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Constructing Contemporary Ethnic American Identities by Reconceptualizing Ancient Narratives

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For many ethnic Americans, forming a cultural identity is a complicated and arduous endeavor. Entrenched in an environment in which mainstream ideologies leave ethnic practices and histories vulnerable to marginalization, accessing a clear picture of cultural origin is nearly impossible for groups that have undergone significant acculturation. As cultures clash, individuals find themselves suspended in a disorienting network of oppositional value systems. People positioned within this disorienting space often seek a firm cultural grounding. Barraged by a number of expectations from both their ethnic and the mainstream culture, minorities often experience a deep sense of displacement. Seeking to recover cultural roots in an effort to make sense of hybridized, ethnic identity becomes a negotiation process that many writers have recounted through autobiography.

Zora Neale Hurston's "Research," Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman," and Maxine Hong Kingston's "White Tigers" each conveys its author's process of drafting her own cultural orientation. Disenfranchised by their culturally hybridized communities, Hurston, an African American, Silko, an American Indian, and Kingston, a Chinese American, each uses the narrative process to reshape and re-envision her ethnic history. By modernizing, revising, and adopting ancient subjectivities, each writer positions herself within an ancient narrative framework. This novel recombination of historical myth, narrative, and performance empowers these women writers to construct their own cultural representations in a tenuous social climate.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Literature's role in establishing and imparting cultural values to readers has routinely guided its distribution and design. In the Western tradition, literature gained a popular presence because it was a powerful tool of moral influence "by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others" (Eagleton 15). When religion failed to shape Victorian citizens' values, literature became the discourse, as politician George Gordon claimed, to "save our souls and heal the State" (qtd. in Eagleton 20). Valorized depictions of mainstream ideals continue to saturate novels, stories, and scripts, and as readers unconsciously absorb a work's exalted image of the prevailing group's doctrines, an insidious and deliberate side effect occurs: the values, cultures, and belief systems that lie somewhere outside of the mainstream become marginalized and eventually vilified.

Frantz Fanon, in *Wrenched of the Earth,* discusses the process of social stratification and the way that in a land that has been conquered and controlled by Western ideology, race and ethnicity become markers of status. Even for countries considered post-colonial, inequitable power

dynamics maintain that members of the ruling class "have come to power in the name of a narrow nationalism and representing a race," the Western, European race (Fanon 163). The characteristics of this Western culture take an elevated position, one that implies they are the crown of success and must be revered and imitated by those who wish to attain a semblance of this power (Fanon 162-63). Whether inadvertently or not, this dynamic promotes "the ingrafting and stiffening of racism which was characteristic of the colonial era" (Fanon 162). This ruling group "manages to mask this racism by a multiplicity of nuances that allow it to preserve intact its proclamation of mankind's outstanding dignity" (Fanon 163). It is often the case that with manipulative strategies such as Manifest Destiny and religious indoctrination, the ruling group erects a fabricated image of itself as the model of human charity that, if certain conditions are met, will graciously usher outsiders into the association of human dignity that is available only to those who are willing to acknowledge the dominant culture's superiority. Historically, works of literature have been endowed with the task of circulating this image of the merciful conqueror. As ideological weapons, these texts wage cultural wars that take place outside of and also within non-white people.

Texts that elevate Western ideologies and debase others succeed in both projecting and masking Eurocentric sentiments. This literary tradition has been present since America's earliest years, when access to minority groups was rather limited but the public's fear of them strong. Early American settlers' knowledge of tribal cultures was often limited to that which they gathered from captivity narratives, and these works paint an enduring, polarized image of the Native American: he is either a barbarous "bad" Indian or a docile "good" Indian (Derounian-Stodola and Levernier 52). These reductive images of the Indian devalue individuality, thereby obscuring the group's humanity. More problematic, however, is the fact that narratives about these "good" Indians use religious zeal to disguise racist undercurrents, for the Natives in these works achieve goodness only because they are simple and their minds, therefore, malleable, making them willing and ready to side with "the values of white society" (Derounian-Stodola and Levernier 52). That early American writers would tout the supremacy of their own mainstream culture's values while defaming those they deem inferior is hardly shocking, but the unrelenting fact is that Eurocentric sentiments also run rampant through works

written by authors who belong to marginalized ethnic groups.

Like captivity narratives, religiosity and progressive politics used in slave narratives often conceal Eurocentric values that demean non-white cultural practices. Written by former slaves, these texts denounce slavery as a heinous institution, but many of them do so by crediting Christianity and patriotism as the means by which the slave is truly set free. "Impelled by faith in God and a commitment to liberty and human dignity comparable...to that of America's founding fathers," the slave manages to reach the North where freedom greets him (Andrews 2051). By adopting the mainstream group's religious tenets, the African slave is not only freed from his pagan ways, but also from the very institution that ordered his subordination. Like tales of the "good" Indian, the freed slave can attain a likeness of humanity and true freedom only when he abjures his native religion and exchanges it for Protestant zeal. Although these texts are instrumental for having paved the way for minority American writers, they often support the widespread notion that the dominant group's values are to be revered and assimilated, even by those who have been victimized by their narrow-minded convictions. Although texts such as captivity narratives

and slave narratives might serve a hegemonic purpose, literature also can sustain and propagate unconventional, even dissident, positions.

In an effort to counteract the images and misconceptions that perpetuate their culture's subaltern status, intellectuals belonging to minority groups often satisfy literary pundits' expectations that they should produce writings that confront the inequitable power dynamics afflicting their ethnic communities. While this expectation might seem somewhat coercive, when one considers the number of works that privilege ideals that the multitudes consider to be conventional, it becomes clear that literatures in which the messages, forms, and themes offset these conventions can mitigate for readers the discriminatory opinions that mainstream works potentially espouse. The idea that unconventional discourse can inspire revolution is the focus of Antonio Gramsci's *The Prison Notebooks*. In this text, Gramsci claims that intellectuals—including teachers, writers, the clergy—either uphold or defy existing social conditions by disseminating their own viewpoints about critical social issues. As leaders within their communities, those intellectuals who espouse unorthodox viewpoints inspire others to question the validity of various ideologies that

are often presented as timeless truths (Gramsci 1589). In countries, such as the United States, founded by colonizing and exploiting vulnerable cultures, the dominant group's racial superiority becomes a "truth" that appears so timeless it often goes unnoticed. The frank discourse of oppressed intellectuals often reveals these widely accepted, yet narrow-minded, ideologies and corrects untruths. Echoing Gramsci, Frantz Fanon sounds a call for minority intellectuals to produce ideologically subversive texts, a call that Fanon himself earnestly answered.

Born in 1925 on the island of Martinique and later relocating to Algeria where he participated in the nation’s fight for independence, Fanon's experiences as a resident of areas colonized by France shaped his theory of cultural relations. Despite having received military honors during the Second World War and subsequently practicing medicine as a licensed psychiatrist, Fanon felt that because he was a black man living in French society, he was continually viewed and treated as a second-class citizen (Johnston 92-93). His first-hand understanding of discrimination aroused his interest in the impact of racial attitudes that pervaded colonized regions. Stemming from what Guillemette Johnston calls Fanon's "blackness in a white world" (92), Fanon's corpus of passionate works exude his contempt for

colonial racism and has resulted in a scholarly legacy amassing numerous interpretations, criticisms, and applications that span academic disciplines but remain faithful to his concern for those who are culturally oppressed. Although his works primarily focus on groups that have been colonized, contemporary theorists apply Fanon's work to their analyses of communities influenced by colonial values. Homi Bhabha, regarded as one of America's most prolific post-colonial scholars, notes that because colonization has secured the West's position as a global powerhouse, colonial interaction occurs in nearly every community worldwide (Bhabha "Framing"). Fanon's teachings seem to anticipate the fact that imperial values would maintain a ubiquitous presence throughout the world, and as he calls on intellectuals to confront this issue, he also sounds a warning.

Fanon asks intellectuals whose ancestral heritage has become the target of cultural warfare to produce texts that "reanimate the cultural dynamic and to give fresh impulses to its themes, its forms, and its tonalities" (Fanon 237). With a revolutionary fervor that rivals Gramsci's, Fanon claims that literature written by minority intellectuals can become a "literature of combat" (240) that seeks to dismantle the ruling group's elevated image while aiming to

raise that of the subordinated group. He cautions readers, however, that cultural hierarchy often leads to galvanization, and as they see their customs under attack, some native intellectuals reintroduce cultural traditions in their most archaic forms and are leery of allowing them to be modified in an environment shaped by colonialism (236-37). These approaches render any "new cultural departures or changes in the national culture"[1] as evidence of defeat, prompting artists to avoid modernizing traditional works (Fanon 237). Archaic forms of culture, however, fail to accommodate contemporary conditions and therefore become "more and more shriveled up, inert, and empty" (Fanon 238). Despite resisting the condemnation that culturally disinterested texts frequently receive, this form of cultural resurrection is restrictive and reductive, for it often promotes a version of ethnic traditions that, with time, become increasingly stylized and stereotyped (Fanon 236-37).

Fanon calls for storytellers instead to reclaim ancient oral traditions that colonial fear has rendered inert and to present them in a way that frees these narratives and their audiences from a chamber locked by

[1] Fanon's term "national culture" refers to the indigenous group's sovereign cultural heritage that existed before colonization.

Westernized notions of time and space (240). Contemporaneity is key, and by modernizing ancestral traditions, the writer can present to readers a nuanced cultural pattern that can rally the people around the central cause of an organized movement (Fanon 240-41), one that allows minorities to identify positively with their ethnic culture even though mainstream society often deems it illogical. In its most organic form, writers enable this act of securing a favorable cultural identification through narrative structure. Guided by a preoccupation with "the diaspora experience and narratives of displacement" (Hall "Cultural" 223), Stuart Hall draws heavily on Fanon's concept of identity politics as he explores the narrative process and its effect on cultural identity.

In "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," Hall asserts that during times of political unrest, ethnic identifications are tested and refined (59), a process that is invariably political, often appears in narrative form, and is dependent on differentiation, a person's ability to distinguish his or herself from the "Other" ("Old" 59, 19). Hall notes that numerous factors complicate this process: "Because identities are constructed within, not outside of discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific

discursive formations and practices," and he contends that "they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion" (Hall "Who" 17). When ethnic American writers narrativize the development of cultural identification, their works not only reveal the social, political, and historical conditions that spur this process and its challenges, but they can begin to reconcile the fear of difference that many of their fellow minorities might harbor. For those who by virtue of their heritage have been continually pushed to the periphery, these texts reveal that being culturally different is a similarity shared among members of the collective group. With this unity, cultural confidence is nurtured, and so ethnic culture can thrive.

In asking writers to reshape the oral traditions of their ancestors, Fanon calls for writers of oppressed groups rhetorically to assert a collective, organic cultural identity although these actions might be seen as a "refusal to submit" to mainstream indoctrination. While a culture might be so marginalized that "It very quickly becomes a culture condemned to secrecy" (Fanon 237), people must refuse the temptation to shroud their ancestral traditions. Modifying these practices in a way that makes

them relevant to contemporary realities transforms difference into a liberating force, demonstrating that cultural vitality is beneficial for both the collective group and the individual.

In a nation whose history is punctuated by moments of racial injustice and exploitation, the corpus of American literature supplies numerous works important not only for having emerged from racial and political tension, but also because they showcase the minority person's journey to develop a cultural identification amid such unrest. As the Civil Rights movement gained ground in the United States, interrogating the longstanding traditions of cultural superiority was no longer taboo. From these conflicts, minority voices that had either been silenced or conscripted by colonial rule were soon heard, and the relationship between ethnic culture and individual identity inspired new literary forms and intellectual practices. Oral traditions and ancient performances were rapidly unearthed and modernized, making their way into contemporary texts that refute or revise early misrepresentations of minorities. In the decades following this resurgence of the ethnic voice, the female voice experienced similar invigoration.

As feminism pressed forward and secured a position in academic institutions during the 1970s and 1980s, women asserted their places in critical discourses that once refused their participation. Not only did works of literature and criticism take gender representation as their central theme, but women themselves began to generate texts that articulated viewpoints that the public once considered to be inconsequential. Feminist scholars, like their minority colleagues, examined old and new texts, considering the way in which works misrepresent women or fail to represent them completely. Scholars have reconsidered Fanon's work in light of feminist theory, and some of these critics, such as Rey Chow, label him as a misogynist who not only misrepresents women, but refuses to admit them into the association of revolutionary intellectuals whom he leads on the postcolonial front (Chow, ch. 3). While such criticisms are fundamental to sustaining discourse centered on gender studies, feminist investigations of Fanon must not end merely at critique.

Similar to Fanon's call for minorities to reanimate cultural dynamics veiled by discrimination, so, too, contemporary critics, specifically women, must reanimate the theoretical underpinnings of male-centered theories. Fanonian analyses of literature written by women lends

female subjectivity to a philosophy many consider to be male-dominated and thereby accomplishes intellectual renovation that begins to counteract historical chauvinism. By pointedly repositioning theoretical frameworks considered to be misogynistic, women gain access to the scholarly sites from which they were once forbidden. Situating Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* within the female positioning present in narratives written by ethnic American women enables readers to glean an understanding of the way in which cultural heritage, narrative, and contemporary ethnic identity are inextricably linked and shape agency.

Zora Neale Hurston's "Research," Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman," and Maxine Hong Kingston's "White Tigers" each represents the modern reality of a person belonging to a specific ethnic American group, but together they exhibit a shared experience, one that shapes the ethnic woman who calls America home. Transgressing conventional notions of race and literary form, these works "reanimate the cultural dynamic" (Fanon 237) of their author's ethnic cultures, an activity that Eurocentric society vehemently discourages. While these characteristics alone render these works polemic and revolutionary, the narrative voice within each of them projects a modified, contemporaneous performance of

an identity so ancient that it has been deemed crude, fictitious, or even dead. By taking up these ancient subjectivities, these writers begin the arduous, ambivalent, and controversial process of re-conceptualizing their ethnic histories in order to modify their own cultural identifications.

Zora Neale Hurston's "Research" is a remarkable account of the author's anthropological work of collecting African American and Bahamian folklore, a task that she begins as an objective outsider but that eventually affects her concept of her African culture. Her project begins in Polk County, Alabama, and readers see that despite having been born in the all-black, southern town of Eatonville, Florida, Hurston is unable to identify with the Southern Negros[2] whose customs she studies. When she unsuccessfully attempts to solicit folklore from them, her difference is so apparent that it renders her an abject outsider whose safety is threatened (Hurston 143-46). By shedding her "Bardanese" dialect, which she developed in the "glamour of Banard college," Hurston makes friends with Big Sweet, a member of the Polk County community who offers Hurston

[2] It should be noted that although the term "Negro" is not one that I use outside of this analysis, Hurston regularly uses in her narrative. In an effort to partake in a dialogue with the text, I have conceded my own convictions that accommodate contemporary political correctness, and will use this term in this analysis only in places where it echoes Hurston's voice, and, thereby, relays her sentiments.

protection and also convinces residents to share their traditions with the anthropologist. While collecting this southern Black folklore, Hurston not only remains distanced from this community's contemporary African American traditions, but she continually uses language that affirms this separation. As if to echo Eurocentric sentiments, she calls Polk County residents "primitive" and, as Fanon predicts many minorities will do, she laments the fact that the modern cadences of the railway workers indicate that "relics, forty thousand years old and more" have undergone a "great surrender to chance and change" (Hurston 147).

As her studies progress, Hurston's longing for what she considers an authentic, organic form of African culture leads her to Louisiana and later the Bahamas, where African religious rituals, song, and dance strip the scientist of her objectivity and compel her to invoke the ancestral spirits of her ethnic heritage. Hurston's inability, which arguably might be interpreted as a refusal, fully to engross herself with the folk traditions of hybridized African American communities has drawn a considerable amount of scrutiny. What "Research" reveals, however, is that Hurston, an ethnic American woman living in the 1930s, does, in fact, want to connect to her African heritage. The text implies that African American folk traditions too

readily reflect the fruits of cultural suppression for Hurston to become actively engaged in them. Conversely, Hoodoo rituals and Bahamian performances are so far removed from the American mainstream that they transgress attempts at cultural domination that represses traditions that precede the moment of enslavement. Hurston actively partakes in a Hoodoo ritual that defies the religious conversions that have swept African American communities since the days of slavery. After invoking African spirits and submitting herself to their control, she is prepared to enact the Bahamian performances that she deems "more original, dynamic and African, than American Negro songs" (157).

Hurston's narrative illustrates the way in which she, as an intellectual American of African heritage, struggles to find a cultural tradition with which she can comfortably identify. Recording this process, Hurston creates a subversive text that defies the misconception that ancestral patterns of African thought have been lost through cultural diasporas. The writer and her text reanimate the ancestral spirits of an oppressed people's cultural hearth.

Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman" follows an indigenous woman as she contemplates the limitations of

cultural identification. She appears to have inherited the ancient Yellow Woman spirit, but after centuries of colonialism, she and her tribal community are reluctant to believe that she can fully identify with this ancestral subjectivity. Despite questioning the possibility that a primordial identity can truly inhabit a modern body, the narrator eventually accepts her ability to inspirit the Yellow Woman, and so she tells her story from Yellow Woman's perspective. Using oral tradition as a point of reference, Yellow Woman recognizes the controversy that her new identity will rouse. Her struggle to acknowledge and accept the vitality of her ancient identity dominates the text and illustrates Fanon's claim that cultural art forms are "part and parcel of the values which have ordained the struggle for freedom" (246).

The Yellow Woman spirit by conventional standards appears reckless and promiscuous, for regardless of her marital status or domestic responsibilities, she almost always has sexual intercourse with a masculine mountain god and then bears his offspring, who eventually become tribal heroes. Despite the fact that she is willing to risk her reputation in order to serve her community, Yellow Woman returns to her village only to be ostracized (Silko "Beatuy" 70). Silko's Yellow Woman fears the same fate, for

although she is a married mother, she wakes up nude next to a man who claims to be a mountain god. She hesitates to believe that she has somehow, like all of the women in the stories before her, inherited the Yellow Woman spirit. She cites the progression of time as the reason for which she cannot possibly assume this ancient identity: "the old stories about the ka'tsina spirit and Yellow Woman can't mean us....what they tell in stories was real only then, back in time immemorial" (368). As she makes her way farther up the mountain and away from modern civilization, however, Yellow Woman's cultural identification is no longer stunted by colonial thought, especially Westernized notions of linear temporality that deem pre-colonial traditions dormant.

By narrating the process of forming an identity that is simultaneously ancient and contemporary, Silko's adoption of Yellow Woman's story itself becomes the offspring of this spiritual union, and it indeed serves her community. Because her tribe's traditions are, through Yellow Woman, reanimated and reshaped, the text staunchly refutes the misunderstanding that cultural oppression has eradicated native ways; in this respect, the woman's story represents "not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonized man" (Fanon 246).

Like Silko and Hurston's works, Maxine Hong Kingston's "White Tigers" stresses that oral tradition and the reanimation of the ancestor provides direction for the ethnic American, in this case a young Chinese American woman who is dissatisfied with what she perceives to be the misogynistic expectations that her Chinese American culture imposes on her. Unlike the African American and American Indian communities that Hurston and Silko discuss, Kingston's family emigrated to American voluntarily, seeking political asylum from a Communist Chinese government. Unable to access China first-hand, oral narratives shape Kingston's image of China and its history. Letters detailing the atrocities of political tyranny, stories introducing nameless women who die for being unorthodox, and proverbial phrases that degrade women create an oppressive image of Chinese culture. This image and the ghosts of the women within these narratives haunt young Kingston.[3] Yet, there are also stories of swordswomen, warriors who "rage across all China" to avenge their nation and families (Kingston "White" 19). Kingston knows that "To avenge my family, I'd have to storm across China to take

[3] "White Tigers" is a chapter in Kingston's book-length memoir, *Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts*. The text's subtitle reveals the extent to which these women's stories affected Kingston during her childhood.

back our farm from the Communists; I'd have to rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California" (Kingston "White" 49). Nevertheless, she fantasizes about becoming the most famous woman warrior who inhibits her mother's stories, Fa Mu Lan. Unlike the sorrowful women from the modern-day stories, the swordswoman embodies the feminist values that Kingston has come to adopt, values that mainstream American and Chinese American communities deem unconventional.

Fanon argues that when helping to build a new national consciousness, ethnic intellectuals must inspire their communities to embrace the cultural shifts and changes that will ensure their lasting vitality. To do so, a work of ethnic literature will "first make the indictment; and then it makes an appeal" (Fanon 239). Kingston's narrator indeed indicts her own community, and from this criticism, she makes an appeal to promote cultural progress. Having spent most of her life in America, Kingston's narrator has adopted the feminist zeal that many of her American contemporaries share but that her ethnic culture does not condone. Although she greatly reveres her Chinese American community, she also feels that by safeguarding the chauvinistic traditions of the homeland, the community continually victimizes her: "Living among one's own

emigrant villagers can give a good Chinese far from China glory and a place," but she also feels that "Even now China wraps double binds around my feet" (Kingston "White" 52, 48). To work through the conflicting feelings she holds for her Chinese heritage, the narrator assumes the subjectivity of Fa Mu Lan, an ancient, ancestral figure who subverts conventional gender roles and unifies disparate cultures. Through Mu Lan, Kingston re-envisions her ethnic culture.

The Fa Mu Lan legend presents a version of Chinese womanhood that differs greatly from the one that Kingston's family would like their daughter to fulfill. Fa Mu Lan mimics men in order to gain valor; not only is she also a wife and a mother, but she is strengthened by these institutions that the narrator believes to be restrictive. Yet, in her Chinese culture, Fa Mu Lan's feminine strength is the exception. Kingston, assuming this ancient subjectivity, becomes a modern woman warrior, intent on normalizing this image of the unconventional woman. Through her incarnation of Mu Lan, Kingston reconstructs Chinese history so that it will accommodate her feminist belief systems to traditional cultural forms. Taking great liberties in reshaping this ancient tale, Kingston's rewriting acknowledges that her interpretation of her own ethnic heritage greatly affects her process of self-

representation. Through modernizing and combining ancient legends into a single tale, Kingston develops a representation of both her culture and her ethnic identity that unifies Chinese tradition with her feminist value system.

Subversive and unorthodox, Hurston, Siklo, and Kingston's works all perform the task that Fanon asks ethnic intellectuals to do: they create new models of cultural identity that can reshape minorities' perceptions of their own cultures. Fanon declares that in order for these new concepts to transform mainstream consciousness, they must exist "in the expression of exceptionally rich forms of literature" (Fanon 246) that will "awaken the native's sensibility and make unreal and inacceptable the contemplative attitude, or the acceptance of defeat" (Fanon 243). In doing so, ethnic American narratives such as these become polemic tools that "question oppression and...open up the struggle for freedom" from cultural tyranny (Fanon 237). Moreover, by bringing ancestral identities into the present day, these narratives avoid treating these embodiments of tradition as if they need to be resurrected by the narrative process. Rather, these identities resurrect the storyteller and shape her contemporary ethnic American identity.

Chapter 2

Tracks on an Ancestral Road:

Zora Neale Hurston and the Ancestor-Self in

"Research" from *Dust Tracks on a Road*

Among the many works that comprise Hurston's canon, her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road,* has been deemed problematic by scholars who believe its placid depiction of race relations reflects "assimilationist racial politics" (Walker 1). Its show of interracial harmony is so striking that in the introduction to the 2006 edition of *Dust Tracks,* Maya Angelou struggles to account for the fact that Hurston "does not mention even one unpleasant racial incident" (x). The bulk of the narrative takes place during the first half of the twentieth century, a time when racism shaped American policy and stunted citizens' understanding of others. Readers having the slightest knowledge of American history might find it doubtful that Hurston did not meet, at the very least, any bigotry-fueled resistance as she successfully secured a reputable position in the academy, an institution whose corridors are predominately guarded by white, privileged men. Alice Walker, one of Hurston's most devoted followers, echoes Angelou's frustration. Contemplating the conventions that

characterize autobiography as a genre meant to disclose its writer's truth, Walker concludes that Hurston "is probably more honest in her fieldwork and her fiction, than she is in her autobiography, because she was hesitant to reveal how different she really was" (qtd. in Howard 164). While she fails to use her autobiography as a platform explicitly to differentiate herself from members of the oppressive, mainstream culture, Hurston instead uses it to differentiate herself from her fellow African Americans. This choice has caused her legacy to be dubiously deemed "the tragedy of a gifted, sensitive mind, eaten up by an egocentrism fed on the patronizing admiration of the dominant white world" (qtd. in Howard 164). Despite the slew of criticisms that brand her as complacent, dishonest, and culturally disloyal, Hurston's controversial process of differentiation reveals her cultural ruminations, which are implicit and more subversive than critics might expect.

In 1942, J. B. Lippincott & Co., one of the largest publishing houses in the United States, published the first edition of *Dust Tracks*. Eight years later, Hurston wrote "What White Publishers Won't Print," an essay castigating the ideological control that white publishers impose on minority literatures. The veracity with which she broaches this subject implies that the essay is as much a first-hand

grievance as it is a sweeping commentary, for she immediately censures "the Anglo-Saxon's lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of the Negros" (Hurston "What" 1159). Published literature, Hurston claims, concocts a polarized image of black Americans: they are either "quaint" or "exceptional" (Hurston "What" 1162). Hurston, as a university-educated anthropologist, belongs not to the "quaint" group of African American laborers whom publishers prefer. Although her academic accomplishments might earn her a position in the "exceptional" group, Hurston argues that these intellectual African Americans' works focus only on "the race problem" (Hurston "What" 1161), which she believes exploits this ethnic struggle.

As if echoing Hurston's condemnation of the trends that limit minority literatures, Fanon criticizes the prevalence of literary figures who reaffirm the mainstream culture's perceived superiority or breed the stereotypical idea that "aggressive patterns of conduct" characterize oppressed minorities. These irate narratives, as they become more and more commonplace, anesthetize the public to the severity of racial injury and are thus "assimilated by the occupying power in a cathartic process" (Fanon 238-39). Although some critics label Hurston's narrative as culturally dispassionate, analyzing it in company with her

own and Fanon's theories of minority discourse allows a far different reading of the author's cultural identification. Her unorthodox use of genre, the social sciences, oral tradition, and folk performance, brazenly dismantles the either/or image of African Americans that confirmed mainstream concepts of race and ethnicity and oversimplified the notion of ethnic identity.

Hurston’s anthropological work illustrates her rapt admiration of folklore. *Mules and Men* and *Every Tongue Got to Confess* are among the first comprehensive collections of black American folk-tradition, an undertaking that verifies Hurston’s intellectual commitment to her minority culture. Defining folklore as “that which the soul lives by” and “the boiled-down juice of man” (qtd. in Wilcots 1), Hurston’s concept of this oral tradition entwines the individual and the collective in a manner that implies their cosmic unification. Barbara J. Wilcots finds that Hurston's anthropological work illustrates an enigmatic connection between identity and folk-practices, arguing that Hurston's canon reveals that “through oral and artistic expression, the individual explores his or her interior life and discovers the connections among all aspects of the universe” (1). In her autobiography, Hurston indeed uses written expression to explore the inner-

workings of her own life, but when this narrative exploration merges with her folkloric work, Hurston's concept of her cultural self is revealed.

Considered one of *Dust Tracks*'s minor chapters, "Research" receives little attention from scholars, who tend to focus on sections that offer a more vibrant reading, as opposed to one that seems more like an anthropologist's field guide than a narrative. To readers who wish to uncover Hurston's personal, racial sentiments, however, "Research" offers the richest illustration of her ethno-political concerns. This chapter allows readers to accompany the author on her quest to collect and record African-based traditions, a task that provides the impetus for the author's own cultural identification to take an unconventional shape. Struggling to locate contemporary folk-traditions to which she feels connected, Hurston appears detached from her ethnic heritage. As she encounters performances that are increasingly less syncretized than those belonging to mainstream African American communities, Hurston soon trades her passivity for all-encompassing activity. Relaying her part as a participant in archaic African rituals, Hurston's text reveals that oral traditions provide her, a disenfranchised African American woman, a position from which she can re-

interpret her ethnic culture. Showing readers that Hurston's "soul *lives* by" archaic forms of African ritual, "Research" stands as an auto-ethnographic account of its author's distinctive means to subvert the mainstream ideologies that characterize these primordial rituals as inert and blasphemous. By importing these past practices to the present through a modern voice, Hurston's text criticizes America's race problem on an ideological level, a didactic form of critique that polemic politics and volatile social conflict often obscures.

Hurston's allusive approach to handling the controversial subjects of race and ethnicity anticipates Fanon's call for minority intellectuals' discourses to present "a new type of man to the public" (Fanon 241). Hurston's "Research" dismantles both the "quaint" and "exceptional" images of African Americans that she later condemns, and it bares the existence of a "new" African American—a multifaceted, learned, minority woman whose cultural pliability "invites participation in an organized movement" (Fanon 242). Unfortunately, Hurston's method is so innovative and reticently radical that her cultural fervor becomes unclear to readers who expect that resistance must appear conspicuously.

With this chapter, Hurston addresses the subject of research, a concept she defines as "formalized curiosity" (Hurston 143). This definition opens the chapter, thus emphasizing that her curiosity has been satisfied with formal education and training. Her academic achievements alone subvert the Euro-centric ideals that in the early twentieth century kept minorities, not to mention women, from attaining a university education. Hurston not only earned a bachelor's degree in anthropology in 1927, but she did so as the only black student at Barnard College of Columbia University. At Barnard, she met Dr. Franz Boas, her academic mentor and an acclaimed anthropologist. Under Boas's professorial guidance, Hurston set out to collect Southern African American folklore, a mission that proved to be as much of an intrapersonal research project as it was a sociological one.

Fanon claims that the dominant culture makes every effort to compel members of the minority group to "admit the inferiority of their culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior," and he contends that this admission often emerges from minority intellectuals who have gained reputable positions within mainstream society (Fanon 236). At first, it seems that Hurston fits Fanon's profile of an assimilated

intellectual. By differentiating herself from the African American laborers whom she studies in Polk County, Alabama, she appears partial to the dominant culture from which she has developed her academic skills. Using words such as "primitive" and "primeval" to describe these black communities (Hurston 146, 152), she seems to promote the "quaint" image that she denounces eight years later in "What White Publishers Won't Print." This allusion to stereotype allows Hurston to construct her autobiographical self as a literary figure who differs from the "quaint" African American image that literature has reduced to a steadfast inanity. Hurston's mastery of Boas's objective, academic approach signals her place in the "exceptional" group of intellectual African Americans with whom she was well acquainted. Nevertheless, what Hurston chooses to do with the skill-set she has gained as an "exceptional" African American keeps her from belonging wholly to this learned society.

When she leaves Barnard for Alabama, Hurston announces her admiration of Dr. Franz Boas's "pure objectivity" and his ability to conduct research without any biases that might influence his findings (Hurston 143). When in Alabama, Hurston, who was born in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, collects the oral traditions of her

regional homeland, the South. Assuming Boaz's scientific approach with great success, however, makes Hurston seem as if she is initiating her own alienation from the group she studies. Hurston's differentiation is so apparent to Polk County residents that they refuse her requests for folklore, and her first six months in the field is rather fruitless (Hurston "Research" 143). Hurston's autobiographical account of this ostracism reveals that group identification is so personal and complex a process that it confounds even group members' expectations and forces them to reconsider the prerequisites that would render an individual eligible for inclusion. The remainder of the narrative suggests that Hurston's self-concept is largely guided by her desire to locate a cultural group to which she can belong without feeling confined.

As an outsider among the contemporary African Americans in Polk County, Hurston's difference is so intense that that it emerges linguistically. Although she relays portions of her personal history in the Black American English dialect, her reception of its colloquialisms are challenged in Polk County. Readers might ponder why Hurston, having been raised in a southern African American community, is unable to master the nuances of a language that, even if remotely, belongs in part to

her. When reflecting on her initial failure to collect Polk County lore, she attributes this blunder to not having “the right approach” (Hurston "Research" 143). Using a dialect characteristic of the academy, Hurston approaches black Alabamans asking, "Pardon me, but do you know any folk tales or folk songs?" (144). This white-washed diction voiced from the mouth of a black woman elicits disappointment and pity from the community to which she racially belongs. Hurston recalls the professional dilemma inspired by others’ unbending expectations: "These men and women who had whole treasures of materials just seeping through their pores, looked at me and shook their heads"(144).

Hurston's experience with Polk County locals mirrors her marginalization among her literary peers. More than twenty years separate Hurston's days in Polk County from the time in which she records this experience for "Research." During this interval, Hurston published numerous works and became a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance, yet this success met relentless criticism. Many of her cohorts—among them, notable writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps—publicly admonished Hurston and her writings for failing to focus on the flagrant racism that afflicted

African American communities (Howard 144-45). Failing to use the written word to narrate racial tensions, Hurston's use of language both in Polk County and her writings defies cultural expectations. By resisting these conventions of conversational discourse and the literary word, Hurston's text argues that these "instinctive patterns of behavior" (Fanon 236) that characterize "exceptional" and "quaint" African Americans are in no way inherent in her. Instead, she rebuffs these socially-acceptable patterns that would limit her ability to exist triumphantly as a human rather than a preconceived type. Although her refusal professionally to placate these cultural expectations ruins her literary career, she is able, in Polk County, to achieve success by relying on the quick wit and sharp tongue of a woman who has mastered a black dialectical practice rooted in oral tradition.

In Big Sweet, Hurston finds a discursive intermediary whose use of language reanimates the ancestor in a way that, as Fanon says, "bring[s] [past] conflicts up to date" (Fanon 240). This reanimation occurs trough Sweet's ability to contemporize historical memory of the ancestor through the rhetorical practice that Hurston calls "specification" (153). Specifying is the feminized form of Signification, a rhetorical device that, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr.,

enables a black speaker who "dwells at the margins of discourse" to subvert the language of the ivory tower that for so long has made him or her culturally and rhetorically peripheral (Gates 52). When tracing the origins of this practice, Gates claims that Signifying derives “from the corpus of mythological narratives” (53). Sweet's keen specifying secures her position as a respected and intimidating member of the community, so much so that people begin to accommodate her new friend’s request for folklore. Big Sweet's ability eloquently to assume the ancient rhetorical practices of her ancestors grants her power within this present-day community. Hurston characterizes this communicative skill as a "weapon" that allows a confident speaker to "go to the house of your enemy, put one foot up on his steps, rest one elbow on you knee and play in the family" (153). Hurston's text functions as an act of Signification, for by transforming her scientific documentation into a literary autobiography, she is bringing her text to the "house of her enemy," convention, and "playing in the family" of intellectual discourse. Furthermore, in using Big Sweet to prove the viability of an ancestral practice, Hurston Signifies against standard views of temporality. Hurston’s Signifying is directed not only to the mainstream culture, but also to

her literary peers, who consider her to be a cultural dissenter for refusing to focus on the widespread, contemporary black struggle.

Rather than focusing on interpersonal tensions that occur between members of the white and black American communities, Hurston calls attention to the shift in cultural values and practices that she believes to be the most substantial tragedy to afflict Americans of African descent. The southern African American folksongs that Hurston collects concern the everyday, ordinary lives of men and women, specifically railroad workers. In his *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence W. Levine posits that these work songs served the purpose of "communal re-creation," a means by which a post-diaspora community can reshape its cultural consciousness (25, 205). Although these communal performances create new African American musical traditions, they ritualize the practice of hard labor that benefits the mainstream American economy, an economic practice that has afflicted Black American communities since the slave trade brought Africans to America. They do not, as Fanon would like them to do, modernize any customs that predate the American slave trade, a fact that Hurston quietly laments.

Hurston deeply admires these labor songs and recognizes their cultural importance. The gravity of these chants inspires the objective scientist to exchange her academic discourse for more eloquent, sentimental language. Between stanzas, poetic diction provides her interpretation of the songs and their nostalgic themes. Singers are not merely called singers, but “poets of the swinging blade!” (143). Vivid imagery describes the work that accompanies these songs, yet these descriptions are embedded with Hurston's commentary on racial politics and her longing for a group performance that predates American industry. Characterizing each axe swing as a ceremonial sacrifice to progress, a "great surrender to chance and change" (147-48), Hurston draws attention to the fact that American economic progress dictates the African American railroad worker's labor, industrialism having historically demanded that vulnerable groups "surrender" to its demands. Although she uses passionate language to describe the scenes before her, Hurston remains distanced from this lore that, despite being a part of the Black American experience, is tinged by mainstream, American values.

Despite her passion for the laborers' music, Hurston's commentary lacks any personal anecdotes; she is an anthropologist, not a participant or an active member of

this community, so she maintains a semblance of objectivity. At first, her distance can be somewhat jarring, but as her research continues, she begins to compile folklore farther removed from contemporary African American society. This old-world genealogical lore becomes an organic source of African identity for Hurston and elicits emotion from a woman discontented with the current state of African Americans pessimism.[4] In his commencement address at Atlanta University in 1906, Hurston's mentor, Dr. Franz Boas, offered a suggestion to African Americans who longed for an ideological reformation to sweep through their communities:

> If, therefore, it is claimed that your race is doomed to economic inferiority, you may confidently look to the home of your ancestors and say, that you have set out to recover for the colored people the strength that was their own before they set foot on the shores of this continent….for you have to recover not only what has been lost in transplanting the Negro race from its native soil to this continent, but

[4] In "My People! My People!," a chapter in *Dust Tracks*, Hurston discusses her frustration with what she feels to be the pessimism that pervades the African American community in the 1930s.

> you must reach higher levels than your ancestors had ever attained. (par. 15)

When Boas delivered the address, Hurston was a young child; however, guided by his methods, she seems to answer his call, for her text shows preference for narrative performances that "recover...what has been lost in transplanting the Negro race from its native soil."

In Mobile, Alabama, Hurston met with an ex-slave, Cudjo Lewis. As she introduces the elderly man, Hurston criticizes the American bastardization of Mr. Lewis's original African name: "There I went to talk to Cudjo Lewis. That is the American version of his name. His African name was Kossola-O-Lo-Loo-Ay" (164). It is important to note that Hurston substitutes the term "English" for "American." As an anthropologist, Hurston is well aware that Cudjo is the English adaptation of Mr. Lewis's African name, yet she identifies "America," a term denoting not language but culture, as the entity responsible for altering the African mother-tongue. In a political sense, America, a society that once promoted slavery, is responsible for this culturally-specific form of linguistic alienation. Hurston acknowledges that many contemporary African American folk-traditions similarly stand as evidence to centuries of cultural oppression,

which naturally obscures African heritage and, as she finds with Cudjo, afflicts its members' senses of their cultural selves. As Cudjo begins to tell of being captured and sold into slavery, Hurston declares her contempt for the way in which cultural diaspora has bred inaccurate folklore that, in her opinion, perpetuates mistruths that have falsely shaped African Americans' notions of cultural origin.

Hurston rejects romanticized versions of African American lineage that have been passed down from one fantastic tale to another. Cudjo's explanation of the traditions that shaped the slave trade illumines a rather unsavory ancestral truth that revisionism has buried. Cudjo contends that royal Africans were not sold into slavery. Instead, these noble captives were beheaded (167). To Hurston, this revelation stirs her contempt for a common folk-tradition among African Americans who are "feeling a romantic lack" and claim to have been descended from African kings (167). Hurston blames "white ancestor hounds in America" for beginning this trend of twisting lineage tales in order to accommodate their desire for royal pedigree (167).

Cudjo continues his story, which reveals that not only did white slave owners instigate the slave trade, but Africans perpetuated this oppression by operating slave

markets. Cudjo exhibits his longstanding struggle to identify cultural loyalty when he recalls, “The white people had held my people in slavery here in America. They had bought us, it is true and exploited us. But the inescapable fact that stuck in my craw, was: my people had *sold* me and the white people had bought me” (165). At this moment, readers find Hurston utterly betrayed by the “folklore I had been brought up on” (165). Her emotional reaction and affection for both cultural authenticity and its origin breaks the wall that until now has sustained her objectivity.

Digressing from his salve narrative, Cudjo discusses the way in which his past creates his current heartache. In addition to losing a son, a link in his familial legacy, Cudjo is severed from his homeland and his people, something he describes as one of his greatest sorrows. Considering Cudjo’s mournful plight, Hurston says, “After seventy-five years, he still had that tragic sense of loss. That yearning for blood and cultural ties. That sense of mutilation. It gave me something to feel about” (168). Hurston's meditation reveals an intimate connection to Cudjo’s story. She also notes that his narrative has become an object of her folk-studies that she not merely observes, but experiences and "feel[s]." Her role as an

anthropological folklorist has propelled her beyond mere observation, mere analysis, and now she *feels* his legacy, a legacy that is also hers. These provocative truths are given to her by a man ripped from his African homeland, and through disclosing her sympathies, she validates the legitimacy of his experiences and lamentations. This singular authenticity and ethnic origin prompt Hurston to acknowledge the racial tragedy she is so often accused of ignoring. This recognition ignites Hurston's quest for what she believes to be legitimate lore that unites its participants and transcends the limits of linear temporality.

As with Cudjo's tale, Hurston finds authenticity in an art form whose African roots are easily identified. While conducting research in Nassau, Hurston encounters polyrhythmic Bahamian song, a style of folk music that differs from the African American forms she has collected in America. Although she admires southern African American song, she admires Bahamian compositions more, saying, "The music of the Bahaman Negros was more original, dynamic, and African than American Negro songs" (157). In an article concerning polyrhythmic Caribbean music, David P. Lichtenstein posits that such music serves a counter-hegemonic purpose, and he characterizes it as a "a tool for

reversing the destructive binary oppositions imposed by empire." As a woman rejecting America's dichotomized view of ethnicity, Hurston appreciates this music that reverses such polarity by voicing of "that West African accent grafted on English" (158). Her admiration of the Bahamian form soon exceeds the aesthetic appreciation she holds for African American music; it turns into loyalty.

When discussing the exemplary form of Bahamian song, Hurston transitions from merely observing this music to becoming its safe-keeper, one who must preserve its authenticity. She warns that over-enthusiasm can "violate" a song's "interest of truth" (163-64). She reminds readers, however, that only an individual who knows the material exceedingly well can identify this corrupting shift in rhythm and tempo (164). Hurston's ability to identify these appropriate rhythms, underscores her acquisition of the cultural form. Furthermore, she perceives the significance of these African-inspired melodies and organizes a stage production that will present audiences in the United States with "genuine Negro material" (158). Hurston intends for these theatrics to create a cultural juxtaposition, noting that when compared to the Broadway concept of black music, the Bahamian form's purity will be amplified (158). By emphasizing the authenticity of this musical form, Hurston

implies the inaccuracy of the current American concept of African tradition.

Religious ritual nurtures Hurston's anthropological quest to concretize her own ethnic identification. Despite claiming to have "tumbled right into the Missionary Baptist Church when I was born," Hurston rejects Christianity. Louisiana presents an opportunity for Hurston to study Hoodoo, a religion vastly different from those that pervade mainstream America. In her essay "Hoodoo in America," she offers a brief definition of the religion and its origin: "They [Haitian emigrants] brought with them their Hoodoo rituals, modified of course by their contact with white civilization and the Catholic Church, but predominately African" (qtd. in Fischer-Hornung 353). While Hurston qualifies Hoodoo's authenticity, she clearly asserts its African roots. At this point, one should revisit Cudjo's conversation and Hurston's critique of the old man's claim that "He was a good Christian and so he pretended to have forgotten all of his African religion. He turned me off with the statement that his Nigerian religion was the same as Christianity." Again, Hurston values honesty and traditional, African origin, bemoaning the fact that Christianity alters spiritual practices and requires its foreign adherents to dismiss ancestral rituals. Hurston's

contempt for this ethnic infidelity prepares her to embrace Hoodoo initiation.

Raised by her minister father and superstitious mother, religious practices and ritual guided Hurston's experiences beginning in her earliest years. As a young woman, Hurston noted what she considered to be Christianity's many contradictions and began slowly to break away from traditional Christian doctrines. She recalls how when partaking in ceremonies, she began merely to make "the motions" and go on (Hurston "Religion" 216-17). When studying African forms of religious ritual, however, Hurston surrenders herself to ceremony, giving more than mere motion. In her article "'Keep Alive the Powers of Africa': Katherine Dunham, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Deren, and the Circum-Caribbean Culture of Vodoun," Dorthea Fischer-Hornung explains that while these religious rituals were integral to Hurston's research, she was not permitted to reveal their processes in their entirety (351). Hurston still manages to convey the importance of these rituals and their everlasting effect on her. She claims the lightening rod painted on her back belongs to her forever and that the reality of supernatural phenomenon haunted her a long time after the ritual's end (Hurston "Research" 156-57). Participating in these tumultuous

rituals affirms the author's spiritual communion with the African-based religion, but her reaction to a form of African spiritualism that is less integrated with European influence reaffirms her reverence for primordial performance.

Hurston's autobiography discloses few details concerning Voodoo traditions, but her loyalty to the religion is clear. She immediately upholds its legitimacy, claiming that since it satisfies the individual urge, it is valid. Her defense becomes more imperative as she identifies The Sec Tough and Ving Bra-Drig, cannibalistic societies that have taken "cover under the name Voodoo" (Hurston "Research" 169), thus infiltrating the tradition. With this clarification, Hurston not only defends Voodoo, but she protects its authenticity, identifying the cultural invaders whose association with Voodoo confuses organic tradition with a counterfeit one. Hurston claims that truth exists in Voodoo, an aspect she denies continually for Christianity: "If science ever gets down to the bottom of Voodoo in Haiti and Africa, it will be found that some important medical secrets, still unknown to medical science, give it its power, rather than the gestures of ceremony" (Hurston "Research" 169). Hurston's assessment does more than avow a religious ceremony's importance, for

she names science, the foundation of her beliefs and vocation, as the power behind this mysterious tradition. With Voodoo, Hurston not only maps the ancestral origin of a contemporary African tradition, but she uses science as a means by which she can validate this practice so that it accommodates her intellectual prowess. Her decision to omit these details from her autobiography reflects her belief in Voodoo's sanctity, a tradition she has consumed and assumed, and with silence, contentedly holds sacred.

While Hurston's works will undoubtedly continue to draw criticism, scholars should turn their attention to her lesser-known works, such as "Research," that abide by her own theories concerning race in literature. Enacting a nuanced approach to confront racial tension, "Research" explicates an intimate, auto-ethnographical portrait of an intellectual woman whom scholars continually struggle to understand. Critics might not ever reach consensus on the way in which Hurston negotiates her minority status in a land where hybrid notions of culture tend to dichotomize ethnic identifications, but the text makes clear one aspect of Hurston's cultural identity: Authentic African culture in the form of folk-performance serves as a foundational grounding for Hurston to re-interpret her ethnic heritage so that she may participate in a multicultural world. These

traditions grant her purpose as an anthropologist, they grant her form as an artist, and they provide her direction as an African American, for their organic truths trace a path on which the traveler can tread the tracks that her ancestors have laid.

Chapter 3

Altering the Ancient and Following the Feminine: The Spiritual Space of Culture in Leslie Marmon Silko's "Yellow Woman"

Celebrated as a preeminent figure of the Native American Renaissance,[5] Leslie Marmon Silko's reputation is grounded in her works' candid explorations of contemporary tribal identity, resulting in a corpus of acclaimed writings that counter mainstream concepts of the self that tend to privilege individuality over collectivity. Her texts that display this thematic tendency draw interpretive trepidation from even the most enthusiastic reader. Among her most challenging works is *Storyteller*, a text that is most often categorized as autobiography yet whose form seems to defy any preconception of the genre itself. Showcasing essays, poetry, her father's photography, her mother and aunt's narratives, and what appears to be her own short fiction, *Storyteller* emerges as a complicated, subversive form of memoir that is as much about personal identity as it is tribal history.

[5] The Native American Renaissance (1968-84) saw comprehensive changes in American Indian communities. An unprecedented number of American Indian works were published during this era.

Describing storytelling as "a way of interacting...a whole way of seeing yourself," Silko advances the argument that collective memory and narrative are instrumental in shaping the individual self (Silko "A Leslie"). The idea that the narrative process informs individual identity is a concept Guy A. M. Widdershoven approaches in "Identity Development: A Narrative Perspective," in which he claims that since humans "experience the world through language," it logically follows that individual consciousness is constructed linguistically (105). Bringing Widdershoven's theory to Silko's *Storyteller* opens a new paradigm for interpretation that supports the idea that it is not only appropriate, but responsible, to categorize this multilayered text as autobiography. Classifying this work as non-fiction remains so controversial that a number of book-length works are devoted to exploring the text's cultural and structural compositions. In one such work, *"Yellow Woman": Leslie Marmon Silko*, Melody Graulich implicitly aligns *Storyteller* and autobiography, observing that Silko's use of other people's narratives is a means through which the author asserts and develops her own identity. Grualich concludes that Silko's works illustrate that "you claim who you are by the stories you accept as your own, the particular stories you tell and retell" (5).

By telling these stories that were once told to her, Silko claims the storyteller identity for herself, a move that enables her actively to maintain the tribal narratives and the identities within them, which simultaneously precede her and accompany her own. Through this narrative act, Silko rises as a modern courier of an ancient tradition that complicates westernized modes of thinking.

To evaluate the relationship between the narrative process and cultural identity, "Yellow Woman," a chapter of Silko's *Storyteller*, is a fascinating subject for analysis. Among the most anthologized works appearing in her autobiography, "Yellow Woman" is a modernized rendition of a prehistoric Keres tale about Yellow Woman, an ancient, matriarchal figure that various tribal peoples of the southwest region, specifically members of Native Puebloan cultures, highly revere. Giving evidence that her venerated reputation predates European contact, her depiction appears on a sandstone panel in Utah, a pictographic portrait estimated to be approximately nine-hundred years old (Patterson-Rudolph iii-iv). Her significance endures today among the Zuni, Hopi, and Pueblo people who frequently portray her legacy through various narrative forms—visual artwork, ceremonies, and storytelling. Contrary to the widely held belief that modern displays of tribally-

specific traditions signal a frenzied effort to resist impending cultural change, Silko's modernized "Yellow Woman" stands as a testament to "the adaptability of her community heritage" and shows that this adaptability is "an essential component of its strength" (Clements and Roemer 278). Precisely because of its concurrent portrayal of ancestral tradition and cultural adaptability, Silko's "Yellow Woman" succeeds in doing what Fanon pleads for minority literature do: it "reanimate[s] the cultural dynamic" (237) of a colonized people, showing that for an oppressed culture to remain vital, its group members must allow it to evolve and undergo change.

As with all works anchored in oral tradition, the Yellow Woman story has throughout the centuries been reshaped and recreated, reflecting its storyteller's values and the social contexts within which the tale is reiterated. Rather than presenting this story in a setting far removed from the present, Silko's story takes place in a contemporary milieu. Consequently, the unique historical, political, and social impositions that American Indian communities have endured are expressed as a collective experience throughout Silko's modernized tale. To assess the way in which this collective experience shapes the individual, readers must turn to the narrator, who

reluctantly acknowledges her intimate tie to the ancient Yellow Woman figure. Ambivalently accepting her role as a refashioned player and teller of this ancient myth, the modern Yellow Woman exploits a fluid concept of self that allows her to serve as a cultural conduit whose message shows oral performance to be profoundly trans-temporal.

Proving that oral tradition ensures cultural maintenance, many of the tale's original elements remain intact throughout Silko's version. Paula Gunn Allen identifies these elements as follows: Yellow Woman encounters a masculine mountain god, a katchina, who leads her northward to his home and away from her village, which lies in the south. This deity's intentions and moral character are colored by ambiguity and contradiction, for he is often malevolent, benevolent, or even both. His pursuit of Yellow Woman culminates in a sexual encounter that somehow benefits the woman's wider community. In many stories, she gives birth to the mountain god's twins who become influential tribal leaders (Allen 86-94). A significant attribute of the Yellow Woman character is that she is somehow uncustomary, and this characteristic, while often threatening her with ostracism, allows her to become a figure who mediates between the human world and the spiritual one, an atypical position that, in turn, benefits

her people (Silko "A Leslie" 56-57). This role of the uncustomary woman as an enlightened mediator prompts a slew of feminist interpretations that tend to disregard the cultural theme on which Silko's story is centered.

Silko's narrator at first appears to lead a typical domestic life: she is a wife, mother, and daughter who lives with her family in a pueblo village nestled at the foot of a mountain range. An indigenous woman existing in a modern era, she has been partially acculturated to the dominant culture. This liminal position activates her story, forcing her to consider, and more important to relay, the ways this intermediary station challenges mainstream notions of gender, culture, time, and space. This interposition necessarily defies prevailing dichotomies. With her willingness to subvert the boundaries that chart ordinary behavior, she challenges standard views of feminine propriety and sexual morality. For many contemporary readers, her willingness to abandon her familial duties as a wife and a mother in order to have sexual intercourse with Silva renders her a liberated figure of unorthodoxy. Yet, other interpretations echo the archetypal goddess/whore binary, maintaining that because she expresses her sensuality sexually, she is a corrupt figure of promiscuity. The story's unabashed portrayal of

such unorthodoxy prompts many critics to view the text through a feminist theoretical lens. According to Allen, however, this theoretical approach is merely a cultural import that obscures the story's cultural significance. Allen argues that:

> when the patriarchal paradigm that characterizes western thinking is applied to gynecentric tribal modes, it transforms the ideas, significances, and raw data into something that is not only unrecognizable to the tribes but entirely incongruent with their philosophies and theories. (84)

Working from this westernized frame of interpretive reference implicates this female narrator as being problematic, even antifeminist. In a cursory analysis, Silko's story indeed appears to promote masculine domination and feminine submission. After all, Yellow Woman, entranced by a masculine deity who convinces her to subvert her own will in order to accommodate his, seems to lack volition. Reading these textual elements as symbols that represent the process of tribal identification, however, yields a different interpretation of Yellow Woman, one that emphasizes the power of cultural heritage as it motivates the modern indigenous women to recognize the

presence of her own dynamic, culturally-based reality. This motivational power, coupled with the narrator's fluid sense of self, reinvigorates Yellow Woman's position as an enduring cultural figure of matrilineal strength. As she inherits this position, she reveals the interdependent relationship among self, story, and place.

In "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination," Silko discusses the culturally-specific aspects of oral tradition that shape Laguna Pueblo storytelling, claiming that these narratives show that "Location, or 'place' nearly always plays a central role in the Pueblo oral narratives" (1008). In keeping with this longstanding tradition, "Yellow Woman" shows space to be an integral part of the Yellow Woman's narrative and so, too, her identity. Among the many landforms that engender Pueblo stories, water formations traditionally indicate the formation of a cultural identity that ties the ethereal world to the tactile, immediate space. Silko recalls that in one Emergence tale:

> The spring also functions on a spiritual level, recalling the original Emergence Place and linking the people and the spring water to all other people and to that moment when the Pueblo people became aware of themselves as they are

> even now. The Emergence was an emergence into a precise cultural identity. (Silko "Landscape" 1111)

"Yellow Woman" opens with a sensual scene in which a body of water, a stream, is the landmark that signals the narrator's emergence into her own "precise cultural identity" and marks the location at which this experience takes narrative form. She awakens on the riverbed, her physical body unable to elude the all-embracing nature of the river. Steeped in the evaporating particles of the river's water, her thigh clings "to [Silva's] with dampness" (Silko "Yellow" 367). They lie nude, implying sexual intercourse. Silko has said that in her story, sexual intimacy is a metaphor for the power that attracts the spirit world and the human world (Silko "A Leslie" 57). Identifying this virile spirit as a mountain god lends yet another spacial aspect to the story, for as he represents both divinity and a primordial, towering landmass, he stands as a symbol that is both ethereal and concrete, foreshadowing the kind of identification that the narrator will soon claim for herself. Silko notes that as these textual depictions of landforms compel oral tradition and build a connection to the spiritual world, they transform into cultural markers that trace a symbolic path

on which readers can partake of the "unique relationship between the ritual-mythic world and the actual, everyday world" (Silko "Landscape" 1011). Having been sexually intimate with this mountain god, the narrator has merged with the earth, and so her ability to entertain the spiritual and cultural aspects of her self begins to take shape. Situated within this space, this landscape, the narrator is positioned within the story that it impels—she now occupies Yellow Woman's narrative position. She realizes that to accept this position means to deny mainstream logic, a task she meets with apprehension.

Observing her surroundings, the narrator contemplates the occurrences that have brought her to this scene. Her memory of the night is fragmented, and her sensory perceptions have been altered so that she is unable to apprehend images of her life as it existed before meeting Silva. The narrator recalls the moment that she scanned the landscape, struggling to find her home: "I *tried* to look beyond the pale red mesas to the pueblo. I knew it was there, even if I could not see it" (367). Despite this visual deficiency, the narrator's sexual experience has aroused in her a heightened sense of sensory awareness, and this change challenges mainstream reason. Although she knows that the landscape cradles her home, she cannot

access its image. Readily available to her, however, are the images and tactile sensations of the mountain range, of Silva's home and domain. She is able to feel Silva's body, to recall the image of the moon reflecting off the river's surface the night before. The pervasiveness of these sensual recollections and perceptions indicates the carnal nature of her relationship with Silva and the transformative effect it has had on her. This carnality, while engendered by sexual passion, exhibits not merely a hedonistic fulfillment of sexual desire. Rather, it demonstrates spiritual connectivity and a return to ancestral origin, a concept that Silva symbolizes.

As previously discussed, Yellow Woman's sexuality allows her to become an intermediary figure who negotiates between the human and spiritual realms. By having intercourse with Silva, a deity who represents cultural origin, the text implies that this physical union has yielded a figurative one, that the past and present are not only complementary, but they are one, a single entity. Moreover, this encounter greatly alters the narrator, a contemporary indigenous female, and she experiences internal conflict when faced with the notion that she has become a modern Yellow Woman figure who mediates, or better yet, encapsulates the past and the present. Silva's elusive

identity only perpetuates her frustrations, but as if she is guided by some force greater than herself, Yellow Woman forages on, accompanying the mountain god who wishes to take her to his home.

Silva's actions in the text are somewhat vague, for he rarely speaks, but when he does, his words reveal his concern for cultural tradition and his capacity to accept non-linear modes of temporality. For instance, he addresses the narrator as Yellow Woman, ascribing to her a name that identifies her as a modern incarnation of an archaic figure, but more important, he reminds her that on the previous night, she had assumed this ancestral identity and had guessed that he is the mountain god character in this traditional story (368). The narrator meets Silva's report with discomfort, and perhaps even shame, for the she refuses to own the very assertion that had guided her actions the night before; she finds it naive to accept this inheritance that challenges the notion of linear progress that she, as a modern woman, has assumed.

Cloaked in darkness and moonlight, a classical allusion to female sexuality, her ability to perceive Silva's spiritual origin, and her own, is a simpler task. The night casts a defamiliarizing light on the land that in the daylight appears familiar and mundane. To illustrate

this point, the narrator notes the way in which her perception of the river has changed: in the daylight, it is a rushing body of water, but in the night, it exists as a pool that reflects the moonlight (368). The river's movement implies momentum, and this image seems to ignite the narrator's predominant concern for linear progress and for her contemporary concerns. While lying beside the moonlit river, she had willingly and passionately assumed the ancestral role of Yellow Woman, but her contemporary role seems to her more plausible and, by far, more real.

When denying this role, she cites the progression of time as the reason for which she cannot possibly assume this ancient identity. She contends that "the old stories about the ka'tsina spirit and Yellow Woman can't mean us....what they tell in stories was real only then, back in time immemorial" (368). Interestingly, her assertion reveals that her distinctions between fact and fiction, history and myth, depends heavily on context, for despite the fact that these stories have continued to be told, their real-life applications are more difficult to grasp. Despite having made their way into contemporary discourse, these tales still remain relics to the narrator, a member of the modern audience who considers them to be oral artifacts that provide entertainment and even cultural

awareness, but by no means convey reality. Silva rejects the narrator's propensity to delegitimize oral tradition, and he contends that this Yellow Woman story will make its way into tribal tradition as he shakes his head softly and says, "someday they will talk about us, and they will say, 'Those two lived long ago when things like that happened'" (369).

Silva's reaction to the narrator's refusal to believe the reality of his and her historical roles in this oral performance reveals his sorrow for her misconception. Shaking his head softly and remaining silent and calm, he exudes calm disappointment. He and this woman from this modern pueblo town can, as the primordial Yellow Woman and the mountain god, regenerate this cultural legacy by providing the impetus for a new story, one that will serve as a cultural offering that the Yellow Woman narrator can bequeath to her community. To do so would mean that she has assumed the matriarchal purpose that her ancient self has always performed. For this phenomenon to occur, however, the narrator must accept this identity, and Silva's uncanny powers eventually lead her to do so.

Endowed with the powers of a deity, Silva's touch causes the narrator to reconsider her primeval identity, to entertain once again the notion that she is Yellow Woman

and that Silva is the mountain god. Like the traditional Yellow Woman, the narrator's passionate impressions ignite change; however, this change is relayed through internal ruminations that elucidate the emotions she feels as she begins to notice a new sense of self emerging. She likens the arousal of her identity to the one that she supposes the ancient Yellow Woman also experienced when she became a player in the old stories. The narrator's sensual acuity serves as a temporal bridge that enables her to retrieve ancestral memory, which empowers her to make sense of her present circumstance and to recognize its narrative significance. With each session of sexual intercourse, her experiences align more closely with the mythological Woman, a similarity that leads her closer to appropriating fully this identity. She is, nevertheless, reluctant to initiate these encounters, and so Silva must convince her to do so.

Making their way up the mountain, the narrator does not refuse to follow Silva's directions; rather, she unconsciously follows him, an action that she recalls did not stem from her having made a deliberate decision, but from her almost involuntary willingness to follow Silva's path (371). As he grips her wrist and leads her along, she "had stopped trying to pull away from him” (368). Seeing Silva as a figure who represents origin, one can see that

his persistence is more of a liberating force than a subjugating one. As she and Silva make their way farther north, deeper into Silva's domain, the narrator's indeterminacy begins to wane and Silva's use of intimidation increases. Perhaps most alarming to contemporary readers is a scene in which Silva coerces the narrator to engage in yet another session of sexual intercourse. She at first welcomes his advances, but when he laughs at her, she rejects him. He then pins her down and reminds her that she will do as he says and that he has the power to have his way with her (370). This scene is undoubtedly confounding, and one would be hard pressed to deny its violent implications. Yet, we must dissect this scene, interpreting its figurative elements.

As a human representation of mountains, Silva is an immovable, unrelenting figure who dominates this space, and on a symbolic level, his tenacity illustrates that heritage is an uncompromising force that demands its descendents to participate in its cultural communion. In this text, cultural lineage, not a sex-crazed man, is the dominating force that transcends the narrator's inability to understand that the past always resides in the present. This inability to deny her cultural legacy and its role in

forging her contemporary indigenous identity exposes her cultural angst.

The narrator's reaction to Silva reveals her cultural anxieties. Before Silva laughs at her, she is just beginning to embrace her modern appropriation of this archaic identity. In doing so, however, and in recognizing the significance of this appropriation, she feels self-conscious, worried that her projection of this identity will cause her to be condemned not only by her own modern community, but by the ancient figures to whom she must do justice. Silva's laughter ignites her worry, and by turning her back on Silva, she symbolically turns her back on her ancestral culture. Silva's reaction, while both sensual and forceful, implies his frustration with her self-consciousness, for it indicates cultural regression, which he vehemently rejects. The narrator also acknowledges Silva's power, saying that "his strength could hurt [her]" (370) and that "he could destroy [her]" (371). This, too, alludes to the narrator's fear of tradition, for as a modern American Indian woman, she has been taught, through various assimilative methods that have proved to be effective over the years, that her ancestral culture is, because of its so-called primitiveness, less legitimate than the dominant one, that while her heritage is

historically important, her people's acculturation to Western ideology is of the utmost concern. Instead of eagerly accepting her primordial inheritance, she fears it. She suspects that it can destroy the sense of common experience she shares with members of the dominant culture. For this reason, when she does fully inhabit this identity, she resigns herself to abandoning the modern world in order to live forever with Silva (371), which will both prove her ancestral fidelity and perhaps reconcile her cultural shortcomings.

Scanning the landscape while perched on Silva's mountaintop home, the narrator again struggles to find a balanced perception. The silent stillness of the atmosphere, the sun that warms her skin, and the drowsing sweetness of the apricots in her mouth goad her into denying that contemporary society exists. She says, "I didn't believe that there were highways or railroads or cattle to steal" (371). Signaling her preference for polarized determinacy and behaving as if she must belong wholly to one culture or time and not to the other, she fails to recognize that equanimity is possible. This limited perception defies the underlying nature of the tradition she has just inherited, for Yellow Woman's strength lies not in her ability to reinforce the

boundaries that divide but in her ability to blur these boundaries, to confound common presuppositions that deny the possibility of integration. Yellow Woman must accept and typify integration, and a confrontation with the outside world prompts this conversion.

To uphold the notion of cultural duality, the narrator must willingly return home as Yellow Woman. The previous day Silva had admitted to stealing Texas ranchers' cattle while she slept the previous night. He intends to sell the meat in Mexico and invites her to accompany him on the journey. She accepts, knowing that her mother and grandmother will raise her daughter. When riding to Mexico, however, they encounter an Anglo rancher who immediately recognizes Silva as the thief who has been stealing his cattle. Silva kills this white rancher, and when he does so, he has symbolically murdered the dominant culture that invades his domain. The rancher, symbolizing the colonizer, disrupts the natural order of life on Silva's wilderness mountain. The mountain god's severe response foretells the degree to which cultural stagnancy, the refusal to evolve and live peacefully within various cultures, breeds dangerous extremism. At this moment, Yellow Woman has reached an impasse, and her loyalties are tested.

Yellow Woman realizes the precarious position in which Silva's actions have put her. If she remains with Silva, she must not merely deny, but she must murder the aspects of her life that have been shaped by the prevailing Eurocentric culture. If she leaves Silva, however, but takes with her the Yellow Woman identity that she can assert through storytelling, she will be able to integrate into the modern setting an ancient form of cultural inheritance that will allow her to continue living in the present while being shaped by her cultural past.

She does return home, and her new identity returns with her, for instead of following the paved road, she retraces the tracks that she and Silva made in the sand. Because this story exists, this story that is Yellow Woman's own account of her experiences, readers know that she has made her cultural contribution. The Yellow Woman has herself become an uncustomary tribal figure, and her story exemplifies her ability to merge the past with the present, creating in a contemporary setting the very story that many imagine has become a relic. With this narrative, Silko resurrects the relic and breathes life into the modern-ancestral form that she allows herself to become.

Chapter 4:

Re-Writing the Word to Re-Envision the Sword:

Maxine Hong Kingston's "White Tigers"

In the late nineteen-sixties, on the island of Oahu, a socially conscious English teacher penned a series of memoirs that would a decade later rank among the most influential post-modern masterpieces of the twentieth century. Comprised of five stories that detail their author's experience growing up as a Chinese American girl in California, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts* offers a poignant account of a young woman's cultural coming-of-age. Approaching a number of topics, such as politics, religion, racism, misogyny, and language, the text's thematic concerns are so universal and its influence so far reaching that it has been translated into three dozen languages and, according to the Modern Language Association, has become the "most often taught text in American universities" (Fonsesca 312). Despite having earned its place on best-seller lists and university syllabi for more than three decades, *Woman Warrior* is anything but simplistic or easily defined.

With *Woman Warrior*, Kingston traces her struggle to negotiate her bipartite cultural identity as a Chinese

American, a task that complicates notions of ethnic kinship and belonging. Born and raised in America to Chinese emigrants, Kingston lives suspended between American and Chinese value systems, a position that creates ideological oppositions that challenge her ability to live contentedly within both cultures. Among the many cultural conflictions that Kingston faces, tendencies of her Chinese heritage that she views to be misogynistic disconcert her most, and she labors to find a way to cherish the very culture whose contemporary values she finds intolerable. The introduction to "*The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston," which appears in *Short Story Criticism*, describes the struggle that Kingston's text explicates:

> Her sense of displacement and alienation from mainstream America is a key theme in *The Woman Warrior*, which highlights the conflict between the traditional and often restrictive expectations of Kingston's Chinese culture and the relative freedom of American life. Kingston's anxiety about belonging to both worlds without being a part of either is a major concern in these stories. (Introduction 2)

Pressed between the expectations of her Chinese-emigrant culture and American ideals, the text's prevailing theme

concerns the way in which cultural identification informs the author's process of representation, that of both her Chinese heritage and her own identity.

Through her willingness to entertain uncertainty and to defy expectations, Kingston emerges from her memoir as a cultural amalgamation, a woman born from the various stories, traditions, places, and experiences that together have constituted her selfhood. The text's structure mirrors the composite sense of self that it so eloquently elucidates, for it, too, promotes a form of self-induced indeterminacy, remaining indefinable in terms of mainstream standards of genre and chronology. With its subtitle, *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, the text claims its own place in the memoir genre, a literary form whose features "are often still confounded" ("memoir").

The memoir, defined by a set of loosely related characteristics that might describe, but are not essential to this genre, the label "memoir" remains open to interpretation and relies more on the writer's process of creating and perceiving his or her own work than it does on a set of literary expectations that have been imposed on the work itself. Kingston's text asserts a similar definition of Chinese American culture, illustrating that the label "Chinese American" is also open to individual

interpretation, for it relies more on the individual's process of identifying with and perceiving his or her own culture than it does on a set of cultural expectations that have been imposed on the Chinese American individual. Sustaining the viewpoint that she must define for herself the concept of her Chinese American culture, a similar process of self-conscious categorization guides Kingston's memoir as she recounts the process of developing a Chinese American identification that satisfies her individual desires while both subverting and honoring her minority culture.

Reared under the strict supervision of her emigrant mother and father, who left China to escape the tyrannical rule of a communist dictatorship, Kingston's parents represent a rather sorrowful, albeit common, segment of American emigrants. To Kingston's family, America bestows both solace and anguish. Family members still living in China regularly send the family letters detailing the atrocities they must endure. A complex sense of guilt and gratitude arises in those fortunate enough to have reached the United States (Kingston "White" 50). Although they do not fear the American government as they do the callous Chinese regime that snares citizens' property, murdering and torturing many in the process, the Hongs are

continually exploited by a ruthless system of American economics that feeds on the family's vulnerability (Fonseca 312). Despite working hard, the Hongs, like many of their peers, fail to attain the financial stability that has come to emblematize mainstream America. Those who do successfully navigate this new economic world must partially assume the dominant values that perpetuate this American concept of success. Viewing these dominant values as a source of American prosperity that is largely off limits to minorities, culture becomes divisive, and for Kingston, the result is profoundly alienating.

Frantz Fanon claims that ethnic minorities unable to attain financial stability cope with this misfortune by flaunting a strict adherence to their ethnic cultures, which often proves to be regressive rather than constructive. Becoming "furious and sick at heart" when recognizing that economic disparity follows cultural divisions, "we observe a falling back toward old...attitudes," a phenomenon Fanon describes as a "race feeling." He asserts that the most staunch observance of this return to old attitudes is mistakenly seen as a triumphant act of cultural maintenance (Fanon 158). In Kingston's working-class community, the same misogynistic values that once bound her female ancestors' feet seem to

be the values with which many residents assert their loyalty to Chinese traditions. A new generation of Chinese women experience a different form of chauvinistic binding, their voices shackled and harnessed so tightly that their silence has become a desirable act of self-restraint. As a young, educated woman who calls America home, Kingston's crisis arises when she recognizes that her will to use words is far stronger than the expectations that urge her to remain silent. To remain faithful to her own desires is to defy her filial duty as a daughter, for she would surely disavow the very value systems that have come to characterize her interpretation of her Chinese heritage.

Kingston's quest to locate an agreeable Chinese identification is guided by her wish to belong to the Chinese community whose patriarchal gender constructs she disdains. Kingston ambivalently recognizes the value of living among those with whom she shares a common lineage and homeland, saying that "living among one's own emigrant villagers can give a good Chinese far from China glory and a place." As a Chinese woman who is a feminist, however, Kingston is not a "good" Chinese girl. Therefore, Chinatown "tasks [her] with the old sayings and the stories" ("White" 51, 52), many of which play a central role in reinstating women's subordinate position. Misogynistic, Chinese axioms—

"girls are maggots in the rice.... there is no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls"—invade conversations among members of her family and community (Kingston "White" 43, 46). These expressions, and the beliefs embedded within them, loom over young Kingston, becoming proverbial incarnations of the values that have made silent martyrs of Chinese women for many generations.[6]

To avoid becoming a silenced woman, Kingston rejects domesticity. She refuses to cook, breaks dishes when washing them, plans never to marry,[7] and relishes in being called a "bad girl," asking, "Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?" (Kingston "White" 47). Rejecting any role that is widely considered to be feminine, however, is merely a superficial act of rebellion, for it fails to dismantle the dichotomized concept of gender that belittles her. Instead, this extremism reinforces the binary, wherein instead of displaying qualities that one might consider distinctly female, Kingston works to become its antithesis, to become more male. She attends college at Berkeley and "marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy." Lamenting

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[6] In "No Name Woman," the first chapter of *Woman Warrior*, Kingston deals extensively with the way in which pervasive misogyny in Chinese culture has victimized thousands of women. She uses her aunt's story as a representative example of this oppression.

[7] Kingston married Earll Kingston in 1962.

this failure, she says, "I would have liked to bring myself back as a boy for my parents to welcome with chickens and pigs" (Kingston "White" 47). Recognizing that the decisions she makes will never mask her sex, the writer resolves to reevaluate the authenticity of her ethnic culture's values. To do so, she revisits and re-envisions historical Chinese myths and legends, a process she details in "White Tigers."

Vivid tales of rebellious, strong swordswomen punctuate the chauvinistic environment in which Kingston is raised. Through the use of narrative, Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, builds for her daughter a corpus of Chinese hero tales that exemplifies the strength and dignity of their native Chinese culture, which modern political tensions threaten to conceal. Brave Orchid's stories become a source of comfort and inspiration for Kingston, for they erect ancestral women as figures who are not only as capable as their male counterparts, but who are champions of their people: "My mother told [stories] that followed swordswomen through woods and palaces for years....Even if she had to rage across all China, a swordswoman got even with anybody who hurt her family" (Kingston "White" 19). Brave Orchid's stories and the lessons they imply differ greatly from what she envisions for her young daughter who she says is destined to "grow up a wife and slave"

(Kingston "White" 20). The woman warrior stories, however, mitigate the mother's prophecy. By relaying powerful and formidable female characters to her daughter, Brave Orchid delivers an alternate insight into the value of women in Chinese society, igniting within the young girl the hope that she would grow up to be a woman warrior (Kingston "White" 20). Contemplating the oppositional images of women that confound her ambitions, young Kingston concludes that the fear of unbridled feminine force has relegated women to a servile position, reasoning that "Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound" (Kingston "White" 19). Despite having reached the conclusion that the misunderstanding of these women's power has engendered their confinement, Kingston regularly fantasizes about being one of these old-time Chinese heroines, Fa Mu Lan, the ancient, gender-bending woman warrior.

Defiantly armed with the story of the woman warrior, Kingston assumes this ancient identity and thereby defines the locus of her own Chinese American legacy, one shaped by both American and Chinese principles. In struggling to make sense of the barrage of conflicting narratives that paint a confusing picture of her ethnic homeland, Kingston not merely revisits but re-envisions the legends that have

become emblematic of Chinese culture. By re-writing national heroes and making their struggles her own, she pens for herself a Chinese history that enables her to make sense of the social system in which she lives.

The act of reconceptulaizing established ideas opens Kingston's version of the Mu Lan narrative. As she ushers readers into the mythical world that grants her courage to become Fa Mu Lan, Kingston remarks that her call to enter Mu Lan's story came "from a bird that flew over our roof," whose likeness she describes: "In the brush drawings it looks like the ideograph for 'human,' two black wings" (Kingston "White" 20). In "Reconceptualizing the Linguistic Divide: Chinese and Western Theories of the Written Sign," Ming Dong Gu charts the development of the symbols specific to Chinese writing systems. Chinese writing utilizes ideographs, symbols that echo pictorial representations of the ideas to which they refer. For this reason, Gu contends, an ideograph, such as the one for "human," simultaneously represents both the spoken word and the concept. As the "White Tigers" narrator points out, the ideograph for "human" is composed of two brush strokes, which Gu describes as a pictorial representation of human legs (111-12). As she sees the bird fly above her, the narrator's new perspective causes her to re-conceptualize

the word, thus subverting the referential relationship that conventional Chinese language prescribes to the ideograph and the image to which it has been assigned. The narrator's revised perception rouses her ability to entertain abstractions, and as the tale continues, she re-envisions what it means to be a Chinese American woman. As she subverts the cultural conventions that dictate what image a "good" Chinese American woman should seek to represent, the bird, evoking the human, comes to represent the possibility of freedom. The young woman can, by embodying revision, by becoming Mu Lan, escape and defy the social constructs that afflict her.

As with any text that explores the process of cultural identification, Kingston's memoir draws criticism that either lauds or castigates her use of historical legend to illustrate her contemporary Chinese American identity. A particularly fervent slew of attacks comes from Frank Chin, a Chinese American author and playwright who has "accused Kingston of inventing and embellishing the Chinese myths she incorporated into the narrative" (Introduction 2). Kingston's "White Tigers" indeed reclaims a number of historical legends specific to Chinese culture: an early Chinese novel, *Shuihu zhuan*, provides the title of "White Tigers," while the text's militaristic scenes allude to Mao

Zeong's Red Army and General Yu Fei, a highly revered historical hero (Lan 229; Matten 70+). This method of revising and combining narratives so as to accommodate present circumstance follows the creative tradition that has refashioned the Mu Lan tale over the course of many centuries.

Feng Lan, in "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mu Lan and Kingston's *Woman Warrior*," traces the development of the Mu Lan legend, noting five major versions. "This genealogy," Feng contends, gives readers "a clear sense of the folk tale's evolution into an instrument for ideological struggles, a process in which the tale was constantly rewritten by mainstream Chinese writers to serve specific political premises" (Lan 233). Although Kingston's adaptation of Mu Lan differs significantly from its earliest versions,[8] it succeeds in doing what its early writers intended it to do: it reflects the ideological struggles affecting its writer, and it re-contextualizes the story in order to fill a

[8] Guo Maoquin's version of the poem, which first appeared in the twelfth-century anthology *Yuefu shiji*, is widely considered to be the standard Mu Lan text. In 568 AD, however, the Mu Lan story first appeared in ballad form, but this text no longer exists. For more information, see Lan's "The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist Approach to Mulan and Kingston's *Woman Warrior*."

specific need that exists in the historical moment in which it is rewritten.

Lan claims that for "a Chinese American, China and Chinese culture always impose memories that must either be rejected or reclaimed in order to achieve a sense of origin" (236). Kingston's sense of cultural origin is a convoluted one, based on a number of conflicting narratives that have shaped her sense of what it means to be Chinese. With "White Tigers," Kingston revises the Mu Lan narrative so that it provides a sense of cultural origin with which she can comfortably identify. Through Mu Lan, Kingston not merely searches for lineal roots, but she identifies these roots, locates them, and fully assumes them as her own.

"White Tigers"'s opening lines emphasize the relationship between storytelling and Kingston's identity development: "When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen" (Kingston "White" 19). Juxtaposing the image of feminine subservience to an image of feminine brawn, Kingston presents the binary concept of womanhood that has dominated her childhood view of gender. These female projections serve as models for Kingston through her youth and adolescence, and she recognizes that her actions echo these

women's lives. Steeped in an environment that equates good girls with silent girls, in moments of crisis, Kingston often mimics the quiet, subservient women whose stories accompany her.

Kingston claims that for women, cultural myths are "more intertwined and inside their lives," that the "myths and the psyche of the women are integrated....and the women are aware of them and living them out" (Kingston "As Truthful" 95)."White Tigers" illustrates Kingston's assertion when the narrator describes a series of confrontations that force her to decide which feminine subjectivity she will perform in order to resolve conflict. In one instance, her employer at a paint supply house describes a color as "N*****[9] yellow." Kingston recalls her timid and unconfident response as she simply replies, "I don't like that word." She feels obliged to take this feeble tone, claiming, "I had to say [it] in my bad, small-person's voice that makes no impact. The boss never deigned to answer" (Kingston "White" 48). When working at a different job, another bigoted employer fires Kingston for refusing to type invitations for an event whose venue her boss has selected because the NAACP and CORE rally against

[9] Asterisks have been added to replace the spelling as it appears in "White Tigers."

it. She considers using the swordswoman spirit to exact revenge on this racist employer, imagining that "If I took the sword, which my hate most surely has forged out of the air, and gutted him, I would put colors and wrinkles into his shirt" (Kingston "White" 49). Finding it impossible to combat all of her oppressors, Kingston remains inactive, lamenting the fact that "I ought to be able to set out confidently, march straight down our street, get going right now" (Kingston "White" 49). The mythic figures are always available for Kingston to occupy, but she must decide when and how to manifest them.

To readers lacking extensive knowledge of Chinese history, "White Tigers" appears to invoke only the Fa Mu Lan legend, and this recognition likely stems from Kingston's explicit disclosure of this information (Kingston "White" 20). As she occupies the Fa Mu Lan position and delves deeper into this ancient narrative voice, readers adept in Chinese history might notice an allusion to another Chinese legend, that of General Fei Yu, a male war hero of the Song Dynasty. Rather than informing readers that she is incorporating another legend into her own first-person narrative, Kingston inserts Yue Fei covertly. In fact, the most obvious display of Fei's presence occurs in a brief scene in which Kingston, in the

guide of Mu Lan, receives a tattoo from her mother before entering battle (Kingston "White" 34). Concerned with notions of gender expectations and their effect on her ability to identify with the Chinese American community, Kingston's momentary occupation of a male warrior's subjectivity allows her to subvert the gender roles that bind her. Of equal importance, however, is that by furtively incorporating this allusion while maintaining Mu Lan's narrative voice, Yue Fei's presence is immediately observable but only to Kingston's cultural kin, thus affirming the author's legitimate place among traditional Chinese readers. This narrative act is a risky venture, for although it allows Kingston to assert her place within the collective group, it draws contempt from traditionalists who, like Chin, might take issue with her willingness so drastically to rewrite this historical figure that his maleness is no longer intact. In fact, Yue Fei is so emasculated that the narrator uses distinctly feminine images to describe the tattoo scene, likening the blood to childbirth and menstruation (Kingston "White" 34). The paradoxical nature of this cultural alliance allows Kingston to assert her place both within and outside of mainstream Chinese values, an act that is both cunning and

representative of the author's conflicted place among her Chinese American constituents.

The paradoxical nature of Kingston's relationship with her ethnic culture is reflected in her recasting of Mu Lan, the woman whose heroic legacy derives from her willingness to rebel against the value systems of the nation she restores. Kingston's Mu Lan tale "captures the dilemma of the Chinese female caught in the contradiction between individual pursuit and communal commitment" (Lan 230), a dilemma that the writer also struggles to resolve. Mu Lan's predicament arises when after fifteen years of military training in the wilderness, she disguises herself as a man and valiantly defends her nation from invaders. She must, however, conceal her true self, for she knows "Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations" (Kingston "White" 39). Kingston, too, realizes that as a woman, her family will not view her accomplishments as a testament to her intrinsic value; her value rests only on her ability to bolster a paternal name. "I am useless," she resigns, "one more girl who couldn't be sold," one girl who will not allow her accomplishments to be bartered for "the good of my future husband's family, not my own" (Kingston "White"

52, 47). Both women, however, engage in rigorous training in order to develop a skill set that will serve the greater good.

Narrating a new version of Fa Mu Lan's tale, Kingston draws a correlation between militaristic training and a writer's ability to sharpen her rhetorical skills for polemic ends. As Mu Lan, Kingston undergoes years of difficult training before finally being prepared to enter battle. Her training years are filled with instances that call for her to negotiate between her identities as a warrior and as a woman. After reaching the age of fertility, Mu Lan peers into a gourd that shows her family celebrating a wedding. The domestic life appeals to the young warrior, who prophesies her own future: "I will have for a new husband my own playmate, dear since childhood, who loved me so much he was to become a spirit bridegroom for my sake." Despite her desire to wed someday, she realizes that through her training, she will avoid becoming like the women in so many stories who die as a result of misogyny. Gaining a solid set of skills for battle will create a strong sense of agency for the narrator. Without this power, women become only apparitions of their potential selves. Knowing that she and her husband "will be happy when I come back to the valley, healthy and strong

and not a ghost" (Kingston "White" 31), Kingston-Mu Lan continues to hone her craft.

After hearing that her father has been called to war, Mu Lan takes her father's place in the military, "vengeance" carved on her back. Years of preparations ensure the woman warrior's success on the battlefield, where she eventually falls in love with one of her fellow soldiers, becomes pregnant, and rides into battle with her young child strapped to her back, "his breathing in rhythm with mine, his heart beating like my heart" (Kingston "White" 40). The narrator's ability to recognize that she can live both as a warrior and a mother indicates Kingston's growing ability to realize the possibilities that her femininity grants her, to abandon the dichotomized notions of womanhood that she has witnessed first-hand in her own community. She attributes this realization to her rigorous preparations that ready her for battle, from which she "learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (Kingston "White" 29).

The battle Kingston fights is different from Mu Lan's; her opponents are not Jin soldiers but oppressive ideologies that relegate her to a marginalized status. Her weapon is not a sword but her words. Comparing herself to

the woman warrior whose story she has just made her own, Kingston notes that "What we have in common are the words at our backs," and for the writer, "The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (Kingston "White" 53).

Twenty-two years after *Woman Warrior*'s publication, Kingston discussed the controversy surrounding her use of myth in "White Tigers." She argues that the evolution of these ancient tales is the key to their survival: "Myth is vibrant and alive as long as it keeps changing," she argues. For emigrants who bring these ancestral traditions to a new, unfamiliar place, the need to sustain these oral narratives through reinvention acquires particular importance. She cautions that if emigrants "don't change those myths, those myths are useless and die" (Kingston "As Truthful" 95). Kingston's defense echoes Frantz Fanon's claim that for members of an oppressed community to ensure their ethnic culture's survival, they must reshape ancestral traditions into contemporary patterns that accommodate the contextual realities from which they are re-expressed.[10] Fanon warns that a frenzied need to sustain native culture will undoubtedly lead to highly stylized,

[10] See Fanon's "On National Culture" from *Wretched of the Earth*.

even stereotypical, representations of arcane traditions. Kingston observes that this phenomenon has become a widespread American malady that infects interpretations of her work:

> There's a movement in America today where people are looking for roots that will at last get them firm ground. These people want something traditional and static. These people are very literal people. They say that there is one version of history, and there is one version of myth. And they will hang on to that one version, so it mustn't change. This is traditionalism, retro-thinking, fundamentalism." (Kingston "As Truthful" 95)

Kingston's "White Tigers" refutes the idea that a singular version of history and myth is possible. More significant, however, it refutes the idea that identity is itself singularly made; rather, it is multilayered, unfixed, and subject to change.

To secure her identity as a Chinese American woman, Kingston returns to the oral traditions that have shaped her perception of the world, and with her text—a contemporary performance of oral tradition—she proclaims, and indeed creates, a cultural identification. Kingston

does not simply exchange a collective identity for an individual one. Rather, she fully recognizes that the Chinese women who have come before her—their experiences, defeats, and triumphs—all exist within her and inform her own identity. In the most ancient Chinese tales, she finds the chance to occupy primordial subjectivities that enable her, on her own terms through narrative performance, to make sense of the ideological contradictions that stand as a haunting source of her oppression. By recasting historical figures of myth, "White Tigers" presents a new vantage point through which cultural tradition can be viewed and critiqued, and it posits by merging tradition and modernity, that culture is not merely pliable, but most viable in its ability to evolve and to empower.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

As demonstrated by the works discussed in this study, cultural identity formation is a complex and individualized endeavor that often takes narrative form. This venture responds to an instinctive need to rediscover the ethnic identities that relocation, political persecution, and marginalization have deemed off limits. Fanon describes this quest as

> passionate research...directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others. (Fanon 201)

When the passionate researcher finds that this "splendid era" is inaccessible, she must take a different approach, one that Stuart Hall argues is not a "rediscovery [of cultural identity] but the *production* of identity. Not an identity grounded in the archeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past" (Hall "Cultural" 224). Re-telling the past in order to inform cultural identity is the subject of Hurston's "Research," Silko's "Yellow Woman," and

Kingston's "White Tigers," and through this narrative process each writer charts for herself a port of cultural origin.

By inhabiting a re-envisioned form of the ancestor, each writer composes her own cultural provenance, the legitimacy of which might be widely disputed but that only she can justly evaluate. Willing to transgress boundaries erected by both their ethnic cultures and the mainstream culture, Hurston's, Silko's, and Kingston's texts rise as dialogical works that subvert preconceived notions of culture to reveal what Fanon calls "a new type of man"[11] (Fanon 241). For these writers, this "new type of man" is truly primordial. Hurston's Hoodoo spirit, Silko's tribal matriarch, and Kingston's ancient swordswoman existed long before the eras in which they are reinvented. These ancient identities' contemporaneity, their ability to exist concurrently within the modern voices that perform them, renders them "new."

According to Stuart Hall, "the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" is the means through which we

[11] As discussed in the first chapter of this analysis, Fanon has been criticized for failing to display the minority woman's ability to participate in an organized movement for liberation. I believe, however, that when he discusses the emergence of a new "man," he means this term to be universal, one which contemporary scholars might replace with the term "human."

construct a cultural identity (Hall "Cultural" 225). By re-appropriating ancient subjectivities through the writing process, Hurston, Silko, and Kingston deliberately position themselves within the narratives of their ethnic groups' past and, by doing so, give a pointed representation of their own cultural identification that serves each woman's specific needs. For Hurston, the political turmoil that had come to characterize the African American experience lead her to pursue a form of African culture less inflected by the Eurocentric ideals that shape mainstream African American life. Invoking a pagan spirit through ritual initiates Hurston into a cultural identification rooted in what she considers to be an authentic form of African culture. Silko's text displays a form of tribal identification that highlights the modern indigenous woman's struggle to conceive that she is the modern incarnation of an ancient spirit. Recalling her grandfather's stories of other women who have inherited this same identity, she acknowledges the legitimacy of this narrative position, which enables her to decipher the bewildering events that lie behind and before her. Disenfranchised and alienated by the misogynistic value systems touted by her Chinese American community, Kingston reclaims the female warrior's story, granting this ancient

warrior a distinctly female voice. Unearthing this voice, which for centuries had been denied, enables Kingston to sharpen the blade of her modern-day weapon, her words.

Narratives such as "Research," "Yellow Woman," and "White Tigers" demonstrate the destabilizing process of occupying the multiple subjectivities that confound their writer's cultural identifications. These works have gained importance because they articulate ethnic American experiences, but they also serve another valuable purpose: they simultaneously represent and become the contact zones in which differing cultures and identities collide. Homi Bhabha says that at these sites, "the process of iteration and differentiation" take place, and "political change often occurs" (Bhabha "Commitment" 2388-89).

The experiences that form the crux of these narratives are steeped in political and social persecution that has, for generations, stifled the very voices that speak these accounts. Finding unorthodox voices discordant, many readers approach them with a great deal of uncertainty. While this indeterminacy might cause interpretive trepidation, it is the reason that these works should be explored, for they reaffirm the nature of identity: it is unstable, fluid, and subject to various interpretations and reiterations. Moreover, these exceptional narratives begin

to normalize the process of occupying these unfamiliar positions, which are usually considered marginal and therefore inferior. As we become increasingly more willing to enter into these contact zones, we can begin to interrogate ideologies that have established the many barriers that separate the marginal from the mainstream.

Readers who consider Fanon's analysis of women to be problematic might avoid using his theories as a point of theoretical departure when analyzing literature written by marginalized women. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, however, argues that these criticisms are not only inaccurate, but they limit the scope of Fanon's contribution to the study of the way in which cultural domination affects ethnic women (Whiting, ch. 4). "To dismiss Fanon as antifeminist...because he does not fit liberal feminists' paradigms of feminism," Whiting argues, "undermines intellectual and pragmatic integrity" (ch. 4). To maintain and strengthen intellectual integrity, critics must expose and rectify the limitations that discriminatory intellectual practices have imposed on ethnic minorities and women. It is not enough, however, merely to reveal the fact that seminal works of literary theory exclude and distort women. Rather, scholars must refuse to allow this disparity to continue. By re-imagining male-centered

theories, much in the way that Hurston, Silko, and Kingston re-envision their ethnic histories, contemporary intellectual needs are met and critical conversations continued. A Fanonian analysis of Hurston's, Silko's, and Kingston's narratives brings these texts into the association of intellectual revolution that Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* so passionately displays.

The cultural potency that "Research," "Yellow Woman," and "White Tigers" display on their own makes them suitable objects for cultural study. When aligned, however, they present multiple cultural perspectives of a single vision: that through the writing process, various sites of cultural manifestation can be tested, defined, and refined. Examining this process leads to an in-depth understanding of origin's instrumental role in shaping the self. Through different means, these writers locate different senses of cultural rootedness, which have been obscured by what Stuart Hall calls "the ruptures and discontinuities" that affect people of cultural diasporas (Hall "Cultural" 222). These texts, for both the women who wrote them and the public who reads them, transform and reinvigorate the concepts of culture that they explore.

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