Communicating with Maternal Spaces—Reading Gloria Naylor’s
*Mama Day* with Reference to Luce Irigaray*

QI Jia-min
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Focusing on African American novelist Gloria Naylor’s fiction *Mama Day*, this article intends to analyze Mama Day and George’s distinctive relationships with maternal spaces, particularly based on French philosopher Luce Irigaray’s philosophy concerning maternal spaces and a feminine way of communication. It is to argue that the two characters’ different ways of communicating with the maternal spaces result in their different endings in the narrative, as well as their different degrees of healing, either healing their own wounded relationships with their mothers or healing the disconnection between men and women. This finding unravels Naylor’s implicit ethical and philosophical messages in writing George’s mystic and tragic death. In addition, by engaging *Mama Day* in active and feminine communication with maternal spaces, Naylor successfully re-establishes “the missing pillar” of the female ancestry that Irigaray observes on Western civilization, thus offering a possibility for a woman to construct her female subjectivity with reference to her maternal origin.

*Keywords:* Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, Luce Irigaray, maternal space, communication

**Introduction**

To give voice to the long silenced black mother, African American female novelist Gloria Naylor’s (1950-2016) third novel *Mama Day* (1988) chants black woman genealogy and magic. *Mama Day* involves a love story between a young couple living in New York City, Cocoa and George, narrated through first-person points of view of Cocoa and George. It also includes stories of the black islanders on Willow Springs through an omniscient narrator—the spirit of Willow Springs, but mainly focuses on one essential islander—Miranda Day (Mama Day), Cocoa’s grandaunt.

*Mama Day* is a magical novel celebrating the power of the Black mother and the true way of communicating with maternal power. Instead of designating some specific mother character, Naylor grants the spirit of mother to spaces, generating spatial signification of mother. The philosophical significance of *Mama Day* is so notable that it is considered to be “no less than a road map for an alternative civilization” (Tharp, 2001, p. 120). The novel intentionally diverts from the mainstream white-dominated culture in the West and offers a holistic, spiritual,

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QI Jia-min, Ph.D. candidate in English Literature, Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.
natural, and maternal heterotopia where people, particularly African Americans, can regain their spiritual and communal integrity.

The thematic focus of communicating with the maternal space in *Mama Day* grants the legitimacy of turning to French philosopher Luce Irigaray’s (1930-) philosophy for exploring its hidden ethical message, as returning to the mother is a crucial theme in the Irigarayian philosophy. Irigaray notably argues that sexual difference is the key feature of human existence and believes that to regain our essential sexual difference, mankind need to reestablish a long-lost feminine genealogy and reconnect with our maternal origin. Indeed, “only a return to a something still more original, to the woman in the mother…allows us to…enter into the presence of the other, with the other” (Irigaray, 2008, p. 114). Reading *Mama Day* with Irigaray’s philosophy would help us fully understand the mystical mechanism of maternal power in Naylor’s magical island, Willow Springs.

Enlightened by Irigaray’s works, this essay argues that it is Mama Day and George’s different ways of communicating with the maternal spaces generate their different endings in the narrative as well as their different degrees of healing, either healing their own wounded relationships with their mothers or healing the disconnection between man and woman.

**The Maternal Nature of Willow Springs**

At the beginning of the fiction, a geographical and historical genesis of Willow Springs is given. Willow Springs is a Gullah island with only African American residents. Geographically speaking, it locates at the offshore border between the states of Georgia and South Carolina, but it does not fall into judicial governance of either state. The island is connected to the mainland through a bridge that lays “right smack in the middle where…the dividing line between them states” (Naylor, 1988, p. 5)\(^1\), so Naylor creates an autonomous realm for black people allowing them to claim ownership of the land and the culture. In addition, the island has a mythical origin. The legend has it that in 1823, the owner of the island, a Norwegian man, married a slave woman from Africa named Sapphire, and then Sapphire kills her white owner/husband, frees all the slaves on the island, and bears seven sons in a thousand days, which later forms the blood line of the Days. In this way, the African female origin of Willow Springs is a fictional revision of the white male genealogy, especially the one planted by Christianity. A white male plantation owner—a Western God—is replaced by a black female Goddess. In doing so, Naylor grants African Americans an imaginary African maternal origin in order to offer a cure for African American’s genealogy trauma. In addition, Willow Springs is a timeless, sensual, and rural place, the metaphorical opposite of New York, a quintessential space of modernity, rationality and urbanity, where George (Cocoa’s husband) comes from, marking the island as a feminine place while New York a masculine one. Furthermore, the geographical gendered signification is reflected in Mama Day’s powerful presence in the Willow Springs community, because in Willow Springs, when “Mama Day say no, everybody say no” (p. 6).

Not only it is a feminine island, Willow Springs is also a maternal space, with many spaces of maternal imagery. First, from the perspective of language, it can be understood that “the Christian God exists in the realm of language, while Sapphire occupies a nonlinguistic, or semiotic, space” (Peters, 2009, p. 104). Indeed, the islanders have a mythical goddess Sapphire Wade who “don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form

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\(^1\) All the quotations from the novel are from the version: Naylor, Gloria. *Mama Day*. New York: Random House, 1988; the quotations from the novel hereafter will only be marked by page number.
words” (p. 4). These dichotomies—Christian white/African black, urban masculine/rural feminine, patriarchal/matriarchal, and linguistic/nonlinguistic (or symbolic/semiotic)—are basic logics for the philosophical construction of Naylor’s magical world in *Mama Day*. Willow Springs is a non-linguistic space that locates beyond the structural Logos, a maternal realm denied by language and order. The entire island forms a maternal space that nurtures a thriving African American community with strong spiritual beliefs and a “herstory.”

Second, its geographical location is so blurry that the rational mind New Yorker George has a difficult time to “map” the place in his mind, as he complains about the troublesome location of Willow Springs, “where was Willow Springs? Nowhere. At least not on any map I had found” (p. 174). A map signifies a structural and symbolic way of understanding the world. The unmappable nature of Willow Springs means that outsiders cannot understand the place so it is left unmarked. Moreover, its unmappable geographical trait resembles the historical repression and illegitimacy of mother that Irigaray (1991, p. 41) stresses. From this perspective, it is reasonable to claim that the island is the womb that rational mainlanders have “no words to talk about it” (p. 41).

All in all, Willow Springs’s unique linguistic and geographical position locate it beyond the masculine structure of reason, language, and God. It is a maternal space where “no word is yet available” (Irigaray, 2004, p. 44).

**Mama Day’s Feminine Way of Communication**

Due to its maternal nature, Willow Springs represents the black mother’s body that has been silenced and denied for centuries. Naylor gives the island a new form of speech—a maternal language—if one really listens, one would hear it.

On one hand, this new form of speech is a speech of silence, “a language that is more communicative and less subjected to information,” (Irigaray, 2004, p. 42). It is a speech that requires our attentiveness “to the awakening of our flesh...a touch that is still silent, still virginal with respect to already used words” (Irigaray, 2010, p. 11). To communicate with the maternal space, one needs to invoke a new way of communicating, which involves a full employment of all sensory perceptions. On the other hand, this maternal language is the only carrier for maternal magic. The most powerful conjure woman on the island and a descendant of Sapphire, Mama Day, uses this new way of communication to speak to the island, the Mother, nature, and magic. Mama Day knows how to use all of her body sensual organs to “listen” to the Great Mother Goddess (Sapphire)’s voice, which grants magic to those who hears. When she “really concentrate: look and listen” (p. 174), Mama Day would either gain foresight for future events or get magical maternal power from Willow Springs. For example, she can hear from the air of Willow Springs, “when the evening air hits her skin...when them streaks of color hit the hush-a-by green of the marsh grass with the blue of The Sound behind ’em, you ain’t never had to set foot in a church to know you looking a living prayer” (p. 78). Such a gentle and warm “living prayer” in the air of the island entails certain femininity, because “while prayers go up in Willow Springs to be spared from what could only be the workings of Woman. And She has no name” (p. 251). This no-name woman is the Great Mother, a permanent spiritual existence on the island, who is also the source of magic.

Not every islander can “hear” this magic, but they all respect the mysterious working of Mother Nature. Mama Day is the one who can harness the power through her magical touch, because her real job is a
doctor/mid-wife for the islanders. The character Mama Day carries the cultural tradition of healing black matriarch from the Afrocentric cultural heritage of conjure women, who “often carry the name Mother and hold considerable power within their communities” (Tucker, 1997, p. 146).

This maternal healing power is best shown by Mama Day’s hand. She helps diagnose Bernice, a female islander with difficulty in conceiving a baby. Mama Day’s method is tactile: putting her hand deep into her uterus: “A path she knew so well that the slightest change of moisture, the amount of give along the walls, or the scent left on her hands could fix a woman’s cycle within less than a day of what was happening with the moon” (pp. 75-76). Mama Day speaks with the womb space through the most intimate language: touch. She touches and feels so she would hear the moisture and temperature of the womb. This is a language of intimacy that Irigaray acclaims, “we need to be listening to a touch…Virginal in an absolute sense” (Irigaray, 2008, p. 21). Therefore, one can see that this intimate speech not only speaks but also listens; quietly, Sapphire speaks through women’s bodies, and Mama Day listens through her hand in the womb so as to understand. When Mama Day’s hand goes deep into other women’s womb, Sapphira—Mama Day—the woman, they constitute a communal self-touching confluence. One woman’s womb becomes a transcendental communication space for all female spirits of Willow Springs. This explains how Mama Day harnesses the great maternal power to help Bernice conceive. A maternal ritual that has to perform in the most mysterious place in Willow Spring—“the other place.”

“The other place” is the ultimate maternal space that simply exists beyond symbolic realm. “The other place,” a “name” for the house that has no name, is the old family house of the Days, where the woman with no name Sapphire used to live, and a nexus of black maternal power. To perform the conception magic, Mama Day invites Bernice to “the other place.” During the execution of the maternal magic, Bernice is not just touched by Mama Day but directly touched by Sapphire, because “it can’t be human hands no way, making her body feel like this” (p. 140). Naylor’s description of Bernice’s physical and spiritual transformation details the mechanism of this maternal magic:

Nine openings melting into the uncountable, 'cause the touch is light, light. Spreading each tiny pore on each inch of skin...as the touching begins deeper at the points of her fingertips...Her shoulders, sides, and stomach made into something more liquid than water...She ain’t flesh, she’s the center between the thighs spreading wide to take in...the touch of feathers. Space to space. Ancient fingers keeping each in line. (Naylor, 1988, p. 140)

This magical touch from the Goddess Sapphire opens Bernice’s body up and melts her into an communal maternal space that transcends time and space. Naylor’s depiction of female touch echoes Irigaray’s emphasis on touch as one’s way of feeling the internal intimate light that allow one to see what’s inside, a way of turning back to ourselves. “Touch which lies invisible in everything, including seeing. Touch which will remain hidden in what is most tactile in it” (Irigaray, 2004, p. 174). At the other place, transcendental black maternal powers converges, and Mama Day uses the ancient black maternal magic to allow Bernice to know herself, feel herself, so her body, especially her womb would be awaken to hear the ancient call.

To truly communicate with the Mother, both Naylor and Irigaray suggest that one should learn to listen to and touch one another. Only when we awaken our sensual organs, we can transcend our physical barriers, particularly the barriers blocked by Western rationality. Only then we can see and understand the maternal magic, which is something that the only male protagonist in the novel, George, has a difficult time in understanding.
George’s Masculine Way of Communication

As an extremely rational man, George intends to comprehend the unique culture of Willow Springs only through logics. His way generates difficulties in communicating with the maternal spaces as well as the islanders.

George’s difficulty with the maternal power is rooted in his birth: he is an orphan. His only knowledge about his parents is that he is born in a “whorehouse,” so he considers himself as “the son of a bitch” (p. 130)\(^2\). Growing up as an orphan boy, George intentionally and unintentionally disconnects himself with his maternal origin, causing him to feel fearful and skeptical towards femininity and maternal power. Due to this epistemological rupture, George develops a strong desire for rationality, which echoes Irigaray’s comments on men’s solution in a mother-son relationship: “To separate himself from his mother, man must therefore invent all sorts of objects for himself, even transcendental ones—gods, Truth” (Irigaray, 2008, p. 110). Indeed, George’s salvation with his loss of mother is to rely heavily upon his rational mind. To deal with the most irrational element of his life—Cocoa, he even buys books to understand women. George has to resort to truth, science, and knowledge to distant himself from women. However, as Cocoa is brought up by two black women in Willow Spring—Mama Day and Grandma Abigail, Cocoa and Cocoa’s world is filled with feminine power, hence not accessible through rationality. George’s obsession with Cocoa can be partly explained by the hidden feminine magic in Cocoa. Furthermore, his bewilderment reaches the peak at his first arrival at Willow Springs, a place not on any map.

During George’s stay at Willow Springs, Cocoa is cursed by a local conjure woman, resulting in a life-endangering situation for her. However, Cocoa’s curse cannot be cured by any modern medicine, which leads to George’s extreme frustration. At that critical moment, the only bridge that connects Willow Springs to the mainland is destroyed by a storm. The bridge signifies a connection between the maternal space to the masculine space. Due to the disconnection from masculine power, the broken bridge further empowers the maternal space, allowing Mama Day—the most powerful conjure woman on the island—to fully perform her magic. Obviously, George cannot understand the mechanism of magic. Eager to get doctors from the mainland to save his wife, George expresses his bewilderment towards the slow way of bridge-building on Willow Springs. As an engineer himself, George exclaims that “I could calculate it for them, making a diagram…But no, that wasn’t the way things were done here” (p. 263). Frustrated and angry, he loses his last patience in trying to comprehend the islanders’ way, a natural and pre-modern way, which is Mama Day’s way.

George’s desperate grip on “real knowledge” is what Irigaray suggests about a masculine way of speaking. “[T]o speak starting from the already known” is to repeat “the said in a new situation, where meaning gets lost. Discourse is often held in this non-sense” (Irigaray, 2004, p. 17). George’s way of communication is rigid, enclosed, and nonsensical in the maternal space. He distrusts the unknown realm. For Willow Springs, the maternal realm, George’s refusal of listening and choosing to believe in the sensual way of communicating renders him to fail in communication. Eventually, his failure leaves him with no choice but to ask Mama Day for help.

To save Cocoa’s life, Mama Day needs George to perform an ultimate magic task—a magic at “the other place.” The philosophical meaning for the magic can be explained in two aspects. On the one hand, the location of

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\(^2\) In Naylor fourth novel *Bailey’s Café* (1992), George’s true parentage is revealed. He is born in Eve’s place, a woman boarding house, and his mother is an Ethiopian virgin.
the magic is significant because the curse on Cocoa’s is so evil that Mama Day needs to invoke the greater maternal power in the maternal space. On the other hand, to counter a curse of malice, one needs a magic of love, a magic requiring Cocoa’s lover, George.

Nevertheless, when Mama Day tells him that the cure requires him to go to her chicken coop and bring back whatever he finds in the nest of a red chicken, George is dumbfounded and furious, calling Mama Day “a crazy old woman” (p. 296). Mama Day knows the difficulty of the task for George, because in the end, the success of the magic not only needs his performance but also his true understanding. Despite his disbelief, George comes to her bidding and agrees to go to the chicken coop to perform the magic.

In this magic, the imagery of the chicken coop can be interpreted as “the text’s dominant symbol of the anima” (Storhoff, 1997, p. 172), an archetype of the feminine principle. In addition, Mama Day is “identified herself with eggs” (Storhoff, 1997, p. 172). This identification signifies the maternal power hidden in hens, and George’s fear of chickens shows his deep fear of the great maternal power and the maternal space—the chicken coop/the womb. “[T]he womb…is fantasized by many men to be a devouring mouth…a phallic threat” (Irigaray, 1991, p. 41). George dislikes the mystery of Willow Springs and fears the crazy maternal power hidden in the chicken coup.

In Willow Springs, the overwhelming power of the maternal spaces renders George out of control, lost in communication, and misplaced in the world. His stubbornness and inner fear cause him to lose his mind and kill all of the hens/mothers, venting his most inner hatred towards his mother. Eventually, he dies in utter frenzy and exhaustion. George’s tragic death signifies his failure in building connection with the maternal power and his failure in communication.

**Healing at the Placenta**

Naylor’s mystic depiction of the ultimate magic conveys a deeper meaning, as well as an ethical message. Many readers are puzzled by the performance of the magic. To truly understand the ultimate magic, one needs to remember that the final goal of the magic is to heal: healing the dying Cocoa. Moreover, Cocoa’s physical suffering is simply a symbol of many sufferings. To truly heal Cocoa’s curse and her wounded body, the magic informs us that one needs to heal many broken relationships, particularly our relationships with our mothers and with each other. Returning to the maternal space leads one towards a new space where one can heal the broken ties with one’s mother and the broken connections between men and women.

The first step of the magic requires Mama Day to mend her broken relationship with her mother, and the symbolic method is to return to her mother’s womb. When Mama Day seeks help from the great Goddess at “the other place,” she falls into a dream-state, dreaming about returning to her mother’s womb and regression to the status of a fetus. During the dream-state of the magic, Mama Day hears a strange word “Daughter” repeat twice (p. 283). The reason why the word “Daughter” is a strange term to Mama Day is because when she is a little girl, she has to become the family’s “little mama” to take care of her heartbroken mother and her younger sister. The role of daughter is what Mama Day longs to be. The return to her mother’s womb grants her a “threshold” into her mother’s space and a chance to heal her own broken mother-daughter relationship. This magical regression revokes the power of maternity, which enabling a sharing between the mother and the fetus, “the sharing of breath and of soul” that would eventually “transform our natural life into a spiritual life” (Irigaray, 2010, p. 4). Through
this dream, Mama Day receives a transforming spiritual sharing with both her mother and the great mother Sapphire, which transmits a message requiring her to uncover a sealed well, where her sister Peace drowns herself. The well has been sealed by her father to avoid pain and trauma.

The second step of the maternal magic asks Mama Day to reach out to her father. When she opens up the well, Mama Day realizes that a true healing requires her to hold a man’s hand, either her father’s hand or George’s hand. Sapphire tells Mama Day that healing requires more than simply rebuilding a relationship with the mother but also a crossing-over between men and women. Therefore, another reason that the other place is wombspace lies in the fact that it is a space where “the placental economy” runs. A highly symbolic part of the magic is that the final step involves a hand-holding between Mama Day and George. “She needs his hand in hers...So together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over. Yes, in his very hands he already held the missing piece she’d come looking for” (p. 285). This revelation of bridge-building between women and men sheds light on an ethical element in Mama Day’s magic. A magical transformation back to a fetus helps Mama Day “remember” a placental economy of the womb—an ethical coexistence of subjects and differences.

In her interview with Hélène Rouch, Irigaray concludes the mechanism of the placental economy, which is “an organized economy, one nor in a state of fusion, which respects the one and the other” (Irigaray, 1993, p. 41). Thus, the placenta enables the construction of an inter-subject relationship. Rouch observes that the placenta is “the mediating space between mother and fetus...it thus establishes a relationship between the mother and fetus, enabling the latter to grow without exhausting the mother in the process” (Irigaray, 1993, pp. 38-39). In mother’s womb, the paternal half and the maternal half can coexist, and it shows “tolerance of the other’s growth within itself without incurring illness or death for either one of the living organisms,” which is “one of the distinctive features of the female body” (Irigaray, 1993, p. 45).

A placental economy explains the final step of healing for both Mama Day and George. To truly heal the pain, Sapphire needs them to mend the historical broken bridge between men and women. Mama Day’s father suffers from the loss of a daughter and a later deranged wife; the Day’s white ancestor—the Norwegian planter—suffers from his hopeless obsession for the impossible Goddess Sapphire; and George suffers from the disconnection with his mother and wife. All of these historical wounds are condensed in “the other place,” a place where pains and losses are buried. Time becomes circular and convoluted in the maternal space, and the present time is entangled with the past.

Mama Day’s hand-holding with the city boy George is supposed to build a bridge between men and women, between the maternal Willow Springs and the masculine New York City, between the past and the present; they are supposed to celebrate their autonomy and differences and open a threshold for mutual admiration and communication. This reveals the ethical message of the magic because Irigaray’s placental economy points to “a deconstructive logic of difference and a feminist ethics of generosity” (Bergoffen, 2007, p. 157), which counters the proposed logic of the Dialectic and Patriarchy. It is an ethical and political proposal to our cultural possibilities.

Showing a similar ethical and political proposal to Irigaray’s, Naylor’s maternal magic advocates that men and women need to reconstruct their relationships, especially in African American communities. Racial and sexual politics add to the historical disconnection between black men and women. The broken connection needs mending, and I find bell hooks’ healing suggestion instructive. Hooks suggests that in order for black women and
men to reconnect with each other, they need to return to the African myth of Isis and Osiris\(^3\), a myth about women healing men. “Black females and males can use this myth to nurture the memory of sustained connection with one another…We can choose a love that will…put the bits and pieces together again, to make us whole” (Hooks, 2004, p. 152). Can we assume that we could “remember” a mythical memory of connection, nurture, and coexistence in the placenta? And can we also suggest that this “remembering” would help us respect each other’s difference and build an intersubjective relationship?

Nonetheless, the placental economy only appears as a wisdom guide by the Great Mother, which is rather metaphysical and surreal. George’s failure in communicating with the maternal spaces costs his life, but through his own sacrifice, Cocoa survives the deadly curse. Still, the cost of miscommunication is much too dear. *Mama Day* shows Naylor’s efforts in restoring both the maternal origin for African Americans and mutual respect between black women and men. However, the ending of the novel returns to a more realistic tone towards Willow Springs, suggesting its inevitable future towards modernization. Its unstoppable change and George’s death show Naylor’s refusal to picture a utopic future for African Americans. There is still much work to be done to heal their historical wounds and social problems. Even though the intersubjective ideal is not achieved in the novel, a literary imagination would help us imagine a progressive agenda against the current specular economy of dualism and masculinism.

**Conclusion**

Restoring female genealogy is able “to make an ethics of sexual difference possible once again, the bond of female ancestries must be renewed” (Irigaray, 1994, p. 109). Reconnecting with their female origin allows men to acknowledge their female origin and enables women to assert female subjectivity against patriarchal definition. Moreover, both sexes would realize that they are only a part of humanity. Mama Day’s way of communication is the better way, and George’s communication needs improvement. However, in the end, “there ain’t no right or wrong to be found” (p. 230) because truth should be “[j]ust like that chicken coop, everything got four sides: his side, her side, an outside, and an inside. All of it is the truth.” (p. 230). In this regard, the ultimate truth or correctness is overrated. What Naylor suggests is that Mama Day needs George, and George needs Mama Day. By defying clear definition of the truth, the Great Mother refuses to give them a clear and definite answer, because there is no correct answer. One needs to listen to the different other to develop a good answer. Reading Mama Day with Irigarayan thoughts allows one to reach an ethical conclusion, which is learning to communicate with our mothers helps us build a respecting and loving world.

Through dissecting Mama Day and George’s distinctive relationships with maternal spaces in *Mama Day* in the light of Irigaray’s philosophy, one gains a clearer insight towards Naylor’s mystic and magical narrative in the novel. It is through Irigaray’s philosophy, the cryptic ethical message hidden in the final magic that saves Cocoa’s life and kills George is revealed: on one hand, black women and men both need to repair their broken connection with their mothers; on the other hand, black women and men both need to listen to each other, learn the feminine way of communication. In addition, by engaging Mama Day in active and feminine communication with maternal spaces, Naylor successfully re-establishes “the missing pillar” of the female ancestry that Irigaray

\(^3\) Bell hooks hence refers to a traditional Egyptian mythology. According to the myth, it is said that Osiris is slaughtered and dismembered by his enemy, and his sister/wife Isis seeks his dismembered body parts and restores his body in whole.
observes on Western civilization, thus offering a possibility for a woman to construct her female subjectivity with reference to her maternal origin.

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