox, building houses, getting our hair done, getting our cars fixed, getting good loving, fishing, drinking, sleeping, and minding other people’s business, really didn’t care about or have time and space to know. Why mess in such matters?—matters we didn’t really believe in the first place, and of which memory grows dimmer and dimmer every time the suns sets... And life in Tims Creek went on as normal after [Clarence] died: folk went on propagating, copulating, and castigating, folk loved, folk hated, folk debauched, got lonely and died. No one talks about Clarence, and God knows what lies they’d tell if they did. (LDBD 22)

Beyond that lovely description of sundry, mundane activities of small-town people, beyond the affirmation that farming and family (with little occasional imperfections, of course) are a good way of life, there is a tiny touch of irony, which makes us smile. Wasn't it the narrator himself that talked about Clarence more than anybody else? Those discrepancies, incongruities, bits of irony make us ever aware of the narrator's presence, of his idiosyncratic personality.

Southern literature is frequently praised for its "told" rather than "written" merits, and Kenan's prose brilliantly captures the orality of voices that speak to us from the pages of the book. The above quotation is just one example of long, painstakingly structured sentences, that highlight the oral quality of the narrative. The essence of the language is seized through such expressions as "you should of seen" (LDBD 13); "to and behold" (LDBD 18); "swore up and down" (LDBD 1) etc. Kenan is consistent in his depiction of African American culture through the medium of language, and even ghosts have a clearly identifiable cultural identity. The community of the dead shares with the community of the living not only concerns but also a relish for rich language, saturated with sayings and neologisms.

"Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" is also written in black vernacular, but this story makes one step further towards full appropriation of language and form. Syntax, orthography, phonetic spellings of words all emphasize the oral quality of the tale. Furthermore, the exchanges between the tale-teller and the unbelieving woman who is listening to the tale in spite of herself, make "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" a paragon of the call and response pattern.

"– Taint no such a lie," the woman says.

"– Hush woman. Was my granddaddy told me, now, You's calling him a lie," the man fusses.

"– Yeah," answers the woman.

"– Well, I hope he come to get you tonight and whup upon your head," the man concludes (LDBD 284).

At different stages in the process of the storytelling the man repudiates challenges of the woman: "Woman, I'm telling this," "Woman will you let me tell this story," "Let me *talk*, woman." Those wonderful exhilarating exchanges so vividly rendered in Black English make us readers respond

to the call of the story in a more personal and instantaneous way. We almost experience porch sitting and storytelling among family, friends and neighbors, drawn into the fictitious world of the story, puzzled by its plot, and in turns irritated or amused by the intrusions made by the woman.

In “Clarence and the Dead” and “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” Kenan incorporates a belief system which treats the land as the habitation of both the living and the dead. In “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” the land is alive with ancient people, rituals and sacred places, while “Clarence and the Dead” dramatizes the permeability of the worlds of the living and the dead. The dead are inhabitants of reality, and they are in no way different from their living family and friends. They share with the living the same interests and speak the same language. They are neither perfect nor evil, just human as the community that they trouble with their visitations. Thus Kenan makes the real and unreal solidly rooted in the genuine world of African American folklore, in black cultural traditions.

What places the two ghosts stories in magical realist tradition is first of all the fact that they recognize no clear-cut divisions between the world of the living and the dead, and secondly that they use folklore and its system of beliefs to make the supernatural real. In other words, the magical and the supernatural are regarded as something real because such is the cosmology of Afro-American people. “The fantastic in folklore is a realistic fantastic,” claims Mikhail Bakhtin in one of his essays in *The Dialogic Imagination*:

In no way does it exceed the limits of the real, here-and-now material world, and it does not stitch together rents in that world with anything that is idealistic or other-worldly; it works with the ordinary expanses of time and space, and experiences these expanses and utilizes them in great breadth and depth. Such a fantastic relies on the real-life possibilities of human development.⁵¹

The ghosts transgress the dividing line between the world of the living and the world of the dead and that is why they present a challenge on the ontological level. Life and death in Kenan’s stories are not separate conditions; therefore, these stories subvert Western belief in the dichotomy

⁵¹ Mikhail Bakhtin. “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel.” *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 150–151.

between life and death. In brief, Kenan subverts the hegemony of the Western brand of logic by creating a vision of community for which the supernatural is something ontologically essential to the conception of reality, and by doing it he ensures the effectiveness of his dissent from the dominant worldview of white America.

In conclusion, Kenan's magical realist texts subvert the conventions upon which modern canonical fiction depends. As in the case of Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day*, the subversion is ontological, formal and linguistic—it pertains respectively to metaphysics, the form and the language of fiction.

Magical realists question the nature of reality and the nature of representation. In this then magical realist texts share (and extend) the tradition of narrative realism: they too, aim to present a credible version of experienced reality.⁵²

Kenan's stories do not create an illusion of a world that is continuous with ours. They take us from the familiar ground of what is knowable and predictable, and draw us into a space that suspends our usual connection to the 'logical' and 'real.' Formal innovation and linguistic appropriation also defy our expectations. Kenan's fiction is free from the conventions of literary realism and its ontological concepts; it has a different ontological and generic status. In both form and content each story dramatizes the transitions between Western conceptions of self and the society and alternative African American constructions of community and consciousness. Kenan's writing is ideologically charged. It takes a stand against historicity, capitalism and institutionalized religion, and seeks to repair the damage they have done to Afro-American communities. He creates his own counter-narrative, which perpetuates native mythologies and ancestral values, which are indispensable in the process of creating a new meaningful identity of modern Afro-Americans. By linking his art to Afro-American cosmology and folklore, Kenan offers the contemporary deracinated generation strategies for survival. He is an ingenious storyteller, whose magical realist texts redefine and revitalize African American culture.

⁵² Lois Parkinson, Zamora. "Magical Romance/Magical Realism." *Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community*. Eds. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, p. 500.

PART TWO

**Mythical patterns of quest and ritual
to bring individual back to the community
in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Paule
Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow***

Introduction

The works of Gloria Naylor and Randall Kenan analyzed in the first section of my thesis seem to illustrate best the argument that magical realist discourses are instrumental in the process of identity formation. *Tar Baby* and *Praisesong for the Widow* might be reasonably discussed in the same context. Toni Morrison and especially Paule Marshall are not fully-fledged magical realist writers. Nevertheless, I plan to demonstrate a family resemblance—thematic and generic—between their novels and the works of fiction discussed in the first section of my thesis. I will demonstrate that with their novels they write themselves into the tradition of African American counter-myth. On the thematic level, their novels continue the previously discussed writers' preoccupation with community, history, myth and identity, though from a radically altered perspective. On the structural level, in composing the mythical structures of their works both Morrison and Marshall use such motifs as dreams and hallucinations, rituals and quests. All of them are magical realist techniques that obliterate the boundaries between the past and the present, the real and the marvelous.

Morrison and Marshall's points of view are completely different than Naylor and Kenan's. In *Tar Baby* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, the African American community, folklore and orality are not so prominent. Still in their different ways those narratives aspire to perpetuate the folk tradition of oral storytelling. Toni Morrison, for example, sees her role as the community's cultural worker whose task is to relate stories conveying tribal wisdom of the ancestors to the contemporary deracinated generation:

We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore, parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has to get out and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel.⁵³

Both Morrison and Marshall write out of a sense of displacement of the traditional rural Afro-American community, depicted in Naylor and in Kenan. They feel the community torn between the past and the present, and with their writing they seek to heal the confusion that is the aftermath of historic discontinuity and transformation. They attempt to bear witness to knowledge, traditions and stories that the contemporary generation has forgotten or the dominant culture has tried to discard. They both prove that the journey back to the past is necessary if the present is to become meaningful.

The mythic patterns of quest and ritual give the novels their form. The novels center around the protagonists'—Jadine and Avey's—quests for self-discovery, in which rituals can play an important function. The reason why those quests are essential is the heroines' cultural displacement. They are removed from the traditional African American community in two ways: physically—they are no longer confined to black rural or urban neighborhood; and spiritually—they are modern, emancipated, upper-class women, proud of their social status and their self-sufficiency. The point of departure of the two novels is the same: a life crisis that sets the women on their journeys for psychic wholeness and cultural authenticity. The resolutions, however, are totally different. Marshall's vision is optimistic—Avey rejects her obsessive materialism and completes her quest back to herself, an essential part of which is the African wisdom still alive in the rituals of black societies in the West Indies. Morrison's vision is pessimistic—materialism, conformism and cosmopolitan upbringing irrevocably destroy Jadine's roots in the community and culture. As Barbara Christian puts it in her essay,

in her search for self she becomes selfish; in her desire for power, she loses essential parts of herself. Thus Morrison has moved a full circle from Pecola, who is destroyed by the community, to Jadine, who destroys any relationship to community in herself.⁵⁴

⁵³ Barbara Christian. "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction." *Conjuring. Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Ed. Majorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, p. 242.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Marshall believes that ritual can help the individual to restore a sense of collective identity. Morrison, on the other hand, saves Son, the only Afro-American who actually possesses this sense of collective identity, by means of textual descent into the realm of African myth and reintegration with the indigenous community of immortal ancestors.

Thus both novels outline sacred mythical places where time exists in eternal continuum. Ibo Landing and Carriacou Island in Marshall's novel and the swamps in the wild part of the Isle des Chevaliers are magical sites, where the protagonists can get free of restricting exigencies of history.

Toni Morrison *Tar Baby*

The narrative of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* is set on one of the small islands of the Caribbean, fictively named Isle des Chevaliers. The action takes place in the twentieth century, and a new form of colonialism has replaced the Caribbean plantation economy, as rich businessmen from the North take their winter holidays there. Famous architects draw elaborate plans for luxurious houses. Laborers from Haiti are hired to clear the island of its rainforest, already two thousand years old, destroying animals and plants, and completely changing its topography to the liking of the island's new affluent proprietors. The novel is mostly peopled with black and white protagonists from the United States and with a small number of indigenous inhabitants from the island. In this way, Morrison infuses her narrative with the history of the African Diaspora in the New World, and blurs the boundaries between the advanced society of North America and the neo-colonial structure of Caribbean and Latin American societies.

The whites of *Tar Baby* are Valerian Street and his much younger wife, Margaret. They own a lavish house on the island called L'Arbe de la Croix. The origin of their wealth is connected with the history of sugar plantations in the Caribbean, as they own and operate a sugar-candy industry. Margaret hates the island, its climate and exoticism. Valerian, though he seems to enjoy his retirement on the island, favors a greenhouse full of delicate plants from a cooler climate and spends there long hours listening to classical music.

The blacks closest to the Streets are their servants, Sydney and Ondine Childs, ironically described as "industrious Philadelphia Negroes—the proudest people in the race."⁵⁵ Ondine's niece, Jadine, links the two

⁵⁵ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*, p. 51. Hereinafter cited parenthetically as TB.

races and the two classes. She is a beautiful orphaned “yellow woman,” twenty-five years old, who is in a way adopted by both black and white couples—the Childses perform the role of biological parents, while the Streets generously provide for her education. Jadine is an example of a black middle class person permanently exposed to Western culture and its values. Educated in Paris in the history of European art, she identifies with Western civilization and adopts indiscriminately its attitude towards other presumably ‘lesser’ civilizations, including her own African. From that perspective, “Picasso is better than an Itumba Mask” (TB 62), and all African art she has come across is mediocre and amateurish. Jadine is so proud of her own individualistic, cultivated identity and of her refined taste that it blinds her to the predatory quality of white civilization. She openly admires Valerian for his intellectual superiority and financial powerfulness, and is “basking in the cold light that came from one of the killers of the world [Valerian]” (TB 174).

She is also fascinated by a beautiful sealskin coat sent to her as a Christmas present by her European boyfriend, Ryk, without giving a thought to the ninety baby seals that were killed to make it.

Sometimes, however, the process of white acculturation, which Jadine underwent in European schools, seems not quite complete. She feels lonely and confused in spite of her success as a model and her degree in art history. She is a bit perturbed about her African background, and she finds it hard to accept it or to forget it. She is deeply shocked when in a Paris supermarket an African woman spits at her. The image of the woman, “that mother/sister/she, a tall transcendent beauty with skin like tar,” her body wrapped in a “canary yellow dress” (TB 38) keeps haunting her long after the incident. She is upset by the powerful look of the woman’s eyes and by her contemptuous gesture. Faced with the contrast between the woman and herself, she feels her own inadequacy, her lack of authenticity and strength: “The woman had made her feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic” (TB 40).

She dreams repeatedly about the woman in yellow and other black women holding their breasts out to her, but she is too deeply affected by her white upbringing to achieve a balance between the contrasting polarities in her identity. Therefore, too confused by the pressures of her life among whites in Paris, she comes to the island for Christmas to look for reassurance among her only relatives, the Childses.

There she meets Son, a dark black stranger, who enters the Streets' house right before Christmas, upsetting utterly the fragile balance in the inhabitants' relationships. With Son, the novel leaves rapidly its realistic premises, moving towards the world of myth and magic. 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 hills, where the mysterious horsemen wander at night. Their existence, past and present, is generally acknowledged as the island takes its name from these horsemen, though the accounts of their origin vary. For the whites the legend takes the form of one or a hundred French horsemen haunting the hills, while the black population of the island circulates quite a different version of the legend. For them, the horsemen are slaves who, in colonial times, three hundred years ago, fled from a sinking French ship to the island that had struck them blind the moment they saw it. According to the legend, the blind horsemen mate with mysterious women, who live on the swamp trees, and have children with them, who are also blind. For Gideon, a black islander who works for the Streets, his mother's younger sister, blind Thérèse, is one of the swamp women and has the power of seeing with the eye of the mind, just as the conjurers and healers in the African culture.

Therefore, for Thérèse and Gideon, Son comes from Seine de Veille, from the swamp where women made love to the blind horsemen and gave birth to their children. His very name Son makes the reader sensitive to the possibility that he may be a son of a swamp woman. This suggestion is further reinforced by the scene in which Jadine is trying to get out of the mud in Seine de Veille, "the ugly part of Isle des Chevaliers—the part she averted her eyes from whenever she drove past" (TB 156).

The trees are described as having female identity (swamp women?) while she is 'dancing' with one having male identity (Son?). If so, he is one of the horsemen, while she is a "runaway child restored to them [the swamp women] but fighting to get away from them, their exceptional femaleness" (TB 155).

Thérèse and Gideon have no doubts that Son is a horseman: "She [Thérèse] had seen him in a dream smiling at her as he rode away wet and naked on the stallion" (TB 89).

She is sure that "he is a horseman come down here to get her [Jadine]. Because he knew she was here, he saw her from the hills" (TB 91).

The structure of the novel encourages such an interpretation. It takes a long time to discover how Son really got to the island and the Streets' house. And when the reader is ready to believe that Son is, in fact, a mythic figure, a realistic explanation is given—we learn that he jumped out of a cargo ship, as did the legendary slaves. The name of the ship *Stor Konigsgaarten*, meaning “King’s Backyard”, also suggests that Son’s escape from the ship has a symbolic meaning and stresses his double role in the novel—as a real person and a mythical figure. Later we find out that while swimming towards the lights of the island, he got aboard the boat belonging to the Streets that took him straight to their house. He arrives just in time for the celebration of Christmas and, ironically, Margaret Street, who anticipated the arrival of her estranged son, gets instead an intruder named Son. Thanks to the generosity of the master of the house, Valerian Street, he quickly changes from a dirty and disgusting tramp called by Jadine “swamp Niger” (TB 85) or “river rat” (TB 136) into an intelligent compatriot, who can play the piano, take good care of Valerian’s flowers or even get engaged in an interesting conversation. His true feelings about white people remain concealed and find their vent only in the presence of Jadine. After inspecting Jadine’s pictures and expensive outfits, he calls her a whore. He frequently invades her bedroom, but when she reveals she is afraid of being raped by him, he tells her to stop acting like white girls “who always think somebody is going to rape [them]” (TB 103).

When Valerian invites his black servants Jadine and Son to the dinner table on Christmas Eve, the celebration of Christmas turns into a catastrophe. The servants turn against their masters, blacks against whites and the hostess against her husband. Ondine reveals that Margaret physically abused her son, Michael, and calls her “a white freak,” to which Margaret reacts by calling Ondine a “Niger bitch” (TB 179), and in this way they both betray their contempt for the other race. Valerian’s domination over Margaret and his control over the whole household is wrecked when he finally learns the true reason of his son’s estrangement.

This situation makes Jadine and Son form an alliance which quickly turns into a passionate affair. They make for the USA and despite the differences in class, education and outlook on matters of race, they try a life together in busy New York and in the little village of Eloë, which is Son’s home. Nowhere in the novel is the conflict between the two cul-

tures—white and black—more conspicuously dramatized. Though Jadine and Son remain in a very intimate relationship, they are at the same time deeply and painfully separated by their various preconceived ideas about race and identity. For Son, Jadine is the tar baby trying to trap him into assimilation with the respectable white culture. She can accept him only on condition that he moves upward and away from his black identity. Life with Son and his “original-dime ways, his white-folks-black-folks primitivism” is for her a “cultural throwback” (TB 237). For Jadine, Son is also a tar baby, attempting to suck her down into a murky black world devoid of any perspective at the cost of losing her individualistic identity, in which she has invested so much.

Finally, both outlooks turn out to be true. Both Jadine and Son are rootless in the black ghetto of New York: she finds it difficult to pursue her professional career, he has no way to live there except on her money, to which he has objections. Jadine sees nothing for her in the Southern black community of Eloë, and though Son reveres it, he seems to do it more out of nostalgia than any real possibilities that it can offer. Their relationship winds down to a total deadlock: “Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” (TB 231)

In the end, Jadine runs away from Son to her previous life in Paris, fleeing in this way commitment. She abandons her ‘dreams of safety’ and feels proud of “having been so decisive, of having refused to be broken in the big ugly hands of any man” (TB 106).

She perceives her escape as a refusal to social degradation, which life with Son would, in her opinion, entail. Still she cannot find the answer to the question: “What went wrong?” and tries to regain control over her conflicting emotions and her sexuality by evoking the image of soldier ants to produce an extended metaphor communicating her visions of a tough and independent woman she considers herself to be.

Once again she is seduced by dreams of personal power. Previously, she used to dream about the forceful and proud African woman, who had the power to offend and hurt her. She had admired Valerian for his intellectual superiority and the way he ruthlessly dominated over his household. She had also found herself attracted to Son because of the brute male power that he demonstrated by rubbing against her. This particular image of soldier ants indicates that this time she sees herself in a

position of power—like the queen of soldier ants she had a short period of intense sexual activity—“the marriage flight”—and then she found in herself the strength to break it up without “peeping back just in case.” The fact that her partner “drops dead, having emptied his sperm into his lady-love” (TB 250) is of no importance to her—it is his destiny to rush towards his self-destruction, which is complete at the moment of the fullest sexual pleasure. This is exactly the way Jadine handles her affair with Son. When sexual satisfaction turns out not to be enough to sustain their relationship, and when it becomes clear that he will never be “an industrious Philadelphia Negro,” she leaves Son to his self-destruction without ever looking back.

And, in fact, when Son, who would like to preserve their love at any price, comes to the Isle des Chevaliers to look for Jadine, he is ready to commit a self-betrayal—to reject his pride and his beliefs: “So he had changed, given up fraternity or believed he had” (TB 157), concludes Thérèse. At this point, the novel reaches its magical and bewildering resolution. The blind Thérèse, who knows by heart the waters of the Caribbean Sea, promises to take him to L’Arbe de la Croix, while, in feet, she takes him to the wild part of the island full of blackness and magic where the blind slaves once landed to inhabit the forest forever.

When Son first sees Thérèse, he tells her he hasn’t got any choice, but she manipulates his trip to give him a chance: “This is a place where you can make a choice” (TB 236), she says about the black, mystical part of the island where she has taken him.

Back there you said you don’t [have a choice]. Now you do. You can choose now. You can get free of her. They [the horsemen] are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked and they are blind too. I have seen them, their eyes have no color in them, But they gallop; they race those horses like angels all over the hills where the rainforest is, where the champion daisy trees still grow. Go there, choose them, (TB 263)

says Thérèse and adds: “Forget her. There is nothing in her parts for you. She had forgotten her ancient properties” (TB 263).

Her voice is “a calamitous whisper coming out of the darkness” and when he asks her for the second time: “Are you sure?” he does not mean: “Are you sure we are in the part of the island where Valerian’s house is,” but: “Are you sure the horsemen are waiting?” because he undoubtedly

heard her explanation—“her voice was near as a skin” (TB 263). And when “the trees stepped back to make the way easier for a certain kind of man” (TB 263), the suggestion is that Nature recognizes him and urges him to join his fellow horsemen. Son fades into the mythical, fantastic world of the legend. If the reader still distrusts such an interpretation of this passage its last sentences allow no ambiguity. The imagery of “lickety--lickety-lickety-split;” of running “looking neither to the left or to the right” (TB 264) implies clearly Son’s escape from “the briar patch,” “the tar baby” Jadine. In this way, Son takes a symbolic retreat into his cultural African past, but since no other explanation of his fate is given, the retreat has also to be taken literally—Son becomes one of the blind horsemen, a part of the myth. Thus the closing marks the movement from “real” time to “mythical” time. It is a departure from the real world into the textual world, the realm of myth and magic.

The imagery of darkness is crucial for understanding the ending of the novel. As the trip goes on the darkness is growing – “each time her [Thérèse’s] shoulders and profile grew darker—her outline fainter. Till finally [Son] could barely make her out at all.” When Son complains he cannot see, she says: “Don’t see, feel. You can feel your way (TB 262).

And as he disappears into the forest, first he stumbles and gropes for his way, then gradually walks more steadily—he, like the blind horsemen, sees his way through the eye of the mind.

Morrison obviously favors black Son over Jadine who is snobbish, demanding and white-oriented. Jadine is a middle class person who, like Ondine and Sydney, wants to ‘make it’ in the white world. Their attitude to life and their feeling of superiority is best summarized in the way Sidney defines the difference between himself and Son:

I am a Philadelphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name. My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were still cutting their faces open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other. (TB 140)

Sydney does not consider Son to be one of his people, which makes Valerian feel “disappointment nudging contempt” for the outrage Jade, Sidney and Ondine exhibited in defending property not belonging to them, from another black man. Like Ondine and Sydney, Jadine occupies

the place granted by the white system. She seems aware of that but at the same time is indifferent to the fact that her position is degrading: “With white people the rules were simpler,” she concludes:

she needed only to be stunning, and to convince them she was not as smart as they were. Say the obvious, laugh with abandon, look interested, and light up at any display of their humanity if they showed it. (TB 108)

Her identity crisis is not resolved by her visit to the island, the proximity of her relatives and Son or, finally, the mythical swamp women.

Son, by contrast, symbolizes the resisting black culture that tenaciously refuses to submit to the domination of white civilization. Contrary to Jadine, the sealskin coat makes him think of slaughter rather than sensuous pleasure in touching it:

[it] looked more alive than seals themselves. He had seen them gliding like shadows in water off the coast of Greenland, moving like supple rocks on pebbly shores and never had they looked more alive as they did now that their insides were gone: lambs, chicken, tuna, children, he had seen all of them die by the ton! There was nothing like it in the world, except the slaughter of the whole families in their sleep and he had seen it too. (TB 112)

Also unlike Jadine, Son is not cheated by the self-image of a deeply moral and ethical businessman that Valerian tries to project. Right away, Son perceives inconsistencies and inadequacies in Valerian’s reasoning:

He [Valerian] had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort, although he had taken sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child’s play and had no value; but he turned it into candy, the invention of which was really a child’s play, and sold it to other children and made a fortune in order to move near, but not in the midst of the jungle where the sugar came from and build a palace with more of their labor and then hired them to do more of the work he was not capable of and paid them again according to some scale of value that would outrage Satan Himself. (TB 23)

Son is not only critical of people like Valerian, who built their power on exploitation and destitution of other people, but also of the American version of capitalism in general. A copy of the international edition of

The Time magazine reminds him of the USA, “its pavements slick with the blood of the best people.” He concludes that:

As soon as a man or woman did something bold, pictures of their funeral lines appeared in the foreign press. When he thought of America, he thought of the tongue that the Mexican drew in Uncle Sam’s mouth: a map of the U.S. as an ill-shaped tongue ringed by teeth and crammed with the corpses of children. (TB 143)

He abhors American capitalists, preoccupied with:

how to make waste, how to make machines that make more waste, how to make wasteful products, how to talk waste, how to cure people who were sickened by waste so they could be well enough to endure it, how to mobilize waste, legalize waste. (TB 216)

He sees big cities as “elaborate toilets, decorated toilets, toilets surrounded with business and enterprise in order to have something to do between defecations, since waste is the order of the day and the ordering principle of the universe” and he is indignant that white people despise his people “that live in cloth houses and shit on the ground away from where they eat,” and that Jadine, “who had been to schools and seen some more of the world, and who ought to know better than any of them because she had been made by them, coached by them and should know by heart the smell of their latrines” (TB 216) does not.

Son remembers clearly the standpoint that Jadine took the evening his presence in the house was discovered, her mocking voice, and the superior managerial, administrative, “clerk-in-a-fucking-office” tone. Although Son tries to do his best to rescue her from “the blinding awe” she has for Valerian and everything that his “head-of-a-coin” profile represents, he fails because, as Gideon remarks, Jadine is a “Yalla,” and

it’s hard for them [yellow women] not to be white people, most never make it. Yallas don’t come to being black natural-like. They have to choose and most don’t choose it. (TB 266)

In this way, the dynamics of the conflict between different cultures is explored on several different levels. On the deepest, psychological level the book examines the complexity of black identity without presenting the reader with clear-cut or heroic resolutions. There is the struggle of the “yellow” woman, Jadine, who cannot reach a compromise between two, different and conflicting sides of her personality because she is too deeply

influenced by Western culture to even realize the nub of her dilemma. Brought up in isolation, away from the black community, Jadine is cut off from the core of black culture. Unlike Morrison, who dedicated her novel to “culture-bearing” women from her own family, all of whom knew their “true and ancient properties,” Jadine never in her life had a griot—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 personal integrity and the power to assert herself in a multicolored and multicultural world.

Morrison who intelligently argues Jadine’s worldview does not overtly criticize her. It is only when we experience it and contrast it with Son’s, the African woman’s or Thérèse’s worldview, that we notice it has some implicit limitations. In this way Jadine’s system of values is circumscribed. As for Son, the world as he knew it offered him no options. His racial separatism and desire to remain economically independent from the white order makes it impossible for him to belong elsewhere than to parochial Eloë, a cargo ship, or to the timeless realm of myth. For him, the white culture is an enemy that should be avoided, and its predatory nature, its wrongdoing against people of different races and nature itself will never be forgotten or forgiven. The catastrophic relationship between Son and Jadine is just an extension of their personal dramas; its failure is an inevitable consequence of their contrasting and mutually exclusive attitudes towards the dominating white culture.

The unceasing conflict between Western civilization that has dominated the physical and cultural landscape of America and the resisting black culture comes to the surface of the characters’ lives. On the cultural level, it can be seen, for example, in the contrast between the white and the black versions of the tale of the horsemen; on the socio-economic level, in the way the native inhabitants of the island are treated in the Streets’ house. Every time they come to L’Arbe de la Croix, they are kept nameless and segregated by both the Streets and the Childses. They are despised and perceived as cheeky and barbarian brutes, deprived of feelings and culture, for whom the white man still must carry his ‘burden’.

Although Morrison has never used the term “magical realism” in relation to her own fiction, she has nonetheless frequently expressed her enthusiasm and admiration for South American novelists as her

“favorite writers,” who produced the best literature in the world over the last quarter of the 20th century. And though she denied any conscious reference to the works of Latin American writers, critics often comment on the Latin American taste of her novels.⁵⁶ For example Thomas Le Clair says that her novels show “a Latin American enchantment.” Also Gayl Jones attributed to Morrison’s novels “some of the magic reality—the sense of fluid possibilities” present in the works of Márquez. Gayl Jones praises the oral power and diverse narrative technique of “African, African American and other Third World literatures”. In her book of essays *Liberating Voices*, she claims that such different writers as Morrison, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, N. Scott Momaday or Ralph Ellison can re-create “sustaining mythologies and culture heroes through oral tradition.”⁵⁷

Morrison obviously is too imaginative a writer to imitate the style of writing of her South American colleagues, but she undoubtedly touches upon similar themes and handles them in a similar fashion. *Tar Baby* explores, like many magical realist novels, the theme of dialogue between different cultures posed in opposition, and the theme of an individual’s impotence in negotiating his or her place between them. The catastrophic relationship between Son and Jadine, who cannot make a life together as a result of their mutually exclusive views on matters of politics and culture, serves in the novel as a vehicle to show that even deepest love might not be enough to overcome painful alienation caused by injudicious cultural affiliation.

Both Jadine and Son are in fact homeless. Jadine is a literal and cultural orphan. Sent to boarding schools early in her life, she has no place she could call home. When asked where she is from, she gives names of three cities: Baltimore, Philadelphia, Paris, confirming in this way her rootlessness and Son’s indictment that she is “not from anywhere.” Her

⁵⁶ In R.Z. Sheppard’s review of the book *Conversations with American Writers* by Charles Ruas; “Quiet, Please, Writers Talking” there is a reference to Morrison’s attempt to evoke black history with techniques of magical realism—the review appeared in *The Time* magazine, December 24, 1984; 68–69. Another reference is also in Joseph T. Skerrett, “Recitation to the Griot.” *Conjuring, Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers; and in the essay by Dorothy H. Hopkins. “Song of Solomon: To Ride the Air.” *Black American Literature Forum*. XVI (1982): 67–70.

⁵⁷ Gayl Jones. *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*. p. 173–176.

sense of self is eroded by dislocation, which proves that a major feature in constructing a meaningful identity is a relevant and profound relation with a place one can call home. She is a modern, assimilated woman with white middle class aspirations who continually desires acceptance into the white society. Yet the possibility that others do not accept the self she has become makes her feel increasingly isolated and insecure. Other people's opinions constantly disrupt her image of herself. The swamp women—the symbolic mothers, grandmothers and sisters to whom the novel is dedicated—see how Jadine's separation from her cultural heritage makes her alienated. Although "they were first delighted when they saw her, the girl's desperate struggle to be something different than they were" makes them "quiet," "arrogant" and "mindful of their value" (TB 266). In Eloë, in a room which reminds her of "a cave, a grave, the dark womb of the earth" (TB 225), she encounters for the first time the night women whom she comes to fear. She observes that:

the night women were not merely against her (and her alone, not him), not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folded stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked to become and choke it off with their loose tits. (TB 225)

She sees the night women as "the mamas who seduced him [Son] and were trying to lay claim on her" (TB 157). From the woman in yellow, to the women in the trees, to the night women in Eloë, all women in the novel question Jadine's womanhood because she distances herself from them.

Although Jadine is adopted by the Childses and treated like a real daughter, her inherent motherlessness is conspicuous throughout the novel. She does not regard Ondine and Sidney as parents; she merely plays the role they are expecting: "playing a daughter to Sidney and Nanadine was a welcome distraction" (TB 57) for her, and although "Nanadine and Sidney mattered to her a lot, what they thought did not" (TB 43). The sleeping and eating arrangements at the Streets' house emphasize her distance from them. She sleeps in a room adjacent to Margaret's, rather than downstairs in the servants quarters with her relatives, and lets herself be cooked for and waited upon by Ondine and Sydney, the very people who sacrificed themselves to help her to get her valuable education. Her loss of concern for her own people, her inability to be

a real daughter becomes finally obvious when Jadine returns to the island to get her belongings. Ondine, who wonders whether she would bother to say goodbye had she not forgotten her sealskin coat, tries to explain to Jadine the reasons why she always feels like a “closed away orphan” (TB 27):

A girl has to be a daughter first, if she never learns how to be a daughter she can never learn how to be a woman: a woman good enough for a man, good enough for respect of other women, a daughter is a woman who cares about where she came from and takes care of them who took care of her. (TB 242)

However, the knowledge that Ondine shares with Jadine comes too late. Jadine argues there are other ways to be a woman: “Your way is one, but it’s not my way. I don’t want to be like you” (TB 242).

This final denial enhances Jadine’s alienation and makes her feel orphaned even more acutely.

Son claims Eloë as his home. It is a village that retained its isolation and is presided over by wide black women in snowy white dresses. However, he cannot return there as he has been a runaway ever since he killed his wife Cheyenne, by driving his car through the house where she was betraying him with a boy. As a result of this blind revenge, he also becomes alienated from his community, his friends and his family. He turns into a solitary wanderer whose only possible company is that of other solitary men on a cargo ship. The money that he sends to his father back in Eloë is his only link with the place of his birth. Like Jadine, he is aware of his solitude:

He was dwelling on his solitude, rocking in the wind, adrift. A man without human rights: anabaptized, uncircumcised, minus puberty rights or the formal rights of manhood. Unmarried and undivorced, he had attended no funeral, married in no church, raised no child. Propertyless, homeless, sought for but not after. (TB 142)

His seclusion is not only a direct result of the violence that he wreaked on his unfaithful wife but also of the fact that “although the world knew his power, it did not consider him able” (TB 142):

The conflict between knowing his power and the world’s opinion of it secluded him, made him unilateral. But he had chosen solitude and the company of other solitary people—opted for it when everybody else had long ago surrendered because he never wanted to live in the world their way. (TB 142)

Their way is Valerian's way or the Childses' way. What Son wants from life is his "original dime—the best in the world and the only real money [he has ever] had, as nothing [he has] ever earned felt like that dime" (TB 145).

But the world as he knows it, confined and controlled by people like Valerian and packed with money, as well as status-conscious people like Jadine or the Childses, who incorporated his values into their own, offers him no hope.

Both Jadine and Son are trying to find their place in the contemporary multicultural world, and their anxious quests are another indication of affinity between this novel and magical realist thematic concerns and stylistic strategies. Jadine's quest is a quest of a contemporary Afro-American female who needs to come to terms with her identity. Her quest is for self-integrity, but since she does not heed the cautions that come to her in various forms she experiences an aborted quest. It involves a series of challenges to her inauthentic existence. First, from the ancestral mothers, personified in the text as "women in the trees" and evoked in figures such as Thérèse, who hear and recognize her, but whom she is unable to recognize. Secondly, she fails to decode the message that night women, the African woman in a Paris supermarket or Ondine send her. Son, who represents the most significant challenge and a real chance to break through to authenticity, also fails in the role of her spiritual guide. In consequence, in spite of the fact that she feels triumphant at the end of the novel, she is the greatest loser of all—all she can do is relish her loneliness and feeling of being "lean and male."

Son's quest leads him through a number of places, as the aim of his quest is to find the place where he can live freely without constraints of white people's values and their clever plans of exploitation. First, he runs away from the cargo ship because he can no longer stand the slave labor there. In New York, he cannot conform to the demands of urban middle class life. For him, New York is a city where black girls are crying, there are no children, and men are maimed because "they found the business of being black and men at the same time too difficult so they dumped it" (TB 196).

While Jadine considers New York her home and is delighted by it, he can tolerate it because she gives him "the ballast and counter weight to the stone of sorrow New York City had given him" (TB 196).

Although he loves parochial Eloë, finally after Jadine abandons him, he comes to consider it ‘stupid, backwoodsy and dumb’. His quest ends where it started—on the Isle des Chevaliers, where the all-seeing and all-knowing blind Thérèse takes him. At the end of his quest, Son joins the horsemen and the swamp women who are genuine Africans, free and natural people. Thanks to Thérèse, a magical woman and a nourishing mother, his quest does not end up in fiasco; after a short spell of doubts, of giving up fraternity, Son returns to his African roots,

Thérèse is the most tangible proof that magic is still alive among genuine Afro-Americans. In the interview with Neille McKay, Morrison admits that “her folks were intimate with the supernatural [as] the real for them went far beyond the limitations of five senses.”⁵⁸ In her essay entitled “Rootedness,” she elaborates on this statement by adding:

I blend the acceptance of the supernatural and the profound rootedness in the real world at the same time, with neither taking precedence of 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 supposed could be called superstition and magic which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were ‘discredited knowledge’ that black people had; discredited only because black people were discredited and therefore what they knew was discredited.⁵⁹

Thérèse is one of such shrewd people. She is a conjure woman who has mythical otherworld qualities. Her magic breasts and her ‘milky eyes’ (TB 91) are the evidence that she belongs to the mythical race of horsemen and swamp women. Gideon openly expresses his “grudging respect for her magic breasts” and admits: “You damn near blind but I have to hand it to you. Some things you see better than me” (TB 90).

Both Thérèse and Gideon manifest the attitude to magic that Morrison reckons so typical of her people. When Gideon reports to Thérèse that “he had seen a swamp woman dart out from behind some trees near the pond.” Thérèse comments in a matter-of-fact way: “It couldn’t be a

⁵⁸ Neille McKay. “Interview with Toni Morrison.” *Contemporary Literature*, 24, 4 (1983): 414.

⁵⁹ Toni Morrison. “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation.” *Black Women Writers (1950–1980) A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Mari Evans, p. 121.

swamp woman because they have a peach-like smell, what he saw must have been a rider” (TB 89).

She is also familiar with voodoo. After Son’s exposure, she observes that the Streets’ house is subdued with fear and “she could think of nothing else—hurricane winds, or magic doll, diamondbacks or monkey teeth” (TB 129) as a possible reason for their fear. Also having cut Son’s hair, she burns it in his presence to show him she means no harm to him.

Morrison’s “profound rootedness in the real world” is apparent in her characterization of Thérèse. Thérèse, magical woman or not, did not escape exploitation by white people. Thanks to her magical breasts, which continue giving milk, she used to be a “wet nurse” for white babies, but almost “starve[d] to death” when “the formula” (TB, 132) came. Similarly, at present, she and Gideon are not only reduced to doing the worst menial jobs but also despised by everybody in the Streets’ house. In this way, throughout the novel, historical facts and the socioeconomic reality of the present life in the Caribbean mingle with magic, myth and legends of the region.

The technique of writing that emphasizes the oral quality of her storytelling also places Morrison’s novel in the tradition of magical realist fiction. Although she does not explicitly show how the consciousness of the individual can be transformed through the narrative act of storytelling if the storytelling is rooted in myth and folklore, *Tar Baby* warns that the absence of cultural narrative destroys not only the self but also the connection with others. Jadine’s failed quest for psychic wholeness and her acute isolation is a direct result of the fact that she has not heard the stories that would teach her how to be an independent, idiosyncratic and authentic woman. Holding on to the Afro-American heritage is, according to Morrison, the only means to preserve identity and connection with the community:

It’s DNA, it’s where you get your cultural information. Also it’s your protection, your education. They [ancestors] were so responsible for us, and we have to be responsible for them. If you ignore your ancestors you put yourself in a spiritually dangerous position of being self-sufficient, having no group you depend on.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Toni Morrison, op. cit., p. 121.

Tar Baby also establishes some intertextual links with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In his novel, Márquez describes the story of a prominent family of the Buendias that was destroyed in consequence of its isolation. In her novel, Morrison portrays the family of the Streets, which is no less eminent, and which also lives in total isolation on the island, far away from any neighbors and the nearest settlement. Both families have shameful incidents in their family histories, the Buendias—incest, the Streets—child abuse. The Buendias’ alienation results in the total destruction of their home, and so does the alienation of the Streets. After the revelation of Margaret’s dreadful secret, Valerian is shattered, and Nature, still alive on the wild, undomesticated part of the island gradually takes over:

After thirty years of shame the champion daisy trees were marshaling for war. The wild parrots that had escaped the guns of Dominique could feel menace in the creeping of their roots. During the day they tossed their branches; at night they walked the hills. (TB 236)

When Jadine returns to L’Arbe de La Croix, she can hardly see the house as she approaches it, as “the trees leaned so close to it” (TB 238). The house itself starts to decay: “the bricks that edged the courtyard were popping up out of the ground, urged out of the earth, like they were poked from beneath” (TB 245).

Sidney also notices that ants ate through the loudspeaker wires and the trees were jumping up overnight. But Valerian finds himself no longer able to care, totally dependent on his wife and the Childses, he is no longer capable to assert his power against that of his wife, servants and above all the island’s. Thus, both Márquez and Morrison seem to say that stagnant societies, as well as isolated and guilty families are doomed to die. After Valerian’s strength is crushed and the ‘imperial center’ does not hold any longer, the natural order replaces white man’s hegemony. In this way, both novels foreshadow the dusk of Eurocentric culture. Michael, the estranged son of the Streets, could hardly be called their heir, as he himself has discarded this culture long ago, preferring life of poverty among Native Americans to perverse and corrupt luxury of his parents’ house.

Five hundred years after Columbus named the continent, the New World’s myths are still being re-visioned and re-evaluated, only this time

the myths are polyphonic and points of view divergent. Toni Morrison reviews the New World's mythology as a black woman and a US citizen. She introduces through her fiction a new type of narrative, which is related to magical realism in its emphasis on the popular roots of contemporary culture and its use of myth and folklore, combined with the sober reality of racial, social and economic abuse. Also by dealing with the contradictory realities of mixed racial heritage in this particular region, the Caribbean, she re-negotiates links between the two hemispheres on the basis of shared cultural, social and economic exposure to Western civilization and common cultural roots in Africa.

Paule Marshall *Praisesong for the Widow*

Praisesong for the Widow is a subtly constructed story of the outcomes of the interaction between African culture and Western values and attitudes. The novel's principal theme is the relationship of an individual to the community, and the interplay of historical and mythical forces that can respectively distance the individual from the society or bring him or her back. The protagonist of the novel is Avey (Avatara) Johnson, a middle-aged, wealthy widow. As the novel opens, we find her on board a luxury liner tellingly named *Bianca Pride*.

Avey is in a state of emotional disarray—haunting memories and even more disturbing dreams unsettle her, spoiling her vacations. The first portents of the crisis come when at Martinique, a few days before the proper action of the story starts; she hears the patois spoken by the local people, which stirs up her childhood memories from the Tatem Island, in South Carolina. Then she has a dream about her long-dead great-great Aunt Cuney, whom she used to visit in Tatem. In the dream, Aunt Cuney is beckoning to her, trying to prevent her from participating in a social event. First Aunt Cuney is coaxing Avey to come with her, but as Avey is getting more and more defiant and stubbornly refuses her Aunt's mute requests, the Aunt becomes aggressive and the two women get into a fistfight. Aunt Cuney tramples Avey's stole and tears her silk blouse and gloves, as if the elegant clothes her great niece wears were objectionable to her. Avey wakes up from the dream exhausted and sore, as if the fight had really happened. She feels not only bruised but also completely unnerved, as she starts remembering things she would have rather forgotten.

All of her memories are connected with Tatem, a place where she used to spend her holidays in the old family house, belonging to Aunt Cuney. The Aunt was an eccentric old lady, who claimed she could communicate with dead ancestors, and therefore she knew that they had chosen her great niece to reincarnate in her body. She had received that message

even before Avey was born, and that was why the child received Aunt Cuney's grandmother's name—Avatara. Avatara is an African name, coming from the word 'avatar'—the idea of deity's reincarnation.⁶¹ And in fact, Avey's ancestors—the African Ibos—were divine creatures, whose history is perpetuated in the myth of which Aunt Cuney was a guardian. The myth maintains that in times of slavery, the Ibos were shipped to Tatem to be sold as slaves. As soon as they got off, they read their future in the American land in the eyes of the slave merchants so they repudiated their fate in the New World and went back on water to their homeland in Africa. Aunt Cuney's grandmother Avatara, who as a six-year-old child was an eye witness to the occurrence, reported the story to her own children, telling them that even though her body stayed in Tatem her mind went with the Ibos back to Africa. Five generations later, she appeared to her granddaughter Cuney in a dream to instruct her that she was sending a baby girl into the family to be named after her. When Avey was six or seven years old, her parents were directed to bring her back to Tatem each year, so that Aunt Cuney could initiate her into the myth which was at the same time her family saga.

The whole island of Tatem, as Avey recalls it, was a mystical, primeval and timeless place, replete with ghosts of the past. A special place in Tatem was Ibo Landing, the original site of the occurrence recounted by the legend, the first and only place where the Ibos had set their feet on the American land. For Aunt Cuney, the place was a shrine, where she took the child Avey to tell her the story of her proud ancestors. Thus Marshall made Ibo Landing a mythic focal point of history. The annual pilgrimages to Ibo Landing were at the same time a historical gesture and the first initiation rituals in Avey's life. To the young and impressionable mind of Avey, the family saga, reiterated year after year in the same wording till she learned it by heart, assumed the proportions of a myth, and its impact on her life proved to be a lasting one.

Through Avey's initiation rites, the unrecorded history was brought back to life. It was immortalized through the tradition of oral storytell-

⁶¹ I quote the etymology of the word 'avatar' after Keith A. Sandiford. Keith A. Sandiford, "Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow: The Reluctant Heiress, or Whose Life is it Anyway?" *Black American Literature Forum*, Volume 20, Number 4, (Winter 1986), p. 391.

ing, through passing the legend from one generation to another. In this way, Marshall introduces in the novel the theme of conflict between the official history and the nation's mythology. She seems to say that the memories of mothers and their daughters must be living archives, and that passing family history from one generation to the next is a means of preserving the truth against all official attempts to erase it. In the Tatem historic annals, there is no record of such an event as the Ibos' miraculous flight; therefore, it is Aunt Cuney's legacy to pass to her offspring the truth of the past and the ethos embodied in the legend.

Aunt Cuney connects the world of the living and the dead. She is a matriarch and a mentor for her great niece, Avey, whom she initiates into the past and her racial identity. Thus perpetuated collective memory is a form of resistance against the Western version of history, just as the Ibos' stance against slavery, their refusal to surrender to the status of slaves, was an act of repudiation of history. The Ibos did not want to play the roles in the time and space assigned to them by history, and instead of being its victims; they chose to be the heroes of their own myth. The Ibos "took their time"⁶²—they chose their own time instead of staying in the historic time. They refused to be forced into the Western temporal dimension, to have their own time mixed with that of the slaveholders. Their power of clairvoyance told them that the future could destroy their identity, so they felt "precariously differentiated" from the New World. They had no sense of "personal consistency or cohesiveness" with the historical events. They renounced history and its temporal mode, and placed themselves in a mythical time and space that allowed them to keep their freedom and their own distinctive cosmology.

In this way, the legend conveys the message of subversion of the order which rules over the physical world, making it possible for those who have faith in the veracity of the Ibo tale to cultivate quite a different version of their national history. Aunt Cuney's periodic, ritualistic trips to Ibo Landing were celebrations of the victory of myth over history—they preserved the cyclical continuum of the Ibos' rejection of the New World. They gave connection to the unknown ancestors in Africa,

⁶² Paule Marshall. *Praisesong for the Widow*, p. 38. Hereinafter cited parenthetically as PW.

and helped Aunt Cuney to fend herself against the New World's ontology. By celebrating the links with the Ibos, Aunt Cuney infused Avey's imagination with mythic concepts of time, place and history. Myth became a prism through which an explanation of life and identity was made. Long annual pilgrimages to Ibo Landing intended to make her aware of the duties and obligations that the incarnation of her ancestor in her body imposed on her.

Therefore, Avey is at the same time a historical person (she lives in the present historical mode,) and a mythical one (she is the incarnation of the Ibos, the embodiment of the myth). She is a battlefield for conflicting forces of history and myth. Keith A. Sandiford in his article about Marshall's novel argues that the circles of history and myth are the forces that drive the narrative forward. In his opinion the novel is:

a fictional drama in which the worlds of history and myth are placed in open and explicit antagonism, and the character consciously apprehends the dilemma of a personal choice as a confrontation between the claims of history and the claims of myth.⁶³

In other words, in Avey's life, history and myth come to grips, trying to lay claim on her life, to reclaim her for their own separate, contradictory realities. In the light of this fact, Avey's life crisis trial on board the ship has a profound meaning. The discrepancy between the situation of the mind and of the body, which Aunt Cuney's grandmother used to talk about, also affects unexpectedly and vehemently Avey's life. While her body is on a luxurious liner, her mind is in the mythic time and space conferred on it by the legend, and it is controlled by the ideas implanted there by Aunt Cuney and the Ibos. While her soul is in the possession of the militant Aunt Cuney, her life is entangled with quite a different myth—the American dream of material progress. Avey's expensive clothes symbolize false ideas pursued in the American society, just as Avey's companions embody the shallowness of the dream of accumulation of property. In Avey's dream, Aunt Cuney plays the role of a judge, who censures Avey's materialist worldview. Tearing apart Avey's clothes is a comment on the superficiality and vacuity of such a worldview, and so is Avey's decision to stealthily leave the cruise.

⁶³ Keith A. Sandiford. *op. cit.*, p. 372.

Avey's progression towards affluence and away from the Ibo ethos starts during the formidable years on Hasley Street in Brooklyn. The drudgery of those years makes her gradually forget the lessons learned at Ibo Landing and her true cultural affiliation. Her constant nagging about the impoverished quality of their life engages her husband Jay in a love-death relationship with the American dream of prosperity.

Little of Jay's past is presented in the novel, but at first he seems to be a man who wholeheartedly embraces the ethos of the Ibo legend. His characterization is at variance with male stereotypes in Afro-American fiction. He is a paragon of Afro-American masculinity—he is intelligent, sensitive and industrious. He is also a great lover and steady and dutiful husband. When, in the early days of their marriage, Avey takes him to Ibo Landing to tell him the tale of the Ibos, he does not hesitate to express his belief in the unrecorded and uncanonized miracle. For him also the legend becomes an article of faith. Though his life is not so imbued with myth as Avey's, still he is a man who operates through rituals that bear affinity with the Ibo ethos. On Saturday night, Jay and Avey dance to Jazz music in their living room pretending it is a ballroom. On Sunday mornings they stage recitals of gospel music and African American poetry, just for the two of them. Jay's sense of identity is deeply anchored in the Afro-American culture, and his imagery is typically African. For example, he praises Avey for her "earth-toned skin," "her high-riding Bantu behind (Guliah gold, he used to call it.)" (PW 134) Similarly, what makes Avey attracted to him is his "wing-flared nose and his seal-brown color" (PW 137).

As long as Jay and Avey lose themselves in their private rituals, they manage to break free from the exigencies of everyday life, abounding in racial discrimination and humiliation. They gain immunity to the harrowing reality thanks to distinctively African forms of expression, such as Jazz, spirituals or poetry (Langston Hughes, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson). This is their way of resisting, of avoiding the traps set up by the oppressive, capitalist society.

Something vivid and affirming and charged with feeling had been present in the small rituals that once had shaped their lives... An ethos they had in common had reached beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their life possible. (PW 137)

The lineage is with other people of African descent, who share the same past and, by necessity, the same future. In other words, the rituals establish relevant links between Avey and Jay and the African American community.

However, neither Jay nor Avey is fully aware of the sustaining power of their personal rites, and this is perhaps why the sordid reality of life in Brooklyn finally catches up with them. The survival of the family makes Jay devote his life to the soul-annihilating pursuit of material things, which soon eliminates the life ensuring-rituals from their life. His job at the department store, door-to-door salesmanship and university courses seriously impair the quality of their life. Jay's aspirations are laudable at first glance. He wants respectability, prosperity and security for his family. The way to achieve those goals leads through academic and professional careers, which cut him off from his essential black self.

The continuous drive for material success and social advancement, which Avey herself initiated, also isolates her from her past and her mythic self. Ibo Landing recedes in her memory till it altogether disappears from her conscious life. The place is taken by the expensive house in White Plaines, an affluent and fashionable part of New York, by insurance policies, trusts, bonds, securities to ensure that a return to Hasley Street will never be possible. They quickly adopt middle class ethos that leaves no place for the dances and recitals of the first decade of their marriage. As they gradually develop a disdain for their own Afro-American culture, they become more and more dignified, well mannered and distant from each other. Neither of them is happy. Avey is tormented by the memories of their earlier happiness, and by the feeling of guilt and betrayal. The gap between her life and her mythical identity grows wider and wider. She no longer thinks about herself as simply Avey or Avatara.

The names 'Avey' and 'Avatara' were those of someone who was no longer present, and she had become Avey Johnson whose face, reflected in the window or a mirror, she sometimes failed to recognize. (PW 141)

Everything that Aunt Cuney tried to stave off in the Tatem years comes back and abates Avey's life. All meaningful connections—their annual trips to Tatem, their regular visits in Harlem—are severed. The continuity is disrupted; their love becomes for Jay a burden, holding him back from his headlong rush towards accumulating properly.

Jerome Johnson was born when Jay's soul died, on a Thursday night in 1947. That night the old Jay and his rituals disappeared forever and the new Jerome Johnson emerged and cried in her arms. That night also some part of Avey's identity perished, or seemed to perish, the part shaped by Aunt Cuney and the Ibo's myth. The part that gave unnatural aura at birth, the mythic self so powerfully experienced during the excursion to Bear Mountain. (PW 141)

Another turning point in Jay's life is signaled by shaving off his moustache, which is a symbolic gesture. The moustache used to protect him against white people by concealing from them his intelligent face expression. Shaving it off marks the moment when Jay assumes quite new ethics that suites better his present higher social position, and when he negotiates a new relationship with his own African American culture. He relegates his old records and assumes an assertive and dominant posture. Thus the success comes not only at the price of Jay and Avey's mutual estrangement. Jay's strong financial position alienates him from his own Afro-American community. Toiling for years for white people to acquire something of their power has made Jay turn his resentment towards his own people. Capitalism has taught him its cruel lesson to hate not the oppressor, but the oppressed. The oppressor's culture and its values diminish him as a human being. He enunciates the ideology, which previously used to sustain his life, blaming it for leading black people to hedonism and failure. He replaces it with the Puritan work ethics and its unfavorable assessment of his own culture. He grows to view jazz, spirituals or poetry as pure entertainment, pleasure and playfulness, whose excess results in the impoverishment of the black race. Such remarks as: "If it was left to me I'd close every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum" prove that he has exchanged the community of the oppressed for the community of the oppressors. In the name of false aspirations, which always beset oppressed people, Jay literally works himself to death, trying to prove that through Herculean work black people can escape the frustration and futility of life in ghettos.

But materialist progress at any price does not figure in African cosmology, and the American dream cannot be effectively incorporated into the Afro-American mythology. Jay achieves empowerment but only in terms of the imperialist white majority. For his errors, he pays the ultimate price—he trades off his soul. His life ends "with a stranger's cold

face laughing in Mephistophelian glee behind his own in the coffin” (PW 134). He sells his soul in a Mephistophelian pact, in exchange for material success and white people’s respect, and he finishes by being mocked at by the irresistible forces of history that operate through the American capitalist machinery.

Avey is luckier than Jay. Before her life is gone, at the age of sixty-two, she gets a chance to reject history’s hegemony over her life and to infuse her life with meaning. Aunt Cuney, who is the embodiment of the collective wisdom of the African American people, violently disrupts Avey’s self image as a balanced and well-mannered matron, and unveils the inner conflict between Avey’s personal and tribal identity. Aunt Cuney proves to be a binding force in Avey’s life, which directs her towards quite a different future. She is extremely despotic and even violent. She uses her prerogative of age and experience to stifle any attempt of rebellion on Avey’s part. In this way, Avey experiences two sides of belonging to the community. On the one hand, she is to find out that the community completes the personal self. Without the community, the self is divided, and only in the context of the community can it gain wholeness and integrity. On the other hand, however, the community controls the individual’s behavior. Aunt Cuney has the power to manipulate Avey’s life even from beyond the grave. She is in furious rage because Avey has violated the community mores, and she is going to make Avey pay dearly for her transgressions. Avey will soon learn that even against her will she is a part of the community, because the community is a part of her. By wreaking such havoc in Avey’s life, Aunt Cuney demonstrates how solid is the power of the community and its mythology. Later in the novel, Lebert Joseph, who takes over Aunt Cuney’s role as Avey’s mentor, describes that power as being able “to spoil your life in a minute” (PW 166).

Totally overwhelmed by the dream and the memories it evokes, Avey gets off on the island of Grenada, where the ship gets supplies, planning to return to New York on the next available flight. She appears there during the festival of the yearly return of Carriacou Islanders to their homeland. The nightmare of the dream is reenacted when some of the excursionists, taking her for someone else, try to drag her along with the throng. A baby grabs at her earrings and tries to pull her. A man takes

her for his lady friend and attempts to steer her by the elbow towards the boats in the harbor. An old lady's umbrella gets caught in the straps of Avey's handbag. Even though Avey does her best to put distance between herself and the crowd, her efforts are futile, as the excursionists refuse to recognize her as a tourist and a stranger.

The images from the Grenada pier are in sharp contrast with Avey's childhood memories of the annual excursions on the Hudson River. During one of such outings, early in her life, Avey became aware of the extensiveness of her identity, which embraced not only herself, but also the community, whose spirit she could sense on the boat. She envisaged "hundred of slender threads streaming from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her" (PW 190).

Then her vision changed and she saw that the threads came not from her but from other people, and that they streamed into her and embraced her. At that time, Avey did not fear being bound with the people around her, nor did she imagine her existence as separate and independent. She felt a kind of umbilical connection with other people of her race, blacks from New York as well as West Indians. As a young girl, Avey felt the "center of huge, wide confraternity" (PW 191). In spite of the festive mood of the excursion, she recalls it now as something "momentous and global" (PW 191). But now Avey has changed and all her actions aim at retiring from the company of others. First she avoids her companions on the cruise and shies away from other passengers. Then at the waterfront in Grenada, she almost panics at the thought of being engulfed by the mass of people.

Avey's first night at one of Grenada's hotels is a breakthrough. For the first time she comprehends the sterility of her final years with Jay. She weeps over Jay, mourning not for his death, but for his lost soul. In the morning, she wakes up to another shock, noticing, also for the first time, the extraordinary resemblance between her own and Aunt Cuney's appearance in the dream. Jolted by the series of epiphanies, Avey sets out on a walk to the beach to regain her balance. This is the point in the novel at which Avey starts gradually to sort out her confusion by merging with the world of myth and ritual. The trek through the beach takes on allegorical proportions of the exploration of the unknown reaches of the self. As Keith A. Sandiford observes, not caring much about the reality

of this scene, Marshall describes the hotel beach as an Edenic place.⁶⁴ Although it is mid-summer, the beach is completely deserted as far as the eye could reach. The shoreline is “a wide, flawless apron of sand” and “not a footprint [is] to be seen” (PW 153). Avey is transfixed by the immaculate landscape, and she explores it in a receptive and imaginative way, with the delight and intensity of a child. This time her encounter with the realm of myth is friendly and soothing. It makes her forget about the breakdown the night before, and the distress that chased her away from the liner.

The primeval, timeless space that surrounds her gradually absorbs her and allures her into its mythical shrine—a rum shop, where she encounters a visionary, named Lebert Joseph, her next guide in the quest for clarity and direction. The link between him and Aunt Cuney is established at once. He is one of these mythical, timeless people “who have the essentials to go for ever.” Like great-aunt Cuney, he has “ways of seeing beyond mere sight and ways of knowing that outstrip ordinary intelligence” (PW 175).

Avey’s confrontation with the old man is rich in symbolic overtones. The scene is a contest between mythical and historical worldviews, between Avey’s individual and collective self. While Joseph Lebert proudly declares his kinship with Carriacou Islanders and his descent from African ancestors whose names are still remembered among the Carriacou people, she stubbornly asserts her identity as a US citizen and a New Yorker. When he again challenges her to reveal to him her true identity, Avey turns out to be a person who has forgotten her roots, who can no longer “call [her] nation” (PW 175). For Lebert Joseph who you are depends on where you come from, and if you do not know your “nation,” your ancestry, you cannot be aware of your true racial and ethnic identity. Thus he quickly comes to the conclusion that Avey must be one of the lost souls who have sinned against their ancestors and, in consequence, live an inauthentic and isolated life of self-negation, even though they were born to be the proudest people of the race. Like the excursionists on the pier, in spite of Avey’s expensive clothes and straightened hair, he recognizes in her an offspring of “the long-time people”, but unlike his compatriots, he comprehends that she has turned

⁶⁴ Keith A. Sandiford, *op. cit.*, p. 385

away from them, their exceptional value. He associates her tormented look with her transgression against the ancestors and with the fact, that her sense of kinship with other African people has been badly damaged. In the grog shop that looks more like a church than a bar, Lebert Joseph gives Avey a foretaste of the Carriacou ceremonies in the memory of African ancestors. He stages little dancing and singing performances that first make Avey embarrassed, then bewildered, and finally relaxed.

In the end, to her own utter amazement, she accepts his invitation to take part in the ceremony on Carriacou Island. At the same time, she agrees to rely on Lebert Joseph as her guide and mediator between herself and the local community. In other words Joseph Lebert, who also vindicates the Ibo ethos, succeeds both at pulling Avey away from her material concerns and at breaking her resistance to that ethos. This is the beginning of Avey's quest for the essential black identity and reintegration with the African American community. The quest is completed in a number of rituals, which establish cultural continuum and offer the heroine possibilities of personal renewal. The first stage, the sea crossing, is Avey's rite of passage. She undergoes the ritual of purification, which prepares her for the last stage—the proper ceremony of affirmation and reintegration with the community.

The channel crossing is the most harrowing experience of all. As the sea is rough and the boat pitches, Avey gets seasick and suffers the unimaginable humiliation of public physical purging. She has violent paroxysms of vomiting, excretion and hallucination. Keith A. Sandiford writes that the ordeal of the sea crossing is reminiscent of “the Middle Passage”⁶⁵ and in symbolic terms its function is to shatter Avey's dreams of self-sufficiency and autonomy. In her anguish, she is sustained by a few elderly women who, to her hallucinating mind “[are] one and the same with the presiding mothers of Mount Olivet” (PW 197), her childhood church. They comfort her and reassure her until, on the island, Rosalie Pary, Lebert Joseph's daughter, takes her to her house.

Rosalie nurses Avey back to health by giving her a ritualistic bath and a massage. The half-conscious Avey identifies her with other important women from her past. First, she takes her for Aunt Cuney, who used to

⁶⁵ Keith A. Sandiford, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

bathe the child Avey during the summers in Tatem. Then, Rosalie evokes the image of Avey's mother keeping an all-night vigil over the sick baby Avey. Finally, Rosalie appears to Avey as a midwife, attending to her during the birth of one of her children. Only this time Avey is giving birth to her own self. The experience teaches Avey the force of the community and reminds her of her own dependence on it. It also has the effect of jolting Avey into the new mythical reality, of preparing her for the final ceremony of acceptance into the community.

The ritual once again shows the centrality of Lebert Joseph's role as a priest, griot and an archivist of the past. As Avey, Rosalie and her maid move up the hill to the place where the ritual is to be held, they stop at the crossroads to meet Lebert Joseph. It is night and in the weak light of a torch some aspects of Lebert Joseph's appearance become foregrounded. He seems ancient almost immortal—"his age is beyond eckoning" (PW 233). He becomes almost a supernatural figure, a ghost of the past, an African deity.

As Eugenia Collier suggests in her essay "The Closing of the Circle Movement from Division to Wholeness in Paule Marshall Fiction,"⁶⁶ Joseph seems to be an incarnation of the African deity Legba—a trickster and a guardian of the crossroads. Legba is vital in some African rituals, some of which are still performed by African descendants living in the Diaspora in the New World. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his groundbreaking study *The Signifying Monkey* describes the importance of that primeval figure in African and Afro-American cultures in the New World. Legba is an interpreter, and since his interpretations are tricks, he is often perceived as a trickster figure. He interprets the will of Gods to men and carries the wishes of men to the gods. He is:

the guardian of crossroads, master of style and stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane.... [He] is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his meditating function: his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realms of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Eugenia Collier. "The Closing of the Circle: Movement from Division to Wholeness in Paule Marshall Fiction." *Black Women Writers 1950–1980. A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Mari Evans, p. 312.

⁶⁷ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of African-American Criticism*, p. 6.

Like Legba, Lebert Joseph is a very old, lame man in ragged clothes. His figure serves as a link between the present and the past, between the living and the dead.

The ceremony is the climax of the novel. The first part of the ceremony is the Beg Pardon, during which the living ask their ancestors to forgive them for whatever errors they may have made during the year. They ask forgiveness not only for themselves, but also for their relatives scattered all around the world. Then the second part begins. It is called the Big Drum and it evokes pure mythical atmosphere. The old-time people are honored in the nation dances. Each dancer performs his or her ancestral dance to pay homage to the ancestors. Then the Creole dances come and this time all the people dance, even those, who, like Avey do not know the name of their nation. By participating in the dance they nevertheless proclaim their respect for the African ancestors and a linkage with all African people. The culmination of the ritual comes when one of the musicians pauses for a while and, by drawing his thumb across the drum, produces a single piercing note. It sounds:

like the distillation of thousand sorrow sounds. The theme of separation and loss the note embodied the unacknowledged longing it conveyed, summed up feelings that were beyond words, feelings, and a host of subliminal memories that over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with its trauma and pain of which they had come. After centuries of forgetfulness and even denial, they refused to go away. The note was a lamentation that hardly could have come from the leg of a drum. Its source had to be the heart, the bruised, still bleeding collective heart. (PW 110-111)

The goal of the ritual then is to express un verbalized feelings and to bring unity among people of the same heritage in the centuries-old community. Although the dancers, the singers and the drummers are people of different age and social status, they are all united by the inclusiveness of the ceremony. The ritual, which is the extension of the myth, allies the individuals into one nation. It connects them to the unknown ancestors across the Atlantic, to whom songs, dances and drumming were life itself, By reminding them of their common roots, it links them with the black community worldwide, proving that the individual is made whole only by the acceptance of the collective past, the community and its laws. In this way, the ritual protects them and gives them power that lies in a truthful vision of their history and culture.

Avey intuitively gets at the profound meaning of the scene that unfolds before her eyes. As the elder women mildly draw her into their circle, she joins their rhythmic trudge, first carefully, then passionately. It reminds her of the ceremony of the Ring Shout, in which she wanted to participate together with Aunt Cuney in Tatem. Now she can fulfill her childhood dream and she takes care to do it properly, not letting her feet leave the ground. In that mythical moment, she becomes Avatara again—she recaptures her identity, her true mythical self. She experiences what Mircea Eliade calls a “mythical instant”, when the ritual power of dance ushers her into mythical temporality.⁶⁸

With her performance, she finally liberates herself from her miserable middle class existence. She realizes that her life has validity only in connection to the Ibo ethos and only the accumulated wisdom of the tribe can give her soul nourishment and confer meaning on her life. In this way Avey achieves personal integrity and wholeness. Her ritualistic transformation makes her conscious of her duties towards her children and all Afro-American people. It is a passage from the ignorance of a child to the responsibility of a grown-up. It puts an end to Avey’s reliance on mentors who impart their wisdom to her, and puts Avey in the position of a griot. Now Avey can herself explore the reaches of her identity and can help others to find theirs. She makes a resolution to return to the old family house in Tatem, and to bring her grandchildren there in order to ensure the continuity of the myth. She starts to see herself as a medium for the power of the myth and undertakes to do for the next generation what the preceding has done for her. She will stop those bright, fiercely articulated young people to initiate them into their heritage, to protect them from cultural annihilation that became her husband’s fate. She will show them that in a different, mythical dimension they are far greater and more powerful people than history cares to admit. She will teach them that while history conveys only the facts of the dispossession and marginality of her people, myth is a source of the most faithful self-representation of their race. She wants, therefore, to convince young Afro-Americans that the true self and true empowerment begin with the acceptance of the community and its unwritten mystical history, and

⁶⁸ Mircea Eliade. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Translated by Willard R. Trask, p. 76.

that they should not see themselves through the eyes of a people that are historically their enemy.

With that message, Marshall reiterates the major theme of her fiction—the clash of cultures and the conflict between history and myth. The undercurrents of myth and history impose pattern on the narrative and shape the structure of the novel. They are constantly placed in opposition as they lay different claims on the protagonist, who has to dig through the layers of interpretations, created by history and myth, in order to make her personal choices. In the epigraph to her earlier novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Marshall puts a piece of wisdom from the Tiv people of West Africa:

Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform the ceremonies of reconciliation, but there is no end.

The Praisesong for the Widow also postulates the historical separateness of cultures and communities. In the encounter between the two cultures; the impact of the Eurocentric culture on the Afro-American is always negative. The American Dream is incompatible with African cosmology, and even a dominant economic position cannot change the diminishing role that the white majority assigned to black people. Avey's and Jay's lives illustrate the dangers of adopting historical perspective in exchange for African mythology. Avey and Jay take in everything that the Ibos rejected, and instead of resisting they assimilate. But soon it becomes clear that White Plains cannot do for them what Ibo Landing did for Aunt Cuney, that materialism cannot replace community and its sustaining rituals. American ideology, putting stress on the individual and his lonely upward social struggle, is not appropriate for Afro-American people, who can acquire integrity and power to assert their selfhood only through cultivating the links with the community of the living and the dead. Once the links are broken, ritual is necessary to restore in the individual the true sense of the self. Ritual then is a key to survival. In the encounters between the people of African descent and the New World, it helps them to fend themselves against a historicity that fools them into believing that social success is sufficient to counter the forces that persecute and try to crash them.

Myth and ritual are stylistic features that Marshall employs not only to advance the action of the story, but also to make a social statement. In

the interview in *New Letters*,⁶⁹ Paule Marshall defines the basic themes of her fiction as the encounter with the past and a need to reverse the social order. The use of myth and ritual in the *Praisesong for the Widow* allows Marshall to explore these themes in a creative and original way. The traditional path of mythological adventure, represented in the rites of passage, separation, initiation and return, is appropriated to the Afro-American experience. The new paradigm, including such motifs as alienation, confrontation and reintegration with the community, dramatizes central principles that bind people of African descent, enhances their cohesion and consolidates their power.

More 'advanced' societies look down on rituals as vestiges of humanity's infancy. These societies can articulate their values, so they have discarded rituals as specific for 'primitive' people, whose social values are still manifested in an emotional, non-verbal way. Indeed, ritual functions at the non-rational level, giving shape to the vital but unarticulated ideas on which society is based. For those readers who believe that ritual is a matrix in which personal and collective identity is encoded, the rituals presented in the book may be very appealing. For others, their function will be purely ornamental. The fact is, however, that for Marshall and for the community she represents, the import of ritual is unquestionable. Thus by incorporating the African American ritual as a central concept that propels narration, Marshall reminds us that no matter how universal and accommodating the text seems to be, it nonetheless contains vital cultural differences that prove that the separateness of cultures is a given.

⁶⁹ Paule Marshall. "Shaping the World of My Art." *New Letters* 40 (Autumn, 1973): 110.

Conclusions

Literature is an important component of a nation's culture. It provides opportunities to consider matters of ethics, social and universal codes of behavior, definitions of civilization, progress, construction of history, tradition and identity. All of them are particularly complex in American literature, as the United States has always been a country of great racial, ethnic and cultural diversity. Not so long ago—before the 1980s—traditional, canonical American literature was free of, uninformed and unshaped by the presence of literary works written by representatives of ethnic groups in the United States. There seemed to be a more or less general agreement among critics and academics that American literature used to be a preserve of white, male, Anglo-Saxon descendants of Puritans who, generation after generation, defined the canon of “national literature.”

In 1989 William Spengemann wrote in his essay “What is American Literature?” that early in the 20th century, when American literature became an academic enterprise, the academic environment “raised in the religion of Anglo-Saxon progress” forged “this Anglo-Saxon myth”⁷⁰ of American civilization. The myth became known as the American Dream. In literature it took the form of works dwelling upon the immigrants’ flight from the Old World to the New World, which was interpreted as a quest from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility.

⁷⁰ William C. Spengemann. *A Mirror for the Americanists, Reflections on the Idea of American Literature*, p. 17.

While, in theory, race or ethnicity were meaningless to the concept of the American identity in practice, to be American was to be white, English speaking, of British descent and Protestant. The part of the population of the New Republic that was neither white, Protestant nor British in origin had little—if—any influence on the formative years of the nation’s literature. The presence of ethnic groups had no significant place in the origins and development of American culture. The American Enlightenment could at the same time propagate lofty ideas of egalitarianism, and accommodate extermination of Indians and slavery at the very heart of the democratic experiment. Similarly the “Americanness” of the “national literature” was separate from and unaware of the ethnic minorities hovering somewhere at the margins of literary imagination. In Toni Morrison’s words:

there is something called American Literature, that according to the conventional wisdom, is certainly not Chicano literature, or Afro-American literature, or Asian-American literature, or... It is somehow separate from them and they from it.⁷¹

William Spengemann rightly claimed that such an approach resulted in the self-improvement of American literature. In his opinion, American literature meant

nothing more than those few works of fiction, poetry and drama which [had] been written in any place that is now part of the United States or by anyone who [had] ever lived in one of those places, and which now rank among the acknowledged masterpieces of Western writing.⁷²

Such a concept of “Americanness” excluded not only literature written by immigrants, in languages other than English; it also excluded literature written in America before the settlement of the first Puritans. It narrowed the scope of material relevant to the study of American literature with the effect that

each year we [said] more and more about less and less until we... [found] ourselves left with a half-dozen masterpieces and nothing more to say about them.⁷³

⁷¹ Toni Morrison. “Unspeaking Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28, 1 (Winter 1989): 1.

⁷² William C. Spengemann. op. cit., p. 11.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

The canon circumscribed “American Literature” within Anglo-Saxon borders. It discredited the literature of the rest of the continent and all ethnic writing within the United States borders. To get out of this “unproductive and demoralizing situation,” William Spengemann proposed to extend the study of American literature into a wider landscape to allow for more exploration and discovery. He thought that there was more than one “American literature” and that venturing beyond the fortress of the established canon could be a worthwhile and rewarding intellectual experience.

The very title of Paul Lauter’s essay “The Literatures of America. A Comparative Discipline” published in 1991 also suggested that there are many literatures which could be labeled as American. The essay criticized academic circles for using a normative model and speaking of literatures other than mainstream as “abnormal, deviant, lesser, perhaps ultimately unimportant.”⁷⁴ Interestingly, Lauter noticed that political agenda was responsible for the refusal of critical insight into ethnic literary heritage:

Marginalized works are, largely, the products of groups who have relatively little access to political, economic or social power. To say it another way, the works generally considered central to a culture are those composed and promoted by persons from groups holding power within it.⁷⁵

Thus for the bigger part of the 20th century critical consensus grounded in political correctness ruled out everything that the dominant class and its culture deemed irrelevant or subversive to the political establishment.

But now the situation has changed. By pushing the ethnic world to the margins of experience, white America overreached herself. In contemporary America unanimity in all spheres of thought can no longer be accepted without question. A kind of mental barrier was broken, and all experience has come to be viewed as un-centered and pluralistic. As a result Americans no longer derive their aesthetic, historical and political theories from a limited number of books chosen by anglophile professors of literature who are influenced by European standards of assessment and who would like to impose coherence on a culture by nature miscellane-

⁷⁴ Paul Lauter. “The Literatures of America: A Comparative Discipline,” p. 9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

ous. Marginality has become a source of creative energy that repeatedly defies traditional literary studies. As a result, readers have to confront new and unnerving styles of narration and unsettling outlooks on such matters as history, community, culture and identity.

Afro-American writers played a vital role in overcoming the historical and political forces which were instrumental in imposing alienation and marginality on people of color. They denounced social inequality and undermined the traditions that left minorities invisible and silenced. They constructed a unique voice, distinct from the dominant aesthetic modes that used to be promoted by American universities. They not only saved the African presence from the stereotypes or oblivion in the canonical narratives, they also gave it a new distinctive form.

Their narratives frequently bear affinity with magical realist fiction. Magical realism encompasses two disparate worlds: historical and imaginary, political and fantastic. Its central structuring principle is based on this dichotomy which is ideologically charged. That is why forms and constructions of magical realism have frequently been a catalyst for the development of “national literatures,” particularly in postcolonial cultures. “Magical realism is especially alive in postcolonial context,”⁷⁶ and as I have argued in the introduction, African American communities can be reasonably treated as postcolonial or ‘Third World’ nations.

The issue of political commitment has been one of the dominant concerns of Afro-American and postcolonial writers. Both African American and postcolonial fiction take a re-visionary position with respect to political practices of their times, helping their people to get out of the disabling cultural position. Those Afro-American texts that are indebted to magical realist devices, draw upon “non-Western systems that privilege mystery over empirism, empathy over technology, innovation over tradition,”⁷⁷ in the effort to compile a “national literature” that is an important element of cultural identity. Toni Morrison claims that literature is the principal way in which human knowledge is made accessible. Thus African American writers have an important cultural mission—they rewrite their culture from an oppositional standpoint,

⁷⁶ Lois Parkinson Zamora, Wendy B. Farris. “Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s.” *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, p. 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3

they reeducate their people and regenerate ancient ontologies, traditions and values, enshrined in the beliefs of ancestral cultures. As Immanuel Wallerstein aptly puts it, they “re-valorize mythical links and socialize members [of the community] into the historical memory.”⁷⁸ They adopt writing as a crucible for cultural identity, and they put themselves in the position of guardians of their culture.

Their writing has a subversive and revolutionary character. Their texts become the major site of confrontation where the struggle for self-empowerment takes place. They validate Lauter’s observations concerning the relationship between literature and power. In his opinion, ‘national literature’ is the key to survival of the dominated people.

The struggle for survival, for space and hope, commands all the limited resources available to a marginalized people. Art cannot stand outside that struggle: on the contrary, it must play an important part in it.⁷⁹

That is why “captive people need a song,”⁸⁰ and not just any song, but their own song, unique in content and style. The widespread appeal to the magical realist mode of writing is a response to that need.

In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation.⁸¹

Magical realism is a mode particularly useful in transgressing ontological boundaries:

Magical realism often facilitates the fusion or coexistence of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. The propensity of magical realist texts to admit plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds—in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism.⁸²

⁷⁸ Qtd. in John Higham’s *Ethnic Leadership in America*, p. 199.

⁷⁹ Paul Lauter, op. cit., p. 20

⁸⁰ Michelle Cliff. *No Telephone to Heaven*, 1987, p. 87.

⁸¹ Lois Parkinson Zamora, Wendy B. Faris. “Introduction...,” op. cit., p. 3

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

The worlds created in *Mama Day* and “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” are such regions where folk beliefs in magic, ghosts or voodoo rituals are something natural.

Ghosts in their many guises abound in magical realist fiction... and they are crucial to any definition of magical realism as a literary mode. Because ghosts make absence present, they foreground magical realism’s basic concern—the nature and limits of the knowable—and they facilitate magical realism’s critique of modernity... They represent an assault on the scientific and materialist assumptions of western modernity: that reality is knowable, predictable, controllable.⁸³

The supernatural is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence, admitted and accepted by the commonsense rational community. It is not a kind of mental aberration but a “normative and normalizing” fact. “Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other” are the boundaries “erased, transgressed, blurred, and brought together... fundamentally refashioned.”⁸⁴ Thus magical realism in those books is an ontological assault on the empirical notion of the probable and predictable relations of cause and effect, on the Cartesian identification of truth with the rational mind. The ontological assault is primarily what makes the texts subversive; “their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures.” Thus admission of the supernatural subverts the existing power; it has the effect that John Erickson calls “corrosion within the engine of system.”⁸⁵

All European and American literary theories form a paradigm, which is considered by many critics universalistic.’ As Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes:

Anglo-American regional culture has too often masked itself as universal, passing itself off as our ‘common culture’ and depicting different cultural traditions as ‘tribal’ or ‘parochial.’ On a more global scale are the familiar claims for a great and integral ‘Western tradition’ containing seeds, fruit and flowers of the very best that has been thought or uttered in human history.⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibid., p. 497–498.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸⁵ John Erickson. “Metoikoi and Magical Realism in the Maghrebian Narratives of Tahar ben Jelloun and Abdelkebir Khatibi.” *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, p. 427.

⁸⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “‘Ethnic and Minority’ Studies,” p. 287.

Those critics who advocate such a theory would like to break all the barriers to intelligibility and make fiction accessible for the ‘universal’ audience. They assess fiction on the basis of the capacity of the non-local readership to understand the text regardless of its cultural context. They favor a realistic mode of writing because:

realism intends its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective (hence universal) representation of natural and social realities... Realism functions ideologically and hegemonically.⁸⁷

Magical realism also functions ideologically but not hegemonically because its program is eccentric and democratic. It does not evolve around a single ideological center; “it creates space for interaction and diversity.”⁸⁸

Practitioners on magical realism do not “monumentalize magical realism as the postmodern or postcolonial mode or propose marginality as some new mainstream.”⁸⁹

Thus ‘universality’ is the hegemonic Euro-American tool for designating “superior” and “inferior” literature. It is a mask beneath which some critics hide their Euro-American preferences. Making literature “universal” or “intelligible” simply means the continuance of Euro-American standards forms and values. “Universality” is then the old equipment used to deal with something new: with the change, innovation and transformation that characterize African American literature. As Dexter Fisher puts it:

The emergence of the Black Aesthetic Movement in the 1960s focused attention on the dilemma faced by minority writers trying to reconcile cultural dualism. Willingly or otherwise, minority writers inherit certain tenets of Western civilization through American society, though they often live alienated from that society. At the same time, they may write out of a cultural and linguistic tradition that sharply departs from the mainstream. Not only does this present constant social, political and literary choices to minority writers, but it also challenges certain aesthetic principles of evaluation for the critic. When the cultural gap between writer and critic is too great, new critical approaches are needed.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Lois Parkinson Zamora, Wendy B. Faris, op. cit., p. 3.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Dexter Fisher. *Minority Language and Literature; Retrospective and Perspective*, p. 13.

Hence the “universalistic” approach cannot be an effective strategy into the complex world of ethnic fiction. Afro-American fiction, as all ethnic literatures, demands new criticism based on the acknowledgement of cultural relativity. Therefore, my readings of the novels by Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall and of Randall Kenan’s stories were not concerned with evaluating one text according to the norms of the canon, but with identifying and articulating their symptomatic and distinctive features, the source of their originality.

I believe that one such feature is the tradition of oral storytelling grounded in folk tradition. Especially Gloria Naylor and Randall Kenan have successfully incorporated folk forms into their fiction in order to create barriers to intelligibility. As Wendy B. Faris would put it, “the communal magic of storytelling figures prominently”⁹¹ in their texts. The oral communal practices of their books testify to their kinship with magical realist writing, which uses performative practices to bind the community together. “Where these practices (or communities) have been occulted or supplanted, magical realist writers may revitalize them in their functions.”⁹² The revitalization is possible through recuperation of “non-Western cultural modes and non-literary forms in their Western form (the novel, the short story, the epic poem).”⁹³ In other words, the writers strive to give their culture a sense of distinctiveness and authenticity through the project of recovering the vestiges of African oral art, lost or devalued in the wake of historical changes, as Afro-American equal to Euro-American literary tradition. They retrieve oral performance from the denigrating label “primitive” and endow it with equal status as a rich and sophisticated artistic tradition. For these writers storytelling is a meaningful recounting of personal experiences, which are revealing for the whole community.

Although orality is altogether a different form of communication than writing, it can do for illiterate culture what writing does for literary culture. It brings the community together and keeps the culture alive. Songs, sermons, folktales have kept alive the experience of enslave-

⁹¹ Wendy B. Faris. “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction.” *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, p. 193.

⁹² Lois Parkinson Zamora, Wendy B. Faris, op. cit., p. 4.

⁹³ Ibid.

ment, the separate and original cultural tradition. Nowadays African American novels and short stories have taken up the task of receiving and passing on of oral traditions. Literary historian Barbara Christian is one of the critics who point to the connection between folk forms and fiction. In her opinion, oral tradition has revitalized the novel, altering “our sense of the novelistic process.”⁹⁴ Orality has become both form and substance; it not only gives meaning to novels and short stories, it can also give them shape by imitating the oral tradition in language and style of a folktale. The array of idioms, the excessive dialogue with repetitions, the multitudes of personal histories create a complex and intricate mosaic of meaning. In place of the linear progression of action and steady character development, the narratives move forward in great strides or circles, making flashbacks, digressions and mixing the past and the present. Their narrative can surge forward just to stop to build a tale within a tale, to make elaborations and to delay climaxes. It takes liberties with the traditional concepts of time, space and logic.

What also binds Naylor’s novel and Kenan’s short stories is the project of reinvention of cultural identities through the medium of language. Language has retained social and economic hierarchies produced by slavery, and now it informs about differences in class and formal education. In literature, language variance becomes a necessary determinant in the process of outlining the structure of a culture. Language appropriation is one of the ways in which ethnic writing announces its difference from the discourse of the main culture. Neologisms, variable orthography, unorthodox grammar and syntax are all the subversive strategies used by the writers to dismantle the duality of the dominant and the dominated culture; to overturn the dichotomy between the centrality and the margin. Thus the use of oral tradition, the constant insistence of the writers that their novels should be heard as well as read, is a major innovation of Afro-American fiction.

Moreover, I maintain that “Mama Day” and Randall Kenan’s stories rely on the same manifestation of the oral interactive pattern. Each text is not only an exercise in reclamation of the richness of the ancient cul-

⁹⁴ Barbara Christian. “Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women’s Fiction.” *Conjuring: Black Women Fiction and Literary Tradition*, p. 233.

ture, but also a manifestation of the call-and-response pattern typical of Afro-American culture. The authors' use of oral tradition evokes the same reciprocal relationship between the teller and the listener as the African tradition of call-and-response or the Greek tradition of choral commentary. Randall Kenan and Gloria Naylor seek to create the same reciprocal relationship between their fiction and the reader. They address the reader directly or make their protagonists call and respond to each other. *Tar Baby* also draws on that paradigm, but in a slightly different manner. Toni Morrison claims that creativity in literary text is collaboration between the author and the reader. She leaves "holes" and "spaces" for the reader to "enter" the narrative and assume an active role in it.

My writing expects, demands a participatory reading, and that I think is what the literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we [the writer and the reader] come together to make this book, to feel this experience.⁹⁵

The two novels analyzed in Part Two, *Tar Baby* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, are manifestations of yet another form of folk aesthetics. Their action is presented through the matrix of mythical quest and ritual, which is the "primary investment of magical realism."⁹⁶ This paradigm allows writers to create complicated interconnections between myth and folklore on the one hand, and history and culture on the other. The books focus on the characters' individual quests and, at the same time, devote full attention to the historical and cultural context that makes the quest imperative. To put it differently, Son, Thérèse, Avey or Lebert Joseph exist not only in their distinct time and space, but also in a mythical time dimension. They are placed solidly in a specific temporal and spatial continuum, but at the same time they are part of a different arrangement in the realm of myth. In their different ways the two novels attempt to reclaim the forgotten myths in order to transform the native culture in

⁹⁵ Toni Morrison. "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." *Black Women Writers (1950–1980). A Critical Evaluation*, ed. by Mari Evans, p. 341.

⁹⁶ Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, op. cit., p. 3.

affirmative ways that celebrate the past and provide continuity with the present.

Therefore, what connects all the texts analyzed in my thesis is their approach to storytelling as a dynamic vehicle for passing the history of the “Afro-American nation” from one generation to another. Such storytelling bridges historical discontinuity brought about by transitions in American life such as for example the Great Migration from the South to the North. But the importance of the South is not only limited to memories of slavery and racial segregation. The South also stands for ancestors, heritage, folklore, and oral interaction; in a word, the tradition that the main culture tried to discredit. The works of fiction bear resemblance with that ancestral heritage. They endeavor to sustain the community and to enrich the lives of Black people. In other words, through the fusion of myth and folklore they validate people and places, offer affirmation of those people and places, and install in contemporary urbanized and assimilated black Americans a sense of dignity and pride in their folkish cultural origins.

It seems extremely important to me that these four writers have chosen the extended Caribbean for the setting of their texts. The Caribbean Islands, as Paule Marshall observes, are the stepping stones that link South and North America, but at the same time, they are slightly out of line, more to the East into the Atlantic Ocean. Their geographical position not only links the Americas, but also the New World with Africa. The Caribbean Islands were the center of triangular trade, the barter and sale of human lives. They are still a place where the atrocities of the slave trade and plantation slavery are vividly remembered, where all racial groups are in exile and under economic and cultural pressure from the United States.

From the early days of slavery until now, cultural clash and miscegenation have shaped the brutal reality of Caribbean life. Accordingly the Caribbean Islands serve in the novels as a powerful symbol of displacement, subjugation and identity crisis. The relationship to land and place plays a vital role in the process of identity formation. *Tar Baby* and *Praisesong for the Widow* display a pervasive concern with the recovery and development of an effective bond between self and place. Jadine’s cosmopolitan lifestyle has strained her cultural ties and made her feel

inauthentic Avey's dedication to materialist progress, which led her from Ibo Landing to the house in White Plains, literally kills her husband and almost annihilates her.

The feeling of alienation, of not-being-at-home motivates a lot of Afro-American writing, as dislocation and oppression by the supposedly superior culture have eroded the sense of self of African American people. Historically Black people suffered many displacements, first from their homeland in Africa, then as a result of the Great Migration from the rural South to the urban North. The movement from Africa to the New World, from the South to the metropolitan centers of the North left a gap between the experience of place and identity. Thus the fiction often evokes mythic places, such as the marshes on the Isle des Chevaliers, Carriacou Island or Ibo Landing, which are timeless realms free of restrictions imposed by history, where displacement is not so acutely felt. Such mythic places make the New World home because it is possible to survive here the ravages of time and to prevail. These mythic places are a powerful counterpart for linear flow of historic time; they are characterized by circular flow of time, repetitive through ritual.

The Praisesong for the Widow demonstrates that ritual, which has its source in both Christian beliefs and pagan practices, retained from indigenous African cultures, can be the central force that drives the quest for identity to its conclusive ending. It has the mythical quality of approaching the higher cosmic order, and it is an outward manifestation of that order. In that emotional non-verbal encounter, through a system of signs and bodily gestures, participants express their attachment to the other members of the community.⁹⁷ Marshall's novel illustrates how ritual solidifies community, and gives coherence to lives of Afro-Americans by re-establishing among them strong bonds of tribal kinship. In this way both individuals and community benefit from the ritual. The feeling of unity with the culture and the people helps Afro-Americans to find the true meaning of their existence and a sense of dignity and historical significance; whereas the community enhances its social structure by establishing the truth about social obligations and expectations. Finally, ritual frees black people from the restrictions of historicity. By oppos-

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

ing Western rationalistic logic and by providing relevant links with the ancestors, ritual protects the oppressed people from assimilation.

The texts included in my thesis undertake the task of dismantling those assumptions which historically constituted the canon of American literature thematically and stylistically they communicate that Afro-American writers can no longer be perceived as marginal to the national experience. They employ a number of strategies that are subversive to the canon, on the ontological, structural and linguistic level. They overpower the canonical forms, genres and themes, turning the limitations of canonical literature into the source of their formal, thematic and linguistic originality. They challenge the Euro-American standards of judgment thought of as “universal.” In their different ways, the analyzed works of fiction illustrate possibilities of creating new cosmologies, myths and systems of values to express through literature a sense of authenticity. In consequence, they are not mere off-shots of American literary tradition but discrete cultural formations, proposing a new definition of cultural identity.

However, it would be too far fetching to assume that the Euro-American literary tradition could be completely overturned and replaced with the traditions, modes and forms of African origin. This would imply a refusal to concede that the displacement and subjugation of Afro-Americans inevitably led to the cultural amalgamation of Euro-American and African traditions, to Afro-European syncretism. The value of Afro-American writing springs from the recognition of the cultural hybridity. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues,

to recognize the distinctiveness of minority culture is no longer to treat it as a thing apart, isolated and uninformed by the ‘dominant’ culture. To be sure, no culture is without conflict: certainly the zone of minority literary production has always been ‘multiaccultural’.⁹⁸

I suppose that we could rightly claim that Afro-American fiction is a fusion of ancestral affiliations and the dominant culture that for centuries exercised hegemony over American reality. Certain elements of that culture, such as language, religion, literacy or historicity have deeply penetrated into the indigenous culture of the slaves and forever

⁹⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “‘Ethnic and Minority’ Studies,” p. 299.

changed its outlook. Thus the recognition of cross-culturality staves off naive nostalgic nationalism, and acknowledges the inescapable cultural and political legacy of history in the contemporary world. Contemporary Black writers prove that in spite of alien cultural forms it is still possible to recover an authentic cultural essence. They are successful because they value ‘folk’ over ‘abstract’ and ‘communal’ over ‘individual’.

African American fiction makes us ponder the value of the culture we have inherited. We tend to see it now as a continuous construction and we question the arrangements of foregrounding and backgrounding, of placing at the center and restricting to the periphery. Carlos Fuentes reminds us that culture is endlessly built through contact and interaction “no culture retains its identity in isolation; identity is attained in contact, in contrast, in breakthrough.”⁹⁹

Therefore, magical realism, which focuses the hybrid nature of culture, is so popular among many ethnic writers. The ideological tension encapsulated in the term itself makes it a suitable tool to describe the process of cultures merging, colliding to form a new distinctive identity.

If the written word has indeed the ability “to reach, to teach, to empower and encourage—to change and save lives,”¹⁰⁰ as Alice Walker maintains it does, then literacy leads to knowledge, which provokes questioning, which generates change. That is why the literatures of the dominated peoples are full of imaginative responses to their plight. By adopting fiction in the service of the community, Afro-American writers proclaim their culture as central and self-determining. Writing becomes a quest for self-representation that strives to escape stereotypes.

Rejecting realism as a proper form for Black expression entails the deconstruction of the philosophical assumptions of rationalism and empiricism which lay at the very heart of realistic presentation. The real with its order and logic is presented in the accompaniment of the mythical and fantastic. The magical, irrational and supernatural, together with mythical patterns of quest and ritual conspire in the text to undermine the empirical and the rational. They change the concepts of time, history, language and place that the reader takes for granted.

⁹⁹ Carlos Fuentes. “How I Started to Write?” *Multicultural Literacy*. Eds. Rick Simonson and Scott Walker, p. 93.

¹⁰⁰ An interview with Alice Walker. *New York Times Book Review*, 1989.

Those relatively new aesthetic practices and cultural models are radical and disruptive to the canon. Formal subversion of the text and contention on the thematic level made magical realism anathema among some critics and academics whose remarks sometimes showed fear that the disruption of the canon would endanger the whole academic world. Karl Sapiro, for example, blamed the decline of poetry in universities on the influence of the South-American Marxist poets and their “large doses of angst, warmed-over surrealism, anti-American hatred and Latino blood, sweat and tears.”¹⁰¹ Undoubtedly, the Latino stereotypes and nationalist-leftist ideologies of most Latin American writers make their literature unacceptable to the mainstream Anglo-Saxon culture. But I believe that these writers’ fiction, which is not completely intelligible for the Western reader, and which requires a suspension of the ontological, stylistic and linguistic expectations, played an even greater part in inciting that antagonism. Another critic, Earl Shorris, validated my observation by claiming that Gabriel Garcia Márquez is the most dangerous writer to the Western canon,

for he is the enemy of history, a convert of the straight line of Western progress into the mythical circle of older civilizations, a telegrapher sending back to us the metaphysics of formerly vanquished.¹⁰²

History indeed is an important thematic center around which the novels I chose to discuss evolve. American history is evoked in references to the times of slavery and to the present exclusionary and exploitative practices. The four writers defy the dominant historical model and replace it with one that does not correspond to what is traditionally regarded as true, but produces meaning in a more effective way. The facts in the novels can be read in two ways: as historical facts and as an intersection between individual and collective history. However, they are always presented from the characters’ point of view, the corollary of which is that the political institutions and the official version of history are no longer privileged and limiting to the oppressed people. Protagonists discover

¹⁰¹ Qtd. in Gene H. Bell-Villado. “Northrop Frye, Modern Fantasy, Centrist Liberalism, and Other Limits of American Criticism.” *Reinventing Americas*. Eds. Bell Gale Chevigny and Gari Laguardia, p. 288.

¹⁰² Earl Shorris. “Gabriel García Márquez, The Alchemy of the History.” *Harper’s Magazine* (Feb. 1972), p. 98.

their relationship to history in an imaginative and liberating way and, on the basis of this discovery, they define their identity.

Kumkum Sangari makes an interesting observation about Márquez's style, which very well epitomizes all the characteristics of magical realism that I want to bring into focus here. He says that Márquez's style is "non-mimetic, polyphonic, non-Western narrative mode, neither modernist nor post-modernist."¹⁰³ Since there some confluences between surrealism, post-modernism and magical realism are possible, post-modernism sought to absorb magical realist fiction into the international post-modern discourse.¹⁰⁴ However it must be noted that the Latin American type of magical realism, the one which I termed the discourse of identity, is a completely distinct literary mode. It always leads to man and community, not to free and abstract art. Afro-American fiction, like Latin American fiction, is a denial of European American preoccupation with an individual and his or her experience. It is not treated as a tool for personal expression, but it serves the needs of the community. Latin American and African American writers see themselves as a part of the community and they feel obliged to work for the good of their people. That is why in words of Kumkum Sangari:

magical realism, in contrast to realism upon which it builds, may encode the strengths of communities even more than the struggles of the individuals. Societies rather than personalities tend to rise and fall in magical realist fiction.¹⁰⁵

The books that I have chosen for my analysis are celebrations of culture and community. They are expressions of a community that is no longer defined by the center and its norms, and thus becomes self-defining and self-sustaining. In my thesis I have tried to prove that the authors have

¹⁰³ Kumkum Sangari. "The Politics of the Possible." *Cultural Critique* (6 Spring 1987), p. 157–186.

¹⁰⁴ Wendy B. Faris, whose essay "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Post-modern Fiction" I quoted in my conclusions on several occasions, actually argues for magical realism's central place in any consideration of postmodernism. However, in the conceptual framework for the mode that she creates in her influential and comprehensive essay, she does not make distinction between "ontological" and "epistemological" types of magical realism to which I referred in the Preface. Therefore, I want to emphasize that I agree with her as far as the second type is concerned, but I object to treating the Latin American type of magic realism as a postmodern discourse.

¹⁰⁵ Lois Parkinson Zamora, Wendy B. Faris, *ibid.*, p. 6.

found magical realist techniques of writing vital in the act of creating a national literature. Their counter-narratives establish a complicated network of connections between history, myth, folklore and culture whose complexities, I believe, can be sorted out by applying theories of magical realist criticism.

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