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Telling a Small Place: Gloria Naylor's Negotiations with Ethnography in *Mama Day*

Anthropology as “the study of man” (though really of small “exotic” communities) became a professional academic discipline at a time of increased migrations of peoples and intercultural contacts towards the end of the nineteenth century. With decolonization abroad, the passage of the 1965 immigration act in the U.S., and the gradual desegregation of racial communities, these migrations and contacts intensified. Cultural interpreters were needed more than ever. By this time, most of the world's local communities had long ceased being “islands unto themselves,” with distinctive, bounded cultures. Meanwhile, cultural anthropology had not adjusted to dealing with small places as part of the global economic and political system.

Without the protective umbrella of colonial institutions, ethnographers could no longer expect the “natives” to docilely submit to “participant observation.” Reflecting on their own precarious and ethically ambiguous position, some ethnographers began to question their discipline's assumptions. For instance, in his introduction to the 1969 collection of essays *Reinventing Anthropology* (a critical intervention into American anthropology's epistemological assumptions, methodologies, and choice of subject matter), Dell Hymes provocatively asked: “If anthropology did not exist, would it have to be invented?” (Hymes, 3). After all, “most of the world has done without something called anthropology” (Hymes, 5). Hymes then went on to argue that American anthropology had become anachronistic, for the conditions that enabled its emergence as a study of exotic peoples no longer existed. Third-World peoples were increasingly beginning to resist ethnographic inquiry, which brought them no measurable benefits (Hymes, 5), being primarily geared to the needs and interests of the Euro-American academia. If the discipline wanted to survive, it would have to make itself relevant and accountable to the communities it studied (Hymes, 55). Though traditionalists mounted

a staunch defense of the discipline, similar views were articulated throughout the 1970s by those who called for a politically engaged anthropology.¹

One of anthropology's major problems was disciplinary. By specializing in "customs and manners," it had left the broader political and economic context out of its purview. Unlike anthropology, ethnic fiction was unhampered by disciplinary constraints, and thus constituted an appealing alternative to "the study of man." Moreover, ethnic fiction was able to reach a broad readership, for neither the writer nor the reader needed specialized training.² More importantly, ethnic writers were not obliged to represent ethnic communities as bounded and homogeneous (standard practice in ethnography) but could highlight the interracial and interethnic relations that shaped them. Finally, literature presented itself as a vehicle for thinking critically about cultural anthropology as a way of knowing.

In this paper, I examine Gloria Naylor's³ *Mama Day* (1988), one of several contemporary ethnic fictions that feature ethnographers, problematize ethnographic constructions of difference, and propose alternative ways of knowing. Valoring literature over ethnography is not my intent; each mode of representation addresses an audience with its own set of interests and formal expectations, and each has its uses in American society. What I do want to look at are points where there has been a productive friction between the established or hegemonic discourse of ethnography and an emergent one – that of ethnic literature. By examining these points of friction from a historical and cultural studies perspec-

¹ Likewise in sociology – which makes extensive use of ethnographic methods – the political upheavals of the 1960s brought a wave of revisionary writing, collected by Joyce Ladner in the ominously titled book *The Death of White Sociology* (1973). This study included essays by such renowned scholars as E. Franklin Frazier, Robert Staples, Robert Blauner and David Wellman, and Kenneth B. Clark, progressive sociologists, both black and white, who considered issues as wide-ranging as the socialization of black sociologists, the white cultural norms underlying minority studies, American racial minorities as constituted by internal colonialism, and the racist bias of white researchers.

² Cathy Davidson, writing about the beginnings of the novel in North America, argued about the democratizing power, particularly in terms of gender and class, of this genre, which did not require an elite education on the part of its writers and readers. In the case of the early American novel, the power to represent and interpret social phenomena was wrested by "average Americans" (i.e. white, middle-class men and women) from the better-educated and institutionally empowered clergymen (55–79). There are some parallels between this process and the development of the ethnic American novel, which empowered writers of color to represent their own communities. See: Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*.

³ Gloria Naylor was born in 1950, to Mississippi sharecroppers who had just migrated to Harlem, New York. After graduating from high school, she postponed going to college in order to serve as a Jehovah's Witness missionary. From 1968 to 1975 she proselytized in New York, North Carolina, and Florida. She subsequently studied nursing at Brooklyn College but eventually changed her major to English. Her first book, *The Women of Brewster Place: A Novel in Seven Stories* (1982), won the American Book Award for the best first novel in 1983. In the same year she received an M.A. in African American studies from Yale. She is also the author of *Linden Hills* (1985), and *Bailey's Café* (1992).

tive we see that literature has not merely reflected the changes that occurred in ethnography over the past four decades; by mounting a critique of ethnographic ways of knowing, ethnic literature has both anticipated and helped to precipitate such changes.

Mama Day is set on a fictional island called Willow Springs, reminiscent of the Gullah Islands off the coast of Georgia. Its all-black population is descended from a Scandinavian planter and his African slave Sapphira. Deeds signed by the planter guarantee that the property stays in the hands of his descendants. While the inhabitants of Willow Springs have telephones, cars, and jobs on the mainland, communal values prevail, and “African survivals”⁴ are a powerful cultural force.

Naylor divides the narrative/ethnographic authority between an anonymous communal voice and two lay seekers of cultural knowledge – Cocoa, a Black woman raised on the island but estranged from it as an adult, and her husband George, a Black male engineer from New York (who assumes the stance of an objective outsider). To complicate conventional notions of knowledge, Naylor represents the isolated (pre)modern Willow Springs culture through magic realist techniques.

As *Mama Day* has already been explored from a variety of angles,⁵ I shall focus solely on Naylor’s humorous critique of ethnography and her nuanced exploration of other ways of knowing cultural difference, with all their limitations. In the opening, an anonymous narrator using the communal “we” alludes to a young islander who had been to the mainland to train as a “native ethnographer” and then returned home to do research. The fact that in the eyes of the locals this “native ethnographer” was a dismal failure suggests that the ethnographer’s shared racial and cultural origin with his or her subjects does not guarantee that the ethnography will adequately represent the community in question.

The role assigned to the ethnographer in *Mama Day* is minor in comparison with such fictional works as Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, the Timeless Peo-*

⁴ “African Survivals” are the subject of Melville Herskovits’s 1941 revisionary study *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Trained in both history and anthropology, Herskovits exposed the racist myth pervasive in his day that the descendants of African slaves had no culture (other than dance and music), and were thus doomed to imitating western culture. Arguing against the widespread belief that African Americans contributed nothing to world history, Herskovits held that not only were African cultures sophisticated rather than primitive, but that many African cultural traits had been transmitted to white Americans.

⁵ For nuanced interpretations of *Mama Day* see: Cheryl A. Wall. “Extending the line: From *Sula* to *Mama Day*”; Susan Meisenhelder. “False Gods and Black Goddesses in Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”; and Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon. “Hearing is believing: Southern racial communities and strategies of story-listening in Gloria Naylor and Lee Smith.” In 2002, Robin Blyn offered an interesting reading of the way *Mama Day* converses with anthropology on the issue of relativism. More specifically, she invoked the work of James Clifford, showing the contradiction inherent in his desire to show ethnography’s affinity with fiction while simultaneously defending it from charges of relativism. By contrast, as Blyn demonstrates, Gloria Naylor in *Mama Day* successfully relativises fictional and factual accounts of African American history.

ple (1969), Russell Leong's "The Eclipse" (2000), or Jesica Hagedorn's *Dream Jungle* (2003), yet the ethnographer's strategic presence in the opening indicates that his role is structurally indispensable. The narrator, who speaks as a representative islander, refuses to give the ethnographers name, introducing him only as "Reema's boy." Apparently Reema's boy has failed the task of telling the small place: "there weren't nothing to do but take pity on him as he rattled on about 'ethnography,' 'unique speech patterns,' 'cultural preservation,' and whatever else he seemed to be getting so much pleasure out of while talking into his little grey machine" (Naylor, 7). The academic jargon and the asymmetry that marks his interactions with the other islanders create an unbridgeable distance. His blackness notwithstanding, the language of his account confirms his allegiance to a professional corporation. Anthropologists Eduardo Restrepo and Arturo Escobar identify this corporation with "dominant anthropologies," which

draw disciplinary genealogies and boundaries as they reproduce themselves not only discursively, but also through maintaining control over the authorization of those who can know. There is a multiplicity of academic and institutional practices (e.g. training, research, writing, publishing, hiring and so forth) that constitute obvious mechanisms of foreclosure of the conditions of reproduction and consolidation of the 'dominant anthropologies' establishment. Indeed, these anthropologies are constituted by the changing and always disputable order of the anthropologically thinkable, sayable and doable, configuring thus not only their horizon of intelligibility but also their possible transformations.

(Naylor, 103)

Alternatives to "dominant anthropologies" do exist, Restrepo and Escobar argue, but "subaltern" or "other anthropologies" require more than just the influx of people of color. "Reema's boy" assumes the authority of one "who can know" when he chooses to ignore his subjects' definitions of "18 & 23," a historically-rooted key phrase in the Willow Springs dialect, imposing instead his own fanciful interpretation. The communal narrator rightly recognizes this (ostensibly minor) misrepresentation as symptomatic of ethnography's lack of respect for local ways of knowing.

Whereas Marshall in *The Chosen Place* had signaled the hope that native ethnographers might reform the discipline, writing two decades later Naylor was disillusioned. She constructed her native ethnographer as a comic figure, the son of an "addle-brained" mother, fallen into the hands of "people who run the type of schools that could turn our children into raving lunatics" (Naylor, 8).⁶ Returning to the island equipped with social science theory overlaid with the slogans of Black Power, Reema's boy reinvents Willow Springs as a primitive place

⁶ Naylor's dismissal of the "native ethnographer" as an ideal knower coincides with similar opinions voiced within contemporary anthropology. For instance, Eduardo Restrepo and Arturo Escobar join Eyal Ben-Ari in arguing that by inviting people of color into academic anthropology, the discipline has expanded its dominance throughout the globe without really transforming itself (Restrepo and Escobar, 109).

whose inhabitants do not know the origins of their own traditions. “Not that he called in being dumb, mind you,” the narrator says ironically.

Called it ‘asserting our cultural identity,’ ‘inverting hostile social and political parameters.’ Cause, see, being we was brought here as slaves, we had no choice but to look at everything upside down. And then being that we was isolated off here on this island, everybody else in the country went on learning good English and calling things what they really was – while we kept on calling things ass-backwards. And he thought that was just so wonderful and marvelous, etcetera, etcetera.

(Naylor, 8)

What the narrator reads between the lines of “Reema’s boy’s” study is the primitivism he has imbibed together with anthropological theory.

Reema’s boy does everything by the book, down to sending several copies of his published ethnography to his folks in Willow Springs. One of the major debates in anthropology in recent decades concerned the ethics of excluding the ethnographic subjects as potential readers. The most extensive study of this problem, aptly titled *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography*, came out in 1996.⁷ The debate registered in the study was prompted by a series of bitter conflicts that broke out between ethnographers and their subjects over what was perceived as misrepresentation. Various groups protested the fact that ethnographers had not felt the need for informants to verify or even respond to the drafts of ethnographies before publication. In *Mama Day* the published ethnography causes no bitterness, only a casual dismissal of a text that is not only unreliable, but also completely irrelevant to the islanders.

Having dismissed “Reema’s boy,” the narrator takes on the role of native informant and puts the reader in the ethnographer’s position in the hope that s/he will succeed where “Reema’s boy” failed. It is all a matter of listening well, the narrator insists: “If the boy wanted to know what 18 & 23 meant, why didn’t he just ask?” (Naylor, 8). “But on second thought, someone who didn’t know how to ask wouldn’t know how to listen. And he coulda listened to them the way you been listening to us right now ... Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only

⁷ Among the many cases discussed by Brettel of “natives” reading – and resenting – what ethnographers have written about them is *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community* by Paul Wrobel. A crisis erupted when the press distorted some of Wrobel’s findings, evoking defensive reactions on the part of Polish-Americans. Like the natives of Willow Springs, the Poles who wrote letters to the editor of the paper that had misrepresented Wrobel’s findings “suggested that Wrobel’s parents had wasted their money in sending their son to college; that no good anthropologist would confine a study to such a small group; that there is nothing wrong with working overtime. Many Poles wrote that they were ‘Polish and proud of it,’ and one irate reader, who acknowledged being ‘extensively involved in Polish affairs,’ commented that ‘constructive criticism is always welcome and beneficial but a study with some unprobable [sic] results, doubtful research methods, and suspicion of bias can only mislead the readers and perform unnecessary harm to the parties involved’” (Brettel, 19). The language of this controversy strongly resembles that which the narrator of *Mama Day* uses with reference to “Reema’s Boy.”

voice is your own” (Naylor, 10). What sounds like a conventional storyteller’s device – the call to “listen” – turns out to be a quite a challenge because the story meanders according to a logic of its own. It also swamps readers with information that they initially have no way of categorizing or memorizing:

Naw, he didn’t really want to know what 18 & 23 meant, or he woulda asked. He woulda asked right off where Miss Abigail Day was staying, so we coulda sent him down the main road to that little yellow house where she used to live. And she woulda given him a tall glass of ice water or some cinnamon tea as he heard about Peace dying young, then Hope, then Peace again. But there was the child of Grace, the grandchild, a girl who went mainside, like him, and did real well. Was living outside of Charleston now with her husband and two boys. So she visits more often than she did when she was up in New York. And she probably woulda pulled out that old photo album, so he coulda seen some photos of her grandchild Cocoa, and then Cocoa’s mama grace. And Miss Abigail flips right through to the beautiful one of Grace resting in her satin-lined coffin. And she walks him back out front and points him across the road to a silver trailer where her sister Miranda lives ...

(Naylor, 9)

What readers are exposed to is something akin to the fieldwork experience, as the informants follow their own narrative logic that cannot be subordinated to researcher’s/reader’s questions. We will never be told explicitly what 18 & 23 means, but by reading the novel attentively we will find the phrase to mean a variety things, depending on the context. It accumulates meaning as it relates the present to the year 1823, when the plantation owner deeded his estate to the slaves he had fathered. The disorientation that Naylor’s readers feel when confronted with an unfamiliar narrative logic resembles that described by the ethnographer Renato Rosaldo in his 1980 study of Ilongot headhunters in the Philippines. Armed with structuralist questions grouped around topics like kinship and feuding patterns, Rosaldo was unprepared for the experience of Ilongot men reciting endless lists of place names.

Perhaps the most tedious stories were about the flight from the Japanese troops in 1945. While people were moved to tears as they recited place name after place name – every rock, hill, and stream where they ate, rested, or slept – my usual response was to continue transcribing in uncomprehending boredom.

(Rosaldo, qtd in Marcus and Fisher, 99)

Only after hearing out his informants and musing over their narratives did Rosaldo come to understand that the men were reconstructing mental maps which were fundamental to the Ilongot sense of space and, even more importantly, history, a discovery that undermined the anthropological perception of indigenous peoples as timeless. Naylor’s readers also have to suppress the desire to make sense of the information flow and trust the narrator/native informant to know best what is worth telling.

After the introductory chapter, the narrative authority is split between three narrators, all of them somewhat unreliable, hampered by the limitations of their positioning. The omniscient voice speaks in a local vernacular and could well be

a ghost. Though the present tense dominates in this narrator's sections, s/he evidently uses it to achieve the effect of immediacy rather than to construct a timeless people, as in the case of the "ethnographic present."⁸ Naylor's omniscient narrator can be in all places at all times, look over all the other characters' shoulders and into their minds, and access historical knowledge unavailable to the present-day residents of Willow Springs. But being a local and lacking exposure to life off the island, s/he only knows the traditional meaning of "field work" and thus berates "Reema's boy" for claiming to have done "extensive field work [when he] ain't never picked a boll of cotton or head of lettuce in his life" (Naylor, 7). The narrator is most interested in one family, the Days, particularly in the three remaining family members: Mama Day (a midwife and healer), her sister Abigail, and Abigail's granddaughter Cocoa. After she gets married, Cocoa brings her husband to Willow Springs for a family visit. Over the course of the novel, the reader learns that the two have been separated by George's sudden death. Cocoa is apparently speaking from her husband's graveside, while George tells his side of the story from another world. Though their voices alternate, they do not seem to hear or respond to one another. Neither are they attuned to the voices of Mama Day and Abigail, from whom they might have learned a good deal.

The protagonists spend a good deal of time trying to understand their cultural others. One of the novel's underlying assumptions is that for Americans ethnography is an everyday practice and a survival strategy; academic ethnography is simply one variant (without necessarily being the most efficient one). Another important assumption is that all knowledge is partial: Naylor avoids idealizing Black people as knowers. For instance, Cocoa, who has left Willow Springs for a career in New York, develops an amusing ethnographic taxonomy of her own as she tries to make sense of her new urban environment. As George points out to Cocoa, she constantly assesses and categorizes New Yorkers as types of food:

that's what you've been saying all evening: fudge sticks, kumquats, bagels, zucchinis. You just called Herman Badillo a taco. Number one, it's ignorant because tacos aren't from Puerto Rico, and number two, your litany has turned the people in this city into material for garbage disposal. I wonder why you do that.

(Naylor, 62)

Unmasked, Cocoa tries to explain her habit as a country girl's way of dealing with the overwhelming and alienating flux of urban life: "I was scared when I came to this city. Really scared. There were more people living on my one block than on the whole island where I grew up ... A whole kaleidoscope of people – nothing's just black and white here like in Willow Springs. Nothing stays put" (Naylor, 63). George's cure for Cocoa's habit is to take her on systematic weekly walking tours around all New York neighborhoods other than the "tourist ghetto" she has lived

⁸ The problematic nature of the "ethnographic present" is thematized in Johannes Fabian's influential study *Time and the Other* (1983).

in for seven years as an office assistant. His way of making sense of the urban “kaleidoscope” is to divide it up into small places and deal with them one at a time.

My city was a network of small towns, some even smaller than here in Willow Springs. It could be an apartment building, a handful of blocks, a single square mile hidden off with its own language, newspapers, and magazines – its own laws and codes of behavior, and sometimes even its own judge and juries.

(Naylor, 61)

Though with George as a guide Cocoa revises her opinion about New Yorkers, it is unclear what the weekly tours actually teach her, for they are limited to the observation of street life and tasting local foods. The fact that George explains to her the difference between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans does not necessarily mean that she stops type-casting people. Neither she nor George seeks a greater intimacy with the people they observe.

Later in the novel, George continues his ethnographic explorations when Cocoa takes him home to Willow Springs. He is probably the character readers unfamiliar with African American culture identify with most readily. An engineer, raised by white educators in a shelter for boys, George has been thoroughly disciplined and taught that “only the present has potential.” Unlike Cocoa, he has no past, no sense of heritage, and no patience with the supernatural – signs of which he encounters everywhere in Willow Springs. Empiricism is important to him. Initially, he is very successful in his amateur ethnography, easily establishing rapport, and drawing the locals out to tell him about their lives. When, after his first morning walk, he reports to Cocoa what he has learned, she recalls thinking:

It was amazing how much you had managed to find out about people I thought I had known all my life. But then I had never spent any time among the men in the barbershop. It was a place to be passed if I was going to the general store or on my way to having my own hair done. Any news about their lives came to me second-hand, filtered through their daughters or wives, sometimes bits and pieces from Grandma and Mama Day.

(Naylor, 190)

By showing that men’s and women’s worlds do not fully overlap, Naylor introduces gender as an important category in ethnography. Cocoa is a cultural insider, on intimate terms with women of all ages, while George has a privileged access to traditionally male spaces, such as the barbershop, the poker game held in the woods by Doctor Buzzard, and the bridge-repair crew. George’s outsider status occasionally proves to be an advantage: being local, Cocoa takes the African survivals in Willow Springs culture for granted, never delving beneath the surface or asking questions about supernatural events, even the spells that disfigure her body. It takes someone like George to defamiliarize the magic by his very ignorance of it. Towards the end of the narrative, George is subjected to a draconian test that requires him to suspend rational thought and take on faith the powers that be. Though he resists and dies in the process, the very fact that he is speaking to us from beyond the grave means that he has had to accept the supernatural. Unlike

the reprobate Harriet in Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, who commits suicide to escape a cultural difference she can neither understand nor control, George dies heroic-comically fighting against phenomena he does not understand and gets to tell the tale from an afterlife.

Mama Day, a classic wise-woman figure, is the novel's most versatile (though not ideal) knower. She functions equally well in the modern-day world of television, telephone bills, and developers, and in "the other place," the old plantation house inhabited by ancestral spirits, where she finds the power to bring down lightning bolts on her enemies. When it comes to ethnographic knowledge, she develops unconventional methods. For instance, when Cocoa leaves Willow Springs for a secretarial career in New York, Mama Day starts

watching the Phil Donahue show religiously ... It gave her an idea of the kind of people Cocoa was living around since she'd moved north ... this show gave the audience a chance to speak, and what they had to say was always of more interest to her than the people on the stage ... sometimes she'll keep the volume turned off for the entire hour, knowing well that what's being said by the audience don't matter a whit to how it's being said. Laughter before or after a mouth opens to speak, the number of times a throat swallows, the curve of the lip, the thrust of the neck, the slump of the shoulders. And always, always the eyes. She can pick out which ladies in the audience have secretly given up their babies for adoption, which fathers have daughters making pornographic movies, exactly which homes been shattered by Vietnam.

(Naylor, 38)

Although this account of Mama Day's "research" is comic, and her knowledge of the northerners must be superficial, it suffices for her purposes. At the end of the novel, Mama Day, despite her age, does "go out into the field" by accompanying Cocoa on a trip to New York. The narrator alternately mocks her and pays tribute to her youthful capacity for learning about people. From this ethnographic expedition, she returns to Willow Springs with shopping bags full of trophies (kitschy gifts for friends at home). But she learns more about the New York's diversity than Cocoa ever did by talking with everyone she meets, from a coffee shop owner to the director of Carnegie Hall, collecting family recipes and information about elite entertainment. Even if Mama Day makes no ethnographic discoveries of great profundity, her interaction with others as equals allows her to make sense of New York.

In many ways the cultural differences within the Willow Springs community itself are starker than those between Willow Springs and "mainside" communities. Some islanders cultivate esoteric knowledge of healing and matchmaking, others make money or wreak vengeance on those they misrecognize as enemies. Some are good housekeepers, others have lost the art of growing food and cooking nutritious meals. An industrious market-gardener, a man who runs a liquor still, and a kept man go dancing together "mainside." Older people celebrate "Candle Walk," the biggest feast of the year, in the old style, walking with their candles and distributing home-made gifts, while younger people do the rounds in pick-up

trucks, use flashlights, and buy their gifts in stores. The novel makes room for cultural syncretisms and asks the reader/listener/amateur ethnographer to do the same.

Like many contemporary anthropologists, Naylor and other ethnic American writers assume that since the subaltern knows him/herself and understands his/her predicament, ethnography can no longer present itself as a privileged way of knowing. While Naylor would probably not deny that is important for people of color to do ethnography, she suggests that race is no guarantee of qualitatively different studies or less exploitative relations between the subjects and objects of research. What ultimately matters is the degree to which the ethnographers from non-traditional backgrounds conform to the socialization of social scientists into their discipline. By taking up ethnography as their subject, and subordinating it to the rules of (often poetic) prose, contemporary ethnic writers assert the significance of postcolonial, postmodern writing in mediating contacts between various cultural groups in the modern world.

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