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Gloria Naylor's Conversation with *The Tempest*

by

Kelly McAvoy-Giarrusso

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requirements for the degree of  
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## Introduction

Gloria Naylor continues a long tradition of engagement with *The Tempest* in her novel *Mama Day*, recognizing the relevance in *Shakespeare's* play of an issue that continues to matter today: the valuing of some bodies and voices over other bodies and voices. Shakespeare uses explicit discussion of physical bodies to empower the voices of some characters over others and to create power structures in *The Tempest*. In *Mama Day*, Naylor engages with *The Tempest* to reveal the imbalance and cost of power structures that rely on bodies and partial narratives. She asks the reader to listen to all narratives, especially if they come from those that have not historically been granted the authority of voice.

As critics have argued, *Mama Day* incorporates elements of and responds to *The Tempest* in many ways (see Alden and Virginia Vaughan, Gary Storhoff, Charles Wilson, and Chantal Zabus). Naylor features many of the same plotlines as *The Tempest*, including its powerful storm, and many of its mystical elements. She rewrites characters in *The Tempest* in her *Mama Day*: Shakespeare's Prospero is Naylor's Miranda who is also called Mama Day, Shakespeare's Miranda is Ophelia who is also called Cocoa, Shakespeare's Stephano is Naylor's Dr. Buzzard, and Shakespeare's Sycorax is Naylor's Sapphira Wade. This thesis, however, will focus on how Naylor used Caliban as inspiration for her character George, and how her evolution of the character reveals issues within the literary community at the time of her writing.

George fulfills Caliban's limitations in that he has more power and autonomy than Caliban, but the tragedy of his death reveals what he has lost in the process of gaining that power. Caliban was a slave, forced to perform manual labor for a powerful sorcerer (Prospero), and is perceived and treated as less than human by the other characters in the text. In contrast, George is a successful Black business owner who employs others and makes his living with his

mind, not his body. Both characters are restricted, but in different ways. Caliban is described as only partially human and is physically controlled by Prospero who threatens him with bodily harm. George's identity was incompletely formed by an education and childhood that valued facts and tangible gains over emotional development and growth.

George restricts himself and silences anything that is not logical, with deadly consequences. It is precisely his suppression of his emotions and intuition that leads to his death. When Mama Day tries to share her history and connections with him, he ignores her, and then cannot trust what she asks him to believe. If George had trusted his perceptions and Mama Day's instructions instead of his search for logic, he would have lived. Through George's death, Naylor asks the reader to question how society affects his identity, in general how society affects Black identities, and what is lost when we conform our identities to fit into society's mold. Naylor's rewrite of Caliban questions the value of education because George's carefully formed identity ultimately leads to his death.

This idea that education and society can cause a loss of self is personal for Naylor. Like George, her education taught her to doubt herself. In interviews, she shared many times that her education showed her through the canon that writers worth studying were white and male. While she always wanted to write, and is surely talented as a writer, she never pictured herself as a writer because society showed her writers that did not look or write like her. It was only in adulthood, through one (and only one) professor in college that she finally read other Black women writers. After this recognition of someone like her as a writer, she allowed herself to seek the wholeness of self and to become the writer she had previously suppressed. In her writing, therefore, she forms her novel to include and welcome her reader, as opposed to *The Tempest's* exclusionary and limiting power structure.

To explore Naylor's response to *The Tempest*, especially how she reimagines Caliban in the character of George, this essay is divided into the following sections. Section 1 explores Naylor's attitudes toward the canonical white authors that she read while in school to examine her motivations in writing *Mama Day*. Section 2 analyzes Naylor's interest in *The Tempest* and how narratives shaped power structures in *The Tempest*. It also explains how Naylor subverts those structures in *Mama Day* to create a more equitable narrative structure for her characters and to give her reader power as an active listener. Section 3 shows that Naylor is participating in a long tradition of using Caliban to question existing power structures, and how she has small but achievable goals for her engagement with Caliban in *Mama Day*. In Section 4, I shift focus to a direct analysis of Caliban and George's characterization to argue that they are characters who are only partially realized because Caliban is not treated as human and George suppresses parts of his humanity. I also argue that if careful George had allowed himself to be more impulsive like Caliban, he would have survived. Section 5 analyzes two characters who are allowed to fully realize their identities. Ferdinand in *The Tempest* and Cocoa in *Mama Day* are able to see how their connection to their history gives them power and choices that George and Caliban do not have. Section 6 explains how George's failure to listen is redeemed in the narrative structure of *Mama Day*, and why the narrative structure of *Mama Day* offers a solution to both George's fractured identity and Naylor's criticisms of the canon.

**1. "Did't not wake you? / It struck mine ear most terribly": Naylor's Identity as a Writer and her Relationship to the Canon**

In her early years as a writer, Gloria Naylor faced a similar problem to George.

She wondered how she could become a writer and also ensure her writing would be true to her identity. In a conversation with Toni Morrison, she reflected on her position and shared:

I knew that I felt most complete when expressing myself through the written word. So I scribbled on bits of looseleaf and in diaries—to hide it all away. I wrote because I had no choice, but that was a long way away from believing I had the authority within myself to believe that I could actually be a writer. The writers I had been taught to love were either male or white. And who was I to argue that Ellison, Austen, Dickens, the Brontes, Baldwin and Faulkner weren't masters? They were and are. But inside there was still the faintest *whisper*. Was there no one *telling my story*? And since it appeared there was not how could I presume to? (“Conversations” 568; emphasis added)

Naylor’s reflection reveals that she recognized the absence of her voice from the conversation within the literary canon, but that she did not write just to add her voice. She understood writing to be a part of who she is, and yet she wondered how she could write because of her identity as a Black woman. Faced with exclusion by her race and/or gender, the absence of writers like her in the canon instilled in her an insecurity about her ability as a storyteller. If stories presented to her as part of the canon, written by those who are presumed to be the best, did not include her story, she wondered if her story was worthy, and also if she or anyone else was worthy of *telling* that story. When Naylor asks why there were no narratives or stories that sounded like her own, she asks why no one “*tells*” her story. We see her answer to this dilemma both in her decision to rewrite a text by Shakespeare, one of the pillars of the canon, and in the narrative structure she decides to employ, which is best defined as a conversation.

Naylor felt excluded when she encountered the canon as it existed when she was in school. The lack of representation in the canon was a systemic, not an individual issue. Naylor told another writer and English Professor Ethel Morgan Smith that she was only able to picture herself as a writer and feel worthy of “adding [her] voice” while she was an undergraduate student at Brooklyn College, because she “had discovered black women writers like Nikki Giovanni, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker” (1432). It is worth noting that she voiced frustration at the lack of intersectionality to the emerging Black studies and Women studies departments, which operated separately at the time, and the fact that only one of her professors included writers who were both Black and women in class readings. In addition, Naylor calls her writing “adding her voice,” which continues her idea of writing as a conversation between texts. Her conversation sometimes took place orally and not just through writing. When she won the National Book Award for a First Novel in 1982, for *The Women of Brewster Place*, in her speech she acknowledged the debt she and other Black women writers owed Alice Walker, who was there and won that same year in Fiction for *The Color Purple*. This direct acknowledgement was later echoed in Naylor’s conversation with Toni Morrison, whom she also thanked directly.

Like Naylor, Alice Walker recounted a direct dismissal of her story-telling abilities and potential as a writer. After she told a “middle-aged Northerner” about her hopes of becoming a poet,

he suggested that a ‘farmer’s daughter’ might not be the stuff of which poets are made. On one level, of course, he had a point. A shack with only a dozen or so books is an unlikely place to discover a young Keats. But it is narrow thinking,

indeed, to believe that a Keats is the only kind of poet one would want to grow up to be. (“Southern Experience,” 10)

Walker shared that she felt a duty to tell her story and to record her voice. She wondered about the creative spirit of Black women who came before her, who adopted narrative methods that may appear unconventional to modern readers. She admired a quilt by an anonymous enslaved woman that depicts the crucifixion of Jesus and is “quite unlike any in the world” (241). She formulated a theory that “our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read” (*Mothers’ Gardens*, 240). While these women may not have been able to read, Walker notes that they shared their stories and their narratives in the forms they knew. In the case of her mother, Walker literally recounted how her mother handed her the creative spirit in the seeds of her plants. Her mother, who labored “before sunup [until] late at night” became a different person while she tended her garden (238). She was “radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have” (*Mothers’ Gardens*, 241). Walker assured Black women that literature and the arts could be a place for them, even a place where they can be the truest version of themselves.

Walker explains that “We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high—and low” (*Mothers’ Gardens*, 241). By “low,” she asks readers and academics to look at the products women’s hands create, even and especially if they have been excluded from the canon. Walker admired her mother’s garden and the quilt of the crucifixion. Gloria Naylor, who was studying African American Studies at Yale when Walker’s essay was published and surely encountered it, writes an interesting echo of that idea in *Mama Day* a few years later. *Mama Day* tells the hypocritical character Pearl, who spends her time at church and Bible study but is cruel

to the people she knows, that “I think the Lord sits high and He looks low” (94). For Naylor, Pearl’s knowledge of the Bible does not matter if she cannot show kindness to the people around her. In this moment and in others in *Mama Day*, the wisest characters are the ones who can “look low:” those who show compassion, knowledge of the earth, and basic common sense. One of Naylor’s messages in *Mama Day* is that the generational wisdom that comes with age and tradition offers the truest path to a wholesome life. Like Walker, who had to “look low” to find the art in her mother’s garden, *Mama Day* “looks low” to give value to characters who garden, who use tree bark instead of prescription medicine, and those who live their religion by treating others well instead of studying the Bible.

It is worth noting here that we need not “look low” to find the contributions of Black women. Naylor noted that her problem is not that there are no Black writers, or that Black women only create outside of the written word, but that Black women were not considered part of the canon when she was in school. She told Kay Bonetti, the director of the American Audio Prose Program who has interviewed over 100 American authors, that she never saw herself reflected in literature “either as a creator of it or a subject within it. And that is because of [my teachers’] own ignorance. These books existed...it was just not part of the standard school curriculum” (60). Naylor’s critique is that her educational experience never showed her that there was the same value in the writing of Black women as there was in the writers of the canon as it existed then.

In addition to Naylor and Lorde, I think it is worth including Audre Lorde, another Black woman writer who critiqued not just the canon but academia overall as exclusionary of Black women’s voices. Lorde shares her experience at a feminist conference in her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Upon her arrival, she discovered that

her invitation was last minute, and that she was invited to speak at the only panel devoted to a wide range of different women, whom she called “poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians” (11). In her view, this panel was a gesture to include the identities of these women, but since they and she were not asked to share their opinions on any of the other panels, she felt these identities were not welcome in the conference’s main discussions. In her essay, Audre Lorde declares that within education and academia, only “the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable” (11). In her essay, she wonders why the conference did not invite more women of color, queer women, or economically disadvantaged women, and she takes offense at the tokenization of her identity to gesture at inclusion, but not to actually include her in most conversations. She knows her voice has value and should not be sidelined to one panel devoted to so many identities that one panel could not address them completely. Her essay calls for a change to the whole system, and notably ends by quoting Aimé Césaire's play *Une Tempête* (*A Tempest*). Here, Caliban declares that Prospero has imposed his flawed and humiliating worldview on him. He proclaims,

And you have lied so much to me

(Lied about the world, lied about me)

That you have ended by imposing on me

An image of myself.

Underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior,

That is the way you have forced me to see myself

I detest that image! What's more, it's a lie! (Césaire, qtd. in Lorde, 40)

Lorde uses Césaire's version of Caliban to criticize Prospero as someone who forced Caliban to see himself as inferior, and notes that this self-doubt is of course a “lie” (40). She draws a

parallel between Prospero and academia, and Caliban and herself. Lorde accuses academia of teaching her that her identity is not valued, and that her voice is not as important as other voices.

All of this leads to an important question. Given Naylor and other critics' hesitations and misgivings about education which favored a largely white and male canon, why would she adapt Shakespeare's writing in *The Tempest*? I argue that Naylor engages with the canon to show the dangers of teaching only the canonical white male texts, especially to Black women. She places herself within these canonical conversations both to be true to herself and to offer alternatives for a new generation of readers. In a recorded conversation for a book about Toni Morrison, Naylor tells Morrison that

all of my education had subconsciously told me it [literature] wasn't the place for me... men wrote, because what was I reading in the Afro-American studies department? Fine, black, male writers. What had I read in high school? White male writers...But for me, where was the authority for me to enter this forbidden terrain? ("Conversations," 575)

Through engagement with what Samuel Delaney and Madhu Dubey call "capitol L Literature," Naylor begins to look, and write, both high and low (50). In the same conversation with Toni Morrison, Naylor shares that as she planned her second book *Linden Hills* (which is a response to Dante's *Inferno*), she was "overwhelmed by the philosophical underpinnings of the poem as well as the characters that Dante created. Then the idea came to me that I could try to sketch out this neighborhood along the lines of *The Inferno*" ("Conversations," 582). To Naylor and by classical standards today, Dante's *Inferno* would surely classify as high literature. As Naylor recognizes, a neighborhood or story like *Linden Hills* had not yet been represented or reflected in a literary way by a woman writer. In that way, it was undiscovered, or as Alice Walker or Gloria

Naylor might label it, “low.” Charles Wilson posits a variation on this idea. He argues that Naylor is above all a postmodernist and “the characters in Naylor’s novels confront the same complexities, confusions, and contradictions” as do the characters in classic texts by Dante and Shakespeare. According to Wilson, she “encourages the reader to consider the similarities in all human experiences” (20). Naylor and Walker urge the reader to “look low” to recognize that human experience can be voiced by any writer or character, and that writing that is of the same quality as classic literature can exist outside of the canon.

## 2. “The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!”: Narrative Structure as Power and Naylor’s Conversation with *The Tempest*

Another main reason I believe Naylor selected *The Tempest* to engage with is Shakespeare’s insistence that the audience participate in the imaginative experience. She asks her readers to participate in a similar way. The play ends with a plea from Prospero to the audience:

But release me from my bands  
With the help of your good hands.  
Gentle breath of yours my sails  
Must fill, or else my project fails.

Which was to please. (Epilogue 9-12)

In the lines above, Prospero asks for the audience’s approval in their bodies through their applause when he asks for “the help of your good hands.” He also requests their vocal approval through their “gentle breath.” He is aware that his legacy requires the audience to validate him. As a performer, he aims to entertain his audience and he asks for evidence of their approval

through applause or words. Furthermore, as a character, he knows that it is the audience who can tell his story and continue his legacy.

Likewise, *Mama Day* requests the reader's participation and in that way includes the reader in the conversation. The book opens with the cautionary tale of Reema's boy, who did not know how to listen, then tells the reader that they will learn the story of George, who had to die before he could learn to listen. Like *The Tempest*, the narrative shape of the *Mama Day* addresses the reader directly. Unlike *The Tempest*, which asks for audience approval and attention at the end, *Mama Day* tells the reader early in the story that they need to listen and then demands active listening from them. The voices of the island tell the reader, "Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own" (10). The reader is reminded that they need to be part of the conversation and the story. Naylor knows how it feels to be excluded from a group, and she makes sure to include the reader as an active part of this story. Through the inclusion of the reader as part of the story, every reader is welcome and valued.

In contrast, *The Tempest* reveals early on that he who controls the narrative holds the power, and while it requests the approval of the audience, it does not give power to the audience or other listeners. *The Tempest* begins with Prospero as the dominant character who recounts his history and shares his narrative. Notably, Caliban does offer an alternative perspective, but he is not granted respect by the other characters and his brief protestations are ignored or quickly rebutted. As Marjorie Garber notes, a counter-narrative may have been offered by Sycorax, but she is absent from the narrative and is "silenced by the simple definitive fact that she never appears in the play" (868). The other characters require Prospero to cede his approval or control: they need him to forgive them, to free them, or to allow them to marry. Therefore, *The Tempest* leans heavily on Prospero's version of events. Charles Frey also notes that the "first half [of *The*

*Tempest*'s plot] is the story recounted by Prospero to Miranda" (171). As a result, Shakespeare gives Prospero the power to voice the background of the story (Antonio and Alonso's betrayal of Prospero).

Prospero is not content to merely tell the story. He needs his audience, Miranda, as well as any presumed audience at the performance, to accept his version of events. He tells Miranda that "The hour's now come / The very minute bids thee ope thine ear / Obey and be attentive" (I.ii.36-38). For Prospero, hearing requires one to "ope thine ear" and listening that they "be attentive." Like Naylor, Prospero needs to make sure that his listener (Miranda and the audience) is engaged with the story. He checks repeatedly that she is following his story: "Dost thou attendest?" "Thou attend'st not" "Dost thou hear?" (I.ii.78, 88, 106). He requires Miranda's answer before he continues with his story. Unlike Naylor, who asks her reader to listen to their feelings and intuition as they hear the story, Prospero wants an audience that will merely affirm his take. Miranda feels deep sorrow for her father and tries to follow his requests. While she demonstrates a model of empathy and compassion in responses such as "Oh, my heart bleeds," her questions merely inquire about logistics, and they do not share a new view of the events (I.ii.63). She asks Prospero about past events or his reason "for raising this sea storm" but does not mention any judgment that differs from Prospero's (I.ii.177). To further show that Miranda is a passive vessel for Prospero's storytelling, not a participant in the conversation, Prospero's tale leads Miranda to fall asleep.

Miranda's passivity when she listens to Prospero's story makes Caliban's perspective more important. It is not until Caliban comes onstage that someone offers a narrative that differs from Prospero's story. Ariel longs to be free, but agrees with Prospero's version of how he freed Ariel from Sycorax's tree. Even when Ariel agrees with Prospero that he owes his freedom to

Prospero, Prospero accuses Ariel of dishonesty and rebukes him: “Thou liest, malignant thing!” (I.ii.309). Prospero requires multiple affirmations from Ariel that his truth is the only truth, and he demands that truth through insults and threats. Ariel’s repeated response if he has forgotten Prospero’s version of the story is “No, sir” (I.ii.301, I.ii.306, and I.ii.311). Even then, Prospero asks Ariel to restate the story by answering Prospero’s questions in the affirmative. Both Miranda and Ariel, the other two characters who could have challenged or supplemented Prospero’s narrative, merely sustain his version of the story.

Caliban reminds Prospero of the ways that he has wronged him, rather than the ways that Prospero has been wronged by other people. Caliban claims that the characters initially exchanged types of knowledge and notes that Prospero did not honor their partnership. Specifically, Caliban claims he taught Prospero more than Prospero shared with him. He says that Prospero taught him

how

To name the bigger light, and how the less,  
 That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee  
 And showed thee all the qualities o' th' isle,  
 The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile. (I.ii.340-345)

Caliban reminds Prospero that once he taught him language in return for the secrets of the island and its life sustaining properties. However, Prospero soon appropriated Caliban’s knowledge and locked him in a cave when he tried to rape Miranda. Caliban resents that Prospero turned his knowledge against him, that he is a slave on an island which he claims as his own, and especially the language which Prospero offered him in exchange for his knowledge. Caliban sees no “profit” in Prospero’s language, except that he “know[s] how to curse” (I.ii.369-370). Caliban

begrudges language that is used against him. He sees no value in learning a language that is only used to dehumanize and disempower him.

In a similar way, Naylor saw harm in an education that taught her first that she does not belong among other writers. She voices her discontent at narratives that disempower people through the people of Willow Springs in *Mama Day*. They see no value in the education that taught Reema's boy to exclude the voices of the people who live in Willow Springs from their own story. Reema's boy is shown as the first example of someone who "wouldn't know how to listen" (10). A native of Willow Springs, he was college educated and wrote a book about the origins of the term "18 and 23" in Willow Springs. Reema's boy looks for reason he can explain instead of "listening" to history or tradition. The people of the island "all told him the God-honest truth: it was just our way of saying something" (7). Reema's boy, however, clearly does not listen or even ask what the "something" is. He ignores their assertions and writes that the numbers "18 and 23 wasn't 18 & 23 at all – was really just 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs exists on the map" (7-8). *Mama Day* notes on the very first page of the book that "18 & 23" refers to the year 1823, when the land of Willow Springs was deeded to the people who lived there. The reader, therefore, can learn how to listen better than Reema's boy. The people of Willow Springs hear Reema's boy's language, which uses phrases like "asserting our cultural identity" and "inverting social and political parameters," and understand that his book called the community of Willow Springs "damned dumb" (8). Reema's boy becomes an example of how education can cause isolation from self and community. *Mama Day* notes that "The people who ran the type of schools that could turn our children into raving lunatics – and then put his picture on the back of the book so we couldn't even deny that it was him – didn't mean us a speck of good" (8). The

story Reema's boy told about Willow Springs is alien to the community of Willow Springs, perhaps as alien as he had become to them. The reader never learns Reema's boy's name, unlike her daughter, Carmen Rae, perhaps because Reema's boy is no longer a part of the Willow Springs community.

With Reema's boy, Naylor voices distrust of education as well as distrust of those who educate. Her critique of the canon is one among others. Dubey reflects on postmodern skepticism of the canon and explains "the study of literary classics was now seen to endow contemporary readers with 'ideological blinders' that eased their accommodation to hierarchical society" (89). In other words, Reema's boy became a "raving lunatic" because he had adopted and even voiced the academic narrative that René Wellek criticizes because it "serves only the interests of the ruling class" (2). Reema's boy is furthermore associated with the developers who want the land in Willow Springs. After his "books came here, if anybody had any doubts about what them developers was up to," the people of Willow Springs knew that they "didn't mean us a speck of good" (8). By association, the "schools" that taught Reema's boy and helped shape his new identity and language are also part of the ruling class that seeks to disempower them. The community of Willow Springs knows that "18 & 23" refers to the year they gained ownership and control over their land. "18 & 23" represents freedom, ingenuity, change and self-determination on their island. However, due to his schooling and association with the outside power structure of formal education, Reema's boy can only see Willow Springs as a place to be mapped or controlled with the logical and hierarchical system of latitude and longitude. Like Prospero, Reema's boy has to control the narrative, and only wants an audience that will affirm his version of events.

In her reflection on Naylor and Walker's writing, Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon notes that some storytellers "recount their experiences in order to secure ownership of events that belong to them" because they are "faced with the threat of having their personal narratives either dismissed or appropriated" (16). *Mama Day* knows that the threat of appropriation is real because it begins with cautionary tales. The first is the threat of developers who seek to buy the land on Willow Springs and their "lies about 'community uplift' and 'better jobs'" (6). The people of the island of Willow Springs know better than to listen to this language and narrative; they remember shoreline communities that were sold under the promise of these lies and that "ain't nobody on them islands benefitted. And the only dark face you see now in them 'vacation paradises' is the ones cleaning the toilets and cutting the grass. On their own land, mind you, their own land" (6). The people of Willow Springs guard against such predatory business practices through the reminder of narratives they have seen happen on other islands.

Naylor offers a start to a more equitable literature in her narrative structure, not just in her setting. *Mama Day's* narrators are a rebuttal of Prospero's narrative dominance. Three Black voices, at least one of them female, narrate *Mama Day* as opposed to Prospero's white male narration. Furthermore, none of the narrators provide an authoritative version. The narrators engage in conversation as opposed to a narrative controlled by one character, Prospero, in *The Tempest*. George tells his story to his wife, Cocoa; Cocoa recounts her version of the story to George; and the voices of the island provide an omniscient view of and context for the events. While the novel recounts events from the years 1980-1985, the text begins and opens in August 1999. George dies of a heart attack in 1985, and when *Mama Day* begins in 1999, the reader is told that Cocoa visits the other place "to meet up with her first husband so they could talk about that summer fourteen years ago" (10). Most of *Mama Day* is a conversation between Cocoa and

her husband who has died and must exist outside of “this world” (268). Both Cocoa and George function as first person narrators who tell their version of events. While the third and omniscient narrator, best described as the voices of the island, could have perhaps offered a definitive version of events, they do not speak more than any other characters. They share the opening of the book, some of Mama Day’s activities, dialogue between characters, and the history of the island. All voices are given equal power over the narrative.

This structure is important because it gives power to multiple characters through their voice. They each tell their story. These characters do more than tell, however. Donlon calls the narration of *Mama Day* “story-listening,” to explain the way that the narrators both tell their side of the story and listen to the other narrators (16). The narrators do not always agree on versions of events, and they often explain their reasoning to the other narrators. In addition, they know that they must hear each other as well. For Naylor, the physical act of hearing is separated from the mental act of listening. The voices describe the conversation between Cocoa and George. They note that the two “are together for a good two hours or so – neither one of them saying a word—Reema’s boy coulda heard from them everything there was to tell” (10). Of course, Reema’s boy cannot listen or even hear the voices because of his alienation from his hometown culture. It is important to note that Cocoa and George talk “without a single living soul saying a word” because the reader has to be able to listen, not just hear (10).

While Naylor offers three narrators (one of whom is many different voices on the island) and three opportunities to connect with the story, she knows that her text, or any text for that matter, will be different depending on who reads it. The final words of *Mama Day* explain the choice in narrative structure and reveal a post-modern skepticism of any one narrator or narrative. Cocoa shares that “it’s just the one truth about you that I hold on to. Because what

really happened to us, George? You see, that's what I mean – there are just too many sides to the whole story” (311). Cocoa as narrator notes that she has one truth about their relationship, but she acknowledges that her version of events is not the authority; it is just one voice among many. This distinction is important because it refutes the narrative structure of *The Tempest* where only one character (Prospero) can label the other characters and grant forgiveness (to the other Italian nobles) and freedom (to Ariel) and permission to marry (to Miranda and Ferdinand). Furthermore, a narrative structure where many voices are valued equally is a solution to the canon of texts that taught Naylor to doubt her abilities as a writer.

Though she has a narrative structure of three narrators (one of whom represents many voices), Naylor goes further and asks the reader to help construct the meaning of the story. As Dubey notes, Naylor aims to “reconceptualize reading as listening” (175). Therefore, the reader is a listener, not just a reader. One incident in *Mama Day* supports this interpretation. When Mama Day watches George paint her chicken coop, she tells him he only needs to paint three sides. However, George declares “when you do a job, you do it right” (229). He says he must paint the fourth wall, which references the phrase to “break the fourth wall” and means to address the audience directly. Therefore, Naylor included the fourth wall in her plan. In this moment in the text, Mama Day is impressed. She reflects:

Just like that chicken coop, everything got four sides: his side, her side, an outside, and an inside. All of it is the truth. But that takes a lot of work and young folks ain't about working hard no more. When getting at the truth starts to hurt, it's easier to turn away. (230)

As Mama Day notes, every story has multiple sides and multiple truths. These lines and the four sides reference the narrative structure of the book: George's story is “his side,” Cocoa's story is

“her side,” the story that the voices of the island tell from the “inside,” and the reader who turns the pages is learning the story from the “outside.” The voices even tell the reader to “listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own” (10). Here, the reader’s voice is named as another narrator or storyteller in this text. The reader provides the outside, the engagement with the “inside” or text. It is the reader who verifies or validates the text for themselves. This matters for George as a reformed Caliban because he relies on the reader to do what he could not: to listen to a truth that some cannot hear, and to use it to create meaning.

There is another value to the role of the reader as listener. Dubey places Gloria Naylor in a tradition of Black postmodernism, especially those who express disenchantment with the promises of urban modernity and print literacy. She notes that writers like Morrison and Naylor “model their writing on oral vernacular traditions that are putatively more expressive of black cultural community than is print literature” (50). Dubey claims these writers doubt that traditional narrative structure can recapture oral or folk forms of expression and instead “reappropriate the print legacy in an effort to extend the social and political provenance of their own representational media” (50). Naylor, who was taught to doubt her writing abilities at school, structures her text as a conversation so she can become a writer who is still true to Black traditions. While the character of George had to sacrifice part of himself to be successful, Naylor participates in print literature while remaining true to her cultural traditions. While George dies because his carefully molded and suppressed identity does not allow him to hear, Naylor finds literary methods that not only accept but celebrate her identity. She looked both “high” and “low,” and in doing so, found her voice and encourages her reader to find theirs.

### 3. “I had peopled else / this isle with Calibans”: A Tradition of Caliban Adaptations

*Mama Day*'s engagement with Caliban is part of a long history of writers who portray Caliban as the Other. Vaughan and Vaughan note that “Caliban fascinates because he violates the order of things....Caliban appeals to rebellious instincts because he challenges a dominant culture” (xv). This section clarifies that Naylor's ambitions with Caliban are narrower than some other writers who have used *The Tempest* to call for revolution. In her interview with Kay Bonetti as part of the American Author interview series, Naylor reflected on literature's ability to cause social change. She notes,

I do not see artists as being an instrument for any sort of change as far as political or social change is involved....I think that particular belief [that art can bring change] is true only in a personal landscape but not in a public landscape, because we have got to be honest that literature is a very bourgeois activity. It comes out of the middle class and is primarily read by the middle class. So you are preaching to the converted. (Bonetti 42)

Here, Naylor shared that she believes that literature will not bring social change because her books are read by “bourgeois” readers who are already “converted.” While many may dispute her claim, she acknowledged that books can change the “personal landscape.” Instead of asking for systematic change, Naylor asks her reader to change their personal opinions and actions. For Naylor, it only took one professor to show her Black women writers, which gave her the confidence to begin writing. In this way, the personal or individual change to one reader can have impact on other people they know. While *Mama Day* makes no explicit claims about the literary canon, it does present itself as an alternative or natural pairing to *The Tempest* and in this way offers an expansion to the canon. While some other adaptations of *The Tempest* call for

revolution, *Mama Day* asks its reader to reflect on their personal participation in the harmful educational practices that led both George and Naylor to doubt themselves.

Peter Hulme and William Sherman argue that Caliban is often used by societies to question established power structures and to delegitimize ruling structures that subjugate other groups. They note that “Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* has been re-read and re-written more radically, perhaps, than any other play” (xi). They further argue that Caliban especially seems to captivate and has become “culturally available across a wide spectrum” as have characters like Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe, and Hamlet (xiii). Caliban is the only character to have achieved this acclaim as a minor character, they highlight, with “considerably lower status, fewer lines, and shorter stage presence than the main figure in the text” (xiii). Why does Caliban alone achieve this attention? The treatment of Caliban by other characters in *The Tempest* has allowed a range of literary artists to explore unjust power structures.

Vaughan and Vaughan note that Caliban’s desire to overturn the power structures of the island has been reconstituted, rewritten, or given new life in literature many times. In essence, Caliban confronts established norms or power structures and asks the audience or reader to do the same. Prospero notes this quality in Caliban because he “never / Yields us kind answer” (I.ii.306-307). Like Vaughan and Vaughan, Charles Zabus provides analyses of writers who rewrote *The Tempest*, but he focuses on rewrites from the 1960s to the 2000s. He explains that the text offers itself for modern adaptations because it is a “viable site” for writers to explore an intersection of “postcoloniality, postpatriarchy, and postmodernism” (7). Rob Nixon notes the popularity of *The Tempest* among African and Caribbean writers between 1957 and 1973 when “the vast majority of African and the larger Caribbean colonies won their independence” (557). Nixon shares examples of how “*The Tempest* came to serve as a Trojan horse, whereby cultures

barred from the citadel of ‘universal’ Western values could win entry and assail those global pretensions from within” (578). I support these reasons for engagement with *The Tempest* and Caliban, especially with regard to postcolonialism. Caliban is an Other whose knowledge and land are forcibly taken from him and who is then excluded from any participation or ownership of the power structure. His criticism reveals the injustice of the system at a macrocosmic level, and the pain his character experiences exposes the results of this inequity at a microcosmic level.

Another reason for the adaptations could be that even Shakespeare’s original description of the character is unclear. His form is ambiguous and easily adapted to fit a new author’s purpose. Prospero first introduces Caliban before he comes on stage. He declares that Caliban was “not honour’d / With a human shape” (II.ii.336-337). When Trinculo sees Caliban for the first time, he cannot classify him and wonders “What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive?” (III.ii.25-26). Later, Trinculo taunts Caliban and addresses him as “half a fish and half a monster” (III.ii.31). Caliban’s multi-faceted appearance, and the fact that every character who refers to him declares that he is at most half-human, reveal that Caliban is an Other, but not in a determinate way. This ambiguousness about Caliban’s shape allows adaptations to image Caliban in forms that serve the adapter’s purposes. Caliban has been seen as “a tortoise, a giant fish, a grotesque monster, a primitive everyman, an anthropoid missing link, and – especially nowadays – an American Indian or a Caribbean slave of African or mestizo ancestry” (Vaughan and Vaughan xiv). His ambiguous form makes an interesting parallel with George in *Mama Day*. Aside from his identity as a Black man, with heart condition and of a particular age, there is no physical description of George at any point in the novel. At the end of the text, Cocoa searches for pictures of him because she realizes she has forgotten what he looked like. She finally gives up and tells her son and herself that he “looked just like love” (Naylor 310). Unlike Caliban who

is at best described as half-human, George is a human whose physical description is left open so that readers can see themselves in him.

For these reasons, *The Tempest* offers Naylor and all writers a thoughtful platform to critique power structures, especially ones based on colonialism or racial discrimination. Naylor's aims are personal to the reader, and she asks them to turn their critical eye to the racism that caused both her and her character George to doubt themselves. Naylor struggled to picture herself as a writer because of the largely white and male canon, and her character George silences parts of his identity to achieve success according to the education of the racist world he inhabits. The tragedy of George in his death asks the reader to reflect on the causes for his death, which is his alienation from himself. George is a Caliban who does not voice an objection to the establishment, but his character reveals the tragedy of a world that teaches a boy not to dream. He dies, but there is also tragedy in the fact that he lives an incomplete life.

#### **4. “Set Caliban and his companions free / Untie the spell”: George as Naylor’s Caliban**

The rewritten Calibans all share their position as an outsider or Other. George is “from beyond the bridge” and is not native to Willow Springs (Naylor 267). This is a reversal of Shakespeare’s Caliban, who not only is native to his island but claims that “This island’s mine” (I.ii.345). In Shakespeare’s play, the island is the setting, but it is a place that most characters only visit. They arrive and then return to Italy, including Prospero and Miranda who had lived there for seven years. In *Mama Day*, however, the island is “home” to every main character except George and offers a refuge from the racism and patriarchy of the outside world (Naylor 50). George, however, is a product of the world beyond the bridge, and his incomplete identity has been shaped by that imperfect world.

In this section, I will first explain why George is a Caliban, despite many differences between the characters. I argue that George has carefully shaped himself and been shaped by the world to a fault, which is how Naylor participates in the tradition of using Caliban to show the injustices in our society. Then I posit that if George were more like Caliban in some ways, he would have been able to survive because he would have been able to hear his inner intuition and connect to history. Naylor shows what is lost when George ignores his inner Caliban.

Many critics have analyzed and identified Caliban's characterization. Garber explains that in a Freudian reading of the play, "surely Caliban is something like libido (sexual desire) or id (basic human drives)" (853). Similarly, Vaughan and Vaughan note that "Caliban lacks moral perception. He responds chiefly to appetite" (Vaughan 17). Caliban is the body, and the being that Miranda dismisses as hopeless. She describes him as "A thing most brutish" and recounts

I endowed thy purposes

With words that made them known. But thy vile race,

Though thou didst learn, had that in-'t which good natures

Could not abide to be with. (I.ii.357-361)

Caliban is a character who is devalued both because of his body but also his behavior, which shows him giving in to his desires. His reliance on his emotions and unwillingness to accept Prospero's dominance and rules make him "a thing most brutish" to Miranda.

Naylor presents George as someone who silences these emotional and physical parts of himself, which we can view as his inner Caliban. She shows George as someone who is "not an imaginative man" and someone who was raised in a shelter in which there were "only rules and facts" (Naylor 145 and 24). Early on in Cocoa and George's relationship, Cocoa asks him to share his feelings and his history. George rebukes her when he says, "I had understood what you

were saying in my office perfectly, but I didn't want to deal with it. I wasn't going to let you manipulate me into opening my guts before I was ready. But the point was, when would I ever be ready?" (Naylor 129). Here, Naylor makes it clear that George is not just a logical man, but a man who is logical because he silences parts of himself. He understands her request for emotional connection but acknowledges that he may never be ready to share that part of himself. These are the parts that Shakespeare's Caliban embodies: he shows his emotions, voices his discomfort, and acts on his impulses. When Caliban first meets Stephano, he admires him as a "fine thing" and asks him to become his new master and to kill his old master (I.ii.106). Caliban is of course wrong in his assessment of Stephano, but he nonetheless quickly decides to take on the only opportunity he has ever had to free himself from Prospero. George does not make quick decisions, and certainly not over such important matters.

George's position as a man, and an outsider or Other is the locus he shares with Caliban (I.ii.357). Caliban is disempowered throughout *The Tempest*, even at the end. While I will not attempt to frame Caliban's identity as belonging to any cultural or racial group, George is a Black man. It is important to analyze George as a character that attempts to reconcile his position as a Black man in a patriarchal and racist system. If George is a part of this group, then his roots as Caliban are important and relevant, even if Shakespeare's character is more ambiguous. Even as a young boy, George notes that he "grew up with absolutely no illusions about [himself] or the world" (Naylor 26). He is taught, and he accepts, the facts of the world around him, and he fits himself into these rules so he can be successful. Gary Storhoff analyzes George's characterization and notes that "Clearly, the highly competitive, egocentric, racist, and male-dominated world of Manhattan requires a certain ruthlessness and focused determination for an African American male to succeed" (40). This determination comes at a cost to George. As he

tells Cocoa, the woman who ran the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys made it clear that “Our rage didn’t matter to her, our hurts or disappointments over what life had done to us. None of that was going to matter a damn to the outside world, so we might as well start learning it” (24). George is taught, and he learns, that his emotions will not matter and may in fact hinder him, so he silences them.

George conforms to the mold he is taught: to find financial success, he distances himself from his history and silences parts of his identity. He becomes the embodiment of what Madhu Dubey calls “cultural rootlessness” (158). George’s partiality is a direct result of his education, and of society’s expectations of Black men. In her writing about Black masculinity, Brittany Slatton echoes this idea and recognizes that “the social structures constructed by whites limit the possibility for black men to create their own identities and cause devastating consequences for their lives” (33). Due to his upbringing, George has limited opportunities to realize who he is and could be, and his story fits in Slatton’s pattern of other Black men. The world George inhabits leads him to lean too heavily on his pragmatism and education, which causes him to eschew some of the qualities Caliban embodies, such as emotions, complications, and trust.

The physical characteristics of Caliban are used by other characters in the text to mark him as an Other and to disempower him. Caliban’s body is described in many forms, but not as a human body. Caliban is controlled through physical means and threats throughout the play. His protestations about his physical pain and requests for the return of his island are dismissed by other characters. Miranda tells Caliban he is “Deservedly confined into this rock / Who hadst deserved more than a prison” (I.ii.357-361). In Miranda’s view, Caliban deserves a worse prison than his cave and his existence on the island as a slave. To be fair, Miranda likely wants physical protection from Caliban, who tried to rape her. However, other characters like Stephano who do

not know about the rape also subordinate Caliban. Finally, Prospero uses physical means to control Caliban's body. He tells Caliban that "If thou neglect'st, or dost unwillingly / What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps / Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar / That beasts shall tremble at thy din" (I.ii.358-361). To make sure Caliban does what Prospero wants him to do, Prospero uses the threat of physical pain to control him.

The disempowerment and physical control of Caliban helps to explain George's characterization to Naylor's readers. It is possible that George silences his emotions and intuition to secure his safety and professional success. When George later dies because he leans too heavily into the logic of the world instead of his intuition, Naylor shows us the human cost of his partiality. He is no criminal and poses no threat. He constructs his mannerisms, his life, his identity, even his self-perception to disprove any stereotypes, and in this way his careful character is the inverse of impassioned Caliban. In this sense, Naylor provides a new Caliban who is limited not by a tangible master Prospero, but by societal and educational forces. George reflects on the fact that he and the other orphans who grew up in the shelter were directed towards jobs instead of dreams. He notes that "the arts were waiting for poor black kids who were encouraged to dream big, but so was death row" (27). The problem here is the binary. George should not have been taught to value logic instead of emotions, or a career over dreams. Both are possible, and it is the categories themselves that are limiting.

The similarities that unite George and Caliban are important because they reveal how two characters with similar histories can become so different. Both characters lack mothers, fathers, and the protection that a parent could offer. George's mother drowned herself in the East River while Sycorax dies years before the events in *The Tempest*. Both characters surely would have had a different life if they had the protection of a parent. George would have a connection to his

past and culture, and it would be interesting to see if Sycorax's powers could have challenged Prospero's abilities. One interesting distinction is that George devalues himself, while Caliban is demeaned by other characters. George refers to himself as a "bastard son" (106) while Prospero calls Caliban the "bastard one" (V.i.328). Perhaps this shows that George has internalized the potential criticisms of the world. For both characters, their legacy of orphanhood leads them to an "othered" status. Both men are educated by people other than their parents: Prospero teaches Caliban his language and Mrs. Jackson, who runs an institution for orphans, raises George. Prospero's arrival takes the island from Caliban, while George and the other orphan boys are taught to follow rules and be good employees. Caliban braces against this change, while George who has known no other way, internalizes his education, and thrives professionally.

Naylor presents readers with an incomplete George that would have been whole if he had not suppressed the Caliban parts of himself. A complete character would be both George and Caliban. Storhoff explores George as a character whose experiences "led him away from wholeness of self, as his lack of empathy for and understanding of women demonstrates. In gaining the world, George has risked his soul" (40). Just as *Mama Day* notes that "Shakespeare didn't have a bit of soul," George is limited in his ability to hear to anything outside the logical or proven. Storhoff argues that George silences the womanly or female parts of himself, but I argue that George silences his intuition and emotions and I see no reason to assign gender to emotions or intuition. Caliban shows these traits and he is distinctively male, which is shown when wishes he had been able to rape Miranda and "peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (I.ii.350-351). Storhoff explores character parallels and implications and notes that "George is Naylor's revised Caliban, but George's condition is the inverse of Caliban's" (39). He correctly claims that while Caliban "fears reason and patriarchal order, George resists emotionality" (40).

George avoids feelings and tries to control his life through predictable routine and precise measurements. George's approach to marriage is to measure the clothes in the closets to decide how to divide their space, and he later storms out of the house when Cocoa moves his medicine "a fraction of an inch" (Naylor 146). Later in the text, George's failure to listen to Mama Day or believe her solution to save Cocoa is in fact his inability to listen to the Caliban part of himself.

For Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, George is "very much an African American lacking in the African traditions—or any traditions—that have structured Cocoa's Southern background of custom and ritual—and storytelling" (23). George was raised in an institution run by a woman whose race is never mentioned. He lacks a family history and any connection with his roots. Therefore, his visit to Willow Springs, which "smells like forever," allows opportunities for George to learn a connection to the past despite what Dubey calls his "urban rootlessness and deracination" (Naylor 175, Dubey 158). For Dubey, George's lack of history leads to his alienation from himself, or "deracination." Both men are left to remember their mother through places. George's history is limited to the monuments she leaves behind: the brownstone where she worked and he was born, Baileys Café where he was found, and the water where her body was found. Caliban knows his history and voices it early in *The Tempest*. He tells Prospero, "This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother / Which thou takest from me" (I.ii.396-397). In contrast, George resists sharing his history and knows only a little of it. When George speaks of his mother's story, he admits, "I don't have all the pieces" (131). He cannot know his whole history, which limits him from complete self-knowledge. In this way, George could have been more complete if he, like Caliban, knew more of his history and was able to share it more often.

Like George, who is emotionally incomplete because of the void left by his mother, Caliban also lost some of himself due to the absences of his mother. However, here the

differences between George and Caliban emerge. George's limitations were taught to him and are psychological, while Caliban's limitations are both physical and emotional. Caliban wants to redeem his othered existence through physical means: he wants to kill Prospero and let Stephano become the ruler of the island. He falls prey to a very physical flaw, drunkenness. In contrast, George must expand his consciousness and acknowledge the role that emotions play in the human experience. Rather than attempt a physical transformation like Caliban, George must change his mind. It is possible but not easy. Mama Day notes, as she throws away the walking stick he relies on, that "the mind is everything" (90). Therefore, George's failure to recognize the abilities of his mind, and his incomplete psyche, are more important even than his physical state. His failure to expand what he thought was possible, to trust Mama Day when she said to bring what he found, even if it was just his hands, was the reason he died. George dies because his mind could not believe.

This idea is realized in the history of slavery in Willow Springs and in the persons of Sapphira and Bascom Wade. George tries to remember the story he had been told about them and heard it "said [Wade] fell under the spell of a woman he owned—only in body, not in mind" (206). Later, George remembers again that Wade "had a claim to [Sapphira's] body, but not her mind" (225). Unlike the island in *The Tempest*, which is taken from Caliban through magical and physical abuse, Willow Springs is given back through the powers of the mind because Wade "fell under the spell" of Sapphira. She overcame the physical control of slavery (despite their love or partnership, she was sold to Wade) to reclaim her island and its deed through her powers of manipulation. The legend of Sapphira Wade, who overcame slavery not only for herself but for all the people of Willow Springs, shows that there is hope through the mind and the body. In

this way, Sapphira Wade achieves ownership over herself and her island, which are the goals that Caliban hopes for.

Desperately, both George and Caliban want to redeem their incompleteness through their own children. Caliban remembers that he wanted to produce children with Miranda: “O ho, O ho! would't had been done! / Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans” (I.ii.419-421). While Caliban attempts to create children by force, George will only have children with Cocoa’s consent. He waits while she finishes her graduate school. When George throws Cocoa’s diaphragm off the George Washington bridge, it is merely symbolic of her concession that they will begin to try to have children (160). George does not seek to use his body to control or dictate to Cocoa. Regardless, George’s longing to produce children to offset his motherless upbringing reveals that in some ways, he does feel the loss of his erased history. He looks to the physical (children) to replace an emotional emptiness. When Cocoa’s friend Bernice asks a question about George’s mother because she does not know his history, George heals from the pain of her question when he pictures his children. He tells Cocoa later that night, “I’d like you to nurse our children” (202). Even if he did not have a mother, he is calmed by the idea that his children will. This is as close as George comes to admitting that his existence with a fractured self is less than desirable. He wants better for his children.

##### **5. “To the most of men this is a Caliban / And they to him are angels”: The Completeness of Ferdinand and Cocoa as Foils to Caliban and George’s Fractured Identities**

George’s and Caliban’s incomplete identities are contrasted through two complete characters: Cocoa and Ferdinand. This section will contrast George and Caliban’s partiality to

two characters who are allowed wholeness of self: Ferdinand and Cocoa. They are given everything both George and Caliban desired: love, children, power, and family history. It is by contrast with these characters that the flaws of Caliban and George become more apparent.

In many ways, Ferdinand is Caliban's foil. Ferdinand will marry Miranda, Ferdinand will earn Prospero's praise instead of his criticism, and Ferdinand will be served rather than serve. A complete George would be part Ferdinand and part Caliban. Indeed, there are parallels between Naylor's George and Shakespeare's Ferdinand. Like George, Ferdinand thinks he is an orphan when he assumes his father died in the shipwreck. Ferdinand does manual labor to earn Prospero's favor, just like George completes chores to earn Mama Day's and Abigail's approval. In their work, both men are determined. Mama Day tells George he does not need to paint the fourth wall, but he replies "No, when you do a job, you do it right. It's not going to take much longer" (229). Miranda tells Ferdinand he does not need to work while her father is gone, but he replies: "The sun will set before I shall discharge / What I must strive to do" (III.i.25). Both Ferdinand and George will complete their tasks until they are satisfied with their work product.

Why does it matter that George can be Caliban as well as Ferdinand? It matters because Ferdinand represents the establishment, the nobility, and the powerful. George is part of the establishment and powerful at the company he owns, but he is not powerful in his relationship with Cocoa and certainly not in Willow Springs. He lacks emotions and completeness of self. If Caliban is emotional, and George is logical, then Ferdinand is both and has the most power. Shakespeare grants Ferdinand the humanity and power that both George and Caliban lack. Of course, as an Italian noble, he was already part of the powerful. George must work to reach a status Ferdinand was born with, which is why Ferdinand has a fully actualized self and George had to lose some parts of himself to gain that power.

When the men are challenged to hear their emotions, the divergence between the characters is clear. Both recognize love or lust when they first meet the women they will love: George when he first sees Cocoa, and Ferdinand when he first sees Miranda. Regardless, the men have dissimilar reactions to their emotions and intuition. Ferdinand tells Miranda “Hear my soul speak / The very instant that I saw you, did / My heart fly to your service” (III.i.75-77). He declares that his heart belongs to her and exists to serve her from the moment they met. In contrast, George first claims that he did not see Cocoa in the coffee shop, which reveals his avoidance of emotions. It is clear that he did see her and suppressed both recognition of her and the emotion he feels when he sees her. George reflects that “what had been captured – and dismissed” is both an image of George “passing [Cocoa] in the coffee shop” and a “feeling so strong it almost physically stops [him]: *I will see that neck again*” (27). When he finally admits that he saw her earlier in the coffee shop when he interviews her for a job in his office, the recognition that he may care for Cocoa causes him horror and then physical pain. Addressing Cocoa, he shares

it was terrifying when you sat down, and then ran your hand up the curve of your neck in a nervous mannerism, pushing up a few loose hairs and pushing me smack into a confrontation with fate. When you unconsciously did that I must have looked as if someone has stuck a knife into my gut, because that’s the way it felt. (28)

Ferdinand listens to hear his “soul speak,” but George avoids and then dismisses emotions as “a knife into my gut.” Additionally, Cocoa notes that her interview was bizarre, and that George “seemed downright scared of me and anxious to get me out of that office” (29). Ferdinand willingly hands over his heart, while George avoids Cocoa. Furthermore, George questions how

he can reconcile fact with feeling and asks, “How was I to reconcile the *fact* of seeing you the second time that day with the *feeling* I had the first time? Not the feeling I told myself I had, but the one I really had” (27). He realizes that he does not listen to his feelings and even admits, “The only way I could sit through that interview was by lying to myself about what had really happened in that coffee shop” (31). George knows he suppresses his instincts and emotions, even though he realizes he is not his careful, thoughtful self with Cocoa. He receives her thank you card, recommends her for a different job, and sends her roses to invite her to dinner. George claims, “I hadn’t thought at all, not even two weeks later when I sent the roses” (56). This hint of thoughtlessness from George reveals that he can operate on his intuition, that he can trust his emotions, and even that he can recognize that part of himself when he indulges it. For George, Cocoa is an opportunity for him to become his fully realized self, but only if he will allow himself to grow.

The beginning to both relationships (Ferdinand-Miranda and George-Cocoa) successfully foreshadows how the men will admit their feelings throughout the relationship. Ferdinand reveals and announces his feelings, while George leans on facts instead of emotions. Ferdinand regularly praises Miranda in the superlative. He proclaims “Admired Miranda! / Indeed the top of admiration! Worth / What’s dearest to the world” (III.ii.47-50). Later in the same scene, he reminds her that she is ideal and perfect to him: “you / So perfect and so peerless, are created / Of every creature’s best!” (III.ii.56-58). Miranda appreciates this praise and reciprocates. George, on the other hand, states the fact that Cocoa is real, and therefore better than perfect. He tells her, “you haven’t disappointed me at all. Only a fool would spend his life looking for some dream woman. The right woman is the one you can live with, not the one in your head” (234). His practical response that he can live with her implies that he loves her more than his “fantasy”

woman, but Cocoa only hears that she is not his fantasy (234). While he is honest and his assessment is true, she has a negative emotional reaction to his logical praise. George then shuts down, tells her, “Don’t you ever ask me anything ever again,” and means it quite literally (234). He spends the rest of the night picturing how they will live their lives together without talking. Sadly, he was right: Cocoa becomes sick, and then he dies before they can have a conversation. It is only after his death that they speak and hear each other again.

Cocoa, and her home Willow Springs, give George more opportunities to be more open to his emotions. When he meets her, he cannot even trust “foods that are mixed together” because “I wanted a potato to be a potato and a slice of meat just that” (54). George relegates attraction to biology and claims that women are the ones who “aren’t programmed to accept the fact that in the beginning, sex is sex” (105). George wants the person to be logical and physical. To this point, George wonders how women can see sex as more than biology and wishes that all women had “Mrs. Jackson’s pragmatism about the whole thing” (105). He notes that women want to be recognized as more than their sexual nature: “she wanted to be pretty, to be intellectual, to be engrossing, to be adored, needed—special. She wanted to be anything but a skinned-down poster [of human anatomy] on Mrs. Jackson’s blackboard” (105). What he fails to mention, however, is that he must also long to be recognized as more than his body. He doesn’t just sleep with Cocoa; he loves and marries her. When George criticizes women for wanting to be more than biology, he admits that he does not want to open the parts of his psyche that will allow him to be more than just a “skinned-down poster” (105).

While George avoids his own ability to listen, he acknowledges the interiority of others, especially Cocoa. He tells her, “I liked that knowing which could only deepen as we went on together....Only I owned the codes to a certain turn of her head, a slight narrowing of her eyes,

the varying textures of her sheets” (159). Nevertheless, George acknowledges Cocoa’s emotional growth at the same time he ignores his own. He reflects back on changes through their time together and tells her, “You weren’t becoming different, you were going back to the way you were” (100). He notices the conversations she has and the attention she pays to people. He claims that he, too, has changed and reflects, “I was so busy enjoying the change in you, I didn’t notice it in myself” (100). But while Cocoa’s emotional connections to others have changed, George explains his feelings for Cocoa through physical differences: his “freshly pressed” jeans and “taking a moment over deciding which aftershave” (100). He cannot acknowledge, hear, or voice his emotional connection to her except in terms of the physical.

In contrast to George, Cocoa knows identities are composed of different layers and that people show their true selves over time. She reflects on herself as both Cocoa and Ophelia: “Regardless of how well you thought you knew me, it was only part of me. The rest of me – the whole of me – was here. And I wondered how you would take the transformation, beginning with something as basic as my name” (176). She knows that George calls her Ophelia, while everyone in Willow Springs knows her as Cocoa. Furthermore, she can see how both her grandmother and her great aunt have influenced her personality. She tells George that “if Grandma had raised me alone, I would have been ruined for fit company. It seemed I could do no wrong with her, while with Mama Day I could do no right. I guess, in a way, they were the perfect mother” (58). Cocoa sees that she is both grand-daughter and grand-niece, and that she can be at home both with George in New York City and with her family who raised her in Willow Springs. She can acknowledge and even evaluate her psychology, her mind, in a way that George cannot. Cocoa admits that what worries her most about their relationship is that George never admits his feelings:

But you'd never talk about your feelings surrounding any of that. 'Only the present has potential' is how you'd brush me off... I thought you didn't trust me enough to share those feelings. A person is made up of much more than the 'now.' (127)

As a child of Willow Springs and a student with a master's degree in history, Cocoa knows the importance of history and is concerned with his focus on the present. It is only after George finally shares a piece of his history with her that she asks him to marry her. He tells Cocoa that his mother was a prostitute, left him to be found at a café, and shows her the river where her body was found. Cocoa is aware that these are not feelings, but she realizes that this admission, this sharing of history and self, is a beginning for George. He shares his small history with Cocoa, and she offers him an opportunity to connect with her and her deeper history of Willow Springs.

#### **6. "Why Couldn't You Hear It?": George as Caliban and his Failure to Listen**

Cocoa is fully herself in Willow Springs, a fictional paradise, freed from many power structures that constrain most real locations. Dubey highlights Willow Springs as a literary answer to everything that the 1980s academia identified as "a sense of crisis in the category of racial community" (5). This island, off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, does not belong to any state, although its residents "have had a say in every national election since Grant" (Naylor 80). While the novel ends with a turn to the future in the new millennium, there is no doubt about the future of the island, nor about the future of its community of inhabitants. Even as developers offer money and jobs to buy the land, the island follows the advice of its oldest residents and reaffirms that "it belongs to us, clean and simple" (5).

George's outsider status matters because Willow Springs represents a possible place of redemption for him. This section will explore the ways the island offered George an opportunity to realize his full identity, safe from the outside world. Susan Meisenhelder presents Willow Springs as a safe place where residents own the land and have lived there for generations. It is a place where the Black residents created their own traditions, including Willow Springs's "Candle Walk instead of Christmas, its 'standing forth' in lieu of funerals" (405). In this place separate from outside power structures and norms, George, who is "imbued with the values of the white world in which he has been educated" appreciates the island but cannot hear the voices or the history of it (Meisenhelder 405). It is on this island that George is given opportunities to become a more complete version of himself, like his wife who says "the whole of me" is in Willow Springs (Naylor 176). There are moments in Willow Springs when the reader is shown that George hears but cannot listen to the parts of himself that he has suppressed. This section will also explore why George is not able to heal his fractured identity and hear the promises of the island. This limitation has deathly consequences for George. If he were able to listen, he could have survived. Instead, he does things "the other way – his way" and as a result, Willow Springs "lose[s] him" (299).

In Willow Springs, George is offered an opportunity to acknowledge his emotional side three times: at Dr. Buzzard's card game, when he and Cocoa walk at the other place, and when he tries to save Cocoa's life with Mama Day. At the card game with Dr. Buzzard, the men begin to clap and sing, and it makes George uncomfortable. George, who does not drink, who "had not tasted beer in over seventeen years," becomes drunk (212). The singing and clapping cause a "lump in my throat," and he attempts to "dissolve it" with beer and drinks one can, then another, and then moonshine (213). As George continues to drink, he notices that the moonshine he

drinks next “didn’t touch as deeply as the rhythm being pounded into my ears” (214). George notes that he “didn’t understand the rhythm and I refused to spoil it by attempting to join in. Perhaps if I had known that I only had to listen to the pulse of my blood” (214). In this first opportunity to connect with his inner self, George ignores that his body connects with the music and attempts to silence his reaction to the music with alcohol. Regardless, this scene shows he can listen, and even George admits that his body recognizes the rhythm.

While in Willow Spring, Cocoa wonders “Why couldn’t you hear it? Over and over again; *you’ll break his heart*” (224). She hears whispers, especially when she visits her ancestral home, but George does not. Cocoa begins to wonder what the island is trying to tell her about George, and why George cannot hear it. The reason George cannot hear the whispers is the same reason he drinks to suppress his feelings when the men sing the music at cards. It is the same reason he focuses on the physical as opposed to the emotional when he goes to the chicken coop to save Cocoa: he has been taught to avoid his emotions and intuition. He cannot completely surrender his logic to a belief in something that is not “what the eyes can see” (36). He focuses on the present and the physical, which are items he can control.

Caliban, in contrast, hears voices and songs. He tells Stephano not to fear the voices of the island because

the isle is full of noises,

Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments

Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices. (III.ii.130-134)

Like Willow Springs, the island in *The Tempest* is full of voices and noises. Caliban can hear these noises because he is in touch with the parts of his humanity that George silences. Jonathan

Goldberg claims that Caliban is on the losing side of the “divisions [Prospero] makes: between those who are bodies and those who are minds, those who have language and those who do not” (Goldberg 23). While Goldberg analyzes only *The Tempest*, his distinctions draw a line between Caliban and George. Caliban is a body who lacks language, and George is a mind who is not in touch with his body, and neither character’s position is complete. George’s position as a mind who does not trust what his body tries to tell him leads directly to his death.

The reason for George’s death is complicated to any outsider, but simple to the natives of Willow Springs. George’s wife Cocoa is poisoned by a jealous neighbor who wrongly thinks Cocoa is romantically involved with her husband. A storm descends and blows the bridge to the mainland away, so George cannot obtain any medical help with the illness that follows her poisoning. Like Willow Springs, Cocoa’s illness is at least partly mystical, and it requires a mystical cure. Mama Day asks Dr. Buzzard to tell George about Cocoa’s sickness and her solution, but Dr. Buzzard knows George cannot understand. He tells Mama Day, “That boy is from beyond the bridge, Miranda....We ain’t even got his kind of words to tell him what’s going on” (267). Dr. Buzzard tries, and George says he “just cannot believe” the story Dr. Buzzard tells him (286). The story Dr. Buzzard shares is not revealed to Naylor’s reader, but Dr. Buzzard likely told George that Cocoa was sick due not just to the poisoning, but also due to supernatural elements. Mama Day needs George to understand because she needs him to help save Cocoa. George admits that he “stopped listening” to “the madness exemplified by [Buzzard’s] story” (286). Instead, George focuses on his logical solution: he devotes all his efforts to repairing the bridge so Cocoa can reach professional medical help. Regardless, the more time he spends working to repair the bridge, the more dire Cocoa’s condition becomes.

Mama Day needs George to hear the story and she needs him to participate so that she can save both Cocoa's and George's lives. She knows that George has the potential to connect with his emotions and intuitions. She observes,

He believes in himself – deep down within himself – `cause he ain't ever had a choice. And he keeps it protected down in his center, but she needs that belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to hand it over to her. She needs his hand in hers – his very hand – so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before.  
(Naylor 285)

Here, Mama Day acknowledges that even though George “keeps it protected down” and “buried,” he needs to give his trust to her, symbolized by his placing his hands in hers, so that she can save both George and Cocoa's lives. When George first met Cocoa, he ignored her and the intuitions he had about her, but they were there. Furthermore, he has a physical reaction to the spirituals Dr. Buzzard and the men sing, even though he drank to silence them. George's overreliance on the logical is not his destiny, but a choice he makes because of his lack of history and education. As Cocoa becomes sicker, George finally accepts some of Dr. Buzzard's story. He stops working on the bridge, walks to the other place, and tries to listen to Mama Day. At first, he dismisses Mama Day's request as “mumbo jumbo,” but later he comes back again to try to follow her instructions (295). His return to Mama Day shows that he must know that she offers Cocoa a better cure than any doctor over a bridge.

Mama Day tells George that she had to “reach back to the beginning for us to find the chains to pull her out of this here trouble. Now, I got all that in this hand but it ain't gonna be complete unless I can reach out with the other hand and take yours” (Naylor 294). Mama Day created a connection with her past, her history and has found the story of Cocoa's ancestor,

Sapphira Wade. If she can make a connection with George, who represents Coca's present and future, then together they can cure her. Mama Day wonders how she can "get him to trust her" (285). She asks him to bring the ledger from the other place and a cane to her chicken coop, fight a hen, look into her nest, and bring back "whatever you find" (295). She needs him to bring back his hands, which will show that he trusts her enough to follow her cryptic instructions and will form a physical connection between Cocoa's past in Mama Day's hands and her future in George's hands.

In the end, George fails to trust his intuition. He searches the chicken coop, and notes over and over again that the only thing he finds in the coop is his hands. He cannot believe, however that his hands are what Mama Day needs because it does not make logical sense to him. First, he says, "There was nothing there – except for my gouged and bleeding hands" (300). Then again, he wonders, "Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands?" (300). Finally, he looks at himself, laughs at the absurdity of the situation, and decides he will use his hands to hold Cocoa. He tells Cocoa, "All of this wasted effort when these were *my* hands, and there was no way I was going to let you go" (301). In doing so, he rejects the truth his intuition tried to tell him. He cannot believe that Mama Day would send him across the island to bring back only his hands. He follows her instructions logically and keeps looking for something in the nest and then the rest of the chicken coop. In doing so, he sacrifices his life to save Cocoa. Before George dies, Mama Day feels a truth that "wrenches her inside that the other way – his way – is to lose him" (299). George leaves the chicken coop, tries to do things "his way" and goes to Cocoa, not to Mama Day. He uses his hands to hold Cocoa, instead of giving his trust to Mama Day. As he puts his hands on Cocoa, his "heart burst[s]" and he dies (302).

However, George's redemption is that in death, he can hear and see the supernatural because he becomes one of the voices of the island. Cocoa comes to the island to talk to him, and Mama Day can hear George as well. She says to George, "One day she'll hear you, just like you're hearing me" (308). The island is now his home. George's rootless, logical life gives way to his spiritual, historical, interconnected afterlife. In the absence of a community or history, George's identity fractured when he was a child, and in the struggle to gain the affirmation of others and find professional success in an imperfect world, George has silenced his ability to listen to his intuition or emotions. In Willow Springs, George is given an opportunity to complete his fractured identity, even though he only makes that change after his death. Just like Reema's boy who could not hear, George is another cautionary tale. He is a city boy, an orphan, and a logical man who has a chance to connect with his emotions in the rich community and history of Willow Springs. While he cannot trust Mama Day's instructions and his own instincts that try to save his life, he does sacrifice his life for Cocoa's. While he dies, he submits to his strongest emotion: love. In addition, in his death he becomes a voice of the island, and he is able to talk to Cocoa and listen to her, in a way he could not in life. While George's story is of a missed opportunity, his story offers opportunities for Naylor's readers. Naylor gives her readers a place to come to, a book we can read, where we can connect with history and learn to hear.

## **7. Conclusion**

While *The Tempest* is interested in recreating the power structure that existed before Prospero lost his throne, *Mama Day* presents a new alternative. Naylor shows and values Willow Springs as a place where George's values can be overturned. George's failure to realize that his worldview might be flawed and his inability to change his viewpoint leads to his death. In

reading the book however, the reader participates in these values of Willow Springs. The reader listens to the voices George could not hear and acknowledges the emotions George could not by reading the text. The reader can recognize and value those qualities, despite and perhaps because of George's failure to do so. Of course, *Mama Day* does not provide a complete solution to the exclusionary history of literature and the structures of American society, but the narrative structure helps to expose power imbalances, especially for George, and to return power to the reader. In his death, George has learned to hear and has become whole again.

George's failure allows the reader to participate in the narrative structure that attempts to bridge the gap between speaker and listener. The reader bears witness to the events in the novel, and Naylor gives the reader the power of interpretation. For Gloria Naylor, Caliban's new reality in George calls for a change in all of those "listening without hearing" (227). If *Mama Day*'s reader can begin to listen, to hear, then the internal Caliban can be embraced, not silenced. *Mama Day* asks George to become more like Caliban, to know his history, and to acknowledge his emotions. Prospero's magic, the literary canon, the fractured postmodern Black identity can be healed with a community of listeners, who are the readers. There can be no exclusion, no rejection, when the only requirement to join is that "the voice is your own" (Naylor 10).

If *Mama Day* is successful, then Naylor's readers will join in the conversation to which Naylor has invited them. She believes literature can change a person, not society. However, Naylor's identity as a writer is the result of just one person: a college professor who showed her other Black female writers. The books shared by that professor allowed Naylor to become the writer she always knew she was. Likewise, Naylor asks her reader to listen to the story of *Mama Day* and themselves. Naylor knows better than anyone that our society can cause people, especially those who have not historically been listened to, to doubt themselves and suppress

parts of their identities. She invites us to visit Willow Springs like George, to listen to all the voices, not just the dominant ones, and to add their voice to the conversation. Her narrative structure includes the reader so that they know their voice is just as valid as the voice of the writer. Naylor wants more voices to join the canonical conversation, so that they become a place any young reader can find their voice, their experience, and their fullness of self.

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