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Word of Myth: Critical Stories in Minority American Literature

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Word of Myth: Critical Stories in Minority American Literature

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B.A., Georgetown University, 2002

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Abstract

Word of Myth: Critical Stories in Minority American Literature
By Sarah Eden Schiff

Since the 1960s, African American, Native American, Asian American, and Chicano/a literatures have captivated the national imagination. "Word of Myth" contends that minority authors' pervasive use of myth has been foundational to this boom in literary production. Because it imposes order on the unknown and makes what is historically specific seem natural and timeless, myth has proven invaluable for minority authors to challenge master narratives while simultaneously reconstructing marginalized ones. Though myth is conventionally understood as a politically conservative narrative form, I argue that it can both conserve and liberate, sanction and qualify. In myth, minority writers found the means to transmit cultural values, intellectual traditions, and silenced histories while retaining an oppositional political stance.

To map the ways crosscultural US literatures deploy myth, I draw on a broad spectrum of myth theory, from mid-century structuralists Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade to more recent scholars of religion and philosophy such as Paul Ricoeur and Wendy Doniger. Considering texts by contemporaneous authors across cultural divides, each chapter of my dissertation identifies formal dynamics by which US literatures of race and ethnicity forge symbolic space for alternate mythologies in order to confront the leviathan of American exceptionalism.

Because myth appears in all cultures but demands cultural context to be understood, it proves to be an especially useful theoretical lens for comparative American literary studies. By making myth a central critical category, "Word of Myth" identifies literary strategies used in common by authors of disparate racial backgrounds, explains the significance of these connections in the context of national politics, and thereby revises the prevailing narrative of American literary history. Rather than a series of unconnected movements or an assortment of multicultural tokens, post-1960s US minority literature, through its emplotment of alternate origin stories, has fundamentally changed the imagination of Americans – both *how* we imagine and *who* we imagine Americans to be.

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Acknowledgments

While it seems too easy to begin my acknowledgments by relating a dream, I have come to realize over the course of my research the significance of the stories that we tell to imagine ourselves. This is a dissertation about people's dreams as they have been conveyed through myth, so I hope you will indulge me.

Somewhat recently, I had a dream that I was afloat in a sea of books. This may sound like a good dream, but it was actually quite foreboding. The books were thick and heavy, and all of a sudden I was no longer floating. I was sinking – deeper and deeper into the musty, dank pages. I couldn't catch my breath.

But then a great school of fish swam through the books, gliding through the pages effortlessly. "Read," said the school of fish, "read, and you will rise to the top."

"Well, maybe you won't rise to the top," a blond fish said, "but you will stop sinking."

* * *

Thank you to the school of fish who kept me afloat through all the years. To Barbara Ladd, Laurie Patton, and Michael Awkward for their encouragement and enthusiasm and for meticulously working through drafts of these chapters with me. To Jennifer Brady, Elizabeth Chase, Kim Green, Shawn McCauley, Michelle Miles, Marc Muneal, and John Peck for an incredibly collegial graduate school experience and from whom I've learned fathoms. Many thanks go to the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University and the English department in particular for their support, both financial and intellectual.

And to that blond fish, Michael Elliott, who wouldn't let me sink to the bottom: You told me I could thank you when I have tenure, so until then – and ever – I'm in your debt.

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Introduction: Stories beyond Compare

According to Maxine Hong Kingston, Leslie Marmon Silko and Toni Morrison are her kindred spirits, creative individuals struggling to make sense of their positions as women, as Americans, as minorities, and as writers: "It looks like Leslie Silko and Toni Morrison are doing what I'm doing too. When we've talked about our backgrounds in myth and storytelling, it sounds like we grew up in very similar ways" (Hoy interview 54).[1] Kingston feels "an affinity" with Morrison and Silko because they all "seem to write alike" and "are living life in a more dangerous place" filled with "ceremony and memory" instead of merely postmodern textuality. Unlike those writers who are "*only* playing with words" (Rabinowitz interview 74), she, Morrison, and Silko evince a functional "aliveness" in their writing because they are connected to a specific "community and a tribe" (74). According to Kingston, the way that literary works spanning cultural divides can achieve political relevance is by being immersed not only in a specific place of cultural origins but also in the "dangerous place" of myth.

Myth – a reputedly conservative narrative form – does more than provide a culturally specific means to make one's writing directly impact the realm of experience. For Kingston, seeing the shared, even universal, mythic themes across cultural divides convinced her of "the connection of all people – that our myths break across all kinds of barriers" (Hornung "Discussions" 318). For this reason, she compares herself not only to the Chinese mythic heroine Fa Mu Lan in interviews (as she also does in *The Woman Warrior*) but also to the Pueblo mythic deity Spiderwoman (Perry interview 175, 188). Kingston's recognition of myth as a means to ground her creative writing in a culturally

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[1] Silko, in turn, has come to similar conclusions; she says that Kingston and Morrison are "thinking and writing about the same sorts of things" as she is (Boos interview 143).

specific context to make literature politically efficacious while recognizing it as a category for crosscultural comparison inspires the questions that drive this dissertation: What role does myth play in minority American literatures, and how does myth provide a coherent and ethically responsible means to engage in comparative US literary studies?

Kingston's identification of myth as a productive tool for making her writing politically functional, for making it alive, connected and attentive to the "cultural memory" (Rabinowitz interview 74) of a specific group of people, and for simultaneously drawing cross-cultural comparisons is not unique. Whether as embedded narrative or structuring device, the persistent use of myth, especially in post-Civil Rights minority American literature, indicates myth's invaluable role in responding to the challenges of producing American literature as a minority and offering a means to theorize alternate American identities. To better understand the cultural and political work that minority American literatures perform at a moment when minority US identities were being newly politicized, this dissertation attends to the particular uses of myth in literature. Why do so many authors writing in a moment of social upheaval and political protest rely on a reputedly conservative narrative form to restore, construct, and revise oppositional formations of culturally specific identity?

Despite its reputation as a politically conservative narrative that supports the status quo and even bolsters hegemonic authority, the usefulness of myth for verifying American indigeneity while challenging dominant stereotypical and racist narratives indicates its political ambivalence, its ability to both conserve and liberate, sanction and relativize. In myth, then, US minority writers found the means to transmit cultural values, intellectual traditions, and silenced histories while breaking down dominant

exceptionalist narratives. Because myths offer transcendent concepts while exposing how such concepts are made transcendent in the first place, especially when in the context of literature, they prove essential to the production of minority American discourse. By focusing on minority American authors' particular deployment of myth across cultural traditions and at specific historical moments, my dissertation seeks to illuminate the creative political and rhetorical maneuvers of those American writers marginalized from the foundational narratives of American nationhood. In this way, we can better understand how minority American literature manages its methodologically ambivalent task of undermining master narratives while recovering and reconstructing alternate ones for the purpose of political and social recognition.

Developing a Comparative Literary Myth Theory

The term "myth" is an especially complicated word to define because it is a contradiction: at its most basic, it can mean a truth or a lie, or, as myth theorist Wendy Doniger, puts it, it can express "both an idea and its opposite" (*Implied* 3). For the purposes of this dissertation, I do not limit myths to characteristically religious stories but rather use the term to describe those significant narratives of collective memory that bind and structure a community by making sense of its surrounding world, both natural and social. Therefore, to identify a myth involves a continual movement between community and narrative, as myth both structures a community and is determined by it. In some ways, the term "folklore" could work just as well for my purposes as that of "myth," in which case myth could be understood as a larger category that contains folklore, myths of the "folk." Drawing too much of a distinction between the two, however, can lead to

elitist and ethnocentric claims that characterize myths as products of allegedly more sophisticated cultures (such as the Greeks) and folktales as that of less.[2] I have chosen to use the term "myth" exclusively so as to avoid confusion and for the purposes of cross-cultural comparison. I will therefore use it to refer simultaneously to what is often referred to as "folklore" in African American studies; "oral narrative" or the "oral tradition" in Native American studies; the "heroic tradition" (in addition to "myth") in Chinese American studies; and, in Chicano/a studies, "myth" when describing Mesoamerican narratives and "religious narrative" when describing the biblical stories of Catholicism.

The long theoretical legacy of understanding myth as a purely conservative narrative type can be attributed to its most basic function: to make order out of chaos. In different ways and to varying degrees, theorists of myth, beginning with the colonialist vanguards of the nineteenth century and through the poststructuralist theorists of today are concerned with myth's ability to make an unfamiliar and unknowable world familiar and knowable. While they approach the functions and significance of myth from various and often incompatible disciplines, myth theorists tend to stress myth's role in providing security, the way it makes a threatening world stable and meaningful. For most, myth is the narrative mode by which humans secure the status quo. For example, although Freud hoped that one day humanity would abandon myth and religion and put our faith in science, he recognized these internalized discourses as important illusory vehicles of

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[2] Alan Dundes and other critics who are more invested than I in generic boundaries would have a problem with such a fusion on my part. Dundes, for example, defines myths as sacred narratives that tell the truth and folktales as secular and fictional (1). I additionally wish to add that my designation of these narratives as "myths" is not meant to be taken as denigrating them or in any way suggesting that they are not "true." My concern is not whether these narratives are true or false but rather how they work within the literary context.

civilization to make us feel safe in a dangerous world, as well as to compensate us for the sacrifices we make to live in a civilization. With myth, he argues, we can "feel at home in the uncanny and can deal by psychical means with our senseless anxiety" (17). Jung, on the other hand, believed myths to be a useful, if not essential, channel through which we gain access to our unconsciousness. One of the ailments of neurotic moderns, he argues, is that our consciousness is dissociated from the archetypes in the collective unconscious. Myths, which we moderns tend to view as primitive and incompatible with science, give us access to that unconscious and have the capacity to make us whole: "Myths and fairytales give expression to unconscious processes, and their retelling cause these processes to come alive again and be recollected, thereby re-establishing the connection between conscious and unconscious" (Jung "Background" 88-89). Both Freud and Jung therefore believe that myths serve to comfort and resolve anxiety through narrative means, though Jung embraces such a role while Freud finds it suspect.

In a different discipline, but with a similar view, historian of religion Mircea Eliade argues that myth "assimilates" the "chaos" of the "wild, uncultivated" world (*Cosmos* 9) and makes the unintelligible suffering of history "tolerable," no longer absurd or contingent (98). Pioneering anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, alternately, focuses on the biological function of myth, arguing that it literally allows communities to survive in the natural world, which is thereby humanized and made knowable when science fails us. For example, he argues that "every item of culture, every custom and belief, represents a value, fulfills a social function, has a positive, biological significance. […] [T]radition is, biologically speaking, a form of collective adaptation of a community to its surroundings" (46). Structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss, finally, views myth as expressing

innate cognitive structures, yet they still serve to make sense of the chaotic world around us through their demonstration of logic (1).

This "conservative" function of myth, in that it works to safeguard existing conditions, tends to raise anxieties among contemporary humanists, who often imagine myth as a narrative used by the dominant class to instill and enforce a strict and restrictive symbolic order. Yet, as indicated by the many different uses to which minority American writers continue to put myth, it must be appreciated as more complicated and multifaceted than that. In order to better understand myth's political ambivalence, we need to acknowledge the distinction between social conservation and political normalization. As a narrative that works to familiarize the strange, myth is definitively a socially conservative narrative that preserves tradition and allows for meaningful transmission and cultural continuance. Myth as a socially conservative narrative type, then, can be employed in the service of political conservatism or as a radical claim of cultural difference. Specifically, it can serve as a culturally specific story of origins that stakes authoritative, oppositional, yet indigenously American, claims of citizenship.

Myth functions in a *politically* conservative manner when it is in the dominant, determinative position, experiencing the luxury of hegemony. Historian Richard Slotkin, among many others, views myth as functioning in this way: "Myth describes a process, credible to its audience, by which knowledge is transformed into power" (*Regeneration* 7).[3] For Roland Barthes, myth is similarly a naturalized form of history and experience, an "ideological abuse" (11), a means especially to remove historical particulars of

[3] Slotkin is also aware of the organizing social function of myth: "There is a strong antimythological stream in our culture, deriving from the utopian ideals of certain of the original colonists and of the revolutionary generation, which asserts that this New World is liberated from the dead hand of the past and become the scene of a new departure in human affairs. Nonetheless, we have continually felt the need for the sense of coherence and direction in history that myths give to those who believe them" (*Regeneration* 3).

colonialism under the auspices of patriotism. Despite the distinction I am drawing between social conservatism and political conservatism, myths can also assume hegemonic roles within a disenfranchised society, for example, when they enforce prescriptive gender roles. When myth is used to support hierarchical forms of human power, it is conservative in both the social and political sense of the term. Therefore, all myth serves to familiarize and secure and so functions as a socially conservative force. When it proceeds to normalize and marginalize, it is in the service of political conservatism.

Barthes' structuralism in *Mythologies* relies on binary oppositions that align myth as a metalanguage with the tool of the elite political right who use it to conserve power. He therefore argues that radical political language cannot be mythic because it is operational, critical, and historically situated as opposed to (allegedly) innocent and eternal. Because minority American writers use myth for operational, politically viable ends, we must turn to a poststructuralist myth theory that does not discount myth's radical political potential in order to come to terms with the political ambivalence of myth, the way that a socially conservative narrative can act either in accord with politically conservative forces or against them – or both simultaneously. Additionally, we require such a theory because the myth theorists cited above almost exclusively rely on a universalist, ethnocentric framework that presupposes evolutionary progress and upholds European or Euro-American Christianity as the pinnacle of human civilization and cultural production. For example, Peter Kerry Powers describes the debilitating experience of interpreting literature according to the Jungian-inspired literary myth theory of Northrop Frye: While it serves to "open the Christian reader to 'non-Christian'

literature," it simultaneously neuters "the difference such literature might have evoked. Believing in a version of the monomyth, we [literary critics of the 1960s] could read almost anything, but we were not ultimately threatened by much of anything since the monomyth always ultimately pointed to Christ" (xv). Given this universalist legacy of myth theory, contemporary literary critics have been reluctant – and often rightfully so – to recognize myth's critical potential.

Several contemporary religion scholars have contributed to the task of transforming universalist theories of myth into poststructuralist ones capable of ethical comparison across cultures. For example, Wendy Doniger argues that Barthes views myth as postpolitical because its politics have been removed in the service of the powerful. She, on the other hand, contends that his stance only applies to the category of a micromyth, a theoretical but "nonexistent story with no point of view" (*Implied* 88). Once a myth is told, she argues, politics and history are restored to it. Therefore myths are actually prepolitical (101), and, depending on the use-value, can be hegemonic or radical. Laurie L. Patton, on the other hand, argues that myths are always political; how they are experienced determines to what degree and in which way. Patton is one of the first scholars of myth not only to acknowledge but also to theorize the inherent paradoxical politics of myth: while it usually works in support of ideological goals, it contains within its narrative construct possibilities of revolution (217). Her "practical theory of myth" allows for us to understand how the unique category of myth provides minority authors and critics with the narrative precedents to conceive of minority identity in simultaneously deconstructive and reconstructive ways. The politically ambivalent function of myth, in other words, fuels such texts' activist claims to racial and cultural

difference without necessarily devolving into romanticized claims to biological essences or apolitical subversions of the concept of identity altogether. For Patton, myth can both "remove the historical contingency of a religious tradition" as well as "act to resist and to relativize the claims to transcendence that a religious tradition makes" (217). It can therefore translate what is historical into something that appears natural, but it can also disrupt naturalizing narratives of progress when experienced as a cultural artifact – especially in the literary realm. If one adopts Patton's perspective, confronting myth in literature can make the political ambivalence of myth explicit, as the literary frame provides an alternate temporal framework against which to read the process of myth's "mythologization."

To expand on this idea that myth incorporated into literature encourages a subversive reading experience, I would like to back up to address the generic differences between literature and myth, as well as between myth and history, so as to explain how the temporal manipulations of myth allow for the kinds of interpretation that interest Patton. Some contemporary myth theorists, such as William Doty (189), Eric Gould (11), and Eric Ziolkowski (310), argue that myth and literature exist on a definitional continuum so that the generic boundary between the two is unclear. However, I find it more constructive to consider myth a unique category, as it, unlike literature, circulates easily throughout other media and functions as a portable, familiar narrative for a particular audience. Additionally, while the author of a literary work is usually a clear individual, that of a myth is more often unknown and communal, the voice of a tradition. While literature is particular, myth is anonymous and communal.

Most significantly for my purposes, myth differs from literature in terms of its temporality. One of myth's distinguishing markers is its atemporality, its cyclical, messianic, or prehistoric setting in an other time distinct from the "human time" that Paul Ricoeur sees as characterizing both literary and historical narrative. By "human time," Ricoeur is referring to narrative time, the creative means by which humans manage the temporal aporia that results from the irreconcilability of the time of the world (cosmological) and the time of experience (phenomenological). For Ricoeur, narrative emplotment by way of history or literature is the only solution to this aporia, though it is a creative, not a philosophical one. He points out narrative's particular use-value when he argues that we talk about being in time even though "the past is no longer," "the future is not yet," and "the present is not always" (Vol. 1 7). In the space of literature, however, where all that is narrated is always occurring within the body of the text, the present *is* always. Literary narrative in particular, then, solves the aporia in imagination. The temporal disjunctions experienced in real life are reconciled in literature, as indicated by literary critics' procedural recourse to the literary present, what J. Hillis Miller refers to as a "simulacrum of the real present we think we inhabit" (249).

By contrast, Ricoeur understands mythic time to be a projected time that assumes the convergence of cosmological and phenomenological time. Whereas myth "enlarges ordinary time (and space)" (Vol. 3 105), literature that engages myth translates or refigures mythic narratives in a familiar temporal experience of human time through the mediating function of emplotment. Ricoeur argues that history performs a similar role through the archival use of the calendar, the trace, and generations. Because history relies on the same conventions of emplotment that literature does, and because both

history and fiction attempt to solve the temporal aporia that the time of myth overcomes, both history and literature inevitably make use of myth.

According to Tzvetan Todorov, as well as other narrative theorists, the time of literature is plural, consisting of both narrating time, which is linear, and time narrated, which is achronological (*Introduction* 30). Literature's compound temporality, then, can contain the other time of myth within the present of the literary reading experience. In this way, literature, which can explore "the nonlinear features of phenomenological time that historical time conceals" (Ricoeur Vol. 3 132), brings myth into the realm of the historical, the experiential. Situating myth in the realm of the literary emplots a myth's narrative according to a temporality alien to myth's conventional temporal framework. It is no longer ahistorical – in an other time – but framed by a literary present: narrated, human time. Conversely, the conventional literary present swells to encompass not just secular, but sacred time. Because myth, according to Ricoeur, emplots a "new quality of time" (Vol. 1 67), its temporality within the context of a literary text exposes the conventions of narrative emplotment at work.[4] When myth is incorporated into literature, it is automatically revised via its emplotment in the literary present, thereby made unportable, unfamiliar, and nonstandard – destabilizing its very categorization as myth.

Myth in literature preserves traditional forms, values, and stories while disrupting the conventional use of myth as well as the temporal unity of a literary text, thereby paving the way for subversion. The ability to expose the narrative conventions of history is particularly pressing for minority writers who are working to counter hegemonic historical discourse, which aspires "toward a system of representation in which word is

[4] Though I agree with Ricoeur that myth emplots an "other" time, one distinct from both cosmological and phenomenological time, I disagree with his belief that myth is an example of "servile application" of narrative (Vol. 1 69), especially given the way myths are constantly revised in oral performances.

linked contiguously with reality, in which hegemonic story [or politically conservative myth] is true history" (Arteaga 20). When literature contains myths, especially when it contains contradicting myths from multiple traditions, it renders visible the rhetorical modes through which communities structure and value their world through narrative conventions. By deciphering these myths within their cultural contexts and putting them in relation to others, we can most fully appreciate the subtle and resourceful projects undertaken by minority American authors. Their writings often act as the stage upon which incongruent myths – foundational origin stories – come into contact with each other. In so doing, they make socially conservative appeals to tradition while radically challenging hegemonic myths deleterious to their communities but that have been long held sacred by the nation.

A major premise of this dissertation is that literature can incorporate contradicting foundational stories, can emplot them according to narrative time, and can expose them as human artifacts that both restrict and inspire. The revised literary myth theory that guides my readings is meant to interrogate much of the contemporary academic sentiment that inhibits critical discussion of myth. Admittedly, myth has a lot of baggage in literary studies, and especially in American studies, where the myth-and-symbol school reigned supreme at its inception and for so long. The methodology of reducing the character of the United States to a universal myth, such as that practiced by Perry Miller, Leo Marx, and Henry Nash Smith, has long been censured for it "methodological naiveté and for its consensualist ideology, its attempt to contain cultural diversity and conflict within a unitary formation" (Buell 14). Unfortunately, an outright rejection of myth largely followed in academia – despite the persistent attention to myth in minority American

literature.[5] A telling example of the way that the backlash against myth remains in academia is Philip Deloria's 2008 presidential address to the American Studies Association. In the speech, Deloria rejects a focus on myth in favor of history in order to make American studies more politically relevant (17). However, in the very next paragraph, he cannot help but refer to his favored critical trope, the crossroad, as "the terrain of tricksters, of spirit figures traversing the underworld, of radically different epistemological possibilities" (17). Despite his rejection of myth, he is drawn to such a culturally significant and crosscultural mythic figure as the trickster – a subject of Chapter Four of this dissertation, no less – in order to characterize his approach to humanistic inquiry as well as to guide the theoretical project that makes such a scholarly endeavor constructive and ethical.

In his influential essay on American studies, Gene Wise attributes the myth-and-symbol school's decline to the divisiveness of the mid-1960s culture over Vietnam and racial politics. At this point, he claims, "students of America thus turned away from any myths and symbols to look at earthier matters, at material artifacts […], at measurable human behavior and at people's lifestyles" (187). Although I believe the categorical distinction he draws between myth and "earthier matters" is probably more complex than Wise allows, especially given the degree to which the study of myth has been essential to his preferred field of anthropology, the frequency with which minority writers, critics, and activists drew on myth at this exact historical moment complicates his claim that thinking about American identity through myth had come to an end.

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[5] Exceptions to this backlash include Sacvan Bercovitch and Richard Slotkin who have continued to incorporate study of myth in mainstream literary studies.

While a discussion of myth in the current intellectual climate seems passé due to our automatic suspicion of ahistorical narratives, minority American writers' frequent recourse to myth attests to its subversive potential. I agree with Wise that the study of myth, especially in its universalist strain, took a backseat in mainstream academia. Yet it flourished in radically new expressions in literary production as well as in the formation of such critical fields as Chicano/a studies, African American studies, Asian American studies, and Native American studies.[6] Whereas the myth-and-symbol school promoted its work in the service of "exceptionalism," which ends up passing for "universalism" and "promulgates an 'idea of America' in a singular sense" (Davidson 349), the minority Americanist turned to myth to discover alternate origin stories by which to forge culturally specific ideas of Americanness. Recognizing the ways that myth continues to have effect in American culture is so integral, Lawrence Buell insisted in 1999, "that one is tempted to suspect that myth scholarship will make a comeback some day" (14). If we pay close attention to the work that minority American writers and critics have been doing, we realize that a non-universalist myth scholarship has been with us all along.

Cross-Cultural US Literary Studies

Though the histories of American minorities have been vastly different, they nonetheless have had the shared experience of contending with a Christian-inflected American mythology, a system of exceptionalist narratives that has guided the nation's policy and character since its founding (the same narratives that were made manifest by

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[6] Examples of the use of myth in the formation of these fields include the pioneering Chicano/a studies journal named for the mythic homeland of the Aztecs, *Aztlan* (1969 through today); *From Behind the Veil* (1979) by Robert Stepto; *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* (1982) by Wilson Jeremiah Moses; *The Sacred Hoop* (1986) by Paula Gunn Allen; *From Folklore to Fiction* (1988) by H. Nigel Thomas; as well as others that are the focus of my discussion in the fourth chapter.

the myth-and-symbol school). Each of the four minority groups considered in this dissertation, African Americans, Chinese Americans, Native Americans, and Chicano/as, has extensive canons – both literary and critical – of their own. Given the extensiveness of these canons, it is not surprising that there is a dearth of scholarship bringing these groups into critical conversation; any comparative move sacrifices at least a degree of in-depth analysis. Yet studying the literary output of these groups under the comparative term of "myth" allows us to more accurately identify the challenges that stem from writing as minority Americans and the creative strategies by which authors have responded to these challenges in order to politicize minority US identity. The precedent for comparison has already been set by the authors themselves, who, like Kingston, frequently work collaboratively or articulate their aspirations by comparing themselves with authors not of the same cultural or racial background.[7] Ishmael Reed, Victor Hernández Cruz, Shawn Wong, and Rudolfo Anaya, for example, founded the influential Before Columbus Foundation, the grantor of the American Book Awards, to identify the US as a definitively multicultural nation and its literature as likewise multicultural: "Recognizing literary excellence demands a panoramic perspective. A narrow view strictly to the mainstream ignores all the tributaries that feed it. American literature is not one tradition but all traditions" (Before). An underlying assumption of this dissertation is that minority Americans have looked to the category of myth in order to register the multiple traditions and identities of the United States and to counter the mono-myth of American exceptionalism and its prescriptions for American citizenship.

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[7] One of the most influential examples is Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's groundbreaking feminist anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) whose contributors were many different women of color.

Myth as a theoretical category is especially useful for crosscultural literary analysis because it is a narrative type that occurs in all cultures but demands cultural context in order to be understood on its own terms. As Doniger puts it, "Myth is an inherently comparative genre, in a double sense: it both compares and is amenable to comparison" (*Implied* 27). The comparative move of crosscultural myth studies, according to Doniger, involves not just comparing myths across cultures but also comparing a single myth to its cultural context: "Comparing contexts – more precisely, comparing the relations of texts to their contexts – might allow us to advance the comparative enterprise without lapsing into the follies of universalism, by taking a kind of middle ground" (46). Attempting to correct myth theory's inclination to impose an ethnocentric framework on "foreign" myths, Doniger recommends a simultaneous telescopic and microscopic view, a two-pronged approach that analyzes a particular myth on its own terms while more widely observing the similarities and the differences of myths across cultures. While aware that the telescopic view's top-down method might appear universalist, even with the corrective of the microscopic view, Doniger argues that the comparative move is necessary, for it "is our way of making sense of difference" (28). While comparative mythology has been dismissed by many critics, especially in light of universalist ethnocentrism, to go to the other extreme of rejecting comparison altogether as a colonizing practice, to insist that the differences of historical contexts are insufficient to endorse constructive comparison, devolves into another way to "deny difference, to remain unmoved and in control" (52). In other words, to contend that each culture is so distinct that it cannot be understood in relation to another is simply to uphold another kind of ethnocentric universalism.

Combined with the historical contexts and cultural differences it evokes, myth proves an apt tool for incorporating minority American literature into the study of American literature more generally without devolving into demeaning tokenism and without demanding cultural assimilation. Because myth allows for the recognition of cultural difference as something distinct but not foreign, it encourages a critically engaged multiculturalism that resists the accommodating pressures of the melting pot and takes into account power relations. If we are going to follow through on the initial promise of multiculturalism, then we require a theoretical and critical means by which minority American writers can be incorporated into the American literary tradition without sacrificing what makes them culturally distinct. The Before Columbus Foundation's vision has proven a difficult one to achieve because it requires situating marginalized literary production not only in a narrative of American literary production but also in its culturally particular narrative – a narrative that must be accompanied by specific historical experiences, cultural practices and philosophies, mythic traditions, and political incentives. In other words, to recognize minority literature as *American* without allowing it be normalized in the process, we must be sure to retain what makes it distinct, marginal. My dissertation seeks a critical framework within which minority American literature is figured as endemically American without resorting fully to assimilative narratives that appropriate politically disruptive markers of difference. As I will discuss in the first chapter, the greatest obstacle to this project is what Sacvan Bercovitch has identified as dominant American mythology's ability to preempt any rhetoric of dissent by situating it as emblematic of the nation's rebellious origins.

A Word on Terminology: Comparative Minority American Literature

The more common term for classifying the minority American literary traditions that I compare in this dissertation is "ethnic" or "multiethnic" literature. As I have briefly mentioned, and as I will discuss in the first chapter, the dissertation's primary concern is the experience of contact and conflict between a dominant American mythology that depends on a white supremacist and Christian theology and the literary responses of those marginalized by such a mythology. For this and other reasons, I have found the term "ethnic" literature inadequate. Cultural critics have long debated the definitions of and differences between such deceptively familiar terms as "race" and "ethnicity." Perhaps the most influential theorist of ethnicity, Werner Sollors understands "ethnic" as a more useful term than "race" to describe cultural groups because in his understanding of cultural difference, he believes it necessary to incorporate the experiences and perspectives of both the dominant and the disenfranchised; for this reason, he understands race as simply an element of ethnicity since all people are "ethnic" (36).

I have found Sollors' model very useful. However, I am at the same time in agreement with many scholars who prefer the term "race," such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant and Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, for whom "ethnicity" too easily overlooks differences between the experiences of minority groups and overly emphasizes the immigration and assimilation narratives of such white ethnics as the Irish, Italians, and Jews (Wong "Immigrant" 161). Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt similarly question the applicability of Sollors' model to racial minorities. Labeling his approach "postethnicity," they place Sollors in the same tradition as such early American studies scholars as Oscar Handlin and Frederick Jackson Turner (6). Singh and Schmidt view

this school as upholding a progressive narrative of assimilation and upward mobility, one in keeping with American exceptionalism.[8]

In addition to these concerns, I do not find the term "ethnic" especially useful for delimiting my study to those authors who have remained outside the dominant symbolizing measures of American mythology. For my purposes, and notwithstanding its own vulnerabilities, I settled on "minority" to indicate my study's comparative focus without resorting to the politically vulnerable term "ethnic." The term "minority" has the added benefit of emphasizing the way that the traditions of culturally specific Americans remain "minor," non-hegemonic, and regularly coded as not entirely American. Simply put, "comparative minority American literature" registers literature from different cultural and racial groups as distinct and therefore demanding comparison, even within the national context of the United States.

My dissertation is not meant to be an exhaustive catalogue of all the ways in which those Americans who do not wholly subscribe to the tenets of dominant American mythology incorporate myth in their writing. Such a task would be boundless, for it would necessitate analysis of all authors – even the most canonical – who in some way explore and expose the limits of American mythology. Additionally, such "white ethnics" as Italian and Irish Americans similarly experienced mythic conflict. However, as indicated by Sollors' model, as well as by recent work in whiteness studies such as by

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[8] Due to this parallel, Singh and Schmidt reject the postethnicity school in favor of the borders school. Influenced by Chicano studies, the borders school stresses labor history, economic structures, class divisions, and hybridity. Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan also view borders studies as a useful paradigm for postcolonial American studies: "In contrast to the understandings of ethnic assimilation developed by literary historians such as Werner Sollors, postcolonial theory argues that the unchanging status of African Americans and Native Americans in American society might best be explained in terms of their treatment as internal colonial subjects" (11). However, as many scholars of Native American studies have pointed out, exactly because Native Americans, as well as Chicano/as, remain "colonial subjects," the term "postcolonial" is not wholly applicable.

Matthew Frye Jacobson and Noel Ignatiev, white ethnics could more easily embrace the progressive narrative of assimilation that American mythology espoused than racial minorities could. Alan Wald insists on the "profound distinction – never to be forgotten – between the experience of people of color and the European ethnic immigrants in the *mode and consequences* of their incorporation into the social formation, and their subsequent treatment" (23). According to Wald, what distinguishes the social formation of racial groups is the derogatory treatment of their cultures, which are "assaulted, obscured and misrepresented in a ways very similar to that experienced by colonial people, and only superficially like European immigrants" (24). Whereas most religious traditions of Americans of color, if they are Christian, have become so through a colonial experience and have changed Christianity dramatically in the process (see Chapter One for more on this syncretic transformation), most European immigrants benefit from a relatively shared "symbolism, vocabulary, frame of reference, view of the world, etc." with the dominant Christian American culture (Wald 26).

In this light, I limit my study of minority American writers to those whose socially significant narratives most manifestly come into conflict with American mythology and to those whose citizenship rights have most drastically suffered from the nation's foundational narratives and the policies derived from them. Two major groups that might be expected to be included in this study but are not are Jewish and Arab Americans. Given the (mostly) religious differences of these groups from the Anglo-Christian influence of American mythology, their literary explorations of American identity via culturally specific myth are comparable in many ways to the works I consider here. However, given that both have legally benefitted from the racial classification of

"Caucasian," their experiences and writings as American minorities are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Critical Multiculturalism and Recent Work in Comparative US Literary Studies

Over the past fifteen years, or so, US multicultural literary studies has continued to re-define and re-imagine itself. Given the ways in which the innovative multicultural movement was diluted over the course of the 1980s and 1990s culture wars into a celebratory narrative suspiciously akin to the American exceptionalist narrative of the melting pot, multicultural studies, almost since its inception, has been pressed to distinguish itself through the term "critical multiculturalism." This comparative mode of US minority literary studies has been much less willing to generalize differences in historical experiences into parallel narratives of immigration, ethnicity, or assimilation. Rather, the goal has been to situate different groups' cultural and literary traditions in relation to each other while attending to shared experiences of disenfranchisement. Yet these shared experiences are recognized as differently manifested within the context of power dynamics, labor and immigration histories, and gender relations.

Though it has largely acquired the reputation of being in the service of exceptionalist critical paradigms, of corporate reifications of monoculturalism and homogeneity, or of being a "done deal" (see Nathan Glazer's 1997 *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*), many multiculturalists have long been explicit about the ways in which their project is meant to inspire resistance, opposition, and social change. For example, David Theo Goldberg's edited collection, *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (1994), draws a distinction between a celebratory pluralism ("unity in diversity!") and an

antihegemonic project of pluralities (3). He, like many critical multiculturalists, has insisted on multiculturalism's usefulness as a means to actively resist integration and assimilation (though not necessarily to espouse separatism). In this way, multiculturalism "does not involve extension of established values and protections over the formerly excluded group, either a liberal bringing into or a Habermasian collectivist extension of the status quo" (Goldberg 9). My dissertation most dramatically contributes to these goals of retaining multiculturalism's resistant value through its focus on alternate origin stories, narratives that emplot origins outside the realm of dominant exceptionalist narratives but that make claims of origins on American soil.

Critical multiculturalists have articulated the distinction between multiculturalism and critical multiculturalism via a number of different arguments. Peter McLaren, for example, points out that even what he terms "left-liberal multiculturalism" ends up essentializing difference and neglecting power relations, thereby undermining its faculty as a "transformative political agenda" (53). The Chicago Cultural Studies Group extends McLaren's critique:

> The concept of 'difference' […] is a master-trope across many contexts of cultural criticism. Its function has been to convert a liberal politics of tolerance which advocates empathy for minorities on the basis of a common humanity into a potential network of alliances no longer predicated on such universals. But this insurgent way of valuing difference still presupposes the coordination of difference and, in this respect, is insufficiently distinguished from a pluralist tolerance with its minoritizing effects. (120)

Despite these concerns, Goldberg, McLaren, the Chicago Cultural Studies Group, and others, did not recommend abandoning multiculturalism entirely.[9] Its value, for them was that it revised "intellectual discourse" so it was no longer a "means of dominant acculturation or international administration, but rather […] the articulation of alternative points of view. […] It can do this only if it is a field for alliances, for different identity struggles to come into a comparative relation under the heading of multiculturalism" (Chicago Cultural Studies Group 124).[10] Perhaps what is most worthwhile about multiculturalism is this ability to forge alliances, exactly what Robert Stam and Ella Shohat find most threatening to neoconservatives. For them, multiculturalism is the "intellectual and political regrouping by which different 'minorities' become a majority seeking to move beyond simply being 'tolerated' to forming active intercommunal coalitions" (300).[11] Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, for example, recognizes how multiculturalism usefully supports coalition in academic inquiry: "Chicana/o studies can be a border crossing between Chicana/o and other underrepresented groups, a way of speaking about the internal and transnational connections between Chicanas/os and other peoples of the Americas" (289).

Critical multiculturalists' many pleas that minority literatures and cultures be studied in comparison remained largely unheeded throughout the 1980s and 1990s. There were some exceptions; however, they were mostly limited to pedagogical studies

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[9] See Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "On Race and Voice" (1990) for just one more analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of multiculturalism as a comparative practice.

[10] Though highly critical of many aspects of multiculturalism, which "doesn't necessarily redistribute power or resources" (259), Michelle Wallace similarly retains an interest in it: "Even at its most cynical and pragmatic, there is something about multiculturalism which continues to be worth pursuing" (260). David Palumbo-Liu, among others, reiterates this stance: "While multiculturalism cum 'pluralism' may well be co-opted and contained, there is a passing need to not abandon the terrain of multicultural studies simply because it may be appropriated by the hegemonic" ("Introduction" 3).

[11] Stam and Shohat credit the Black Panthers with the term "intercommunalism" (322).

and reference works about how to teach minority US literatures and how to integrate them into K-12 and higher education curricula. There were also several influential anthologies and such edited collections as A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry Washington Ward's *Redefining American Literary History* (1990), Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan's *Memory, Narrative, Identity* (1994) and David Palumbo-Liu's *The Ethnic Canon* (1995).[12] Often the most interested in practicing a form of critical multiculturalism, the drawback of the edited collections was that very few essays featured in them pursued a comparative framework and instead focused on works from one particular ethnic or racial tradition.

Altogether, very few studies published in the 1980s and 1990s explicitly brought into relation minority literatures from across cultural divides. Those that did, such as Werner Sollors' *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), Mary V. Dearborn's *Pocahontas's Daughters* (1986), William Boelhower's *Through a Glass Darkly* (1987), and Thomas Ferraro's *Ethnic Passages* (1993), often presented their arguments according to narratives of immigration (frequently equating the white ethnic experience with that of people of color) or else centered around such themes as autobiographical writing and community. These thematic organizing structures tended to lump disparate peoples and histories according to ethnocentric classifications in which minority cultures were often romanticized and in which the Euro-American literary tradition remained central and standard. Additionally, these studies were often interested in exploring – and celebrating – cultural difference but not necessarily political difference. As Frances R. Aparicio

[12] For examples of pedagogical discussions and reference works, see Paul Lauter's *Reconstructing American Literature* (1983) and Betty E.M. Ch'maj's *Multicultural America*. For examples of anthologies, see the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (first edition 1989), Dexter Fisher's *The Third Woman* (1980), and Ishmael Reed's *MultiAmerica*.

cautioned, "Those definitions of multiculturalism and processes of implementation that do not probe into unearned advantages based on skin color, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation, among other variables of power, are destined to leave intact the very inequities protected and perpetuated by social institutions and structures" (576).

More recently, now that multiculturalism has lost its status as guiding critical practice in US literary studies to transnationalism, the call for a critical multiculturalist literary practice that seeks a politics of coalition has been met with a promising response. Literary scholars have become better adept at bringing literary traditions and their bodies of criticism into relation in order to identify literary strategies used in common by authors of disparate racial backgrounds, explain the significance of these connections in the context of national politics, and thereby revise the prevailing narrative of American literary history. In so doing, such scholars call attention to the defining role that US minority literatures have played in the national literary landscape; no longer are they limited to a series of unconnected movements or an assortment of multicultural tokens.

Studies that I consider at the forefront of this critical trend include Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents* (2006), Christopher Douglas' *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (2009), Charlotte J. Rich's *Transcending the New Woman* (2009), Crystal Parikh's *An Ethics of Betrayal* (2009), and Joshua Miller's *Accented America* (2010). All of these works bring literary texts by authors of disparate cultural and racial traditions into comparative analysis through an organizing focus such as social justice, gender politics, or language politics yet simultaneously adhere to the culturally specific factors that make literary works understandable primarily within their cultural and historical contexts. In *Through Other Continents*, for example, Dimock employs an

ecocritical and transnational approach in order to trace seams of connection between works by American minorities and mythic traditions that span national borders. Not interested in concepts of origins, Dimock is rather in pursuit of a multicultural future. By tracking the connections between Hindu and Chinese mythology and the way they are reiterated and revised by such authors as Maxine Hong Kingston and Gerald Vizenor, she recognizes such seemingly "foreign" mythologies as "Native American" because they "will be fruitful and multiply in the Americas, will leave many traces" (191).

Taking a very different tack that is also interested in situating crosscultural literary works within specific settings and intellectual contexts, Douglas' *Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* considers minority literary production in relation to altering trends in the social sciences over the course of the twentieth century. To do so, he documents how many minority writers, from Américo Paredes to Zora Neale Hurston, from Richard Wright to John Okada, were often formally or informally trained in the social sciences. Though I believe he unnecessarily privileges concepts of culture over those of race, I find Douglas' comparative study especially rewarding given the ways it conscientiously characterizes the moment of literary production via its cultural, historical, political, and intellectual contexts while paying heed to the ways larger conversations – such as those taking place in the anthropological and sociological fields – were being had across cultural divides. Altogether, such critical multiculturalist work evinces a methodological overlap with trends in comparative literature, postcolonial studies, and transnationalism. Yet these studies focus on literatures that specifically address histories, heritages, languages, and political activity within a national context. This dissertation similarly undertakes comparative study as an intra-national project, which always

radiates beyond national borders but also retains the organizing category of the nation, a determining power that is especially pressing to engage for minority US writers.

The Use-Value of Myth for Minority American Writing: Making Symbolic Space

Because American myth and history have long worked in the service of each other, because American history has been written according to the exceptionalist and progressive mythic tropes of Christian salvation, the melting pot, and manifest destiny, minority American writers whose experiences and aspirations defy such myth-histories are faced with the task of forging symbolic space to emplot their own narratives. Since I am identifying the confrontation of dominant American mythology as the shared experience of minority American writers in order to delimit this comparative project, and since myths work to structure and define a community, one of the central challenges faced by these authors is the need to lobby for, defend, and demand the rights of American citizenship. If minority American writers are at once burdened and blessed with mythic baggage distinct from dominant exceptionalist narratives, then they must determine how to reconcile or differentiate that surplus within the context of literature.

Myths are categorically familiar stories, yet when minority writers integrate their myths, which are often unfamiliar to readers not of their communities, they expose the compromises that occur between incongruous myths as well as the contradictions in myths themselves. With this comparative encounter, readers can experience the same kind of work comparative mythologists do, as understood by Doniger. She argues that by realizing how familiar foreign myths are, we are defamiliarized from ourselves (*Other* 141). I would add that they can work in the reverse direction as well: they can make our

own familiar myths strange and unnatural. To become so disoriented is to experience the unmaking of hegemonic myths that we tend to take for granted and to open up symbolic space for that which remains marginalized.

Authoring minority American literature necessitates not only the subversion of hegemonic narratives but also the recovery and revision of marginalized ones. Such a project is methodologically vexed: How does one emplot ahistorical, centralizing narratives to forge collective identity while taking a position that views dominant mythic paradigms with suspicion? Because of their political ambivalence, mythic narratives embedded in literature have proven an effective tool for carrying out such a double-edged task. In addition to myth's political ambivalence, the reasons for its particular usefulness are manifold, as will be demonstrated over the course of this dissertation. Due to its temporal difference, its authoritative appeal to sacred origins, and its portability, myth has been especially productive for making claims to cultural specificity through the shared knowledge of significant stories rather than by appealing to racial essentialism or doing away with the concept of cultural difference altogether through social constructivism.

Myth, then, is especially useful in studying minority literatures as it is a narrative of the communal; it focuses our attention on how narratives bind and define both national and subnational groups. Authors of any racial classification tend to be outsiders of their communities, yet minority writers' propensity for including mythic narratives indicates their desire to insist on a notion of community, though it be constructed around narrative. To incorporate myth, in other words, is to insist on the legacy and relevance of a culturally specific tradition. It is also to stake claims on the interpretive possibilities of

the creative text as a whole, because to decipher a text's meaning, one must have access to the significant stories – or myths – of a specific racial or cultural group.

To chart the different dynamics by which minority writers creatively forge rhetorical and symbolic space for their own mythologies when confronted with the leviathan of American exceptionalism, I consider specific literary works as representative of a larger trend in minority American writing at different moments in American literary history. Most of the authors whom I consider as exemplary practitioners of these trends are major figures in their fields.[13] Despite my commitment to bringing awareness to marginalized texts, I have mostly chosen more canonical authors given the comparative nature of this project so as to aid readers who may not be well-informed in one or more of the traditions discussed as well as to illustrate the influence of myth in the formation of minority American literatures. Though I view my selected examples as illustrative of wide-ranging and characteristic uses of myth, they are also exceptional in their self-awareness of their applications of myth. The considered texts therefore draw attention to the different dynamics by which myth functions at specific historical moments to investigate and theorize communal American identities.

The Organization of the Dissertation

Each chapter of this dissertation considers how myths function and interact within the literary context according to a distinguishing dynamic that occurs across cultural and racial boundaries at a particular moment in American literary and political history. The main body of the dissertation focuses on literature published in and after the 1960s, the

[13] Sometimes the texts I select, such as Amiri Baraka's *A Black Mass* and Frank Chin's *Gee, Pop!* are less familiar because they have been overlooked in the critical tradition or have remained unpublished, perhaps due to their reliance on unfamiliar myths.

moment at which minority American writing flourished and when, I believe for related reasons, myths appeared in that literature as markers of cultural specificity. However, to account for the paradigm shift that occurred in the 1960s in which culturally specific myths were made integral to the production of minority literature and innovative formations of American minority identity, I begin with an overview of literature written in the first half of the century, in which myth figures suggestively – if less prominently than in more contemporary writings.

The first chapter, "Mythic Syncretism and the Case for American Citizenship," therefore details what I understand to be American mythology and then theorizes the dynamic of mythic syncretism, a strategy that characterizes much early twentieth-century minority American literature. In the early twentieth century, American social scientists began to show an interest in culturally specific mythologies, investigating African and Native traditions either to pathologize them or to "salvage" them from annihilation. My primary argument is that many minority American authors similarly documented their culture's narratives, but did so by aligning them with dominant American mythology. By re-inscribing narratives of American exceptionalism through syncretic maneuvers, minority authors could make powerful claims to citizenship rights at a time when minority citizenship status was so tenuous. I consider, for example, how such authors as Charles Eastman, Pardee Lowe, María Cristina Mena, and W.E.B. Du Bois reproduce dominant American myths while preserving culturally specific myths and showcasing their natural alliance with a Christian-inflected American mythology. This strategic use of myth provides evidence of myth's dual ability to preserve the status quo and question its relevance. While most current interpretive practices try to divide pre-Civil Rights

literatures of race and ethnicity into either assimilationist or pluralist camps, I argue that mythic syncretism provides a productive way to think beyond this binary division. Even though mythic syncretism appears to be – and in many ways is – an accommodation to dominant mythic paradigms, the strategy also serves as a means by which culturally specific myths persist to be engaged by later writers in the century.

The second chapter, "Power Literature and the Recovery of Essential Myths," turns to the first wave of these later writers, whose work I characterize as "Power literature" due to its ideological alliance with the post-Civil Rights Power movements. While early minority American literature often registers as part of the "consensus of dissent" that Sacvan Bercovitch views as characterizing American mythology, Power literature breaks from this seemingly unavoidable rhetorical force, inspiring a paradigm shift in the way Americans could imagine categories of citizenship, cultural heritage, and identity. To theorize a politically viable sense of collective identity, Power literature emplots alternate origin stories as markers of cultural specificity. In this chapter, I interpret N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), Amiri Baraka's *A Black Mass* (1966/1969), and Frank Chin's *Gee, Pop!* (1975/1976) as integrating culturally specific myths of origin while rejecting the dominant American myths that have been largely responsible for figuring minority Americans as pseudo-citizens. Their work can be understood as a creative expression of the contemporaneous political work of the American Indian, Black Power, Asian American, and Chicano Movements, radicalized versions of the Civil Rights Movement that rejected its assimilationist program.

Instead of attempting to align disparate mythic legacies, as much early twentieth-century minority American literature did, Power literature stakes rhetorically powerful

claims of primacy and indigeneity, forging an alternate narrative line that makes culturally specific myth determinative of and prior to dominant American myth. In so doing, Power literature, rather paradoxically, exploits universalist strategies of such leading mid-century mythologists as Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell. This method, like that of mythic syncretism, is emblematic of the way myth can work in support of simultaneously conservative and radical political goals. While a petition for separatism and unassimilable difference is most often figured as politically radical, Momaday's, Baraka's, and Chin's attempt to recover authentic, culturally specific myths for the sake of group rights can also be understood as a conservative attempt at preservation. Over the course of the chapter, I identify both the achievements and the limitations of Power literature's dependence on racial memory, cultural nationalism, and masculine normativity to mobilize myth as the narrative vehicle of communal liberation. While Power literature's method is troubling given its investment in universalist discourse and nostalgia, this chapter argues that critiquing texts of those with race, class, and gender privilege as opposed to minority discourse has far different ethical and political implications.

The third chapter, "Myth and Minority Feminist Revision," considers how women writers of color continue much of the work of Power literature to provide alternative origin stories for politically instrumental reasons. However, they do so with the critical understanding that systems of oppression are linked – a ground-breaking premise of womanism and other minority feminisms of the 1970s and 1980s. To avoid the marginalizing strategies of both Power literature and second-wave feminism, the latter of which often figured "woman" as a universal category that, like Power literature,

neglected the particular experiences of women of color, Gloria Anzaldúa, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Maxine Hong Kingston evince a greater degree of literary self-consciousness in their incorporation of mythic narratives, which are always susceptible to normalizing impulses. They pursue as an alternative to a universalist means, a universally liberating end, one in which no populations are marginalized as they formulate concepts of group identity for the sake of group rights.

This chapter charts the persistent link between minority feminism and mythic revision, a self-reflexive strategy that necessitates a particular kind of temporal manipulation. Instead of conflating mythic and historical time as in Power literature, minority women writers incorporate multiple temporalities under the auspices of the literary present. By pioneering such temporal devices as situating historical discourse alongside that of myth (instead of conflating them) and recovering neglected histories of minority experiences, these writers anticipate the potential pitfall of any project of mythic revision due to myth's notorious role in supporting patriarchal ends. Whereas Power literature is more invested in recovering ostensibly "authentic" mythic narratives, minority feminists are instead aware of the inherent malleability of myth, the way that it adapts over time. The unwieldy temporalities and generic experimentation of these works makes explicit the mutually constitutive functioning of oppression, the ways in which identities themselves are unwieldy composites of race, class, and gender that cannot be separated into convenient structuralist binaries. The highly risky nature of this methodology, however, leads to literary controversies over essentialism, the exploitation of the sacred, and the reception of minority American literature more generally.

The controversies raised by minority feminist writing point to a need for comparative mythic literary criticism, the subject of my final chapter, "Monkey Myths and Critical Tricksters." Feminist minority American literature added a more complicating and self-reflexive dimension to Power literature's project of animating separate myth, thereby setting the precedent for a critical approach to myth made explicit in the literary-myth theories of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gerald Vizenor. Given its capability for asserting a culturally specific intellectual tradition, myth has proven invaluable for literary critics to offer theoretical means by which minority literary productions can be interpreted according to the traditions from which they emerge. Such a critical project was especially necessary as multiculturalism achieved canonical, though not uncontroversial, status in the academy against the backdrop of the culture wars.

By turning to African/African American and Anishinaabe trickster figures, respectively, Gates and Vizenor respond to the theoretical impasse between essentialism and poststructuralist deconstruction that characterized minority literary criticism in the 1980s and 1990s. As indicated by Power literature's exploitation of universalist methods for separatist ends and feminist minority literature's revision of recovered origin stories with the supplement of historical discourse, minority identity politics works to contest assimilative and racist definitions of identity while reconstructing more liberating versions – without inviting such deconstructive methods upon the very narratives and concepts being constructed. Though both Gates and Vizenor draw on myth to reconcile this theoretical aporia, their myth-inspired literary theories remain susceptible to deconstructive readings that downplay material experiences of exploitation, power relations, and cultural difference, as indicated by the extent to which each has been

criticized as apolitical elitists or pawns of mainstream academe. Inspired by Patton's myth theory, I therefore supplement their use of the trickster as a semiological trope with a phenomenological focus on the trickster as culturally specific narrative artifact. To illustrate how this revised theoretical approach works, I read Vizenor's novel *Griever* as exemplifying a critical perspective that imports the experiential into the hermeneutic.

This final theoretical approach that I describe in the last chapter actually guides the readings in previous chapters. For this reason, the dissertation could have been organized so that the final chapter would have come first. It is not, however, because I believe strongly that Gates' and Vizenor's theories could not have been possible without the work performed by their predecessors and contemporaries. Both Gates and Vizenor undoubtedly benefit from the symbolic space opened up through syncretic, recovered, and revised mythic forms of cultural identity. My goal is not to offer a comprehensive survey of the way all minority American literature incorporates mythic narratives. Nevertheless, if symbolic space has already been forged, then later writers are freed or compelled to use myth in new kinds of ways and to respond to new developments in literary, political, and intellectual history.

I envision the theoretical approach developed in the final chapter and applied in the entire dissertation as a way to interpret minority American literature ethically in a comparative setting. My attention to myth therefore offers a constructive means for understanding the political value of US literatures of race and ethnicity, for attending to differences and points of convergence across cultural divides, and for revealing the way such texts have fundamentally changed the imagination of Americans. In my experiences in the classroom, I have found that the first impulse of many students – indeed, of many

readers – is to interpret minority American literature according to an allegory of assimilation. All works by minority Americans turn out to be about the protagonist's (or even the author's) attempt to assimilate into dominant white American society. In other words, minority literature is persistently read as chronicling the process of making one's life cohere with a national mythic paradigm of American exceptionalism, rags to riches, and the melting pot.

To get readers to appreciate the complexity of minority American literature, the way that it expands and re-imagines familiar concepts of Americanness, I believe we must focus explicitly on the category of myth – notwithstanding its theoretical challenges. Doing so productively uncovers the ways in which alternate origin stories call into question the basic assumptions of dominant American mythology while revealing that they are already an intricate component of American mythology more largely conceived. To recognize the value of minority myths on their own terms is to perceive that they have always infiltrated what we common believe to be American mythic legacies. And with this awareness, we are better prepared to read minority American literature as not subscribing to a dominant myth or allegory of assimilation but rather as contributing to a much more complex and unwieldy compilation of mythic traditions and systems, which, in turn, better guide our reading experiences.

In the post-9/11 era, we are discovering, finally, that literary criticism must contend with religious difference after the long-held and well-deserved reign of the race, class, gender critical paradigm. Given the degree to which minority American authors continue to incorporate sacred stories – narratives critical to their communities and critical of narratives that harm them – it is to our detriment if we continue to ignore them,

mystify them, or allow them to go under-theorized. Not only can we become better readers of minority American literature by approaching it from a critical perspective that appreciates the role and function of myth; we can also continue the essential project of reading the stories offered by minority American literature as foundational stories of the nation's origins and promise.

Chapter One: Mythic Syncretism and the Case for Citizenship Rights

At the turn of the twentieth century, Charles Chesnutt proclaimed that the "future American" will be an amalgamation not just of the European races but of all the races on the continent. To protest Jim Crow segregation policies and the daily racism experienced by African Americans, Chesnutt exposes how many reputedly white Americans actually already have black ancestry (128), thereby documenting the erasure of racial difference already in progress. Instead of making the argument that African Americans deserve American citizenship rights *as* African Americans, Chesnutt stakes his claims of citizenship by undoing apparent racial barriers, lobbying on behalf of a singular American "race," a term that he uses to indicate "a people who look substantially alike, and are moulded by the same culture and dominated by the same ideals" (123). In this way, Chesnutt figures the biological mixing of peoples as a literal manifestation of the melting pot, one of the nation's formative origin stories. By demonstrating that the color line has already been undone by miscegenation, Chesnutt integrates those not phenotypically white into the shared narrative plotline that should guarantee "the rights and dignities of citizenship" (134) to all the nation's inhabitants. While vouching for African Americans' place in a national myth heretofore reserved for European immigrants, Chesnutt endorses the nation-wide embrace of Christianity as the means by which they can be integrated as genuine citizens. Because "the only thing that ever succeeded in keeping two races separated when living on the same soil – the only true ground of caste – is religion," and because "the colored people are the same as the whites in religion" (134), their path toward citizenship has already been forged. In other words, because white and black Americans share the same sacred stories and rituals – a universal

application of myth across racial but within national borders – African Americans are incontrovertibly entitled to and equipped for the rights of American citizenship.

Twenty years later, Jean Toomer began working on his patriotic poem, "The First American," which would eventually be published in 1936 as "Blue Meridian." This Whitmanian epic reiterates Chesnutt's conviction that Americans can counter racial discrimination by embracing the melting pot myth in a literal, biological way. Unlike Chesnutt, however, Toomer urges Americans to abandon their old gods, those of Christianity, Africa, and Native America, and instead to live as "free men, whole men, men connected / With one another and with Deity" (65). This new Deity is a national one undivided by religious difference: "Open the religions, the exclusive creeds, / Those tight parodies of God's intention; / There is a Root Religion / And we are of it, whose force transforms, / Whose way *progressively* reveals / The shining terrace of one reality" (65; italics mine). Toomer's "root religion" is figured as universally available to all those within US borders, a nation-specific mythology inattentive to cultural, religious, or racial difference. Aiming to free Americans from discrete and divisive religious denominations, Toomer emplots a mythic narrative by which they may unite under a shared mythic system, an alliance of nation-centered and nation-centering narratives that he believes is already epitomized by the united, multiracial American population.

Despite his disregard for specific religions, Toomer appropriates Adamic myth to present himself as the first American awoken to national consciousness. In so doing, he evokes what myth-and-symbol critic R.W.B. Lewis famously claimed a central archetype of American literature since the 1850s, the American Adam: "The image contrived to embody the most fruitful contemporary ideas was that of the authentic American as a

figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (1). In Toomer's figuration of this image, however, the "authentic American," like Chesnutt's "future American," is a man of mixed racial ancestry. Toomer's poem, then, brings about the erasure of racial difference through the erasure of mythic difference – the disregard for distinct faith traditions and their culturally specific narratives – under the auspices of an American, but Christian-inflected, mythic system. This de-racialized model validates the definitively American melting pot mythic narrative, yet, in so doing, jeopardizes the prevailing racial and political assumptions undergirding nativism and Southern lynch law.

Toomer's progressivist mythology is so complete that in one stanza he affirms, "The great red race was here" (53), cites the colonial moment when "a white-robed priest" arrived (54), and mimics a Navajo chant, "Hé-ya, hé-yo, hé-yo" (54); in the very next stanza, though, he portrays the pre-colonial continent as a vast, empty space to be penetrated: "When the spirit of mankind conceived / a New World in America, and dreamed / The human structure rising from his base, / The land was a vacant house to new inhabitants, / A vacuum compelled by Nature to be filled" (54). Native Americans' prior claims to the land are now marginalized in the service of a fully functional exceptionalist American mythology, one in which the call of the wild frontier is made sacred because it is destined. Yet the myth that Toomer emplots is meant to be available to all of the nation's residents, and not just the descendants of those white Europeans on the initial sacred errand into the wilderness.

Current interpretive practices tend to divide pre-Civil Rights literatures of race and ethnicity into either assimilationist or pluralist camps. These texts are often viewed as accommodating to exceptionalist narratives or else attempting to proffer supplementary, revisionary, sometimes radical, narratives and concepts of American nationality. Despite its heuristic value, relying on such a structuralist binary tends to rouse concerns as to whether a specific author or text should be regarded as critical of dominant norms, and therefore good for the tradition, or accommodating to them, and therefore bad.[14] Perhaps the best-known example of this divide is the conventional antagonistic relationship conceived in scholarly conversations between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.[15] Similarly, Asian American literary criticism is often structured around an opposition between such reputed assimilationists as Jade Snow Wong and Pardee Lowe and such reputed pluralists as Sui Sin Far and Carlos Bulosan.[16] In this critical climate motivated by questions as to whether a minority literary work fits into an assimilationist or pluralist model, how do we understand Chesnutt's and Toomer's literary protests figured according to dominant mythic narratives, those of a national Protestant Christianity, the American Adam, the melting pot, and American exceptionalism?

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[14] Concerns about whether an author is good or bad for the tradition may also, conversely, lead to the desire for a structuralist interpretive paradigm.
[15] Numerous critics have weighed in on the intricacies of this debate, many arguing that the disagreement was more in terms of degree than kind. See, for example, Wilson Jeremiah Moses' *Creative Conflict in African American Thought*, Jacqueline M. Moore's *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift*, and Mark Bauerlein's "Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois."
[16] Conversations in Chicano/a criticism often are structured around the divide between such supposed assimilationists as Fray Angélico Chávez and José Antonio Villarreal and such supposed pluralists as María Amparo Ruiz de Burton and Josephina Niggli; and those in Native American criticism between such supposed assimilationists as Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and Alice Callahan and such supposed pluralists as Luther Standing Bear and D'Arcy McNickle.

To circumvent the structuralist interpretive model that assigns literary figures according to their supposedly unilateral political allegiances, we must recognize both authors as addressing a fundamental challenge faced by many pre-1960s US minority writers: how to advance a powerful argument on behalf of American citizenship rights in a nation whose central narratives portray non-European cultures as "primitive" and their people as incapable of self-governance. Due in many ways to these narratives' influence, the citizenship rights of minority Americans – the specific legal and cultural manifestations of which varied over time and across different racial groups – were either legally denied or else precariously warranted. Though Chesnutt incorporates the African American folkloric tradition in his conjure tales and though Toomer does so with some ambivalence in *Cane* (1923), in "The Future American" and "Blue Meridian," they both mostly seek to integrate African Americans into dominant mythic plotlines of the nation. They do so in order to make a polemical case for deserved and destined equal rights.

Chesnutt's and Toomer's projects in "The Future American" and "Blue Meridian" epitomize the recurring effort in much pre-1960s minority American literatures to disregard culturally specific myths in order to position minority Americans as faithful to the nation's centralizing stories. Theirs is a project different from that which is the focus of this chapter, yet it usefully illustrates the poverty of the assimilationist versus separatist model of literary interpretation. Writers contemporaneous with Chesnutt and Toomer considered in this chapter attend to the problem of precarious citizenship rights and disparate mythic heritages out of similar motives but by employing the method of mythic syncretism. Such authors as W.E.B. Du Bois, Charles Eastman, María Cristina Mena, and Pardee Lowe documented their culture's specific narratives while aligning

them with dominant American mythology. In so doing, they couched culturally specific myths within dominant mythic plotlines in order to submit powerful claims to American citizenship rights.

Late in the nineteenth century, in what was increasingly becoming clear was a multicultural nation, US social scientists turned their attention to culturally specific narrative traditions so as to document and understand "group-based difference" (Elliott xviii). For example, in 1879, the US government established the Bureau of American Ethnology, which recorded the traditional customs and narratives of what were perceived to be quickly deteriorating Native cultures. And in 1888, the American Folklore Society was founded to collect traditional stories in order to better understand the cultures in which they were told (127). While most mainstream social scientists were concerned with investigating African or Native traditions either to pathologize them or to "salvage" them from inevitable annihilation – both under the auspices of "documenting American 'progress'" (Hegeman 29) – many authors of minority American literature collected culturally specific narratives by conflating them with dominant American mythic narratives, a strategy of mythic syncretism that I refer to as "syncretism on the page."

Such a project manifests in a number of different ways, including the juxtaposition of culturally specific myths against dominant American myths within the literary frame; the presentation of disparate myths as functionally equivalent under the umbrella of a universal, nation-specific metaphysic; and the documentation of organic syncretism, "syncretism on the ground," that has taken place within the authors' communities. This final mode, for example, vouches for the ways that culturally specific myths are already in accord with the nation's origin stories. In this chapter, I argue that

the strategy of mythic syncretism, a process in which two (or more) mythic traditions are creatively intertwined, offered a functional means for minority American writers in the first half of the century to respond to and, in turn, influence their particularly tenuous citizenship status.

Though identifying culturally specific myth in pre-1960s minority American literature is often challenging given the accommodating technique of mythic syncretism, doing so provides evidence of the way myth can be deployed in support of both radical and conservative political goals, further underscoring the limitations of the assimilationist versus pluralist critical model. Mythic syncretism conservatively justifies dominant narratives while making a radical case for the truth value of alternate traditions. By making culturally specific myth accord with dominant American myth, in other words, many early twentieth-century minority writers could destabilize the hegemonic status and transcendent claims of such nationalist and Christian-inflected narratives as the melting pot and manifest destiny – those that supported racist and imperialist policies. In turn, by re-inscribing the narratives of American exceptionalism through syncretic maneuvers, these authors integrated those Americans figured as pseudo-citizens into national narratives that authorized categories of self-governance. By juxtaposing and conflating alternate mythic traditions within the literary frame, minority writers attest to a universal, yet nation-specific, narrative plotline, one expansive enough to encompass all of the nation's inhabitants. Considering early twentieth-century minority American literature through the lens of mythic syncretism therefore allows us to think beyond the binary political division between assimilationist and pluralist models that guides many prevailing reading strategies.

Because this chapter considers literary works ranging from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1950s, I am beginning this dissertation with the least historicist chapter of what is otherwise a historically oriented project. Later chapters will focus on how authors across cultural divides employ comparable formal mythic dynamics within a particular intellectual and creative movement during a decade-long period. This chapter will consider more broadly the dynamic of mythic syncretism from the moment at which the national imagination showed an interest in culturally specific myth – even if in mostly detrimental ways – up until the paradigm shift that occurred in the 1960s. I view my strategic ahistoricism in this chapter as akin to Lauren Berlant's in her noted essay, "The Queen of America Goes to Washington City." She describes her task as elucidating the "structural echoes and political continuities" (243) that recur in various texts across genres and time periods to explicitly critique the interconnected system of oppression of African American women. I similarly aim to expose the rhetorical pressures and trace the effects of dominant American mythology, which either demands assimilation according to its dictates or relegates racial minorities to voiceless non-entities. In response to a coercive exceptionalist mythology inapplicable to many of its inhabitants, minority authors faced the imposing task of finding a middle ground, of forging symbolic space by which to claim their citizenship rights as Americans.

Disinherited heirs of the nation's foundational stories, many minority American writers of the early twentieth century make mythic syncretism central to their literary productions in order to re-insert themselves into such narratives. Constitutional law scholar Milner S. Ball reads the Constitution as "the American story of origins" (2280), a definitively mythic story (though he rarely uses the term "myth"). This story, he reveals,

"fundamentally excludes [Indian] tribes and denies them voice" (2300) and legalizes slavery. It also makes sacred the progress of American economic development and geographic expansion – a progress that depends on the silencing and marginalization of minorities while exploiting the labor they provide. When the prominent *Californio* Lugo family lost its wealth shortly after the Mexican American war, for example, Judge Benjamin Hayes interpreted their downfall according to the exceptionalist and Puritan-inspired myth of manifest destiny: "The finger of Providence seems to mark the decay of old Californian families" (qtd. in Pitt 277).

James Baldwin recognizes that such a mythic heritage, which pervades racial minorities' daily lives, portrays African Americans as "devils"; in response, he claims that he must "accept the status which myth, if nothing else, gives me in the West before I can hope to change the myth" ("Stranger" 157). In other words, minority authors must become aware of, even embrace, dominant American myths before they can hope to revise and take part in such formative national narratives. In order to demand citizenship rights at a time when they were so tenuously proffered, many early twentieth-century minority authors incorporate dominant myths of American exceptionalism in their literary texts and align them with more culturally specific mythic narratives toward a universal, but nationally defined vision. This dynamic of mythic syncretism, one that exceeds labels of assimilationist or pluralist, allows authors to forge integral symbolic space within a terrain that figures American citizenship as only fully available to white men.

By analyzing the use-value of this strategy, we can recognize how minority writers have tirelessly worked to make claims to legal and cultural citizenship through the creative manipulation of seemingly irreconcilable mythic traditions. To do so, I will first

provide a more detailed description of American mythology, the mythic system or canonical collection of narratives that has provided foundational narrative support to the nation. I will then illustrate the specific burden of this narrative tradition on minority writers, given the ways it is constitutive of a racist political system that disenfranchises those Americans deemed unfit for "Christian civilization." After a more thorough discussion of the term and functioning of "mythic syncretism," I will briefly analyze works by Charles Eastman, Pardee Lowe, and María Cristina Mena, followed by a more sustained discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* (1903). I offer this collective of readings to illustrate the way mythic syncretism variously worked to conserve culturally specific narratives while making them cohere with the dominant American mythology that determined the makeup of its citizenry.

American Mythology

Myths work to order and make meaningful the inexplicable experiences of history and to provide identifying markers for a group of people, often by establishing origins. In turn, these stories of origins provide the narrative material by which groups, nations, and nation-states self-regulate and self-govern. As Ball puts it, "Stories of origin locate law, invest it with legitimacy, and so lend it stability" (2280). In this light, it is useful to think of the familiar narrative of American exceptionalism as not just a narrative, but as a specifically *mythic* narrative, one that has guided so much domestic and international policy of the United States and provided a sense of "imagined" national cohesion and character. In many ways, myth can be understood as ideological, given that it often legitimates a ruling power and eases historical tensions (Eagleton 8). Whereas ideology

is characteristically understood as "false consciousness," myth resists delimitation according to truth claims; in other words, myths, by their very nature, signify both falsehood and truth. It is especially fruitful to consider the narrative of American exceptionalism as "mythic" rather than exclusively "ideological" because the former term allows us to recognize such tropes as manifest destiny, the melting pot, the frontier, the new world, and the American dream as sacred and integral to the nation as a whole, not simply imposed by a ruling class on an impressionable public.

The use of the term "myth" rather than "ideology" – or even "hegemony" – additionally emphasizes the narrative form of American exceptionalism, a defining, teleological plotline that provides a sacred sense of origins and continues to be operational in guiding the nation's policies. In this way, what I am referring to generally as "American mythology" is an example of Paul Ricoeur's "foundational mythopoetic nucleus of a society," the "hidden" kernel that defines a nation's or group's identity, that "can never be reduced to empirical norms or laws," and "cannot be explained in terms of some transparent model because it is constitutive *of* a culture *before* it can be expressed and reflected in specific representations or ideas" ("Myth" 117-118). By acknowledging the sacred aspect of national myths, Ricoeur argues, we can view them as simultaneously threatening ahistorical repression, as in ideology's more familiar usage, while inviting a critical view that relativizes the claims to ahistoricity that myths are always making. In other words, myth's political ambivalence differentiates it from conventional understandings of ideology. Because myths change over time, they demand a historical perspective, and such a perspective allows them to retain their potential for liberation, by which Ricoeur means "the liberation of humanity as a *whole*" (120). Ball adds that

myths, specifically national stories of origin, are never finished, are always adapting and being amended. In this way, they are "empowering and transforming as well as conserving" (2294). Therefore, understanding American myth *as* myth allows us to appreciate it not only as hegemonic "ideology in narrative form" (B. Lincoln xii) but also as possessing in its very being promises of revolution – both of which many early twentieth-century minority American authors readily discerned. Understanding the role that American exceptionalism plays as myth – as formative origin story – additionally allows us to recognize the oppositional function and impact of the alternate origin stories so vital to post-Civil Rights minority US literatures.

Finally, I am persuaded to characterize the narrative of "American exceptionalism" as mythic due to the frequency with which many Americanists, almost instinctively, depend on the language of myth to characterize it. Such a critical trend, I believe, demands a more rigorous and more theoretical approach to myth in order to contribute to our understanding of the way the "master narrative" of the United States is in fact a mythic one. We must recognize the myth of American exceptionalism as working to naturalize disorder and accident into a clearly structured, destined, narrative, one that is both constructive and destructive given the ways it marginalizes contradictory histories of injustice while advocating equal opportunity. This awareness is especially necessary if we are to avoid the pitfalls of a foundational generation of American studies scholars who too looked to the discourse of myth in order to characterize the American nation. Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), which describes "one of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character" as "the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward"

(3), was just one of the influential critical works of the now often criticized myth-and-symbol school.

While Smith's and other mid-century scholars' pioneering American studies has repeatedly been challenged for its Cold War endorsement of a chauvinistic national culture, its lessons have remained valuable to later scholars who continue to expose how mythic elements have not only forged a national culture but also warranted discriminatory practices in so doing. Such a critical perspective is requisite given how influential the sanctioned narrative remains in popular culture. In just one of the many invectives against multiculturalism, for example, conservative political reporter John J. Miller relies on the exceptionalist and exclusionary rhetoric fueled by American mythology. Evoking John Winthrop's 1630 Puritan sermon, "Model of Christian Charity," in which Winthrop refers to the colonies as a "city upon a hill," Miller derides the "particularist" claims of multiculturalism and upholds instead "Americanization" (237). By "Americanization," Miller means assimilation, the process that he claims should follow immigration, which he views as "one of America's great national stories, our country's creation myth" (vii). One of the primary characteristics of the United States that makes of it a "model policy for others around the globe to emulate" is that it is "a place where folks can bury the past" (237). What replaces a history of slavery, immigration restriction, literal and cultural genocide, and imperialist policy is an ahistorical, predestined, even biological myth of manifest destiny and frontier spirit, one evocative of Toomer's "vacant house" and Smith's "vacant continent." Miller writes, "It is a country of spaces so vast that it hardwires humility into the American spirit and helps make Americans among the most religious, but not fanatic, people on the planet" (237-

238). Despite his contention that Americans are of the most humble people, Miller does not evince much modesty about the United States' role as a paragon of virtue for the globe. The ahistoricizing, normalizing capability of myth allows Miller to make his seductive argument, a reigning argument whose influence remains keenly felt.

For this reason, I want to provide a brief recap of some of the influential scholarship that has formulated concepts of American mythology in order to remind readers of its influence even in the present critical climate, which frequently values the historically particular, and, in so doing, overlooks its own dependence on mythic rhetoric and tropes. The Ricoeurian "foundational mythopoetic nucleus" that comprises the dominant American mythology articulated by Smith and Miller and confronted by minority American writers is characteristically Christian, white supremacist, and capitalist.[17] While these three components are inextricably linked, I have identified them as central elements to what can be understood as the annals of American mythology. Of course, American myth has continued to evolve and manifest in multiple guises, yet the determining component that remains intact is what Sacvan Bercovitch describes as the rhetorical "consensus of dissent": whatever initially appears to be successful protest or amendment ends up being subsumed by the consensual force of dominant myth, best exemplified by one of the original American genres, the Puritan jeremiad. A telling example for my purposes is the way in which what could have been – and initially was – such a politically disruptive development of multiculturalism was, over the course of the

[17] When I label the myth "Christian," I am mostly, of course, referring to a very specific kind of Protestantism. The relationship to Catholicism is a complicated one; at times American Catholicism can align relatively smoothly with dominant Amer-Christian Protestantism, as in the post-World War II assimilation of the Irish and Italians; at other times, it can be figured as wholly distinct and "ethnic," as in much Chicano/a practice. See *How the Irish Became White* (1995) by Noel Ignatiev, *Are Italians White?* (2003), edited by Jennifer Gugliemo and Salvatore Salerno, and *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1998) by Matthew Frye Jacobson on the former and Miguel A. De La Torre and Gastón Espinosa's *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity* (2006) on the latter.

1980s and 1990s "culture wars," organically subsumed into the more socially acceptable mythic form of the melting pot, a celebration of difference, whose difference is, finally, another version of the same.[18]

Whereas Perry Miller, a myth-and-symbol school critic, focused on the "dark side of the jeremiad," Bercovitch contends that these "Puritan cries of declension and doom were part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand" (*American* xiv). With the secularist turn of the late seventeenth century, at which point the Puritan vision remarkably "survived the collapse of the church state" (90), American writers and religious figures "abstracted from [the Puritan jeremiads'] antiquated social forms the larger, vaguer, and more flexible forms of symbol and metaphor (*new chosen people*, *city on a hill*, *promised land*, *destined progress*, *New Eden*, *American Jerusalem*), and so facilitated the movement from visible sainthood to American patriot, sacred errand to manifest destiny, colony to republic to imperial power" (92). The exceptionalist logic of the Puritans' original errand, in other words, alters and endures as the national narrative of destined progress. The "rhetoric of consensus" that Bercovitch recognizes as characterizing American discourse is not just dependent on secular ideology but also sacred myth because it renders in narrative form the nation's "civic institutions a fulfillment of prophecy" (*Rites* 41).

Deborah Madsen similarly traces the American narrative of exceptionalism to the Puritans and discerns their influence in the early nineteenth century, which "saw the rising power of exceptionalist mythology translated into the concept of Manifest Destiny – the belief that the United States was destined to bring a perfected form of democratic

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[18] See the introduction and Chapter Four for more on the way multiculturalism has been subsumed by a less resistant cultural pluralism.

capitalism to the entire North American continent – and a policy of forcible removal of those [Indian] tribes that would not retreat before the advance of democratic civilization" (Madsen 47-48).[19] Werner Sollors adds that by employing the theological method of typology essential to the Puritan mission, "the westward movement across the prairie was often seen as a new exodus" (*Beyond* 46). This typological move allowed the nation to simultaneously make claims to "progress" while verifying that progress as destined.[20] It has also proven useful in such mainstays of American mythology as the melting pot, which Sollors reads as an "antitype" for the biblical dictum of "one blood": "The proclaiming of the biblical truth of 'one blood' [in Acts 17.26] in America established a sacred textual basis for the spiritual unity of a secularly divided people" (60).

Not only Christian (and a specific kind of Christian), American mythology has, of course, been racially determined, so much so that the myth of American exceptionalism has long been interpreted as prophesied evidence of white supremacy, what James Baldwin refers to as the "very warp and woof of the heritage of the West" ("Stranger" 155). As Audrey Smedley argues, "The presumed superior 'racial' traits of Anglo-Saxons became a stimulus for American expansion. Indeed, the myth was at the heart of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, by which some white Americans expressed belief in

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[19] Richard Slotkin's trilogy, *Regeneration through Violence* (1973), *The Fatal Environment* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation* (1998), similarly argues that the United States has been made coherent and given direction through its appeal to a particular kind of frontier myth: "The first colonists saw in American an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation, but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (*Regeneration* 3).

[20] William Spengemann and L.R. Lundquist early on make a powerful case for what many view as a secular political ideal is in fact a religiously inflected mythic structure: "Whatever the particular form in which the myth has presented itself, it remains […] an adaptation of Christian mythology to the particular problems of American life. […] [A]s an American myth it has combined, and often confused, the religious ideas of sin and atonement with the political issues of democracy" (503). Much of the myth, they contend, rests on the "notion of progress" (504), a notion that is difficult to square when juxtaposed against a history of minority disenfranchisement.

themselves as a 'chosen people' destined to dominate others" (196).[21] It is important to acknowledge that American myth is typologically interlocked with white supremacy because that supremacy justified and perpetuated slavery, the relocation and genocide of Indians, imperialist aspirations into Mexico, and anti-immigration laws, which, in turn, legitimated the nation's exceptionalist narratives. For example, Sollors points out that the "concepts of the self-made man and of Jim Crow had their origins in the same culture at about the same time" (*Beyond* 38). In order for consent, as opposed to descent, to be the ruling paradigm of American citizenship, the nation's mythology was determined by unqualified others against whom to juxtapose deserved models of citizenship. In other words, for a capitalist democracy, and not an aristocracy, to thrive, it required populations of disenfranchised laborers and a racial technology to differentiate capable citizens – those saintly patriots endowed with Christian civilization – from reputedly incapable ones.[22] Embracing such exceptionalist myths as manifest destiny, the melting pot, and the self-made man allowed the nation to formulate such a technology and deem it fated and natural.

The seemingly secular mythic system – or collection of centralizing narratives – so bound up with cooperating ideas of Puritan grace and destiny, could not but pose a serious burden to those minority writers attempting to confirm a sense of American

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[21] The European precursor to this myth fueled the infamous Doctrine of Discovery, the policy justifying the colonization of non-Christian peoples, which proceeded to be cited in numerous Supreme Court cases to warrant the national confiscation of Indian lands (Robertson 4). It remains official legal doctrine still. By 1850, Reginald Horsman adds, American imperialism came to be understood not only as "a victory for the principles of free democratic republicanism than as evidence of the innate superiority of the American Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race" (1). Ronald Takaki agrees, "The doctrine of 'manifest destiny' embraced a belief in American Anglo-Saxon superiority – the expansion of Jefferson's homogeneous republic and Franklin's America of 'the lovely White'" (176).

[22] Lisa Lowe explains this arrangement according to Marxist theory: "As Marx observed of the United States in the 1860s, the bulk of the land was still available public property, but labor was in short supply. In this situation […], capital needed a cheap, manipulable labor force, yet a surplus of enfranchised workers could run dangerously in excess of the accumulation of capital" (13).

identity and citizenship. These writers speak from the place against which American mythology was forged, the others who were physically displaced and legally denied a voice, the pseudo-citizens who bolstered a white, Christian citizenry and literally built the nation. To resolve what Madsen refers to as "the otherwise irresolvable tension between European claims to the land and the prior claims of the native people," for example, American mythology incorporated the particularly attractive myth of the "vanishing American" who could not survive in "the modern democratic civilization that America was divinely fated to bring to the wilderness of the New World" (43). This exceptionalist mythic rhetoric allowed Native American writers little room from which to give voice to their communities' needs and visions, facing "a choice between physical extinction and cultural extinction, assimilation or death. Within the narrative of American exceptionalism there is no role for tribal sovereignty or native separatism" (43), nor for full rights as African American, Asian American, or Mexican American citizens. Averting American exceptionalist myth would have to await the separatist political and literary movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the meantime, many minority authors looked to the dynamic of mythic syncretism to negotiate their precarious subject positions and citizenship status, to which I now turn.

Precarious Minority American Citizenship

To understand the impetus of mythic syncretism, we must explicitly recognize the role of exceptionalist myth in figuring minority American citizenship as such a tenuous category – both symbolically and legally – at least through the 1960s. While African Americans, Native Americans, Chicano/as, and Asian Americans have been the targets of

drastically different legislative and non-legislative programs, the constant throughout is that they have experienced serious limitations to their rights as citizens or even to their status *as* citizens. Numerous historians and social scientists have already charted the legal and extra-legal machinations, especially those of Jim Crow, that undermined the citizenship rights of so many of the nation's inhabitants.[23] Matthew Frye Jacobson, for one, traces the original racialized ideas of American citizenship to the 1790 naturalization law, a supplement to the Constitution that delimited citizenship to "free, white persons" and that "demonstrates the republican convergence of race and 'fitness for self-government'" (8). Jacobson explains the ways in which myth substantiated this legislation: from 1790 to 1840, American politicians depended not on discourses of racial difference to justify slavery and Indian removal, but rather on mythic discourses of Christian civilization (31). Edward J. Blum adds that such rhetoric continued well into the early twentieth century, alongside more familiar concept of racial difference, both of which paved the way for social Darwinism: "White supremacists classified people of African descent as racially subordinate – not only to exploit them economically but also to link whiteness to the divine" (64-65). American mythology as outlined above offered little province for potential minority citizens, who were assigned roles as less than human, less than civilized, incapable of self-governance, and therefore not entitled to the full rights of citizenship.

The post-bellum period raised new questions of citizenship in response to a heightened awareness of potential citizens: the freed slaves; hostile Indians encountered during Western expansion; the newly Americanized Mexicans after the 1848 Treaty of

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[23] See Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long* and Michael J. Klarman's *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights* for more on Jim Crow America.

Guadalupe-Hidalgo; and an influx of Asian and Irish, then Italian and Jewish immigrants. One of the primary conditions of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, for example, was to assure the citizenship rights of the newly created Mexican Americans. However, as numerous scholars have shown, these rights were not honored. The only right guaranteed in practice was the freedom of religion (Tatum 5), though Genaro Padilla questions even that (15).[24] While Chicano/a history arguably began in 1848, most Chicano/as have come to the United States as immigrants rather than spontaneously becoming Americans. They have regularly filled the need for labor, but when that need diminished, a backlash against immigration was the inevitable result. As Ronald Takaki shrewdly puts it, "The [United States/Mexico] border existed only when Mexican labor was not needed" (334).

The history of significant Chinese immigration begins just a year later, in 1849, and tells a similar story: Initially arriving in the country to fill a labor shortage on the West Coast in the mines and on the railroads, the Chinese were regularly denied citizenship and degraded as a "subservient laboring caste" given the "dominant ideology

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[24] This moment marked "the onset of a long period of Chicano racialization and proletarianization" (González 4) and the transformation of a former Mexican population into what Mario Barrera refers to as a "colonial labor force" (qtd. in González 5). One of the greatest threats the Mexican Americans posed was their ownership of land endowed by the Spanish government desired for American settlement. Even though the 1848 treaty promised the protection of private property, the 1851 Congressional Land Act required that all *Californios* provide documentation of their land grants. While most of these land grants were eventually approved, most *Californios* lost their land over the course of long and expensive legal battles (del Castillo 533). See *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton for an early novel that documents the ways Mexican Americans' rights were not protected, leading to their financial decline. Even though Ruiz de Burton is often considered a subversive, even separatist writer in critical conversations, her perspective is that of the white "Spano-Americans," not the mestizo race. She protests American expansionism by claiming that the Spanish and Mexicans were engaged in the same exceptionalist, missionizing project as the Anglo-Americans, "to give large tracts of land as an inducement to those citizens who would utilize the wilderness of the government domain – utilize it by starting ranchos which afterwards would originate 'pueblos' or villages, and so on. The fact that these land-owners who established large ranchos were very efficient and faithful collaborators in the foundation of missions, was also taken into consideration by the Spanish Government or the viceroys of Mexico. The land-owners were useful in many ways, though to a limited extent they attracted population by employing white labor. They also employed Indians, who thus began to be less wild. Then in times of Indian outbreaks, the landowners with their servants would turn out as in feudal times in Europe, to assist in the defense of the missions and the sparsely settled country threatened by the savages" (176).

that defined America as a racially homogeneous society and Americans as white" (Takaki 204). This treatment of Chinese Americans was not idiosyncratic but rather exemplary of the nation's foundational mythology that equates self-governance with Christian civilization: The "status of racial inferiority assigned to the Chinese had been prefigured in the black and Indian past" (Takaki 204). When the economy slowed in the 1880s and jobs lessened, the "Yellow Peril" spread, and the Chinese were officially excluded.[25]

In the 1870s and 1880s, as well, the US government exerted greater energy in assimilating the Indians in order to gain access to their lands, thereby denying them rights of sovereignty formally guaranteed by treaties. In 1871, Congress passed the Indian Appropriation Act, which disallowed any future treaties and accelerated assimilationist Indian policy.[26] From the 1880s through the 1920s, the United States government also forbade many Indian religious practices, especially the pan-Indian Ghost Dance.[27] In

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[25] From 1882 to 1943, no Chinese could legally enter the United States unless they could provide documentation that they were the sons of citizens; even wives of the already-migrated Chinese men could not join their husbands. Such a regulation led to the formation of "bachelor societies," which prohibited family life and hindered the reproduction of a Chinese American population. Jacobson adds that the nativism that drove the Chinese exclusion act can be traced to the threat of the large numbers of Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants in the mid- to late-nineteenth centuries. The influx of these undesirable immigrants who, technically, were "free white persons" and so could be naturalized as American citizens, challenged American notions of governance; it likewise fed a fear that the white race would be supreme no longer, as indicated by Madison Grant's 1916 jeremiad, *The Passing of the Great Race*. The reactionary nativism that accompanied the arrival of these immigrants led to revisions of the concept of "whiteness" so it was less inclusive, culminating in the 1924 restrictive immigration laws that made whiteness into a hierarchy based on eugenic science.

[26] The drive to acquire Indian lands, especially for the railroads, under the pretense of Indian acculturation culminated with the 1887 Dawes Act, "hailed by the reformers as the 'Indian Emancipation Act," which broke up reservations into individual allotments, attempted to transform Indians into property owners, and sold the "'surplus' reservation land – land that remained after allotment – to white settlers in 160-acre tracts" (Takaki 234). There was a short hiatus to this policy under FDR: "The allotment program was suddenly halted in 1934 by the Indian Reorganization Act, a policy devised by John Collier," who appreciated the communalism and heritage of the Indians (Takaki 238) and encouraged Indian self-government (239). However, during the Cold War, "in the midst of an energetic national anticommunism, the United States began to target other communalist groups in the country: namely, the Indian tribes, whose sovereignty came under attack with the passing of the Termination bill in 1953, directing that treaty relationships between the federal government and the individual tribes be terminated, and individual Indians be assimilated into the modern, urban world" (Douglas 130).

[27] Lucy Maddox usefully sums up the precarious citizenship status of Native Americans around the turn of the century: "The creation of the reservation system and the subsequent attempt to dissolve the reservations

1924, Indians who had not acquired it through other means were finally bestowed US citizenship with the Citizenship Act. However, Walter Benn Michaels contends that since Native Americans were by this point so peripheral to national politics and so assumed to be a "Vanishing Race," the 1924 Act was actually "a cynical acknowledgement of the ultimate irrelevance of citizenship to the Indians' predicament" (31). Michaels attributes the United States' eventual willingness to make Native Americans citizens to a white nativist sentiment that emphasized citizenship as a right inherited rather than achieved (32). It is no coincidence, he argues, that Congress passed the Immigration Act, which dramatically restricted immigration by national origin, in the same year as the Citizenship Act. Just two years prior, as well, Congress failed to pass the Dyer anti-lynching bill after a filibuster by Southern democrats in the Senate.

Simultaneous with the nativist reaction to Mexican, Asian, Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century and to African American immigration north after World War I was the rise of nativism's ideological opposite, what Michael Omi and Howard Winant (but not the practitioners themselves) refer to as ethnicity theory. In response to the white supremacist and social Darwinist conceptions of race, which contributed to Jim Crow, Indian removal, Chicano/a labor exploitation, and Asian exclusion, Robert Park, Booker T. Washington's secretary and a leading member of the school of sociology at Chicago, suggested that assimilation would ultimately undermine the role of race, and therefore segregation and racism. Charles Chesnutt's aspiration for

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through the forced imposition of land allotments, the establishment of the system of boarding schools for Indian children, the abrogation of the treaty process, the admission of ten western states to the union between 1889 and 1912, and the judicial system's repeated denial of birthright citizenship to American Indians had placed the majority of Indian people in the position of legal wards of the federal government with very few means of influencing or even understanding the limitations and controls placed in their lives, much less changing them" (8-9).

the "future American" is indicative of this view that considers separatism an encumbrance to entering mainstream society and an undesirable reaction to racism. Because he believes Native Americans have largely assimilated into and intermarried with white Americans, Chesnutt claims that it will be "the fault of the United States Indian himself if he be not speedily amalgamated with the white population" (124). In keeping with and prefiguring Park's theory, Chesnutt argues that the "absorption of the Indians will be delayed so long as the tribal relations continue, and so long as the Indians are treated as wards of the Government, instead of being given their rights once for all, placed upon the footing of other citizens" (131).[28] Assimilation, in other words, is impeded both by restrictive national policies as well as by self-segregating behavior of minorities themselves.

Like Chesnutt, Park did not believe minority groups could preserve their cultural differences and survive as Americans, in part because he viewed cultural difference not as the retention of culturally specific central narratives but as simply "reactions to a racist society that kept the races separated by law and custom" (Douglas 75). As Park puts it, "Race consciousness is the natural and inevitable reaction to race prejudice" ("Negro" 294).[29] Anticipating by several decades Nathan Glazer's and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1963 *Beyond the Melting Pot*, which reinvigorated ethnicity theory, Park argues that "Race conflicts in the modern world, which is already or presently will be a single great society, will be more and more in the future confused with, and eventually superseded by, the conflicts of classes" ("Nature" 116).

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[28] While Chesnutt views Native Americans as having the path toward full citizenship laid out before them, he views racism against African Americans as more intractable.

[29] In response to segregation and the "isolation of the black man," Park argues that African Americans have developed "race pride," "a common interest among all the different colors and classes of the race" ("Racial" 214).

Park could make such an argument because he claimed that the “Negro problem” was not “more urgent than or essentially different from that of the immigrant” (“Education” 263). He also believed that African Americans left all of their traditions in Africa, thereby undermining the legitimacy of an *African* American culture: “The amount of African tradition which the Negro brought to the United States was very small. In fact, there is every reason to believe, it seems to me, that the Negro, when he landed in the United States, left behind him almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament” (“Education” 267). Paradoxically depending on essentialist arguments typical of sociological discourse at the time, Park argues that it is this “racial temperament,” which he characterizes as “sunny and artistic” (280), that he recommends sociologists study and understand in order to promote “naturalization, assimilation, Americanization, Christianization, and acculturation generally” (281).

Pragmatist philosopher Horace Kallen countered Park’s assimilationist stance and vision of a “single great society” with his 1915 revision of the melting pot into cultural pluralism, the idea that ethnic groups could retain their cultural differences, that, in fact, they must, given their biological inheritance:

> At his core, no human being, even in a ‘state of nature’ is a mere mathematical unit. […] Behind him and tremendously in him in quality, are his ancestors; around him in space are his relatives and kin, carrying in common with him the inherited organic set from a remoter common ancestry. […] They constitute his, literally, *nation*, the inwardness of his nativity. […] The America he comes to, beside Europe, is Nature virgin and inviolate. It does not guide him with ancestral

> blazings: externally he is cut off from the past. Not so internally: whatever else he changes, he cannot change his grandfather. (94)

Reiterating the exceptionalist narrative that the American continent is a vacuum waiting to be filled with immigrant ingenuity, but aiming to counter nativist suspicion of immigrants, Kallen resists the idea that Americans of different cultural backgrounds will eventually fuse into a singular American race: "The likelihood of a new 'American' race is remote enough, and the fear of it unnecessary" (97). The inherent variety of Americans – even white Americans (97) – makes it impossible that there will not always be diversity. Faced with this "cacophony," Kallen recommends instead of "unison," a "harmony" (104).

While Park argued that economic success leads to assimilation, Kallen instead contends that as immigrants become "more prosperous and 'Americanized,' as they become freed from the stigma of 'foreigner,' they develop group self-respect. [...] They learn, or they recall, the spiritual heritage of their nationality" (106). To counter the chauvinistic and nativist sentiment thriving at the time of his writing, Kallen upholds the paradox that "the most eagerly American of the immigrant groups are also the most autonomous and self-conscious in spirit and culture" (114). As these passages and as his chosen exemplary populations (Italian Americans, Polish Americans, Jewish Americans) make clear, Kallen's theory of cultural pluralism focused primarily on white ethnics' and immigrants' suitability for the American Dream. He had trouble reconciling phenotypically different minorities into his paradigm. In fact, his hope was that the "orchestration of mankind," which he contends should comprise "American civilization," would be characterized exclusively by "the perfection of the cooperative harmonies of

'European civilization' – the waste, the squalor and the distress of Europe being eliminated" (124).

Both Park's and Kallen's selective uses of assimilationist and immigrant narratives that respected cultural, but not racial, diversity achieved hegemonic status in the post-World War II era. At this point, what Jacobson terms "probationary" whites – the Irish, Italian, Jews, and other "white ethnics" – were inducted into the newly created "scientific" category of the "Caucasian" race (8). With the devastation wrought by fascist use of the word "race," the concept was transformed into a social construct, and the word "ethnicity" was adopted to convey a more culturally based understanding of difference. In response, the mid-century national imagination developed a racial dichotomy between black and white, between the anomalous category of "the Negro" and the "Caucasian." Given this racial binarism, Jacobson claims that Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino/as disappeared from the national imagination.[30] Arguably, then, these racial others who did not fit into the familiar symbolic order of black and white reemerged in the age of multiculturalism, the point at which Jacobson's study ends, and the moment that my dissertation will take up in the next chapter.

Much of my argument in this dissertation rests on the premise that the 1960s experienced a profound paradigm shift in the way that Americans could imagine citizenship, as both a legal and figurative category. Such a shift was made politically evident by the 1964 Civil Rights Act; the 1965 Voting Rights Act; the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which finally repealed the 1924 Immigration Act; and the 1970

[30] Jacobson argues that the category of "the Negro" as an anomaly that could not be assimilated allowed for white ethnics to benefit from the Civil Rights Movement's efforts toward equal rights. While African American remained unassimilable and excluded, white ethnics could put forth powerful claims to full citizenship rights. These probationary whites, who were needed for inexpensive labor, then, "owed their inclusion to the exclusion of others" (Jacobson 241).

message to Congress delivered by President Richard Nixon, which "renounced termination and relocation and established tribal 'self-determination' as official policy" (Weaver *That* 122). Before this shift, many minority American authors responded to the dominant mythology that legally sustained experiences of pseudo-citizenship through the dynamic of mythic syncretism, a social scientific urge to preserve distinct cultural narrative traditions tempered by the politically motivated goal of figuring minority Americans according to the nation's central narratives.

Mythic Syncretism

Faced with a threatened citizenship status delimited by the established mythic system, many early twentieth century minority American authors carved out symbolic space for their rights as citizens by conflating culturally specific myths with those of American exceptionalism. Put differently, by giving credence to foundational stories of the nation through mythic syncretism, many minority authors made a powerful case of entitlement to the rights of American citizenship. Literature, in turn, provided the stage upon which these writers creatively merged seemingly incompatible narratives. In so doing, they confirmed minority American citizenship through a mythic formula and subscribed to the gospel of the nation. This strategy can be read as simultaneously politically conservative and radical, for it upheld the hegemonic values of mainstream American mythology – the exceptional value of American citizenship, for one – while inserting allegedly peripheral characters and plotlines into its formative narratives. This strategic use of myth provides evidence of myth's dual ability of preserving the status

quo (supporting assimilation) while questioning its relevance (offering a plurality of narrative paths toward American nationality).

I am culling the term "syncretism" from the field of religious studies in order to designate the process by which multiple mythic systems are so intertwined as to create a wholly new mythic system, one in which the different components are difficult to extricate. André Droogers adds that there is "more at stake than just the borrowing of elements" in syncretism, that it leads to symbols themselves changing, their meanings changing, and sometimes the system of symbols altogether changing (18). Syncretism is a difficult concept to analyze because it is not a final product but a continuous process, and it is not the exception but the rule – even if it is often portrayed as atypical. The moment different peoples come into contact with each other, their mythic systems begin to commingle. Syncretism is the day-to-day reality of most Americans' religious experiences, as particularly indicated by the blend of Native rites and narratives with Christianity in the Native American Church; the African and Caribbean influences on African American Christianity and the Nation of Islam; the indigenous elements that persist in Chicano/a Catholicism; and the ways in which Chinese American Christianity incorporates Buddhist, Confucianist, and Taoist, among other, traditions.[31]

The United States is a ripe place for syncretism given its slave-holding, labor-driven history and its original status as a settler colony. For this reason, "Simply identifying a ritual or tradition [or myth] as 'syncretic' tells us very little and gets us practically nowhere, since all religions have composite origins and are continually

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[31] There are many good books documenting the way religions of minority Americans are often syncretic. See, among others, Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion* (1978), Clyde Holler's *Black Elk's Religion* (1995), Mary R. Sawyer's *The Church on the Margins* (2003), C. Eric Lincoln's *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (1984), David K. Yoo's *New Spiritual Homes* (1999), and Miguel A. De La Torre and Gastón Espinosa's *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion and Identity* (2006).

reconstructed through ongoing processes of synthesis and erasure" (Shaw and Stewart 7). In response to this seeming dead-end, Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart recommend focusing on syncretism as a process and a discourse rather than a static category; "this necessarily involves attending to the workings of power and agency" (7). Given that "mission and syncretism have always been companion phenomena" (Starkloff 10), the importance of recognizing the power relations involved in American religious practice is that much more pressing. For example, James Treat argues that the

> idea of a native [American Indian] Christian identity is both historically and culturally problematic. The blatant opportunism and oppressive dogmatism of the missionization process, the open complicity of white religious leaders in widespread land dispossession, and the growing strength of the native traditionalist revival work together to challenge the legitimacy of the personal religious choices many native Christians have made. (9)

George Tinker adds that the linear temporality of Euro-Christianity (further discussed in Chapter Two) assumes that white Christians "maintain a critical advantage over those of us who hear [the gospel] later and have to rely on those who heard it first to give us a full interpretation" (119). Even the most sincere and orthodox espousal of Christianity by minority Americans, according to Treat, inevitably places them on the receiving, not the contributing, end of mythic knowledge.

A similar problem of influence pertains to African American Christianity, given that the Christian religion was originally taught to black slaves as a form of social control. But, as has been well-documented, the use of identifiably Christian myths, most famously that of the Exodus, has long worked to inspire African American resistance,

especially in the form of liberation theology.[32] And it would be inaccurate to portray African American Christianity as an unqualified adoption of dominant white Christianity instead of an African-inflected theology that often "utilized Christian forms for the purpose of camouflage" (H. Thomas 17). As such, minority Christians do not just receive but, significantly, contribute to mythic knowledge through the syncretic process. The same can be said regarding the syncretism between indigenous religions and Catholicism after the Spanish conquest of South and Central America. Many scholars read the Virgin of Guadalupe, for example, as a means by which the Spanish conquerors could convert the indigenous populations by highlighting – and then supplanting – her similarities with Aztec goddesses. Yet when the perspective is shifted, as by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (see Chapter Three), and the focus is not on Guadalupe as the Virgin Mary but as the Mesoamerican Tonantsin, this syncretic mythic figure betokens greater radical potential.

Though syncretism most often receives attention for its role in the service of hegemonic powers, to convert the colonized, it, like myth in general, can also offer effective means for minority cultural survival. In the latter case, colonized, indigenous, or immigrant populations often appropriate dominant myths to subvert the system from which they derive. Shaw and Stewart add that subversion "may even be an *unintended* consequence of a syncretic process in which actors intend to appropriate rather than subvert cultural dominance. These conundrums of agency and intentionality make syncretism very slippery, as it is precisely its capacity to contain paradox, contradiction and polyphony which makes syncretism such a powerful symbolic process" (21; italics in

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[32] See James H. Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) for more. Also see Robert Allen Warrior's influential essay, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today" on why the Exodus story is inapplicable and even inappropriate to Native American Christianity.

original). This paradox of syncretism makes it a clear manifestation of the way that myth can support both conservative and radical ends, whether intentionally or not. Such an ambivalent process proves invaluable for marginalized writers working to integrate themselves into a marginalizing mythic tradition and national space.

Even though it is generally accepted that all religions are syncretic (Droogers 12), it has been, and remains, a term of disparagement in theological fields (as opposed to religious studies). To refer to a religion as "syncretic" is to accuse it of inauthenticity and theological compromise (Starkloff 11-12), as "violating the essence of the belief system" (Droogers 7). In this light, even though minority authors' conflation of mythic traditions may initially appear conciliatory to the dominant mythic system, we must also understand it as highly disruptive. The authors considered in this chapter readily discern the political ambivalence of myth and mythic syncretism, converting what is more conventionally understood as a syncretism on the ground, a process that occurs naturally over time in communities and that tends to favor the dominant power, into a syncretism on the page that tends to favor what remains marginalized. In order to secure an insecure citizenship, many minority American writers work to emplot their culturally specific mythologies in accordance with dominant myths, thereby enforcing a familiar symbolic order upon which the American nation already rests. Yet viewed from another perspective, such a rhetorical strategy can be understood as making a preliminary move to preserve culturally specific traditions while calling into question the founding belief that American citizenship is most fully the right of white, Christian men.

Mythic Syncretism in Early Twentieth-Century Minority American Literature:

Charles Eastman, Pardee Lowe, María Cristina Mena

While the main focus of this chapter is the dynamic of mythic syncretism, many minority authors, especially before but also well after the ethnographic turn of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, figured their claims to citizenship rights with a different approach to myth. Instead of conflating divergent mythic systems, they rather integrated a minority protagonist into dominant mythic plotlines, as exemplified by Toomer's figuration of an African American as the American Adam. We can understood why autobiography was the most common genre of nineteenth-century minority American literature, for example, when it is viewed as an apt form for emplotting the narrative plotline of dominant American mythology at the expense of culturally specific mythologies, and for thereby making a vigorous case for self-governance.[33] Facing a legislative ethos that denied minorities equal rights, what Sollors terms "ethnoautobiographic literature" proved to be "an imminently political genre, as it seemed to provide information for the general reading public about the 'desirability,' potential 'assimilability,' or 'compatibility' of whole groups of people" (*Ethnic* 42). To make their own dreams align with the American Dream, to literally embody it, the protagonists of many early minority autobiographies, from William Apess' *Son of the Forest* (1829) to Frederick Douglass' *Life and Times* (1881) to Yung Wing's *My Life in China and America* (1909), act out the rags-to-riches myth, assuming the "riches" of

[33] The origin of autobiography arguably lies with St. Augustine's *Confessions*, so the genre can be understood as correlated with a profession of faith. Roy Pascal, for example, argues that Augustine's is the first autobiography because of its expression of a "feeling of movement in time, of history, a consciousness of an inward stream of forces that becomes evident in, and gives significance to, incidents that in themselves would be trivial" (23). In the American context, James Craig Holte adds that the "foundations of all American personal writing can be found in the spiritual narratives of the Pilgrims, Puritans, and Quakers," which were "inquisition[s] of the soul" (4). He argues that even Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, a no-doubt secular narrative, stems from colonial spiritual narratives (4) and "borrows directly from his Puritan forebears" by translating a spiritual journey from "inherent depravity to a state of grace" to the quintessential American myth of rags-to-riches (5).

American citizenship and values, having elevated from the "rags" of "primitive" mythology.[34]

Booker T. Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1900) offers another example of a work that marginalizes a culturally specific narrative tradition to integrate a minority protagonist into dominant American myth and to thereby confirm African Americans as civilized citizens capable of self-governance. Positioning African Americans to achieve the riches of American economic opportunity, religion, and culture, Washington goes so far as to argue that slavery was actually a blessing in disguise, a "school" from which he and his fellow African Americans graduated, endowing them

[34] A Christian convert and Methodist preacher, Apess protests the ways in which Native Americans have been mistreated and denied citizenship rights (31) while claiming that partaking of the narratives of Christianity is the only means by which he is allowed voice and agency. He verifies this integration of Natives in a Christian mythic trajectory by asserting that their skin color is the same as that of the original man, Adam (34). Given their undeniable Christian destiny, Apess ends his autobiography with a defiant statement addressed to white American citizens who view Indians as "savages"; once converted, he contends, "the natives of the forest […] will occupy seats in the kingdom of heaven before you" (51). Strategically employing the word "before," to mean both "spatially adjacent" and "prior to," Apess vouches for the Christian salvation of Native Americans and their destiny as true American citizens because they can more faithfully and less hypocritically abide by the nation's mythic dictates. Similarly, to counter the "superstition, bigotry, and priestcraft" of his people, Douglass not only confesses his Christian faith but also recommends the central ingredients of the American Dream: "self-reliance, self-respect, industry, perseverance, and economy" (475), so long the right entitlement of white men. To downplay African cultural forms, Douglass even casts Sandy, his "genuine" African who had "inherited some of the so-called magical powers said to be possessed by the eastern nations" (119), as a traitor who causes the failure of his escape from Covey's plantation. Though Douglass refers to Sandy's belief in the powers of the conjure root as "positively sinful" and "dealings with the devil" (119), it is noteworthy that Douglass has in his possession Sandy's root, which was supposed to protect him from Covey, during their famous confrontation. Despite Douglass' attempt to supplant traditional African religion, the root's efficacy is not disproven. Finally, Xiao-huang Yin argues that Yung Wing's autobiography is "a conscious attempt to imitate the work of Puritan historians" (76). Yung Wing, a converted Christian, and the first person of Chinese descent to graduate from Yale, describes his plan to one day attend Yale as "trusting to a wise Providence to care for my future, as it had done for my past" (32). Yung attempted to join the Union army during the Civil War to "show my loyalty and patriotism to my adopted country," but was denied entry (158-159). Yung also protests the anti-Chinese immigration legislation and the "rampant" "race prejudice" of the nation when his students are denied entrance into Annapolis and West Point (208). Nevertheless, Yung remains convinced of the "superiority of Occidental civilization over that of China" (216) and raises his children after his white wife dies as New England Christians: "Knowing that my sons would be well cared for, and leaving the development of their characters to an all-wise and ever-ruling Providence, as well as to their innate qualities, I embarked for China" (228).

with the quintessential American trait of self-reliance.[35] “Notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery,” he insists, “the ten million Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe” (9). Had slavery been for missionary purposes and not for “selfish and financial reasons,” he claims, it would have been less condemnable (10), for it saved African Americans from the “darkest heathenism,” the rags, of African tradition (47). Applying a Puritan plotline and diction to African American experience, Washington confesses, “When persons ask me in these days how, in the midst of what sometimes seem hopelessly discouraging conditions, I can have such faith in the future of my race in this country, I remind them of the *wilderness* through which and out of which, a good *Providence* has already led us” (10; italics mine). According to this narrative, Africans brought via slavery assumed the same errand as the Puritans, having faced the “wilderness” of primitive culture and emerged by the providential grace of God as potential, even fated citizens now endowed with democratic, capitalist, Christian civilization.[36]

According to Washington, African Americans have already reached the status of definitive Americans, especially given their attainment of self-reliance from slavery. White Americans, on the other hand, have relinquished their archetypal American traits through their dependence on slave labor: “The slave system on our place, in a large

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[35] Washington is keenly aware of the symbolic significance of a mythic American plotline, and so sets the evocative Fourth of July as Tuskegee’s opening day (69). For this and other reasons, Wilson J. Moses reads *Up From Slavery* as depending “on an intuitive grasp of the same myths that inspired Horatio Alger” (“More” 109).

[36] Moses makes the argument that Washington’s Protestant ethic is in keeping with Tuskegee’s “program for economic reform.” For this reason, “he opposed the religion of the masses because it was not useful to his program of supply-side economics, not because of its Africanness” (*Creative* 167).

measure, took the spirit of self-reliance and self-help out of the white people" (10). Many critics, including Susanna Egan, argue that Washington poses no threat to his white readers and to the Jim Crow legislative reality because he "suggest[s] that the black race is primitive and in need of much help before it can be seen as truly equivalent to the white" (84). Washington protests, however, that African Americans, not white Americans, are the true Americans because they more faithfully embody the nation's mythology.

Rather than a syncretism of two mythic systems by which to make claims to citizenship rights, Washington integrates African Americans into the dominant mythic narrative, discounting indications of mythic difference along the way. With the renewed interest in non-Christian, non-European cultures at the turn of the century, numerous other minority authors sought out a less integrationist means by which to argue on behalf of citizenship rights. Instead of denying the relevance or authenticity of culturally specific mythic traditions, such authors make them syncretic with dominant American myth, often toward a universal, but nation-specific vision. Recognizing the use-value, prevalence, and range of "syncretism on the page" should illustrate how the strategy usefully mediates the binary critical divide between assimilation and pluralism by putting forth persuasive arguments on behalf of citizenship rights while retaining concepts of cultural specificity.

Much criticism of pre-1960s minority US literature either registers discomfort with its conciliatory thematic or else wishes to resuscitate it by excavating subversive elements beneath an assimilationist façade. Lucy Maddox, for example, argues that turn-of-the-century members of the Society of American Indians (SAI) often exploited their

performative roles as "authentic" Indians in order to better the daily lives of American Indians by speaking, however circuitously, to their white audiences. If we consider these creative efforts of the SAI as exemplifying the dynamic of mythic syncretism, then both readings – the integrationist and the separatist, the assimilationist and the pluralist – can be applicable and productive. It is mythic syncretism, in other words, that allows minority authors to simultaneously make powerful claims to American citizenship while registering the culturally distinct remainder of mythic difference, even if such a radical potential is easily obscured. Given the predominantly white audience of the works considered here, such obfuscation was largely the point. Mythic syncretism has played a crucial role in fashioning the disguise, allowing minority authors to voice radical protests inflected through dominant discourse at a time when the nation's foundational stories offered them no place from which to speak.

A reform organization founded in 1911, the SAI was largely influenced by the Progressive movement, which was comprised primarily of middle-class Protestants inspired by Christian ideals of charity. Lucy Maddox casts the underlying assumptions of the Progressives in identifiably exceptionalist mythic terms: "To take part in this reshaping process was to confirm one's confidence in the ultimate triumph of America's particular form of civil religion. […] The work of uplift […] produced and fostered a discourse shared among the reformers, one that named progress, social evolution, Christianity, civilization, and citizenship as the uncontested goals of liberal democracy in America" (11). In this context, the SAI was in some respects pro-assimilation given the devastation of the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre and even supported a proposed law

against peyotism.[37] Robert Warrior argues that the SAI members "played Indian," in Philip Deloria's terms, in order to "gain sympathy from white audiences for the difficult, but to the authors necessary process of becoming American citizens" (*Tribal* 8).

Despite what many critics have viewed as conciliatory politics for the sake of Indian recognition, many of these writers – Charles Eastman/Ohiyesa (Santee Sioux), Carlos Montezuma/Wassaja (Yavapai), and Gertrude Simmons Bonnin/Zitkala-Sa (Yankton Sioux) –insist on the continued relevance of tribal religions by conflating them with dominant American mythology, aspiring to a universal, but US-specific, vision. For example, in his study of traditional Native American religions, *The Soul of the Indian* (1911), Eastman repeatedly draws correlations between the Sioux religion and Christianity in order to help his white readers leave behind their "racial and religious prejudice" and reach "sympathetic comprehension" (x). In order to do so, he emphatically resists the "ethnological standpoint" that reduces Native tradition to "dry bones" and "matter of curiosity" and instead "emphasize[s] its *universal* quality" (xii; italics mine).

Given his interest in conceiving correspondences between Native and Christian religions for a better understanding of the former, it is perhaps surprising that Eastman dismisses much of the existing ethnographic work on Native American religion – that performed by the Bureau of American Ethnology and other practitioners of "salvage ethnography." According to Eastman, early twentieth century ethnography relies on evidence that has been tainted by Native traditions' contact, or syncretism, with Christianity. Although a converted Christian, he is interested in capturing the pre-contact

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[37] Peyotism was finally allowed, though, because "unlike the Ghost Dance, it was perceived as a quietistic response to the condition of Natives" (Weaver *That* 87).

Native religion as he recalls it from his youth (even though he was hardly born pre-contact), before Indians "modified their customs and beliefs continually, creating a singular admixture of Christian with pagan superstitions, and an addition to the old folk-lore of disguised Bible stories under an Indian aspect. […] Most of the material collected by modern observers is necessarily of this promiscuous character" (54-55). Rather than relying on "tainted" anthropological evidence of Native religions (syncretism on the ground), Eastman wishes to convey what he views as uncontaminated Native traditions and *then* to reveal how they are comparable with Christianity by juxtaposing them in the literary context (syncretism on the page). To make his argument on behalf of American Indian citizenship rights, Eastman does not expose how Native Americans have integrated Christianity into their native traditions, or vice versa, but rather locates the original narratives and rites of his people, figuring them as prescient of dominant American narratives. Whereas the initial colonizers and missionaries "branded us as pagans and devil-worshippers," he emphatically argues, "we of the twentieth century know better! We know that all religious aspiration, all sincere worship, can have but one source and one goal. We know that the God of the lettered and the unlettered […] is after all the same God" (xiii).

Eastman's syncretic move, then, is not to document the ways Native religious experience is already comprised of a mixture of multiple mythic traditions. Instead, it is to conflate recovered Native traditions with Christianity in order to attest to the intersection of their theological beginnings and ends. By upholding the distinctiveness yet conflating the roles and meanings of the two mythic systems, Eastman deliberately merges them into one larger, comprehensive mythic system applicable to the nation as a

whole. Put in structuralist terminology, the signifiers – Native religions and Christianity – remain distinct, but the signified – the universal applicability of the nation's sacred stories – is the same. If pre-contact Native myths and Christian myths speak to universal truths, both come from and point to the same place, and if they contribute to a larger mythic system of American nationhood, then there is room in that system and the nation it sustains, as Eastman envisions them, for even the most reputedly primitive peoples.

To attest to the "one source and one goal" of both mythic traditions, Eastman draws repeated analogies between Indian myths and rituals and those of Christianity. For example, he compares the Sioux tradition of *hambeday* to "confirmation or conversion in Christian experience" (7). In response to the skeptic who interprets Native American religions as superstitious, he counters, "Our American Indian myths and hero stories are perhaps, in themselves, quite as credible as those of the Hebrews of old" (17). This syncretic assertion – in that the mythic traditions' meanings are conflated under the auspices of a universal truth – is made possible because "the spirit of Christianity and of our ancient religion is essentially the same" (24).

With this knowledge, Eastman interprets the origin story of the Sioux as akin to the Judeo-Christian myth of Adam and Eve: "At last, like Adam, the 'First-Born' of the Sioux became weary of living alone, and formed for himself a companion – not a mate, but a brother – not out of a rib from his side, but from a splinter which he drew from his great toe!" (124). By evoking the biblical story and then highlighting the ways that the Sioux origin story both reiterates and varies from it, Eastman appeals to universal claims that allow for the simultaneous truth value of the mythic traditions. While innocuously suggesting that Native myths reinforce predominant Christian myths, he also registers

how the Native American myths remain distinct, relevant, and worth preserving – even if simply as cultural variants of the same universal. Though the mythic narratives of Christianity are upheld as rightful, they do not have the monopoly on expressions of truth.

Maddox has shown that Eastman, in keeping with a long tradition that cast Native Americans as natural democrats, views the Indian as the "ideal" "model of democratic citizenship that set into relief the debasements of a society driven by materialism, greed, a love of ease, and the corruptions of political ambition" (132). Because he views traditional Indian religions as teaching respect for the land and valuing hard work, Eastman reveals that they already exemplify the standards of American citizenship. The Native claim to American citizenship, suggests Eastman, is also manifest in their experience as colonized subjects, as embodying the Puritan ideal of suffering. Because "Jesus' hard sayings to the rich would have been entirely comprehensible" (19) to them, Eastman portrays Native Americans as predestined Christians. He manages the difference of Native American mythology, then, by aligning it under the rubric of American citizenship. Eastman put this belief into action through his syncretic work with the Boy Scouts of America, an organization for training young (predominantly white, Christian) Americans for the responsibilities of citizenship by acquainting them with Native American traditions.

Eastman's creative generation of a natural alliance between culturally specific myth, American citizenship, and Christian religion is likewise characteristic of Pardee Lowe's autobiography, *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943). Given the mistreatment of Chinese and Chinese Americans by the "anti-Oriental state and national legislation"

(19), Lowe puts a great deal of effort into vouching for his and his father's Americanness by aligning their Chinese beliefs and lifestyle with democratic narratives: "Chinatown was filled with stories of self-made men and women" (21). Instead of traditional Chinese names, Lowe and his siblings are christened after famed American government officials so that white Americans "never forget the proud American spiritual lineage from which we sprung" (19-20). Simply by being endowed with an American name, he enters a "spiritual" heritage of the United States, not just the biological ancestry of his parents. His book's title therefore assumes a double descent: He is the "glorious descendant" of both his Chinese parents and his country of birth. By inserting his life story into the American heritage, Lowe critically defies "a popular belief which held that the Chinese did not wish to assimilate into American society and [proves] the falsity of discriminatory practices against the Chinese based on that idea" (Yin 128).

Like Charles Eastman, Lowe is a Christian convert who yet appreciates the continued relevance of his ancestors' traditions. At the Presbyterian church where he teaches, for example, he hopes to convey to the students a syncretic "smattering of Christian ethics, heavily modified by Father's pragmatic Confucianism" (Lowe 168). Though reputedly exotic, Chinese myth is made compatible with Christianity. Lowe claims, for example, that the Virgin Mary is "reminiscent" of Kuan Yin, the Chinese goddess of "great compassion and infinite mercy" (157). To defend against discriminatory misreadings of Chinese ritual and myth, Lowe temporarily assumes the ignorant viewpoint of many of his white readers. He recalls that as a child, he found his stepmother's Chinese worship "strange," and he was "aggressively intolerant" of it when he was a young "'sound' Christian." After his college education, however, his

"'rockbound faith' of the Puritan Fathers" was shaken, and he began to appreciate his stepmother's worship as symbolizing "the deeply religious heart whose prayers are grounded in *universal* humanity" (308; italics mine). While Washington assumes the position of Puritan autobiographer, Lowe questions the applicability of the Puritan mythic legacy, attempting to make room for a less ethnocentric and more universal mythic narrative for the nation.

Lowe reconciles his Christian faith and American patriotism with the Chinese faith of his forebears through a universalist form of mythic syncretism that allows him to be American without adopting an orthodox American mythology based solely on Puritan origins. Though he is repeatedly dismissed in critical conversations for his self-consciously accommodationist work, even for wanting to "break from [his] ethnic roots" (Yin 121), the syncretic conflation of fundamentally different mythic traditions within his literary text contributes to the survival of those traditions supposedly doomed for extinction. The book itself ends with a plea for the persistence of culturally distinct myths and rituals within the context of a dominant American mythology: "Even in the Western World, even in Chinatown, the old traditions prevailed" (322). Lowe's strategic diction intimates that the Chinese mythic tradition not only survives, but also triumphs.[38]

At times, these "old traditions" prevail with enough force so as threaten American mythology's preeminent claim to a universal, but nation-specific truth. These

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[38] Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) is another example of a work often denigrated for its conciliatory stance that yet allows for culturally specific traditions to survive through a universalist appeal. Throughout the autobiographical novel, Wong struggles to reconcile her Christianity with Chinese traditions. When her father converts to Christianity, he "became as serious about Christian precepts as he was intent on Confucian propriety. It was a blend which was infused into all his children" (74-75). Even though she often criticizes Chinese culture, especially for its discrimination against women, when she herself experience racial discrimination, she ignores the "ignorant" white boy, because every one knows "the Chinese people had a superior culture" (70), a claim hard to synchronize with her alleged conciliatory stance. This superior culture is made syncretic with the dominant American one, not wholly deserted for the sake of assimilation.

suggestions of cultural relativism, however, are ambivalent given the precarious historical context in which they are made. It is difficult to discern, for example, when narratives of cultural difference are figured as nostalgic, romantic, or Orientalist tokens rather than sincere expressions of alterity, whether they are kitschy variants that affirm the dominant mythic system or alternate origin stories that relativize it. María Cristina Mena's short fiction, published in the first decades of the twentieth century in such mainstream publications as *American Magazine, Century*, and *Cosmopolitan*, in some ways bears resemblance to Washington's autobiography. Her stories, for example, often uphold American democratic values and denigrate Mexico's aristocracy, especially when documenting the patriarchal mistreatment of Mexican women (39). We can appreciate the burden that Mena faced in representing Mexico when we bear in mind that essays by prominent eugenicists warning of the vanishing of the white race were published alongside her own stories (C. Rich 138). Because Mena received pressure from her editors and readers to write appealing "local color" tales of Mexican life, Amy Doherty explains that the political and social issues raised in her writing, especially the way that she exposes the deleterious effects of US imperialism in Mexico, are often ignored (vii). For example, in "The Gold Vanity Set" (1913), some vacationing white Americans are repeatedly described as "invading" and "occupying" their Mexican destination (3). Even in the context of a story putatively meant to demur to its predominantly white reading audience, Mena exposes the imperialist undercurrents of American policies, both within the nation's borders and without.

Mena's interpolation of Aztec myth in "The Birth of the God of War" (1914) prefigures a common strategy of Chicano/a writers of the second half of the twentieth

century who worked to recover an indigenous mythic tradition so long overshadowed by Catholicism. In Mena's version, the narrator recalls hearing "stories of our pristine ancestors" from her grandmother (63), who had a "store of Aztec mythology" (64). The granddaughter proceeds to tell her grandmother's tale, to educate us about the Aztec god of war, Huitzilopochtli, and his mother, Coatlicue, the goddess of love and sin, life and death. Instead of forging a collective sense of identity for her Chicano/a readers, as many of her successors will, Mena makes the polytheistic Aztec religion cohere with monotheistic Christianity. In other words, rather than recovering Aztec mythology from colonial intervention as a coherent, but vastly different, tradition in its own right, Mena figures it syncretically within the guise of the dominant mythic system: "The Aztecs, apart from and above their hero demigods, […] worshipped an invisible Ruler of the Universe" (67). Through characteristically Christian diction, such as "annunciation" and "miracle of conception" (67), Coatlicue's virgin birth of Huitzilopochtli is made analogous to that of the Virgin Mary. Charged with both seducing and challenging her white readers, Mena looks to the strategy of literary mythic syncretism to integrate what might appear to be disruptive differences of myth within the dominant mythic system.

As if to disallow the interpretation that she is actually proposing a kind of cultural relativism, Mena builds into her story a teaching moment, similar to Lowe's, in which her narrator is reprimanded for not embracing the mutual vision of the two narrative traditions. In response to her grandmother's "thrilling" story, the narrator confesses,

> Once I voiced the infantile view that the fate of Coatlicue was much more charming than that of the Virgin Mary, who had remained on this sad earth as the wife of a carpenter; but *mamagrande* was so distressed, and signed my forehead

> and her own so often, and made me repeat so many credos, and disquieted me so with a vision of a feathered Apache coming to carry me off to the mountains, that I was brought to a speedy realization of my sin, and never repeated it. (69)

Intimidated with the possibility of Indian abduction, a familiar threat of Puritan jeremiads, the narrator is made to realize that the point of her *mamagrande*'s tale is that the stories are inextricable, not alternatives. Connected through syncretic diction and plotlines, both Catholic and Aztec mythology are part of the same universal, though inevitably Christian, vision.

The narrator's grandmother further emphasizes this lesson through the example of the Catholic church that they attend every Sunday; it "remain[s] from the great temple built by our warrior ancestors for the worship of the god Huitzilopochtli" (69). For the grandmother, the story of the Aztecs and the story of present-day Christians derive from the same origin. Because the Christian church has supplanted the Aztec temple, the grandmother's final message seems to be that the former has naturally inherited the latter's original purpose.[39] Despite such progressivist logic, the Aztec mythology persists

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[39] One of the earliest novels written by a Native American woman, *Cogewea* (1927) by Mourning Dove (Colville/Okanogan) engages in a similar manipulation of myth that subsumes cultural remainders within the dominant mythic system. In a notable scene, Cogewea's grandmother tells her and the evil white man who nearly dupes her a mythic story about the first coming of the white man, a "true," sacred story, which she knows her ancestors would not want a white man to hear. However, in Vanishing Indian discourse, she claims, "they are gone and for me the sunset of the last evening is approaching and I must not carry with me this history" (122). In her story, a young man in the tribe dies and then returns with his vision of a "pale-faced nation moving from the sunrise" (125). He foresees that when the white missionaries arrive, they "will show you a new trail to the Great Spirit. You must believe them!" (126). This "true" story proposes a syncretic myth system that conflates Jesus with the Great Spirit, lays a pathway for unimposed conversion, and credits pre-Christian Indian prophecy as the herald of the Christian religion. Elsewhere, Cogewea reiterates Eastman's universalist sentiment when she briefly entertains the Doctrine of Discovery but then questions its ethnocentric prescriptions: "Zealous and good Christians […] see in the Discovery by Columbus, a guidance of Divine Providence, in that a new faith was brought to the natives. This may be, but the mistake was with the priests and teachers who did not understand that there was no fundamental difference in the attributes of the deities of the two races" (133). Mourning Dove's autobiography similarly searches for a way that traditional myths can be retained but Indian people still survive as Americans. She repeatedly claims, for example, that her mother was simultaneously a practitioner of the "ancient" ways and a "fanatically religious Catholic" (24), and that she herself "saw no difference between them" (30). To

in the grandmother's and granddaughter's memories and, now, in the imaginations of Mena's readers. Like Eastman's Sioux origin story, like Pardee Lowe's Chinese rituals, the Aztec mythology registered – if syncretically – by Mena represents a tentative step toward recognizing the political potential of alternate origin stories, which will be so seminal to the paradigm shift of the 1960s and 1970s.[40]

W.E.B. Du Bois' Case for Citizenship Rights through Mythic Syncretism

Through its use of both social scientific and humanistic discourses, the classic *Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois explicitly illustrates the steps of transition between an assimilationist use of myth – that of Washington, Chesnutt, and Toomer – to a syncretic one akin to Eastman, Lowe, and Mena. Now that I have demonstrated the difference between them and explained the sociological impetus that fueled the transition, focusing on Du Bois, the first and most influential minority American sociologist, here allows us to chart the shift from a model of mythic integration to one of mythic syncretism. Du Bois is especially valuable to consider as a practitioner of literary mythic syncretism as his historically oriented text spotlights the ambivalent political potential of myth, its ability to voice radical protest while affirming dominant values.

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forge this path, Mourning Dove simply has to confirm the ways many Indians are already living in syncretic ways that retain cultural distinctiveness: "To some extent we have tried to live in both worlds. An Indian knew he could be faithful to his native creed and still pray every day to the God of the whites. When in actual need from the troubles of the world, however, he did not hesitate to turn to the sweat lodge, never understanding how this could conflict with the white God, since the missionaries always said that God had many ways of helping people in distress" (141). In this way, the sweat lodge can be retained because it fits into the Christian mythic system – at least as Mourning Dove renders it.

[40] For another example of a Mexican American author incorporating traditional Native myth and ritual as a precursor to a destined and necessary Christian conversion, see the writings of Fray Angélico Chávez. Also see Jovita González Mireles' folktales and novels for a universalist use of myth that draws attention to Indian and Aztec influence (Ybarra 180).

Arguing that the sociological study of African American religion began with Du Bois, Phil Zuckerman credits him with recognizing that religion "has the capacity for human betterment and detriment" (13). While Du Bois' work is often upheld as the most progressive of those of his contemporaries, viewing it as an emplotment of mythic syncretism will allow us to better grasp the complex political and rhetorical moves Du Bois makes in order to integrate not only African American people but also their culture into a dominant mythic system that determines the beneficiaries of American citizenship. Yet even as it mobilizes this new model, *The Souls of Black Folk* – so attuned to the political, literary, and historical workings of myth – additionally hints at the pitfalls of mythic syncretism.

One of the most careful and influential commentators on minority American identity and citizenship, W.E.B. Du Bois famously diagnosed the African American experience as that of double consciousness. Throughout his multigeneric work, Du Bois frequently chronicles the precarious state of African American citizenship and the way disenfranchisement and daily experiences of racism have led to a vexed state of self-consciousness: "We are diseased and dying, cried the dark hosts; we cannot write, our voting is vain; what need of education, since we must always cook and serve? And the nation echoed and enforced this self-criticism, saying: Be content to be servants, and nothing more; what need of higher culture for half-men?" (51). Denied "higher culture," the sacred stories of a nation, African Americans are ever pseudo-citizens, at once believers in the righteousness of American mythology and witnesses to its inadequacies: "Living as the blacks do in close contact with a great modern nation, they must necessarily be affected more or less directly by all the religious and ethical forces that are

to-day moving the United States. These questions and movements are, however, overshadowed and dwarfed by the (to them) all-important question of their civil, political, and economic status" (222). For Du Bois, then, a primary cause of double consciousness is not being able to live according to the "religious and ethical forces" that move the nation, embodied most clearly in its central stories. In response to this condition, he turns to mythic syncretism to integrate African Americans into a restorative narrative and thereby attend to the double consciousness that results from pseudo-citizenship.

Recently, extensive research into Du Bois' religious thought has supplemented the flourishing scholarly attention to his sociological, historical, and autobiographical work. Setting this trend, Edward Blum argues that scholars' frequent association of Du Bois with secularism has been to the detriment of his influential and sophisticated theological writings (10-12).[41] Du Bois himself claims that detailed study of African Americans' religious life is central to his intellectual pursuit: "Since under the peculiar circumstances of the black man's environment," such "characteristics of Negro religious life [as shouting] were the one expression of his higher life, they are of deep interest to the student of his development, both socially and psychologically" (212). One of Blum's primary goals is to document how Du Bois aligns *The Souls of Black Folk* with Christian discourse, from the way he structures the table of contents (78-79), to his typological paralleling of African Americans and biblical Jews, to his pervasive use of the veil, a "biblical metaphor" "to describe the social, personal, psychological, economic, and

[41] David Howard-Pitney is another historian interested in Du Bois' theological discourse. He argues that Du Bois relied on "American civil religion, or myths about the providential mission of the American nation, as a major source of his protest rhetoric and prophetic hope" (137). Howard-Pitney is also interested in Du Bois' strategic use of the jeremiad: "Because it frames dissent about current conditions within a celebration of past promises – particularly as contained in America's founding documents – and proclaims faith in their future fulfillment, the jeremiad uniquely clothes forceful black protest in patriotism" (139).

religious fabric that separated blacks and whites" (5). I want to contribute to Blum's project of understanding *The Souls of Black Folk* as "a new psalm for the modern age" (4) by analyzing the strategic use to which Du Bois imagined myth could be put to alleviate the double consciousness that resulted from the United States' endemic racism. What is the function of putting forth an activist sociological treatise that accords with dominant mythic narratives?

At the turn of the century, before Robert Park's assimilationist model took hold, mainstream sociological discourse was almost exclusively concerned with investigating the "Negro problem." With the failure of Reconstruction, with lynchings and nativism on the rise, Du Bois was very aware of this intellectual trend, as the first page of his book explicitly addresses. He introduces *The Souls of Black Folk* with the "unasked question" that those of "the other world" always wish to ask him but do not: "How does it feel to be a problem?" (43). Driven by the assumption that human society could be categorized according to an evolutionary model, one in which non-Christian cultures were considered less evolved, sociological work in the US was primarily focused on documenting how African Americans were degenerate and unassimilable.[42] While Du Bois believes that the African American community should be "allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems," he laments that "sociologists gleefully count his ["the black man's"] bastards and his prostitutes" (50). In a pioneering intellectual move also adopted by the "father" of American anthropology, Franz Boas, Du Bois improved upon the dominant sociological model with his advocacy for participant observation. By immersing oneself within a culture of study, Du Bois aimed to challenge the generalizing

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[42] For example, Talcott Parsons, working in the 1940s and 1950s, and whose theories influenced Robert Park, Louis Wirth, and Milton Gordon, "saw ethnicity as a social problem to be explained through careful study of the barriers preventing full assimilation into the mainstream of society" (Gutiérrez "Ethnic" 158).

and racist methodologies of what he terms "the car-window sociologist" (179) and to "learn by intimate contact with the masses, and not by wholesale arguments covering millions separate in time and space" the Georgian black farm-laborers' "daily lives and longings," their "homely joys and sorrows," their "real shortcomings and the meaning of their crimes!" (164).

While conversations about racial difference were primarily concerned with "the Negro problem" in sociological fields, those in mainstream culture revolved around not whether African Americans were potential American citizens but whether they had souls, whether they were cursed and associated with the devil (Blum 62-63), whether they were fit for Christian civilization and self-governance. Within this Progressive era context, Du Bois' aptly titled *Souls of Black Folk* made a forceful statement for inserting African Americans into the narrative of Christian civilization. What Blum says of Du Bois' work, then, is likewise applicable to Eastman's *Soul of the Indian*, the title of which could be referencing *Souls of Black Folk*: "The book's purpose, and Du Bois's vocation, was to display the spiritual side of the black life, the side that white supremacist theologians denied even existed, the side that could only be viewed by first believing that people of color had souls" (77). To achieve this goal, Du Bois opens *The Souls of Black Folk* with "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," an overview of the religious and social experiences of the African American community from slavery through the present.[43]

In this first chapter, Du Bois puts forth his most celebrated theory about African American – and minority, more generally – identity. Through biblical allusion and diction, Du Bois gives voice to the despairing cry of young African Americans: "Why did

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[43] This chapter is basically the same as his "Strivings of the Negro People," published originally in 1897 in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?" (45). This experience of being denied citizen rights in one's place of origin leads to the gift of "second-sight," endowed to all African Americans who, yet, have "no true self-consciousness" and only can "see himself through the revelation of the other world. [...] One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (45). Du Bois seeks a way to bring peace to these two contradictory, warring selves: "The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (45). Yet this merging, Du Bois insists, is *not* full-fledged assimilation: "In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American" (45). For such a union to take place, for the African American to "be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture" (46), Du Bois uncovers the ways mythic syncretism has already been put to use in African American communities for both assimilationist and pluralist ends.

Du Bois' syncretism on the page occurs in multiple guises. In addition to structuring his work according to familiar Christian narratives and incorporating Christian discourse and imagery, as Blum demonstrates, Du Bois also emplots Greek mythic narratives by which to articulate his protest against the disenfranchisement of African Americans. For example, in the chapter "Of the Wings of Atalanta," Du Bois

questions the exploitative capitalist policies of the city of Atlanta by comparing it to the mythic figure Atalanta, who met her defeat when distracted by golden apples. Instead of a culture that has transformed "a fair far-off ideal of Freedom into the hard reality of bread-winning and the consequent deification of Bread" (113-114) – a perverted application of myth in keeping with Booker T. Washington's policies – Du Bois recommends that the talented "thinkers," those destined for intellectual as opposed to industrial work, be provided a college education. Each member of the "talented tenth" could thereby "be made a missionary of culture to an untaught people" (117). Once bequeathed the foundational narratives that comprise much of Euro-American culture – such as that of Atalanta – African American leaders can begin the conversion of their people into full-fledged citizens.[44]

Such an embrace of a narrative that positions Euro-American culture as *the* culture to be attained for American citizenship might at first suggest that Du Bois' use of myth is actually akin to that of Washington, one in which African ancestors lack a sophisticated, civilized tradition as opposed to having a different one that requires sociological attention. At times, Du Bois even unapologetically refers to Africans as "savages" (212). His attempt in "Of the Faith of the Fathers" to trace the evolution of African American religion from "the heathenism of the Gold Coast to the institutional Negro church of Chicago" (213) might also indicate that Du Bois is interested in supplanting a defunct mythic system with a more sophisticated one according to a familiar progressivist myth of racial uplift. However, with a model reminiscent of María

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[44] In the chapter "The Quest for the Golden Fleece," Du Bois compares cotton to the mythic golden fleece (162) to comment on the violence of the South: "Certainly one might frame a pretty and not far-fetched analogy of witchery and dragon's teeth, and blood and armed men, between the ancient and the modern quest of the Golden Fleece in the Black Sea" (163). Again, he uses Greek myth to illuminate contemporary and past experiences of exploitation.

Cristina Mena's temple, Du Bois traces this evolution to document the history of imposed conversion and to underscore the ways that African myth and ritual persist in the American mythic context.

In an attempt to account for why nearly every African American is a church member and why there "is an organized Negro church for every sixty black families in the nation" (215), Du Bois traces Christianity's widespread influence to the "nature-worship" religions of Africa in which priests or medicine men served as organizing figureheads of the community's clans (215).[45] The African medicine man, according to Du Bois, evolved into the Negro preacher, but this evolution did not occur as an immediate or intentional conversion. Instead, the first Negro churches were initially "an adoption and mingling of heathen rites among the members of each plantation, and roughly designated as Voodooism. Association with the masters, missionary efforts and motives of expediency gave these rites an early veneer of Christianity, and after the lapse of many generations the Negro church became Christian" (216). According to Du Bois, the gradual Christianization of the slaves occurred as an organic syncretism, at first a convenient cover for traditional, "heathen" African tradition and finally a genuine replacement of it.

Though seemingly accidental, this syncretism was actually inevitable. According to Du Bois, African Americans are innately religious given their "deep emotional nature which turns instinctively toward the supernatural" (218). Just as Eastman claims that the "Indian was a religious man from his mother's womb" (28), Du Bois attests to African

[45] James Weldon Johnson is similarly interested in the extent to which African Americans are faithful Christians. In his collection of poeticized sermons, Johnson attests to the continued influence of the "old-time preacher": "The Negro today is, perhaps, the most priest-governed group in the country" (3). At the same time, Johnson fears that the "old-time Negro preacher is rapidly passing" (11). His work is therefore a creative form of salvage ethnography: "I have here tried sincerely to fix something of him" (11).

Americans' inherent theological capacity. To support this rare turn to essentialism, Du Bois moves from biological claims to rhetorical ones, vouching for the shared mythic structures between African religions and the experience of slavery: "Endowed with a rich tropical imagination and a keen, delicate appreciation of Nature, the transplanted African lived in a world animate with gods and devils, elves and witches; full of strange influences, – of Good to be implored, of Evil to be propitiated. Slavery, then, was to him the dark triumph of Evil over him" (218).[46] According to Du Bois, the mythic means by which Africans made sense of the world around them – through richly imagined tropes, animistic understandings of nature, and a Manichaean symbolic order between good and evil – was made literal in their experience of slavery.

The unnatural institution of slavery, then, led to the defensive retention of what Du Bois characterizes as barbaric rituals and myths. In response to the literal experience of myth, slaves

> called up all the resources of heathenism to aid, – exorcism and witch-craft, the mysterious Obi worship with its barbarous rites, spells, and blood-sacrifice even, now and then, of human victims. Weird midnight orgies and mystic conjurations were invoked, the witch-woman and the voodoo-priest became the centre of Negro group life, and that vein of vague superstition which characterizes the unlettered Negro even to-day was deepened and strengthened. (218)

Prefiguring Robert Park, Du Bois here views the slaves' and freedmen's preservation of "vague superstition" as a defense mechanism, as unproductive "resources" to live according to myths of good and evil. This defense mechanism persists in the present:

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[46] Adolph L. Reed, Jr. argues that Du Bois' essentialism is much in keeping with the sociological discourse of the Progressive era (122-123).

"One can see in the Negro church to-day, reproduced in microcosm, all the great world from which the Negro is cut off by color-prejudice and social condition" (214). For Du Bois, it is essential to pay attention to the ways in which the Negro church internalizes "mysterious" mythic narratives and rituals because they represent the obstacles to the attainment of American, Christian civilization.

Yet Du Bois remains ambivalent about that civilization, for he regards the legacy of Christian conversion as also one of exploitation. Because African religion was already about good and evil, slavery made African Americans "ripe for a new philosophy of life" (218). As the influence of African religions began to fade over time and the slave masters' imposed Christianity, what Du Bois refers to as "religious propaganda" (219), began to take hold, the latter mythic system proved especially appealing because it promised the redemption of a second life. Instead of abiding by a mythic narrative that figured slavery as the triumph of evil, slaves now adhered to one designed by a slaveholding society stressing "passive submission" (219). Over fifty years, Negro religion transformed into "the dream of Abolition" (220), and instead of living according to the dictate of the masters' religion as submissive slaves, the malleability and political ambivalence of myth made it possible for them to figure themselves typologically as the enslaved Israelites. Christian myths, in other words, evolved in African American communities according to specific political aspirations: "Thus, when emancipation finally came, it seemed to the freedman a literal Coming of the Lord" (220). Yet this liberating use-value of Christian myth, too, was fleeting; with the failures of Reconstruction, it no longer applied. Due to the daily experiences of injustice, African American religion, "instead of a worship, is a complaint and a curse, a wail rather than a hope, a sneer rather

than a faith" (222). Pseudo-citizenship and double consciousness endure, prohibiting African Americans from living according to Christian-inspired religious narratives in legitimate and productive ways. Again and again, Du Bois registers the failures of organic syncretism, whether as a force of conversion or liberation.

Despite his thorough documentation of the continued misuse and failings of myth, Du Bois remains hopeful at the end: "Some day the Awakening will come, when the pent-up vigor of ten million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the Goal, out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living – Liberty, Justice, and Right – is marked 'For White People Only'" (225). To better contextualize this optimistic and biblically resonant ending of "Of the Faith of the Fathers," in which Christianity both supplants African barbarism and is viewed as inapplicable to the experiences of African Americans, we must return to "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." We can then appreciate how Du Bois' advocacy for education is figured as a means to bring an awareness that American myth – the national narrative that upholds "Liberty, Justice, and Right" as universally available – is already, in fact, African.

This strategy is akin to that of Eastman, Lowe, and Mena, who all entertain the possibility that culturally specific precursors to American myth persist by being subsumed into a multicultural, but no less American mythic narrative. For Du Bois, such a realization, which can only come through extensive education, will allow African Americans to wholeheartedly partake in foundational American stories: "The training of the schools we need today more than ever, – the training of deft hands, quick eyes and ears, and above all the broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds and pure hearts"

(52). Through education, African Americans will embrace the significant stories that comprise "higher culture," which instructs citizens in

> that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to our contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the great ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack. (52)

By "conforming" to the nation's exceptionalist "great ideals," African Americans will no longer be understood as a separate race but rather be unified with fellow Americans in a reciprocal relationship. Given this reciprocity, such an embrace of the United States' foundational values does not necessitate the sacrifice of identifiably African American cultural forms:

> We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: There are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness. (52)

After attesting in a way similar to Washington that African Americans are the true Americans given their pursuit of freedom – a pursuit that accords with American exceptionalist narratives – Du Bois offers myth, in the way of "fairy tales and folklore," as a unifying source of American tradition because American myth already is African, as

well as Indian.[47] By acknowledging the multiple heritages of American myth, the nation's foundational stories can now incorporate its minority citizens. Such an indigenous, identifiably multicultural American myth system, in turn, promises to save the nation from dehumanizing economic policies – the "dusty desert of dollars and smartness."[48]

Revealing that what many assume to be pure, unsyncretic, Christian-inspired American myths – manifest destiny, rags to riches, redeemer nation – are actually products of multiple traditions, Du Bois ends *The Souls of Black Folk* with "Of the Sorrow Songs," in which he advances a forceful argument that African Americans are not only participants in the nation's foundational stories but actually prefigure them. Near the end of the chapter, Du Bois directly challenges his readers,

> Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song-soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. (275)

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[47] Earlier, Du Bois prefigures this stance that African Americans are the more natural Americans: "Away back in the days of bondage they thought to see in one divine event [Emancipation] the end of all doubt and disappointment; few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries" (47).

[48] Though skeptical of its exploitative and anti-intellectual trends, Du Bois likewise vouches for multicultural American myth in "Of the Faith of the Fathers": "The Methodists and Baptists of America owe much of their condition to the silent but potent influence of their millions of Negro converts. Especially is this noticeable in the South, where theology and religious philosophy are on this account a long way behind the North, and where the religion of the poor whites is a plain copy of Negro thought and methods. The mass of 'gospel' hymns which has swept through American churches and well-nigh ruined our sense of song consists largely of debased imitations of Negro melodies made by ears that caught the jingle but not the music, the body but not the soul, of the Jubilee songs. It is thus clear that the study of Negro religion is not only a vital part of the history of the Negro in America, but an interesting part of American history" (213).

Typologically figured as the biblical three wise men, African Americans are recognized for their contribution of three pre-American gifts: story, labor, and religion, each of which has been foundational in building the nation. By tracing the roots of the American nation and the mythology that sustains it to the contribution of African spiritual narratives, which have inextricably "mingled" with those of white European culture, Du Bois forges and revives a narrative line by which the slaves' descendants can make a rightful claim as original American citizens.

In this final chapter, Du Bois also reveals that, throughout the book, he has been introducing each chapter with bars of music from those "weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" (264). Du Bois traces these "primitive" songs, "the sole American music" (265), to Africa, brought over by, among others, his own grandfather's grandmother (267). Epitomizing the "siftings of centuries" (266), the sorrow songs retain their African specificity through their notes and rhythms, which are "far more ancient than the words" (267). It is through the music, and not the lyrics, that Du Bois attempts to "trace here and there signs of development" (267), the ways in which slaves responded to and influenced their situations through a mixing of African song with Christian narrative. He does so by recording the "heathen melody" (267) – the musical notation as well as the lyrics – that his great-great-grandmother sang to her child: "Do ba-na co-ba, ge-ne me, ge-ne me!" (268). Her child "sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music" (268). Here, Du Bois documents the means by which music, a

universal idiom, has been able to transmit the "meaning" of the African song, the signified, if not the literal words.

This "primitive African music," according to Du Bois, can also "be seen in larger form in the strange chant which heralds 'The Coming of John'" (268), the first piece of fiction Du Bois wrote, and the only one in *The Souls of Black Folk*. This integration of multiple genres into his work performs the syncretism Du Bois documents through his sociological writings. Since this dissertation as a whole is interested in the literary incorporation of mythic narratives, Du Bois' literary experimentation provides early evidence of the ways minority American writers have worked to tear down racist narratives and reinstate culturally specific ones in the context of dominant mythology. Such a methodologically vexed project can be understood as demanding, in some sense, a syncretism of genres, a method that will become especially prevalent in literatures of the second half of the twentieth century. By incorporating fiction into a primarily sociological work, Du Bois is able to put forth different kinds of truth claims, to juxtapose them against each other, and to explore alternate and multiple means by which to assail American literary and political discourse. He is likewise able to conflate seemingly incompatible types of mythic narratives within a unified text. For Du Bois, the incorporation of not only sociological writing and fiction, but also autobiography ("Of the Passing of the First Born") and hagiography ("Of Alexander Crummell") into one text allows him to make multiple discourses jointly work toward the goal of weaving together multiple mythic traditions and thereby rectify the sundered nature of African American citizenship.

Du Bois reveals that the lyrics for the music that introduces "Of the Coming of John," are to one of the spirituals made famous by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, "I'll Hear the Trumpet Sound." Du Bois only quotes the first three lines: "You may bury me in the East, / You may bury me in the West, / But I'll hear the trumpet sound in that morning" (268). Not only is this particular song "of undoubted Negro origin" (268); it is actually, according to Du Bois, purely "African," not "Afro-American" (270), a different kind of sorrow song than one such as "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." Yet because the original African words of this song and others were never translated, they represent "a dimly understood theology." Only hints, the occasional "strange word of an unknown tongue, as the 'Mighty Myo,' which figures as a river of death" remain to provide evidence that these songs, myths set to music, are of African origin.[49] These traces, however, are difficult to discern through the "conventional [Protestant] theology" that syncretically overlays the songs' original lyrics and subject, which constitute what Du Bois, again, according to a progressivist logic, characterizes as the pagan expressions of "primitive folk" who "stood near to Nature's heart" (271).

Though Du Bois does not register it explicitly, the entire text of "I'll Hear the Trumpet Sound" reveals exactly what he is attempting to argue, that these songs are comprised of a syncretic mixing of Christian and African/African American mythic traditions, not only of the musical forms, but also of the narratives themselves. Each verse of the song, for example, contains a version of the line, "I'll take my wings and fly away" (qtd. in Pike 176). This line is most likely an echo of one of the best-known

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[49] In his collection of Negro spirituals, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom Du Bois cites (266, 274), says that he could get no explanation for what the "Mighty Myo" is, except that an old man guesses it might be the "river of death," for in the "Cameroon dialect, 'Mawa' signifies 'to die'" (686).

African American folktales, the story of the flying Africans.[50] Whether or not Du Bois made this connection, his incentive to document the African influences on American cultural production, the music that constitutes "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation" (265), is vouched for by the lyrics of this particular "Negro folk-song" (265).

Du Bois refers to the first three lines of "I'll Hear the Trumpet Sound," as "the voice of exile," a clue as to how we should read John's experiences and downfall in "Of the Coming of John." Though the reader is unaware of it (unless he or she can sight-read music) until the next chapter's explication of the sorrow songs, the story opens with a fictionalized rendition of the syncretic spiritual, which begins, "You can bury me in the East / You can bury me in the West."[51] "Of the Coming of John," in turn, begins by describing Carlisle Street in Johnstown, the site of the fictional version of a black college, Wells Institute: "When at evening the winds come swelling from the *east*, and the great pall of the city's smoke hangs wearily above the valley, then the red *west* glows like a dreamland" (245-246; italics mine). With the immediate juxtaposition of east and west, the story, through its reference to the spiritual about mortality, redemption, and flying back to Africa, foretells John's death at the end.

Though a short story, "Of the Coming of John" can also be read as a fictionalized version of a sociological case study in double consciousness. The narrator is a professor at a black college – one similar to Du Bois himself – who is reporting to his readers how John Jones from Altamaha, Georgia developed from a joyful young man in harmony with

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[50] Eric J. Sundquist also recognizes the way that "I'll Hear the Trumpet Sound" alludes to the legend of the flying Africans, as well as to "the act of transcendence that Du Bois borrows from the figure of the swan [in Wagner's opera, *Lohengrin*]" (523). Toni Morrison's 1976 novel *Song of Solomon* is in many ways a novelization of this folktale. Ralph Ellison's 1944 short story "Flying Home" also makes use of it.

[51] Russell A. Berman argues that the spiritual also usefully – and syncretically – echoes Wagner's *Lohengrin*, the opera figured in the story, when Heinrich promises "equality in East and West" (130).

his community to an educated adult dissatisfied with life and dissociated from both his home community and the culture of the nation as a whole. In his youth, John is "voted a good boy" by the white community until his mother decides to "send him off to school": "It'll spoil him, – ruin him" (246). For the "black folk," however, he is a cause for pride, assuming the status of hero. After he leaves, the community only has "one ever-recurring word , – 'When John comes.' […] Still the legend lingered, – 'When John comes'" (247). Once graduated, John is disinclined to return home and so travels to New York City with the school's singing group. There, he is accidently swept into the opera with the white John who used to be his playmate. While listening to Wagner's *Lohengrin*, a mythically allusive work, John's heart rises "out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled" (252).

Briefly, John experiences the enculturation that Du Bois envisions is possible through connection with the central stories of a Western heritage. But John, whose presence discomforts the white John, is removed from the opera (253). According to a Parkian model, one in which segregation leads to a contrived race consciousness that hinders American assimilation, the imposed segregation that John experiences makes him conscious of his race and disallows him from partaking in the dominant culture. Feeling the disappointment of "exile," John realizes that it is time to return home, to accept what he describes in characteristically exceptionalist rhetoric as his "manifest destiny" (254). When he does return to Altamaha, John urges education, philanthropic work, and "finally he urged unity, and deprecated especially religious and denominational bickering" (256). Like Toomer, Du Bois' John envisions a shared mythic system by which to direct "what part the Negroes of this land would take in the striving of the new century" (256). But

John tramples too harshly over that which “this little world held sacred” (257), what the people view as “the true Religion,” one deeply inflected by African American cultural forms. In so doing, he outrages “their deepest feelings” (258).

Despite all the syncretic moves made in *The Souls of Black Folk*, John’s insensitivity to the traditional beliefs of his community draws attention to the inevitable pitfalls of the syncretic impulse, anticipating both the Afrocentric leanings of Du Bois’ more radical years and the paradigm shift of the 1960s and 1970s. Du Bois provides another indication of this shortcoming when John is gearing himself up for his dreaded return home. As he decides to “settle the Negro problems there,” he speaks the words of Esther, “I will go in to the King, which is not according to law; and if I perish, I perish” (254). Yet, while the biblical Esther revealed herself to be a Jew, successfully convinced the king to spare her people, and became a hero, John dies at the hands of a lynch mob. When lynched to the tune of *Lohengrin* – and not the sorrow songs – in his head, we are apprised not of the triumphant use-value of syncretism, as in the sociological writings, but instead warned of its dangers.[52] Notwithstanding its rhetorical force, mythic syncretism is here proven an untenable paradigm that had to be overthrown. Ultimately, John’s story is a tragic one about a man removed from the central stories of his home community as well as those sanctioned by the nation and therefore destined to be “torn asunder.”

The Vulnerability and Inevitable Decline of Mythic Syncretism

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[52] Sundquist similarly argues that “John’s obliviousness to what is sacred in his tradition is underscored by his humming of Wagner at the point of death” (524).

The political ambivalence of myth – its ability to naturalize the historically specific while exposing such a process at work – allows Du Bois to put mythic syncretism to use in such a way that forges symbolic space within which conventionally suspended citizens can be figured as destined Americans. Through sociological study of the African influence on Christian-inspired American mythology, Du Bois reveals how organic syncretism confirms African Americans' rightful place as cultured citizens. And by revealing the detriments that result from denying syncretism – the ways in which African Americans are always kept at a remove from the nation's central stories – he traces the roots of double consciousness to the experience of pseudo-citizenship. Even though the strategy of mythic syncretism discussed in this chapter appears (and in many ways *is*) conciliatory to a dominant mythic paradigm, it also fosters politically transgressive rhetoric. The protest stems from the relativization of dominant mythic narratives, which were and continue to be produced through minority exclusion. Such narratives are made relative by their juxtaposition with, and, in some cases, dependence on, alternate, culturally specific mythologies. In later chapters, I will demonstrate how Eastman's, Lowe's, Mena's, and Du Bois' successors similarly exploit the political ambivalence of myth, but in different ways and to different ends.

While the kind of protest put forward through mythic syncretism was not without consequence, its vulnerability lay in its default espousal of prevailing mythic terms. Because the American culture of dissent shapes "the subversive in its own image, and thereby within limits, [is] shaped in turn by the radicalism it seeks to contain" (*Rites* 348), Bercovitch seems to suggest that there is in fact no way to escape the appropriative

potential of American myth or rhetoric. William L. Andrews, for example, corroborates Bercovitch's assertion through his reading of Frederick Douglass' autobiography:

> Douglass was free to excoriate his country for its failure to live up to its ideals, as stated in the Declaration of Independence. However, the rhetorical posture of the jeremiad also required Douglass to celebrate the American Dream, to affirm the middle-class consensus about how to achieve it, and thus to endorse the ideology of "true Americanism" even as he denounced those who threatened that ideal with their perverted or "false Americanism." (207)

Bercovitch diagnoses this kind of rhetoric as such: "To denounce immoral Christians by contrast with the sacred example of Christ is to Christianize morality. To define injustice through particular violations of free enterprise (or its constituent elements, such as equal opportunity and representative individualism) is to consecrate free enterprise as *the* just society" (*Rites* 366). Though it makes politically dissonant claims, mythic syncretism upholds the marginalizing ideals of American mythology: exceptionalism, destined ascendancy, and Christian salvation.

While mythic syncretism can be understood as functioning according to the consensus of dissent that Bercovitch so compellingly diagnosis as characterizing American discourse, later writers resist the arrogating force of dominant American mythology through a separatist turn to culturally specific myth. Such a rejection of syncretism allowed for the paradigm shift of the 1960s and 1970s, at which point minority American identity would be re-theorized and newly politicized through the emplotment of alternate origin stories, a project I investigate in the next chapter. Just before this shift, one that will resolutely evade through mythic separatism what

Bercovitch proposes cannot be escaped, James Baldwin identifies an additional liability of mythic syncretism. He describes the ways in which Christian conversion makes the Negro worship a God "who had made him, but not in his image. This tableau, this impossibility, is the heritage of the Negro in America" ("Everybody's" 21). For this reason, he understands the downfall of Richard Wright's protagonist in *Native Son* as such: "Bigger's tragedy is not that he is […] American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life" (22). This verdict points to the damage done by aligning minority American experience with dominant American mythic paradigms; double consciousness is in fact exacerbated, not healed.[53]

A half century prior, Sui Sin Far, credited with being the first Asian American fiction writer, too recognized the ways in which dominant mythic imagery damages minority American's status and self-knowledge.[54] In her autobiographical essay, "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" (1909), Sui likens her experience of discrimination to that of black West Indians:

> I am also surrounded by a race of people, the reputed descendants of Ham, the sons of Noah, whose offspring, it was prophesied, should be the servants of the songs of Shem and Japheth. As I am a descendant, according to the Bible, of both Shem and Japheth, I have a perfect right to set my heel upon the Ham people; but

[53] Langston Hughes' first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), similarly explores the damaging effects of African Americans practicing Christianity, especially a white-oriented version of it. Aunt Hager's social-climbing daughter, Tempy, who looks down on "low niggers" (37) and prefers Du Bois' intellectualism to Washington's focus on industry (242), leaves the Baptist church in favor of the Episcopalian one. Aunt Hager is concerned in a way that evokes Baldwin's criticism: "I told her I didn't think much o' joinin' a church so far away from God that they didn't want nothin' but yaller niggers for members, an' so full o' forms an' fashions that a good Christian couldn't shout" (37). Whereas the Baptist church at least seems to accommodate African-inspired traditions, the Episcopalian one resists anything not identified with a Euro-American, white Christianity. Tempy's foil is Aunt Hager's youngest daughter, Harriett, who criticizes all of Christianity for restraining African Americans from enjoying themselves. Again, her criticism evokes Baldwin's: "Your old Jesus is white, I guess, that's why! He's white and stiff and don't like niggers!" (55).

[54] Born Edith Maude Eaton, Sui's father was a white Briton and her mother was Chinese. She could pass for white but chose not to and identified herself as a "Eurasian."

> tho I see others around me following out the Bible suggestion, it is not in my nature to be arrogant to any but those who seek to impress me with their superiority, which the poor black maid who has been assigned to me by the hotel certainly does not. […] Occasionally an Englishman will warn me against the 'brown boys' of the island, little dreaming that I too am of the 'brown people' of the earth. (225)

With this passage, Sui illustrates the inapplicability of biblical myth, the one that has been most influential in justifying colonialism, slavery, racialized labor forces, and upholding artificial color lines.[55] For all his disinterest in African tradition and for all his endorsement of cultural assimilation and Christian conversion, even Park recognized the role myth has played in alienating African Americans from full-fledged American

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[55] Despite her rejection of such dominant mythic narratives, Sui Sin Far strategically uses others to promote Chinese American political interests. For example, she positions herself as the European mythic figure of Joan of Arc, instead of the Chinese woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan: "I love poetry, particularly heroic pieces. I also love fairy tales. […] I dream dreams of being great and noble. […] I glory in the idea of dying at the stake and a great genie arising from the flames and declaring to those who have scorned us: 'Behold, how great and glorious and noble are the Chinese people!'" (222). See Chapter Three for a discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976), which explicitly rejects the Joan of Arc myth in favor of Fa Mu Lan, exemplifying the difference between pre- and post-1960s minority literature's use of myth. Like Eastman, Sui also attests to the parallels between Chinese and American myth. In "Her Chinese Husband," which is the sequel of two stories from the point of view of a white woman who married a Chinese man, the narrator recalls, "He told me one day he thought the stories in the Bible were more like Chinese than American stories" (78). And, in a statement similar to that of Du Bois that poses minority Americans as destined for equal citizenship rights, characters in Sui Sin Far's story, "The Wisdom of the New," explain that since the Chinese religion, Confucianism, is "practical," the "Chinese mind requires two religions. Even the most commonplace Chinese has yearnings for something above everyday life. Therefore, he combines with his Confucianism, Buddhism – or, in this country, Christianity" (56). Given the "practical" nature of Chinese myth, according to Sui, Chinese Americans are destined to accept the dominant mythic narratives of their adopted country. Sui's vision is also akin to Chesnutt's and Toomer's, which anticipate a literal incarnation of the melting pot myth, a true blending rather than compliant assimilation: "Fundamentally, I muse, people are all the same. My mother's race is as prejudiced as my father's. Only when the whole world becomes as one family will human beings be able to see clearly and hear distinctly. I believe that some day a great part of the world will be Eurasian" (223). My reading therefore goes against Xiao-huang Yin's, who argues that Sui Sin Far views American and Chinese culture as "mutually exclusive": "Because people are unable to synchronize the two different cultures, they will have to choose between them" (97). Because I view Sui Sin Far's mythic syncretism as a means by which the two different cultures can indeed be "synchronized," I depart from Yin, whose reading cannot account for Sui's pioneering use of the term "Chinese-American" in a 1913 issue of *The Independent*, even though he alludes to it (97).

citizenship rights: "The Negro had been taught, and he had it from the Bible, too, that the curse of Canaan had made him black and condemned him forever to be a hewer of wood, a drawer of water, and servant to his master, the white man" ("Negro" 287). The extent to which a Christian-inspired American mythology was saturated with and constituted by white supremacist narratives made the project of attempting to accommodate to it, ultimately, unsustainable.

The turn in the 1960s and 1970s to culturally specific foundational stories to develop a theoretically coherent concept of minority American identity was in fact presaged, among others, by Zora Neale Hurston, whose adoption of Boasian anthropology fueled her commitment to cultural relativism and cultural pluralism (Douglas 22). The "sovereignty of community" (22) that she espoused, while seemingly radical, can also be understood as consistent with what many of her contemporaries viewed as a conservative political stance, especially her denunciation of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling.[56] Though she documents the entanglement of Christian and African myths in much of her fiction, especially *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), as well as her ethnography, Hurston is primarily concerned with how mythic syncretism manifests in a distinctive and separate African American community. For this reason, she describes her black preacher character John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* as not "an imitation puritan ram-rod in pants. Just the human being and the poet that he must be to succeed in the Negro pulpit" ("Letter" 284).[57] Attributing Hurston's cultural separatism to her anthropological training, Michael

[56] See Mary Helen Washington's introduction to *I Love Myself When I am Laughing* for more on Hurston's ambivalent politics.
[57] It is also for this reason that Hurston revises the Moses myth in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, questioning whether Moses was in fact a Hebrew and instead suggesting that he was, in fact, Egyptian. In Hurston's

A. Elliott describes her project as such: "It does not matter that some African Americans follow the religious beliefs first imparted to them by white Christians; what matters is that African Americans turn their services into 'excellent prose poetry.' […] Mimicry is both prevalent and aesthetically accomplished, according to Hurston, but does not make African American culture less integrated or pure" (167-168). Hurston's effort to give credence to culturally specific mythic forms led not only to disapproval by her most vocal critic, Richard Wright, for submitting to preconceived stereotypes of African American culture as primitive, simple, and uncivilized; it also led to decades of neglect.[58] Hurston was ignored, I propose, because of her dedication to portraying African American mythology as separate from prevailing narratives emplotted through mythic syncretism. Her separatist mythic vision was more in keeping with the project of mythic recovery of the 1960s and 1970s, which is why she would not be herself recovered until that time.

The narratives that vigorously worked toward politically viable statements of Americanness through mythic syncretism reached their pinnacle during the Civil Rights movement. No one, perhaps, put mythic syncretism to better or more productive

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telling of the myth, Moses is the one who introduces the monotheistic religion to the Hebrews. One of her characters in *Moses* voices a concern similar to Baldwin's regarding the applicability of Christianity for freed slaves: "Anybody depending on somebody else's gods is depending on a fox not to eat chickens" (6).

[58] See Richard Wright's "Between Laughter and Tears" for his disparaging review of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Christopher Douglas makes the compelling argument that Hurston's cultural anthropology was eclipsed by Park's sociological model, applied by Wright's integrationist poetics of the 1940s and 1950s (51). We can understand Wright's mythic vision as the last gasp of Chesnutt's and Toomer's national, universal vision. For example, Wright, in keeping with the integrationist aspirations of the Civil Rights movement, argues that the first black poet, Phyllis Wheatley, could be "at one with her culture" ("Literature" 115) because she had been raised as if she were a white Christian. For this reason, she could write nationalist, American poetry (114). Later writings by African Americans, according to Wright, could only despair at their separation from the national culture. In response to segregation, authors would turn to "forms of things unknown," by which he means the culturally distinct mythic narratives of the folk (123). Anticipating a moment when a focus on class and integration will allow there to be no such thing as Negro literature, just "American literature" (148), Wright believes that if writers no longer focuses on racial difference, "there will exist one more proof of the oneness of man, of the basic unity of human life on this earth" (150). In response, African Americans will revoke the mythic difference epitomized by the "forms of things unknown" and instead embrace a national mythology. James Coleman somewhat similarly argues that Richard Wright as well as Ralph Ellison steered away from religious discourse in their writing mid-century in order to better integrate into dominant American writing (1).

rhetorical use than Martin Luther King, Jr. In his landmark "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," for example, King compares his fight for civil rights to those of the Hebrew Bible prophets and the Apostle Paul, "compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town" (28). He additionally makes the typological relationship between the nation's Christian foundation and democratic ideals explicit:

> One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. (33)

Yet, as Hortense Spillers convincingly argues, King figures such typological protest with the aid of mythic forms characteristic of the African oral tradition, which "had a cultural tenacity which survived all efforts to destroy it" ("Martin" 97), and which was passed down through the slave ministers into the African American church (77-78). Spillers explains, "He was part of the growing tradition of young, university-trained black preachers, who combine analysis with the manner and style of the elders. The combination is formidable, melding the traditions of the folk and the scholar" (79). King's adherence to dominant mythic narratives while paying heed to culturally specific influences leads him to insist, echoing Du Bois, "Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here" (33). Situating African slaves at the origins of the nation is to confirm that their descendants are destined Americans, entitled to the nation's exceptional, providential narrative, which grants full rights of citizenship: "We will win our freedom

because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands" (33).

When many of the goals of the Civil Rights movement, such as the development of a "race-free society" and "equal opportunity," remained unrealized, however, so too did the ideals of the exceptionalist mythic narrative that drove it. The late 1960s Power Movements and authors of Power literature rejected the myth of origins provided by American exceptionalism and instead embraced wholly separate – yet American – myths of origins. Even if figured in the service of a nation-specific, universalist exceptionalism, though, culturally specific myth was for the first time recorded by many early twentieth-century minority US writers in validating rather than disparaging ways. Eastman's, Lowe's, Mena's, and Du Bois' reconciliation of culturally specific mythic narratives with dominant American myth allowed the alternate origin stories to be reclaimed at a moment in the nation's history when the syncretic move had proven untenable. In an attempt to make marginalized myths integral to the dominant mythic paradigm, early twentieth century minority American writings concurrently affirmed such an ultimately destructive paradigm. In other words, though the strategy of mythic syncretism vouches for the simultaneously radical and conservative political aspirations of myth, it does not escape the appropriative influence of American exceptionalism. In response to the failures and the successes of the Civil Rights movement, both activists and writers (sometimes the same individuals) turned to mythic separatism in order to theorize a politically viable concept of collective identity that resisted – and radically so – the consensual tradition of American mythology.

Chapter Two: Power Literature and the Recovery of Essential Myths

In and after the 1960s, minority American writing flourished. Concurrently, and not coincidently, mythic narratives as markers of cultural specificity became nearly ubiquitous in this body of what would soon come to be known as "multicultural American literature." Whereas US minority authors in the first half of the twentieth century deployed mythology according to a syncretic dynamic, as discussed in Chapter One, authors of the 1960s and 1970s who explicitly identified with a more distinct subnational body politic – authors of what I term "Power literature" – looked to myth in a new light. Dissatisfied with the supposed progress the United States had made toward its minorities, authors of this period turned to cultural and mythic separatism. If we recognize the burden of American exceptionalism for American minorities, then we can, in turn, recognize the profound longing for alternate mythologies. To defy the appropriative rhetoric that Sacvan Bercovitch describes as characterizing American exceptionalist mythology (*Rites* 41), the separatist mythic recovery of Power literature served to theorize a politically viable sense of collective identity that resisted that consensual influence.

Because the American culture of dissent shapes "the subversive in its own image, and thereby within limits, [is] shaped in turn by the radicalism it seeks to contain" (*Rites* 348), Bercovitch seems to be arguing that the appropriative potential of American mythic rhetoric cannot be eluded. Through the emplotment of alternate origin stories, however, Power literature found the means to re-theorize and newly politicize minority American identity outside the realm of American exceptionalist mythology. The work of Power literature, then, ushered in a fundamental paradigm shift that rejected the myth of origins

provided by dominant American mythology and instead provided separatist – yet indigenously American – myths of origins. In other words, I categorize the literature that coincides with the Power movements, whether temporally or ideologically, as Power literature in order to delimit the political and aesthetic project that advanced a sense of collective identity figured as distinct and unassimilated while endemically American. In so doing, it staked rhetorically powerful claims of primacy and indigeneity. Instead of attempting to align disparate mythic legacies, Power literature forged an alternate narrative line that made culturally specific myth determinative of and distinguished from dominant American mythology. Myth, in other words, played a defining role in newly politicizing race in the post-Civil Rights era.

To secure group rights and to stake a claim on American citizenship in the artistic realm, authors of Power literature recognized the need to recover neglected myths in order to develop a coherent group identity that could act on behalf of its people – people who had long been inhabitants of America, who were relatively recently granted citizenship, but who remained second-class citizens in terms of their economic opportunities and political representation. Given myth's transmission of cultural values, its ability to impose order on the unknown, and its establishment of group boundaries, authors of this period capitalized on the nationalizing and normalizing capabilities of mythic narrative.[59] In other words, because myth provides groups and individuals with models and memories of identity and community, the recovery of non-Euro-American

[59] By "normative," I am referring to the means by which myth functions to make something natural that is actually historical. Roland Barthes, in *Mythologies*, for example, argues that myth, in its naturalization of history and culture, becomes an "ideological abuse" (11). I understand Barthes' argument as such: When myth serves to familiarize, it functions in a conservative force; when it then proceeds to nationalize, it is in the service of hegemony. In both cases, however, it works by normalizing what is historically specific.

mythology through literary expression proved essential to differentiating minority identity and politicizing it in the name of group rights.

Motivation for such work came in the wake of the early Civil Rights movement, which, in its call for a race-free society, relied on an ethnicity model of race, a model that depended on the assumption that racial minorities could be assimilated as white ethnics had been.[60] Michael Omi and Howard Winant explain that the later Power movements, such as Black Power, the American Indian/Red Power Movement, the Asian American/Yellow Power Movement, and the Chicano Movement/*El Movimiento*, rejected the ethnicity model's familiar immigrant narrative of acculturation (12). Since policies toward racial difference in the US had remained basically unchanged since the end of Reconstruction, for this transition to occur, the collective identity of African Americans and other groups had to be politicized in a new way (98). This politicization occurred through a transition to more radical class- and nation-based models of race.[61] Indicating the affinity between myth and identity politics, Omi and Winant argue that Civil Rights' leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, were often religious officials who could tap into a cultural reservoir of mythic materials (99-100). Building on Omi and Winant's suggestion, this essay argues that the recovery of sacred narratives was central to Power literature's project of securing group rights of origins on American soil – in the political as well as literary spheres. Power literature, in fact, built upon the uses of myth in movement politics and sought to return to politics even more thoughtful concepts of myth's place and purpose.

[60] Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe this model as influenced by Robert Park's School of Sociology at the University of Chicago. See Chapter One for more on Park.
[61] Omi and Winant criticize the class-based paradigm, though, for overlooking the complexities of U.S. race relations, for, in essence, abstracting race into an economically determined category. They also have difficulty with the nation-based paradigm, which can easily be reduced to militancy or separatism (37).

In this chapter, I situate an analysis of the writing of N. Scott Momaday, Amiri Baraka, and Frank Chin, whom I identify as influential authors of Power literature, within the historical context of the identity movements that followed Civil Rights.[62] In so doing, my goal is to better understand the complicated cultural work that politically motivated minority discourse performs when it integrates myth, a sacred narrative, into literature, a secular one. Because culturally specific sacred narratives were often made syncretic with dominant American mythology prior to this moment, and so were not immediately accessible to the people, the strategy of using myth to instigate political liberation depended on the concomitant project of mythic recovery. The recovery of myth was therefore not just an outcome of Power literature but was also a critical method by which separate group identities were newly politicized.

Power literature's mythic recovery can be understand as stemming from the same ambitions of multiculturalism, which, at its inception, achieved its purpose and vitality not only from the promotion of contemporary minority writing but also from literary recovery. These efforts led to the publication of numerous anthologies of minority literature, such as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal's *Black Fire: An Anthology*

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[62] Despite their significant contributions to the discursive politicization of race in the post-Civil Rights era, the Power movements are largely excluded in the master narrative of American political history in favor of a predominant focus on the Civil Rights movement. A few attempts at a label for these political movements that espoused a new model of race include "ethnic-consciousness" and "ethnic-awareness" movements; forgiving their bulkiness, these descriptors detract from the movements' radical nature through their recourse to the word "ethnic," a term that, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant indicate, has long been in the service of assimilation narratives. Perhaps the most useful categorization has been offered by sociologist Joseph Tilden Rhea, who refers to the "various assertions of minority cultural identity since the mid 1960s" as "the Race Pride Movement" (4). Rhea, however, worries that these activists' focus on "expanding recognition of the value of their pasts" (126) automatically disallows a sense of inclusion in the American nation. Such a critique takes for granted that a "coherent and positive national identity," one that demands assimilation, is the desired goal of all Americans (127). My classification of late 1960s and early 1970s literature written by many different minority men as "Power" is not meant to indicate that each author was equally invested in his respective political movement. For example, N. Scott Momaday was not directly involved with the efforts of the American Indian Movement, whereas Amiri Baraka was considered one of the Black Power movement's leading figures.

of Afro-American Writing (1968), Octavio I. Romano-V. and Herminio Rios C.'s *El Espejo/The Mirror: Selected Mexican American Literature* (1969), Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong's *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), and Kenneth Rosen's *The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians* (1974). Authors of Power literature wrote at the same time as, and were often directly involved in, these projects of literary recovery. For this reason, they can be understood as originating their respective literary traditions within the early multicultural context. Significantly, they are often described in paternal terms: Momaday is repeatedly credited with being the "forefather" of Native American literature (Krupat *Voice* 177); Baraka is widely known as the "father" of the Black Arts Movement (Richards 233); Chin is often referred to as the "godfather" or "patriarch" of Asian American literature (Yung 305; Eng 30); and Rudolfo Anaya (discussed in the next chapter) is commonly understood to be "one of the founding fathers" of Chicano literature (Pérez-Torres 41). Much of the originary force that these authors invoke ultimately stems from their efforts to establish a sense of group identity via the incorporation of culturally specific origin stories within their literary productions.

While authors of Power literature are usually characterized as radical in their politics of difference, their political stance becomes more complicated when we focus on their literary use of myth. In the hands of Momaday, Baraka, and Chin, among others, traditional myth functions in paradigmatic ways that strikingly resemble the structuralist myth theories of Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, and Joseph Campbell, who were, at the time, widely cited in the myth criticism of British and Anglo-American literature. According to these theories, myths were interpreted to refer to "some aspect of mind (the inside) or,

in a primitive and mistaken fashion, to some feature of the objective world (the outside). […] The result is that myth becomes associated with the primitive, the past, the subjective, and the untrue" (Scarborough 10). The shared bed of these strange fellows – the minority authors who insist on distinct and authentic mythic traditions and the white religion scholars whose theories are best described and often discredited as universalist – can be attributed to a shared modernist outlook and a mutual interest in nation-building fueled by nostalgia for a mythic past.

Though politically progressive, Power literature's drive to compose separate origin stories threatens to devolve into ahistorical longing for a pre-colonial origin moment. Despite their ethnocentric tendencies, the universalist mythologists themselves were often considered progressive for their interest in marginalized cultures and their belief that myths and rituals of "primitive" people could offer a means for modern "man" to reconnect with the sacred. By focusing on Momaday's 1968 novel *House Made of Dawn*, Amiri Baraka's 1966 play *A Black Mass*, and Frank Chin's 1974 play *Gee, Pop!*, which emplot empowering narratives in the mythic realm, we can investigate the complications that lurk beneath Power literature's universalist logic for separatist ends. In so doing, we find that though they might share the same nationalist visions and universalizing methods, the results of Power literature's deployment of myth are categorically different from those of the mid-century myth theorists.

While Eliade, Jung, and Campbell sacrifice the particulars of cultural difference and historical context in order to promote their theories, minority authors did not have, and did not want, that luxury. They were faced, after all, with the task of recovering not only myth but also history. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd describe the

struggle of minority discourse against the "hegemonic culture" as necessitating "the recovery and mediation of cultural practices that continue to be subjected to 'institutional forgetting,' which, as a form of control of one's memory and history, is one of the gravest forms of damage done to minority cultures. Archival work, as a form of counter-memory, therefore is essential to the critical articulation of minority discourses" (6).[63] History, given its requisite attention to recorded experiences, situates nostalgia so that it becomes a strategic act, one that counterbalances a romantic thirst for origins with a violent quest for redress. By appealing to history, the recovered myths in Power literature act in revolutionary ways while retaining a politics of conservation.

Given the challenges of recovering pre-contact history, however, authors of Power literature are not primarily concerned with delving into the archives to recover what is usually categorized as recorded history in their quest for origins. For them, myth plays an inimitable role in the process of restoring memory as well as history, in part because it can mediate between the two. In other words, Power literature's recovered collective memories do not rely on the conventions of traditional recorded history. Rather than charting histories of oppression, they are more interested in establishing a narrative of the people that extends both back in time to a pre-contact origin moment while forward to a glorious destiny. Because history, of course, has most often been set down by the victors (colonialists, slave-holders, makers of immigration policies) and because the archive offers only a limited view of life pre-contact, authors of Power

[63] JanMohamed and Lloyd describe this hegemonic culture as "the universalizing humanist project [that] has been highly selective, systemically valorizing certain texts and authors as *the* humanist tradition while ignoring or actively repressing alternative traditions and attitudes" (6). See the first chapter of my dissertation for more on this exceptionalist national culture.

literature make the strategic choice to emplot auspicious narratives of distinct non-dominant cultures in the ahistorical realm of myth.

Among other theorists, Paul Ricoeur helps to explain why the apparent dissonance between universalist means and a separatist end turns out to be a productive one for Power literature. A constant thread in narrative theory focuses on the required negotiation between phenomenological, or experienced, time and cosmological time, that of the unknowable realm of the world. The paradoxical aporia of time that Ricoeur attributes to an awareness of the shortness of life in contrast with the infinitude of the universe can only be managed, never solved, through the emplotment of human, or narrative, time, which can take the guise of either history or fiction.[64] Though they are almost indistinguishable in form, fiction is free to imagine endless possibilities, "what might have been" (Vol. 3 192), while history is restricted by its objective recovery of such "first-order entities – peoples, nations, civilizations – that bear the indelible mark of concrete agents' participatory belongings to the sphere of praxis and narrative" (Vol. 1 181) by way of the archive.

Because minority authors must constantly work to forge symbolic space for alternate narratives, they cannot afford such a Eurocentric generic divide between history and fiction. To counter this hegemonic model that is free to differentiate what is true, because it has already been written and received, from what is imagined, Power literature resorts to myth to elide the distinction between history and fiction and thereby undermine master historical narratives while making separate room for alternate myth-histories. The form of literature, given its exclusive capability for temporal manipulation, as Ricoeur

[64] By "fiction," Ricoeur is referring to all genres of creative writing.

understands it, and given its potential for assimilating both nonfictional and fictional truth claims, allows these authors to stage negotiations between historical and mythic time.

Momaday, Baraka, and Chin use myth as a separatist tool for cultural recovery and the formation of alternate myth-histories with the use of three universalizing strategies: the trope of racial memory; cultural nationalist politics integrated within the confines of the text; and a performance of masculine heroism as an alleviation of modernist alienation. These thematic attributes are interrelated in their insistence on an essential heritage that determines a people's nature.[65] Because the authors' political motivations comprise and determine both the aesthetic form of the works as well as their results, their strategies can be read as functioning in a feedback loop. In other words, the racialist, separatist, and masculinist aesthetics of the texts are, somewhat tautologically, both the tools by which to recover a mythic heritage as well as the end result of such mythic incorporation.[66] Through a consideration of Momaday's racial memory, Baraka's cultural nationalism, and Chin's masculinism, we can identify the precarious homology between Power literature's radical recovery of indigenous myth and the myth theorists' conservative universalism. While Power literature's essentialism results in significant limitations, not the least of which is the marginalization of women, such a strategy must be contextualized in its historical moment and acknowledged as a dissident activism that

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[65] While an argument can be made for each of these authors exemplifying each of the strategies, for the sake of attempted brevity and in the hopes that one thorough example can speak volumes beyond three cursory ones, I will consider in detail only one work per strategy in order to reveal how the trend of mythic recovery operates at this period in American literary history.

[66] The tautological nature of my argument can be read as symptomatic of what some critics contend as the shortcomings of the Black Arts Movement, that it conflates ideology with art. See, among others, Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* for how the Black Aesthetic's "creative and critical framework" can resemble "a closed circle" (81). However, as Baker acknowledges, founders of the Black Arts Movement, such as Larry Neal, were often the first to acknowledge the "critical and theoretical weaknesses of their new paradigm" (85). Additionally, many critics read this moment as one necessary before the deconstructive and post-structuralist works of later writers. Others contend that such deconstruction is not even appropriate for minority writers. As Craig Womack argues, "It is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven't yet constructed it" (*Red* 3).

makes use of universalizing methods for separatist, rather than supremacist, ends. In doing so, we can appreciate the political efficacy of myth – despite its tendency to support the ideological status quo – at a foundational moment in minority identity politics.

Racial Memory: N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*

By making separatist, racially-specific claims to a mythic heritage while endorsing a fundamental, communal experience of it, racial memory uniquely manages the discursive project of subnational formation. Given its authentication of an essential mythic heritage that determines a people's nature, racial memory serves as an indicative example of how Power literature accomplished mythic recovery to develop a coherent group identity capable of political action. For example, in his 1970 essay "Black Woman," Baraka explains that black men and women, though often distanced by the assimilationist pressures of white American culture, have in common their "racial memory," which is the means by which their nation, still a "nation in bondage," survives (152). Likewise, the main structuring feature of Frank Chin's novel *Donald Duk* (1990) is that of racial memory; throughout, the eponymous protagonist discovers the history of early Chinese American immigrants by dreaming of their work on the transcontinental railroad. This section of the chapter focuses on N. Scott Momaday, whose use of the racial memory trope is perhaps the best-known and most controversial. Although his perception of racial memory has evolved somewhat over the forty or so years he has been publishing, I am interested in considering his use of it at a moment contemporaneous with the Power movements and with his rise to the literary scene. For this reason, my

discussion will focus on Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning *House Made of Dawn* (1968), which brought written Native American literature to the attention of the Euro-American literary community.[67]

Narrated in a characteristically modernist style, *House Made of Dawn* is about a young Jemez Pueblo Indian named Abel who has recently returned from World War II, estranged, distraught, and cut-off from his communal life.[68] He attempts to reintegrate himself into his community on the Jemez Pueblo reservation, but he cannot yet access his cultural heritage in order to find a place of healing. When he is humiliated during the sacred feast of Porcingula by an albino Indian, whom Abel recognizes as evil, he hunts the albino down and murders him.[69] Abel is then sent to jail and, when released six years later, relocated to Los Angeles, where he meets Ben Benally, a Navajo, Milly, a white social worker, and Reverend John Big Bluff Tosamah, a Kiowa (Momaday's tribe) and the prophet and "Priest of the Sun" of the Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission. In Los Angeles, Abel makes one more attempt – on his own – to rid evil from this world by attacking a corrupt police officer named Martinez, who beats him nearly to death. The novel ends with Abel's return to the reservation where he takes care of his dying

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[67] Written Native American literature is at least as old as John Rollin Ridge's/Yellow Bird's 1854 *Joaquin Muríeta, the Celebrated California Bandit*. Obviously, oral Native American literature is as old as the people themselves. As Momaday makes clear, written literature is a relatively new phenomenon, even for Anglos – just "six or seven thousand years old, we are told. Language, and in it the formation of that cultural record which is literature, is immeasurably older. Oral tradition is the foundation of literature" ("Native" 14).

[68] Some critics argue that Abel was already dissociated from his communal origins before going to war. For example, Paula Gunn Allen points out that Abel "is isolated from the traditions that organize the seasons and human relationships into significant patterns" (12). Similarly, Robert M. Nelson contends that Abel's "disease […] predates any of his recorded encounters with either corrupting Anglos or the horrors of the war" (48).

[69] Lawrence J. Evers describes Abel's murder of the albino as "an attitude toward evil more akin to the Christian attitude of [the priest] Nicolas V. […] The murder scene is rife with Christian overtones. […] Abel appears to kill the albino then as a frustrated response to the White Man and Christianity, but he does so more in accordance with Anglo tradition than Indian tradition. Indeed, he has been trained in the Army to be a killer" (218-219).

grandfather, Francisco, who raised him. There, Abel is healed and reintegrated into Jemez life by running in the ceremonial Winter Race.[70]

House Made of Dawn implements mythic material on multiple levels, both as embedded text, in the way of Tosamah's origin myth conveyed in his sermon "The Way to Rainy Mountain," and as structuring analogue, in the way of Abel's enactment of "the questing hero's journey in the pattern of […] Native American culture heroes" (Owens *Mixedblood* 64).[71] The novelistic form therefore allows both of these modes to co-exist, contribute to, and comment on each other. In his sermon, which introduces the concept of racial memory, Tosamah claims that the original home of the Kiowa Indians "lay like memory in [his grandmother's] blood," even though she has never seen it (129). He proclaims, "She could tell of the Crows, whom she had never seen, and of the Black Hills, where she had never been" (129). With such memories, she can share the myths of her people with Tosamah. In turn, he passes on this identity-forming material with his parishioners, as well as with us, the readers. What complicates Tosamah's lesson is that his words are virtually verbatim from both Momaday's *The Journey of Tai-Me* (1967), a limited edition, hand-printed memoir, and *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), a later adaptation of the former for a larger audience.[72] Only in *House Made of Dawn*, however, does "The Way to Rainy Mountain" appear as the words of a fictional character and not as those of Momaday himself. Given such a complex publication history, within such a short amount of time, it is clear that Tosamah's speech is integral to Momaday's

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[70] While my argument, like that of most critics, assumes that the ending of *House Made of Dawn* is one of restoration, especially given the novel's cyclic structure, it is possible to read the novel with less optimism since we do not see Abel after he partakes in the final race.

[71] In Native American criticism, myths are often referred to as oral narratives.

[72] In February 1967, it was additionally published separately in essay form in *The Reporter* as "The Way to Rainy Mountain." Both *The Journey of Tai-Me* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain* are multi-generic works that attempt to conceive of Momaday's mythic birthright in terms of his personal identity as a Kiowa Indian through the trope of racial memory.

conception not only of language and Indian identity, but also of myth – how it functions in literature and the world.

Tosamah is also an enigmatic character because, though he appears to be a spokesperson for Momaday, Benally refers to him as someone who "talks pretty big" but "doesn't understand," partly because he's "educated" (148).[73] Critics have therefore aptly labeled Tosamah a trickster, a culture hero who presents the truth through facetious language and ridiculous antics often misinterpreted by Benally and other characters. Louis Owens explains, "As a trickster, Tosamah undertakes the appropriate trickster task of mocking and taunting Abel into self-knowledge" (*Other* 111). Kroeber adds that Tosamah's "shaggy" and "cat-like" features render him "an unmistakable version of Coyote, the most familiar guise of the trickster" (20). Given Momaday's own ursine appearance, numerous critics, including Alan R. Velie, have made a case for the physical resemblance between Tosamah and Momaday (58). Keeping in mind that Momaday is the original speaker of "The Way to Rainy Mountain," he too may occupy the position of trickster, a mythic figure who can reveal to the people – if obliquely – who they are.[74]

The medium through which Momaday undertakes the culturally significant task of the trickster is, of course, his novel. As numerous critics have pointed out, the first and last words of *House Made of Dawn*, "*Dypaloh*" and "*Qtsedaba*," are ceremonial words for introducing and concluding sacred stories in the Jemez Pueblo oral tradition. In this way, Momaday's highly literary novel enters the realm of the sacred and carries on the role of the oral tradition (Evers 214), which Owens describes as having "serious responsibilities: to tell us who we are and where we come from, to make us whole and

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[73] Matthias Schubnell refers to Tosamah as Momaday's mouthpiece even though he is, in Momaday's words "more articulate" and speaks more "glibly" (qtd. in Schubnell 99).
[74] See Chapter Four for more on the trickster.

heal us, to integrate us fully within the world in which we live and make that world inhabitable, to compel order and reality" (*Other* 94). The primary justification for Momaday's assumption of such a sacred role, of establishing a communally restorative understanding of origins, is his memory in the blood, a trope that makes inherent claims to authenticity. This trope acts as the linking concept between the two levels of myth in the novel; because Tosamah's myth accounts for the way racial memory works, it likewise provides the mythic context necessary to understand how the trope is activated in Abel's heroic journey toward psychic and communal healing.

Despite the fact that both racial memory and myth are major topics of study in Native American literature, critics have tended to overlook how they complement each other, specifically how racial memory contributes to the project of mythic recovery. When critics analyze Momaday's use of racial memory, the goal tends to be either to save him from the eugenicist implications of the trope or else to call him to task for those same racialist overtones. For example, Chadwick Allen argues that blood memory's "provocative juxtaposition of *blood* and *memory* transforms that taxonomy of delegitimization through genetic mixing [the U.S. government's use of 'blood quantum' to regulate Indian identity] into an authenticating genealogy of stories and storytelling" (94). Never clarifying why or how he does so, Allen translates Momaday's trope from a potentially biological bond into a figurative, narrative one.[75] Allen's analysis focuses primarily on later works, in which Momaday arguably began rethinking his original intent. For example, in his memoir *The Names* (1976), Momaday describes his mother's

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[75] Gerald Vizenor, a postmodern Native American author and critic whom I will discuss in Chapter Four also revises Momaday's concept of blood memory so that it appears more figurative. Artfully replacing the word "blood" with "imagination," he explains in his characteristic deconstructive style: "Aho, his grandmother, heard stories of the long migration of the tribe, and these stories became her memories in imagination, so that she could hear the shadows of a landscape that she had never seen" ("Ruins" 145).

Indian identity as something "imagined" in response to "that dim native heritage" (25). Because her ancestry was white excepting her Cherokee great-grandmother, Natachee Scott Momaday had to conceive of herself as an Indian in terms more figurative than Momaday's father, a "full-blood" Kiowa, did.[76] Despite this seeming departure from a genetic conception of Indian identity, as late as 1989, Momaday was willing to say to his book-length interviewer, Charles L. Woodard, "Each of us bears in his genes or in his blood or wherever a recollection of the past. Even the very distant past. I just think that's the way it is" (19). When asked if he thinks of it as a "genetic imprint," Momaday responds, "Yes. I suppose I'd say that" (20). Momaday then proceeds to explicitly relate his racial memory to mythology, arguing that this "genetic imprint" allows him to access his people's past via its disclosure of mythic knowledge: "I can tell you about my people – not the individuals beyond, say, three or four generations, but the people as a whole – from the time they entered into the Great Plains and even before that through mythology" (21). It is therefore unfaithful to Momaday's project to reduce his memory in the blood to a metaphor for imagination.

While Allen wishes to save Momaday from the genetic implications of blood memory, Arnold Krupat takes the opposite tack in his 1989 *Voice in the Margin*; in the space of a footnote, he proclaims Momaday's use of the trope "absurdly racist" (14, fn. 7).[77] Krupat spends little time justifying such a claim, simply adding that H. David Brumble III, who, like Allen, attempts to refigure blood memory as signifying "culture"

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[76] Critics also argue that Momaday's blood memory must be understood as symbolic when referring to his well-known 1970 speech, "A Man Made of Words," in which he claims that "an Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself" (49). However, he further argues that in order to express this idea, an Indian needs access to his racial memory. Recalling the epilogue from *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday claims that his memory of Ko-Sahn, an elderly Kiowa storyteller, allows him to witness the scenes present in her own racial memory: those of the Kiowa past (52-54).

[77] Christopher Douglas, alternately, attributes Momaday's turn to blood memory as a compensation for feeling inauthentically Kiowa (251).

(Brumble 174), is too generous (13-14, fn. 7). Krupat has often been censured for this charge, for example by Jace Weaver, who joins Allen in using Momaday's description of his mother in *The Names* to allegorize blood memory and to denounce Krupat's judgment as inconsistent and "misguided." Weaver insists, contra Momaday, "There are, alas, no stories carried in the blood" (*Other* 7).

My goal is not to undermine the undeniable racial implications of Momaday's blood memory nor to pass judgment on his use of the trope. Instead, I want to explicate how racial memory serves a specific literary and political function and, in so doing, how it raises complications that lurk beneath Power literature's universalist methodology for separatist political ends. We can account for the concern surrounding Momaday's use of racial memory in part through its homologous relationship with Jung's controversial concept of the collective unconscious. Much of the controversy surrounding Jung derives from the debate over whether or not the collective unconscious is in fact universal. As Robert Ellwood explains, Jung understood the "collective unconscious" to signify "mental contents [known as archetypes] shared with others, either the entire human race or a subdivision of it, such as a culture or nationality" (44). Jung has been criticized both for his universalist stance that all humankind shares the same archetypes, which are the Platonic ideals from which myths derive, as well as for arguing that different nationalities have different unconscious structures. In the latter case, he has been repeatedly accused of anti-Semitism and even pro-Nazi sentiments for his early argument that the archetypes of Jews and Germans were inherently different (Casement 106).[78] As Don McGowan

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[78] Don McGowan argues that "Jung should not be considered an anti-Semite, but rather a Nordic supremacist" (83). Ann Casement adds that most people believe he made mistakes but was not pro-Nazi. His mistakes consisted of his anti-Semitism and his endorsement of the spiritual recovery practiced by the Nazis (107).

explains, Jung wavered throughout his career about whether or not the collective unconscious was racially determined (17; 69). Regardless, for Jung, myth is inherently genetic, a universal or national narrative in the blood that provides nourishing material for the alienated modern person and community. Racial memory's ability, then, to bridge national and universal narratives makes it an apt, if precarious, trope for Momaday's project of recovering myth for separatist ends.

To make such a simultaneously universal and (sub)national memory operative, Tosamah appeals to an archetypal mandate.[79] He authorizes his sermon, for example, by endowing his dying grandmother with the face "of a child" (128). In returning to a Platonic state of youthful innocence, she has greater access to the archetypes of the unconscious than do those further removed from it. He proceeds, "When she was born, the Kiowas were living the last great moment of their history" (128). Tracing a cyclical ancestry, Tosamah dates the decline of his people to the birth of his grandmother (C. Allen 101-102); as Tosamah recounts the Kiowa origin story with which he is endowed via her blood memory, his grandmother's death makes room for a rebirth of the Kiowa spirit and people.

Momaday paves the way for such a rebirth by emphasizing the inevitable triumph of the Kiowas' narrative history. During his description of the decline of the Kiowas at the hands of the U.S. Cavalry, for instance, Tosamah makes the first but not most explicit reference to racial memory: though she did not witness it in her lifetime, Aho knew "from birth the affliction of defeat, the dark brooding of old warriors" (128). The sermon, however, does not end with the decline but returns to the people's awe-inspiring origins.

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[79] I have placed "sub" in parentheses to highlight the dual nature of the Kiowa people's nationalities, as simultaneously members of the Kiowa nation as well as of the United States.

Though referring to *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Velie's argument is equally pertinent to *House Made of Dawn*: "Momaday does not dwell on painful moments; he is more interested in the glory of the Kiowas than in their sorrows, and he prizes what he can appropriate for himself of their legacy" (30). In keeping with the nationalist goal of restoring the Kiowas' glorious past, Momaday must be selective in his portrayal of the tribe. Perhaps for this reason, he removes from *The Way to Rainy Mountain* tales about the failures of the last Tai-Me keeper, Botone, which appeared in *The Journey of Tai-Me*, when he revised it into the book that would have a much wider reading audience.[80] For Momaday, the recovery of the Kiowa past is a selective one that translates a history of colonial interference into a myth of destined ascendancy.

The narrative of Tosamah's pilgrimage acts as a means toward mythic recovery – a recovery *of* mythic narratives as well as a psychic recovery effected *by* myth. His emphasis on origins and the Kiowa migration story, a formative mythic narrative, indicates his desire to situate the Kiowas in an atemporal and extraterrestrial, or, universal, realm. For example, he describes the migration as leading to a "golden age" (128) and Rainy Mountain as "the top of the world" (129). Just as his grandmother can experience a past she never lived, so too can Tosamah see "to the center of the world's being" (136). Such discourse that situates the Kiowas in a transcendent place and time, like Jung's archetypes, is analogous to Mircea Eliade's belief that the "primitive" or "archaic" "man," in other words, the non-Christian, looks to myth for knowledge of an origin moment, which takes place at the world's center and is "at once primordial and

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[80] The Tai-Me doll is the sacred fetish of the Sun Dance. According to Kenneth Lincoln, Momaday left out the Botone stories because they "cast him in a bad light in general," and Momaday claims his daughter, whom he visited in the mid-1960s to see the Tai-me doll, as a friend (113).

infinitely recoverable" ("Myths" 24).[81] Eliade explains, "For members of archaic and traditional societies, myth narrates a sacred history, telling of events that took place in primordial time, the fabulous time of the 'beginnings'" ("Myths" 23). Knowledge of such a "sacred" time (24) allows traditional people to occupy an ahistorical, cyclical temporality and to thereby make their lives and identities "real" (5, 34).

Though he wants to inspire in "contemporary Western society" a similar respect for the sacred as that typified by primitives, Eliade's ethnocentrism here comes to the fore; while Christians have evolved to the point where history plays an essential role in salvation by way of Christ's intervention, tribal peoples cannot manage the apparent arbitrariness of historical events and so look to myth to escape secular time and enter cosmological time (*Sacred* 20, 35-36). According to Eliade, primitives inhabit cyclical time to escape history, which is inevitably painful, and live according to the transcendent truths provided by knowledge of an origin moment at the world's center: "By 'living' myths, one emerges from profane, chronologically ordered time and enters a time that is of a different quality – a 'sacred' time, at once primordial and infinitely recoverable" ("Myths" 24). Myths, for "primitives" and other "archaic" peoples, provide an identity that is not individual, that is of a people and a tradition, and assimilates the chaos of nature into a narrative of inevitability.

In a less condescending discussion, Standing Rock Sioux theologian, historian, and activist, Vine Deloria, Jr., a contemporary of Momaday, largely agrees with Eliade's differentiation between Indian and Christian temporality. He faults Christian discourse for its reliance on a linear history; native religions, on the other hand, lack "a sense of

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[81] It is unclear if Eliade would or did categorize Jews and Muslims as "archaic." He certainly recognized the Jewish influence on Christianity but still upheld Christianity as the most evolved form of theological expression given the historical hierophany of Jesus.

rigid chronology" and do not "base their validity on any specific incident dividing human time experience into before and after" (*God* 98). Consistent with Deloria's functionalist characterization of Native thought, indigenous myths and rituals do not "depend on history for their verification. If they worked for the community in the present, that was sufficient evidence of their validity" (*God* 102). For this reason, not only does Tosamah's embedded myth insist on the restorative potential of the center, but the novel thrives on a cyclical temporality, beginning and ending with the same scene of Abel running in the Winter Race. Partaking in the same structuralist discourse as Eliade and Deloria, Momaday's nonlinear temporality assumes an antagonistic relationship between traditional myth and modern history, the latter of which is inherently alienating.

According to his literary logic, in order to make symbolic space for a restored Kiowa memory in the American imagination, Momaday must render Christianity, an imposed mythic and temporal framework, foreign to Native tradition. In so doing, Kiowa mythology is not figured as an immature version of religion that cannot manage the historical, as in Eliade's conception, but rather as a valid alternative to it, as in Deloria's. Near the end of the sermon, for example, Tosamah explains his grandmother's religiosity. Her "holy regard" for the sun "is all but gone out of mankind. There was a wariness in her, and an ancient awe. She was a Christian in her later years, but she had come a long way about, and she never forgot her birthright" (132).[82] Here, Tosamah stresses his grandmother's primordial faith, trivializing her Christianity, the faith of the colonizers.[83]

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[82] He likewise refers to the sun dance as "the essential act of [the Kiowas'] faith" (133). Because his grandmother witnessed the U.S. soldiers prevent the tribe from reviving the sun dance in 1890 (the year of the massacre at Wounded Knee), she lived the rest of her life haunted by "a vision of deicide" (133).
[83] Just as Tosamah distances Aho from her Christianity, so too does he blame Christianity for Abel's downfall. Describing Abel's imprisonment, he says, "They put that cat away, man. They had to. It's part of the Jesus scheme" (149).

I am not the first to draw attention to the similarities between Eliade's and Momaday's understandings of mythology, despite their vastly different agendas. For example, Matthias Schubnell uses Eliade's "studies of initiation ceremonies and religious patterns" (102) to sort out the plotline of *House Made of Dawn*. Momaday himself even cites Eliade in an early essay, "The Morality of Indian Hating." In it, he refers to Eliade's belief that "the sacred, in all times, is 'the revelation of the real, an encounter with that which saves us by giving meaning to our existence'" (114). Momaday then offers his commentary:

> Yes, I want to say, here [in Eliade's description] is a brilliant equation of the sacred with reality, salvation, and meaning. But there is more, for the sacred finally transcends definition. The mind does not comprehend it, it is at last to be recognized and acknowledged in the heart and soul. Those who seek to study or understand the sacred in academic terms are misled. (114)

Much can be and has been said of Eliade's dangerous tendency to romanticize "the primitive." Here, Momaday verges on out-romanticizing him by situating that which provides order outside the realm of rational knowledge or scholarly investigation. Yet by doing so, he bounds Native religious traditions, which have for so long been co-opted, and makes them inaccessible to those who cannot connect on an emotional, experiential level with what is sacred according to a specific cultural context – those, in other words, who do not share his racial memory. Eliade's universalism has given way to Momaday's particularism.

Thus far, my consideration of racial memory in *House Made of Dawn*, like that of most critics, has exclusively focused on what can be referred to as an autobiographical

reflection that Momaday incorporated into his otherwise fictional novel. Such an approach, however, makes his inclusion of such a trope seem, at first, superfluous to the rest of the novel. Karl Kroeber, for example, describes the entire sermon as "unefficacious" and "not integral to the development of *House Made of Dawn*" (21). I argue, however, that the sermon explains the function of racial memory in order to guide the reader as to its significance when it is set in motion at the end of the novel. While critics have recognized Abel's recovery at the end of the novel through his participation in Jemez ritual, specifically the preparation of his grandfather's corpse and his partaking in the Winter Race, they tend to overlook the intermediary stage: the activation of his racial memory. In so doing, they lose sight of the process prescribed by Momaday that allows for Abel's transformation from a trodden man to one harmonious with the Jemez people.[84]

At the novel's end, the memories of Abel's grandfather, Francisco, are passed to Abel via racial memory. The transmitted materials allow Abel to run in the mythic race, and so to be healed. At first, Abel cannot understand Francisco's words, which the grandfather is so desperate to communicate. For six days, Francisco awakens from a coma at dawn, yet his words are broken and incoherent. Finally, on the seventh morning, "the voice of his memory was whole and clear and growing like the dawn" (197). Francisco's memories are conveyed to Abel not through literal dialogue coded as such by quotation marks. Instead, because it is "the voice of his memory," and not Francisco's literal voice, the typography turns to italics, the narration to stream-of-consciousness, and the point of view to the third person (as opposed to Francisco's first). The deliberately

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[84] James Welch's (Blackfeet/Gros Ventre) highly acclaimed *Winter in the Blood* (1974) also emplots a healing transmission of blood memory from grandfather to grandson. The very title of the novel refers to the memory of a historic winter that led to the sexual encounter of the nameless protagonist's grandparents.

obscure narration does not signify the literal words spoken by Francisco on his deathbed but rather a non-verbalized language of memory activated in Abel's consciousness.

Francisco's memories, like Tosamah's, evoke the transcendent setting and cyclical temporality of myth according to Eliade's framework. One of the events Francisco remembers, for example, is taking Abel and his brother Vidal to Campo Santo to examine the landscape, to see "the house of the sun" (197), where it originates at dawn. He points out geographic sites where such rituals as the rooster race, the Pecos bull dance, the "secret dances" in the kivas, and the Winter race are performed (197-198). At the end of the chapter, his last thought is again of this mythic race, when he himself was a runner (208). This last piece of knowledge no doubt inspires Abel to continue the tradition and, in so doing, to be healed at the end of the novel. Yet Abel has always had access to this knowledge. In the description of Francisco's memories, the narrator highlights such a paradoxical function of racial memory:

> These things he told to his grandsons carefully, slowly and at length, because they were old and true, and they could be lost forever as easily as one generation is lost to the next. […] But his grandsons knew already; not the names or the strict position of the sun each day in relation to its house, but the larger motion and meaning of the great organic calendar itself. […] And he knew they knew. (198)

Here, the narrative actually insists on a double racial memory: Francisco wordlessly expresses to Abel, through their blood connection, a memory of him endowing Abel with knowledge that he already knows through his racial memory. Yet it must be repeated, because it is always threatened by the suppressive forces of colonialism. As Tosamah explains, the oral tradition is "always but one generation from extinction" (97). Such a

belief echoes the epilogue of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, in which Momaday justifies his compilation of narratives from the Kiowas' oral tradition: "It is within the reach of memory still, though tenuously now, and moreover it is even defined in a remarkably rich and living verbal tradition which demands to be preserved for its own sake" (86). The preservation of the material "for its own sake" speaks to Momaday's project of recovery, a project that Abel figuratively accomplishes and Momaday literally does. What is to be recovered, that which has been disregarded, is ultimately what is to be preserved, for those mythic memories are always already in the blood, yet they require narration so as to defy assimilation and have effect in the world.

When Francisco dies, Abel senses his passing and wakes though there is no sound (209). At this point, Abel instinctively knows via his blood memory "what is to be done" (209), which, as many critics argue, indicates Abel's entrance into the spiritual ways of his people. Evers explains that this is the first time "he correctly performs a ceremonial function as he prepares Francisco for burial and delivers him to Father Olguin" (227). The reader has already witnessed these Jemez burial customs; in his journal, Fray Nicolas, one of the early missionaries at the Pueblo, bemoans how the Jemez Indians reject the Catholic last rites in favor of a Native burial (48). Because Abel abruptly tells the priest to bury his grandfather and then proceeds to the course of the runners after receiving Francisco's memories about the Winter race, he continues in this trend of rejecting Christian rites and myths in favor of those of the Pueblo. By joining in the mythic race, Abel takes over the position of his grandfather, entering into a sacred rite that heals a man suffering from a "heaviness of heart" (Parsons 820) and counters evil in the world, a communal ceremony that serves as the culturally appropriate mode of

dealing with evil as opposed to his murder of the albino.[85] Armed with the mythic material transferred to him through the blood he shares with his grandfather, Abel can become reintegrated into his society.

Despite this dependence on the trope of racial memory for mythic recovery, the majority of the mythic material incorporated into *House Made of Dawn* actually derives from Navajo and Jemez Pueblo traditions, much of which Momaday acquired from anthropological sources, and not from his own Kiowa heritage.[86] The first juxtaposition of these diverse materials comes on the very first page; after the introductory Jemez invocation "*Dypaloh*," the narrative quotes the Navajo Night Chant: "There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen and of rain, and the land was very old and everlasting" (1). Given Momaday's insistence on the narrative efficacy of racial memory, it seems at first inconsistent to provide mythic material to which he has no "blood" connection. Much of his familiarity with the sacred stories, instead, derives from his cultural familiarity with the Navajo and the Jemez people, with whom he lived in his youth. In *The Names*, for instance, he explains his early life on the Navajo reservation: "Just as I was coming alive to the wide world, the vast and beautiful landscape of Dine bikeyah [Navajo country] *was* my world, all of it that I could perceive" (61).

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[85] Vernon E. Lattin points out that Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* also ends with "the ancient run against evil that can never end" (632), when Antonio runs to warn Ultima that Tenorio Trementina is planning to murder her.

[86] For example, Momaday almost verbatim reproduces the Navajo Night Chant from white anthropologist Washington Matthews' transcription of the Navajo Nightway ceremony in his 1902 *The Night Chant: A Navaho Ceremony*. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, he also includes anthropological materials about his own Kiowa people from such white scholars as James Mooney and Elsie Clews Parsons, instead of solely relying on narratives passed down through his father, Al Momaday, and his grandmother, Aho. For example, he cites Mooney to explain the significance of the Tai-me doll to the Sun Dance (37). Perhaps Momaday does so because of his unfamiliarity with the Kiowa language and so is reliant on others for access to the stories.

The incorporation of non-Kiowa tribal materials in conjunction with a dependence on blood memory can be reconciled by interpreting Momaday's characters as inhabiting a pan-tribal mythic realm. For example, at the feast of Porcingula, Francisco, a Jemez, thinks of the Navajo children as a harvest of "the regeneration of his own bone and blood" (76). Here, his biological makeup persists through the future generations of another Indian tribe, and such "regeneration" is brought about at the sacred moment of the feast. This cross-tribal succession is paralleled by the syncretic moves Momaday makes in order to correlate myths across tribal boundaries. In "The Way to Rainy Mountain" sermon, for example, Tosamah describes the Kiowa migration as "a journey toward the dawn" (129). By referencing the dawn in the description of the Kiowa migration, Tosamah draws parallels to the Navajo Nightway, "House Made of Dawn," which is usually sung over someone as a "balancing and re-ordering ceremonial – a ceremonial to restore health and beauty" (Faris 6). Though he is recounting a very specific origin story of the Kiowa people, it resonates in this context across tribal boundaries. Similarly, the Jemez Winter Race echoes the Kiowa migration, and Abel incorporates the Navajo influence when he sings "*House made of pollen, house made of dawn*" (212).[87] Paradoxically, then, a tribally specific racial memory conveyed by Abel's grandfather endows Abel with the inspiration and means to perform a pan-tribal curative rite by which to enter his own specific community as well as that of Indians generally. His vision, again, is simultaneously universal and particular.

Because he believes that pan-Indianness supersedes tribalism (Woodard interview 37-38), Momaday relies on many of the same strategies that guided the political

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[87] Evers similarly points out that the race can be read as analogous to the re-emergence myth sung about in the Navajo Night Chant (214).

movements surrounding the publication of *House Made of Dawn*. Even though Momaday was not actively involved in the American Indian Movement (AIM), Sean Kicummah Teuton refers to him as "a founding Indian voice at the rise of Red Power" (7).[88] Between 1964 and 1973, Indians from multiple tribes fought together to make their concerns, especially about tribal self-determination (an inherently particularist political project), apparent to the federal government and the general population.[89] Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior describe the 1964 occupation of Alcatraz Island, for example, as electrifying the Indian population, "captur[ing] their imagination and never let[ting] go. The 1964 landing became part of the community's oral history" (11). Acting on that oral history, there were additional attempts to claim the land; the best-known took place in 1969 and was led by Adam Nordall, who read the Alcatraz Proclamation, mimicking treaty discourse:

> We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four dollars (24) in glass beads and red cloth. […] We will give to the inhabitants of this island a portion of the land for their own to be held in trust by the American Indian Government and by the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs to hold in perpetuity – for as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea." (qtd. in Smith and Warrior 28)

Other AIM undertakings include the settlement of Seattle's Fort Lawton in 1970, to which the Seattle Indians eventually received the title, the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC in 1972, and, perhaps the most famous, the occupation of Wounded Knee on the Oglala Lakota Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation in 1973.

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[88] Teuton even goes so far as to argue that scenes from *House Made of Dawn* both prefigure and recall famous moments of Indian activism, such as the occupation of Alcatraz (45).
[89] They did not assume the title American Indian Movement until 1968.

Sam D. Gill explains that the American Indian Movement achieved much of its rhetorical momentum from its investment in the pan-tribal mythic figure of Mother Earth. In an argument that has been denounced by some Indian activists and critics, Gill claims that Mother Earth is actually not an indigenous mythic figure but rather a revised, twentieth-century version that generalizes the many different traditional tribal goddesses.[90] My concern here is not to account for the origins of the Mother Earth myth but rather to highlight Gill's less controversial argument that it "gives a primordial and spiritual foundation to the history, culture, morality, and values of Native Americans" (146) as a retaliating force against Euro-American culture. In other words, this pan-tribal mythic figure endowed Indian activists with the universalist means to authorize their particularist claims of primacy to the land. Mother Earth thereby countered Euro-American Christian mythology, which, according to Vine Deloria, ultimately sanctioned Westerners' "ideas of divine right to conquest, of manifest destiny, of themselves as the vanguard of true civilization" (*God* 111). Because Deloria views syncretism of native religions and Christianity as not only undesirable but impossible without the ultimate sacrifice of the former (*God* 254), he embraces a model of pan-tribal separatism "to achieve equality of personality both for groups and individuals" (*Custer* 188). In keeping with the indigenous mythic vision of AIM and Deloria, Momaday's Tosamah, the priest of a pan-tribal church, provides a racial memory that is therapeutic to Indians of all tribes who have been displaced by the relocation programs of the 1950s.[91]

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[90] The most vocal criticism came from Ward Churchill, but others, including Jace Weaver, have been troubled by Gill's argument that the Mother Earth myth is a fabrication. For Churchill's critique, see *Fantasies of the Master Race* (106-117). For Weaver's critique, see his introduction to *Defending Mother Earth* (9-10).

[91] Though the Native American Church incorporates Christian elements, Momaday does not reference any identifiable Christian myths, rituals, or markers unless to estrange them from traditional Native American theologies.

Though Momaday's cyclical temporality recalls the romantic nostalgia of Eliade and Jung, his particular deployment of myth in the fictive realm complicates their ahistoricism by seamlessly merging the past with a politically contingent present. For example, the narrator of *House Made of Dawn* describes contemporary Indians as retaining their way of life "after four centuries of Christianity," as still praying in their native languages to their "old deities of the earth and sky" and still holding "on to their own, secret souls."[92] In this, the narrator assures, "there is a resistance and an overcoming" (58). While making claims to separatism by recovering the "old deities," the narrator denies the need to recover what already exists. The above quotation comes from a lengthy rumination on the earth, in which the land is described in a conditional tense that elides the distinction between past and present:

> Man came down the ladder to the plain a long time ago. It was a slow migration, though he came only from the caves in the canyons and the tops of the mesas nearby. […] [S]till there are metates and broken bowls and ancient ears of corn, as if the prehistoric civilization had gone out among the hills for a little while and would return; and then everything would be restored to an older age, and time would have returned upon itself and a bad dream of invasion and change would have been dissolved in an hour before the dawn. For man, too, has tenure in the land; he dwelt upon the land twenty-five thousand years ago, and his gods before him. (57-58)

[92] Professor of Theology and evangelist Achiel Peelman, somewhat begrudgingly, acknowledges the truth of Momaday's statement: "Christianity has not been able to displace the traditional AmerIndian religions. Ancestral spirituality continues to play a significant role in the lives of many native Americans and in their communities. It is a vital factor even in the lives of many AmerIndians who consider themselves faithful members of the Christian church" (15).

In an admittedly nostalgic temper, this meditation insists on a resistant need for preservation, both of the landscape and of the stories that enlighten it. Because in mythic time the Natives' "gods" occupied the land, present-day Indians continue to retain their "tenure" in it. If knowledge of these stories is shared, the narrator suggests, a restoration of the "prehistoric civilization" indigenous to the land and its accompanying gods is at hand.

Momaday's effort to recoup traditional myths for the political and psychic recuperation of the Indian population is not limited to the literary sphere and continues to this day. He has established a foundation called "Buffalo Trust" whose purpose is "to restore and preserve the sacred, and perpetuate the sacred cultural inheritance of American Indian people" ("Buffalo Trust"). The website's mission statement reads, "I founded the Buffalo Trust, having concluded that young Indian people are drifting inexorably from the ancient center of their traditional world." Here, too, Momaday's temporal engagement is both of the past and the present. To allow for alienated Indians' resurgence, his Trust simultaneously recovers what was and conserves what already is.

Fueled by such a paradoxical methodology, one that allows for the recovery of that which has never waned, Momaday's goal of conveying sacred stories to an alienated population is comparable to the restorative work of Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement. When put in conversation with Baraka's project, we can better understand how Momaday's novel conflates myth and history in the space of literature for the explicit political purpose of emplotting an alternate origin story. While Momaday approaches literature as a medium through which to "center" American Indians with restorative mythic materials, Baraka integrates such a political drive within the context of

the creative realm itself. By acknowledging the conflation of art and politics in Amiri Baraka's work, a particular deployment of mythic time can be identified as the technique that distinguishes Power literature – if precariously so – from the universalist theories of mid-century myth theorists.

Political, Aesthetic, and Temporal Conflation: Amiri Baraka's *A Black Mass*

More drastically than Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Baraka's play *A Black Mass* elides the distinction between literature and political activism, so much so that his dramatic realm conflates mythic and historical time to emplot a master minority narrative.[93] Similar to Momaday's deployment of Native oral tradition to promote a separatist politics, Baraka makes of his play *A Black Mass* a politically motivated iteration of Nation of Islam mythology. By reading such a mythic incorporation as offering an origin story wholly distinct from and resistant to American exceptionalist mythology, we can recognize how Power literature's temporal manipulations thrive off of the tension between universalist methodology and separatist ends that I have described in Momaday's work. Baraka translates separatist myth into a universal origin story that encompasses white people while giving precedence to black people. In so doing, he co-opts the ahistorical narratives of American exceptionalism by making them derivative of a more authentic – because aboriginal – myth-history. To allow such a coherent narrative to take its rightful place in the world, Baraka integrates the political impulse within the context of the play itself, denying the modernist position that literature and politics are

[93] Though *A Black Mass* was written, produced, and published when Baraka was still using the name "LeRoi Jones," I refer to him as Amiri Baraka ("Blessed Prince") since it is the name he goes by today. For more on Baraka's name change, see, among others, Nilgun Anadolu-Okur's *Contemporary African American Theater* (87) and Jerry Gafio Watts' *Amiri Baraka* (310). Baraka also provides his own account in his autobiography (376).

and should be distinct. In this way, he exposes the privilege of such a supposedly disinterested aesthetic perspective since it already relies – and effortlessly so – on documented history.

A Black Mass was first produced in 1966 at Proctor's Theatre in New Jersey but not published until 1969 along with *Experimental Death Unit 1*, *Great Goodness of Life*, and *Madheart: A Morality Play* as *Four Black Revolutionary Plays*. These agitprop plays were written at the beginning of what Werner Sollors refers to as Baraka's nationalist phase of writing, when his work became more ethnocentric and aggressive (*Amiri* 5).[94] At this moment, Baraka had become disenchanted with the racially integrated bohemian lifestyle and beat movement of New York's Village. In 1965, as if to personalize the change in his political commitments, he divorced his Jewish wife, Hettie Cohen, left their two daughters, and moved to Harlem. Much of the nonfiction prose Baraka wrote during this period concerns the "Black man's" need to separate himself in a new nation, distinct from bourgeois American culture, and to recover a sense of African identity. For example, in his 1967 essay "The Need for a Cultural Base to Civil Rites & Bpower Mooments [sic]," Baraka argues that "the only black power that can exist is that established by black nationalism. We want power to control our lives, as separate from what Americans, white and white-oriented people, want to do with their lives" (41). Part of the means by which African Americans can achieve this power is by acknowledging their history and ancestry as "the relatives of the most ancient men on earth" ("Poetry" 24). In a 1967 interview, Baraka likewise explains that what he means by "cultural

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[94] Much like Malcolm X's and Elijah Muhammad's nationalism, it is debatable if Baraka indeed wanted a separate sovereign state established for African Americans. Sollors claims that, for Baraka, nationalism was more cultural than literal: "Social change was to come about through Black consciousness, new images, and the minds of the people" (*Amiri* 170).

nationalism" is that African Americans "have to be for the resurrection of new black forms and the resurrection of old forms, traditional forms, that will instruct you in what you're doing and give you a connection with your past" (R. Allen interview 23). It is therefore the artist's responsibility to provide such ancestral knowledge, which fuels the political action and efficacy of Black Power.

One of the primary mythic sources Baraka relies on in order to recover this traditional knowledge is the Nation of Islam, which he describes as a "total definer of the world" because it is a "form of spirit worship (a moral guide) as well as a socio-economic and political program" ("Need" 43).[95] Baraka appreciates this totality because it provides "all the symbols of the culture, all the keys and images out of the black past" (44). This past that needs to be revived is specifically "black african-middle eastern" (44), hence Islamic. To restore the Islamic history of the 15 to 20 percent of African slaves brought over on the Middle Passage who were Muslim (McCloud 102), Aminah Beverly McCloud argues that the Nation of Islam calls on a "kind of primordial memory of Islam as the monotheistic tradition of slaves" (105).[96] Baraka's relationship with the Nation of

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[95] It is difficult to determine if Maulana Karenga's syncretic theological philosophy, Kawaida, best known for its December holiday, Kwanzaa, also was an influencing mythic factor for Baraka at the time he wrote *A Black Mass*. He claims that around the same time that he discovered the Nation of Islam through Malcolm X, he was also introduced to the Yoruba religion (X and Faruk interview 51), which was a major component of Kawaida. And Nilgun Anadolu-Okur argues that in 1967, Baraka "had already become a follower" of Kawaida. In 1969, Baraka published "7 Principles of US Maulana Karenga & the Need for a Black Value System," in which he presents Kawaida, like the Nation of Islam, as a philosophy that provides means by which the black population can control all aspects of life: "Maulana speaks of spiritual concepts & scientific principles embodied as a morality system–complete in itself, as a contemporary Black philosophy old as the sun" (134). This contrived philosophy is for Baraka "superior to the practiced morality of Euro-American civilization" (137), and it provides the tools necessary to establish an African American nation, as indicated by his 1972 collection of essays *Kawaida Studies: The New Nationalism*.

[96] Though the slaves were only able to retain their Muslim religion for a couple generations (McCloud 102), the Islamic revival in the African American community actually dates back to the First Moorish Science Temple founded in 1913 by Noble Drew Ali. This group is distinct from the Nation of Islam, which was founded in the 1930s by Wallace D. Fard, who, however, did claim to be Drew Ali reincarnated (Essien-Udom 55). Both Ali and Fard believed that a "true knowledge" of African Americans' Muslim history was essential to "black liberation" (Glaude 37). In order to "connect black Americans – whose ancestors were predominantly West Africans – to the ancient civilization of Egypt and the Islamic culture

Islam is complex, but it is important to acknowledge his commitment to it when he wrote *A Black Mass* as well as his belief that the religion could bring self-knowledge and political awareness to African Americans. Baraka never officially joined the Nation of Islam, in part due to the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X, without whom the Nation of Islam lost much of its appeal for him (*Autobiography* 312).[97] Instead, he described himself as "an Orthodox Sunni Muslim," because he believed more fervently than the Black Muslims in the importance of prayer (Clarke interview 37). Nevertheless, the Nation of Islam signified for him "progressive social thinking" (X and Faruk interview 51) as well as a theological rejection of the characteristically white Christian religion, which Baraka claimed makes African Americans "pray to a god who allows you to be a slave" (Clarke interview 37).

A Black Mass is primarily an animation of the Nation of Islam's origin myth, which conceives white people as the result of a black man's creation.[98] This myth, which had been circulating among Black Muslims since the 1930s, is recounted in Messenger Elijah Muhammad's foundational text, *A Message to the Black Man* (1965) and often appears in the Nation of Islam's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*.[99] According to the

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of Arabia" Fard "created the fantasyland of 'East Asia,'" which equated with the Nile River Valley in Africa (Clegg 45-46). Elijah Muhammad, the Messenger and leader of the Nation of Islam from 1934 to 1975, later identified Fard as Allah.

[97] See Kimberly W. Benston's *Baraka* (33-37) for more on Baraka's relationship with the Nation of Islam.

[98] The Nation of Islam is not the only tradition that espouses a belief that black men preceded and are responsible for the existence of white men. Numerous folktales prevalent both during and after slavery purported the precedence and supremacy of black people. For example, Lawrence W. Levine reveals that narratives that positioned black people at the origin of humanity were common in slavery and afterward: "The assumption of a black creation allowed slaves to stand the white creation myths on their heads" (85).

[99] Malcolm X also recounts the myth in his autobiography, in which he situates present-day African Americans as descendants of the people of Mecca (167-171). Aminah Beverly McCloud understands this myth as providing solace to its believers because it explains the "subjugation, exploitation, and poverty" that characterized much of African American life as "the result of a plan, and the release from this state involved their recognizing who they were and the necessity to set things right. […] This creation story sufficed to repair some of the psychological damage done from slavery, segregation, and the ensuing physical violence" (108).

myth, only black people originally inhabited the earth. They lived peacefully in present-day Saudi Arabia until a brilliant scientist with an unusually large head, Yakub, decided he could create a new race of people to serve him. He came to this realization when he observed magnetism, the dynamic of "like" being attracted to "unlike," which led him to the discovery of the black and brown "germs," or genes, that structure each person's anatomy. Yakub began gathering followers, telling them that he would invent a race of slaves for them.[100] The Meccan officials became nervous and made a deal with Yakub: they would support him and his 59,999 followers on the island of Pelan for six hundred years in exchange for their departure from Mecca. Once exiled, Yakub instituted a thorough eugenics plan, enforcing infanticide for dark black babies and encouraging light-skinned people to marry each other.[101] Over the six-hundred-year period, during which Yakub died but left his legacy, the race became purely white, as well as corrupt and dishonest. When they returned to Mecca and raised havoc, Mecca defended itself and banished the white race to the North (Europe), where they survived without a culture or civilization.

In *A Black Mass*, Baraka modifies the Nation of Islam myth slightly in order to downplay its eugenic premise and to include a more identifiably African tradition of magic. Instead of creating a white race over hundreds of years of meticulous breeding policies, Baraka's Jacoub (his spelling) does so through scientific experiments in a laboratory with mortar and pestle. When the white man is invented, it is seemingly from Jacoub's own flesh: "Now is the time of creation. […] The blood flows in my head and fingers. The world is expanding. I create the new substance of life" (45). The white

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[100] The irony, which draws attention to the white race's enslavement of black people, is readily apparent.
[101] Again, the myth parodies the eugenic systems of slavery and Jim Crow.

man's beastly appearance is strikingly similar to that of Momaday's evil albino, who is repeatedly described along with reptilian modifiers as "the white man." Baraka's stage directions read, "*The figure is absolutely cold white with red lizard-devil mask which covers the whole head and ends up as a lizard spine cape*" (46). Here, both Momaday and Baraka are of course reversing the conventional Judeo-Christian dichotomy that ascribes evil to darkness and goodness to light, exposing such archetypal markers as faulty, socially constructed, and undeniably racist.[102] In so doing, they make room for the recovery of alternate myths and value-systems.

Baraka's white beast, the original ancestor of all members of the Caucasian race, can only speak three words: "I," "me," and "White." By removing from his white "Adam" figure any ability to communicate, Baraka reduces his being to a redundant assertion of racial subjectivity. Despite the beast's limited vocabulary, Jacoub, like Dr. Frankenstein, believes that his creation can be educated. However, his fellow magicians, Tanzil and Nasafi, the latter of whom has a third eye (47) and so superior perception, both recognize its evil, that it "WILL KILL, JACOUB. […] WILL TAKE HUMAN LIFE" because "IT HAS NO REGARD FOR HUMAN LIFE!" (47). Jacoub ignores these warnings and does not admit his error until a woman is attacked and vampirically becomes white herself. However, he still believes he can teach the beasts. Nasafi instead recommends banishing them to "the cold north" (52): Europe.

Beginning with Larry Neal, critics have repeatedly argued that Jacoub's arrogance is meant to indict New Criticism, which divorces the aesthetic from the political. Neal

[102] Perhaps ironically, Momaday and Baraka enter into a quintessentially American literary tradition of equating whiteness with evil, best exemplified by Melville's *Moby-Dick*. As Sollors argues, the "symbolic association of whiteness and evil is a literary strategy which subtly reflects both Baraka's sense of racial alienation and his literary debt to Melville" (*Amiri* 43).

contends that Jacoub's beast "is created merely for the sake of creation" (284). Just as Jacoub desires knowledge for its own sake, so too do New Critics read high modernist literature as devoid of political implication and historical specificity. Baraka himself supported Neal's interpretation, though, through his spelling, he references the myth's protagonist, and not his own: "Yakub was first of all a new critic" ("Fire" 119). Such a distinction between the traditional Nation of Islam mythic figure and Baraka's dramatic version allows for us to read his play as more than a critique of the contemporary field of literary criticism, so influenced by the myth-and-symbol school.

While I agree with Larry Neal's analysis, *A Black Mass* additionally offers mythic materials as symbolic fodder for Baraka's black audience members – at this time, Baraka forbade white people from attending his plays (Sollors *Amiri* 5; Gottlieb 30). Similar to Momaday's appeal to a pan-tribal population (even though his readers were not exclusively or primarily Indian), Baraka addresses an audience that is delimited by phenotypical markers, not place of origin. For example, the play's setting illustrates the international derivation of the world before the white man. In the laboratory, there are signs in both Arabic and Swahili on the wall and working there are three magicians wearing a skullcap, a fez, and an "African hat, (fila)" (37). Such diverse attire emphasizes Baraka's interest in recovering a simultaneously Arab, Muslim, and African heritage.[103] Such a pan-African, diasporic approach is analogous to Momaday's pan-tribal racial memory; both authors correlate a genetic link, a tradition of mythic narratives, and a collective political ambition in response to dominant American exceptionalist mythology.

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[103] Philip Uko Effiong attributes the interchangeability of Arab, Islamic, and sub-Saharan African traditions to Baraka's Kawaida faith (113), which is, inherently, an international belief system. As an activist, Baraka additionally helped organize a major pan-African congress in Atlanta in 1968.

By watching *A Black Mass*, the viewers receive this international mythic heritage to substantiate a distinct African American identity. In keeping with the Black Arts movement, the aesthetic counterpart of the Black Power movement that Baraka spearheaded with Neal, *A Black Mass* conflates art and politics so that literature enters the world in functional ways, to symbolically counter assimilationist and racist discourse and policies and to develop empowering narratives of communal identity. Despite criticisms that such an evident ulterior motive drains the aesthetic value of Baraka's literature, such as those voiced by Jerry Watts (5, 16, 161, 183), Neal explains that the Black Arts movement "proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconography" (272) in order to support the "Black Power movement, which is the will toward self-determination and nationhood" (277). Because "it is informed by a mythology that is wholly the creation of the Afro-American sensibility," Neal contends that *A Black Mass* is actually Baraka's "most important play" (284).[104]

Such a project of prescribing mythic knowledge for countering the relentless domination of American exceptionalist mythology, ultimately, is one of edification, hence the play's "didactic tone" (Anadolu-Okur 101). Similar to Momaday's Buffalo Trust foundation, Baraka assumes the role of instructor endowed with knowledge of African and African American mythology, which he transmits to his student-viewers. These student-viewers can be understood as constituting the "black masses," whom members of the Black Arts movement identified as their "ideal audience" (Watts 171).

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[104] Another play that Neal greatly admires and that has received more critical attention that *A Black Mass* is his 1967/1969 *Slave Ship*. This play, which Baraka subtitles "A Historical Pageant," attempts to capture the horrific conditions of the Middle Passage along with the original Yoruba traditions that sustained many of the newly enslaved men and women. The purpose of the play is to remind the audience members of such a tradition so that the people might rise and rid themselves of a stultifying Christianity, which inevitably turns African Americans into conciliatory Uncle Toms. Larry Neal additionally contends that the play's purpose is to "extend memory" (285).

The title of the play, then, functions as a pun, indicating both the scene performed on stage as well as the audience members themselves. Envisioning himself as "a Muslim soothsayer" (X and Faruk interview 5) and also as a teacher (indicated by the title "Imamu," which he affixed to his name during his nationalist period), Baraka assumes responsibility for the enlightenment of his audience, who need to be reacquainted with "our origins, as those origins exist within us now" (Clarke interview 41).[105] Philip Uko Effiong adds, "Merging an African name with a Muslim leadership title depicts Baraka's ardent quest for a ceremonial role as opposed to just the role of playwright" (82). Even more than Momaday's framing of his literary work within the Jemez sacred tradition, Baraka envisions his play as sustaining a mythic heritage whose political relevance far exceeds the stage or page.

We can better appreciate Baraka's conception of the restorative power of myth if we view it in the context of Jung's thought, which proposes that myths, given their access into the collective unconscious, can provide healing power to alienated moderns. For Jung, myth exists to "satisfy the psychological need for contact with the unconscious" (Segal 3). He explains that the process of individuation, of leaving behind a dissociated state to become a unified whole (*Archetypes* 275), entails "integrat[ing] the unconscious into consciousness" (40). Myths (and the literature that incorporates them) are essential to this therapeutic procedure because they make us aware of the archetypes extant in our unconscious, which is too often obscured by the alienating influences of a technologically preoccupied modern life, and, for Baraka, a Euro-American one. Significantly, the "Original Man" is one of Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious (*Archetypes* 71). Baraka's fictive portrayal of such an archetypal figure therefore works to reorient

[105] Another translation of "Imamu" is "spiritual leader."

his viewers with their pre-colonial lineage and heal their postcolonial angst. If our egos are too swayed by the collective *conscious* at the expense of the collective *un*conscious, Jung explains, then "the result of that is the *mass* man, the ever-ready victim of some wretched 'ism'" ("Structure" 219; italics mine). For Baraka, the form of that "ism" is American exceptionalist, Christian mythology, which promotes Uncle Tomism and internalized racism. For this reason, Baraka's "Adam" figure is a far cry from Toomer's American Adam, discussed in Chapter One.

At the end of *A Black Mass*, the white man and now-white woman kill the rest of the characters. Jacoub's dying words are, "With my last breath I condemn you to the caves. […] *Izm-el-Azam*. May God have mercy" (55). Finally, Jacoub recants, admitting his fault in unleashing such a beast into the world. Before the end, though, the white man and woman enter the audience and begin licking the members, signaling the remaining threat to black people being made white through assimilation, self-hate, and the pressures of American exceptionalist mythology. The narrator's voice, which sounds over a loudspeaker, then confirms such a danger: "And so Brothers and Sisters, these beasts are still loose in the world. […] Let us find them and slay them. […] Let us declare the Holy War. The Jihad" (56). Here, Baraka's narrative voice encroaches on the dramatic realm with the authority of sacred Muslim discourse and instructs the viewing audience how to counter white oppression.[106] Such an intrusion persuades the audience to apply the mythic narrative animated before them – though whether to do so literally or figuratively is left unclear – to their present moment and not to forsake it to the realm of apolitical nostalgia.

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[106] For a discussion of Baraka's endorsement of violence, see below.

Ultimately, *A Black Mass* acquires its political force from Baraka's conflation of mythic and historical time. Before Jacoub usurps it, the original purpose of the mass is to weaken time, one of Jacoub's recent inventions in his Faustian pursuit to attain all knowledge. Tanzil refers to time as "white madness" (38), and Nasafi says it is turning humans into "running animals" (39). Jacoub even envisions the white beast as a creature "in love with time" (42). Equated with the regimented and artificial structure of industrialized Euro-America, Baraka's characterization of time can be understood as analogous to Ricoeur's notion of narrative time, discussed above, which attempts to mediate between cosmological and lived time. Yet at one point, Ricoeur proposes that such an intercession was not necessary. The temporal experience allowed by one's engagement with myth, according to Ricoeur, "takes us back before this split [between cosmological and lived time] to a point in the problematic of time where it still embraces the totality of what we designate as, on the one hand, the world and, on the other hand, human existence" (Vol. 3 105). Baraka, then, actually narrates such a split occurring through Jacoub's invention.

As an alternative to Jacoub's artificial time, which is associated with white civilization, *A Black Mass* reinstates that mythic time before the split, pre-contact. In other words, Baraka's primary goal, like Momaday's cyclical temporal emplotment, is to establish a mythic alternative to history and not to recover an empirical one. Baraka's motivation for doing so can be understood as "reconstituting the discourse of cultural difference," which Bhabha recognizes as demanding "more than a simple change of cultural contents and symbols, for a replacement within the same representational time frame is never adequate. This reconstitution requires a radical revision of the social

temporality in which emergent histories may be written" ("Freedom's" 47-48; italics in original). In Baraka's projected temporal space, myth is conflated with history so that the temporality of *A Black Mass* communicates not "what might have been" in the way of imagined fiction, but what *had* been in a pre-contact world that never can be recovered through history alone. Myths do not make reference to "first-order" things in the way of history, yet they also do not make reference to what exists purely in the individual imagination in the way of fiction. Myth, in other words, hovers in the liminal generic space between history, which refers "back to first-order entities," in Ricoeur's understanding, and fiction, which is free to escape such an obligation. Baraka's mythic evocation, in this context, makes structural appeals to truth even if Jacoub did not exist in the realm of empirical history. Because the archive is limited in its availability and has been co-opted by hegemonic narratives, characteristically historical – as opposed to mythical – discourse founders as a means to restore and rewrite Bhabha's "emergent histories."

By incorporating a transcendent cultural narrative into the dramatic realm, Baraka makes it constitutive of historical narratives of conquest and exploitation, which lose their authority as origin moments of minority American identity and are refigured as unnatural interferences to the prior narrative. What was once a master narrative structured by a binary relationship between victor and victim becomes a *minor*ity narrative structured by a binary relationship between originators and obtrusive latecomers, derivatives, or invaders.[107] The cyclical temporality and structure of *House*

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[107] Somewhat inexplicably, Sollors most strongly criticizes the drama of Baraka's nationalist period, claiming that he solely portrays African Americans as victims instead of heroes (*Amiri* 219). It is difficult to conceive of Jacoub as a victim, given his great power, though he does die at the end. I am more inclined

Made of Dawn functions similarly; for Momaday, non-linear time represents a better, more authentic time to be recovered. All that has occurred post-contact has been an aberrant departure from that once glorious time, a "bad dream of invasion and change [that] would have been dissolved in an hour before the dawn" (57-58). In their literary conflation of myth and history by way of mythic time, Momaday and Baraka establish a temporal model that asserts an enduring origin; once knowledge of such an origin is recovered via the incorporation of traditional myth in literature, such an authentic legacy will realize its rightful course. This reinstated narrative, which insists on indigenous primacy, provides an alternative to American exceptionalist mythology and the history of victimhood that has been written in its stead because its origin prefigures and so repudiates Euro-American origin stories of colonization. Rather than succumbing to dominant mythology's appropriative influence, Momaday and Baraka emplot alternate origin stories that foundationally alter the creative means of culturally specific group formation.

Momaday and Baraka use myth, then, not only for its reference to a nostalgic past in order to sustain group identity through archetypes but also to make it determinative of the Euro-American myth of origins. As discussed above, Momaday is greatly invested in the idea that, by recovering traditional myths, Indians can return to the moment pre-contact when "there was nothing all around but the hills and the sunrise and the clouds" (145). Tosamah's narration of the Kiowa migration story, combined with Abel's running in the Winter Race, connects his novel with the time of origins, signaled by the dawn, a time of supremacy for America's indigenous populations. Baraka revives a similar

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to agree with Alain Ricard's reading, which characterizes *A Black Mass* as of "the theatre of black supermen" (119).

moment by reinstating the primitive as an authoritative, not historically defunct or culturally backward, figure. In addition to conflating myth and history, Baraka conflates sacred, scientific, and magical knowledge. In so doing, he reinstates a concept of African civilization, an alternative to what Priscilla Wald has recognized as the longstanding "developmental narrative of black progress [in the US] in which Africans had never successfully created a civilization" (174).

The scene in which this play is exclusively set is a place of sanctity, as indicated by the term "mass"; science, as indicated by the laboratory; and magic, as indicated by the magicians, who are actually referred to as Gods as well (41). Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford explain that the "very idea of 'black magic' became a key part of the Black Arts Movement" in its attempt to reclaim the "black primitive" (18, fn. 35).[108] While those invested in Western conceptions of "black magic" may assume that the play is about something evil given the title, the first line of the play stresses the mass's beneficent value. Holding a glowing bowl above him, Nasafi announces, "These are the beauties of creation. […] The beauties of strength of our blackness, of our *black arts*" (37; italics mine). Here, Baraka draws explicit parallels with and a genealogy of the Black Arts movement, indicating that the formidable scientific experiment performed by the original magicians is analogous to the work done by Harlem artists in the 1960s.[109] By making magic, science, religion, and even literature functionally synonymous, Baraka undermines the conventional binary divide between modern science and primitive magic, thereby reinstating a traditional system of magic as politically efficacious and identifiably sacred on its own terms. The correlation of magic with science at an origin moment

[108] For example, Baraka ends the one-page essay "State/meant" (1965) with a poem: "We [black artists] are black magicians, black art / s we make in black labs of the heart" (252).
[109] The play itself is dedicated to "the brothers and sisters of the Black Arts" (33).

makes the primitive authentic because original as well as presently relevant. For Baraka, magic *is* science and not a less sophisticated version of it. His primitive is not Jung and Eliade's nostalgic symbol for a simpler time but a mythic antecedent that remains essential in the present to realize a destined and glorious future.[110] To be made so politically efficacious, it must be divested of its colonialist baggage – its relegated position in a Euro-American monolithic myth system – and recovered according to a diasporic African worldview.

In a discussion of Jacoub's unadvised scientific aspirations, Nasafi warns Jacoub to remember the myths (42), an apt imperative for Baraka's audience members as well. When witnessing this play, audience members are persuaded that they are not the helpless victims of the white race but rather the ones responsible for white people's very existence. In turn, these viewers, who were once dissociated from their mythic heritages, are empowered and healed by receiving the myth recovered by the play. The resurrection of an originary ancestor places current-day African Americans within a lineage that has a long and culturally rich history, which manifests itself in the form of myth. As Eliade explains, by having access to a myth, "one knows the 'origin' of things, and hence can control and manipulate them at will" ("Myths" 23). Though ultimately critical of the strategy (in another context), Frantz Fanon recognizes the "passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era" as "legitimate" given "native intellectuals'" anxiety about "shrink[ing] away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped" (209). Such a project is especially important and even necessary

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[110] Also see Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* for a Eurocentric theory that posits magic as a less sophisticated version of science.

(211) in light of colonialism's strategy of turning "to the past of the oppressed people, and distort[ing], disfigur[ing], and destroy[ing] it" (210).

If a minority group's origins are unknown or maintained by mainstream historical discourse, then they must be refined through the recovery of a meaningful myth, even if – and *because* – such a recovery necessitates the ceding of empirical "first-order entities" in favor of archetypally resonant narratives. If Momaday's myths heal the alienated consciousness by insisting on Natives' original "tenure" to the land of the United States, Baraka's do so by insisting on black people's original tenure to human existence. Perhaps due to its inspirational mythic material, *A Black Mass* was actually one of Baraka's most popular plays (Benston *Baraka* 242). When they left the theater, Baraka's audience members took with them knowledge of sacred origins and so occupied a position in a new mythic-historical narrative that countered the dominance of the white man, who, it turns out, is just a creation of the black original man. This newly forged position allowed the African American community to trace their defining origin story to a culturally specific myth and to thereby skirt the white supremacist and Christian trajectory of American exceptionalist mythology.

Masculine Hero versus Modernist Alienation: Frank Chin's *Gee, Pop!*

Despite Baraka's disapproval of New Criticism and high modernism, his and Momaday's projects of recouping traditional myth for psychic and communal recuperation is characteristic of the modernist vision that embraces art as a healing space against a fragmented world. In his commendation of *Ulysses*, for example, T.S. Eliot, anticipating Eliade, describes Joyce's use of myth as "manipulating a continuous parallel

between contemporaneity and antiquity" and "a way of controlling, of ordering, or giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177). Eliot views this "mythical method" as one of the few means by which the modern world, which seems to lack "order and form," can be made artful (178). Though Momaday and Baraka, as well as Frank Chin, might balk at the admittedly "Anglo" label, they can all be classified as modernist in the ways that they work to extract from lost traditions the material that can heal an alienated consciousness.[111] For this reason, Louis Owens contends in familiar modernist – as well as Eliadean – discourse that once Abel is made aware of his people's sacred traditions, "the center still holds" and "is there to be recovered" (*Other* 99).

While Baraka's play appears antithetical to the modernist label given its explicit political commitment, Momaday's novel has actually been accused of being too modernist and therefore not political enough. A. Robert Lee, for one, points out that Momaday was actually charged with writing a novel "somehow too consciously literary in design. Momaday allegedly had traded the advantages of the performative immediacy, the improvisation, of oral Native tradition for an obscuring modernism" (21).[112] Other critics, however, have acknowledged *House Made of Dawn*'s political undertones, which are, of course, part of the same impetus of the American Indian Movement and in kind

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[111] Momaday emerges clearly as a modernist in his well-known speech "The Man Made of Words," in which he says that we moderns "have become disoriented," and that we "have suffered a kind of psychic dislocation of ourselves in time and space" (54). Lorenzo Thomas equates the work Baraka and his Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School did with that of Ezra Pound's aesthetics; both were "determined to MAKE IT NEW" (68). Werner Sollors additionally calls Baraka a "populist modernist" throughout his career, despite the different stages of his political and literary leanings, because of his commitment to the "unity of life and art" (*Amiri* 8). He also adds that Baraka's anti-Semitism, though "a matter of radical chic among Black nationalists of the late 1960s," also places him squarely among modernists, given the anti-Semitism of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot (199) – a correspondence I will return to in the chapter's conclusion.

[112] Louis Owens argues otherwise, that Momaday's style is actually in keeping with Pueblo and Navajo mythology (*Mixedblood* 63).

with Baraka's commitments. For example, Simon J. Ortiz characterizes *House Made of Dawn* as a resistance novel, given its application of the oral tradition, which Ortiz credits with continuing political resistance (10), and its "affirmation of knowledge of source and place and spiritual return" (11).[113] By focusing on both Momaday's and AIM's, as well as Baraka's and Black Power's, shared recourse to mythic discourse to achieve a nationalist vision, we can appreciate how their projects are interrelated as well as how they rely on and revise familiar concepts of modernism. The modernist form and universalist vision of *House Made of Dawn* and *A Black Mass*, then, do not preclude their separatist politics, but rather fuel it in an especially complicated way.

In Power literature, the particularly minority modernist experience of fragmentation stems not necessarily from dissatisfaction with urban life and a feeling of meaninglessness after the World Wars. Rather, it is a direct result of (post)colonial dissociation from an identifiable mythic heritage that has been endangered by the dominant Euro-American, Christian mythic tradition – that of Eliot and Joyce.[114] It is the minority author's responsibility, Momaday, Baraka, as well as Frank Chin assert, to recover and make available mythic and thereby centralizing narratives for the sake of cultural identity and group rights. To counter a co-optive American exceptionalist mythology that devalues historically specific experiences of oppression, these authors break from conventional modernist plotlines by narrating the protagonist's rise from dissociated figure to hero who successfully receives, revives, and transmits the mythic

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[113] Robert Warrior agrees, arguing that Momaday's work is not conservative or apolitical just because he was not actively involved in the political movements of the time (*People* 169). Rather, his work imparts a powerful political message due to the value it places on accessing "tribal histories to discover the means by which to move toward the future" (172).

[114] Though cumbersome, I put "post" in parentheses to acknowledge that Native Americans remain in a colonized state.

materials that stem from and point to his origin. For didactic purposes, this heroic figure often serves as an allegorical or archetypal figure of the male minority population more generally. Such a representative function of the hero can be understood as "a process very much like culture-building," as John W. Roberts understands it. According to Roberts, the hero allows a group to maintain "an image of itself to proclaim difference from others by objectifying in its institutions the ideals that it claims for itself" and to uphold such an image as superior to others (1).

Intimately associated with feelings of mythic dissociation that compel such a heroic figure are those of emasculation. To be deprived of one's traditional myths, these authors assert, is to be deprived of one's masculinity. The emasculating effects of racism on US minorities have been well documented. Elaine H. Kim, for example, describes the feminizing stereotypes of the Asian American culture as existing to "define as their dialectical opposite the Anglo man as heroic, courageous, and physically superior, whether as soldier, missionary, master, or lover" ("Defining" 148). Phillip Brian Harper, alternately, attributes much of the hypermasculinity of black culture to a reaction against the feminized conception of the tragic mulatto (104). In response to such emasculating pressures from the dominant culture, many authors of Power literature assumed the task of animating hypermasculine mythic figures to restore an effectual sense of communal self. Momaday's novel, for one, is replete with images of the solitary Plains warrior. At first glance, this isolated figure seems incongruous not only because of the communal experience endorsed by the text but also because much research on Native American life and narrative stresses the communitarian nature of Native American tribes.[115] Numerous

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[115] See for example Jace Weaver's *Other Words* in which he argues that "Natives define their identity in terms of community and relate to ultimate reality through that community" (35).

critics have called attention to this seeming contradiction. Krupat, for example, disapproves of Momaday's emphasis on the lone figure, arguing that it is more typical of the Western tradition's isolated ego (*Voice* 133).

Such apparent friction between a lone hero and the community that Momaday is attempting to sustain is actually a mythic and archetypal struggle; the same tension is expressed but never resolved in the myth theories of Eliade, Jung, and Campbell, who all insist on a "tribal collective consciousness" while believing that "salvation can only be individual" (Ellwood 28). Momaday seeks to reconcile such an apparent contradiction by depicting Abel as a communally recognized figure of the culture hero, one whose very purpose is to act alone on behalf of his people. As a culture hero, Abel excels beyond the conventional bewildered and, ultimately, ineffectual modernist heroes; it is for good reason that his name is a homonym for "able," for he proves himself able to effect, to have influence in the world. The particularly minority modernist experience, then, fuels a politically charged ideal in which myth provides the narrative means to restore, and not just document and bemoan, a fragmented and suffering community.

Momaday's emphasis on the individual man is significantly tied to his framing of the heroic figure within the warrior tradition. Throughout Tosamah's meditation on the Kiowa glory days, the era when the tribe "controlled the open range" and "ruled the whole of the Southern Plains" (128), he stresses their ways as brave fighters, claiming that war "was their sacred business" (128). It is out of a similar investment in masculinist discourse that Baraka calls for a "holy war" at the end of *A Black Mass*. In an attempt to supply African American mythology with needed heroic figures, Baraka embraces the origin myth of the Nation of Islam because it positions a black man in the dominating

role of creator. Baraka himself admits that whereas *Dutchman* and other plays of his earlier period portrayed African Americans as victims, in his nationalist phase, he can no longer "lay with the victim thing" (R. Allen interview 24).

To expunge narratives that position African Americans as victims, Baraka explicitly promotes the use of violence against white people. This endorsement of violence can be attributed, at least in part, to the influence of the Black Power movement, whose "emphasis on men also coincided with the valorization of violence as the means for attaining freedom" (Watts 326). Harper understands Baraka's militarism and hyper-masculinism as a way to counteract the (perceived) passivity and ineffectuality of intellectualism and poetry as opposed to activism (51). Accusations of apoliticism directed at Momaday seem to justify such a concern. Baraka's call to violence, then, is meant to elevate his dramatic rhetoric into the realm of political efficacy and immediacy. Critics continue to debate how sincere Baraka was in his promotion of violence, though it is – at the least, figuratively – implicated in his quest for a mythic heritage. For example, in the following quotation, it is difficult to draw a boundary line between a literal call to war and a metaphorical exhortation for the intellectual recovery of an African narrative past, which seems to get more of his attention: "We are the real warriors, and we must plan the real war. Nationalism is the equipping for a breed of new men descendants of the oldest civilizations on the planet to reorder that planet. It is a spiritual heritage. […] Study the history of ancient Egypt. […] The ancient race of Black giants come to life again" ("Meanings" 109).[116]

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[116] Implicated in this masculinism are the complements of misogyny and homophobia. Krupat, for example, points to Momaday's famous speech and essay "The Man Made of Words," in which he refuses "to generalize gender reference to include women as significant humans" (*Voice* 13). Even more apparent

Due, in part, to the specific experiences and labor history of Chinese Americans, Frank Chin is more explicit than Momaday and Baraka about his interest in recovering overtly masculine myths. The record of immigration legislation and its complementary stereotypes that feminize Asian American men make many Chinese Americans' desire to assert their masculinity especially pressing. From the 1840s, when immigrants first arrived as coolie laborers, through the 1940s, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was finally repealed, "Chinese immigrant masculinity had been socially and institutionally marked as different from that of Anglo and Euro-American 'white' citizens owing to the forms of work and community that had been historically available to Chinese men" (Lowe 11).[117] By "forms of work," Lisa Lowe is primarily referring to the "women's work" of the laundry and restaurant industries. Although Chinese men did work as gold miners and builders of the transcontinental railroad, this characteristically masculine labor was mostly overshadowed by the more visible service industries in urban areas. Lowe adds that even the miners and railroad workers were denied citizenship and, by association, stripped of their masculinity (11). Due to the exclusionary laws' attempts to limit the reproduction of Chinese Americans, women were mostly forbidden from entering the country, resulting in the formation of bachelor societies. David Eng explains that these communities took a heavy toll on perceptions of Asian American masculinity: "Physically, socially, and psychically isolated, these segregated bachelor communities might easily be thought of as 'queer' spaces" (18). Such non-normative spaces have been

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is Baraka's misogyny during his cultural nationalist phase when he imbibed much of the Nation of Islam's belief that women should be "'submissive' as a natural expression of their femininity" (Sollors *Amiri* 181).

[117] The Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 to limit the amount of Chinese immigrants after the large waves that came in the 1840s for the gold rush and the 1860s to build the transcontinental railroad.

easily co-opted so that the Chinese American *man* becomes in the popular American imagination a voiceless non-entity.

In their foundational and pioneering editorship of *Aiiieeeee!*, Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong fervently argue for the need to revive a masculine literary tradition in order to counter the assimilationist writings of such authors as Jade Snow Wong, Betty Lee Sung, and Pardee Lowe, those who purportedly concede to popular images of Asian Americans as exotic, inscrutable, and feminine.[118] Chin and his fellow editors especially take to task writers who "brown-nose the white man" and fall "short of the vision Malcolm X and other blacks had for their 'minority'" (Preface xiii). Arguing that non-Asian American minorities are hyper-masculinized by white racists, Chin and his colleagues use this form of racism – in an admittedly ethically questionable way – for their own constructive ends. They attempt to channel the patriarchal power reputedly characteristic of African Americans in order to defy the stereotype that the "Asian-American [who is assumed to be male] is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" (Introduction xxx).[119]

Much of the editors' commentary in *Aiiieeeee!* is a revision of "Racist Love," an article co-written by Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan just a couple years prior. Chin and Chan prefigure the concept of the "model minority" by arguing that in order to retain white Christian supremacy, the dominant American culture enforces white supremacy by

[118] Though Pardee Lowe's work can be read as conciliatory to a dominant American mythology (see Chapter One), it is a far cry from feminine, as the *Aiiieeeee!* editors describe it. Lowe's assimilationist stance is, in fact, highly masculinized (14).

[119] It is no coincidence that *Aiiieeeee!* was published by Howard University Press. Similarly, Chin was the only non-African American included in Ishmael Reed's 1970 anthology *19 Necromancers from Now*, and Reed invited Chin and Shawn Wong to edit the third volume of his multi-cultural *Yardbird Reader*. On the back of the issue, Reed describes Chin and Wong as leaders of the Asian American "renaissance" and describes them as "American people. Our folks."

relegating non-whites and non-Christians either to an acceptable stereotype, "racist love," or an unacceptable stereotype, "racist hate" (65). The latter includes the "hostile black stud," the "savage, kill-crazy Geronimo," the "mad dog Santa Ana," and Fu Manchu. The former includes Stepin Fetchit, Tonto, the Cisco Kid, and Charlie Chan (65). Chin and Chan believe this symbolic system has been especially successful with Asian Americans, who, they argue, have accepted the conciliatory Charlie Chan stereotype as truth and so live "in a state of euphemized self-contempt" (67). One of the major factors contributing to Chinese Americans' acceptance of the stereotype is that they "were the target of the largest missionary campaign ever mounted in the history of mankind" (68). Put differently, they consider Christian myths as having successfully replaced native Chinese myths, and so modern-day Chinese Americans, particularly men, are left with no other narrative source of identity.[120] American exceptionalist mythology has co-opted Chinese American creative formations of self, situating them on the receiving end of a deleterious narrative tradition.

Just as the American Indian Movement and the Black Power Movement framed and were fueled by the writings of Momaday and Baraka, respectively, so too is Chin committed to the Asian American Movement and its rallying cry for Yellow Power. In 1968, students at San Francisco State College coined the neologism "Asian American," a pan-Asian interest group that worked toward "racial empowerment" (Nguyen 130) in a

[120] Chin and Chan put much of the blame on the concept of "dual personality," the belief that Chinese Americans are divided between the East and West, and therefore not unified beings ("Racist" 72). Just as members of the Black Arts Movement rejected Du Bois' double consciousness due to its "self-destructiveness" (Watts 205), so too do Chin and Chan question the hyphenated identifier of "Chinese-American." Both preclude "an organic, whole identity" ("Racist" 76). For this reason, Chin eventually uses the term "Chinaman," thereby reinterpreting a term that was once used disparagingly. In a 1970 interview with Jeffery Paul Chan, Chin says that the term, because it connects present-day Chinese Americans with their ancestors, is "something to be proud of" (310). Elsewhere he contends that "it's the white man's fault that Chinaman is a bad word" (qtd. in Nee 379).

way similar to the pan-tribalism of AIM and Momaday and the pan-Africanism of Black Power and Baraka. Contributing to this political movement in the literary domain, Chin organized the Combined Asian American Resources Project, "which did important pioneering work in collecting and preserving" Asian American literature and cultural materials (Chua "*Year*" 178). In 1972, he also founded the Asian American Theater Workshop in San Francisco. Daniel Y. Kim argues that Chin "spearheaded an Asian American literary movement that was clearly modeled on Black Arts" (16). David Leiwei Li adds that *Aiiieeeee!* was obviously influenced by Baraka and Neal's anthology *Black Fire* (*Imagining* 36). And just as the Black Arts Movement conflates ethics and aesthetics, so too does Chin emphasize the social obligation of literature, even if it leads to accusations of deficient art.[121] Similar to Baraka, in fact, Chin builds into *Gee, Pop!* a moment in which the protagonist is chastised for importing political commitment into the literary realm: "All your hatred and pain and anger keep rushing in to spoil any art you create" (2-2).[122]

While Frank Chin's best-known plays *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1971) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974) present a political separatist agenda similar to the writings of Momaday and Baraka, they do not revitalize traditional myths to restore a sense of cultural identity, as do *House Made of Dawn* and *A Black Mass*. For this reason, several critics argue that Chin did not become interested in recovering an identifiably Chinese

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[121] Like Momaday's Buffalo Trust and Baraka's commitment to the Black Power Movement, Chin asserts that knowledge of myth can provide a source of healing in the "real world." For example, he diagnoses the interethnic violence of the Rodney King affair in such a way: "Had they [people in general] a sense of myth that began with a live storyteller telling stories their people have valued through history […], more people might look on themselves as more than the moral equivalent of consumer goods and stay away from the mob" ("Pidgin" 423).

[122] The page numbers for the second act begin at one and are all listed as "2," indicating the act number, dash, then the page of this act.

mythology until the mid-1980s.[123] His unpublished play *Gee, Pop!: A Real Cartoon*, which was produced in 1975 and 1976 at the East West Players and the American Conservatory Theater, indicates that Chin had actually discovered by the mid-1970s the Chinese heroic tradition, which he would draw upon to remedy what he diagnoses as the internalized self-hate and emasculation of the Chinese American population.[124]

Winner of the East West Players playwriting contest, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* was the first play by an Asian American to be staged in New York City. Set in the late 1960s, it presents filmmaker Tam Lum doing research for a documentary about his hero, Ovaltine Jack Dancer, an African American boxer. Tam, a typical "Chinian" protagonist who lacks a strong male influence, is attempting to find Dancer's father, whom Dancer claims is an aged pornographer named Charlie Popcorn, in order to interview him. When Popcorn turns out to be a fake, Tam is distraught. Throughout the play, Tam assumes the perceived mannerisms of African Americans, desiring to be a part of a culture that is so apparently masculine and so distinct from the dominant white culture. Elaine Kim reads

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[123] For example, Daniel Y. Kim credits the anger Chin experienced about Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* to his turn in the late 1980s to working toward "an authentic Asian identity, not just Asian American" (226). Likewise, Patricia P. Chu claims that Chin came late to the heroic tradition (203, fn. 4). David Palumbo-Liu argues that none of the Asian American cultural nationalists wanted to insist on the continuity of an Asian tradition in the American context because Asian Americans were too often seen according to Orientalist discourse as perpetual sojourners (*Asian/American*). *Gee, Pop!* proves that Chin, in fact, could look to the Asian tradition to substantiate American citizenship and origins.

[124] In a personal correspondence, Chin describes the play as unfinished because he continued to revise it while it was being produced. The only extant copy remains in a draft state with Chin's annotations in the margins. The California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, Department of Special Collections, Donald C. Davidson Library at the University of Santa Barbara, California houses Chin's manuscripts and papers. Chin also told me that he was always aware of such Chinese mythic figures as Kwan Kung, "in the same way that Hemingway was aware of JACK [and] THE BEANSTALK when he wrote THE SUN ALSO RISES, but made no direct references to JACK." Since *Gee, Pop!*, Chin's interest in Kwan Kung and other figures from the heroic tradition has only grown. *Donald Duk* (1991), for example, revives the interest in Kwan Kung as a heroic figure who can recover the forgotten and notable history of Chinese Americans' contribution to the transcontinental railroad. *Gunga Din Highway* (1994) perhaps even more explicitly returns to the themes and characters of *Gee, Pop!*; Kwan Kung is again an inspiration for wreaking vengeance upon Charlie Chan. Whereas Baraka has recanted much of the views typical of his cultural nationalist phase, Chin (and Momaday as well) remains committed to the idea that recovered myth can allow for cultural and psychic recovery.

Tam's final monologue as conceding that he cannot find paternal models in the African American community, yet because he does not have a replacement, he suffers a psychological meltdown ("Frank Chin" 86). Daniel Y. Kim, on the other hand, interprets the speech as a search for culturally appropriate origins in the history and memory of Chinese America. According to Daniel Kim's reading, Tam turns to his grandmother's legend, which "memorializes his own great-grandfather as well as the host of Chinese immigrant laborers who, under dangerous and exploitative conditions, helped construct the transcontinental railroad" (196).[125] The introduction to *Aiiieeeee!* endorses such a reading: "Tam is forced to invent a past, a mythology, and traditions from the antiques and curios of his immediate experience" in his attempt to "link himself with the first known Chinese-Americans" (xlvii). To do so, Tam references a Chinese American myth fabricated by Chin, that of the Iron Moonhunter, which situates Chinese Americans as indigenous members of the United States.[126]

At the beginning of Act Two, Tam introduces this myth after dismissing a familiar heroic figure of Euro-America, the Lone Ranger, whom he had once hoped was Asian and wore his mask to cover his "Asian eyes" (32). Juxtaposed against this worthless mythic figure, who appears on stage as old, obese, and bigoted, Tam remembers his grandmother who had "an ear for nothing but ancient trains in the night" (31). As a child, though, he could not understand her language, "pure Chinamouth" (31). Instead, the radio's alienating myths of dominant white society, of the "ALL-AMERICAN BOYS," who are "white boys everyday," the "hee-rohs!" (31), drowned out

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[125] The railroad holds special significance for Chin, both personally and professionally. His grandfather worked for the Southern Pacific as a steward, and Chin himself claims to have been the first Chinese American brakeman for the same company.

[126] Sau-Ling Wong argues that this myth is invented by Chin because she has not been able to track down any reference to it (Daniel Kim 198).

his grandmother's plea to "listen for the Chinaman-known Iron Moonhunter, that train built by Chinamans who knew they'd never be given passes to ride the rails they laid" so they "builded themselves a wild engine to take them home" (31). This myth's significance lies not in its appeal to an authentic Chinese tradition but rather in its indigeneity to Chinese America. During Tam's final monologue, he returns to the kitchen scene of the radio versus his grandmother and instructs his audience to "turn off them radios and listen in the kitchen!" (65). He continues his grandmother's story of a "Chinaman borne, high stepping Iron Moonhunter, liften eagles with its breath!" (65). Tam closes the play confessing that he can "feel them old days children" and invites the audience members to ride with him (66). This ending recalls Baraka's simultaneously modernist and politically committed charge that his audience members remember their mythic origins. However, the play does not appeal to an "authentic" Chinese mythic tradition, but rather to an invented one, to provide knowledge of Chinese Americans' foundations in the American national space. In other words, by fabricating a myth that evokes the pioneering immigrants who built the transcontinental railroad, Tam is only temporarily, and disingenuously, strengthened by his knowledge of Chinese American ancestors as indigenous members of the United States.

Most critics read Chin's next play, *The Year of the Dragon*, as offering another example of an irrevocably alienated protagonist. An aspiring writer who runs his father's tour business, Fred Eng performs the stereotypical Charlie Chan character, his only available model, for the entertainment of white tourists. Fred's dismissive father dies at the end without having accepted Fred's talent, and Fred, rather hauntingly, transforms into a bleached-out Charlie Chan figure, "an image of death" (141). Left without a strong

paternal influence, his only recourse is to submit to Euro-America's projected renderings of the Chinese American man as emasculated and submissive. Elaine Kim reads the story that this play evolved from, "Food for All His Dead" (1962), as Chin's criticism of Chinatown, a dying culture to which he and his characters feel superior ("Frank Chin" 81). If we acknowledge, however, the ambivalence expressed by the protagonist of the story, Johnny, as well as by Fred in the play, their supposed superiority complexes indicate Chin's mournful, not patronizing, attitude toward Chinatown.[127] For example, when Johnny criticizes Chinese Americans for laughing "with accents," he is immediately "sorry for what he said" (53). The prevailing tone of both the story and the play is not disgust but rather nostalgia. Johnny, for example, longs for the support he experienced when young: "I remember when I was a kid. Man, then I knew everything. I knew […] all my uncles were heroes from the war and the strongest guys in the world […] I knew more then than I do now" (58-59). The indication here is that Johnny and Fred have become alienated from their roots and so are nostalgic for a time when they had heroes they could venerate. Such a state of dissociation and the ensuing criticism of Chinatown should be read as a warning, of what occurs when Chinese Americans have no access to their mythic heritage.[128] In this light, we can understand his early plays as providing evidence that Chin had considered a lack of mythic tradition as a foundational cause of Chinese American alienation.

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[127] His unpleasant descriptions could also indicate his desire to expose the terrible living conditions of Chinatown, one of the major goals of the Asian American Movement (Chun 108-109).

[128] Chin claimed in an email correspondence that at the end of *The Year of the Dragon* a statue of Kwan Kung, the god discussed below, is placed by a picture of Pa – that it is "in the stage directions." However, these directions only read that his picture is placed before a "red-painted coffee can" (141). Since Kwan Kung is always presented as red, perhaps the coffee can is meant to signify this figure.

Unlike the previous two plays, *Gee, Pop!* implements the heroic tradition provided by Chinese mythology as a therapeutic resource for the alienated condition of Chinese American men. In response to the perceived lack of masculine authority available, Chin seeks out a hyper-masculine mythic figure to act as the symbolic force by which his protagonist can access neglected mythologies as well as to serve as the tradition's identifying character.[129] Also known as Guan Di and Kuan Yu, Kwan Kung is a figure out of Confucian folklore, the god of war and writers, revered by Taoists and Buddhists alike. Known for his great stature, strength, and bravery, Kwan Kung is usually depicted in red face with a forked beard (Davis 375) and carries in one hand a sword and in the other a book. According to Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald, Kwan Kung "acted heroically for the powerless," though he was also "selfish and individualistic" (xxvi). The god remained well-known to Chinese immigrants in the United States not only via oral tradition but also through his appearance in the epic novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* written in the fourteenth century by Luo Guanzhong. Perhaps the best-known scene of the novel is the "famed fraternal oath in the Peach Garden sworn by the three heroes: Liu-pei, Kwan Kung, and Chang-fei" (McDonald xxvii). Claiming that the Peach Garden scene is "the most famous scene in the most popular novel in Chinese history" ("Come" 31), Chin adds that Kwan Kung is "the most popular character from *Three Kingdoms*" (38) because he "is the exemplar of the universal man" (39).

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[129] King-Kok Cheung points out a complication with this strategy: "Despite his avowed intention to combat white supremacy, his selective and tendentious invocation of Chinese lore echoes Western ideologies of masculinity, and his cultural nationalist gesture is undermined by an apparent counterinvestment in patriarchal prescriptions" (219). Elaine H. Kim adds, "To accept the contention that a revival of these patriarchal signifiers [of the heroic tradition] is all that is needed for Asian American empowerment is to accept political invisibility for Asian American women" ("Such" 78).

Among Chin's archived papers are pages and pages of his research on Kwan Kung, usually dated 1975, in which he documents anthropologists' and historians' analysis of the god of war and writers and how he was retained in the popular imagination of early Chinese immigrants to the United States. Chin refers to Kwan Kung as "the god of badass Chinamans" and pays special attention to him when referenced as a popular hero. Kwan Kung's folk popularity is not the only appeal for Chin; that he is the god of writers and fighters aptly serves his purpose because, for him, "Writing is fighting" ("Come" 35). Such a formula provides a hypermasculine as well as highly literary means by which to ward off American exceptionalist myths and to restore an endangered mythic tradition.[130] Chin even makes the connection between war and his own personal writing a genealogical legacy by claiming descent from Kwan Kung ("Lowe Hoy" 265). He explains, "The Kwan blood from my mother meant I was chosen to write theater like making war" (qtd. in McDonald xxviii). In this way, Chin takes on the persona of his favorite character, Kwan Kung – just as Momaday does as trickster and Baraka does as loudspeaker jihadist – so that his literature can perform a rescue operation in no less than heroic terms.[131] For this reason, he pits Kwan Kung against Charlie Chan in *Gee, Pop!*.

Like Abel recovering through his participation in Native myths, and like Jacoub's heroic status as creator, Chinaman assumes the role of the writing and fighting hero, symbolically and literally attacking the figures of Charlie Chan and John Wayne who

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[130] As early as 1972, Chin shows interest in recovering the Chinese heroic tradition when he writes, "Life is war to the Chinese. The personal form of the Confucian mandate of heaven [that kingdoms rise and fall] is the Confucian ethic of private revenge" ("Confessions" 75). Cheung, however, points out that Confucius "would have been shocked to hear his teaching summarized as the 'ethic of private revenge'" (219).
[131] It is perhaps not a coincidence that two of the three texts considered in this chapter are plays. The dramatic medium allows both Baraka and Chin to embody the political impetus of their literary and mythic endeavors in ways more palpable and immediate than other genres.

have long distracted Chinese Americans from what Chin views is their authentic identity. Not surprisingly, Chin's, Baraka's, and Momaday's reliance on the dissociated hero who ventures into the unfamiliar and returns with greater knowledge recalls Joseph Campbell's (in)famous *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell describes the universal pattern he finds in the world's myths, a "monomyth," as such: "*A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man*" (30; italics in original). If, in structuralist fashion, we map the complicated plot of *Gee, Pop!*, it rather easily correlates with Campbell's account of the hero's adventure. The Chinatown Kid enters a supernatural world, specifically, the future, where he combats the corrupting influence of Auntie Phoebe, the manipulations of Charlie Chan and his daughter Lily, and the brute force of John Wayne. In keeping with the representation of this future world, Campbell describes the locale of a hero's quest as "a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms" (97). The characters' multiple personae combined with the presence of figures out of American popular culture contribute to the dream-like and porous setting of *Gee, Pop!*.

Additionally, the play's time travel plot makes of the Chinatown Kid's journey a palimpsest that does not require physical movement, one in which different temporal settings are conflated under the auspices of collective racial memories of Kwan Kung. Campbell similarly complicates his description of the hero's journey by arguing that it is "a labor not of attainment but of reattainment, not discovery but rediscovery. The godly powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the

hero all the time" (39). Such a cyclic structure that allows for a recovery of what already exists typifies the paradoxical – and mythic – function of racial memory, which elides the distinction between the act of preservation with that of recovery. As Momaday understands it, racial memory automatically preserves narratives of a communal past but requires activation through the act of storytelling. As such, his hero can only recover through an essential connection with his bloodline, which both supports and is supported by a tradition of mythic narrative. The "godly powers" won by Chin's hero similarly manifest as the mythic knowledge he accrues with the help of the hypermasculine heroic figure, Kwan Kung. The play, then, like Momaday's novel, incorporates mythic narratives via the Kwan Kung character while assuming an archetypal mythic structure, thereby conflating myth and history into a heroic, destined narrative.

Readers of Chin will find many elements of *Gee, Pop!* familiar. A surreal production with multiple temporal frames, the play chronicles the various alter egos of "The Chinaman 'Donald Duck'" as he attempts to write an autobiographical movie. The time-travel premise of the play, which recalls the temporal manipulation of *House Made of Dawn* and *A Black Mass*, is complemented by the fluid ego boundaries of the characters, who often overlap each other and are easily confused. Taking the familiar image of the fragmented modernist protagonist to the extreme, Chin's Chinaman is comprised of multiple personalities torn apart by self-hate and pressures of assimilation. Usually referred to in the *Gee, Pop!* script simply as "Chinaman," the generic name is obviously meant to signify all Chinese American men, and so his travails and ultimate self-discovery through his connection with Kwan Kung can be read as an archetypal model for others.

When Chinaman appears as a child in the present-time frame of the play, he is referred to as the Chinatown Kid. Gravelly Lake Ponders, Chinaman's other personality, attempts to pass for African American, like Tam Lum.[132] Often reciting Shakespeare, Gravelly Lake Ponders, spouts such self-hating invectives as "You don't know the depths of ass Chinese folks go kissing wit dere lips!" (13). That Ponders quotes Shakespeare, representative of the Anglo literary tradition, and assumes the mannerisms of an African American attests to his inability to identify himself as a Chinese American. Throughout the play, Chinaman often reverts to this persona when threatened by the white actor who plays Charlie Chan and who serves as one of the father figures of the three manifestations of Chinaman. The other main father figure is Father/Old Man Hong, who usually supports his son by assuming the position of Kwan Kung.[133]

Set in the late 1960s, *Gee, Pop!* begins with an old Chinaman named Shopping Bags, the "Chinatown Storyteller," striking a "Kwan Kung Opera battle pose" (1).[134] He then appeals to the god, as if to a muse: "You hear dat ah-Kwan Kung ahh! God of fighters and writers, ah!" (1). Bemoaning Chinese Americans' ignorance of such heroic figures as Kwan Kung, Shopping Bags claims he is going to tell "one more story" (1) to the young, self-hating Chinatown Kid. The purpose of his story is to convince the Kid that he should not be acting in movies that represent Chinese Americans as conciliatory Orientals. Shopping Bags' morality tale functions similarly to Baraka's didactic play,

[132] At various points in the script, in fact, Chinaman is referred to as Golford Tam Lum.

[133] This father figure is reminiscent (or prescient) of the fathers in such short stories as "Railroad Standard Time" (1978), which appears in the collection *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco R.R. Co* (1988), winner of the 1989 American Book Award. He too is an erstwhile actor who has recently recovered from paralysis due to an on-set accident. Yet, with the help of Kwan Kung, the father in *Gee, Pop!* is much more effectual than the debilitated fathers in most of Chin's short stories.

[134] *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has been made into a popular Cantonese opera.

indicating Chin's belief, in keeping with that of Power literature, that "Art can obviously change history" ("This" 13).

Shopping Bags' disruption of history, like that of Momaday and Baraka, takes place via temporal manipulation. Chinatown Kid is presented in the future, at which point he has already starred in a Charlie Chan movie as the number six son. The Kid, at first, is excited to hear the premise of the story: "I'm gonna be a Hollywood rare Oriental star!" (5). However, Shopping Bags' futuristic tale, which comprises the body of the play, eventually dissuades him from this naïve, self-hating view. Throughout the play, the figure of Kwan Kung intervenes in various guises to direct both Chinaman as well as all of the men he symbolizes toward an embrace of their mythical past. In this way, they become equipped to assert their fundamental American citizenship rights and defy the effeminizing stereotypes that have been conveyed in dominant American history and myth.

Throughout much of the play, Chin reveals that Chinaman is suffering from "racist love." When we are first introduced to the future version of Chinatown Kid as Chinaman, an actor and professional ghostwriter, he is attempting to write an autobiographical movie in which he wants to present himself as "just a human being," not a Chinese American.[135] In his nonfiction, Chin often lambasts such a stance that attempts to pass for enlightened liberalism; to universalize a specifically ethnic identity toward the generic label of "human" inevitably manifests as white and Christian. As an alternative to such a harmful and assimilated identity, Shopping Bags maintains that all Chinese Americans, especially the railroad workers, used to be like Kwan Kung (6). Kwan Kung

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[135] Throughout his career, Chin has bemoaned the genre of autobiography as inappropriate for and even destructive to Chinese American discourse. See my discussion of the controversy between him and Maxine Hong Kingston in the next chapter.

is therefore presented to the young (male) viewer as well as to the audience as a role model indigenous to both an authentic Chinese mythic tradition as well as to a specifically Chinese American history.

Chinaman's foil and one of the threats to his discovery of an authentic Chinese American identity is Charlie Chan, a white actor tired of playing an "Oriental." At one point, he calls upon Jesus: "You sent me out of whiteness to be the perfect Oriental to show yellows the way to acceptance" (10). Here, Chin equates white civilization's desire for Asian American assimilation with Christianity, which, in an argument reminiscent of Vine Deloria's, Chin claims can never be adopted without a complete abandonment of Asian culture. Wanting to act as a white character, Charlie Chan devises a plan to anger Chinaman so much that he will write a movie in which the Charlie Chan character is killed. Over the course of the first act, Charlie Chan berates Chinaman, encouraging him to realize that Hollywood has "snuff[ed]" out authentic Asian American tradition with Christianity and Shakespeare (26). He also points out that the same year Earl Derr Biggers wrote the first Charlie Chan novel, "they closed America to Chinese women and outlawed mixed marriage. Then came the movies … the ones you die in … You, Donald Duck, doesn't that make you angry?" (31). By calling attention to the simultaneity of the origin of Charlie Chan and the legislated rejection of Chinese American family life, Chan hopes to restore to Chinaman (and Chin to his audience) the historical knowledge necessary to subvert a stereotype that has been so destructive due to its ahistoricity. With the help of Kwan Kung as father figure and in response to Charlie Chan's continued provocation, Chinaman exclaims at the end of Act One that he will abandon his

autobiographical movie and write one with an authentic Chinese American protagonist (59).

Before he can succeed in writing his new movie that eliminates the figure of Charlie Chan and asserts an authentic Chinese American identity, two tasks that are constitutive of each other, Chinaman must face numerous obstacles. These obstacles symbolize the multi-faceted assimilative pressures experienced every day by the Chinese American population, pressures that are so powerful because they are remain unchallenged by mythic alternatives. For example, acting agent Auntie Phoebe's diatribes about the required assimilation of Chinese Americans, such as "More dispersion away from San Francisco and New York should be encouraged […] because distribution reduces the degree of visibility!" (2-7), frequently interrupt Chinaman's progress.[136] More threateningly, once Chinaman begins to narrate the ritualistic death scene of Charlie Chan, Chan begins to fear his character's death and recants, protesting that "Charlie Chan is an American institution. […] Next to jazz, Charlie Chan is the only art form invented in America. You don't kill an institution" (2-10).[137]

To find a way out of such self-sustaining racist rhetoric, Chinaman emulates the righteous anger that depends on knowledge of mythic origins. He argues that he did not originally want to kill Charlie Chan, the symbol of Chinese American assimilation and feminization, but since he has researched his past and "rediscovered [his] people" (2-12), he is "irked, irritated, piqued, and pissed off! I wanta write Chan dead!" (2-11).

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[136] Auntie Phoebe's words are taken almost verbatim from Betty Lee Sung's 1967 *Mountain of Gold*, which Chin often maligns as self-hating and conciliatory in his nonfiction essays.

[137] Chinaman's new movie is about a group of bowlers called "The Sons of Chan" (2-8), who are plotting the death of Charlie Chan. With an obvious reference to the oath taken by Kwan Kung, Liu-pei, and Chang-fei, one of the bowlers explains, "We all took this blood oath […] We all swore to kill Charlie Chan" (2-7). In this way, the plot against Charlie Chan, the symbolic father figure of assimilated Chinese Americans, assumes mythic significance and righteousness.

However, Chin makes it clear that he can only do so with the help of Kwan Kung. When Charlie Chan attempts to deter Chinaman by baiting him with his daughter, Lily, Father "reaches for redfaced and bearded mask of Kwan Kung," hands it to Chinaman, and tells him to "put it on" (2-19). Lily had been reciting Shakespeare lines in a stereotypical Dragon Lady accent, but with the Kwan Kung mask, Chinaman "recovers from Shakespeare" (2-19). The mask of Kwan Kung gives Chinaman the ability to ward off a seductive European tradition as well as an Orientalized white woman – until she removes the mask from his face (2-20).[138] Without the support of Kwan Kung, Chinaman reverts to his Gravelly Lake Ponders persona (2-22), follows Lily off-stage, and recites Shakespeare (2-23).

Eventually, Chinaman has to enter a showdown with Charlie Chan, accompanied by John Wayne, the classic embodiment of the mythic white cowboy. Chinaman, still insisting that he is "just a man" (2-47) and not a Chinaman, loses two quick draws in a row. At this point, Father/Old Man Hong and Shopping Bags, characters who believe in the power of Kwan Kung, come to Chinaman's aid. In a March 1976 letter to "Fay," perhaps Fay Chiang, poet and fellow member of the Asian American Movement, Chin provides the stage directions of this scene and describes Father as Kwan Kung fighting John Wayne: "John Wayne twirls his guns and does tricks. HONG knocks the gun of Wayne's hand to the ground with his Kwan knife and exits doing twirls" (2-3). As they depart, Chinaman yells, in Kwan Kung fashion, "Revenge!" (2-55) and evokes the "god of fighters and writers" (2-64). The play closes with Chinaman narrating his new movie about El Chino, the Chinatown Cowboy (2-64), which is about the original Chinamen

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[138] In *Donald Duk*, as well as in numerous essays, Chin explains how the bearing of a Kwan Kung mask during Cantonese Opera is said to endow the wearer with his powers; for this reason, it is a very serious and consequential role that few attempt.

who contributed to the making of the nation on the Western railroads. Finally, Chinaman fulfills his original appellation of "the Chinatown Kid," a name with deliberate resonance of a cowboy identity. Knowledge of Kwan Kung, as it is passed down by two paternal figures, allows Chinaman to insist on his permanence, his origins, and his self-awareness as a Chinese American, despite the pressures from both white America and self-hating Chinese Americans.[139]

Similar to Momaday's evocation of the Indian warriors on the open plains, Chin stages exploits of railroad workers as cowboys in the specific geographic locale of the Western United States, the telos of Manifest Destiny. In so doing, he establishes Chinese Americans' indigeneity to the US, especially in the mythic realm, by pushing the conventional image of the white cowboy to the margins. As McDonald explains, "To counter the effeminate, Christianized Charlie Chan image of the post-1925 era," Chin restores "the immensely masculine Kwan Kung, whose strength of mind and body, individuality and loyalty, capacity for revenge and essential aloneness are reminiscent of the rugged Western hero of American myth" (xxviii). At one point in the play, Chinaman's father dons "the redfaced long bearded mask of Kwan Kung" and says, "I am Kwan Kung Longtime Californ come across centuries of legends with the Cantonese! […] Over from China to teach you respect for Longtime Californ Chinese!" (20). The goal of Kwan Kung's appearance is clear: to educate Chinaman as to his people's myths

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[139] Chin's goal of encouraging Chinese American men to embrace their identity via myth in literature, and dramatizing how to do so, seems to have succeeded, at least once. Playwright David Henry Hwang actually credits *Gee, Pop!* with inspiring him to pursue his playwriting as an act of self-discovery. Before he saw the play (and before he read Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*), he confesses that he had no interest in writing as a man of color (16). He describes his first, Obie-winning play, *F.O.B.*, as a dramatization of the meeting between Kingston's Fa Mu Lan and Chin's Kwan Kung, whom he first learned about when he saw *Gee, Pop!* (16). Such a success, however, is bittersweet for Chin, who derides Hwang as a "fake" in "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." He also rejects Hwang's homage to Chin's rendering of Kwan Kung in "This is Not an Autobiography" (119).

and to make them verifiably native to the United States in so doing. It is for this reason that Chin elsewhere affirms, "The American West is mine" ("This" 116).

By conflating the history of Chinese American laborers with the mythic narrative of Kwan Kung, Chin is able to recoup an origin story that promotes empowered models of Chinese American manhood. In other words, the hypermasculine mythic figure recalls for Chinaman, as well as for all those he represents, his historical ancestors who contributed to the formation of the American nation. The play traces a narrative of permanence and manifestly *American* destiny by appealing to an identifiably *Chinese* mythic figure, whose masculinity authenticates Chinese American citizenship. If Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* restores such an origin story through a cyclical temporal emplotment and if Baraka's *A Black Mass* does so through a reinstatement of mythic time before the split with historical time, Frank Chin's *Gee, Pop!* exemplifies Power literature's recourse to a masculinist aesthetic, conceived as indigenous to mythic heritage, in order to bring about such temporal manipulation. In ways similar to Momaday's racial memory, Chin's selective masculinism makes an essentialist appeal that collapses bodies distanced by time (mythic warriors, coolie laborers, and present-day Chinese Americans), given their shared masculinity. Conflating the mythic Kwan Kung with the original Chinese American laborers allows him to emplot a myth-history that is both authentically Chinese and indigenously American.

More so than for Momaday or Baraka, Chin is eager to recover, along with myth, the archival history of discrimination experienced by Chinese and Chinese American men.[140] It is for this reason that, when Charlie Chan bates Chinaman, he responds by

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[140] Momaday does turn to the historical in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, in which he supplements the mythic stories conveyed by his father and other Kiowa elders with historical and anthropological discourse as well

researching how Chinese Americans were made the "dear, subject people" of dominant society while simultaneously being lynched in Los Angeles, Washington State, and Monterey.[141] He therefore models the kind of restorative work necessary for politicizing a culturally specific American identity. Yet the two forms of narratives – myth and history – are seamlessly conflated. To understand how Chin performs this conflation, we must consult his statements about the immutable nature of myth. Like Momaday and Baraka, Chin is a prolific writer of nonfiction prose, which often receives more critical attention than his fiction and drama. In particular, critics have converged on his notorious attack of Amy Tan, David Henry Hwang, and especially Maxine Hong Kingston, all of whom he views as romanticizing, revising, and "faking" Chinese mythology for the sake of their white Christian audiences.

I will take up the details of this controversy in the next chapter; for now, it suffices to say that Chin treats myths as static narratives that must be literally recovered via the text, not revised as Kingston does in *The Woman Warrior*.[142] The former approach represents for Chin the "real" Chinese American culture, and the latter

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as his own autobiographical voice. However, since Momaday and Baraka seem more interested in providing empowering narratives, they perhaps view histories of reservation policies and slavery, respectively, as instigating feelings of victimhood rather than inspiration.

[141] Chin lists these devastating events in "Afterward" (1976), a response to Myron Simon's article about him and Ishmael Reed, "Two Angry Ethnic Writers.": "From the 1880's through 1912 the western United States waged a race war against Chinamans and forced Frisco Chinatown to become a fortress. Whites burned down Chinatown Monterey. The Monterey papers of the period cheer the whites who set the torch to Chinatown. Today's history books blame the Monterey fire on Chinaman who after thousands of years of civilization didn't know how to play with fire. Whites flooded Chinatown Santa Cruz, massacred three hundred Chinamans on Vashon Island in Washington and buried the bodies in their basements … these are the stories we're bringing to light again. The whites have wiped out our history to make themselves look good" (17). Through his writing, then, Chin feels the need to recover this forsaken history.

[142] Xiao-huang Yin points out the complications with Chin's argument given that there are often many conflicting texts of ancient myths: "The Fa Mu Lan origins are obscure, so Chin's hunt for an authentic version is moot" (244, n. 78 on p. 252). Interestingly, Momaday seems to have a similar view about myths' immutability. In his interview with Charles L. Woodard, he responds enigmatically when Woodard asks if the arrowmaker myth can be revised. He says that he cannot answer because the myth exists as it is (119).

represents "the fake."[143] He explains in his essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," "Myths are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths" (29). Denying that a group's memory can change over the course of history or in its contact with other cultures, Chin condemns Kingston for suggesting that she has the right to revise myths. He attributes her view to a belief that when immigrants "settled and established Chinese America," their "faulty memory combined with new experience produced new versions of these traditional stories" (3). Chin, on the other hand, believes that collective memories ultimately cannot change because Chinese American myths can be traced back to original texts, just as history cannot change given its recourse to the archive. If myth is static, then its narrative framework functions in the same way as that of history, as offering unchanging and absolute truths about the past. Chin's emphasis on "the real" is in accord with Eliade's belief that myth is an account only of "that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. […] Myth is regarded as a sacred story, and hence a 'true history,' because it always deals with realities" (*Myth and Reality* 6; italics in original). For Eliade and for Chin, myth's reality, not falsehood, is self-confirming: Myth's authenticity is attested to by its sacredness and the way it manifests truly in the world.

For Chin, myth and history are both identity-forming narratives that have been squandered by white Christian and exceptionalist myth. In response, they must be

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[143] Chin's belief about minority culture manifesting as both fake and real has influenced critics of other ethnic backgrounds as well. For example, Sioux scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn insists that "the Frank Chin observation that in the case of Asian works, history was nearly destroyed by Christian missionaries and is now being faked by writers continuing in that tradition must be taken up by Native American literary critics as a cause-and-effect probability" (30). She argues that literature should work to sustain and continue tradition and indigenous nationalism (35).

recovered through archival research, supported by the masculine prowess of the mythic figure Kwan Kung. For example, when Chinaman resists Lily's Shakespearean and seductive chatter by declaring, "I am blood to Kwan Kung, the god of war," he experiences a racial memory of being in an opium den: "I breathe the gasps of thousands of bad dreams in the den where a British flag hangs over the door" (2-20). With the mask of Kwan Kung on his face and via the blood in his veins, Chinaman has access to the effects of British imperialism, a history of victimhood that has been squandered by American exceptionalist myth and its accessory, racist love, but that must be recovered by mythic heroism. Similarly, Lily attempts to distract Father from helping Chinaman by feigning the persona of his dead wife, Flora. Lily as Flora declares, "I'd marry a white man if I had it to do all over again" (2-45). In shock, the father responds, "Ma! You blood to Kwan Kung greates' Chinaman ever libbing!" (2-45). His way of protesting her self-hate is by insisting on her biological bond to the god of war.

The invocation of Kwan Kung leads the father to recall a neglected moment of Chinese American history: "My pa one dah four hundred Chinamans spike down track for lay dah record, of the transcontinental *original*" (2-49; italics mine). Here, the heroic tradition of Kwan Kung is joined with the heroic work of the coolie laborers as interrelated legacies of Chinese American identity, thereby making that labor integral to American mythology by situating it at the nation's origin. Similarly, Chinaman's (and by extension, Chin's) project of writing a narrative that reconnects with Chinese Americans myths allows him to attain the status of hero. Chinaman, for example, explains that killing Charlie Chan in a movie "would make me a hero of my people" (2-13). The role of literature, Chin asserts, is to recover neglected myth-histories through archival

research. Such a project, in turn, is supported and inspired by the masculine prowess of Kwan Kung, whom Chin himself recovers in his own heroic effort to make writing "fighting." In the tradition of Power literature, Chin turns to the formative material of myth to position the exploited and oft-neglected Chinese laborers not just as heroes but as original Americans.

Coming to Terms with the Homology: Its Risks and Rewards

To elucidate the work of myth in Momaday's, Baraka's, and Chin's Power literature, I have evoked the theories of three somewhat notorious mythologists. While such a move is risky given the prolific amount of criticism that has been leveled at Jung, Eliade, and Campbell, I have done so to illustrate an unexpected alliance. Two incredibly different groups of thinkers similarly understand the function of myth in the modern era and, in so doing, end up marginalizing significant parts of the population: "primitives" in the case of the myth theorists; women in the case of Power literature. Such marginalization can be understood, in part, as symptomatic of their reactionary impulse to counter a perceived dearth of mythic materials by attempting to salvage them; this methodology, of course, is what makes them all modernists. Momaday, Baraka, and Chin's deployment of myth is inherently troublesome because it, like that of Jung, Eliade, and Campbell, depends on a universalist premise, wherein different myths from different tribes, cultures, and nations are generalized and homogenized in the service of a nationalist and sexist politics. Jung, Eliade, and Campbell have been taken to task for such universalism, for drawing "an overwhelming wealth of examples from a range of sources and cultural contexts, treating them all uncritically as equal" (Ellwood 107).

Such an approach that lumps disparate peoples into the same category, which inevitably ends up situating Christianity at the pinnacle of that category, is exactly what Momaday, Baraka, and Chin are protesting.

Correspondingly, and equally difficult, the universalism of Eliade, Jung, and Campbell often bleeds into a white supremacist model that depends on an inherent distinction between primitives and moderns. In addition to Eliade's view that Christianity is the most mature faith given its willingness to accept the terrors of history, the racialist and Orientalist subtext of the first sentence of Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* is undeniable: "Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-tse [...] it will be always the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story" (3). To make matters worse, these myth theorists, much like the most famed American literary modernists, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, have repeatedly been accused of fascist leanings.[144] Provided a certain, admittedly extreme, political context, a nostalgic quest for origins can manifest as the cultural work of fascist Germany, where a renewal of the nation's "great" beginnings fed the belief that Germans are supreme beings. Such white supremacist ideologies, too, counter the particular experiences championed by Power literature.

It is tempting to now proceed to the logical (and often-made) argument that any attempt to conserve group identity in the service of a progressive politics of difference inevitably undermines itself due to its investment in universalist strategies. Though its

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[144] See, among others, Robert Ellwood's *The Politics of Myth*, which discusses the potentially pro-Nazi leanings of Eliade, Jung, and Campbell. Also see Ernst Cassirer's *Myth of the State* and Bruce Lincoln's *Theorizing Myth* for thorough discussions about how the project of mythic recovery fuels fascist political states.

aim is to liberate a population, Power literature's recourse to essentialist notions of race, nation, and gender ends up marginalizing just as often as it empowers. Indeed, many critics have already made such an argument, although not in the context of the literature's use of myth. For example, David Eng draws attention to the harmful contradiction of the *Aiiieeeee!* editors' dependence on "compulsory heterosexuality and cultural authenticity," which inevitably mirrors "the dominant heterosexist and racial structures through which the Asian American male is historically feminized and rendered self-hating in the first place" (21). Similarly, bell hooks recognizes the irony of Baraka's celebration of the black man's power as "primitive, strong, and virile," since these are the "same images of black men [...] evoked by racist whites to support the argument that all black men were rapists" (*Ain't* 96). And Josefina Saldaña-Portillo usefully points out that racial memory is inherently nostalgic because "biologic representation [...], in discursive and political terms, always already places the Indian under erasure" (413). Such evaluations are important, if not essential. Stephen Greenblatt calls attention to the dangers of allowing minority identity politics to escape the "withering critiques by feminism, deconstruction, and new historicism" because they are automatically deemed "worthy of admiration and support" (58). Yet it is also important to acknowledge that critiquing texts of the dominant as opposed to minority discourse has far different ethical and political implications. We must carefully distinguish the egregious ethnocentrism of myth theory prevalent during the production of Power literature and the subversive uses to which Power literature, in turn, deploys much of that theory.

Despite their shared methodologies, the universalist theories of mythologists are categorically different from the myth-histories of Power literature. Given their nostalgia

for the non-European, non-Christian "primitive," the universalizing generalizations of Eliade, Jung, and Campbell depend on the narratives of a mythic past (and present, since many of their references to primitives are to contemporary indigenous peoples) as repositories of the Other. With such appropriated narratives, they seek to bolster the present, Euro-Christian symbolic order, which, in characteristically modernist fashion, they viewed as foundering. Their work can thus be understood as – quite literally – whitewashing mythic difference to promote theories deemed universally applicable while presenting non-European/Euro-American mythic expression as inferior. Alternately, Power literature's temporal manipulation that emplots a master minority narrative thrives off the tension between universalist method and separatist ends. Whereas the myth theorists' evolutionary models find support in the master narratives of documented history, the minority authors develop an alternate narrative that fills in undocumented gaps by conflating historical temporality with that of myth. While the myth theorists presume universalism, a stance that ends up masking Christian supremacy, Power literature exploits this presumption, bounding a universalist concept of identity that is yet racially circumscribed.

Manipulated by those whom hegemonic forces attempt to erase, "foreign" myths presented in universal terms become unassimilable, necessitating a separate worldview. Through their invocation of universalist means for separatist ends, authors of Power literature forge symbolic space for appropriation-resistant mythic difference. And by recovering alternate origin stories that prefigure the master narratives of Euro-American history and mythology, they expose the blind spots, the erasures, that have made Eliade, Jung, and Campbell's universalism possible. Minority separatist writing that partakes of

universalist mythic discourse is therefore valuable and constructive for its reversal of structuralist binaries, thereby rendering – if reflexively – such binaries as constructed, and so reversible. Though both mid-century myth theory and Power literature rely on evolutionary narratives anchored by an Other, prior time, the myth theorists have the luxury of a documented history of Euro-American dominance, which the minority writers ceaselessly works to destabilize through neglected, yet enduring, origin stories. Power literature restores these origin stories, exposing the moments when superimposed American exceptionalist myths fall short, unable to assimilate narratives of Plains warriors, black Jihadists, and writing and fighting gods.

As I have been arguing throughout the dissertation, myths, by their very nature, can contain both conservative and radical potentialities. Though they are most conventionally understood as ideological narratives that enforce the status quo, they can also undermine it by exposing its relativity. As all of the traits discussed in this chapter – racial memory, didactic cultural nationalism, and masculine heroism – are fueled by mythic preservation and authorize a normative worldview, the use of myth in Power literature is necessarily conservative despite its radical goal of asserting a politics of difference.[145] Power literature's use of myth, then, fuels this conservative drive, whose aim is to conserve materials and modes of the past. Yet it is also radical, since these mythic materials act as liberating alternatives to dominant mythologies and histories. Baraka recognizes this tension himself: "Although I am a progressive, in many senses I'm a conservative in that I would like to see black people wholly in tune with those

[145] Paul Gilroy points out that exceptionalist concepts of race, such as those employed by the Black Power and Black Arts movements, actually disguise their conservatism through their radical political rhetoric (100).

things that benefit them – with the blackest things, with their strengths" (R. Allen interview 21). The mythic tension apparent in each of these texts thereby illuminates the authors' inherently vexed political projects.

To contribute to the work of attaining long-awaited group rights, minority activists and authors recognized the need for a separate communal identity to be theorized as well as a creative means for establishing a unified population of people, Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans – constructed identities all. Mythic narrative integrated into the context of literature proved able to do both. By attending to the creative negotiations undertaken by Power literature's use of traditional myths, we can likewise detect the theoretical negotiations required to establish such separate but communal group identities at the moment when identity politics was seeking its own origin story.

To make symbolic space for minority mythologies in response to the nearly inescapable presence of American exceptionalist mythology, authors of Power literature adopted the universalist techniques of the very mythmakers and mythologies they were countering. In so doing, they ushered in a paradigm-shifting politics and oppositional discourse that, in strenuous and inescapable terms, made coherent claims to unassimilated but foundationally American minority identities. Instead of now further highlighting Power literature's contradictory, though groundbreaking, use of myth, let us move on to some literary works that are more open and willing to embrace the relativizing potential of myth and so do the work for us.

Chapter Three: Myth and Minority Feminist Revision

Laguna Pueblo mythic figure Yellow Woman, or Kochininako, is known for having a wild side. In the traditional stories, this culture hero is either abducted by or goes willingly with a ka'tsina, a mountain spirit, with whom she ventures into unknown and sometimes hostile territory. In the end, either her death or her return to the Pueblo benefits her community in some way. Leslie Marmon Silko's multigeneric collection *Storyteller* (1981) includes multiple accounts of Yellow Woman; she appears as the protagonist of a short story, as the traditional figure in transcribed oral narratives, and as a cross between the two as characters or allusions in revised oral stories and original poems. While we know that Silko was familiar with Franz Boas' *Keresan Texts* and John Gunn's *Schat Chen* (Nelson "He Said" 33), her versions of the Yellow Woman myths vary significantly from these printed ethnographic accounts. Silko offers numerous renditions of the Yellow Woman myth not only by revising the stories passed on to her by her female relatives, not only by framing them within different genres, but also by departing from generic conventions altogether. In the short story "Yellow Woman," for example, the traditional tale is evoked as a contemporary woman finds herself in a situation strangely akin to that of Yellow Woman. Such an overlapping temporal setting breaks down the boundaries between sacred myth, recorded history, and personal experience. It does so by inviting readers to question if the "original" mythic figure herself was actually a historical Laguna Pueblo woman whose story was transmitted and made mythic through an ensuing storytelling tradition. The protagonist, for example, wonders "if Yellow Woman had known who she was – if she knew that she would become part of the stories. Maybe she'd had another name that her husband and relatives

called her so that only the ka'tsina from the north and the storytellers would know her as Yellow Woman" (55).

Immediately following this short story are the two parts of "Cottonwood," poems about Yellow Woman that, due to their formatting, repetition, and lyric diction, mimic the traditional voice of oral narrative in identifiable ways for the reader. Despite the seemingly faithful ethnographic rendering, the ending of the first poem, "Story of Sun House," alludes to William Carlos Williams' 1923 defining modernist poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow." The entirety of Williams' poem reads: "so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens" (56). Silko's ends with similar diction and similar formatting: "Cottonwood, / cottonwood / So much depends / upon one in the great canyon" (67). This evocation of a poet of the Anglo-American tradition within the context of a traditional Laguna myth resists what is conventionally understood as an "authentic" Native oral tradition, whether in the spirit of "salvage ethnography" or the cultural restoration of Power literature.[146]

The subsequent version of the Cottonwood poem, "Buffalo Story" is more faithful to the traditional abduction storyline of the myth. Yet, as Bernard Hirsch reveals, Silko's ending is noticeably different from Boas' (16). Whereas Boas depicts Yellow Woman's death as inconsequential, Silko stresses her intentional and heroic martyrdom: "It was all because / one time long ago / our daughter, our sister Kochininako / went away with them" (76). Even Silko's rendering of the most enduring traditional stories, then, departs from ethnographic and Power literature's methodological precedents by revising myths

[146] See James Clifford for more on "salvage ethnography," in which "the other is lost, in dissipating time and space, but saved in the text" (112).

for a culturally specific feminist end, one that makes an archetypal, yet strangely intimate, female figure the agent of her community's salvation.

Silko's feminist revision of traditional myth does not end here but extends into the metafictional by spotlighting the process of revision itself. The appropriately titled poem "Storytelling," for example, presents the Yellow Woman myth being told orally to a group of people. In this version, just as Yellow Woman is located in the mythic realm, the story slips into a historical setting, which alludes to a future point in the traditional story, after Yellow Woman has returned home: "'You better have a damn good story,' / her husband said, / 'about where you been for the past / ten months and how you explain these / twin baby boys'" (95). Such contemporary diction grates against the elevated discourse of traditional oral narrative as it is conventionally translated into English, thereby exposing the conventions that determine any narrative rendering.

Each revised version of the Yellow Woman myth in Silko's collection offers a supplemental interpretation of it. As such, Silko indicates the range of meanings, genres, and purposes the Yellow Woman myth can assume within the literary context. By presenting traditional myth as short stories, poems, sacred narratives, and as combinations of these genres, Silko reveals myth to be a unique kind of narrative that is adaptable in the literary realm *because of*, not despite, its temporal difference from literary and historical narrative. The hermeneutic project embedded within the body of *Storyteller* therefore indicates Silko's self-reflexive approach toward myth. For her, myth is enduring because it has been transmitted by her ancestors, as well as constructed, both organically, via the passage of time, and creatively, via the authorial voice. In a departure from Power literature's project of recovering "authentic" myths and conflating

them with history, Silko exposes and exploits their malleability, especially as such malleability is determined by historical context and political motivation.

This chapter's goal is to chart the projects of a generation of minority women writers who forged a link between mythic revision and minority feminism. In response to the pioneering literary, political, and mythic work accomplished by such figures as Momaday, Baraka, and Chin, many women minority writers exhibited a conflicted allegiance between contributing to nationalist efforts and challenging the sexism and homophobia that accompanied Power literatures' masculinism. Such a formidable project is characterized by a nostalgic desire for a meaningful past, one akin to, if differently configured from, the recovery work of Power literature, coupled with suspicion of the inevitable patriarchy of such histories.

Numerous minority women activists complained about the ostracism they experienced from the men who dominated the Black Power, Chicano, American Indian, and Asian American political movements.[147] For example, Valerie Smith characterizes the black nationalist movement and its accompanying Black Arts Movement as celebrating "black manhood" out of "the political need to reclaim racial pride"; yet, in so doing, they, "like other radical movements of the 1970s," "marginalized feminist politics" (61). Often considered the creative mouthpieces of minority feminist activism, the figures at the center of this chapter – Gloria Anzaldúa, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Maxine Hong Kingston – engaged in the familiar strategy of recovery by incorporating

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[147] Paula M. L. Moya, for example, describes the Chicano nationalist emphasis on "family loyalty" as assigning "Chicanas a subordinate and circumscribed role within the movement. […] [A]lthough Chicanas were active at every stage and at every level of the Chicano Movement, their participation was rarely acknowledged or recorded" (88-89).

female mythic figures twice neglected by Euro-American and minority nationalist narratives.[148] However, because they could not unconditionally embrace the recovered masculinist myths of Power literature and activism, they also recognized the necessity of revision, a strategy that demands a heightened degree of literary self-consciousness.

Minority women writers of the 1970s and 1980s, of course, were not alone in their revision of traditional myth for feminist purposes. Taking as its inspiration Adrienne Rich's 1971 call for "re-vision," "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35), much feminist literary criticism of this era concentrated on remaking the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions' representations of women so long conveyed through literature and art. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar endorse such a liberating textual act in their foundational feminist literary study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979): "To heal herself […], the woman writer must exorcise the sentences which bred her infection […], and she can only do this by revising the maker's texts […], especially the paradigmatic [and mythic] polarities of angel and monster" (76). In her study of (primarily) Anglo-American and British contemporary poets, Alicia Suskin Ostriker attempts to theorize how such feminist revision functions. She understands "revisionist mythmaking" as "a means of redefining both woman and culture" (211) because myths "are the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for 'male' and 'female' are stored" (11). For Ostriker, myth epitomizes a quintessential form of phallogocentric language. Revising myth, then, automatically becomes a subversive project because revised myths in poetic form "dismantle the

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[148] Works by such African American authors as Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, and Gloria Naylor could also be included in my consideration of minority feminist mythic revision, were there world enough and time (and an incredibly patient reader). See the third chapter of Amy Benson Brown's *Rewriting the Word* for a discussion of mythic, especially Biblical, revision in Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe* and Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

literary conventions to reveal the social ones, and reverse both, usually by the simple device of making Other into Subject" (216).

However, Ostriker's methodology, which translates a personal subject into a universalist Everywoman (228), can only be accomplished by relegating to the periphery poetry written by minority women.[149] Many other second-wave feminists have been taken to task for their dependence on essentialist and ultimately ethnocentric definitions of "woman" in their challenges to patriarchal legacies. For example, in her early womanist essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith declares, "It is galling that ostensible feminists and acknowledged lesbians have been so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood and that they have yet to struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is at the source of this blindness" (169).[150]

Luce Irigary, for one, is nostalgic for an origin moment when all women were united and lived according to "natural" relationships (13). She goes so far as to recommend that pictures of recovered Greek goddesses be displayed to "redress women's individual and collective loss of identity" (9-10), proposing that ancient Greek constructions of divine women can empower all contemporary women. Feminist

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[149] Another literary critic whose project is similar to Ostriker's is Annis Pratt, who relies on Jungian archetypes, as well as the structuralist myth theories of Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye, to identify shared and universal attributes of women's fiction, which, she claims, is inherently different from men's. In her wide-ranging study, such African American writers as Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston, receive, at most, three pages of mention.

[150] Michael Awkward adds that the separation of public and private spheres characteristic of much early white feminism was "less feasible for many black women during this period, whose political awakening in most cases resulted from their participation in radical 1960s racial politics" (293). Much of the feminist theorizing put forward by privileged white women therefore relied on ahistorical and allegedly natural conceptions of women's experience. Feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza similarly critiques Mary Daly's philosophical model for feminist liberation by pointing out that her "structuralist" analysis in *The Church and the Second Sex* "highlights universal structures of patriarchal oppression but dehistoricizes the oppression itself, since her analysis can not conceptualize the concrete, historical oppression of women in different societies, cultures, and religions" (*In Memory* 25).

theologian Mary Daly similarly posits the universal category of woman in order to develop a philosophy of women's liberation: "The bonding [of women] is born out of shared recognition that there exists a worldwide phenomenon of sexual caste, basically the same whether one lives in Saudi Arabia or in Sweden" (2). In order to be liberated from patriarchal religion, as well as the phallogocentric language that supports it, Daly advocates "*castrating*" language by revising familiar terms into more liberating versions (8; italics in original). Just as authors of Power literature can find little room for women's voices, Daly cannot support the revisionary tactics of African American nationalist theology: "The Black God and Black Messiah apparently are merely the same patriarchs after a pigmentation operation – their behavior unaltered" (25).

As indicated by these arguments, the methodology of second-wave feminist theory and criticism partakes in universalist discourse that is strikingly similar to the Power literature of Momaday, Baraka, and Chin. Both reverse Manichean binaries to situate either recovered mythic heroes or recovered and revised mythic heroines as central to ahistorical narratives of liberation. The racial, sexual, and historical differences between the bodies of Greek goddesses and those of contemporary women, for example, are collapsed in favor of a politically resonant, non-existent category "Woman." As such, the pioneering attempts to theorize feminist liberation often devolved into ethnocentric imaging of woman as white and middle-class.[151] Many second-wave feminists worked according to the premise that the co-optation of traditional, patriarchal myth is automatically a subversive act. By offering a voice to the silenced Other, so the argument went, the familiar structuralist binary of man-woman/subject-object would be reversed, thereby empowering the latter term.

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[151] Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is perhaps the most (in)famous example.

I do not deny the import and efficacy of this struggle toward human liberation; the analogous methodology of Power literature is equally compelling, if only because they both expose such binaries as socially constructed and so malleable. Yet it was left primarily to minority feminist writers to self-consciously embrace such an adaptable approach to myth. Torn between the nationalist efforts of minority men and the feminist efforts of white women, minority feminist activists and artists were faced with the task of not only challenging these projects but also forging symbolic space for their own political activism and literary engagement. Continuing much of the work of Power literature to provide alternate origin stories for politically instrumental reasons, women writers of color do so with the critical understanding that systems of oppression are linked – a ground-breaking premise of womanism and other minority feminisms of the 1970s and 1980s.

In this period, minority women writers were published with much more frequency than ever before, and scholars in the humanities and social sciences began developing theories and methodologies for such fields as black women's studies and third world feminism. Also at this time, self-proclaimed third world feminists worked to accomplish their political goals through protest, social justice efforts related to abortion, rape, health care, education, and labor exploitation (Combahee 20-21), as well as by documenting and analyzing "Black women's relationship to American capitalism; the situation of Black women in prison and the connection between their incarceration and our own; the social history of Black women's domestic work; and the investigation of Black women's mental and physical health" (Hull and Smith xxii).

Because it necessitates (at least) a third term, a minority feminist approach to traditional myth and collective identity complicates what is otherwise a Manichean conflict between either white men and minority men or white men and white women in which the white man is always the defining term. Yet this third term does not simply make a pair into a triad. Instead, the positioning of minority feminist identity is much more complex, as Elizabeth V. Spelman argues about African American women: "It is highly misleading to say, without further explanation, that black women experience sexism and racism. For to say *merely* that suggests that black women experience one form of oppression *as blacks*–the same thing black men experience–and that they experience another form of oppression, *as women*–the same thing white women experience" (42). Marked by multiple identity categories that are "affected in different ways, depending upon the extent to which they are affected by other forms of oppression" (Spelman 42), minority women writers expose the unwieldiness and composite nature of identities, the way that they are composites of race, class, and gender that cannot be separated into convenient structuralist binaries. In so doing, they dismantle the structuralist foundations of Power literature and white feminist criticism.

Because African American women observe the world from what bell hooks calls a "special vantage point," they can challenge and provide alternatives to the mainstream bourgeois feminist paradigm that seeks equality with white men and that evokes "a very romantic notion of personal freedom that is more acceptable than a definition that emphasizes radical political action" and the eradication of all forms of domination (*Feminist* 25).[152] For hooks and for the minority women writers considered here,

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[152] bell hooks explains that because African American women have "no institutionalized 'other,'" their experiences challenge "the prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology";

universalism is not the methodology employed, but, rather, universal liberation is the endpoint sought. Such an aspiration is essential because, as the Combahee River Collective put it in their 1977 "Black Feminist Statement," in order for racism to be dismantled, so too must sexism, and every other kind of oppression, for "the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (13). According to this revolutionary thought of early third-wave feminism, each form of oppression is dependent on the others. In her foundational womanist text, *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks explains, "Although the focus is on the black female, our struggle for liberation has significance only if it takes place within a feminist movement that has as its fundamental goal the liberation of all people" (13). For this reason, black and other minority feminists draw on the work accomplished by the Power movements and white feminist movements (as well as their literatures) in order to strive toward a goal much more broadly conceived. The Combahee River Collective explain, "Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. […] We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy" (16).

If systems of oppression are linked, then the narratives that support them must be rendered historically contingent and not universally applicable, as they normally circulate. To break down an ahistorical symbolic order that thrives off of clear-cut binaries necessitates a self-conscious approach to self-perpetuating, interwoven systems of oppression. In their introduction to the groundbreaking collection on black women's

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as such, their consciousnesses are shaped "in such a way that our world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege (however relative within the existing system)" (*Feminist* 16).

studies, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith argue that black women's studies should take as its inspiration the activism of black women in order to achieve political agency via the academy and become a "transformer of consciousness" (Introduction xxi). The goal, then, is not just restoration and revision, but transformation – transformation of social systems as well as the modes of thought that support those systems.

Such a project is more conflictual and descriptive than the characteristically prescriptive efforts of Power movements and Power literature. Silko addresses this distinction by making an argument for the efficacy of literature over more overt political protest:

> Certainly for me the most political statement I could make is in my art work. I believe in subversion rather than straight-out confrontation. […] Especially in America, when you confront the so-called mainstream, it's very inefficient, and in every way possible destroys you and disarms you. I'm still a believer in subversion. I don't think we're numerous enough, whoever 'we' are, to take them by storm. (Coltelli interview 147-148)

When asked whether she agrees with AIM's tactics, Silko responds that she understands and is not at all critical of them, but that "with the givens that I have, with what I do best, and sort of where I found myself, that […] isn't where I can do the best work" (148). Given her position, Silko looks to more subtle, discursive tactics to effect change, to achieve the same goals of sovereignty, equal treatment of Native Americans, and full citizenship rights pursued by AIM, yet with an approach she finds more suited to and promising for her position as a woman of color.

With such an awareness, minority women writers actively revise the mythic narratives that circulate so widely in their communities and in the nation more largely, exposing them as malleable, contingent, and available for liberating ends. To avoid the marginalizing strategies of both Power literature and second-wave feminism, minority women writers evince a greater degree of literary self-consciousness in their incorporation of mythic narratives, which are always susceptible to normalizing impulses. Such self-consciousness is analogous to the decided effort of minority feminist activists to name their state of oppression in simultaneously antiracist and antisexist terms (Combahee 14), those that do not marginalize one population to elevate another. Instead of adapting universalist models of traditional narrative in the service of particularist ends, then, Anzaldúa, Silko, and Kingston self-consciously exploit traditional narrative as a revisable category. In so doing, they locate the specific experiences of women of color while theorizing a means toward universal liberation.

When racial and gender identities are simultaneously incorporated into the project of mythic deconstruction and reconstruction, the stakes of the project are raised. While second-wave feminists could refigure familiar myths to develop inspiring female heroines and challenge a patriarchal status quo, minority feminists demanded an ambivalent approach to myth due to the legacy of both Power literature's and second-wave feminism's precarious use of it. Feminist philosopher of religion Pamela Sue Anderson might identify such an approach as "liberal essentialist" because it insists "upon the existence of positive, natural images of women in myth" alongside "the need to reproduce radically new versions of old myths in order to reverse the reversals of

patriarchy" ("Myth" 103).[153] Given such ambivalence, minority feminist writers assumed a greater literary self-consciousness, incorporating into their works hermeneutic comments about their revision of both Euro-American and recovered minority myths.

Theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that if a feminist reinterpretation of biblical texts relies on a "gender-specific biblical hermeneutics in terms of Jungian archetypal psychology and cultural glorification of femininity, motherhood, and true womanhood," then "such imaginative biblical recreations unconsciously reproduce the Western romanticist and individualist ideal of the 'White Lady'" (*But She Said* 27), thereby falling back into the structuralist trap that limits the potential of women into an unattainable ideal of Everywoman. What distinguishes such ethnocentric feminist theological revisions from more liberating ones, Schüssler Fiorenza argues, is an accompanying "*hermeneutics of suspicion*" that disallows an uncritical embrace of "feminine role models that the androcentric text constructs" (27). In other words, simply recovering female figures who exist in (patriarchal) traditional myth is not enough to counteract misogyny and racism. Such recovery demands persistent and self-reflexive revision.

Suspicious of the seductive trap of structuralist discourse, an inevitably marginalizing paradigm, minority women writers metafictionally stage in their literary texts the conflict involved in rejecting such seductive traps. Through a particular management of temporality that flaunts the conventions of narrative, these authors embed a self-reflexive literary perspective within their projects. In so doing, women writers of

[153] Anderson actually views such an approach as problematic due to its essentialism. She proposes a more postmodern and fluid approach to mythic identity that thrives off of possibility while taking into account historical and social constructs (119). Her model, though, proves untenable for minority feminists, as discussed in Chapter Four.

color simultaneously defer to and remark on traditional mythic narratives, disallowing their universality and ahistoricity while retaining their political capacity to relativize narratives that support oppressive social structures. Rather than relying on claims to authenticity, these authors draw on an ever-changing but no less culturally defining narrative tradition.

As Paul Ricoeur has shown, narrative depends on its temporal emplotment to convey meaning (Vol. 1 54). Because the project of revising myth is contingent on the disruption of the standard forms that sustain it, minority women writers are faced with the accompanying task of revising temporal categories, hence the formal experimentation exemplified by each of the works considered here. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson describes African American women writing as engaging in the double-pronged methodology of "disruption, rereading, and rewriting the conventional and canonical stories, as well as revising the conventional generic forms that convey these stories" (49).[154] In a somewhat similar vein, Trinh T. Minh-ha makes the compelling argument that the reason so many of the world's storytellers are women is because stories, as opposed to history, "tell us not only what might have happened, but also what is happening at an unspecified time and place" (120). Women, who are in many ways outside documented history, are capable of transmitting these counternarratives, which are "truer than history" (120). Not surprisingly, Minh-ha cites both Silko and Kingston in her theorization of women's storytelling as an undertaking that invites revision on multiple levels: both content and the temporal frames that convey it.

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[154] Alicia Ostriker also makes the argument that the reversal of speaking subject and silent other accomplished by feminist writers necessitates innovative literary forms to contain new meanings and to call attention to the subversive act itself, what she refers to as stealing (236).

To revise both content and form via temporal manipulation, these women writers supplement the recovery of traditional mythic narratives with historical recovery. Just as American exceptionalist and minority nationalist myths are fraught with masculinism and heterosexism, so too is history conventionally dismissive of women's, especially minority women's, experiences. As feminist historian Gerda Lerner has shown, "History as traditionally recorded and interpreted by historians has been, in fact, the history of the activities of men ordered by male values" (168). By pioneering such temporal devices as situating historical discourse alongside that of myth and recovering neglected histories of minority experiences, these writers anticipate the potential pitfall of any project of mythic revision due to myth's notorious role in supporting patriarchal ends: "At first thought, mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer. […] It is thanks to myth that we believe that woman must be either angel or monster" (Ostriker 211-212).[155] Pamela Sue Anderson similarly acknowledges the difficulty of changing myth because the "privileging of a configured text, as built upon the normative material of pre-signification, might merely reinforce status quo of patriarchy and its injustices" (*Feminist* 147).

Minority feminists, however, are not interested in engaging narratives that are "pre-signified," in Anderson's use of the term, because they emplot myth within specific historical contexts while explicitly meditating on narrative conventions. Whereas

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[155] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in her study of (mostly white) women writers and how they "rewrite, reinterpret, or reenvision classical myths" (105), similarly argues that "when a woman writer chooses myth as her subject, she is faced with material that is indifferent or, more often, actively hostile to historical considerations of gender, claiming as it does universal, humanistic, natural, or even archetypal status" (106). DuPlessis offers an interesting way of understanding women writers' revision of myth as different from an engagement of archetypes because they instead offer prototypes. In so doing, they "break with the idea of an essentially unchanging reality," because prototypes are "open to transformation" (133). I remain skeptical, however, of her statement that posits prototypes as models offered by (again, mostly white) women for all other women, even if they are not "imposed" (133).

Momaday, Baraka, and Chin considered myth a repository of static narratives requiring faithful preservation, Anzaldúa, Silko, and Kingston frame even the most nostalgic reference to origins within historical discourse, thereby disallowing an origin moment that is not already a story, a human construct emplotted according to specific conventions.

This narrative technique, symptomatic of the cross purposes of minority mythic recovery and feminist mythic revision, ultimately provoked controversy within the authors' respective literary traditions. As literary "matriarchs," Anzaldúa, Silko, and Kingston have received, for the most part, more attention from both popular culture and academia than their "patriarchal" counterparts; however, their literary use of myth has not always been endorsed within their own cultural groups.[156] Myth, then, often acts as the site of philosophical and aesthetic disagreements about the role of minority literature, and this mixed history of reception can be credited, at least in part, to these authors' especially complex modes of temporal emplotment. To transform consciousness and challenge systemic oppression, these authors tackle and profit from the hostile tradition of myth, exposing a reputedly ahistorical narrative type as historically determined.

Who's an Essentialist? Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

[156] Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* is often credited as the founding document of border studies, which is the central methodology of Chicano studies. Silko's *Ceremony* is the most taught Native American novel and reputedly one of the "most important" contemporary American novels (Roemer 223). Similarly, Helena Grice reveals that "it is now lore in Asian American circles that Kingston is the most widely taught living writer in US colleges today" (4) and adds that "delineations of Asian American feminist writing almost always pinpoint the publication of Kingston's text as *the* pivotal moment in its maturation" (7).

One of the primary achievements of Gloria Anzaldúa's acclaimed collection of nonfiction essays and poems, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), is her recovery of female mythic figures from Mesoamerica. For her resistance to the racism and sexism of the United States and the sexism of Chicano culture, Anzaldúa is repeatedly cited as an inspiration by both Chicana and non-Chicana feminists. Despite her canonical status in Chicana/o and women's studies, she is frequently taken to task for her essentialist portrayal of the Indian woman, for attempting to recover an ahistorical mythic tradition even while exhibiting the hybrid heritage of Chicana/os as inhabitants of the borderlands. However, Anzaldúa's use of historical discourse in her project of mythic recovery and revision complicates her alleged essentialism. If Aztec goddesses are to serve a feminist end, and if they are not to succumb to the dominant patriarchal-racist narratives of the US or the patriarchal-nationalist narratives of the Chicano Movement, her text suggests, then they must be qualified by, embedded in, and contingent on historical discourse.

The incentive to revise can be attributed to a discomfort with origins. In language evocative of Freud's notion of the uncanny, Anzaldúa describes growing up on the border as "like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element" that is "familiar – never comfortable … but home" (Preface n.p.). This ambivalent reference to home is repeated throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*, such as when she claims, "I had to leave home so I could find myself" (16). Because her place of origin is a restrictive space for women and for homosexuals, Anzaldúa must break away from it in order to achieve the critical distance necessary to revise the myths that support restrictive societal mores and to conceptualize her unnamed experiences of oppression. Amritjit Singh, Joseph T.

Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan explain that minority women "may expend much less nostalgia than immigrant men on homeland memories, which often include painful recollections of sexist behavior and patriarchal attitudes, customs, and conventions" (10).[157] By interpreting representations of home, a place of origin, as metonymic commentaries on myths, stories of origin, we can appreciate the uniquely critical outlook of minority women writers. Given the patriarchal obstacle to unmediated nostalgia, the perspective of minority women writers challenges the most limiting components of recovered myth while exploiting the most liberating of them.

Many scholars trace the origins of minority feminism to Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's joint editorship of *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981).[158] In this landmark anthology, the contributors pushed bourgeois white feminism to encompass differences of race and class. In so doing, they also effectively announced their departure from the nationalist efforts of Power literature. Alvina Quintana characterizes *Borderlands/La Frontera* as transforming "many of *Bridge*'s themes and narrative strategies into sustained methods for Chicana feminist self-fashioning" (114).[159] Anzaldúa's work also made the concept of the "borderlands" a commonplace in literary studies and the "guiding metaphor of Latino studies" (Flores 212).[160] Her familiar trope of the border, which is not only a dividing line but also a contact zone and not only geographical but also psychological, spiritual, and sexual, allows her to authenticate

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[157] While most of their discussion focuses on women immigrants, their analysis applies in this context to non-immigrant minority American women as well.
[158] Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith's *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982) is often included in this genealogy.
[159] Quintana makes the same argument regarding Moraga's autobiography, *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (1983).
[160] Though Anzaldúa has been credited with its introduction to Chicana/o and literary studies, the term "borderlands" was first introduced by historian Herbert Eugene Bolton in the 1920s "to highlight similarities in the histories of various nations in the hemisphere" (Sadowski-Smith 2).

concepts of individual and group identity while exposing that identity's inherent hybridity.

Unlike Power literature's goal of recovering a bona fide cultural heritage, Anzaldúa is interested in revising the myths endowed to her from multiple sources: her Aztec, Spanish, Euro-American, and African ancestors and her Chicano contemporaries. One of the primary myths evoked by the 1960s and 1970s Chicano Movement, or *El Movimiento*, was the story of the land of Aztlán, the origin of the Aztecs before their migration south and their founding of a powerful empire. Though the actual geographical locale is only known to be north of Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City, Chicano activists designated the location of Aztlán as the United States Southwest, thereby making Chicanos twice indigenous to the United States. The Aztlán myth was first used in support of *El Movimiento* in the 1969 "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," attributed to the poet Alurista and presented at the First Chicano National Conference by activist and poet Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales.[161] It claims in a nostalgic spirit of nationalistic "brotherhood" that Chicanos are newly conscious of their "proud historical heritage" and that "the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny" ("El Plan" 1).[162]

No doubt influenced by this document, twenty-six Chicano militants from Los Angeles seized Santa Catalina Island in 1972 and renamed it Aztlán Libre. They attributed their efforts to AIM's influence and referred to themselves as the Brown

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[161] Ramón A. Gutiérrez reveals that the Aztán myth was actually used much earlier to lure Anglo immigrants to New Mexico in the 1880s ("Aztlán" 173-174). Sheila Marie Contreras also points out that Jack Forbes, in *Aztecas del Norte: The Chicanos of Aztlán* (1973), claimed to be the first to use the term "Aztlán" as early as 1962 (30).

[162] Like the nationalism of Baraka, it is unclear if the nationalism of the Chicano Movement actually intended to work toward a separate nation or instead endorsed cultural nationalism.

Berets, modeled after the Black Panthers (Rhea 75).[163] In keeping with much of the same essentialist discourse driving the American Indian, Asian American, and Black Power movements, the Aztlán plan relied on the biological tie to a mythic people as well as a highly masculinist sensibility. Ramon Gutiérrez explains,

> Much of the ethnic militancy that Chicanos articulated was profoundly influenced by black nationalism. […] Reciting the psychic violence that racism and discrimination had wrecked on African Americans, Malcolm X noted that the most profound had been the emasculation of black men. […] Chicanos faced what was undoubtedly a rather similar experience – social emasculation and cultural negation – by seeking strength and inspiration in a heroic Aztec past. ("Community" 354)

The movement's preferred god was Huitzilopochtli, the patron god of the Aztecs who led them out of Aztlán and whose "primary associations were with blood and warfare" (M. Smith 211).[164] The reinstatement of Huitzilopochtli's warrior discourse, though "a gendered vision that rarely extends to women" (Gutiérrez 355), allowed Chicano activists to make forceful claims to US territory and citizenship rights despite a history of exclusion.

As indicated by Alurista's and Gonzales' embrace of Aztlán, the myth proved serviceable to Chicano authors as well as activists.[165] In the introduction to their edited

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[163] For more on the Chicano Movement, see Carlos Munoz's *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (1989) and Mario Barrera's *Beyond Aztlán: Ethnic Autonomy in Comparative Perspective* (1988).

[164] Norma Alarcón points out that the Chicano Movement did also adopt the Virgin of Guadalupe at times, but at the expense of women's agency: "In their quest for 'authenticity,' Chicanos often desired the silent mediator – Guadalupe, the unquestioning transmitter of tradition and deliverer from oppression" ("Traddutora" 69).

[165] See, for example, Alurista's poetry collection *Floricanto en Aztlán* (1971); Gonzales' bilingual epic poem "Yo Soy Joaquín" (1967), Sergio Elizondo's epic poem *Perros Y Antiperros* (1972), and Oscar Zeta-

collection *Aztlán* (1989), Rudolfo Anaya, best known as the author of *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), and Francisco A. Lomeli describe the myth as surviving from the Aztecs to the present; it "was only dormant in the collective unconscious" as an "archetype" that "speaks of origins and ancestors" (iii). In his essay included in the collection, Anaya adds that the Aztlán myth was "not learned" but exists in "the archetypal memory residing in the blood" ("Aztlán" 236).[166] Reviving Jungian archetypes via blood memory is, of course, one of Power literature's central strategies. Like Momaday's racial memory that attests to Indian "tenure" to the land (58), Baraka's myth of black primacy, and Chin's cowboy rhetoric, the myth of Aztlán allowed Chicano authors to insist on their "historical precedence over Anglos in the Southwest" (Arteaga *Chicano* 9).

Cherríe Moraga contends that the masculinism of the Chicano movement was a reaction to "Anglo-America's emasculation of Chicano men," but their embrace of "the most patriarchal aspects" of their heritage alienated Chicanas (*Last* 156). This gendered condition of *El Movimiento* led to a "bitter division" between Chicano nationalists and Chicana activists (Saldívar-Hull *Feminism* 30), the latter of whom "were accused of betraying the political struggle by criticizing the behavior of Chicanos" (Bruce-Novoa *Retrospace* 86).[167] Norma Alarcón accounts for such accusations by characterizing Chicano culture as "a traditional society organized along metaphysical or cosmological figurations of good and evil" ("Traddutora" 63). In order to find a voice outside such a

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Acosta's memoir *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973). Luis Valdez's *El Teatro Campesino*, the Farmworkers Theater, is an example of a dramatic medium that incorporated Aztec myths to contribute to the fight for Chicano rights.

[166] Elizabeth Jacobs argues that blood is actually the "central image" that guided the construction of a modern mestizo Chicano's identity during *El Movimiento* (72). Later women writers, however, are not as tempted by the trope of racial memory, which, for example, Moraga refers to as "simple" and "rehearsed" (*Loving* 75).

[167] Just one example that reveals the masculinism and heterosexism of the Chicano movement is that the main book on its history, Carlos Munoz, Jr.'s *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (1989) virtually ignores women's contributions and completely overlooks gays and lesbians (Saldívar-Hull 33).

binary symbolic order, feminist activists and authors needed to alter and appropriate "cherished metaphysical beliefs" (63), such as those widely circulated by myth. Activists such as Theresa Aragón and Consuelo Nieto, for example, worked to incorporate feminist concerns within the Chicano Movement's anticolonial political demands, revealing their interrelatedness.[168] Authors such as Bernice Zamora, Lucha Corpi, and Alma Villanueva did so by revising the mythic sources employed by authors of Power literature to further the politicization of Chicano/a identity but also to challenge the masculinist and heterosexist structure that supported the Movement's recovery efforts. The most influential Chicana author to do so was Gloria Anzaldúa.[169]

Though Anzaldúa recognizes the 1960s as a signal moment when Chicanos began to "know" themselves as "a people" (63), her model for "knowing" departs from the Chicano movement's focus on masculine heroes, uniformity, and an uncritical glorification of the past. She, like Moraga, attributes the motivation for the Chicano Movement's masculinist recovery to a "legitimate" need "to offset the extreme devaluation of it by the white culture" (22). Despite this empathy, she asserts that she "will not glorify those [misogynist] aspects of my culture" (22). Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez usefully contrasts Anzaldúa's use of myth with that of Momaday, "who wholeheartedly embraces Kiowa heritage. […] For Anzaldúa, the process of remembering is inseparable from the process of selection: she must pick and choose from among the cultural models she has inherited in order to reconstruct her own identity"

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[168] See Gutiérrez's "Community, Patriarchy, and Individualism" for more on the contributions of Chicanas to the Chicano Movement.

[169] Even though *Borderlands/La Frontera* did not appear until after many other works by Chicana authors, I focus on Anzaldúa because her work "has had the largest cultural impact" in its attempt to displace "Aztlán from the center of Chicana/o studies" (Sadowski-Smith 28). Additionally, Anzaldúa reveals that much of *Borderlands/La Frontera* has its roots in the mid-1970s (Torres interview 135), so it is indicative of the revisionary impulse that immediately followed and accompanied the Chicano Movement.

(45). Not only must she select; she must recover and revise. Such a compound methodology suggests the complexity of Anzaldúa's mythic project, which works to provide a model of the "new mestiza" for her Chicana readers, encourages her Chicano readers to make room in their narratives for these new mestizas, and offers her white readers an "invitation" to meet her "halfway" ("Preface" n.p.). In order to forge a symbolic model of Chicana identity, she revises the myths circulating in Anglo American society while remaking the monologic myth of Aztlán, which she refigures into the borderlands – a fluid space of multiple origins, peoples, traditions, and languages.[170]

Several critics have identified Anzaldúa's trope of the border as a retooling of the Aztlán narrative. For example, Alfred Arteaga argues that whereas the Aztlán myth "fosters the essentialist argument that Chicanos have more valuable presence in Aztlán than do Anglos in the Americas because Chicanos are more Indian," the borderlands concept "works against the tendency to define the nation, for it emphasizes an overlap between nation states where the sharp distinctions are both contested and ambiguous" (*Chicano* 14-15). As has been often recognized, hybridity discourse pervades *Borderlands/La Frontera* and exists on multiple levels: as geographic place; as linguistic faculty; as mythic heritage; and as personal identity. Anzaldúa's sense of hybridity is multiple, not dual – à la Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales' characterization of Joaquín as both "Aztec prince and Christian Christ" ("I Am Joaquín" in *Message* 29). Hers does not lend

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[170] Even though Aztlán was often portrayed simplistically to insist on a monolithic Chicano identity, Daniel Cooper Alarcón argues that the myth is inherently ripe for hybrid interpretations. In fact, most Chicanos during the 1960s were not even familiar with the "authentic" narratives about Aztlán, which are actually "complex," "intertextual," and multidimensional" (4-8).

itself to a simplistic reversal of colonizer and colonized in an attempt to undermine conventional power relations.[171]

In Anzaldúa's rendering, Aztlán is no longer a monolithic myth of Chicano origins but an amalgamation of international sources. In keeping with the tradition of Power literature, Anzaldúa identifies her place of origin by titling the first chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, "The Homeland, Aztlán." After two epigraphs, this chapter begins with an untitled poem that creatively presents much of the theorizing of the borderlands that is to follow. The speaking subject is situated "at the edge where earth touches ocean / where the two overlap / a gentle coming together / at other times and places a violent crash" (1). This locale introduces the borderlands as an ambiguous place, both gentle and violent. Already the Chicano Movement's origins are revised from a stable homeland to a stratified region constantly in flux. Because the liminal border is the permanent place of residence for Chicana/os, and not a temporary or extraordinary place, Anzaldúa likewise departs from Victor Turner's understanding of liminality as a temporary phase of transition, exterior to "the structural realm" (110). While Anzaldúa agrees that life in the borderlands is "betwixt and between" (Turner 110), it is also what permanently grounds daily life. A monolithic origin story is manifested plural, yet it remains a story of origins.

[171] Even though she grew up on the border between Mexico and Texas, for example, she describes her cultural and racial identity as at least fourfold: Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo-American, the last two of which are themselves twofold categories. Likewise, her languages, all eight of which are both discussed and used within the body of the text, include "Standard English, Working class and slang English, Standard Spanish, Standard Mexican Spanish, North Mexican Spanish dialect, Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California have regional variations), Tex-Mex, Pachuco (called caló)" (55). Of this multilingual usage, Alvina E. Quintana comments that Anzaldúa forces her non-Spanish speaking readers to "experience alienation and the pain of exclusion" (138). Arteaga describes such code-switching as working out "linguistically with thought what the border does culturally with the nation and what mestijaze does racially with the body" ("Other" 10).

Whereas the myth of Aztlán relied primarily on Aztec narratives, Anzaldúa's borderlands encompasses myths from multiple traditions. The first non-Aztec mythic reference is to Jesus' resurrection: "*Miro el mar atacar* [I watch the sea attack] / *la cerca en* [the fence at] Border Field Park / *con sus buchones de agua* [with its bursts of water], / an Easter Sunday resurrection / of the brown blood in my veins" (2).[172] Christ's rise from death is translated into the speaker's own blood rising, as if inspired by the sea that is "gashing a hole under the border fence" (1). In such a way, she invokes a powerful myth both in Euro-American and Chicana/o Christian religions to expose the violence brought about by artificial barriers. She then describes the "1,950 mile-long" border as an "open wound," what she will refer to in the prose section that follows the poem as "*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (3). Anzaldúa employs both Spanish and English to underscore the importance of this celebrated concept of the "open wound," in which the earth is embodied and the Chicana body is figured as an imbrication of multiple racial and mythic sources. In the poem, she describes the wound as "dividing a *pueblo* [a people, a town], a culture, / running down the length of my body, / staking fence rods in my flesh, / splits me   splits me" (2).[173] Just as this language of wounding undermines the dominant national discourse that relies on clearly defined borders between nations and races, it likewise disturbs romantic conceptions of Aztlán as a unified place of Indian origin. For Anzaldúa, the reference to blood does not evoke a biological connection to Aztec ancestors but instead the violent encounters that occur daily at the border between nations, between people, and, ultimately, within one's own hybrid self.

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[172] I have not been able to verify the translation of "bursts" for "buchones." I asked a Mexican colleague, and he described "buchones de agua" as the eruption of a bubbly burst of water.
[173] This spacing is consistent with that in Anzaldúa's text.

To this point in the poem, Anzaldúa has described Aztlán as fragmented by imperialist boundaries, mixed races, and multiple mythic traditions. The tone of the poem then turns: "But the skin of the earth is seamless. / The sea cannot be fenced, / *el mar* does not stop at borders. / To show the white man what she thought of his / arrogance, / *Yemaya* blew that wire fence down" (3). That which is natural, the earth and the sea, is coherent and defies colonizing impositions. This feminine force is personified by Yemaya, a Yoruban orisha, or goddess, of the ocean. Here, Anzaldúa does not (yet) draw on Aztec deities to contest the United States' immigration policies and Chicano preconceptions about Aztlán. Instead, she calls on a goddess from West Africa; in so doing, she revises not only the myth of Aztlán but also the monolithic identity of Chicanos that has been formed in its stead. In the final lines of the poem, the speaker, inspired by the Virgin of Guadalupe, accepts that she is a "*mexicana de este lade* [mexicana of this side]" (3). The mythic means by which she stakes a claim on the border and embraces her hybrid identity as a "puente [bridge]" (3) between the United States and Mexico is not an Aztec deity but a syncretic figure of Spanish and Indian origins.[174] However, to appreciate the full extent of the Virgin's revisionary potential, the reader must continue into the heart of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where Anzaldúa recovers the history of this mythic figure in order to reveal how she has customarily been evoked in support of patriarchal norms.[175]

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[174] See Chapter One for more on syncretism. Anzaldúa's syncretism departs from that of the authors discussed there because her fusion is meant to highlight the multiplicity of mythic sources not to subsume one under the other.

[175] By supplementing her revision with recovery, Anzaldúa additionally exposes the revisions already undertaken by patriarchal Chicano mythmaking, which itself selected certain myths and certain gods to recover in the first place – even if such a process was not recognized.

Feminist myth theorist Wendy Doniger claims that patriarchy and misogyny are societal mechanisms that precede and so enter myths; we cannot point to myths themselves as disinterested narratives responsible for sexist cultures (119). For this reason, historical discourse becomes essential to myth's liberating use-value so as to recognize how misogyny manifests in myth and is normalized. By "historical discourse," I am relying on Ricoeur's definition of history as referring "back to first-order entities – peoples, nations, civilizations – that bear the indelible mark of concrete agents' participatory belongings to the sphere of praxis and narrative" (Vol. 1 181). For Ricoeur, history is categorically different from creative literature because it is grounded by its recourse to the archive. Even if those archives are themselves constructed, the historian's impulse and responsibility to submit to the archive makes history, if not more truthful than fiction, at least a different kind of truth. Furthering Ricoeur's argument, Dominick LaCapra adds that the archive must always "be open to interrogation about the manner and motivations according to which it was put together and used or abused over time" (*History* 25). Yet he also insists, "The 'happening' of the past does not exist only in the telling or the (historian's) text. If it did, there would be no referential dimension to historiography. It would be self-referential, formalistic fiction" (29).

To contextualize her creative writing within a referential and characteristically empirical knowledge, Anzaldúa provides extensive historical information complete with footnotes about the origins of her people.[176] She recounts the Aztec migrations, Cortez's invasion, the wars between Texas, Mexico, and the United States, up through the

[176] Because much of the detail of pre-colonial life have been lost, of course, some of Anzaldúa's history cannot be substantiated. For this reason, she has been criticized for "compress[ing] and distort[ing] Mexican history" (Yarbro-Bejarano 14). As if commenting on the inherently vexed task of writing pre-colonial history, Anzaldúa's footnotes are sometimes more enigmatic than explicatory.

twentieth-century "return to the place of origin" that constitutes immigration, both legal and illegal, into the United States (4-11). Integrated within her recovered history are personal and fictional vignettes and poems that tell of the horrors of immigration, making politically contingent what could otherwise be construed as a nostalgic search for roots.[177] In other words, the specific historical experiences documented by what exists of the recovered archive are made relevant in a present moment in which Chicano/as remain subjugated by US immigration policies and exploited by inequitable systems of labor.

In addition to revising the traditional myth of Aztlán by framing it within historical discourse, Anzaldúa juxtaposes her revised narrative against Euro-American mythic language of manifest destiny and Christian redemption. In poetic form, she quotes early nineteenth century Texan politician and colonist William H. Wharton's speech that seeks to justify American imperialism in Texas: "The justice and benevolence of God / will forbid that […] Texas should again / become a howling wilderness / trod only by savages. […] The Anglo-American race are destined / to be forever the proprietors of / this land of promise and fulfillment. […] The wilderness of Texas has been redeemed / by Anglo-American blood and enterprise" (7). Wharton's palpable ethnocentric discourse in combination with his appeal to a Christian God puts the lie to his colonialist project, which can only be justified if the land colonized is solely inhabited by absence, that is "savages."

By positioning a long and complex history of Chicano migration adjacent to political rhetoric so heavily infused with Anglo American mythic language that has construed such migrations as heathen invasions, Anzaldúa demonstrates the constructed

[177] Sonia Saldívar-Hull likewise argues that "[t]he 'lost land' [Anzaldúa] rediscovers or uncovers is always grounded in a specific material history of what was once northern Mexico" ("Introduction" 2).

quality of dominant mythologies; what circulates as "natural" is more accurately historical.[178] Despite myth's reputation as an ideological narrative of the dominant class, Anzaldúa's revision of Aztlán through the historical indicates that how a myth is employed actually determines its political function. In other words, putting myth in the context of history exposes the source of its ideology. For this reason, Doniger understands myths as "prepolitical" (101): once a myth is recounted, its historical and political context is evoked, and it cannot be critiqued exclusive of that context.[179] Whereas Power literature disregards such context in order to make of myth a normative narrative ripe for unmediated nostalgia, Anzaldúa incorporates historical context to deny myth universalist authority while retaining its political efficacy.

Like authors of Power literature, Anzaldúa believes in the psychological and revolutionary benefits of myth: "I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become" (71). She even provides narrative space for the Chicano Movement's favored god, Huitzilopochtli (5). Yet in order to make her Aztec roots politically effective, she recovers the historical context that made Huitzilopochtli the dominant god in the first place. Because the Aztecs were an imperialist population, they adopted Huitzilopochtli as their patron so as to justify their conquering of other peoples (Taube 50). In so doing, they rejected what Anzaldúa identifies as the feminine mythic component of other Mesoamerican tribes. At the peak of the Aztecs' civilization on the eve of Cortez's arrival, they were already functioning according to a "patriarchal order" that had "vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-Columbian America" (5).

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[178] See the introduction for a discussion of how many myth theorists, most prominently Roland Barthes, argues that myths naturalize what is actually historically specific.
[179] Laurie L. Patton disagrees, arguing that myths are always political. How myths are experienced determines if they are politically radical or conservative, or both simultaneously.

Here, not only does Anzaldúa pardon European patriarchal influences, but she also departs from the passive glorification of Aztec roots. By using historical discourse to bring to light a previous origin moment overlooked by the Chicano Movement, Anzaldúa reveals how the uncritical veneration of Aztec mythology has led to the simultaneous demonization and romanticization of women through the "*virgen*/*puta* (whore) dichotomy" (31).

To make Chicano mythology work toward feminist political ends, Anzaldúa traces the Virgin of Guadalupe to these pre-Aztec mythic roots.[180] Like Power literature's claims to indigeneity, Anzaldúa's recovered goddesses thrive on an authority built on primacy. Anthropologist and historian Karl Taube explains that the belief system of the pre-Aztec Nahua Indians recognized the complementarity of "opposition and conflict" (31), which was embodied in the one "creator god, Ometeotl, God of Duality, who [possessed] both the male and female creative principles" (31).[181] Anzaldúa adds that before "the Aztecs became a militaristic, bureaucratic state where male predatory warfare and conquest were based on patrilineal nobility, the principle of balanced opposition between the sexes existed" (31). Here, Anzaldúa provides a footnote arguing that Lévi-Strauss' structuralist understanding of human belief systems does not apply to the original Aztecs' conflation of masculine and feminine power in a single deity (94, fn. 19). The binary terms, then, cannot just be reversed but are exposed as intricately related:

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[180] Related to Anzaldúa's complication of the Virgin of Guadalupe is her similar contextualization of such familiar figures as La Llorona, a haunting woman of Mexican and Chicana/o folklore, and Malintzin, the historical woman who was Cortés' translator and mistress. See Norma Alarcón's "Traddutora, Traditora" for a discussion of the way the Virgin of Guadalupe and Malintzin "have become a function of each other" (61) in Mexican and Chicano/a popular consciousness. *Goddess of the Americas*, edited by Ana Castillo, and Tey Diana Rebolledo's influential *Women Singing in the Snow*, especially pages 50-81, are also useful resources on the female mythic figures in the Chicana/o tradition.

[181] Because there are multiple sources documenting Aztec mythology in multiple languages and with differing agendas, the details and names vary greatly.

a composite. Preceding this history lesson, Anzaldúa quotes a speech of Huitzilopochtli, who characteristically asserts, "Waging war is my duty" (31). After providing the reader with a mythic figure typically cited by Power literature, Anzaldúa reveals that Huitzilopochtli only arose to power at the expense of the dual god Ometeotl and his/her male and female aspects.

Determined to recover the feminine aspect mainly ignored during the Aztecs' rise to power as well as during the Chicano Movement, Anzaldúa introduces the related goddesses Tonantsi, Cihuacoatl, Coatlalopeuh, and Coatlicue, the last of whom "had a human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feat" (27). By evoking this grotesque goddess, the mother of Huitzilopochtli, Anzaldúa restores the feminine component of Aztec deism, one that does not fit so readily into the virgin/whore binary. When the Aztecs rose to power, they standardized that detrimental binary by splitting the horrific and beneficent goddess into two versions: Coatlicue remained "dark" while Tonantsi became a "good mother" (27). It was "on the spot where the Aztec goddess, *Tonantsi* ('Our Lady Mother'), had been worshipped by the Nahuas," a group of indigenous Mesoamerican tribes, including the Aztecs, that the Virgin of Guadalupe first appeared to Juan Diego (28).[182] According to this historical reconstruction, the Virgin of Guadalupe is figured not as a Mexican version of the Virgin Mary and not as a reincarnation of a warrior god but as a syncretic revision of a very ancient goddess indigenous to the land itself.

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[182] Anzaldúa explains that the Spanish identified her as the Virgin of Guadalupe because "*Coatlalopeuh* [another name for Tonantsi] was homophonous to the Spanish *Guadalupe*," who was the "patroness of West Central Spain" (29). For more on the Virgin of Guadalupe's appearance, see Chapter 12, "The Goddess" of B. Marie Christian's *Belief in Dialogue*.

Because of the Virgin's complex history and mythology, she acts as Anzaldúa's "symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity" (30). Ambiguity is therefore embedded in Anzaldúa's very delineation of ethnicity, a category that conventionally resists blurred boundaries. For example, Hortense Spillers characterizes the ethnicity proposed by the infamous Moynihan Report of 1965 as a term that "freezes all meaning, takes on constancy, assumes the look and the affects of the Eternal" ("Mama's" 259). Anzaldúa's composite model of ethnicity acts as the defense against a monolithic version of the Virgin who for so long "has been used by the Church to mete out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and *mexicanos* and Chicanos" (31) through alluring syncretism, which, inevitably, downplays Indian roots as a nostalgic heritage of the past and emphasizes Christian discourse as exclusively relevant. For Anzaldúa, her Indian heritage is presently meaningful; she explicitly says, "Before the Chicano and the undocumented worker and the Mexican from the other side can come together, before the Chicano can have unity with Native Americans and other groups, we need to know the history of their struggle and they need to know ours" (86).[183] At the end of the poem that introduces the collection, Anzaldúa finds strength in the Virgin because, once historical and mythic knowledge of her is restored, she becomes restorative to the new mestiza – and to everyone else.

Recovered myths, which, according to Anzaldúa, exist as archetypes within the psyche, can reconcile an identity split by racism, sexism, homophobia, and imperialism. To better understand Anzaldúa's hybrid conception of identity and therapeutic understanding of myth, it is helpful to turn to Jung as well as Jungian psychoanalyst

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[183] At times, Anzaldúa does rely on stereotypes of Indians, for example when she claims that, "There is the quiet of the Indian about us [Chicanos]" (63).

James Hillman, both of whom she cites in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and the latter of whom she claims is "instrumental in the development of [her] thought" (95, fn. 6). Jung, whose theories about the collective unconscious resonated strongly with Power literature, fuels Anzaldúa's belief in the psychic recuperation offered by myths, especially those gendered female. In his attempt to reintroduce theology into psychology, Hillman argues that moderns are mentally unwell because we are dissociated from mythic archetypes, "the roots of the soul governing the perspectives we have of ourselves and the world" (Hillman xiii). Hillman is especially interested in the feminine components of these "roots" and argues that the psyche is more structured by "the polytheistic feminine" (21).[184] For Anzaldúa and for Hillman, by accessing the feminine component of each one of our psyches, we can rebel against "dominant paradigms" (Anzaldúa 16). These difficult processes of recovering myths and recovering a coherent sense of self and community, as they are for Power literature, are one and the same.

Anzaldúa dubs the psychological torment experienced by acknowledging one's own hybrid identity "the Coatlicue state." Because of the constraints of a patriarchal symbolic order, the process by which we become aware of the multiple archetypes within each of us necessitates a fragmentation of the self: "[T]hings fall apart as the one becomes many" (Hillman 35). Through this transformative attainment of mythic knowledge, the narrator develops a more complete, and therefore plural, identity. Because this process is accompanied by "paralysis, depression" for fear of "falling apart"

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[184] Associated with this feminine component of the psyche is Hillman's understanding of the shadow, which is "a concealed counterpersonality" that we keep in the dark because of the dangers it poses to society (22). In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, this figure appears often, representing for Anzaldúa a stubborn component of identity, often feminine, that repudiates modern science's attempts to theorize human beings as contained and unified. See Annamarie Jagose for more on the psychoanalytic functioning of the shadow-beast (148).

(48), Anzaldúa departs from postmodern convention (if there is such a thing); she does not glorify or romanticize the plurality of an identity in the borderlands, although she has been misunderstood on this point by some critics. She acknowledges that her multiple selves do provide her with more ingenuity, which she calls "*la facultad*," but she also mourns the attending "psychic restlessness" (78) of such a split life.[185] AnaLouise Keating, for example, contrasts Hélène Cixous' "highly celebratory version of writing the body" with Anzaldúa's, which "combines affirmation with the recognition of intense physical and psychic pain" (125). Once this pain is experienced and managed, however, the center holds: "All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. *Completa*. [Complete]" (*Borderlands* 51).

Though Anzaldúa here seems to be recalling such modernist plotlines as those enacted in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, in which Abel recovers innate archetypes in order to recover himself, she further revises such a structure as well as Hillman's and Jung's theories by asserting that her writings can, in fact, revise what they perceive as ahistorical, and therefore noncontingent, archetypes. She explains, "Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (87). To enact change, Anzaldúa not only revises myths conveyed through cultural productions but also as they have been solidified within our own psyches. Accordingly, Anzaldúa's archetypes, no longer static structures innate to human cognition, cede to the influence of recorded history and personal experience. If institutional sexism develops into masculinist archetypes, then revision of these archetypes via creative writing, historical discourse,

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[185] Anzaldúa's "*facultad*" can be read as analogous to hooks' aforementioned "special vantage point."

and a focus on female mythic figures, in turn, can lead to feminist liberation.[186] Such a project of accessing these revised archetypes is not only applicable for Chicanas or even for minorities. Anzaldúa recommends that Euro-Americans also recognize the myths indigenous to their own land instead of looking to Greece for mythic sustenance: "Whites, along with a good number of our own people, have cut themselves off from their spiritual roots. […] Let's all stop importing Greek myths and the Western Cartesian split point of view and root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent" (68).

Because she employs historical discourse to unearth the founding dualistic mythic tradition of pre-Aztec society, Anzaldúa still depends on concepts of origins. She criticizes her Aztec ancestors because their myths, like those of the Chicano Movement, were unfaithful to these origins. As such, Anzaldúa can, like the male authors of the Power movement, be understood as an essentialist, as looking toward a stable origin to determine identity configurations applicable across time and space. However such a label seems inconsistent with her hybrid, unfixed model of identity, fashioned after a sexually dual deific figure. The general appeal of the borderlands in the academy appears to be that it so readily corresponds with poststructuralist notions of the self as a fragmented, discursively constructed being. However, Anzaldúa is suspicious of such a reception. Like other minority critics, she points out the alarming simultaneity of poststructuralist destabilizations of the self and the rise of minorities' and women's theorization of subjectivity: "Now that marginal people are finally getting to a space where we can say, 'I am creating my subjectivity. I am taking center stage,' all of a

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[186] My argument is somewhat in line with that of Erika Aigner-Varoz who argues that Anzaldúa attempts to influence her own and her readers' unconscious by "reappropriating and subverting the serpent metaphors within *Borderlands*" (49).

sudden they say, 'The subject – there is no such thing" (Torres interview 132).[187] While white postmodernists tend to approach border life as an analogue for their own cosmopolitan identities, the reality, Anzaldúa reveals, is not the refuge some make it out to be: "The border can be symbol and rendered poetic, but it is always a site of real world politics. It is not simply a metaphor" (Arteaga *Chicano* 8). For Anzaldúa, residing in the borderlands does not equate with the fragmentation of self, but rather to the acknowledgment of many selves within the self. As she provocatively asks, "Who says you have to be fixed, anchored, and solid to have subjectivity?" (Torres interview 132). Her conception of identity is not postmodern because, though it is multiple, it remains a coherent model.[188]

On the other side of this questionable reception in the academy are frequent accusations of essentialism, many by Chicano/a scholars. Norma Alarcón reveals that such charges often "are made at conferences, or muttered in classrooms and academic hallways" ("Conjugating" 129). These criticisms mostly center around Anzaldúa's "reference to the 'Indian woman' and the privileging of the pre-Columbian deity

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[187] She also points out that "minor literatures," which had long been representing identity as "multiple, moving, movable," preceded poststructuralism (Torres interview 131-132). I will return to this seeming theoretical impasse between post-structuralist deconstructions of identity and the positivist delineations of identity politics faced by critics of minority studies in Chapter Four. Numerous scholars in addition to Anzaldúa have called attention to the impasse. For example, see Jace Weaver's *Other Words*, in which he makes a similar point: "It is no coincidence that just as the peoples of the Two-Thirds world [the colonized] began to find their voices and assert their own agency and subjectivity, postmodernism proclaimed the end of subjectivity" (294). Stuart Hall likewise describes himself as a migrant who, in the age of poststructuralism finds himself "centered at last. Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centered. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be *the* representative modern experience!" (114). Barbara Christian reiterates their concerns about the simultaneity of postmodernism and minority theories of identity (43), as does social scientist Patricia Hill Collins (130, 145).

[188] Elsewhere, Anzaldúa references the Hindu god Shiva and the image of the spider to reconcile multiplicity with coherence and to reside comfortably in ambivalence: "You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web" ("La Prieta" 205). Like Walt Whitman, she may also be challenging: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . . I contain multitudes" (85).

Coatlicue" (Yarbro-Bejarano 12). Perhaps due to the success Anzaldúa has experienced in mainstream literary studies as the originator of "border studies," few critics have been willing to publish their accusations. Yet they persist, so much so that Saldívar-Hull, for one, has attempted to save her from the charge: "Though the text often has been dismissed as indulging in a quest for lost origins […], I propose that even in its most mystical, spiritual moments, the text circles back to a political consciousness with a specific political agenda that identifies not with the patriarchal nation-state Aztlán but with the feminist state, Coatlicue" (*Feminism* 64). However, if her strategy is just to replace one state with another, then it can still be construed as essentialist.

One of the few critics to publish her indictments of Anzaldúa, Josefina Saldaña-Portillo makes the insightful argument that when the Chicano Movement attempted to forge an ancestral tie to the Aztecs, they inevitably recuperated "the Indian as an ancestral past rather than recognizing contemporary Indians" (413). While she does acknowledge Anzaldúa's attempt to complicate such a genetic bond through her representation of the border as "not a plausible end of history, but a 'constant state of transition'" (414), for Saldaña-Portillo, Anzaldúa's evocation of pre-Aztec Indians ends up overshadowing "a political tie with contemporary U.S. Native Americans or Mexican Indians" (415). In other words, when Anzaldúa "resuscitates" female goddesses, she ends up excluding "contemporary indigenous subjectivity and practices on both sides of the border" (416) and so falls into the same nostalgic trap of her predecessors.[189] What Saldaña-Portillo and other critics at conferences and in classrooms are reacting to, it seems, is the disquieting correspondences between Anzaldúa's recovery of Aztec

[189] Contreras also makes the compelling argument that Anzaldúa's mythic recovery partakes in imperialist narratives of archeology and art history (130).

goddesses and the Chicano Movement's recovery of Aztlán and Huitzilopochtli, despite Anzaldúa's concurrent and historically informed revision of Aztlán into the borderlands. Ultimately, relying on the tools of "the founding Chicano fathers who enlisted mythical figures to consolidate cultural identity and pride" (Pérez-Torres 54) raises alarm, for anything that approaches essentialism can easily lend itself to ethnocentric ends. Yet if we reduce Anzaldúa's new mestiza to a metaphor, then the "legal history of the racialization of the pre-Columbian subject" might be silenced in the process (N. Alarcón "Conjugating" 130). In other words, if her borderlands concept is read figuratively as representative of cosmopolitan identity, then it can too easily become an elitist model co-opted by alienated (post)moderns, what Caren Kaplan might call "a form of theoretical tourism on the part of the first world critic, where the margin becomes a linguistic or critical vacation, a new poetics of the exotic" (361) instead of a tool to liberate a specific population of people.

Despite nostalgia's resistance to historical context and change, Anzaldúa's frequent evocation of historical discourse and contemporary political contexts at least destabilizes her essentialism, if not completely dismantling it. As Craig S. Womack puts it, "'Not all essentialisms are created equal.' Some of them are useful" ("Theorizing" 359). Those essentialisms Womack finds most germane are theories and aspirations of identity that recognize the plural origins and traditions of a people who are yet brought together by shared narratives, histories, and experiences. Given her efforts to revise and historicize the undeniably essentialist claims of Power literature, then, Anzaldúa's essentialism can be understood as conditional. Her willingness to defend an essential Chicano identity when attacked and to attack it when it manifests in patriarchal or

homophobic ways can be understood as a version of Spivak's strategic essentialism, a temporary affirmation and solidification of communal identity for the sake of political recognition and social protest (*In Other Worlds* 205).

Linda Alcoff has criticized the admittedly contentious concept of strategic essentialism as manifesting "a certain theoretical incoherence between one's political practice and one's theoretical commitments" (323).[190] Despite this critique, numerous minority thinkers have depended on such a paradoxical methodology. For example, Patricia Hill Collins argues that "Black essentialism may be the best defense against White essentialism. While intellectuals in academia deconstruct everything, including their own leftist politics, little remains on which to construct a new politics capable of responding to unemployment, police brutality, teen violence, adolescent childbearing, AIDS, and other social issues of pressing concern to African-Americans" (182). Alice Walker somewhat similarly describes a womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color" who is "not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist" (xi). Walker's appeal to periodic separatism juxtaposed with her purposely elusive fragment, "traditionally universalist," suggests the self-reflexivity and complexity of such

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[190] Alcoff adds that strategic essentialism is elitist because it "operates to divide the 'knowing' theorists who deploy identity strategically and the 'unknowing' activists who continue to believe in identity" (323). While I accept Alcoff's exposure of the seeming contradictions of "strategic essentialism," which Spivak too rethinks in her 1989 interview with Ellen Rooney in *differences*, reprinted in *The Essential Difference*, I disagree with her claim that it is elitist. I do not think that Spivak was arguing that activists are ignorant of their strategic use of identity, but rather that certain political conditions require certain manifestations and deployments of concepts of identity. I instead agree with Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's model of "speaking in tongues": "Black women writers enter into testimonial [familial] discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into competitive [public] discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women. […] It is the complexity of these simultaneously homogeneous and heterogeneous social and discursive domains out of which black women write and construct themselves (as blacks and women and often, as poor, black women) that enables these women writers authoritatively to speak to and engage both hegemonic and ambiguously (non)hegemonic discourse" (122-124). See Chapter Four for more on the tensions between essentialism and deconstruction in the formation of minority identity and discourse.

a strategic stance. The self-consciousness and adaptability required to embrace an identity that is both separatist and universalist, both ethnic and Everywoman, evinces a theoretical perspective that attends to the conflicted need to recover what has been neglected and revise what has been retained – all in the service of a universally liberating end.

Walker here deliberately adopts and revises the loaded term "universalist" to indicate the minority feminist's project of identifying the interrelatedness of oppressions. Instead of adapting universalist strategies in the ways of Power literature, Walker and other minority feminists expose the unwieldiness of power relations, that they are more complicated than the binary structures of racism and sexism that the Power movements and white feminism, respectively, reverse. Once oppression is removed from a structuralist model dependent on binaries, a new model can take hold. This self-reflexive understanding allows a minority feminist, among others, to confront sexism, racism, classism, and heteronormativity while working toward the liberation of all from the oppressions they inadvertently sustain. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa's essentialism is tempered by her appeal to historical context, which, in turn, determines the role of myth, a narrative that can and must be constantly revised in the political, the psychic, and the literary realm. When politically viable mythic narratives are embraced as historically contingent, then their liberating use-value becomes applicable not only to a racially distinct population delimited by suspect biologisms but rather to a multiracial population thinking beyond national and other imposed borders.

To Whom Do These Myths Belong? Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

Like Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) breaks from the precedent of Momaday's novel and Power literature in general through its emphasis on sacred narratives that highlight inspiring female mythic figures. However, while Anzaldúa uses the discourse of history to claim a feminine origin of the Chicano people prior to the patriarchal Aztec empire, Silko complicates the concept of origins all together by casting the boundary between mythic and historical time as permeable. Through Silko's manipulation of temporal boundaries, what occurs in our own historical lifetimes can be understood within the same context of what is constantly occurring in mythical stories. *Ceremony*'s temporality is in this way analogous to the universal present with which literary critics analyze action in novels so that the past, present, and future are always, simultaneously, occurring in the space of narrative. Such simultaneity disallows the temporal conflation and narrative progressivism emplotted by Power literature while registering and retaining the liberating use-value of mythic narratives.

In many ways indebted to *House Made of Dawn*, *Ceremony* features a distraught male Indian veteran returning to his reservation after World War II. Like Momaday's Abel, Tayo is reintegrated into his homeland via a connection with sacred narratives.[191] Suffering from nausea and traumatic memories, Tayo blames himself for the drought plaguing the Pueblos because he had cursed the rain in the Philippine jungle, where, during the Bataan Death March, he witnessed the death of his cousin Rocky. He is also haunted by the execution of a Japanese soldier who uncannily resembled his uncle

[191] Like Abel, Tayo is already alienated from his community before going to war, in part due to his biracial heritage and his mother's outsider status as a prostitute who left the reservation. As Andrew Wiget explains, "The war provided only the catalytic shock necessary to galvanize the forces working to alienate him from his land, his family, his tribe and tradition, even from his own flesh" (*Native* 86).

Josiah.[192] To bring him relief, the Laguna elders send Ku'oosh, a traditional medicine man, to perform a Scalp Ceremony. The ceremony begins to work (39) but is not enough; Tayo's only fleeting solace is in drink and storytelling with his fellow veterans. Among these friends, however, is Emo, whom the reader soon learns is allied with the evil of witchery.[193] When Tayo remains sick, Ku'oosh recommends that he visit Betonie, a Navajo medicine man of mixed heritage. After teaching Tayo about the nature of witchery and performing a syncretic ceremony, Betonie instructs him that the ceremony will only be complete when he meets a woman, returns the cattle that were stolen from his uncle Josiah, and resists Emo's witchery.[194] The woman he meets, Ts'eh, a supernatural character modeled on Laguna mythic figures, continues Betonie's lessons and points Tayo in the direction he must go to complete the ceremony. Finally, Tayo is healed and returns to Laguna to tell the elders about his quest.

In aligning her novel's plot and theme so closely with Momaday's foundational text, Silko foregrounds her work as a form of revision. As in *House Made of Dawn*, *Ceremony*'s incorporation of recovered myth functions on two levels, each commenting on the other: myth is the structuring element of the novel in that Tayo, like Abel, acts out the role of culture hero; simultaneously, mythic narratives themselves are integrated

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[192] As for Anzaldúa, the beginning of Tayo's healing is brought on by a moment of disturbing (un)familiarity that disrupts ego boundaries and indicates a need for reconciliation.
[193] Just one of the many indications that Emo is associated with witchery is his rattling of human teeth like dice (60), alluding to the Kaup'a'ta gambler (see below).
[194] Shamoon Zamir points out, "The first part of the ceremony designed by Betonie and enacted in his hut is an almost exact reenactment of the Coyote Transformation section of the male branch of the Navajo Red Antway Evilway. This section of what is a long ceremonial cure is specifically concerned with the correction of effects of witchcraft" (406). Silko's source (keeping in mind that she did not have direct, communal access to Navajo ceremony), which she cites almost verbatim, is Leland C. Wyman's *The Red Antway of the Navajo*. Zamir recognizes that "Silko acknowledges her anthropological source in *Ceremony* by naming Betonie's grandfather, the originator of the the [sic] ongoing ceremony in which Betonie and Tayo participate *Descheeny*" (407); "Deshchin'i" is the name of Wyman's source (406).

within the same space as the fictional plot.[195] The most apparent example of the latter manifestation is the story about Hummingbird and Green Bottle Fly restoring water to the people after a long drought. Reprinted in sections throughout the novel, this myth functions as the novel's backbone, a "counterpoint to the modern story of Tayo's life" (Cutchins 81).

It is also the inclusion of this clan story that led Paula Gunn Allen, author, literary critic, and fellow Laguna Pueblo Indian, to accuse Silko of inappropriately publishing stories that Allen considers tribal property. In addition to its productive manipulation of time, *Ceremony*, then, raises important questions about the suitability of myth as a literary and secular, as opposed to oral and sacred, genre. By recording traditional myths in the space of a written text and by departing from recorded versions of those myths, Silko revises the very function of myth, making it a text that not only serves a specific cultural environment and community but also one that acts as a hermeneutic metatext. Because myth, according to Ricoeur, emplots a "new quality of time" in that the audience is not surprised by and does not anticipate the ending with expectation (Vol. 1 67), its temporality within the context of a literary text exposes the conventions of narrative emplotment at work. In other words, the composite temporality of the text indicts formal conventions as human constructs – constructs that can be exploited by the creative impulse for politically engaged ends.

Tayo's recovery, and the implied recovery of the Laguna people as a result, hinges on *Ceremony*'s incorporation of female-centered myths. Gregory Salyer notices that as "women begin to appear more frequently and with greater importance, the rhythm

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[195] See James Ruppert (91) and Robert Dale Parker (130), both of whom argue that Tayo acts as a culture hero.

of the novel changes. […] The ceremony has begun" (46). Because Silko's protagonist is male, it is perhaps surprising that so much of the recovered myth in the novel is driven by its feminist energy. In her nonfiction, Silko is actually reluctant to profess herself a full-fledged feminist, especially because of second-wave feminism's long-standing exclusion of women of color. Silko's feminist position, then, must be qualified by her premier dedication to the Laguna worldview (Danielson "*Storyteller*" 328). For Silko, the feminism of the myths is, as for Anzaldúa, native to the culture itself, antedating contact with Europeans, because Laguna society is traditionally matriarchal. If such is the case, there is no need to adopt a calculated feminist political stance: "Because the Creator is female, there is no stigma on being female" ("Yellow Woman" 66). When Kim Barnes asked Silko if myths about Yellow Woman have "arisen from the need for escape on the part of women from a kind of social and sexual dominance," Silko rejects such a universalizing interpretation: "The need for that kind of escape is the need of a woman in middle-America, a white Anglo, the WASP woman" (57). Her feminism is more in line with the culturally specific Native feminism that thrives off of cross-cultural comparisons with other women of color.

Despite Silko's remonstrations, the Laguna matrilineal system has been corrupted through the patriarchy of colonialism (Moss 9).[196] For this reason, Silko attributes the rise of Pueblo misogyny to the influence of Christianity: "In the old Pueblo worldview, we are all a mixture of male and female, and this sexual identity is changing constantly. Sexual inhibition did not begin until the Christian missionaries arrived ("Yellow

[196] Additionally, many of the traditional stories collected by ethnographers were solely narrated by men. Because white anthropologists assumed that men were the authoritative storytellers, many of the stories were lost and/or skewed, either by the men recounting the stories or by the ethnographers attempting to make them more familiar to a white, Christian audience.

Woman" 67).[197] Like Anzaldúa, the matriarchal origins of Silko's people are figured not as woman-centric but rather as encompassing a complex relationship wherein no single gender is normalized. As if to counter the stigma transferred from patriarchal missionizing, Silko presents her complex, heroic women characters as mythic incarnations, endowed with sacred authority. Both Night Swan, first Josiah's lover and then Tayo's before he goes to war, and Ts'eh, the mysterious mountain woman with whom he falls in love, act as Tayo's spiritual guides, "working for rain, healing, fertility, and Tayo's restoration" (Wiget *Native* 88).

To recognize the divine status of these characters, the reader must frame them within the context of *Ceremony*'s embedded traditional myths that emphasize Laguna's matrifocal theology. In other words, Silko provides the sacred narratives necessary for non-Laguna readers to interpret her fictional characters according to their mythic significance. The novel begins with the origin story of the Pueblo people: "Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman, / is sitting in her room / and whatever she thinks about / appears" (1).[198] Correlating the female body with the narrative tradition, Thought-Woman creates the world both corporeally and discursively. "The supreme Spirit" who "is both Mother and Father to all people and to all creatures" (Allen *Sacred* 15), Thought-Woman is in some ways analogous to Anzaldúa's dual creator deity, Ometeotl.[199] Both

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[197] Even more forthright about Laguna's current problems, Paula Gunn Allen tells stories of the abuse that women experience daily on the reservations and reveals that patriarchal attitudes have permeated the minds of American Indian men, who "have benefited in certain ways from white male-centeredness" (*Sacred* 224).

[198] For similar versions gathered as ethnography, see Franz Boas' *Keresan Texts*.

[199] Thought-Woman is also known as Grandmother Spider or Spider Old Woman, who "spins the world from her body [and] creates things by thinking of them" (Jaskoski 25). Allen adds, "Contemporary Indian tales suggest that the creatures are born from the mating of sky father and earth mother, but that seems to be a recent interpolation of the original sacred texts" (*Sacred* 15). In this way, she in some ways seems to be echoing Sam Gill's controversial *Mother Earth*, discussed in Chapter Two, which contends that the

mythic figures emphasize the androgynous – and therefore universal – quality of the creator god in order to disallow the artificial elevation of one half of the population over the other.

Similarly, Corn and Reed Woman, sisters and goddesses of the Earth, act as informative analogues to *Ceremony*'s female characters. Their myth, the clan story that serves as the novel's backbone, first appears when Tayo remembers hearing "his own voice praying against the rain" (12). This perverse prayer (traditional Laguna prayers are *for* rain) is immediately followed by the myth, center-formatted in a poetic mode, in which Corn Woman becomes angry at Reed Woman for bathing all day, wasting precious time and water. In response, Reed Woman abandons the earth, which leads to a drought (13). The rest of the mythic narrative, over the course of the novel, charts the people's attempts to entreat Reed Woman to relieve the drought. As such, this traditional story acts as a metafictional interpretation of Tayo's journey to atone for his prayer against the rain and relieve his community's drought – both literal and spiritual. In other words, we are to understand Tayo's present-time experiences and engagement with Ts'eh and Night Swan as determined by as well as inspiring the telling of this myth.

A third female mythic figure evoked in *Ceremony*, though never explicitly named, is Yellow Woman. As Louis Owens has recognized, the female characters who contribute so much to Tayo's healing are closely related to Yellow Woman (187), whom Silko describes as her "favorite because she dares to cross traditional boundaries of ordinary behavior during times of crisis and in order to save the Pueblo; her power lies in her courage and in her uninhibited sexuality" ("Yellow Woman" 70). For this reason, the

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relegation of the feminine godly component to the earth was a product of Indian religions' complicated relationship with Christianity.

women who play significant roles in Tayo's healing are not only portrayed in supernatural terms but are highly sexualized. Silko clearly indicates Night Swan and Ts'eh's deific qualities by portraying Night Swan as ageless (98) and by linking both her and Ts'eh closely with the earth (99, 222). Like Reed Woman, Ts'eh is credited with affecting the seasons, for example when she folds up her storm blanket to stop the snow (208) and when she digs out a plant "the color of the sky after a summer rainstorm" to take it "where it hasn't rained for a while" (224). Ts'eh, who wears men's clothing (177), is also repeatedly associated with the androgynous Thought-Woman, or Ts'its'tse'nako, especially by her name; she tells Tayo that "Ts'eh" is her nickname because her "Indian name is so long" (223).[200] Ts'eh's role is confirmed as supernatural when Tayo tells his story to the Laguna elders, who interpret her as a goddess (257). Just before this moment, as Tayo returns to the reservation, the narrator reveals, "He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there" (255). The referents of the female pronouns here are deliberately absent, potentially referring to Ts'eh, to Night Swan, to a deity, and to his biological mother. They are all related and all applicable; his healing, like that of Anzaldúa, is intimately associated with his recovery of femininity in general.

Night Swan and Ts'eh, incarnations of Thought Woman, Reed Woman, and Yellow Woman all, impart to Tayo important advice that prophecies and confirms the workings of Betonie's ceremony. Both advise Tayo to "remember" (100, 231) because, according to Ts'eh, those who want to destroy the earth "work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten" (229). Both women, then, stress the importance of

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[200] Critics have also pointed out the proximity of Ts'eh's name to that of Mount Taylor, Tse'pina, which Silko translates as "Woman Veiled in Rain Clouds" (*Ceremony* 87).

preservation. Paradoxically, however, they also endorse change as essential to survival. Night Swan, for example, explains that people fear change, which causes them to act in harmful ways (100). Modeling such a directive, Silko makes her own case for change through her alterations of traditional myths. For example, Salyer (48) and Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson and Malcolm A. Nelson (122) argue that Silko revises the Yellow Woman myth in *Ceremony* by making Tayo the wanderer and Ts'eh the abductor. Such a gender-bending modification serves as a feminist critique both of the dominant Christian mythology in the United States, which Silko interprets as stressing the virginal and pure ("Fifth World" 133), as well as of those traditionalists – like Frank Chin – who view myth as an utterance that should be enduring rather than altered. Silko's complex approach to myth, which she puts in practice and explicates through her characters' mouths, departs from the authentic recovery of Power literature and is significantly determined by her tribally specific feminism. Even so, Silko remains faithful to the traditional Pueblo worldview, in which Yellow Woman is a heroine whose very difference "makes her special adventures possible" (Allen *Sacred* 227). For Silko, myth itself makes revision possible. Her modification of traditional myths epitomizes a paradoxical methodology in which revision is embraced as an enduring legacy of origins. Yellow Woman is emblematic of such a methodology, for she is characterized by her habitual defiance of the status quo in order to maintain the survival of her people.

Betonie, the most articulate advocate for mythic change, constantly argues against the flawed belief that ceremonies "must be performed exactly as they have always been" because "long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's

claw. […] You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing" (126). While change is original to tradition, at the colonial moment, when "elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies" (126), change became deliberate. Arnold Krupat usefully points out that what makes *Ceremony* different from prior Native American literature "is that changing the traditional in the interest of sustaining the 'traditional' has become something one does self-consciously rather than unself-consciously" (*Red* 110). Krupat here identifies the self-reflexivity of *Ceremony*, the deliberate integration of hermeneutic commentary on performing mythic revisions while bringing those revisions about to strengthen tradition.

Silko's paradoxical embrace of both revision and conservation, however, is only made possible through her management of time, which, in turn, is contingent on her attention to the role of women in the Pueblo oral tradition. She explains that women "hold such an important position in temporal matters," for they are responsible for "remembering, listening, hearing the things that are said and done" (Coltelli interview 139). The feminist partiality of Silko's tradition, then, allows for her revisionary methodology, which necessitates a particular relationship between mythic and historical time. Instead of referencing history to recover and sustain the mythic, as in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, or conflating the two, as in Power literature, *Ceremony* juxtaposes histories of injustice against traditional myths, revealing how the former are determined by the latter and vice versa.

If Momaday's time is cyclical, Silko's is palimpsestic, wherein all times overlay and erupt into each other. According to Louis Owens, "mythology in *Ceremony* insists upon its actual simultaneity with and interpretation into the events of the everyday,

mundane world" (168). In *Ceremony*, Silko claims, "I was trying to reconcile Western European ideas of linear time and the older beliefs" (Coltelli interview 138). She explicates this alternate "space-time" (138) elsewhere when she describes her ancestors as believing that "there are no future times or past times; there are *always all* the times. […] The past and the future are the same because they exist only in the present of our imaginations" ("Notes" 137), or, in the literary present. As discussed in the dissertation's introduction, Paul Ricoeur describes the aporia of time as stemming from our inability to reconcile the time of the world (cosmological) with lived (phenomenological) time. For Ricoeur, narrative emplotment by way of history or literature is the only solution to this disjuncture, though it is a creative, not philosophical, one. He points out narrative's efficacy when he argues that we talk about being in time even though "the past is no longer," "the future is not yet," and "the present is not always" (Vol. 1 7). However, in the space of literature, where all that is narrated is always occurring within the body of the text, the present *is* always, and so literary narrative in particular solves the aporia in imagination, as indicated by literary scholars' procedural recourse to the literary present. Literature, which can explore "the nonlinear features of phenomenological time that historical time conceals" (Ricoeur Vol. 3 132), thereby brings myth into the realm of the historical, the experiential.

In the literary context, as opposed to the anthropological one, myth can break out of its temporal location in a pre-historical past. Not relegated to a realm so susceptible to nostalgia, it no longer requires "authentic" recovery. Situating myth in the realm of the literary emplots it according to a temporality alien to its conventional temporal framework. It is no longer ahistorical – in an other time – but framed by a literary

present – narrated, human time. Such self-reflexive temporal manipulation departs from both the progressivist temporality of dominant American mythology that situates "primitives" in an unrecoverable past and positions minority cultures as unassimilable. Simultaneously, it complicates the conflated temporality of Power literature that resuscitates origins as operational in the present.[201]

For the reader to distinguish such temporal manipulation, Silko positions Tayo as a model, his experiences serving as an analogue for our own readerly experience. To be healed, Tayo must realize the unbounded quality of time, a process akin to the disorientation of Anzaldúa's Coatlicue state, in which Tayo is bombarded by seemingly irreconcilable temporal frames. When he is sick near the beginning of the novel, he is disoriented by the sudden permeability of temporal boundaries: "Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander back and forth in time. Maybe it had always been this way and he was only seeing it for the first time" (18). This traumatic temporal experience allows him to realize the connections between people across national and cultural borders, such as when he conflates Josiah with the executed Japanese soldier (7-8) and a young Japanese American boy at the train station with Rocky (18). At these moments, a fluid experience of time imposes itself on Tayo's consciousness, and the ensuing trauma initiates his healing, preceding even the ceremonies. Betonie confirms Tayo's mistaken identities as actually not so mistaken: "Thirty thousand years ago they were no strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you

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[201] See Chapter One for more on the temporality of American mythology as well as Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other* for more on how the primitive is a temporal category (18).

saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world" (124).[202] To achieve a universally liberating and therefore healing vision, Tayo must find a way to emplot seemingly irreconcilable temporal boundaries according to a narrative that can sustain both mythic and historical time, a time of origins and a time of phenomenological experience.

Tayo's reaction is equally jarring when he enters Betonie's home, at which point he feels "dizzy and sick" (120). It is filled with "paraphernalia" representing traditional tools of the medicine man as well as "junk" representing the chronological and cataloging timekeeping of dominant American culture: newspapers, telephone books, and calendars. Such "junk" can be read as functioning according to Ricoeur's notion of the trace, which exists in a "hybrid time" (Vol. 3 122) in that it is a product of the past that continues to convey its stories in the present.[203] Yet this secular temporality is made sacred via its shared space with "the painted gourd rattles and deer-hoof clackers of the ceremony" (120). Even though he is overwhelmed, Tayo begins "to feel another dimension to the old man's room" (120).

The multiple dimensions of time become more manageable as the ceremonies begin to take effect. Nearing a cured state, Tayo's attempts to repatriate the stolen cattle and resist the witchery allow him to access "all directions of time" (192). Encountering a "hybrid" temporality – in Ricoeur's understanding of the term – on the sacred mountain, he realizes

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[202] Betonie is possibly making reference to the Bering Straight migration theory that Native Americans originally crossed the land bridge from Asia, though he is more importantly highlighting global connections between all people.

[203] Benedict Anderson might recognize the junk's temporality as akin to that of the modern nation. Strikingly, Anderson refers to the act of reading the newspaper as a "ceremony," marking the steady progress through history: "What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?" (35).

> […] why the oldtimers could only speak of yesterday and tomorrow in terms of the present moment: the only certainty; and this present sense of being was qualified with bare hints of yesterday or tomorrow, by saying, 'I go up to the mountain yesterday or I go up to the mountain tomorrow.' The ck'o'yo Kaup'a'ta [an evil mythic figure] somewhere is tacking his gambling sticks and waiting for a visitor; Rocky and I are walking across the ridge in the moonlight; Josiah and Robert are waiting for us. This night is a single night; and there has never been any other. (192)

Just as this passage describes the Keresan language as emplotting events according to the same tense and using relative adverbs to qualify temporal difference, so too does *Ceremony* emplot mythic time according to the same conventions as historical time, and vice versa. For this reason, Tayo's grandmother, after hearing his story, ends the novel with the anti-climactic statement, "It seems like I already heard these stories before … only thing is, the names sound different" (260).[204] What we know to be myth, then, is more than what once occurred in history; it is what is packaged, remembered, and recounted as a socially significant narrative. Because literature can consider what "might have been" (Ricoeur Vol. 3 192), it can posit myth as reconstructed history, as a narrated story that is therefore revisable.

While Tayo is learning this lesson, the reader is likewise bombarded with a correspondingly disorienting experience of time. Throughout the novel, historical and political events are juxtaposed against categorically mythical narratives, though the former are more often overlooked in the criticism. Reyes Garcia, for one, acknowledges

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[204] All that follows the grandmother's concluding lines are two mythic poems, the first of which reveals that the witchery is "dead for now" (261), and the second of which closes the frame from the novel's opening by asking the sunrise to accept "this offering" (262), the novel itself.

that, while there are actually "many overtly political themes in *Ceremony*, […] its clearest political themes revolve around the uranium mining which followed the first nuclear blast at White Sands, New Mexico, and around the loss and recovery of Indian lands" (40). It is for this reason that Tayo's healing requires not only Betonie's traditional ceremony but also his reclaiming of Josiah's stolen cattle – if not land, at least a sustaining commodity. And whereas *House Made of Dawn* features only one scene from the war in which Abel woozily remembers an approaching tank as a mysterious machine (24-25), *Ceremony* includes numerous descriptions of wartime and references to the atomic bomb. For example, while Tayo attempts to resist the witchery, he walks along the open pit of the uranium mine and recalls his grandmother's story about the first atomic bomb blast (245). While her memory is conveyed in the mode of traditional storytelling (arranged in poetic lines), the narrator immediately prior provides the history of uranium mining on Pueblo land: "Early in the spring of 1943, the mine began to flood" (243) and, when the government had completed excavating all of the uranium – uranium that would be used to develop the atomic bomb – "the mine was closed, but the barbed-wire fences and the guards remained until August 1945" (244). To stress the unambiguous history of the exploitation of the land's resources that made the bombings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima possible, Silko includes dates in her historical narrative. To present the mythic in the realm of the historical, and vice versa, she then juxtaposes this history against Grandma's orally inflected memory of the first explosion.[205]

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[205] As indicated by her scornful review of Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* (1986), the incorporation of the historical and the political is essential to Silko's view of good (Native American?) literature. She condemns the postmodern technique of Erdrich's highly acclaimed novel for representing words "as they really are" "without the tiresome interference of any historical, political or cultural connections the words might have had in the past" (179). Because Erdrich seems to overlook racism, sexism, and homophobia in her novel and to idealize the small North Dakota town in which it is set, Silko argues that *The Beet Queen*'s postmodernism obscures "basic truth" (180). See Chapter Four for more on this issue.

To process such a compound temporality, Tayo and the reader must recognize that it is all "part of the pattern" (120). Perhaps given the influence of *House Made of Dawn*, some critics have read *Ceremony* as emplotting the same kind of cyclical temporality. In his structuralist critique, for example, Robert C. Bell argues that, in *Ceremony*, "There is no end (a linear concept), but a beginning again (a circular concept); Tayo relives legend, from beginning to end to begin again" (30).[206] And perhaps because he overlooks *Ceremony*'s feminist aesthetic, Shamoon Zamir accuses Silko of "ahistorical nostalgia for mythical transcendence" (406).[207] However, Zamir does not acknowledge how Silko's temporal emplotment incorporates historical markers as well as how it embraces a revisionary impulse that can only reach fulfillment through the passage of time. Such readings that categorically differentiate temporalities risk relegating Tayo's inherently political and historical experiences to an unthreatening past.

Ceremony does not end where it begins, as does *House Made of Dawn*, but rather concludes with the application of a new narrative when Tayo tells the elders his story.[208] In this way, the temporality of *Ceremony* is less like a circle and more like Ricoeur's hermeneutic spiral, in which comprehension rises ever higher, one's "meditation" passing the same point, but at "different altitudes" (Vol. 1 72). With this model, Silko's temporal manipulation allows stories to remain the same while changing; the horizontal plane stays

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[206] Bell is not alone in this reading, as Ellen Arnold indicates: "Much of the criticism of the novel [insists] on Tayo's journey as a return to tradition and a communal identity that requires the rejection of a linear and dichotomizing Euro-American worldview. Frequently this logic also suggests a certain nostalgia for a romanticized communal and ecological harmony that denies the novel its full depth and complexity" ("Ear" 71).

[207] For example, Zamir criticizes Tayo's quest for the "source": "This desire to return to the source contains obvious dangers of a nostalgic and reactionary recoding" (400). However, the passage Zamir is referring to is not narrated from Tayo's perspective, but rather from that of Auntie, a character who is criticized in the text for her pro-Christian and assimilationist views.

[208] Kevin Concannon additionally makes the very good point that Tayo's is not the only voice or perspective of the novel, and that some characters, such as Helen Jean and Tayo's mother, do not experience mythic transcendence, but remain lost. Their voices attest to the ongoing debilitations of colonialism.

level, and the vertical plane ascends. Though spiral images do appear in *Ceremony* (229, 247), they do not receive as much narrative attention as does the pattern of the constellation, Walter Benjamin's preferred temporal image because it disallows a linear narrative of time: "What has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (463). Betonie recommends that Tayo consider the stars in his quest, and the sole illustration of the novel, which comprises an entire page (179), is of a constellation.[209] Just as Tayo is about to resist the witchery, he sees "the constellation in the north sky" and recognizes that "the pattern of the ceremony was in the stars" (247). Tayo and the reader can better comprehend the meaning of the ceremony by looking to a non-linear pattern of the stars. Such a pattern requires the participation of the viewer, who must fill in the lines of connection to envision a complete image. While the parts of the constellation always remain, it can only achieve its full potential each time it is witnessed and put into dynamic relation.

In addition to this readerly act, the novel endorses creative witnessing as a deterring force against witchery. Immediately after Tayo's recognition of the constellation, Silko includes the myth of Arrowboy, who, in beholding a witches' ceremony, makes their evil magic nonfunctional (247). Silko here stresses the need for audience participation to resist witchery and to conceive of the world as an interconnected constellation of times, traditions, and peoples. The stories must constantly and creatively be told – and read – to keep the counterforce, the "destroyers" who seek human forgetfulness, at bay. In the end, Tayo is successful when he can accept such a dynamic pattern for what it is: "He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together–the old stories, the war stories, their stories–to become the

[209] Robert M. Nelson argues that this constellation is the "Big Star" pattern ("Kaupata" 7).

story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (246). This oft-cited passage attests to Silko's emplotment of a temporal model that is both fixed and always changing – just like the stars.

To develop a temporal model that can support the multivalent task of recovering and revising traditional myths for the purpose of political empowerment without political marginalization, Silko extricates myth from its designated position as a genre distinct from the secular. By making myth a component of her narrative as well as a hermeneutic comment on that narrative, she also revises its function. Instead of recovering traditional myths as modernist plotlines and healing archetypes, the recovered and revised myths in *Ceremony* are deliberate temporal dislocations that disorient the readers from familiar progressive narratives. In numerous interviews, for example, Silko has revealed that she strove to publish *Ceremony* in 1976, the year of the American bicentennial.[210] In an interview from that year, she explains, "I just want to make sure that during this year when all of this sort of celebrating is going on," when people are "rhapsodizing about Paul Revere and George Washington and Ben Franklin," that they "be reminded that there are different ways to look at the past two hundred years" (Seyersted interview 8). Such narrative intervention in the celebratory mythmaking attests to Silko's belief that the literary incorporation of myth can counteract deleterious master narratives. Because she aligns the origin moment of the novel with the origin moment of the world according to Pueblo mythology, *Ceremony* assumes the social significance of myth itself. The novel's opening, in which the narrator confesses that she is simply telling us the story that Thought-Woman "is thinking" (1), confirms that each time *Ceremony* is read, the sacred

[210] The publishers were one year late.

action of the novel (re)occurs. Silko fashions herself as merely the mouthpiece of *Ceremony*: what she narrates is *happening*.

Yet such a literary application of myth has raised hackles among traditionalists, especially Paula Gunn Allen, whose attack on Silko is well known in Native American literary studies.[211] Though laudatory of *Ceremony* elsewhere, Allen takes issue with its application of traditional myths in the 1990 essay "Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*." In this piece, she argues, "To use the oral tradition directly is to run afoul of native ethics" (379), because when myth is removed from its sacred context, "*tragic consequences ensue*" (380; italics in original). In Native worldviews, as many scholars have affirmed, and as *Ceremony* attests, words do not just represent the world but directly affect it.[212] For this reason, Allen compares literary criticism that analyzes the mythic elements of *Ceremony* (such as my own) to matricide: "I could no more do (or sanction) the kind of ceremonial investigation of *Ceremony* done by some researchers than I could slit my mother's throat. Even seeing some of it published makes my skin crawl" (383). Such a visceral response suggests Allen's perceived biological connection to her oral tradition, which non-Lagunas therefore cannot access. Justifiably concerned about the frequent relegation of tribal art to anthropological relics, Allen fears that those readers without the appropriate knowledge and even racial affiliation to process *Ceremony* will inevitably romanticize it and so discredit its sacred components. For this reason, Allen claims that she "non-teaches" *Ceremony* (383) by resisting student curiosity. When assigning literature not from her own tradition, she learns "as little ritual

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[211] Jana Sequoya-Magdaleno is just one critic who agrees with Allen. She argues that Silko serves up Laguna clan stories for the dominant culture's consumption, and such an "assimilation" undermines their power as healing narratives (103).

[212] See, among others, Craig Womack's "Theorizing American Indian Experience" on the empirical ramifications of oral narratives during sacred ceremonies.

or myth as possible in any particular detail to further buttress my defense against ethical violations" (385). To be ethical, Allen chooses ignorance over what she regards as exploitative thoroughness.

More so than Silko, Allen emphasizes the conservative aspects of her culture, which she describes as highly valuing "maintenance of traditional customs, values, and perspectives," which "might result in slower societal change" but "has the advantage of providing a solid sense of identity" (*Sacred* 210). Perhaps for this reason, Salyer attributes Allen's disapproval of Silko's novel to Allen's resistance to change (132). However, Allen is open to the kind of changes prompted by such mythic figures as Yellow Woman, whose actions "must be improper or nonconformist for the greater good of the whole" (*Sacred* 227). Yet the revisions Silko endorses are qualitatively different than those endorsed by Allen, as Zamir reveals: "The kind of changes Betonie makes in the ceremonies and Silko in the oral stories do constitute departures that are much more radical than those that occur during a process of change within a traditional environment" (398). Because she changes myth via creative intrusion, Silko supersedes its designation as property of the tribe that changes only organically. Whereas the literary projects of Power literature and even of *Borderlands/La Frontera* are engaged in a return to authentic mythic origins, Silko's harkening to origins is an appeal to difference, to an awareness that myths both change on their own and must be changed by artists when historical context and political circumstances demand it. Such revision of traditional narratives is, for Silko, indigenous to the tradition itself, but can only occur as time elapses. Her appeal to origins is therefore a paradoxical appeal to the changing same.[213]

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[213] When asked about her accusations, Silko contends that Allen's resistance to the fictional inclusion of myth is a reaction to colonialism, an attempt at "closing things off," which is "not the original Pueblo way.

A mythic tradition conceived as both essential and flexible remains problematic, for how can sacred stories be preserved if they are constantly changing? In her interviews, Silko sometimes comes across as adopting the recovery mode of Power literature, viewing her authorship of *Ceremony* as assuming "some kind of responsibility to make sure it [the story tradition she was told] wasn't just put away or put aside" (Arnold interview 178). At other times, she endorses what she considers to be the approach of her ancestors, who believed that if a story "has a kind of substance that reaches to the heart of the community life and what's gone before and what's gone later, it will be remembered. And if it's not remembered, the people no longer wanted it, or it no longer had its place in the community" (Barnes interview 51). Here, unlike Momaday, whose Buffalo Trust works to preserve traditional myths for their own sake, Silko perceives myth as responding to contemporary political demands of the community; myths remain, change, or disappear as needed. She embraces such a "tough-minded" view as opposed to the "moist-eyed" romanticism of anthropologists (Barnes interview 52) out of necessity. Simply because of the cognitive structure of the human

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That's reactionary, protective, and that's a kind of a shrinking away or a diminishment of the spirit of what the people had been able to do" (Arnold interview 178). Here, Silko evokes concepts of origins to challenge Allen, yet such an evocation opens up possibilities rather than closes them down; it is a harkening to a tradition of generic and temporal transformation. She argues that Allen's belief that certain myths "belong" to the people relies on "Western European" discourse of "ownership" (Arnold interview 178), which is a nostalgic limitation of the "essential" flexibility of the tradition. Silko is also sure to clarify, "I feel confident that I've never divulged anything that was kept secret" (Arnold interview 178). Robert M. Nelson makes an interesting argument defending Silko in this claim: "At least all but two of the embedded texts [traditional myths] in *Ceremony* are appropriated, sometimes verbatim, from preexisting ethnographic print texts rather than immediately from remembered oral performance ("Rewriting" 48). So, "Silko is not revealing or even re-revealing clan secrets but rather repatriating Laguna 'artifacts,' working to rescue them from their deadening status as ethnographic museum pieces and to return them to living circulation as part(s) of an ongoing, living story" (48).

mind, “memory gets all mixed together with imagination” (51), so there is no way to recover an authentic past, either by blood memory or ethnography.[214]

While she remains of two minds about myth in her interviews, Silko’s management of temporality in *Ceremony* allows her to revise traditional narratives while remaining faithful to them. For example, Silko makes mythic even Emo’s misogynist, self-hating, and witching rhetoric. While Tayo and his friends are drinking at the bar, they tell stories about their war-time sexual exploits. Emo’s myth, which tells of “this In’di’n” “grabbin’ white pussy” (59), though attributed to the influence of witchery, is formatted in the same way as the traditional Laguna myths incorporated throughout the novel. Robert Dale Parker characterizes Silko’s strategy as a deliberate set up, “tempting readers to take *Ceremony*’s poetry sanctimoniously, as inherently sacralizing, despite its prosaic sound, because it is prettily carved up in lines that set it apart from the prose” (137). Such a technique, he claims, defies any romanticizing penchants on the part of the reader (137-138). Silko is also warning of the seductive power of myth, that anything can function as a socially significant narrative. The direction it guides in, however, can only be determined within the context of lived time. Her moral ambivalence toward myth, then, allows for her endorsement of change; if a myth in and of itself does not necessarily offer a moral good, then it is not an artifact that must be preserved for its own sake. While the return to an origin is appealing in the (post)colonial moment in that it

[214] Silko does make reference to blood memory twice in *Ceremony*. The first time, she connects it with animal instinct: “Maybe the dawn woke the instinct in the dim memory of the blood when horses had been as wild as the deer and at sunrise went into the trees and thickets to hide” (182-183). The second time, it assumes emotional significance rather than literal narrative content; what is remembered is an abstract concept of familial love, which Tayo realizes is a “vitality locked deep in blood memory” (220). Chadwick Allen briefly discusses both of these moments in his *Blood Narrative* (189-190).

provides a sense of stability, *Ceremony* disallows such a nostalgic return by making narratives of that prior time contingent on the historical present.[215]

Toward a similar end, Silko situates a fabricated origin myth – not a traditional clan story – at the exact center of the novel. In this invented narrative, white people are created by an Indian witch to win a magic contest.[216] This myth about destruction and colonialism paradoxically de-centers, yet it is also centering because it allows Tayo to understand the systemic, interconnected function of evil and oppression, a knowledge he must have if he is to be healed. In *Ceremony*, Silko does not clarify that this myth is invented; she even bestows it with a traditional beginning: "Long time ago / in the beginning" (132), the first line recalling the opening of the Laguna *hummah-hah* traditional myths, and the second recalling the openings of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel of John. Her invented myth, then, exemplifies the syncretic adaptation that Silko views as presently necessary. However, Silko's endorsement of change is not finally credited to the colonial arrival of white people, for, in this story, they are only the creations of Indians. Of course, this myth has the effect of reversing "traditional Western narratives, making the New World the Old, and reincorporating white civilization into a Native view of the world" (Karem 27). In this regard, Silko's claim to Laguna precedence is in many ways akin to the empowering mythic work of Amiri Baraka's *A Black Mass*. However, unlike Baraka's play, the myth refuses to label white people as

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[215] Though cumbersome, I put "post" in parentheses to acknowledge that Native Americans remain in a colonized state.

[216] Silko admits to inventing the "awful story" in her interview with Evers and Carr (20). However, Carol Mitchell points out that there does seem to be a "traditional connection between a witch and the creation of white people," as the goddess who is the "mother of the white people," I'tscts'ity'i, is a "half-witch" (29-30). Danielson adds that "prophecy about the coming of white people is part of Keresan [the language of the Pueblos] and many other tribal traditions" ("Storytellers" 208). However, Silko admits that witchcraft is not nearly as prevalent at Laguna as it is among the Navajo. She explains that people in Laguna don't consider witch stories "a polite subject for conversation," so she did not hear them until she went to Chinle, on the Navajo reservation (Evers and Carr interview 17).

the ultimate enemy. Tayo's realization is not as comforting as it is for Baraka's audience, for it exposes a much more intractable foe: witchery.

In keeping with the womanist goal of exposing the complex systemic workings of oppression, Silko's invented myth disallows a glorious origin because it dismantles the familiar binary between white people as victimizers and Indians as victims without just reversing it. Silko makes structuralist reversal especially difficult because, unlike in *A Black Mass*, the originator is not a known, specific individual. Rather, the creator of white people is tribeless and genderless: "No one ever knew where this witch came from / which tribe / or it if was a woman or a man" (134). Silko's unwillingness to concretize the original colonial moment exposes witchery as a force greater than any one person, one people, one time, or one place.[217]

Such a methodology of deferral is likewise employed in her portrayal of the drought, which is credited with an excess of causes, both in Tayo's contemporary time and in mythic time. These include Tayo's cursing of the rain (14); the Scalp Ceremony's etiological explanation (37); Josiah's belief that "droughts happen when people forget, when people misbehave" (46); the heroic twins' neglect of the corn altar because of their attention to the Ck'o'yo witch (46-49); Tayo's killing of the flies as a child (101-102); the invented witchery myth, which attributes drought to white people (136); the Kaup'a'ta gambler's capture of the rainclouds (172); and, finally, the white people's exploitation of the land (186). This excess of etiological accounts indicates there is no one culprit, no one origin, that all people, times, and places are connected to an

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[217] See her interview with Larry Evers and Denny Carr, in which she explains that she is trying to "go beyond any specific kind of Laguna witchery or Navajo witchery" (Evers and Carr 18); rather, the witchery represents a counterforce, which thrives off of manipulation, especially textual manipulation, and not original creation (Evers and Carr interview 20).

interlocking system of good and evil. The stable ambivalence between myth and history, present and past, and good and evil that Silko establishes is finally manifested in the kiva where Tayo tells his story to the elders.[218] In this most sacred of traditional Laguna places, Tayo sits on a chair labeled "ST. JOSEPH MISSION" (256). Tayo's return to the Pueblo allows him to recognize it as a syncretic place that is comfortably and supportively hybrid.

Because Silko's novel incorporates traditional myth, self-hating mythic discourse, and invented origin stories, her use of Laguna clan stories as authoritative and curing narratives is context-specific, not nostalgic. The significance of myth becomes not its authority, its atemporality, or its sanctity, but rather how it is used, whether or not in the service of witchery. But evil is not something to be dismissed or destroyed. Rather, it is to be watched over because even evil plays a balancing act in the world. Silko's application of mythic discourse for various purposes and in various guises demands a critical eye toward myth as well as an informed audience. To understand Silko's utilitarian application of myth, the reader must not hover in a state of ignorance so as to avoid romanticized readings, as Paula Gunn Allen would have it, but must hone his or her interpretive abilities so as to not be seduced, as so many of her characters are, by the compelling words of witches.

What's Real, What's Fake? Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

Both Anzaldúa's and Silko's commitments to "transforming consciousness," in Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith's understanding, is manifested through their self-reflexive use of myth, one that demands a critical reception of a narrative type so resistant

[218] A kiva is a sacred chamber, usually built underground, used in Pueblo ceremonies.

to historical contingency and feminist politics. Throughout *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Maxine Hong Kingston similarly explores and, ultimately, never resolves, the seductive power of myth as both restrictive and liberating. Like Anzaldúa and Silko, Kingston accompanies her recovery of female mythic figures with a necessary revisionary impulse to galvanize identity-forming narrative structures. However, while Anzaldúa resides comfortably in the border between a normative mestiza identity and an awareness that such an identity is always historically constructed, and while Silko embraces myth as a paradoxical but no less dependable genre of the changing same, Kingston takes another tack. While putting her confidence in revised myth, she simultaneously questions its historical and political relevance, even once revised. Such an ambivalent approach to myth, while self-reflexive, has invited significant criticism about Kingston's commitment to her heritage and raised the question of whether she simply revises myth so that it more easily coheres with dominant American mythology. While Anzaldúa is challenged for remaining too faithful to essential aspects of myth, Kingston is accused of the opposite, of straying too far. And whereas Silko was brought to task for exposing sacred texts to non-Laguna readers, for revising the *function* of myth, Kingston receives her greatest criticism for revising the *content* of myths as they have been recorded in Chinese and Chinese American minds and texts.[219]

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston records and illuminates her women family member's lives in relation to the figure Fa Mu Lan, a well-known warrior woman in

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[219] Chinese mythology is not the only source material, however. While describing her childhood in America, for example, Maxine claims, "Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe" (97). ["Ghost" is the text's oft-used term for, among other things, the unknown other. For more on Kingston's use of ghosts, see Yan Gao's *The Art of Parody*, in which she argues that Kingston's "Chinese myths are *ghost stories* in the sense that they are foreign to the American norm" (7) and Malini Johar Schueller's "Questioning Race and Gender Definitions," in which she defines "ghost" as "an appellation used for any concept that defies clear interpretation" (60).] Her childhood inability to process American life, then, is conveyed in the somewhat jarring diction of Euro-American fairy tales.

Chinese history and mythology who took her elderly father's place in battle.[220] Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, Kingston's memoir has achieved canonical status, so much so that it is "one of the most widely circulated and frequently taught literary texts by a living American author" (Wong "Introduction" 3). It was also a phenomenal success among the general reading public, remaining on the bestseller list thirteen years after its original publication.[221] Clearly, Kingston's first book struck a chord during the period of waning ethnic nationalisms and the rise of feminism, and that chord continues to sound despite shifting political climates. Yet the response to *The Woman Warrior* has not all been positive. Though, or because, the most critically acclaimed Asian American author, Kingston is also the most frequent target of criticism from within the Asian American literary community. Largely concerned about white readers' reception, her detractors have complained that *The Woman Warrior* invites Orientalist responses and that its author conceded to a feminist fad by exaggerating the misogyny of Chinese culture. For example, Jeffery Paul Chan accused her of creating "an artful fiction drawn from a sensibility shaped by a white culture predisposed to fanciful caricatures of a Shangri-la four thousand years wise, but feudally binding" ("Mysterious" 86).[222]

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[220] The choice of a warrior is, of course, deliberate, simultaneously referencing and revising the warrior figures prized by Chin and his colleagues. Wong explains that Kingston's version of Fa Mu Lan's name "appears to be a composite of Cantonese and Mandarin transliterations, *Fa Muk Lan* and *Hua Mu Lan* – another impurity?" ("Autobiography" 163, fn. 6). By "impurity," Wong is referring to Kingston's revisionary strategy that departs from Chinese tradition.
[221] See Kingston's interview with Shelley Fisher Fishkin (163).
[222] Perhaps the most forgiving criticism has been leveled by Chinese scholar Zhang Ya-jie, who confesses that she first disliked the book because of the "twisted" Chinese stories, which were full of "American imagination" (103). She admits that some of Kingston's writing "offended my sense of national pride" and that she was concerned "Westerners" would get the "wrong impression" about Chinese culture (103). When she realized, however, that *The Woman Warrior* was not a Chinese story but a Chinese American one, she accepted Kingston's "distortions of the stories which have always been so lofty and sacred" (104). Ya-jie comes to accept that, within the American context, traditional Chinese myths necessitate revision.

Kingston's greatest and most vocal critic is Frank Chin. The aesthetic, ethical, and political dispute between Kingston and Chin, in fact, has, alongside *The Woman Warrior*, achieved canonical status in Asian American literary studies.[223] In many cases, the disagreement is viewed as Chin's overreaction to Kingston's feminist project, especially her exposure of Chinese and Chinese American misogyny. King-Kok Cheung explains that "Kingston is accused of falsifying culture and of reinforcing stereotype in the name of feminism" ("*Woman Warrior*" 112). The gender debate is no doubt a major cause of the rift; however, other critics have pointed out that it cannot be the only one. After all, Chin published numerous women writers in the *Aiiieeeee!* anthologies, and Kingston trumpets Chinese and Chinese American male characters as heroes in the companion memoir to *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men* (1980).[224] In addition to disagreements about gender, Chin and Kingston differ significantly in their ideas about how myth should be incorporated in the literary context. Cheung reveals that despite theirs as being "one of the longest controversies in Chinese American literary studies," Chin and Kingston actually "have more in common with each other than with any other Asian American writers, especially in their persistent pursuit and deployment of Chinese classics" ("Deployment" 217). Perhaps it is their joint interest in myth that ultimately sets in motion their bitter dispute.

Frank Chin was one of *The Woman Warrior*'s first readers. Because of his status as a leading Asian American writer at the time, Kingston's editor at Knopf sent him the bound galleys of the book. Though Chin acknowledged the aesthetic achievement of

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[223] See, among others, King-Kok Cheung's "*Woman Warrior*" and David Leiwei Li's "Re-presenting *The Woman Warrior*" for more on this notorious debate.

[224] The original title of *China Men*, in fact, was *Gold Mountain Heroes*, but Kingston changed it because there were too many books being published with the words "gold mountain" in them (Horton interview 5).

Kingston's prose, he vehemently disapproved of the book's generic label of nonfiction.[225] Chin has long denounced Chinese American use of autobiography because he views it a Christian genre, a mythic frame that undermines Chinese American discourse and makes it self-hating: "Monotheism, Christianity, and obfuscation in an arty fog of expressionist fear and pessimism have destroyed knowledge of Chinaman history and culture through that peculiarly Christian literary weapon: the autobiography" ("This" 109). For this reason, Chin derisively refers to Kingston as a Christian, even though she is a Buddhist.[226] According to Chin, any attempt at autobiographical writing by an Asian American, no matter how subversive, is an inevitable iteration of the confessional mode initiated by St. Augustine. At the outset, then, Chin's anger with Kingston stemmed not from her revision of traditional Chinese myths but from her couching of those myths in a hegemonic Western genre – one that inevitably assimilates non-Western narratives into nonthreatening exotica.

At first hoping to reach an understanding, Kingston responded to Chin's criticism with surprise and tried to explain her motivations as a victim of white American racism and sexism as well as Chinese American sexism.[227] Chin's response was dismissive and violent – almost hysterically so. In a 1976 letter to Kingston, with no shortage of obscenities, he calls her his enemy and compares her to a Nazi and an Uncle Tom.

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[225] The genre debate about *The Woman Warrior* is a long one. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?" is a useful resource. Kingston herself comments on the controversy frequently in her interviews. For example, in her conversation with Gary Kubota, she confesses that she originally thought of *The Woman Warrior* as a novel, but the editor thought it would be better reviewed and sell better as nonfiction (2).

[226] See Frank Chin's letters to Kingston, which are housed at the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Frank Chin has given me permission to characterize these letters. Excerpts of the letters are also available in David Leiwei Li's "Re-presenting *The Woman Warrior*" (183).

[227] I am summarizing an unpublished letter in Chin's archive dated October 16, 1976.

Kingston's autobiography, for him, is just another example of a "yellow" story made white through the confessional mode.

Then, in a 1984 issue of *Quilt*, Chin published a fake review of a parodic version of *The Woman Warrior*. His criticism this time focused not only on Kingston's nonfiction genre but also on her revision of traditional Chinese myth, especially that of Fa Mu Lan. This myth mostly survives through oral narrative, or what Kingston terms "talk-story," though it has been recorded in various ballad forms since the sixth century.[228] Chin's review, entitled "The Most Popular Book in China," describes the invented novel *The Unmanly Warrior* as a revision of the Joan of Arc myth.[229] Written by a French author living in China, *The Unmanly Warrior* reverses the premise of *The Woman Warrior*; it is well-received by Chinese citizens but disparaged by the French.[230] In an attempt to stir the ire of those reading from a Euro-American literary tradition, the parody demands his readers to consider how it feels to have their revered myths tampered with. To expose the dangers of mythic revision, historical truth becomes subject to dangerous relativism, so much so that Nazis enter as admirable characters (25-26).

Chin expands on his concerns about mythic revision in his protracted introductory essay to *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake" (1991), in which he argues that by revising traditional, "real" myths, Kingston

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[228] "Talk-story" is Kingston's term for storytelling, which comes both from the Chinese term *gong gu tsai* and is also a "Hawaiian pidgin phrase, borrowed street language" (Brownmiller 178). Linda Ching Sledge describes the tradition as "a conservative, communal folk art by and for the common people, performed in the various dialects of diverse ethnic enclaves and never intended for the ears of non-Chinese" (143).
[229] Chin then reprinted the parody as the afterword to his 1988 short story collection, *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco R.R. Co*. According to David Leiwei Li, this piece is probably the only one in the collection conceived after 1976; Li argues that *The Woman Warrior* "seems to have stunted Chin's creative output for more than a dozen years following its appearance, and it now sets the terms, as Chin himself admits, in which his gallery of works is to be reviewed" ("Re-presenting" 191). Kingston might have had the last word, though, with her 1989 publication of *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, whose trickster protagonist, Wittman Ah-Sing, many have read as a satirical but also affectionate personification of Frank Chin. See Chapter Four.
[230] The French are here a stand-in for Chinese Americans, and the Chinese for Euro-Americans.

"fakes" them for the pleasure of her white readers. Here, Chin's reactions seem analogous to Paula Gunn Allen's reaction to Silko; both are fearful of white readers' romanticizing projections, which are seemingly endorsed by Silko's and Kingston's mythic revisions. As discussed in Chapter Two, for Chin, "Myths are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths" (29). Like Kingston, Chin equates myths with collective memory, yet his is a racial one, which does not change over time but remains static, a conduit into the essential nature of a people.

In interviews, Kingston has repeatedly responded to her critics, explaining her motives for mythic revision: "The way I keep the old Chinese myths alive is by telling them in a new American way. I can't help feeling that people who accuse me of misrepresenting the myths are looking at the past in a sentimental kind of way" (Pfaff interview 18). If a mythic heritage is not acknowledged as evolving, she argues, then the literary endeavor that cites that tradition devolves into nostalgia and submissive propaganda. Ironically, Chin makes the same accusation about Asian American autobiography, referring to it as "propaganda-as-autobiography" ("Preface" xiv). While literary texts that aspire to mythic purity can be read as conceding to a reputedly authentic Chinese tradition, those that embrace myth as constantly changing can be read as subservient to an assimilationist Christian one. Supporting Kingston's revisionary task, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong explains that the "Fa Mu Lan story itself, which many of Kingston's critics take to be a fixed and sacred given, actually exists in a multitude of Chinese texts differing from each other in purpose as well as detail" ("Autobiography" 162). The controversy surrounding Chin and Kingston, then, exposes the risks – as well

as the rewards – of incorporating myth into literature. Given the accommodating pressures of American exceptionalist mythology discussed in Chapter One, strenuous efforts to resist such co-optation become all the more necessary if an author is to make his or her work successfully impinge on the political realm. While drawing on myth as a marker of cultural specificity and tool for feminist empowerment, Kingston's self-reflexive methodology also resists myth's normalizing impulses, thereby working toward a universally liberating end.

To determine how Kingston's efforts usefully build on Chin's, and, more generally, how minority feminist writing builds on Power literature, we must return to the issue of gender, for Chin's accusations rest on the assumption that the term "Asian American" refers primarily to men, as exemplified in the following statement about stereotypes: "At worst, the Asian-American is contemptible because he is womanly, effeminate, devoid of al the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" ("Introduction" xxx). Because Chin ascribes such "traditionally masculine qualities" as universals, he can look to the heroic tradition replete with male warriors as supporting those qualities.[231] However, Kingston does not feel she has such a luxury of (supposed) mythic accuracy: "As a woman, it's absolutely clear to me that we have the freedom of creating alternate myths, and for Frank Chin, as a male, there is a monolith, one monument of a myth" (Ling interview 58). For Kingston, then, mythic revision is an essential practice for women, who must approach myth with modified notions of tradition and, consequently, of time.

[231] King-Kok Cheung points out that Chin is just as revisionary toward myth as is Kingston. For example, he selectively incorporates myths that stress the warrior tradition and so support his masculinist struggle against feminizing stereotypes. Cheung also argues that Confucius "would have been shocked to hear his teaching summarized as the 'ethic of private revenge'" ("Deployment" 219).

Despite the personal nature of Chin's vendetta, he was actually proven right: *The Woman Warrior* was devoured by much of the white literary establishment, in part, for serving up a Chinese culture read as irredeemably misogynistic and inferior. For this and other reasons, the mainstream reviews of *The Woman Warrior* were nearly all positive. Kingston was so upset by the Orientalist appraisals that she felt compelled to respond in a 1982 essay, "Cultural Mis-Readings by American Reviewers." In it, she confesses that she did not anticipate that white reviewers would measure "the book and me against the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable, mysterious oriental. […] Pridefully enough, I believed that I had written with such power that the reality and humanity of my characters would bust through any stereotypes of them" (95). To state that she had not foreseen the Orientalist interpretations is not quite right; after all, Chin had given her fair warning. His concerns about the juxtaposition of myth and history within the same supposedly nonfictional work and Kingston's liberties with those narratives were not, then, entirely off-base.

Though most critics have distanced themselves from Chin's accusations for being overzealous and for "buttressing patriarchy by invoking gender stereotypes" (Cheung "*Woman Warrior*" 110), his foundational concern about the reading audience's unschooled response to traditional Chinese myths remains unresolved. Cheung explains, "For a 'minority' author to exercise such artistic freedom [as genre manipulation and mythic revision] is perilous business because white critics and reviewers persist in seeing creative expressions by her as no more than cultural history. Members from the ethnic community are in turn upset if they feel that they have been 'misrepresented' by one of their own" ("*Woman Warrior*" 112). If they are so risky, then, what are Kingston's

mythic revisions supposed to achieve? Are they self-indulgent elaborations that help her manage her self-hate bequeathed by a domineering mother, a patriarchal Chinese culture, and a patriarchal, racist American one? Do they privilege feminist political goals at the expense of ethnic pride in the way of second-wave feminism? Whereas Silko claims change as the legacy of her tradition, Kingston finds no such convention of mythic variation, paradoxical though it is, to which to lay claim. For Kingston, myth is potentially liberatory if it is revised for feminist ends, yet it inevitably submits to hegemonic authority because mythic and historical times almost never align – except, occasionally, in the realm of creative literature.

Before Kingston can expose the precarious function of myth in life and literature, she must first, like Anzaldúa and Silko, recover those female mythic figures who suffered anonymity during the heyday of Yellow Power. Deborah Woo argues that part of Kingston's primary goal is to "show how ignorance of the past is the basis of personal crisis" (187) – hence the characteristically modernist need to recover myths in order to recover from psychic trauma. Such a quest for personal memories is made analogous to her quest for collective memories, often in the form of myths, for the establishment of group identity. Kingston recognizes the essential correlation between group identity and mythology when she explains the reason why she had to separate the women's and men's stories in her memoirs, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, which she had originally conceived as one volume: "The men's stories didn't fit in with the women's stories. The mythology is so different – the men's stories were in *conflict* with the women's stories" (Brownmiller interview 178; italics in original).[232] For Kingston, the basic tension

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[232] Cheung attributes the separate publication of these two works to Kingston's career-long attempt to "mediate between affirming her ethnic heritage and undermining patriarchy. But she feels that

between men's and women's lives can be best exposed through their respective mythologies.

Several of the female characters of the book, including the narrator, Maxine, and her mother, Brave Orchid, assume the qualities of the woman warrior through their defiant words and rebellious actions.[233] The mythic realm thereby enters the historical in a way that resembles *Ceremony*, in which Tayo, like Maxine and Brave Orchid, becomes an actor in a mythic story. Kingston's methodology of integrating categorically "historical" autobiography with "fantastic" mythology is exemplified in the first chapter, where she defiantly tells the story of her Chinese No Name Aunt, another warrior woman, who killed herself and her illegitimate baby in the family's drinking well. Since her aunt could not cross national borders, like the male members of her family who journeyed to "Gold Mountain" (the United States), Maxine conjectures that her aunt, like Anzaldúa's new mestiza and Silko's Yellow Woman, "crossed boundaries not delineated in space" (8). As Maxine imagines the different possibilities explaining her aunt's actions – as being raped, as actively seeking out a lover, as spitefully contaminating the family's drinking water – she explains that "unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (8). In order to receive the ancestral help to develop her sense of self, Maxine must imaginatively recover and embellish the untold, because her father's family history (the name of the father) has denied the aunt's existence. It is her mother, Brave Orchid, who, also defiantly, breaks the silence. However, she does so not

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identification with Asian men at times inhibits an equally strong feminist impulse" ("*Woman Warrior*" 119). Kingston adds, citing Jung, that writing the two books reconciled the anima and animus dimensions of her unconsciousness (Bonetti interview 70).

[233] Though the narrator remains unnamed (much like the No Name Aunt) throughout the book, I will refer to her as Maxine to differentiate the youthful, often naïve voice of the narrator, from that of the author, Kingston.

to endow her sister-in-law with an autonomous identity but rather to teach an adolescent Maxine how to live according to traditional patriarchal mores: “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us” (5). The aunt’s story, which takes on mythic proportion in Kingston’s telling, exposes the conflicting ends to which myth, when recovered, can be put: it can repress by enforcing a strict symbolic order; or, when engaged, modified, and questioned, it can liberate and inspire rebellion.[234] The precedent for the embellishment of mythic narratives is now set so that the No Name Woman section “serves as a model for the way Kingston later improvises on public texts” (Shostak 58).

Maxine requires “ancestral help” because she is confused by the contradictory lessons about womanhood that she learns from her mother. One moment Brave Orchid’s bedtime stories of warrior women seep into her dreams; the next, her mother mouths one of the sexist proverbs that teaches girls they will “grow up a wife and a slave” (20). Early on, Maxine determines that, given her options, she “would have to grow up a warrior woman” (20), and so embraces myths as more meaningful than clichés, which are devoid of narrative substance, though immeasurably hurtful. This declaration indicates that Maxine is making a deliberate, critical decision about the use-value of myth. The next paragraph, which begins, “The call would come from a bird that flew over our roof” (20), continues in the conditional tense, and so Kingston elides a decision that takes place in the historical present into a fantastic condition by which Maxine enters the persona of the warrior woman. Whereas Anzaldúa’s and Silko’s formatting differentiates mythic from historical discourses, though they are closely related, Kingston removes

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[234] Kingston herself claims that her ancestors take on mythic significance, in part because they are unnamed, but also because of their heroic actions, their “great stories” (Islas interview 27).

distinguishing formatting markers entirely. For three paragraphs, Kingston sustains this liminal tense; then, after a line break, Maxine's fantasy cedes to a more stable past tense: "The door opened, and an old man and an old woman came out" (21). When they ask her if she has eaten today, she answers, "out of politeness," "'Yes, I have'" (21). One might expect that the mythic tone of the story would now remain monolithic, yet just as it begins, Maxine/Fa Mu Lan explains in her American vernacular, "'No, I haven't,' I would have said in real life, mad at the Chinese for lying so much. 'I'm starved. Do you have any cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies'" (21). Amy Ling points out the irreconcilability of these two discourses, that Maxine's childish voice pales in significance to the convention of the elder couple's inquiry, which yet remains stilted. She insightfully asks, "Can it then be that Kingston is advocating Chinese politeness at the same time that she is complaining about it?" ("Maxine" 158). Ling's question remains unanswered so that the two discourses, one temporally historical, one temporally mythic, co-exist, neither discounting nor reconciling with each other.

Such a confused temporality is experienced by the narrator when training to become a warrior. On a quest alone in the forest, she realizes that she is "walking in circles. Hadn't I been already found by the old people? Or was that yet to come?" (26). At first she is distraught by this experience until she, like Tayo, is able to envision the pattern of the world, reaching an enlightened awareness in which everything is connected.[235] She watches "the centuries pass in moments because suddenly I understand time, which is spinning and fixed like the North Star" (27). This paradoxical

[235] The all-inclusive temporality is paralleled by her awareness of space, which is now both centered and global; when she sees two figures as the "axis of the earth's turning," she describes them as "Chinese lion dancers, African lion dancers in midstep. I heard high Javanese bells deepen in midring to Indian bells, Hindu Indian, American Indian" (27).

temporal quality, as both static and in motion – again, like the stars – metafictionally elucidates the compound temporality of the text itself. In other words, Kingston builds into her text a hermeneutic explanation of the way time functions as a multiply framing emplotment device. If readers balk at such an unwieldy temporalization, especially if under the impression that the nonfiction generic label on the book jacket implies "real," then they must attempt to emulate Maxine's/Fa Mu Lan's achievement of making her "mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (29).[236]

To exploit Fa Mu Lan's liberatory potential, Kingston must depart drastically from the traditional myth's dependence on "an androcentric paradigm of identity and selfhood" that serves the symbolic order (S. Smith 66).[237] As Pin-chia Feng wittily puts it, "Writing wrong […] is another way to right wrongs" (120). Whereas traditional tellings of the myth largely omit Fa Mu Lan's actual exploits on the battlefield, Kingston's version details her valiant abilities in combat, which are often credited to her gender and especially her righteous feminist anger. In her last battle, for example, she kills the corrupt emperor because he cannot see the world without sexist eyes. When he asks who she is, she responds, "I am a female avenger" (43). Instead of perceiving "female" as an adjective modifying "avenger," the emperor interprets her answer as a mission to avenge women, a mission he cannot fathom. Because the emperor will not acknowledge women as anything but "maggots in the rice" (43) or take responsibility for

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[236] If the (white) readers again balk at such a concept as "inscrutable" and metaphysically foreign, then they must acknowledge that such a concept is famously indigenous to the United States and one of its founding poets, Walt Whitman, who is also a professed influence of Kingston: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . . I contain multitudes" (85). See note 43 above about Anzaldúa's potential allusion to the same passage.

[237] Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong provides multiple examples of Kingston's departures from the traditional Fa Mu Lan myth, such as the section that details Maxine's/Fa Mu Lan's training, which "draws extensively on popular martial arts 'novels' or 'romances' (*wuxia xiaoshuo*) as well as from traditional fantasy lore or *shenxian* ('immortals')" ("Autobiography" 149). Also see Kathryn VanSpankeren's argument that Kingston applies myths about the Buddha to her version of Fa Mu Lan (47).

his abusive leadership, Maxine/Fa Mu Lan reveals to him the tattoos of revenge her parents had carved on her back. When he sees her breasts, she decapitates him (44).[238]

Despite the inspiration that Kingston's revised version of the woman warrior has offered to many feminists, both Chinese American and not, one of the most forceful complaints against it, voiced by Frank Chin among others, is that she incorporates a plot point from a myth about a male warrior, Yue Fei, "whose mother carved four characters (not entire passages [as in *The Woman Warrior*]) onto his back, exhorting him to be loyal to his country" (Wong "Autobiography" 149). When Fa Mu Lan receives the tattoos of vengeance, Kingston, in essence, strips them from a male hero unknown by most of her reading audience, and endows Maxine/Fa Mu Lan with his authority: "I gave a man's myth to a woman because it's part of the feminist war that's going on in *The Woman Warrior*, to take the men's stories away form them and give the strength of that story to a woman" (Bonetti interview 40). Whereas the Yue Fei myth is typically used in support of patriarchal and nationalist narratives, like that of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston here puts it in the service of a rebellious woman. Similar to Thought-Woman, Fa Mu Lan's mythic authority is granted both by her words and by the female body that engenders them.

Like Anzaldúa's Coatlicue and Silko's Yellow Woman, Fa Mu Lan is indigenous to Kingston's mythic tradition, so the figure has the legitimacy to challenge that tradition

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[238] An additional example that illustrates the benefit of her feminine gender includes when she begins to menstruate, at which point her training is not interrupted and she is "as strong as on any other day" (30). Instead of being told a horror story about (im)proper female behavior when she reaches puberty, as her mother does, the couple who are training her encourage her to let the blood "run," or "walk" in Chinese (31). She does not have to curb her natural biological experiences that mark her as female. Later in the chapter, Maxine comments that "[m]arriage and childbirth strengthen the swordswoman, who is not a maid like Joan of Arc" (48). This point is emphasized when Maxine/Fa Mu Lan becomes pregnant, which only makes her look more "powerful" in her armor (39). The old man also explains that her femininity is an asset, not a shortcoming: "Even when you fight against soldiers trained as you are, most of them will be men, heavy footed and rough. You will have the advantage" (32). Maxine/Fa Mu Lan's flexibility is what allows her to be an even more powerful warrior than the most formidable of men. It is also her feminine allegiance, her unwillingness to allow her men to "rape" their enemies, that allows her to bring "order" wherever she goes (37).

in particularly vigorous ways. Kingston's revisions, however, are even more extensive than Anzaldúa's and Silko's. She does, at one point in an interview, claim that "it never was a tradition to keep everything the same" (Bonetti interview 42), and so, like Anzaldúa and Silko, invokes tradition in order to make its narratives relevant in the contemporary historical context. However, the text of *The Woman Warrior* does not reference such an indigenous revisionary impulse, as does *Ceremony* through the voices of Night Swan, Ts'eh, and Betonie, perhaps because Kingston does not feel that she can look to a pre-colonial moment when women were the equals of men. Because she cannot or does not wish to recover a matriarchal origin, even one as adaptable and androgynous as Silko's Laguna, Kingston exploits the suggestions of (proto)feminism that already exist in Chinese mythology, especially the woman warrior stories (Chu 89). Doniger argues that there is feminist influence even in the most patriarchal of discourses, and just as "the dominated often reproduce the opinions of the dominators, so it is also true, though less so and less well known, that the dominators mirror the opinions of the dominated" (122). By accentuating these indigenous feminist undercurrents, Kingston takes advantage of the ambivalent political potentialities of myth, the way myth – whether from time immemorial or a contemporary adaptation – can serve hegemonic powers or liberate oppressed minorities.

Even if we recognize the feminist undercurrents indigenous to Chinese mythology and embellished by *The Woman Warrior*, however, Kingston still disallows absolute faith in mythic knowledge. By building into her text multiple moments when myths do not apply and by retaining patriarchal elements that undermine the feminist impetus of even Kingston's revised versions, *The Woman Warrior* reveals the shortcomings of traditional

mythic storytelling in the literary context. For example, in Kingston's retelling of the myth, Maxine/Fa Mu Lan's accomplishments still cannot be appreciated as those of a woman. Remaining the exception that proves the rule, she admits, "I never told them [her soldiers] the truth. Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations" (39). And, in the end, when Maxine/Fa Mu Lan returns to her husband's family, she, like the original Fa Mu Lan, submits to the patriarchal order and promises to give them more sons (45).

Wong describes such an irreconcilable ending as the narrator's attempt to "have her cake and eat it too: her glorious subversion of patriarchy ends in reconciliation with it" ("Kingston's" 29). Yet the mythic narrative concludes with an explanatory meta-comment; returning to that ambiguous conditional tense, Maxine wryly predicts that "the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality" (45). Hegemonic forces, then, will inevitably co-opt (and have already) her tale of rebellion into one of submission. Though Kingston has put such effort into (re)instating the myth's feminist agenda, it cannot help but function as a socially sanctioned narrative about Fa Mu Lan's deference to patriarchal and nationalist norms. While Anzaldúa uses historical discourse to expose and undermine the ways in which myths have been made to serve patriarchy, Kingston builds into the framework of her text a hermeneutic comment about how myth is perpetually and inevitably galvanized by dominant powers, no matter how bravely they are fought and written against. The patriarchal forces of traditionally accepted myth seem constantly to trump even Kingston's revisionary devices.

After the line break that follows the Fa Mu Lan myth, Maxine's historical voice returns and reveals, just about as bluntly as possible, how ineffectual knowing the myth has been for her: "My American life has been such a disappointment" (45). The episode serves as an escapist fantasy but has no bearing in the experiential world. Myth is revealed to be not only inconsistent but also falsely motivating: "Everywhere the legend is betrayed as a misleading fiction" (S. Smith 67). Such a deception makes Maxine feel inadequate in her daily life, where she can only throw tantrums in response to sexist sayings (46); where she can only concoct "gun and knife fantasies and [do] nothing useful" when "urban renewal tore down [her] parents' laundry" (48); where her "bad, small-person's voice" cannot defy her white bosses' racism (48-49); and where straight A's are worthless because they cannot be eaten. When she tells her mother her grades, Brave Orchid indifferently rejoins that she will tell her a much more noteworthy and "true story about a girl who saved her village" (45-46). In response to the great injustices of the world, Maxine realizes that she cannot assume the larger-than-life role of Fa Mu Lan and succeed: "To avenge my family, I'd have to storm across China to take 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. Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia" (49). Though diasporic Chinese critic Toming Jun Liu reads such a fantasy as "infantile" (26), Kingston's point is that myth does not merit blind faith and compliance, even it if it is the oldest and most revered type of narrative.

Kingston reiterates such a conviction when she exposes the discrepancies between myth and her own family history: "It is confusing that my family was not the poor to be championed. They were executed [during China's cultural revolution] like the barons in

the stories, when they were not barons" (51). The woman warrior myth, then, is not directly translatable into reality, which is far more complicated than an epic battle between good and evil, and far more grisly: "What fighting and killing I have seen [in Stockton, California] have not been glorious but slum grubby. […] Fights are confusing as to who has won" (51). Despite these inconsistencies, Kingston ends the Fa Mu Lan chapter with the realization, "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. […] What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance–not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (53). Here, Kingston begins her revision of the warrior woman into the writing woman.

In this literary manifestation, myth *can* productively impinge on the empirical realm. In the final chapter, Maxine discovers Ts'ai Yen, a legendary female poet from the second century.[239] Ts'ai Yen was kidnapped by the Hsiung-nu (the Huns), forced to marry their chief, and bore him two children before being ransomed and returned home. She wrote at least three poems about her experiences, though none of the extant versions can be definitively attributed to her (Gao 43). Conventionally, the myth of Ts'ai Yen, like that of Fa Mu Lan and Yue Fei, is "an ethnocentric tale about Chinese cultural superiority" (Schueller 62).[240] Yet Ts'ai Yen enters Kingston's text without such patriarchal baggage in a moment of collaborative storytelling between Maxine and Brave Orchid: "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (206). It is purposely unclear where the demarcation lies, although it is likely at the thematic divergence in the

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[239] VanSpanckeren claims that Ts'ai Yen is China's "first great woman poet" (45).
[240] Also see Cheung's "'Don't Tell'" on the conventional hegemonic function of the Ts'ai Yen myth (171).

middle of the story, which is first about Kingston's family back in China, where they often attended the theater. Kingston then departs, rather drastically, from her mother's story: "I like to think that at some of those performances, they heard the songs of Ts'ai Yen" (207).[241]

As Cheung argues, Ts'ai Yen acts as a supplementary revision to Fa Mu Lan's story: "She engages in another art hitherto dominated by men – writing – yet she does not disguise her sex" (*Articulate* 95). Despite her inability to understand the Huns' language, Ts'ai Yen can decipher the beautiful music they make. In response, she sings, and though her words are Chinese, the "barbarians understood their sadness and anger" (209). When she returns home, she composes poetry, which "translated well" (209). This last declarative line of *The Woman Warrior* attests to the crosscultural translatability of literary narrative. Sheryl A. Mylan astutely points out that the Fa Mu Lan story, given its many inconsistencies, does not "translate well" (138), and so the reader is meant to recognize that of Ts'ai Yen as a more productive alternative.

Though Cheung reads Kingston's endorsement of Ts'ai Yen as indicating reconciliation ("'Don't'" 171), I understand it as an ambivalent embrace, much like that of *Ceremony*'s anticlimactic ending, because Kingston describes the high note of the Huns' music, Ts'ai Yen's inspiration, as "an icicle in the desert" (208), ever at risk of melting away. Similarly, she does not allow for an easy allegorical correlation between Ts'ai Yen and any of her fictional characters, while arguments can be made for virtually every female character in the book as emulating Fa Mu Lan.[242] Perhaps for this reason,

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[241] Though Kingston provides some biographical details about Ts'ai Yen, she does not reveal where she learned about her, whether from her mother or possibly from her own research.

[242] Critics have debated back and forth if Ts'ai Yen is an allegorical figure for Maxine, Brave Orchid, or Chinese immigrants in general, but, ultimately, no match is perfect. See, for example, Sheryl A. Mylan's

critics have prioritized Fa Mu Lan, which Kingston herself has regretfully noticed: "Most readers remember Fa Mu Lan as the woman warrior, but I meant to question her weapons. […] As a pacifist, I would rather we use the power of Ts'ai Yen, the woman warrior who made words of the formations of birds in the sky" (*Through* 8). Yet we do not hear those words; Kingston does not provide Ts'ai Yen's poems and only names one. The poems' content, which actually conveys "anxiety, lamentation, and sorrow of exile" (Gao 43), is not what matters. Rather, it is the meta-commentary they evoke about the creative, literary effort to hear the words and appreciate the beauty of even one's greatest enemy.

Before she can reach even this tenuous stage in her literary approach to myth, one that can imagine beyond structuralist binaries of oppression, Maxine must first come to accept the interminability of her book-length project to distinguish "what is Chinese tradition and what is the movies" (6). Near the end, she is still sorting "out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (205), but the concluding Ts'ai Yen account is a deliberately awkward jumbling of family history and legendary narrative without any clarification about how or if they contribute to each other. When Maxine castigates her mother for confusing her about reality, for lying "with stories" (202), she experiences an epiphany that the only one listening to her complaints is herself (204). Her accusation is deflated and anti-climactic because Maxine realizes the benefits of not drawing artificial boundaries between what is

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claim that Ts'ai Yen is not Maxine, "a sojourner in barbarian cultures, longing to return to her native land. The United States is her native land, not China. […] It is Maxine's mother, Brave Orchid – also a consummate storyteller – who has spent long years away from her homeland in an alien culture" (149). Wong argues that Ts'ai Yen "represents, in a sense, the immigrant generation suffering from nostalgia and alienation" and so Maxine does not ruminate long on Ts'ai Yen's return for, to do so would be to "negate the validity of her life as an American-born Chinese" ("Kingston's" 33).

a "true story" and what is "just a story" (202); ultimately, they are not mutually exclusive categories. Debra Shostak recognizes the irony of such an authorial position when she argues that Maxine's frustration with her mother is analogous to the reader's likely frustration with Kingston. Both Maxine and the reader feel frustrated by the flouted "distinction between reality and fantasy, fiction and nonfiction" (58).[243] This deliberate mimesis serves as a self-reflexive critique of the youthful Maxine's and the impressionable reader's desire for impermeable boundaries between permeable categories. With her young narrator-self, Kingston provides a model for the reader, whose positivist attempts to sort out real from false and whose Orientalist tendencies to read her stories as ethnographic truth about China are constantly deferred.

Ultimately, Chin's accusations that Kingston provides the fake at the expense of the real fall flat, for such categories are undermined within the text itself. What, then, can explain her readers' penchant for reading fiction as fact, talk-stories as ahistorical truth? Though the Fa Mu Lan myth is no doubt inspiring as a feminist text, such seductive inspiration may well be its greatest vulnerability. No matter now persistently it is revised and revealed as ill-fitting, myth proves too susceptible to romanticizing projections. Despite all of Kingston's metacomments on the shortcomings of myth, Ts'ai Yen, the tenuous and literary alternative to the ahistorical, transcendent Fa Mu Lan, is mostly forgotten in the criticism. The woman warrior remains the dominant and indomitable

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[243] Cheung makes a similar argument: "Perhaps there is no greater index of the disparity between the narrator's pronouncements and the author's strategies than the ironic fact that the very criticism Maxine levels against her mother anticipates the criticism many Asian American intellectuals have leveled against *The Woman Warrior*" (*Articulate* 97-98).

force, associated with an exotic Chinese culture instead of a myth "transformed by America" (Kingston "Cultural Mis-Readings" 97).[244]

Despite Kingston's built-in suspicion of the seductive power of myth, even revised myths at that, *The Woman Warrior* was met with an uproar of complaints and a plethora of demeaning praise. Did Kingston fail to challenge the reader enough or to provide sufficient historical context?[245] Is the enemy Kingston fights too powerful to be vanquished by words alone? Laurie Patton and Wendy Doniger argue that "the presence of myth within literature or art, and the critics' tracing of it, is a deconstructive act in that it can interrupt the seamless unfolding of a work" (Introduction 17). They continue, "If one reads mythic elements correctly, one cannot help but see the ways in which they break down the ontological movement of the work toward autonomous meaning–by reminding one of the necessary reconfigurations of narrative and image that are entailed" (20-21). While this seems to suggest that the literary incorporation of myth is inherently a deconstructive act, Patton and Doniger indicate that it only assumes such a function when the reader engages the text according to a specific critical perspective. When myth is embedded in literature, a critic must approach it not from the theoretical assumptions of universalism but with the specific goal of uncovering seams of construction – the way it disrupts literary and historical time with transcendent time. In other words, subversion can only occur at the level of the reader, not the text. Given the risk of reception that

[244] David Leiwei Li argues that such a misguided focus can be attributed to the book's ripeness for (white) feminist interpretation, which "cancels the specificity of ethnic womanhood" and so limits "other possible interpretations" ("Re-presenting" 187).

[245] Much of the cultural work that Kingston put into her next publication, *China Men*, including a straightforward historical account of legislative discrimination against Chinese immigrants in the United States, is most likely an attempt to compensate for the mythic gambles she took, and perhaps lost, in *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston explains the need for this strategy because the "mainstream culture doesn't know the history of Chinese Americans, which has been written and written well" (Pfaff interview 15). She hopes now "another Chinese American writer won't have to write that history" (15). See the fifth chapter of Jinqi Ling's *Narrating Nationalisms* for more on the use of the historical in *China Men*.

accompanies any artistic incorporation of myth, especially that of minority Americans, Kingston (and Silko as well) builds into her text exemplary acts of reading to attempt to guide the reader. While Tayo fills in the gaps between the stars, Maxine comes to accept the permeable temporal boundary between myth, fiction, and history as productive. Like Maxine, Kingston's readers must distrust a too-easy conflation between myth and reality, must embrace the disorienting experience of temporal disjunction and generic juxtaposition, if they are to appreciate the radical potential of myth in both the literary and political realms.

Temporal Unwieldiness and the Interconnection of Oppressions

Because Anzaldúa's, Silko's, and Kingston's texts were so readily consumed by white feminists and mainstream critics in ways that served longstanding stereotypical assumptions and ethnocentrisms, members of their own communities protested the essentialist and romanticist readings that threaten to result from any literary engagement with myth.[246] Yet this problem of reception can be understood only by attending to the cross-purposes of these authors' political commitments: to simultaneously recover neglected feminist mythologies and revise nationalist ones to expose the mutually constitutive functioning of oppression. Temporal unwieldiness, ultimately, mirrors the systemic unwieldiness of power relations and the composite nature of any identity. Just as the primitive/modern and myth/history binaries must be exposed as falsely opposed, so too must the dualistic structure between white man and black man or white man and white woman be revised into a network, a constellation, of oppressions. To acknowledge

[246] Critics that attribute the disputes to such unattractive explanations as professional jealousy or sexism do an injustice to the serious challenge faced by minority authors in their attempts to manage a vexed mythic heritage.

the ways in which myths consistently infiltrate non-mythic discourses in the service of the dominant is to open up space for the consciousness-transformation that womanists and third-world women in the 1970s and 1980s were calling for.

Though Anzaldúa, Silko, and Kingston manage such a conflicted project in a self-reflexive mode, they do not do so to the extent that would classify their works as postmodern.[247] Anzaldúa's and Silko's focus on origins and Kingston's embrace of Ts'ai Yen ultimately disallow infinite signification. Wong, for example, denies the postmodern label for *The Woman Warrior* because "its tenuous referential grounding is not motivated by a sense of depletion or a self-mocking mistrust of language. On the contrary, Kingston has great faith in the power of language to overcome alienation, to create alternative 'metaphors to live by,' to communicate, to bring together" ("Ethnic" 283-284). Silko similarly diagnoses disconnection as the problem with postmodernism because language always allows for connection (Perry interview 335). In this way, their temporally multilayered fictions are analogous to Dominick LaCapra's historiographic model that negotiates between the "documentary or self-sufficient research model," in which "primary (preferably archival) documents" authenticate "facts about the past" (*Writing* 2), and the "radically constructivist position" of Hayden White. Such a paradoxical strategy of simultaneously having faith in language to convey truth and always doubting that truth, of recovering their myths and revising them too, of framing an

[247] Testifying to the ambivalent position of these texts, at different points in the bodies of criticism, each one has been referred to as both modernist and postmodernist, yet neither assignation quite fits. For example, Linda Hutcheon argues that *The Woman Warrior* is a postmodern text, but in her reading, she characterizes the narrator as a dual personality, neither Chinese nor American (72-73) and so denies her a coherent identity. So much of the text, though, makes claims to an established Chinese American identity, even if it is constantly in flux.

other mythic time in a literary present, is no doubt one of the mainsprings for these books' mixed reception histories.

In a study that includes both Silko and Kingston, Bonnie TuSmith alternately attributes the reception problem to the authors' modernist techniques of demanding reader participation: "A major problem for ethnic writers is the audience's lack of knowledge regarding ethnic American histories and cultures" (53). Is mythic revision, then, a luxury only afforded by those who identify solely with a familiar dominant tradition? If so, a successful minority feminist project seems frustratingly beyond reach. Perhaps in response to their detractors, Silko and Kingston modified their strategies in later works, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), both of which are more identifiably postmodern in terms of their textual play and global focus. The mythic revision accomplished by Anzaldúa, Silko, and Kingston, then, might best be understood as a temporary victory over patriarchal and stereotypical interpretations, in Russ Castronovo's understanding: "Too often […] resistance is neither a new conclusion nor a promised land, but a temporary victory susceptible to national retrenchment" (204). Just as Anzaldúa recognizes that minority literature must "go nationalist […] until its identity as ethnic people is validated" before it can "uphold a diverse image of subjectivity and identities" (Torres interview 133), so too can the feminist minority literature that followed be appreciated as a requisite step toward challenging dominant mythic narratives and building new ones, even if such a project necessitated a paradoxical and easily co-opted methodology.

If women minority writers' project is to simultaneously "Deconstruct, construct" (82), in Anzaldúa's terms, how is one to embrace deconstruction without inviting such an

interrogation upon the very formations of identity and myths that one is constructing? Perhaps because such literary categories as modernism and postmodernism were mostly established by white theorists in reference to literature written by white authors, they do not adequately apply to minority discourse that simultaneously seeks solace in tradition while exposing such tradition as constructed.[248] By resisting a structuralist paradigm, minority feminists pave the way for poststructuralist concepts of identity but resist comprehensively deconstructed models incapable of political engagement or reimagining categories of American citizenship. With the rise of multiculturalism and minority literature's secure acceptance in the academy, a mode of criticism was needed to speak to this vexed discursive realm of identity politics. A startling amount of that criticism has found its model in the mythic tradition, especially in the figure of the trickster – the mythic incarnation of minority literary theory.

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[248] John Lowe similarly challenges Frederic Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard, and other theorists of postmodernism, "who have failed to note developments beyond the narrow parameters of their theory in the very texts that one would presume should generate such an apparatus in the first place. I would further suggest that if postmodern theorists had developed their definition and paradigms with ethnic writers and texts in mind, we would have a more accurate and useful sense of both the way postmodernist writing functions in general and the social functions this new form of writing continues to serve, especially within the ethnic communities of this nation" (104).

Chapter Four: Monkey Myths and Critical Tricksters

In the 1980s and 1990s, both poststructuralist theory and multicultural literature flourished in the US academy. Derridean deconstruction, feminist theory, new historicism, and such new "interdisciplines" (P. Deloria 8) as African American studies, women's studies, and ethnic studies all proved invaluable for literary critics to challenge the universalizing methods of new criticism and structuralism, which often upheld the patriarchal Euro-American tradition as the pinnacle of cultural production. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty, among others, has pointed out, the origins of the interdisciplinary departments and programs organized around concepts of identity "can be traced to oppositional social movements" (187). The Civil Rights, Power, women's, and Third World movements, as I have discussed in Chapters Two and Three, "fueled the demand for a knowledge and history 'of our own'" (Mohanty 187). Given the alternate origins they emplotted, these revived histories and mythologies proved especially threatening to dominant mythic narratives and policies of the nation.

As shown in Chapter One, such exceptionalist national narratives touted unity, individual achievement, and destined progress while depending on the oppression of racial minorities and women and the exploitation of their underpaid or unpaid labor. Just as multiculturalism was gaining ground in the academy and in grade-school curriculum, formidably challenging these exceptionalist narratives, arguments voiced primarily by the political right accused academia of promoting the erosion of (a Euro-American) literary and cultural tradition. Over the course of the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, such Bush administration education leaders as Lynne Cheney, William Bennett, and Diane Ravitch, and such scholars as Allan Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, Dinesh D'Souza, and Arthur

M.. Schlesinger portrayed multiculturalism's focus on difference as "disuniting" America, in Schlesinger's phrasing. While its proponents viewed multiculturalism as a necessary challenge to monoculturalism, its adversaries viewed it as a hostile attack on US values, identity, and patriotism.

Also since its inception, multiculturalism's inquiry based on concepts of identity has been undermined by another contingent of thinkers, primarily from the intellectual left. In many ways, the rise of French theory in the US academy supported the claims to difference espoused by women's and ethnic studies. Linda Hutcheon, for one, credits African American studies and feminist theory as largely responsible for the "postmodernist refocusing on historicity" (16). Driven by the progressive motive to deflate the influence of master narratives, poststructuralist theories reveled in subverting foundational beliefs in identity, history, and objective knowledge. They often did so by exposing how such concepts are always mediated through a phallocentric and ethnocentric language tradition.

While poststructuralist suspicion of universals made way for the emergence of heretofore marginalized literary and cultural traditions, it also threatened to undermine minority authors' and critics' aspiration to theorize a sense of cultural identity and heritage through essential concepts of race and a trust in the truth-value of history and experience. As Norma Alarcón writes of the groundbreaking minority feminist collection, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa: Its "existential writings foreshadowed, *avant la lettre*, the poststructuralist subject, yet emerged as a paradoxical, contradictory subject whose own pursuit of 'identity politics' was fissured by every other sentence through an affirmation of

difference that questioned every category of import to the formation of a new society" (136).[249] Given the ways in which poststructuralist theory undermines the authority of experience, and given the degree to which appeals to experience fueled politically motivated theories of racial difference, poststructuralism proved inconsistent with the goals of forming coherent concepts of culturally specific identity and tradition. As Patricia Hill Collins puts it, "Deconstructive methodologies operate more effectively as a critique of power than as a theory of empowerment" (140-141).

Virtually since its inception, then, minority identity politics and multiculturalism have had to confront this theoretical impasse between poststructuralist deconstruction and essentialist appeals to racial difference.[250] As I have indicated in my discussions of both Power literature and feminist minority literature, expressions of minority identity politics labor to contest assimilative and racist definitions of identity while reconstructing more liberative versions – without inviting such deconstructive methods upon the very narratives and concepts being constructed. R. Radhakrishnan describes such a seemingly vexed project as such: "The constituency of 'the ethnic' [...] has to actualize, enfranchize, and empower its own 'identity' and coextensively engage in the deconstruction of the very logic of 'identity' and its binary and exclusionary politics" (50). Because theoretical understandings of racial identity seem to compel essentialist

[249] See Chapter Three for more on *This Bridge* and its influence on minority feminism.

[250] Such in impasse is analogous to the crisis of representation evidenced in historiography at least since Hayden White's introduction of tropological theory. Dominick LaCapra is just one historian who attempts to mediate between objectivist and constructivist methodologies. See White's *The Content of the Form* and LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* and also Chapter Three of this dissertation. The impasse can also be understood as analogous to the challenge faced by poststructuralist philosophy: "While this disenchantment with belief in atemporal truths and indubitable foundations has liberated exciting new possibilities for knowledge and understanding, it correspondingly raises the spectre of relativism and indeed irrationalism" (Healy 2). Paul Healy actually dates the decline of philosophical foundationalism with Hegel, who challenged the belief that "the monological subject constitutes the indisputable fulcrum in our quest for knowledge and understanding" (1). Yet, as Tom Rockmore asserts, foundationalism has persisted in various philosophical guises through today (4).

arguments that supersede historical context, critics of minority identity and literature find themselves depending on such appeals while challenging the essentialist claims to racial and cultural superiority propagated by hegemonic Euro-American discourse.

The vulnerability of racial essentialism, as we witnessed in the creative and theoretical negotiations made by Power literature and in the controversies surrounding minority feminist literature, lies in its ahistorical nostalgia that disregards the inherently hybrid, fluid, and contested nature of identity. Because it has become "a commonplace of research biology that, in fact, there is no gene for race" (Lee 4), any concept of racial difference anchored by biological argument inevitably falls back on questionable theories of blood quantum or eugenics. In his well-known essay "The Uncompleted Argument," for example, K. Anthony Appiah points out that though W.E.B. Du Bois attempted to "assimilate the unbiological nature of races" (22), he continually resorted to an understanding of race determined by such phenotypical markers as skin, hair, and bone. Though Du Bois labored to bound notions of a racial group by the shared histories of a community, Appiah argues that he failed to acknowledge that that community must already be categorized by the "brand" of color before one can identify its history (27).

Given what Paula M. L. Moya refers to the "epistemological and political dangers of essentialist conceptions of identity" (*Learning* 9), a characteristically poststructuralist understanding of the socially constructed nature of race appeared to some theorists in the 1980s and 1990s to be the only responsible alternative. Moya describes many white cultural critics' turn to "postmodernist deconstructions of identity" as the "safest, most progressive way to go" (9). The limitation of such anti-foundationalism, however, is that it appears to undermine the ability to act in the experiential realm and to transmit

meaning via language. What could be a powerful interest group threatens to fade into a figurative, and ultimately fictional, body.[251] Paul Gilroy, for one, criticizes poststructuralist theories as evacuating human agency (77). Additionally, much poststructuralist theory remains embedded in detrimental evolutionary narratives that situate Euro-American "civilizations" as the most sophisticated and developed; Jean-François Lyotard indicatively claims that his postmodern "report on knowledge" only applies to the "most highly developed contemporary society" (11).

In turn, many cultural and feminist critics have suggested that the simultaneity of marginalized groups beginning to express their subjectivity and the deconstruction of subjectivity in general is actually motivated. As Jace Weaver argues, "It is no coincidence that just as postcolonial peoples find the power to assert their own autonomy and personhood, the postmodern theorists of continental Europe and their Amer-European disciples proclaim an end to subjectivity. It serves once again to preserve the myths of conquest and the literature of dominance" (*That* 141).[252] Such preservation in the academic realm can be understood as tapping into the hegemonic influence of American exceptionalist mythology, which, as discussed in Chapter One, derives its influence from its ability to co-opt what initially appears foreign. By embracing dissent

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[251] Judith Butler, who, in gender studies especially, has been taken to task for seemingly doing away with all conceptions of the subject through her poststructuralist methodology, acknowledges that "in this country, lobbying efforts are virtually impossible without recourse to identity politics" (49). However, she claims that "to take the construction of the subject as a political problematic is not the same as doing away with the subject; to deconstruct the subject is not to negate or throw away the concept" (48-49).

[252] Butler expresses this suspicion as such: "There is the repeated refrain that, just now, when women are beginning to assume the place of subjects, postmodern positions come along to announce that the subject is dead (there is a difference between positions of poststructuralism which claim that the subject *never* existed, and postmodern positions which claim that the subject *once* had integrity, but no longer does)" (48). See Chapter Three, especially the section of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, for more on this simultaneity.

and pluralism, it translates what is potentially threatening mythic difference into a familiar mythic component of a larger, non-threatening, unified tradition.

Given American exceptionalist mythology's dominance, we can clearly understand how the culture wars successfully disabled the initial promise of multiculturalism. What could have been a radical system of difference gave way to a diluted cultural pluralism, one suspiciously akin to the melting pot mythology that had so long circumscribed politically disruptive claims of racial difference. To retain an intact myth of American exceptionalism, multiculturalism's assertions of *racial* difference were translated into a less homogenous but no less exceptionalist version celebrating *cultural* difference.[253] In other words, over the course of the culture wars, the initially radical concept of multiculturalism was redefined "in terms of an apolitical, ahistorical cultural pluralism" (Mohanty 197).[254]

Recognizing how multiculturalism has been co-opted by its critics on the right and undermined by the influence of poststructuralism in the academy demands a consideration of the ways in which critics of minority US literature and culture attempted to respond to these challenges. While poststructuralist theory risked ahistoricism and undercut claims to experience, it also offered a strategy of subversion useful for scholars attempting to formulate theories of culturally specific literary traditions. Influential theorists of minority literature and culture of the 1980s and 1990s recognized such a value but framed the contributions of French theory within culturally specific

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[253] Walter Benn Michaels loudly denounces this trend in *Our America*: "What's wrong with cultural identity is that, without recourse to the racial identity that (in its current manifestations) it repudiates, it makes no sense" (142)

[254] See the dissertation's introduction for a discussion of "critical multiculturalism," an interdisciplinary movement to which Mohanty can be understood as contributing that worked to resist the way multiculturalism was devolving into cultural pluralism.

philosophies and aesthetic traditions. In other words, strategies of subversion, which resonated strongly with familiar poststructuralist theories, were revealed to be indigenous to the culturally specific traditions themselves.

Such theorists of minority literature and culture as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gerald Vizenor articulated such a homology by appealing to myths as repositories of culturally specific traditions. At the same time, these traditions filled the need for an aesthetic theory that could resist the co-optive influence of a watered-down multiculturalism. As witnessed by the neglect of much Power literature as well as the ways in which minority feminist literatures were so readily appropriated in the American literary tradition, the call for a culturally specific literary theory proved all the more pressing. While Appiah seems to embrace the incompletability of Du Bois' quest to define race, such cultural and literary critics as Gates and Vizenor attempted to formulate a functional model, which is usually admitted as partial, for analyzing and understanding identity as an empirical category that continues to resist assimilative pressures.[255] In so doing, they seek out a theoretical middle ground through which to reconcile the binary opposition between essentialism and racial/ethnic constructivism that seemed, at least briefly, to be the only two models through which to approach identity politics.

Such a mediating theoretical drive similarly manifested in the accompanying production of much minority literature in the 1980s and 1990s, especially that often categorized as postmodern. By the notoriously slippery term "postmodern," I am

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[255] Some examples, which I will discuss over the course of this chapter, include that of Houston A. Baker, Jr., who proposes a vernacular theory with the primary trope of the blues, which aptly figures African American culture because it is "nonlinear, freely associative," and "anonymous" (5); Craig Womack's "historical and materialist theoretical commitment" ("Theorizing" 353) to American Indian experience; and Moya's postpositivist realism. Further examples include Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, Ramón Saldívar's dialectics of difference, and Sean Kicummah Teuton's "tribal realism." All of these models can be understood as constructive partners to both Gates and Vizenor's theories, the focus of this chapter.

referring to experimental literary trends that accompanied the theoretical developments of poststructuralism: self-reflexivity, metafictional commentary, narrative excess, and the conflation of conventionally distinct categories and genres such as history and fiction.[256] Before advancing to a discussion of Gates' and Vizenor's use of myth in their theoretical models, I will first offer an interpretation of a literary analogue by a familiar author, Maxine Hong Kingston. In an interview, in fact, Kingston claims that when writing *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), she was thinking of Gates' *Signifying Monkey* (Janette 151). This example should bring to the fore the ways in which myth provided a productive middle-ground for those attempting to express concepts of minority identity during the heyday of academic poststructuralism and amidst the culture-wars' clamor about American tradition.

Despite its affinity for deferring meaning and relativizing foundational concepts of identity, postmodernism was readily embraced by many minority artists who remained committed – if self-reflexively so – to the project of restoring a sense of collective identity and recovering transmittable histories and myths. Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* is one example of such a stylistically postmodern yet politically engaged novel, one that exemplifies the impasse between poststructuralist destabilizations of identity and essentialist commitments to it. Set in Berkeley during the 1960s, *Tripmaster Monkey*

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[256] My distinction does not always translate to postmodernist and poststructuralist theorists' use of the terms. For example, what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as "postmodern," an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv) I would correlate with poststructuralism, reserving postmodern for a specific description of literary development. Similarly, Gerald Vizenor categorizes his criticism as "postmodern" in his edited collection, *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*. While I understand his literature as postmodern, I find "poststructuralist" to be a more useful descriptor for his criticism in order to understand it as part of the same theoretical projects as such poststructuralist theorists as Derrida, Lacan, and Bakhtin, whom he frequently cites. David A. Hollinger makes a useful distinction between two different postmodernisms: "an American, literary-artistic postmodernism defined against the canonical modernists of 1890-1930, and a French, philosophical-political postmodernism defined against the Enlightenment" (129). When I am discussing literary postmodernism in this chapter, I am, basically, referring to the former, and when discussing poststructuralist theory, I am referring to the latter.

explores a moment of artistic and political origin when minority American identity was being aggressively re-imagined, as indicated by my discussion of Power literature in Chapter Two. Its protagonist is aspiring playwright Wittman Ah Sing, a fictional version of Frank Chin, though Kingston diplomatically denies the resemblance.[257] While getting fired from his job and going on welfare, marrying a white woman he just met, crashing parties, dodging the draft, and ranting throughout the whole book, Wittman wrestles with his sense of self as a Chinese American, attempting to overcome self-hate through boisterous and often offensive behavior.

Neither an indictment nor a glorification, Kingston's portrait of Wittman assumes a mythic bearing when she repeatedly refers to him as the eponymous "monkey" of the book's title, an identity the character himself embraces: "I am really: the present-day U.S.A. incarnation of the King of the Monkeys" (33). The Monkey King is a trickster figure in Chinese mythology primarily known for his humorous antics, his ability to outwit bigger and stronger foes, and his tendency to be tricked just as often as he tricks others. His mythic narrative is based on the historical event when the Buddhist monk Tripitaka brought Buddhism to China from India. By the end of the tenth century, "this epic journey, long a favorite subject for storytellers" incorporated supernatural elements,

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[257] For those familiar with Chin's writing style, when reading *Tripmaster Monkey*, it becomes easy to imagine Chin as the actual speaker of the text. There are many explicit references to Chin's writings, style, and even autobiography in *Tripmaster Monkey*. Just one example is an allusion to one of the main characters of Chin's collection of short stories, *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco RR Co.*, Dirigible (196). In a private conversation with Shawn Wong, one of Chin's good friends and collaborators, Amy Ling reports that he "was amazed at how accurately Maxine had caught Frank's voice; he phoned Frank to say, 'She must have been a fly on the wall when you were talking'" ("Maxine" 155). The novel also acknowledges the controversy between Kingston and Chin discussed in Chapter Three, especially through its subtitle: "His Fake Book." For Kingston's denial of the correspondence, see her interview with William Satake Blauvelt (80-81). In this interview, she claims that she and Chin have much in common, so if Wittman is a version of Chin then he is also a version of herself. Ling, however, reveals that "in a personal conversation," Kingston "admitted that Frank Chin was 'an inspiration' for Wittman, but, as if to dilute this confession, she added that her husband (an actor), her son (a musician), and her brother were also models" (*Between* 149).

including the travel companion Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, which became integral to religious rituals commemorating the event (Palmer and Xiaomin 36). Wu Ch'eng-en's sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West*, still one of the most popular novels in China, recorded the myth in printed form, in part to promote Buddhism and belittle the competing Taoist and Confucian faiths (37).[258]

In addition to his own acknowledged Chinese *American* trickster status as "the U.SA. incarnation," Wittman Ah Sing evokes crosscultural significance through his name's reference to the quintessential American poet Walt Whitman, who "sings" himself.[259] In Wittman, an identifiably Chinese mythic figure is aligned with a foundational American literary figure, so that Kingston's protagonist develops a sense of self and community through mythic recovery as well as through the reconciliation of crosscultural narratives within the literary context. Despite the characteristically postmodern narrative style of *Tripmaster Monkey,* the novel's ultimate purpose is to allow Wittman to discover, to "sing," himself and his community through staging a play.[260] Mostly improvised and collaborative, his play ascribes such traditionally Chinese mythic figures as Kwan Kung (spelled Gwan Goong in *Tripmaster*) and Fa Mu

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[258] Long published anonymously, the novel has been credited to Wu Ch'eng-en beginning in the twentieth century. Martin Palmer and Zhao Xiaomin argue that "rarely in history has a written novel, as far as we can see as just a good read, managed to create so many new deities" (37). According to this genealogy, then, history becomes fiction, which then becomes myth. The myth has also been staged theatrically for centuries.

[259] Wittman can also be read as an analogue for Tripitaka given the novel's title, "*Trip*master Monkey." Such a parallel makes it possible to read Wittman's journey as a pilgrimage responsible for bringing sacred materials to his people, Chinese Americans or Americans more generally, in the form of his plays. If such is the case, then Kingston can be read as Wittman's magical aid, "the American girl Monkey" (157), as Lewis Hyde describes her.

[260] The unwieldy structure of the novel can also be attributed to its affiliation with the traditional narrative style of *The Journey to the West*, which has a meandering plotline and chapter endings that anticipate each subsequent chapter. Here is an example of one of Kingston's chapter endings that echoes a chapter ending of Wu Ch'eng-en's book, as well as other traditional Chinese novels and narratives: "Our Wittman is going to work on his play for the rest of the night. If you want to see whether he will get that play up, and how a poor monkey makes a living so he can afford to spend the weekday afternoon drinking coffee and hanging out, go on to the next chapter" (35).

Lan, the woman warrior, "star roles in *American* theater" (138; emphasis added), and renders Wittman's eyes "cowboy eyes" (314). Through such syncretic discourse, *Tripmaster Monkey* emplots a similar narrative of indigeneity as those developed by Power literature.

Wittman narrates his story, but he also shares narrative control with an unnamed speaker; the text, however, does not explicitly designate when this new narrative voice interrupts. In interviews, Kingston identifies her as Kuan Yin, a Buddhist bodhisattva and the goddess of mercy, the same goddess who assigned the Monkey King to serve Tripitaka.[261] This forgiving but also judicious narrative voice provides an interpretive lens through which to understand Wittman's successes and failures, as well as the underlying insecurities that motivate his actions and his need to discover himself and his community. For example, when he thinks with envy of the "Howl" case and the "famous" "gang of poets" who came to the poem's and publisher's defense, she observes, "He, poor monkey, was yet looking for others of his kind" (21), indicating the lack of a recognized community among Asian American artists – one of the major incentives for Chin's editorship of *Aiiieeeee!*[262] Kingston's parodic use of Chin allows her to channel his previous attempts to theorize a collective sense of Chinese/Asian American identity and contribute to his Power literature project. In turn, by supplementing the parody, a form especially productive for postmodern interrogation (Hutcheon 11), with the compassionate voice of Kuan Yin, Kingston refigures Wittman's disruptive antics and postmodern wordplay into hermeneutic commentary on his very project. While the trickster figure works to establish a sense of collective identity via mythic reference, the

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[261] See, for example, her interview with Marilyn Chin (88-89).
[262] See Chapter Two.

Kuan Yin figure provides an interpretive perspective that acknowledges both the pitfalls and the benefits of such an effort.

Though surreal, open-ended, and highly allusive, Wittman's play has real-world implications. Wittman insists, "There's a war on. It comes this way, we have to take part. You can't stand aside and let your people be slaughtered. You have to be realistic" (142). He later reiterates such a stance: "I'm a realist. […] It's the business of a playwright to bring thoughts into reality" (240). And the "real" function of his play is "revolution" (305). As the Kuan Yin narrator explains, it is the staging of "a fake war, which might very well be displacing some real war. […] He was defining a community. […] Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it" (306). Through the realm of the fictional, which mediates the historical and the mythic, Wittman's play, and, by association, Kingston's novel, encroaches on the political realm with tangible, liberatory repercussions. Both function as a protest of the literal Vietnam War as well as the more abstract war being fought against racism, sexism, and self-hate.[263]

Ultimately, Kingston's turn to the trickster figure to develop a coherent and materialist, yet candidly constructed sense of Asian American identity – since community "is not built once-and-for-all" – is indicative of a significant trend in minority writing of the 1980s and 1990s that sought to reconcile the theoretical adversaries of essentialism and poststructuralism by way of myth. When discussing *Tripmaster Monkey* in an interview, Kingston describes it as evincing a

[263] The Kuan Yin narrator is not wholly convinced of the successful transmission of Wittman's message, however: "He [Wittman] was losing some audience. […] They love fight scenes; they love firecrackers. But during a soliloquy when a human being is thinking out how to live, everybody walks about, goes to the can, eats, visits. O audience" (333).

> Belief [that] we can all own one another's myths. All we have to do is hear them, and then they become ours. I am making a statement there against what's been happening in ethnic studies, against the idea that you have to be by blood an Indian or black in order to own those creation myths or to own James Baldwin. People worry so much about assimilation, losing culture. They are so possessive of myths. I am saying that these myths belong to all of us. I'm saying, 'I'm going to give you one. When you hear this myth, you're Chinese also.' This is my way of trying to get Wittman to transcend race. Even as he's talking about being a Chinese, it's really an American problem. This transcendence has to be done in a storytelling, imagistic way. (Janette interview 155)

As if to argue against Paula Gunn Allen's, Frank Chin's, and others' assertions that myths are the possessions of a certain community, Kingston here suggests that myths, transmitted via literature, allow for crosscultural alliance in a way that moves beyond the separatist rhetoric of Power literature.[264] For Kingston, having access to and sharing myths, not blood quantum, are what identify individuals with a specific community. Yet this deconstructive move also documents the Americanness of Chinese myth, and vice versa, in a way that evokes Power literature's use of alternate origin stories to make powerful claims to American citizenship rights and indigeneity.

Additional examples of postmodern literary attempts to retain politically relevant concepts of community while perceiving such concepts as derived through narrative include: Nathaniel Mackey's experimental poetry and fiction that accumulate West African and Muslim mythologies; Louise Erdrich's serial novels that interweave Anishinaabe myth with the histories and genealogies of her characters; and Sandra

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[264] See Chapter Three.

Cisneros' roguish poetry and fiction that inject the mythic directly into the historic.[265] Chicano poet and playwright Juan Felipe Herrera attributes the turn to the trickster directly to the shortcomings of multiculturalism, which cannot adequately chronicle significant political moments.[266] To "initiate the process of resolving one's cultural disenfranchisement in the United States," his only recourse, he claims, has been to "become a trickster, a language saboteur, an akimbo, cross-eyed seeker of self. The path of the colored trickster requires fracture; we must disrupt the terms, figures, and images of colonialism, first, if we dare go looking for the way back home" (102). For Herrera, the mythic trickster allows for the means, tempered by poststructuralist suspicion of nostalgia, to discover his specific cultural origins (103-104) and to actively combat "cultural disenfranchisement."

Contemporaneous with this postmodern mythic turn in minority American literature, two of the most prominent critics in their respective fields, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gerald Vizenor, similarly appealed to the trickster figure in order to mediate between essentialism and poststructuralism in the theoretical realm.[267] These analogous strategies, combined with the prevalence of myth in minority American literature more generally, mandate a theoretical study of myth as a literary critical category. When myth is acknowledged as a foundational yet adaptable form of narrative in the literary context,

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[265] Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and *Flight to Canada* (1976) are two works of fiction that animate traditional trickster figures, both from African/African American and Native American traditions. Even though they precede the time frame I am discussing, I believe they are very much a part and instigator of the trickster fiction and criticism I am referring to here. For example, Gates credits *Mumbo Jumbo* with inspiring his signifying criticism (*Signifying* 218).
[266] See the dissertation's introduction for a discussion of the pitfalls of multiculturalism.
[267] Additional critics not discussed here who look to myth to develop culturally specific literary theories include: Vèvè A. Clark, who developed the "mythical theory of textual relationships based on the Haitian Vodoun sign for the Divine Twins, the *marasa*" in order to "imagine beyond the binary" (43) and develop a "diaspora literacy" for interpreting literatures of the African Diaspora; and José David Saldívar, who argues that the folkloric narrative of the *corrido* "is the central sociopoetic Chicano paradigm" (13).

its ability to simultaneously make claims to truth while exposing those truths as socially determined can be embraced as a productive hermeneutic, a means to establish a culturally specific literary theory that also has comparative potential. In this way, the literary self-consciousness inspired by minority feminist authors' revision of myth can be appreciated as paving the way for the formation of minority literary criticism through the implementation of the mythic tradition. The critical work incorporated into the revisionary and metafictional projects of Anzaldúa, Silko, and Kingston, in other words, is made explicit in the mythic literary criticism of Gates and Vizenor.

As I have been suggesting throughout the dissertation, because myth is a communal narrative that bounds a group of people through intersubjective experiences of telling, listening, and reading, and not by the color of their skin or the deity they worship, it has the capacity to evade both racial essentialism and complete deconstruction while providing a tangible object of study: a narrative. With this understanding, I accept the call of Michael Omi and Howard Winant to approach race exceptionally, so as to challenge it both as an essence and as an illusion and focus on it as a unique collection of "social meanings" engaged in political struggles (55). Myth is a ripe and universal manifestation of such social meanings; it is therefore no surprise that it has functioned so influentially in minority American literature and has assumed a primary role in minority American literary criticism. Myth, for many writers, has made the theoretical impasse between essentialism and deconstruction a productive one.

The mediating potential of myth results, in part, from its ambivalent meaning-making capacity. According to Eric Gould, myths emerge in the moment of disconnect between language and reality, between meaning and event (6). In their weighty

expression that acknowledges their own inexpressibility, myths can register the disconnection by inviting hermeneutic suspicion while pointing to the foundational significance of that which is being expressed. Through their universal attempt to "reconstitute an original event or explain some fact about human nature and its worldly or cosmic context," myths "necessarily refer to some essential meaning which is absent until it appears as a function of interpretation" (6).

Related to this semiotic function of myth that mediates between essential truth and its linguistic reconstruction is its mediating function in the political realm. As indicated by my analyses of early minority American literature, Power literature, and feminist minority American literature, myths encompass both conservative and radical orientations. They can – and often do – support hegemonic ideologies, yet they can also subvert such ideologies, especially when embraced as malleable narratives in the context of a literary narrative. It is a critic's responsibility to take into account such factors as power relations, historical context, and legacies of suffering in order to determine which functions of a particular myth, whether hegemonic, liberating, or both, are coming to the fore and which are being suppressed. Laurie L. Patton argues that reading the process of myth's "mythologization" allows a critic to discern how it is both conservative – how it makes transcendent claims – and how it is radical – how it relativizes those claims. Patton is one of the first scholars of myth not only to acknowledge but also to theorize the paradoxical politics of myth: while it usually works in support of ideological goals, it contains within its narrative construct possibilities of revolution (217). When we recognize the ways temporalities are juxtaposed, such as mythic and narrative time, within the realm of the literary, we are compelled to acknowledge the conventions –

generic, social, political – that both promote and limit meaning. Patton's "practical theory of myth," then, delineates how the unique category of myth provides minority authors and critics with the narrative materials to conceive of minority identity in simultaneously deconstructive and reconstructive ways.

Always in the process of deconstructing master narratives while making symbolic space for alternate ones, minority American literature discovers an aptly mediating narrative support in myth. The trickster discourse practiced by Gates' Signifying Monkey, for example, "functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically" (*Signifying* 124). Because the (usually male) trickster character animates through his very being what are some of the defining characteristics of myth – its manipulation of language conventions, its ability to encompass contradictions and mediate between them, its crosscultural relevance, its simultaneously conservative and revolutionary potential – he serves as an apt synecdoche for the way myth functions hermeneutically in minority literary criticism.[268] This is not to say that only myths or literature that incorporates the trickster figure inspire or enjoin such a criticism, but it is to say that the trickster makes most explicit the critical usefulness of the literary-mythic paradigm for minority American writers. As "the archetype who attacks all archetypes," as the "the character in myth who threatens to take the myth apart" (Hyde 14), the trickster occupies an inimitable position in the literary and critical context: he proves himself capable of endorsing while commenting on myth's capacity to be simultaneously

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[268] To avoid cumbersome pronoun usage, I will refer to the generic trickster figure with the masculine pronoun. While most tricksters are male, their gender is often blurred, and so they are more accurately identified as androgynous. As Gates argues, Esu is "genderless, or of dual gender, as recorded Yoruba and Fon myths suggest, despite his remarkable penis feats" (*Signifying* 29). Vizenor likewise refers to the trickster as hermaphroditic (*Trickster* x). Lewis Hyde provides some examples of female tricksters (336-343), although he argues that all of the "canonical tricksters operate in patriarchal mythologies, and it would seem that patriarchy's prime actors, even at the margins, are male" (8).

disruptive and productive. It is from the Greek trickster, Hermes, after all, that we get the word "hermeneutic."

Theories of the Trickster

Known for their humor and for playing tricks to outwit their more powerful opponents, tricksters appear in mythic narratives across the globe, though scholars have focused primarily on Native American and African/African American cultures.[269] Because the term "trickster" is an imposed anthropological category on infinitely diverse mythic stories, no one trickster exemplifies all of the supposed traits of the archetypal figure, and no definition of the trickster perfectly applies to a particular example. Though William J. Hynes and William G. Doty admit that it may not be possible to provide a "generalizing comparativist view" of the trickster, they believe that there are enough similarities "to speak, at least informally, of a generic 'trickster figure'" ("Introducing" 2).[270] Though disruptive, tricksters often assume an etiological role in mythic traditions and are "regularly honored as the creators of culture" (Hyde 8). They are also identified as liminal figures, hovering between animals and human and gods, between earth and heaven, between male and female. They therefore occupy a characteristically border life, at the crossroads, without a fixed form. Simply by their existence, they call into question the concept of borders and the aspiration to categorize. As Kimberly M. Blaeser puts it, "Not either/or, but either/and: Trickster mediates between supposed contradictory forces

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[269] Hyde argues that tricksters only exist in polytheistic cultures, for if "the spiritual world is dominated by a single high god opposed by a single embodiment of evil then the ancient trickster disappears" (9-10). Numerous scholars, however, have made arguments for tricksters existing in monotheistic cultures in the form of confidence men and other familiar disruptors of societal norms.

[270] Hynes adds that "to define (de-finis) is to draw borders around phenomena, and tricksters seem amazingly resistant to such capture" (33).

or elements by retaining aspects of both, by revealing them to be coexisting parts of one whole, interconnected, often indistinguishable elements of the one" ("Trickster" 51). Because of the tricks they are constantly playing and that are constantly being played on them, they flout societal conventions, either to affirm their necessity or else to expose them as constructed and so amenable to reform.[271] Tricksters, then, usefully mediate between tradition and change, between recovery and revision. Especially inspiring to minority communities is their use of cunning, wit, and verbal expression to subvert hegemonic powers, powers that such communities would not be able to overturn through brute strength or conventional weapons alone.

In his foundational study *The Trickster* (1956), Paul Radin analyzes the Winnebago Indians' *Wakdjunkaga*, which translates to "the tricky one" (132).[272] From his analysis of the *Wakdjunkaga* stories, which he refers to as a "trickster cycle," Radin extrapolates a theory about the role of tricksters in all Native American mythic traditions. He defines the trickster as "at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself" (ix). Viewing the trickster as an amoral "psychological entity" (x), Radin argues that he is "neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both," and that he is ruled by his "passions and appetites" (ix). He comes to these purportedly universal conclusions by assuming that the "fundamental content" of all trickster stories has remained "unchanged" and that "the

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[271] Roger D. Abrahams points out that "the motives and moral attitudes of the protagonists of [African American trickster stories] are just too complex and too ambiguous to argue that the stories provide a simple substitute for the lack of power over their [African Americans who tell the stories] own lives," since the trickster often gets his comeuppance (20).

[272] Radin admits that the etymology of the word is unclear and may be redundant: "the one who acts like *Wakdjunkaga*" (132). Though Radin's study is often cited as foundational, Robert D. Pelton indicates that Daniel Brinton first gave the name "trickster" in 1868 to the mythic figure "who was a gross deceiver, a crude prankster, a creator of the earth, a shaper of culture, and a fool caught in his own lies" (6-7). The term became standard by the end of the nineteenth century (7).

Trickster myth is found in clearly recognizable form among the simplest aboriginal tribes and among the complex. We encounter it among the ancient Greeks, the Chinese, the Japanese and in the Semitic world" (ix). Radin's generalizing approach, what Hynes and Doty refer to as "parallelomania" ("Historical" 27), is characteristic of the archetypal theories of Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell, which emphasize mythic sameness at the expense of cultural and historical differences while upholding Christianity as the most enlightened mythic tradition.[273] According to his evolutionary theoretical narrative, Radin situates North American Natives as exemplifying the simplest human civilization. As such, he insists that their myths have remained unchanged so they can be accessed – recovered – in their pure, authentic, original state.[274] By studying the Native American version of the trickster, "its earliest and most archaic form" (ix), Radin deduces that he can better understand the trickster's role in more "complex" cultures since it is "the oldest of all figures in American Indian mythology, probably in all mythologies" (164).

With the precedent of Radin's archetypal study, anthropological analyses of the trickster in minority cultures have been haunted by such a characteristically structuralist

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[273] See Chapter Two for more on Jung, Eliade, and Campbell. Robert Pelton similarly charges the high priest of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, with distilling various trickster myths into "a colorless list of pure ideas" (16).

[274] Radin makes repeated claims attesting to the myths' authenticity, for example when he insists that his informant, Sam Blowsnake is a "full-blood" and "adhered to every aspect of the old Winnebago culture" (111). Despite Radin's efforts to prove the accuracy of his methodology, he unintentionally exposes potential failures of transmission as well as his precarious ethical position; for example, he confesses that he could not know the identity of the elder from whom Blowsnake heard the story because the myth is sacred and Radin is a "stranger" and a "white man" (111). The way he documents the authenticity of the myth even though he cannot vouch for the anonymous elder is that "it would never occur to a Winnebago to alter, in any appreciable manner, a narrative told to him by one who had the traditional right to tell it" (112). It is difficult to determine how Radin would know what would or would not occur to a Winnebago, especially in the context of telling a sacred story to an outsider.

approach.[275] This view, which posits the trickster primarily as a psychological category indicative of the primitive mindset, overlooks one of his most provocative characteristics: the way he hermeneutically guides interpretation of culturally specific narratives and other forms of aesthetic expression. For example, in his afterward to Radin's book, Jung argues that the Winnebagos have "no earthly reason to theorize about the meaning and purpose of myths" (201), directly rejecting the trickster's interpretive role. Beginning in the 1980s, once study of the trickster figure became more culturally specific and disentangled from prior evolutionary models, the trickster's "signifying" component, his penchant for manipulating language to outwit his opponents, and his role as a model of textual interpretation, became not only recognizable but central to his characterization. Anne Doueihi, for example, argues, "The sacredness and power of this trickster, who is in the space between discourse and story, lie in his making meaning possible" (201).[276] Here, Doueihi links the realm of the sacred with the realm of narrative. It is the trickster's unique ability to mediate the gap between event and meaning that makes him such an attractive figure for minority writers struggling to make their words mean something tangible in a postmodern world made figurative.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s highly influential *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) was the first work of literary criticism to draw attention to the trickster figure's traditional hermeneutic role.[277] One of Gates' primary goals is to argue that Africans and African

[275] See Hynes and Doty's "Historical Overview of Theoretical Issues" for a summary of the major anthropological studies of the trickster.
[276] Robert Pelton similarly describes the trickster as "meta-social commentary" (266) and "hermeneutics in action, creating language out of his own body like a spider spinning its web" (243). Given this definition, it is possible to read the Laguna Pueblo goddess Thought-Woman, or Spider-Woman, especially as she is figured by Silko, as a trickster. See Chapter Three.
[277] In a 1983 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, Gates published the influential article, "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," which prefigured the monograph. In the preface to *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates cites a number of anthropologists whom he credits with departing

Americans have been theorizing about language use since its inception, and he does so through the recovery and analysis of the African American trickster figure, the Signifying Monkey, and his African ancestor Esu-Elegbara, thereby making his theoretical paradigm indigenous and culturally specific. Among other reasons, he formulates an Afro-centric literary theory to "confound a Eurocentric bias" that theory is solely the domain of the Euro-American tradition (*Signifying* xx). Western poststructuralism, he insists, may be an analogue for his African American literary theory but is not a point of departure (*Signifying* xx). In other words, the writings of Derrida and Paul de Man may sound like the notorious word play of the mythic monkey, but Africans and African Americans were signifying long before the publication of *Of Grammatology*.[278]

To make the argument that signifying is a defining and essential element of African and African American literary practice, Gates embraces the trickster as representative of a vernacular theory comparable to that which Houston A. Baker, Jr. develops in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984).[279] The promise of signifying and the blues is that they usefully mediate between theories that elevate blackness to a transcendent signified and those that deflate signifiers of racial difference to apolitical social constructions. Both theorists put in dynamic relation the romantic

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from the tendency of their "less imaginative colleagues" to "collect folklore in order to imprison it, to delimit its potential implications." The scholars he cites, on the other hand, "recognize that the import of collection is to make possible interpretation, which expands on the possibilities inherent in the primary texts themselves" (xi). He later recognizes Roger Abrahams as being the first, in his 1962 *Deep Down in the Jungle*, with being the first scholar "to define Signifyin(g) as a language, by which he mean a particular rhetorical strategy." He expands on Abrahams' definition of Monkey as "a master of technique" and instead defines him as technique itself" (75).

[278] Robert Pelton, one of Gates' sources, describes the function of West African trickster figures in terms that are strikingly similar to postmodern discourse: "As in his contradiction of the contradictor, [the trickster] negates negation and thereby gives birth to a dialectic whose aim is not synthesis, but a never-ending juggling of thesis and antithesis" (37).

[279] Bradley John Monsma describes Baker's vernacular theory based on the blues as likewise exhibiting a "trickster trace" because the blues tradition is "replete with tricksters" (83). Given their shared interest in establishing a specifically African American theory, Gates refers to Baker as his "ideal reader" (*Signifying* x).

appeal to essences characteristic of the Black Arts Movement (which includes Baker's previous work) and the poststructuralist methodology characteristic of what Baker terms the "Reconstructionists" (which includes Gates' previous work). In so doing, they each develop a theory that is particular to the culture from which its objects of study materialize but that is also in conversation with continental literary theories and philosophy. By formulating culturally specific theories that are simultaneously crosscultural (but not universalist), they confirm that discourses identified as Euro-American cannot be fully differentiated or extricated from discourses identified as indigenous.[280] For this reason, Gates insists that "any one who analyzes black literature must do so as a comparativist, by definition, because our canonical texts have complex double antecedents, the Western and the black" (xxiv). Mediation between African and American, and between racial essentialism and poststructuralist deconstruction, is thereby figured as authentic to the culture itself.

Despite Gates' poststructuralist background, which calls into question such concepts as origins and essences, in the preface to *Signifying Monkey*, he declares that he is constructing "a myth of origins for Signifyin(g) and its sign, the Signifying Monkey" (ix).[281] He does so by charting a "descent for the Monkey," a trickster figure who, in African American communities' traditional stories, commonly outwits the more powerful Lion. The African descendant of the Monkey, Gates posits, is the Yoruba trickster figure, Esu-Elegbara, the god of the crossroads, the mediator between divinity and humanity (6),

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[280] For example, see Chapter Two for a discussion of how the Black Arts Movement, and Power literature in general, partakes in high modernist discourse.
[281] Gates explains that he puts the final "g" in parentheses to register the black difference in the use of the term (*Signifying* 46).

and the "divine linguist" (7).[282] He finds inspiration in Esu because he is "the indigenous black metaphor for the literary critic"; in Ifa divination, the Yoruba people appeal to Esu to help interpret texts as well as the interpretations of those texts (9). Gates goes to great lengths to chart this genealogy from Esu to the Monkey, to "show through their functional equivalency that the two figures are related historically" (xxi), though he admits on more than one occasion that he cannot definitively link the two, for written documents that could verify the connection do not exist (5).[283]

Gates' appeal to origins is reminiscent of the logic of Power literature and the Black Arts Movement, which labored to recover originary figures and practices for nationalist ends. In this vein, he describes the practice of signifyin(g) as African Americans' desire to "preserve the traditions of 'the race'" against assimilationist pressures (xi). Though he circumscribes the term "race" in scare quotes, a nod to the constructivist stance of his edited collection *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (1986), his desire to retain and bolster essential practices, which are always susceptible to assimilation, is sincere.[284] Evoking the concerns of many minority critics, Gates is suspicious of the simultaneity of poststructuralist theory's reign in the academy and the rise of multiculturalism: "Consider the irony: precisely when we (and other third world peoples) obtain the complex wherewithal to define our black subjectivity in the republic

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[282] Gates details multiple manifestations of this figure from West Africa, the Caribbean, and African America (*Signifying* 5-6).

[283] A monkey character does appear in some of the Ifa divination myths, but not as a major character. Gates admits it is difficult to explain how the monkey became "through a displacement in African myths in the New World, a central character" (*Signifying* 15).

[284] On the first page of the introduction, Gates wonders, no doubt with some anxiety, about the possibility of the disappearance of the black vernacular if African Americans were to fully assimilate into dominant US culture. He attributes the preservation of a vernacular, which, "since slavery," has "encoded private yet communal cultural rituals," to a need for African Americans to retain an "ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue" (xix).

of Western letters, our theoretical colleagues declare that there ain't no such thing as a subject" ("Master's Pieces" 36).

Yet Gates' argument about African American rhetoric as privileging signifying through word play is no doubt in accord with the poststructuralist focus on the signifier (discourse) over the signified (meaning). The vernacular term "signifyin(g)," Gates points out, is a homonym for the standard English signifier "signification," which generally refers to a closure of meaning. The black vernacular term "signifying" then, signifies on the standard English term (*Signifying* 45-47): "Whereas [standard] signification depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time, [black vernacular] Signification luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations" (49). Functioning at a metacritical level, the rhetorical term refers to the practice of revision and ways of meaning while epitomizing a quintessential example of such revision. For this reason, the Signifying Monkey became "a trope of literary revision itself" (44). Abrahams describes the ambivalent definition of signifying as "one of those bed-rock black terms that can be self-contradictory – that is, it comes to mean one thing and its opposite at the same time" (6). In this way, the ability of the term to contain conflicting meanings highlights its hermeneutic function; it demands a critical context in order to interpret which meaning, if not both, is being deployed and how.

Gates' focus on the signifier is no doubt a corrective to the tendency of previous African American literary criticism, and that of other fields of minority studies, to appeal more to anthropological models than to literary ones. Such a focus was characteristic of both Black Aesthetic critics, whom Baker compares to cultural anthropologists in their

search for characteristically black art forms (*Blues* 78), as well as of mainstream white critics such as Irving Howe. Ralph Ellison, for example, refers to Howe as a "sociology-oriented" critic ("World" 108) and chides him for being unable to recognize the irony in *Invisible Man* (109). Gates explains that critics "have far more often than not directed their attention to the signified, often at the expense of the signifier, as if the latter were transparent. This functions contrary to the principles of criticism inherent in the concept of Signifyin(g)" (*Signifying* 79). An indigenous criticism proved essential given the abundance of structuralist misreadings of minority American literature, including the Orientalist interpretations of Kingston's *Woman Warrior* discussed in the previous chapter. Such pre-determined, discriminatory analyses came about, Gates suggests, because critics prioritized meaning over how meaning is made. In this way, literary interpretations arrogated anthropological methods to make objects of cultural difference static, thereby conforming them to preconceived Eurocentric critical paradigms.

In turn, while the deconstructive focus on the non-transparent nature of language seemed initially promising, many minority critics feared that poststructuralist theory would prove unable to interpret minority literature and culture without evacuating it of political import. As previously discussed, unconditional deconstruction destabilizes reference to the point that meaning is waylaid, never transmitted. It also prioritizes the exclusivity of the text, much like its predecessor New Criticism, without regard for materialist concerns. Given its hegemonic critical status by the early 1990s, deconstruction had devolved into an apolitical foregone conclusion, so much so that Cornel West could characterize the critical work of Derrida's followers as "rather monotonous, Johnny-one-note rhetorical readings that disassemble texts with little

attention to the effects and consequences these dismantlings have in relation to the operations of military, economic, and social powers" (30). As I will illustrate below, because the trickster evokes concepts of origins in his etiological function, he summons a necessary historical and cultural context. As such, the endless signification of conventional poststructuralism is grounded in – particularized by – an appeal to an essential, original cultural practice.

Beginning in the late 1970s, and into the 1980s and 1990s, Gerald Vizenor, Anishinaabe Indian author and critic, also became interested in the trickster figure as indigenous hermeneut. Because Vizenor, like Gates, is suspicious of anthropological discourses that commodify the trickster figure and Native American cultures in general, he focuses almost exclusively in his criticism on the trickster as a means of interpretation, not as narrative content.[285] In other words, he implements the figure of the trickster to offer a theory of interpretation and rarely analyzes his role as a character in traditional Anishinaabe mythic narratives. In his fiction, however, tricksters appear as characters, as narrative content in the way of Kingston's Wittman, and not solely as tropes of discourse. Vizenor recognizes this contradiction, in which the trickster in his criticism is an "absence" and in his fiction is a "presence"; when describing his trickster criticism, he confesses that "no trickster in heard stories would agree [with him], and there we have a language game" ("Trickster Discourse" in *BR* 70). To be left with a language game, of course, is the ideal situation for Vizenor's rhetorical strategy, which aims to deconstruct

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[285] It is actually very difficult to differentiate between Vizenor's genres of writing. For my purposes here, however, I will focus on Vizenor's criticism in the two essays entitled "Trickster Discourse," which most explicitly theorize the trickster's role in minority literature and culture. The former appeared in 1993 with the subtitle "Comic and Tragic Themes in Native American Literature" in the edited collection *Buried Roots and Indestructible Seeds*, the conference proceedings sponsored by the Wisconsin Humanities Committee of 1990 and 1991. The latter, a revised, expanded, and more complex version, appeared the same year with the subtitle "Comic Holotropes and Language Games" in Vizenor's own edited collection of postmodern Native American literary criticism, *Narrative Chance*.

structuralist, anthropological, and modernist concepts of identity typical of both white academic discourse as well as the American Indian Movement.

Like Gates' interest in revising (signifying upon) both Black Arts essentialism and poststructuralist deconstruction, Vizenor's theoretical trickster is ever on the move to challenge Manichean models that reify power dynamics, either by endorsing or reversing them.[286] In his critical essays, whose bibliographies read like a "who's who" of poststructuralist theorists, Vizenor's trickster functions as a semiotic sign, a trope about meaning, not meaning itself, to defer romantic conceptions that characterize the trickster as "invented to be an individual, or at least the metaphor of individualism; this image supports the notion of the vanishing tribes" ("Trickster Discourse" in *NC* 193). Instead, "Tricksters are not blood or material, but imagination" ("Trickster Discourse" in *BR* 70). What registers as an absence cannot be objectified in structuralist hierarchies to buttress narratives of assimilation and domination. In characteristically postmodern evasiveness, Vizenor explains, "The only way an anthropologist can understand a trickster is to know that tricksters are never possessed by understanding" (70), for it is in the colonial act of possession, of consumption, that the trickster disappears (71). Too often, anthropology, the infamous "handmaiden of colonialism" as Lévi-Strauss famous described it, has commodified Natives as "savages," frozen them in time and "reinvented" them as "racial emblems" "to oppose bourgeois materialism" (193). Such theories that exploit the Indian

[286] Gates adds that the trickster figure defies binary logic due to his narrative frame: "While Signifyin(g) can, and indeed does, occur between two people, the three terms of the traditional mythic structure [Monkey, Lion, and Elephant] serve to dispel a simple relation of identity between the allegorical figures of the poem and the binary political relationship, outside the text, between black and white. The third term both critiques the idea of the binary opposition and demonstrates that Signifyin(g) itself encompasses a larger domain than merely the political" (*Signifying* 70).

as an atemporal primitive, that impose structuralist models, must be challenged by "trickster discourse."

To develop such a liberating critical approach, Vizenor, like Gates, looks to a culturally specific example of the trickster: the Anishinaabe's Naanabozho. This trickster figure, like Esu and the Signifying Monkey for Gates, allows Vizenor to posit literary criticism and philosophy as stemming from native tradition itself. Whereas Jung, among others, portrays Native Americans as incapable of thinking hermeneutically about their own texts, Vizenor's appeal to an indigenous figure who encompasses interpretation in his very being challenges characterizations of traditional oral narratives as objects to be interpreted rather than offering their own interpretations.

In his use of traditional Naanabozho narratives to develop his elusive critical theory, Vizenor acknowledges that they are primarily available via ethnographic transcriptions, which "rendered a tribal language game into power theories, linear social structures" (198). By identifying the harmful mistranslations of anthropologist Victor Barnouw, who interprets Anishinaabe myths according to psychoanalytic theories of repression, for example, Vizenor reveals how the trickster's role as hermeneutic sign has been contained (198-199).[287] In response, Vizenor aspires to recover the original interpretive role of the trickster, an appeal to essences that is mediated by an awareness of

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[287] In *Earthdivers*, Vizenor also takes issue with the psychoanalytic theories of leading folklorist Alan Dundes, who Vizenor argues relies on "philosophical dualism," which is alien to the Anishinaabe worldview (xiv; xi-xii). Vizenor is therefore careful to distance his own use of the traditional earthdiver myth from the accounts of anthropologists. Instead, he revises the "traditional," "creation" myth to make political commentary, recasting the mythic figures as mixedbloods, tribal tricksters, and the contemporary "heirs and survivors from the premier union between the daughters of the woodland shamans and white fur traders" (ix). Such a project that traces a lineage by conflating history and myth is reminiscent of Power literature, though Vizenor juxtaposes that conflation with the work of a historical figure, Louis Reil, "one of the great leaders of the Métis, [who] declared a new mixedblood nation in the last century" and who was "convicted of 'high treason' and executed" (ix-x). With his revised narrative, Vizenor summons "white settlers" "to dive with mixedblood survivors into the unknown, into the legal morass of treaties and bureaucratic evils, and to swim deep down and around through federal exclaves and colonial economic enterprises in search of a few honest words upon which to build a new urban turtle island" (xi).

the non-transparent nature of those essences. In other words, Vizenor's subversive trickster discourse is authenticated by an ancient tradition of interpretation. While Silko revises the function of myths and Kingston revises their content to make them more liberative, Vizenor revises the interpretations of myth, especially those that have been imposed by the non-indigenous field of anthropology. He looks to trickster myths to inspire such revised interpretations, which reject "manifest manners," Vizenor's term for imperialist behavior sanctioned by Manifest Destiny, as well as "terminal creeds," Vizenor's term for fundamentalist thought.

By emphasizing the semiotic function of the trickster, Vizenor undermines hegemonic perceptions of Native cultures while remaining faithful to the trickster's intrinsically playful and benevolent qualities, even at his most destructive. On more than one occasion, Vizenor takes issue with Radin for his claim that the trickster is amoral, an allegation that drains the trickster of his beneficial effects: "*Wenebojo* or *naanabozho* is the *compassionate* trickster, not the trickster in the word constructions of the anthropologist Paul Radin, the one who 'possesses no values […],'" (*Earthdivers* xii). In response to the structuralist approach that interprets traditional myth not as hermeneutic guide but as cognitive or psychological category, Vizenor's trickster discourse is meant to restore the original morality, the compassion, to the trickster's narrative role.[288] Trickster discourse, ultimately, can be identified by its capacity not to possess and manipulate tribal cultures but rather to heal and liberate them ("Trickster Discourse" in *NC* 192-193). Though postmodern discourse is consistently attacked as apolitical, a contention I review below, Vizenor's trickster figure intrudes into the experiential realm

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[288] Somewhat similarly, Eric Gould argues that "Formalism has eroded the morality of myth" (5).

in order to liberate Native Americans from imposed models of identity, those of the noble savage, the vanishing Indian, and the natural primitive.

Ultimately, it is difficult to parse Vizenor's descriptions of trickster discourse, which he practices but never fully explicates, and which he frequently describes resistantly by indicating what it is not, rather than what it is. His writing is replete with neologisms, deliberately abstruse diction and sentence construction, and allusions to characters and events from other Vizenor works. But, of course, this is the point. Trickster discourse is not something that can be made explicit but only performed, for a definition would adversely limit its potential and applicability. Its very purpose, like that of Gates' signifying, is to open up multiple meanings, to revel in semiotic excess. Such an act finds its precedent in indigenous traditions, which prefigure and reject such conventional traditions of Western interpretation as New Criticism that seek to determine the stable meaning of a text.[289]

The Trickster Controversy: Critics of Gates and Vizenor

Though highly influential and pioneering in their use of theory to advance culturally specific literary studies, Gates' and Vizenor's appeals to the trickster have provoked heated censure from some of their fellow scholars. Though these critiques vary, the most recurring challenge to Gates' signifyin(g) and Vizenor's trickster discourse is their apparent participation in a poststructuralist methodology that is, at best, suspiciously akin to dominant Euro-American theories, and, at worst, harmfully

[289] Christopher Norris adds that New Criticism often relied on unacknowledged ethnocentric and Christian values, which were disguised as universally applicable: "What the orthodox New Critics sought in the language of poetry was a structure somehow transcending human reason and ultimately pointing to a religious [Christian] sense of values" (13).

apolitical. The most notorious example of this concern is the 1987 debate on the role of theory in African American literary criticism between Gates, Baker, and Joyce A. Joyce in *New Literary History*. In "The Black Canon," Joyce indicted Gates and Baker for relying on "distant and sterile" poststructuralist theories (294) that do "not apply to Black American literary works" (295).[290] One of Joyce's most compelling charges points to the anxiety about poststructuralist mystification of language and subjectivity: "For the Black American – even the Black intellectual – to maintain that meaningful or real communication between human beings is impossible because we cannot know each other through language would be to erase or ignore the continuity embodied in Black American history" (295). If such continuity is disavowed, then it becomes far easier for the nation to ignore its responsibilities to that community (296), especially at a moment in US cultural history when multiculturalism was being watered down into a resurrected cultural pluralism.

Anticipating an uproar, the editor of *New Literary History* invited Gates and Baker to respond to Joyce's accusations in the same issue.[291] In "What's Love Got to Do With It?" – a satirical title that signifies on Joyce's claim that "black creative art is an act of love which attempts to destroy estrangement and elitism" (296) – Gates defends himself by identifying signifying as a "canonical black" discourse (299). In other words,

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[290] Sandra Adell is just one critic who reiterates Joyce's concerns. Discussing *The Signifying Monkey*, she writes, "It seems that the more the black theorist writes in the interest of blackness, the greater his Euro-centrism reveals itself to be" (533-534). Norman Harris, one of many critics who quickly joined Joyce in voicing their suspicions of Gates' project, argues that the problem with extracting "terms derived from Afro-American culture" is that they become "meaningless and whorelike when separated from their contexts" (40). However, Harris' critique depends on his definition of theory as an abstract and universal application, which inevitably succumbs to a hegemonic Euro-American framework.

[291] Baker questions the intentions of the editor in his response to Joyce's article: "It is impossible to believe that an essay focused on Anglo-American criticism as dreadfully flawed by factual mistakes as Professor Joyce's work on Afro-American criticism would have been accepted or printed by a major critical or theoretical journal" ("In Dubious" 315).

he draws on a concept of indigeneity to support his theoretically poststructuralist project: "Only a black person alienated from black language use could fail to understand that we have been deconstructing white people's languages and discourses since […] 1619" (309). To assume, as Joyce does, that the application of theory to African American literary production is a foreign imposition is to imply that African Americans do not engage in theoretical endeavors. What Esu and the Signifying Monkey do is allow for a hermeneutic exploration of African American cultural production particular to that culture without, necessarily, importing violating foreign discourses. Gates is not a theoretical separatist, though. He concedes that Euro-American theories are also applicable to African American cultural production, especially once "translated" into "the black idiom," for "any tool that enables the critic to explain the complex workings of the language of a text is an 'appropriate' tool" ("What's" 304). According to Gates, to ignore the indigenous hermeneutic criticism of the Signifying Monkey, granting its correspondence to dominant poststructuralist discourse, is to rule out one of the most applicable and productive tools for literary criticism available.

More recently, the term "trickster" itself has come under attack by prominent critics of Native American literature. While Vizenor derides the field of anthropology, Craig S. Womack points out that even appealing to the trickster partakes in an anthropological, and so externally imposed, discourse ("Single" 8, 70).[292] Womack is

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[292] Womack insists that "there is no such thing as a trickster in indigenous cultures, that tricksters were invented by anthropologists, that no Indian language has the word 'trickster' in it" ("Single" 19). Anthropologist and African studies scholar T.O. Beidelman agrees with Womack. He argues that the trickster is "too general a category" for useful analysis, which requires cultural context and starting with the particular instead of a category (175). He continues, "No term corresponding to our term trickster is used by Kaguru themselves" (176) and that "disparate figures have all frequently been termed tricksters, yet this term is clearly the product of the analysts' ethnocentric evaluations of deviance and disorder and does not always derive squarely from the evaluations held by the members of the cultures in which they appear" (189). For this reason, he suggests we "abandon" the term trickster altogether (190).

concerned about the slew of literary critics in the 1980s and 1990s, Native and non-Native alike, who, following the lead of anthropologists and often of Vizenor himself, tended to over-apply the trickster trope to Native American literature.[293] Womack humorously characterizes such criticism as such: "Every Indian story was actually about tricksters if we looked deeply enough" ("Single" 19).[294]

Womack's critique is actually a recurring one in minority studies, going back at least to Ralph Ellison's 1958 essay, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." In this piece, Ellison responds to Stanley Edgar Hyman's claim that the minstrel is descended from the trickster figure of African folklore, and that the trickster has served as the defining archetype of African American literature.[295] Ellison primarily takes issue with Hyman's "conceptions of the way in which folk tradition gets into literature" (46), especially his own *Invisible Man*. Acknowledging that "archetypes, like taxes, seem doomed to be with us always" (46), Ellison insists that their application in the literary context involves "the living human being in a specific texture of time, place and circumstance" (46); whereas "archetypes are timeless, novels are time-haunted" (57). By focusing exclusively on the trickster archetype and not on the literary and historical departures from it, Hyman,

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[293] Such a trend is not limited to criticism of Native American literature. Though I find hers a fascinating comparative study, Jeanne Rosier Smith, for example, tends to focus on the trickster exclusively as a signifying trope, not as a character and so over-applies it by sacrificing cultural contexts. A study of literatures by women writers who engage trickster figures, Maxine Hong Kingston, Louise Erdrich, and Toni Morrison, *Writing Tricksters* views the trickster, "who embodies a divided, fluid, shifting identity, as a mythic trope for the postmodern" (16).
Smith tends to stretch her understanding of a "trickster aesthetic" to apply to all women minority writers who occupy a border space, though it is unclear why this aesthetic could not also apply to all male minority writers or other inhabitants of border spaces. When she argues that "it makes sense to look to women of color, whose lives cross so many borders, for the best models of trickster strategy" (28), she generalizes tricksterdom to border crossing.

[294] Among other critics, Womack takes to task Choctaw/Cherokee author and critic Louis Owens, whose readings of Vizenor's literature in *Other Destinies* seemed too eager to apply the concept of the trickster: "Simply saying 'trickster' over and over again, as years of this kind of criticism have shown, does not guarantee one is actually communicating anything" ("Single" 49).

[295] Ellison's response to the former claim is that the minstrel is a definitively American – and white American, at that – figure. I am grateful to Lawrence Jackson for bringing this piece to my attention.

according to Ellison, engages in "archetype-hunting," a form of anthropological criticism comparable to that of Black Arts, which "leads to a critical game that ignores the specificity of literary works" (46) toward a generalization about African American cultural production. Hyman's misreading and Ellison's ensuing correction point to the need for a culturally specific literary myth criticism, so that Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for one, is not made to fit universal (read: Euro-American) archetypes. Instead, it is to be recognized as a signifying revision of multiple archetypes from multiple sources within a specific historical, cultural, and literary context.

Womack shares Ellison's concern about the inappropriate application of an anthropological category, the trickster, on a work of literature, as well as Joyce's concern about poststructuralism's co-optation of a minority cultural production. He is additionally apprehensive about the debilitating political consequences of aligning trickster discourse with Euro-American poststructuralism.[296] For example, he takes issue with Anishinaabe author and critic Kimberly Blaeser's monograph on Vizenor, as well as with Vizenor himself, for "assuming a perfect" compatibility between poststructuralism and oral traditions ("Single" 65). Because Womack views poststructuralism as prioritizing aesthetics over pragmatic efforts to challenge "the social ills that threaten our communities" ("Single" 8), he wonders, "How would tribes manage in the world of

[296] Womack does acknowledge the benefits of Vizenor's writing, that, in borrowing "from the poststructural idea of liberating signifier from signified," it opens "up static definitions of Indianness (in simple language, to challenge stereotypes)" ("Single" 64-65). He adds that the "heterodoxy of Vizenor's work is one of the best things to have happened to Native studies. But, like all heterodoxies, as well as orthodoxies, it is fraught with its own set of problems" (64). Andrew Wiget echoes Womack's concern about poststructuralism in his disparaging review of Vizenor's edited collection of poststructuralist Native American literary criticism, *Narrative Chance*: "The poststructuralist's perpetual deferral of signification amounts to the perpetual deferral of significance" (478). Also see Ward Churchill's review of *Manifest Manners*, which he describes as "opaque to the point of sheer meaningless" because of the postmodernist "vernacular-driven plunge into cliquish obscurantism" (313). He views *Manifest Manners*' approach as an unethical abstraction of serious political issues (318-319).

federal Indian law if 'Indian' is a matter of infinite signification and ultimately undecidable?" ("Single" 65).[297] Though it is debatable if Vizenor's culturally specific trickster discourse is suggesting that identity actually is infinitely undecidable (a matter I return to below), Womack's concerns are not to be taken lightly.[298]

Ultimately, Womack's misgivings are not directed at trickster discourse exclusively, but at the ways in which it has been made to align with Euro-American poststructuralism to the exclusion of historical and cultural specificity. While he does acknowledge the similarities between trickster characters in Native storytelling traditions and those of other cultures across the globe, including Europe, he laments that these similarities have received far more critical attention than have the differences ("Single" 19): "The use of the word 'trickster' in Native American literature has sometimes meant simply resorting to laziness – the substitution of cliché for substantive analysis with attention to historical and cultural particulars" ("Single" 70). Womack therefore leaves room for trickster criticism if it is accompanied by historical and cultural specificity.

Rather than pursue such a form of criticism, Womack is interested in developing a faith-based theory that promotes effective representation and a ceremonial function of language. Such an endeavor builds on the tribally specific literary criticism that he had previously theorized in *Red on Red* (1999). This form of criticism draws attention to moments of incompatibility between Native expression and poststructuralism, for he finds it difficult "to reconcile notions of nonrepresentation with certain ceremonial

[297] Womack adds, "Skeptics might question the relevance of an inaccessible prose style toward intervening in the real world" ("Single" 72).

[298] Related to this allegation is the oft-expressed suspicion about the simultaneity of poststructuralist deconstruction of identity in general and the politicization of minority identity: "Some Native critics are frustrated to find out that just when they might finally have an audience for their side of the story, the non-Indian world has discovered that all stories are subjective" ("Single" 41). Put another way, "It is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven't yet constructed it" (*Red* 3).

settings, where spoken words are sometimes seen as having a physical component or a physical effect on the world: *words* cause *things* to happen, a very special relationship between signifier and signified" ("Single" 65). Based on the *a priori* knowledge that there are transcendent beings "besides humans" who manage the meaning-making of language, Womack's more recent theory bridges the theoretical impasse between positivist reasoning and poststructuralist subversion through a "materialist criticism with a difference: it makes religious matters a central concern" ("Single" 9). In other words, Womack does not discount the role of the supernatural, which can only be addressed according to a culturally specific vocabulary and worldview, in his project of attending to documented experiences of oppression.

As previously mentioned, Womack is not alone in his attempt to mediate the impasse between essentialist and poststructuralist claims to identity, and he takes as his inspiration one precedent, Paula M. L. Moya's postpositivist realism. Moya's theoretical approach to minority subjectivity is useful for its early insistence that "identity, experience, and knowledge" (*Learning* 3) can be conceived of in ways that are not so reliant on poststructuralism that the arguments succumb to political irrelevance.[299] Yet identity, for Moya, is not a purely biological category either; it is a "socially significant and context-specific ideological" construct that refers to "verifiable aspects of the social world" (*Learning* 13).[300] While race can be represented and referenced, it cannot be positively defined – nor completely dismantled.

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[299] Like Womack and many other cultural critics, Moya reiterates the suspicion about the simultaneity of postmodernism and identity politics, suggesting it might indicate "a racist counterstance to the agency of newly politicized minorities" ("Introduction" 7, fn 9).
[300] Moya's incentive to restore identity to an empirical category of knowledge stems from the pragmatic awareness that "goods and resources are still distributed according to identity categories" ("Introduction" 8). Given Moya's complementary interest in reviving identity as a category that provides meaning for

To make identity refer to real-world experiences in the poststructuralist age, Moya revises the positivist stance that human observation is an unmediated activity and that knowledge cannot be objective if it is theory-mediated ("Introduction" 12).[301] For Moya, even if objective knowledge cannot be reached, that does not deny its existence and the importance of the asymptotic pursuit to attain it. As Linda Martín Alcoff puts it, "positivism," the belief that one can step outside language and "present facts in pure form," does not equal "realism" ("Who's" 316).[302] For post-positivist realists, then, theories of identity are objective if they apply to experience, if they "provide narratives that explain the links between group historical memory and individual contemporary experience," if they "create unifying frames for rendering experience intelligible" (Alcoff "Who's" 324). Such experience must be considered objectively (from the outside, who one appears to be by others) as well as subjectively (from the inside, who one feels oneself to be) (*Visible* 191, "Who's" 336-337). The end result of such a "dynamic" approach to identity elucidates the personal experience of being marked by racial difference. In accordance with Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks (discussed in Chapter Three), Moya argues that oppressed people benefit from an "epistemic privilege," a more accurate awareness of the way power dynamics work in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality, because they have experienced – and suffered from – hierarchical arrangements of power in their daily lives ("Postmodernism" 81).[303]

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individuals and communities, it may be contradictory that her argument seems to suggest that in an ideally equal world, identity categories would not be necessary.

[301] Moya adds that post-positivist realists "endorse a conception of objectivity as an ideal of inquiry rather than as a condition of absolute and achieved certainty" ("Introduction" 12).

[302] Alcoff attributes the Enlightenment, positivist conception of reason as requiring an autonomous self to achieve critical distance apart from others to the European colonizer's "need to deflect the reflection they see in their victim's eyes" ("Who's" 334).

[303] Teuton reiterates this concept: "Native tribal experience provides American Indian scholars with an epistemic privilege in interpreting their culture, and thus challenges a long history of colonized studies in

While he appreciates such a theoretical mediation between deconstruction and experiential claims to identity ("Theorizing" 354), Womack departs from Moya because he wants "to offer alternatives to [its] insistence on the rejection of foundationalism" ("Theorizing" 353).[304] Because she defines "objectivity as an ideal of inquiry necessarily involving theoretical bias and interest" (*Learning* 14), Moya does not provide an adequate model for making ethical or aesthetic judgments. The problem, Womack argues, is that she simultaneously wants to "retain the theoretical sophistication of postmodernism in terms of looking at how history and culture give rise to ideas that are always mediated by human knowledge (rather than consisting of some kind of preexistent foundation) while also insisting that truth claims can be judged *relatively* true or false" ("Theorizing" 355). Given their anxiety about being perceived as essentialists and their ensuing rejection of all foundations – those basic beliefs that do not fall prey to critiques of cultural constructivism – Womack is unconvinced that postpositivist realists can avoid relativism (355). Though he admits that he is unsure if his position is not just as problematic (355), Womack develops his theory by coming "out of the essentialist closet" (357). To "escape essentialism entirely," he writes, "one would have to quit writing and speaking" ("Single" 73). Yet Womack complicates his essentialism through historical references that particularize "universal claims" ("Single" 6). Theory must always remain politically attuned, and history, for Womack, allows it to do so ("Single" 41).

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the dominant culture" (184-185). I believe this sentence would be improved simply by pluralizing the word "experience."

[304] Moya's primary influence is Satya P. Mohanty's *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, which reconciles his antifoundationalism with "a realist view of scientific inquiry as a social practice" (22) by acknowledging that objectivity, like science, is "socially conditioned and produced (and hence radically revisable and antifoundationalist)" (23).

I have devoted this space to documenting Womack's concerns because I view his self-reflexive conception of Native American identity and literature, grounded in their specific cultural contexts and framed by the knowledge that *human* cultural production is socially mediated ("Single" 65), to be a compelling and responsible theoretical model. Womack looks to the realm of religious practice as a mediating foundation because not all ceremonial activity and faith "can be explained as social practice" ("Theorizing" 364). In other words, for Womack, the successful transmission of meaning that occurs at a ceremonial moment exceeds the domain of cultural construction because it can only be made meaningful through an ineffable act of faith. As such, when language assumes sacred proportions, it offers a foundational act of meaning-making that resists relativizing deconstruction.

While I believe Womack's approach is one that leads to constructive interpretations of tribally specific Native American literature, it also bounds a theorist's focus to one particular cultural/religious context. Guided by Womack, I wish to return to Gates' and Vizenor's trickster criticisms in order to propose the narrative category of myth, because it does not require faith in order to be interpreted, as a foundation for crosscultural theorizing. In this way, we can retain Gates' and Vizenor's hermeneutic suspicion as well as Womack's focus on the phenomena of language acts to develop a comparative minority literary criticism. Minority authors' and critics' recurring appeal to myths – the most culturally significant and sacred narratives that communities possess and organize themselves around – indicates an acknowledged foundation *at the level of narrative itself*. By viewing myths as second-order expressions of foundational knowledge – as *records* of truths and origins instead of as the truths and origins

themselves – we can theorize across cultures while framing each literary manifestation of a myth within its particular context.

Given the widespread use of myth, and of the trickster particularly, in minority cultural and critical production, myth's applicability cannot be ruled out, even if we acknowledge that it has been exploited by hegemonic and marginalizing theoretical practices. While a petition of faith disallows crosscultural literary comparison because it necessitates a culturally specific ceremonial context, literary appeals to foundations in the realm of myth do not – necessarily. If they are exclusively correlated with archetypal expressions carried in the blood in the way of Power literature, then they are still susceptible to an essentialist worldview. However, even Power literature allowed for a provisional crosscultural awareness by way of its universalist methodology, as in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, which correlates Navajo and Jemez mythology with that of the Kiowa. And given the trickster's comparative potential, he cannot be done away with solely because "trickster" is not an indigenous term. As Lewis Hyde puts it,

> Indigenous terms doubtless allow a fuller feeling for trickster's sacred complexity. But [the trickster's] trickiness was hardly invented by ethnographers. Hermes is called Mechaniôta in Homeric Greek, which translates as well as "trickster." The West African trickster Legba is called Aflakete, which means, 'I have tricked you.' The Winnebago Indian figure is called Wakdjunkaga, which means 'the tricky one.' Trickery appeared long before anthropology. (7)

Before advancing to a revised trickster literary theory that can respond to Joyce, Ellison, and Womack, I want to contend with one more manifestation of the trickster critique, the accusation of essentialism (more often directed at Gates than Vizenor), in

order to underscore how theoretical appeals to the trickster seem torn between deconstructive and essentialist readings. If we can make the two sides of the critique productive, if we can allow the trickster to mediate between the two, then the figure can serve as a uniquely effective guide for theoretically approaching minority American literature, a creative production that is always attempting to forge politically viable symbolic space while challenging dominant conceptions of such space.

More persistent than Joyce's resistance to Gates' poststructuralist methodology (perhaps due to poststructuralism's triumph in the academy) is the seemingly more detrimental accusation of essentialism directed at his search for the African origins of the African American signifying tradition. Adolph L. Reed, Jr., for one, criticizes the ahistoricity of *The Signifying Monkey* and the lack of any apparent connection between Esu and the monkey (141-143).[305] He attributes Gates' strained Esu-monkey link to an Afro-centrist fetish for African origins (152), although such a link was much earlier documented by Zora Neale Hurston, to whom Gates frequently refers. According to Hurston, "the trickster-hero of West Africa has been transplanted to America" ("Characteristics" 299). Echoing Reed, Sandra Adell argues that the vernacular theories of Gates and Baker are "inherently conservative" because of their "nostalgia for tradition" (538), which threatens to accompany any application of myth.[306] Both of these critiques come out of an apparent distrust of any form of literary theory that appears separatist, that exclusively draws on African and African American cultural practices for

[305] Expressing a familiar criticism of Gates' theory, that he reiterates the essentializing ideology of the Black Aesthetic, Reed adds that Gates "simply shifts the locus of the warranted mimesis from content to form" (152). This focus on form, though, is sufficiently different to complicate the Black Arts' appeal to origins since it invites interpretation into its very existence, underscoring change and revision.

[306] To understand Gates' most recent turn to what he calls "roots in a test tube" in *Finding Oprah's Roots*, Eric Lott goes back to *"Race," Writing, and Difference* and argues that a cryptoessentialist imperative" "animated" that work "all along," despite its "antiessentialist theory" (1522).

the elucidation of African American cultural forms. Despite Gates' frequent reference to non-African and non-African American theoretical discourses, and despite his previously cited recognition that the African American literary tradition is heterogeneous, prominent structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov, for one, contends that Gates' development of an indigenous critical theory assumes that "the content of a thought depends on the color of the thinker's skin – that is, to practice the very racialism one is combating" (376).[307]

In addition to conflating biological with cultural understandings of racial difference, what Todorov does not acknowledge is that the Euro-American theoretical perspective that Gates and others are attempting to combat did not emerge from an *a priori*, universally applicable mode of abstract reasoning, though such has been the claim since the Enlightenment, but rather from specific political contexts of colonialism, slavery, war, and other manifestations of "racial formation," as Omi and Winant refer to them. A critical theory based on racial difference is categorically different from one based on universal standards of literary achievement. The complex position of minority critics, one that demands a seemingly dissonant undertaking of recovering threatened

[307] Unfortunately, Todorov and other critics seem to put Gates so much on the defensive that his argument at times contradicts itself, indicating the potential for mediation that trickster criticism allows, but that must be embraced as such if it is to be applicable. Sounding somewhat like Joyce in his response to Todorov, he argues, "My position is that for a critic of black literature to borrow European or American theories of literature regardless of 'where they come from' is for that critic to be trapped in a relation of intellectual indenture or colonialism" ("Talkin'" 406). Since he obviously does study African American literature in collaboration with non-indigenous theories, he is not a separatist, though he sounds like one here to defend his appeal to an indigenous criticism. Another example of his liminal position between the rock of universalism and the hard place of the vernacular is his response to Baker that he could not include a vernacular critic in *"Race," Writing, and Difference* due to Todorov's accusation: "Todorov can't even hear us, Houston, when we talk *his* academic talk; how he gonna hear us if we 'talk *that* talk,' the talk of the black idiom?" (409). Eric Lott has problems with this exchange: "The rather smarmy apostrophes to 'Houston' (over against last-name-only bad guy Todorov) are more complicated rhetorical devices than they might appear. They erect an insider discourse that – finally – issues in the black vernacular even as it excludes black critics who are not Gates and Baker. […] This insider discourse, meanwhile, turns their conversation into one *overheard* by those outside the circle, principally white scholars; but this effect disguises the act of academic infiltration if not accommodation that Gates is transparently arguing for." Lott refers to this subtext as an "allegory of upward mobility" (1523).

narratives and philosophies while breaking down the hegemony of a colonizing Eurocentrism, necessitates an equally dynamic theoretical approach. Because trickster myths evoke ahistorical concepts of culturally specific modes of being and ways of meaning, they prove incredibly viable for taking on such a compound performative role.

Mediating Trickster Criticism

Keeping in mind Womack's critique, my goal is to revise trickster discourse and signifying as they are theorized by Vizenor and Gates respectively so that the character of the trickster is historically grounded, so that this mythic figure communicates responsibly and productively only within a specific context of material experience. In other words, we must make of the doubly problematic nature of trickster discourse, its potential essentialist and deconstructive impulses, a self-reflexive mediation between the benefits of each. Despite the long legacy of exploitative and colonialist use of the trickster, he remains invaluable. Just part of his critical promise and appeal lies in his liminal status, which contests not only the species dividing line between animal and human but also the imposed boundary lines that so precariously divide humans into racial categories (Dimock 195). As such, he is useful for his parodic mimicry of humanity, his uncanny ability to blur defining boundaries and open up space for alternate political futures. He can be understood, then, as analogous to Bhabha's characterization of the colonized, who "mimics the collaborative colonial ideologies of patriotism and patriarchy, depriving those narratives of their imperial authority" ("DissemiNation" 318).

Recognizing the destabilizing, parodic force of the colonized and the mimic, however, requires a particular critical vantage point, one distinct from the hegemonic

perspective that reduces such mimicry to deficient assimilation or apolitical entertainment. For example, John Edgar Wideman celebrates the tradition of signifying because "in the street a skillful signifier can talk behind a victim's back while looking him in the face" (66). While this rhetorical practice is an empowering one for the person doing the signifying, it does not necessarily disrupt the victim's worldview, a worldview that for so long viewed black art as derivative and thereby deprived it of its satiric, innovative, and interpretive value. For this reason, the trickster is not automatically politically effectual. On the contrary, the trickster is prone to be co-opted into just a delightfully comical figure. He demands a critical vantage point fueled by hermeneutic analysis in order for the political message to be discerned.

However, if the trickster functions solely as hermeneutic trope, as he primarily does in Gates' and Vizenor's criticism, then such a reading strategy can be doomed to infinite, subjective relativism. A frequent criticism of hermeneutics, according to Alcoff, is that it is too "subject-centered" (in Jürgen Habermas' phrase), in that language is used as a tool that can be directed by humans "as we will" (*Visible* 100). Such a criticism can be leveled at Gates and Vizenor, who come across as too eager to exploit homologies between the role of traditional trickster figures and dominant Euro-American poststructuralist discourses that embrace the infinite elusiveness of signs. In so doing, they seem to extract the tricksters from their respective contexts and direct them for their own purposes of developing theories of literary criticism, which are admittedly directed back at their specific literary and cultural traditions. Such a critical move neglects the trickster's phenomenological aspect, his role as a character in traditional narratives, and seems to endorse endless signification and possibly harmful relativism.

To confront the relativizing dangers of a trickster theory that stresses hermeneutic interpretation over material experience, I argue that trickster criticism necessitates both hermeneutic and phenomenological modes of analysis. To allow the trickster to function productively as culturally specific hermeneutic guide, politically engaged character, and crosscultural mythic foundation, we require a theory of literary analysis that can appreciate the figure as a phenomenological marker of a culture's narrative tradition, that which can be directly experienced through the act of reading, telling, or listening.[308] In other words, to retain the historical context that makes the trickster politically efficacious and applicable, we must maintain a phenomenological focus on the trickster figure, and on mythic narratives more generally, as narrative content. In this way, the trickster assumes the position of an experienced object of analysis, one that arrests endless signification. Through my recourse to phenomenology, I am suggesting that the hermeneutic capacity of the trickster so well articulated by Gates and Vizenor must be supplemented with a focus on the role of the trickster as a character that imports specific experiences of the material realm into abstract theorizing or archetypal interpretation. We must focus on the two parts of the trickster, who, "by dividing himself, so to speak, into narrator and character," "both tells the story and is 'in' the story" (Doueihi 200).

In turn, the hermeneutic act must supplement the phenomenological given the latter's tendency to privilege direct experience over cultural and semiotic constructions, which always frame and influence experience and the archive. As Ricoeur succinctly puts it, "phenomenology must be hermeneutic because what is closest to us is also what is

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[308] Barry Smith and David Woodruff Smith indicate that the actual existence of the phenomena being experienced is not what is at issue in phenomenology but rather on the experience of the phenomena, even if it is a mythic or fictional narrative or character in a narrative (11): "The phenomenologist can apply his method to the things of fiction or mythology as well as to the things of physics, to the things of imagination as well as to the things of perception and memory" (12).

most covered over" (Vol. 3 87). That which can be known through experience, ultimately, can only be known through what Ricoeur repeatedly refers to as the "detour" of interpretation because direct experience is always "mediated through historically embedded socio-cultural frameworks" (McCarthy 17). This simultaneously hermeneutic and phenomenological approach posits the figure of the trickster as both a substantive character in a specific narrative framed by its temporal context as well as a critical trope that guides interpretation.

To import the historical by way of myth, I look to Laurie Patton's "practical theory of myth," which allows us to determine how a myth "is made transcendent, becoming a sanctioned norm or explanation for human behavior" (217). Defining myth as "the process by which a cultural form can be transcendentalized, thus guiding and regularizing human behavior" (216-217), Patton's approach identifies when myth has "contributed to [human] flourishing, and when myth precludes the possibility for such flourishing altogether" (216). Myth can both "remove the historical contingency of a religious tradition" as well as "act to resist and to relativize the claims to transcendence that a religious tradition makes" (217). In other words, it can translate what is historical into something that appears natural, but it can also disrupt naturalizing narratives of progress when experienced as a cultural artifact.

When a reader confronts a myth or mythic figure in the literary context, for example, that myth's appeal to cosmological time disrupts the narrative temporality and claims to unity of the literary text. Patton takes as her exemplar Walter Benjamin, who, a practitioner of Husserlian phenomenology, believed that "philosophy can be rendered tangible through the momentary contemplation of an image" (219). For Benjamin, the

materialist images on display in the Parisian Arcades remind “the contemplative of the often violent and untold history of those who have been left out of the record. Traces of the past stand in juxtaposition to the present, interrupting the progress of history asserted by the victors” (220). Patton approaches myths with the same phenomenological focus, so that if a critic concentrates on a myth as an object, as phenomenon occupying a specific historical moment, then such an act can qualify that very myth’s claims to transcendence, to ahistoricism, to universality. If mythic claims to transcendence are relativized via myth’s own claims to history, for example in the way that Power literature conflates myth with history, then such a critical viewpoint allows room for “social change” (234).[309]

This appeal to phenomenology in order to import the historical into the mythic by way of the literary context allows for three interrelated correctives to Gates and Vizenor’s hermeneutic theories. The first is that when we concentrate on the trickster figure as a literary character, he evokes a narrative time that disrupts the transcendental temporality of myth.[310] In other words, the literary context makes the myth temporally particular rather than transcendent. As Patton attests, acknowledging the liberating potential of myth demands recognizing it as an object particular to its temporal setting. The literary context, then, can be understood as providing the requisite cultural phenomena to do so because it comprises within its framework the time of myth alongside the time of human

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[309] See Chapter Two for more on how and why Power literature accomplishes this temporal manipulation.

[310] I am here relying on Ricoeur’s argument, discussed in previous chapters, that narratives are characterized by their attempts to manage the paradoxical aporia between cosmological and phenomenological time. Fiction and history, the two manifestations of narrative that manage this aporia, are differentiated by the latter’s appeal to archival “first-order entities”; as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, however, such a generic distinction falls flat in minority literature, which challenges dominant histories and mythologies while forging alternate ones by way of both historical and fictional discourses. Minority fiction, then, necessarily integrates historical time, even if it is by conflating it with mythic time, as in the way of Power literature.

narrative, in Ricoeur's understanding. Simply put, when we come into contact with an archetypal trickster character in the context of literature, he is historicized, particularized, made non-archetypal.

Exemplifying a time-bound representation of a characteristically universal archetype, the trickster character recalls the realm of experience and makes us focus on him not only as discursive trope but also as a figure who assumes ontological significance in the literary narrative itself. This second corrective to Gates and Vizenor disallows the infinitely referential quality of the trickster. Especially when reading literature that incorporates unfamiliar phenomena, being faced with the trickster character who is unassimilable to our prior knowledge forestalls archetypal assumptions while continuing to guide the hermeneutic act. In trickster criticism, it is an intentional paradox that a figure of disruption and mystification is associated with a task of elucidation. But such a paradoxical role is especially important when engaging with marginalized cultures, which are always susceptible to homogenizing analyses. As Doris Sommer puts it in her study of minority American writing, "The slap of refused intimacy from uncooperative books can slow readers down, detain them at the boundary between contact and conquest, before they press particularist writing to surrender cultural difference for the sake of universal meaning" (ix). With culturally specific literary criticism, a trickster character, though an archetype, thwarts the acquisitive reader response. As a particular manifestation of the archetype that almost but never quite aligns with it, a trickster character provokes active audience negotiation by simultaneously inviting the reader in

through archetypal familiarity but also distancing through textual deferral.[311] The rhetorical features of the trickster – his wit, his linguistic play, even his lewdness – come to the fore not only as indications of his hermeneutic faculty but also to challenge reductive readings based solely on his archetypal role. For example, the crudeness of Vizenor's trickster characters, such as their overt sexuality and scatological inclinations, while authentic to the Anishinaabe oral tradition, is also meant to jolt the reader out of a mentality that romanticizes such figures as noble savages.

The third corrective to Gates' and Vizenor's hermeneutic theories offered by phenomenology is the ability to retain a sense of foundations at the level of narrative when the trickster character is understood as emblematic of a shared mythic tradition. He thereby provides a coherent means, a common denominator, by which to define group identity if a communal foundation is understood not as a "basic belief," which requires an act of faith, but as a shared narrative. For example, the African American community is made coherent not only through the people's shared rhetorical strategy of signifying, as Gates argues, but also through their collective knowledge of and familiarity with the monkey character, with whose narrative the practice of signifying originates. If we ignore the phenomenological aspect that the trickster inspires through his role as an embodied character in both traditional and literary narratives, we dismiss him as a foundation, albeit a narrative foundation, that allows for a focus on shared stories as the defining characteristic of a community, a race, a people. In other words, the trickster is not just an appeal to an indigenous form of hermeneutic theory, though he is significantly that; he is also a character representative of a narrative foundation that, in part,

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[311] Bradley John Monsma comes to a similar conclusion about trickster texts, which "position readers in relation to the difference of the text by confronting readers with their own potential for misunderstanding even while compelling participation in the act of creating meaning from shifting texts" (84).

determines communal boundaries through a shared phenomenological experience of storytelling.

By recognizing the phenomenological and hermeneutic role of the trickster – indeed of any myth – trickster discourse is revised into a mediating literary criticism that can embrace the trickster without sacrificing politically advantageous notions of foundations. Even such a characteristically postmodern writer as Vizenor seems to embrace a concept of foundations in his frequent allusions to shadows, especially in his essay "Shadow Survivance."[312] For example, he writes that "shadows are prenarrative silence that inherits the words" (64).[313] Despite this essay's frequent use of poststructuralist theory, Vizenor anticipates that the shadow will speak, differentiating it from Derrida's *différance*, which is incapable of answering "to the tone and dissemblance of scriptural, hermeneutical, and representational translations of the heard stories" (71). Vizenor's continued evocation of shadows can be elucidated if we recognize it as analogous to the "implied spider" concept of Wendy Doniger, who argues that though all we can ever experience is the myth rather than the origin it narrates (i.e. the spider web), "we must believe in the existence of the spider, the experience behind the myth" (*Implied* 61).

For both Vizenor and Doniger, then, the foundation that precedes language exists but cannot be expressed in language or directly experienced. Though we experience only the shadow or the web or the mythic narrative, its very existence demands a foundation: the shadow-maker, the spider, the unknowable original experience. And though we may

[312] This essay appears in *Manifest Manners* (63-106). "Survivance" is Vizenor's term for "the idea of survival and resistance" (*Postindian* 79).
[313] Vizenor's references to shadows are not always affirmative, especially when they are taken to be ends in themselves, terminal creeds instead of creative expressions of what cannot be expressed.

not have phenomenological access to that foundation, we can come to hermeneutic conclusions about its presence via its very absence, which is signified by the presence of shadows or webs or narratives. Such a theoretical formulation does not deny foundations but does deny exact linguistic expression of them, which would be a manifestation of Vizenor's terminal creeds. In this way, the trickster can be "real in stories but not in the flesh" (Vizenor "Trickster Discourse" in *BR* 70) and can be "real in those who imagine the narrative" ("Trickster Discourse" in *NC* 190). Vizenor's insistence on the *reality* of the trickster despite characteristic poststructuralist discourse that seemingly undermines any foundational sense of the real indicates the trickster's potential to mediate between absence and presence, signifier and signified, and therefore to act in the phenomenological realm of experience.[314]

In addition to grounding what could otherwise be an infinitely relative play of signifiers, and thereby making trickster discourse politically viable, focusing on the trickster as a shared cultural phenomenon bolsters the crosscultural comparative act by providing a foundational point of comparison at the level of narrative. For Doniger, acknowledging foundations allows for her crosscultural comparative mythic project, a project likewise invaluable in the multicultural American literary context. In his critique of Gates, Adolph Reed indicates why we need a theoretical means to responsibly compare mythic narratives. Complicating Gates' appeal to the African figure Esu and the African American Signifying Monkey, Reed argues that this trickster is not purely

[314] Vizenor reiterates this argument in an interview: "There isn't any center to the world but a story. […] Stories, I believe, […] grow out of real or imagined experience, both those are real or true, or mythic" (Coltelli 156). One example Vizenor provides of a real-world effect of his writing is when he claims that his stories liberated Ishi, the last Yahi Indian who lived in a museum at Berkeley. With Vizenor's "trickster signature," "Ishi was released from the burdens of culture and became a real person" (*Interior* 226).

African or African American, but is likely influenced by Native American trickster figures (143-144). Similarly, Jace Weaver looks to the trickster in order to explicate the ways in which Native American communities can simultaneously be both native and Christian, interpreting the Old and New Testament mythic figures Jacob and Jesus as tricksters (*Other* 248-254).[315] Because myth is always being compared, because it is always crossing (imposed) boundaries, and because such contact is made explicit in minority American literature, we require a responsible theoretical model that can address such comparisons without resorting to universalist methodologies that subsume difference.

By offering crosscultural myth theory as a mediator between universal myth theories that impose a top-down perspective, akin to those of Eliade, Jung, and Campbell, and a focus on just one mythic tradition, akin to that of Womack, Doniger draws on the differences of myths' contents and contexts as well as on their similarities. She does so because comparison "is our way of making sense of difference" (28). While comparative mythology has been dismissed by many critics, especially in light of universalist ethnocentrism, to go to the other extreme of rejecting comparison altogether as a colonizing practice, to insist that the differences of historical contexts are insufficient to endorse constructive comparison, devolves into another way to "deny difference, to remain unmoved and in control" (52). Simply because Eurocentrist forms and theories,

[315] Despite his suspicion of postmodern discourse, discussed above, Weaver recognizes Vizenor's employment of it as "startingly akin to the premodern, to the tribal, to the dynamism of traditional orature. It thus becomes for him a powerful revolutionary tool for breaking down dominant structures" (*That* 141). Like Reed and Weaver, Wai Chee Dimock illustrates the potential of the trickster as a comparative figure. Given her ecocritical approach, she is less interested in tracing the crosscultural origins of the trickster than in anticipating his multicultural future; for her, Hanuman, the Hindu trickster god that was a prototype of the Monkey King in Chinese Buddhism, is "Native American" "in that he will be fruitful and multiply in the Americas, will leave many traces of himself" (191). Gates' Signifying Monkey, Kingston's Wittman, and Vizenor's Griever, the protagonist of the novel to be discussed below, are just three of these traces, she argues (192).

once deemed universally applicable, have been exposed as culturally specific and historically contingent, that does not then suspend all theoretical perspectives that can make meaningful universal experiences (Alcoff *Visible* 97). Because of the crosscultural nature of myth, especially of the trickster, and because of the multicultural mythic setting of the United States, trickster myths manifest in different contexts for different political reasons, while providing a foundational means to make sense of those differences. The trickster character, as phenomenon particular to his literary and cultural context and as hermeneutic trope, guides both the culturally specific and the crosscultural critical act. Ultimately, the trickster proves invaluable, especially at the present intellectual moment, for mediating between essentialism and deconstruction by way of his dual phenomenological and hermeneutic directive.

Critical Trickster Fiction

Despite the limitations of the trickster discourse theorized by Gates and Vizenor, Vizenor's fictional tricksters prove more capable of eliciting mediating theoretical discourse than do his critical ones.[316] In his criticism, Vizenor is so preoccupied with rejecting anthropological discourse that he neglects the empirical function of the trickster. Karen Oakes responds to Vizenor's rejection of the social sciences by pointing out that not all anthropological methods are reductive; if we dismiss them all, we simultaneously dismiss their "contextualizing insights," which "are not only necessary at times to help prevent misinterpretation," but also can "help to enlarge appreciation as traditional literary studies attempts to become more interdisciplinary" (145). If we turn to Vizenor's fiction, we can appreciate that he too sees possibilities for social science discourse, an apt

[316] It might be out of a similar concern that Baker refers to Gates as a better critic than theorist (*Blues* 107).

medium for documenting cultural phenomena, beyond the universalizing theories that have reduced Native Americans to primitives, their culture to artifacts, and tricksters to amoral clowns. Armed with cultural phenomena conveyed through the literary context, the reader can appreciate Vizenor's trickster characters as a communally specific therapeutic force whose meanings radiate beyond his specific community. According to such a revised theoretical perspective, the text is less prone to co-optation either as purely anthropological content or disruptive signifier. In the space of the literary text, the characteristically peripatetic character is, momentarily, grounded.

It is difficult to generalize about Vizenor's literary work, which, in the 1990s, was "unexceeded in volume by any Native American author" (Blaeser *Gerald* 5).[317] He began his writing career in the 1970s as a journalist, a recorder and commentator on the realm of material experience.[318] Vizenor claims that he sees his journalism as carrying on the "agonistic tradition" of his ancestors who "published the first newspaper on the White Earth Reservation," *The Progress*, which was published in the late nineteenth century and "was critical of land allotment legislation and the Bureau of Indian Affairs" (*Crossbloods* viii). Vizenor's journalistic essays report on such political issues as the reservation school systems, hunting and fishing rights, Indian suicides, and the American Indian National Bank. He also wrote and continues to write editorially about the American Indian Movement, Native American remains, and the legal case of Thomas White Hawk, a young Oglala Sioux Indian who murdered a white man and raped his

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[317] Cherokee author Robert Conley, whose novels alone number in the forties, now far outdistances Vizenor.

[318] Much of Vizenor's early journalism has been collected in both *Tribal Scenes and Ceremonies* (1976) and *Crossbloods: Bone Courts, Bingo, and Other Reports* (1990).

wife.[319] Vizenor successfully petitioned to have White Hawk's death sentence commuted to life in jail and published articles about the hearings, White Hawk's psychological state, which Vizenor believed to be "cultural schizophrenia," and the responses of the Native American and white communities to the case.

Related to Vizenor's polemic writings and activism is his concurrent publication of traditional Anishinaabe oral narratives. Engaged in a similar project of recovery as authors of Power literature (though with different ends), Vizenor published numerous monographs that transcribed these traditional narratives, again taking as his guide his ancestors who recorded these myths in their newspaper.[320] In the introduction to the compilation of these collections, *Summer in the Spring* (1981, 1993), Vizenor explains his motivation: "There were worried hearts that recovered memories, and trickster stories that endured the manifest manners of a consumer civilization. […] The visions of birds and words once heard were roused in the imagination and remembrance of readers, a new tribal hermeneutics" (3-4). Here, he explicitly links a project of recovering traditional trickster stories with a political project of liberation. By evoking the indigenous legacy of interpretation, he galvanizes enduring narratives that challenge those propagated by a capitalist, colonialist, and exceptionalist authority.

In addition to his journalism, his transcription of traditional oral narratives, as well as his critically acclaimed haiku, Vizenor has been a prolific writer of, and is best known for, his fiction, which Arnold Krupat and Michael A. Elliott explain is only "a label of convenience when discussing the work of someone like Vizenor, whose writing

[319] Of Native American human remains, for example, Vizenor argues for the establishment of bone courts because these remains, often stored as archeological artifacts instead of being buried, have the right to "be their own narrators," for "human rights continue after death" (*Interior* 258).
[320] See Blaeser's *Gerald Vizenor* for a complete list of these titles (6-7).

typically breaks down genre boundaries (novel, short story, autobiography) as well as the ontological boundaries between the imagined and the real" (141). Trickster characters have been central to and a unifying thread of Vizenor's fiction – if such a decentralized corpus can be argued as having unity. For complex reasons, his fiction, especially that of the 1980s and 1990s, has been attacked as often as his criticism for being apolitical and for partaking in an imposed Euro-American theoretical discourse. (No doubt his criticism has influenced the critical reception of his fiction, and vice versa.) For example, Sean Kicummah Teuton, who aligns himself with the post-positivist realism of Paula M. L. Moya, argues that poststructuralist writers such as Vizenor deny transmission of meaning because they assume that objectivity "is the achievement of pure knowledge absolutely free of theoretical mediation" (23). In other words, their definition of objectivity relies on positivist assumptions rather than post-positivist ones.[321]

While a wholesale rejection of objectivity may be the project of some trickster critics, I do not think it is characteristic of Vizenor's literary writings, especially his many multigeneric short stories and novels, because of their "theoretical attachments" to such referential categories as "history, society, [and] culture" (23), which Teuton views as essential to reach theoretically mediated objective conclusions. Teuton's argument, that "Vizenor suggests that cultural identity in the service of political action is theoretically indefensible, even pernicious" (179), comes at the expense of Vizenor's decades-long

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[321] Part of Teuton's disapproving characterization of trickster criticism stems from his interpretation of the trickster as an exact analogue for poststructuralist subversion rather than indigenous hermeneutics. On the other side of the debate are those critics who embrace Vizenor as the most sophisticated Native American author for the same reason. Elvira Pulitano, for example, contrasts Vizenor with the essentialism of Paula Gunn Allen (12) and "the internal contradictions and linguistic inconsistencies of […] Warrior's and Womack's *tribalcentric* approaches to a Native theory" (13). She thinks Vizenor is "the most provocative and definitely the most subversive" (14) and attributes his "elusive style" more to the influence of Derrida and poststructuralists than to his Anishinaabe heritage (155), though such a claim proves difficult to support.

and well-documented history of community advocacy and political activism.[322] To reconcile Vizenor's attempts to make tangible changes to the material experiences of Native Americans with his theoretical trickster discourse, we must look to his fiction, which mediates between his reportage and his poststructuralist criticism.

In his fiction, Vizenor is more willing than in his criticism to explain what a trickster is than what he is not, to characterize his presence rather than dwell on his absence. For example, in a story about Almost Browne, one of his mixedblood trickster characters who appears in numerous works, the narrator takes time away from the plot to explain, "The trickster is a character in stories, an animal, or person, even a tree at times, and he frees the world in stories. Almost said the trickster is almost a man and almost a woman, and almost a child, a clown who laughs and plays games with words in stories" (*Landfill* 24).[323] Here, the narrator delineates the familiar archetypal characteristics of the trickster: a liminal, comical figure whose primary role is to manipulate language for the betterment of "the world." In the realm of fiction, Vizenor animates the trickster character Almost within a specific temporality and geography so that the reader can interpret his excessive words and subversive actions according to those contexts. Because he is simultaneously a "character in stories" as well as someone who "frees the

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[322] Vizenor describes his activism, among other places, in his autobiography, *Interior Landscapes* (185-198).

[323] Vizenor frequently refers to his characters, both trickster and not, as mixedbloods to indicate their multiple heritages and to challenge the frequent characterizing of such characters as tragic and incapable of survival in a modern world. Kimberly Blaeser characterizes this view as such: "Most mixedbloods in Native American literature (read marginal characters) have desired and sought [a] resolution of ambiguous identity that results from movement to one side of the border or the other (most usually back to a tribal center of culture). Therefore, unless and until they reach that resolution, they exist in and are depicted in a tragic state" (*Gerald* 158). Vizenor's mixedblood tricksters, on the other hand, "celebrate" their "ambiguous or marginal state" (158). Vizenor also refers to his characters as mixedbloods or crossbloods to challenge any notion of a pureblood or authentic Indian identity. For example, in *The Trickster of Liberty*, a Chinese translator admits that she had not realized that the "real Red Indians" were actually mixedbloods because she was "taught that Red Indians were primitives and savages." An elder responds to her attempt to pin down Indian identity by saying, "No one is a real Indian" (144).

world *in* stories" and "plays games with words *in* stories," he is both a character (a narrated object) and a storyteller (a narrating and interpreting subject). He is both phenomenon to be experienced through reading and a trope to guide the act of reading.

To make his trickster characters a presence, to make them impinge on the experiential realm, Vizenor retains the phenomenological impulse of his journalism by appealing to primary, archival sources as well as to such secondary sources as historical and anthropological studies – this despite Teuton's claim that Vizenor's fiction is "ahistorical trickster fiction" (172). It is in these fictional writings that he combines his documentation of such first-order phenomena as archival documents, maps, and photographs with his hermeneutical trickster perspective that draws attention to the ways in which such phenomena have been constructed and exploited, mostly to detrimental ends.[324] Though it is a common strategy of postmodern writers to fabricate ostensibly authentic documents to undermine the authority of any archival material, Vizenor reveals that he does not contrive fake sources to "disguise the actual sources." Rather, he "must establish and then tease historical realities in the interests of my tricky characters, who overturn the obvious" (*Postindian* 126). Here, Vizenor is forthright about his project of simultaneously constructing, or recovering, verifiable histories while exposing how constructions of such histories have manifested in harmful ways to reinforce oppressive systems of power.

Vizenor's fictional work, then, does not end with subversion but paves the way for reconstruction, fueled by the historical archive. As Kimberly Blaeser puts it,

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[324] For example, in the epilogue to *The Trickster of Liberty*, a collection of linked short stories, Vizenor reveals that his fictional trickster characters' land is the exact same one that was allotted to his grandmother: the "quotations on land allotment in the first chapter of this novel are from an original patent issued to" her (156) "by order of the secretary of the interior and signed by President Theodore Roosevelt on May 21, 1908" (157).

"Vizenor's deconstruction of what he sees as stereotypic and invented Indian identity serves the end of another kind of construction, the constructive of new authentic identity, existing through it might at the intersections of cultures and surviving though it does by a constant struggle for balance" (*Gerald* 158). The trickster figure can assume such a dual task because he functions in fiction both as phenomenon (character) and as hermeneut (trope) to deconstruct, among other things, imposed, tragic understandings of Indian identity. Vizenor repeatedly argues that since the moment of contact, Native American identity has been an imposed concept, a "simulation" "that means an absence" (*Fugitive* 15).[325] For this reason, he often characterizes such an imposed identity as that of an

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[325] Vizenor's critical writings often refer to "*indians*" as simulations, alluding to Jean Baudrillard's claim in *Simulacra and Simulation* (which he often cites) that in the present time, reality exists "without origin" and in fact is a "hyperreal" (1). Simulation, he contends, is something different from dissimulating, because by simulating, one actually experiences the symptom of what one is simulating (3). For this reason, Vizenor would argue that many Native Americans have assumed the qualities of the Indian identity projected by the dominant culture. Perhaps the most notorious example of his subversion of imposed concepts of Indian identity is his attack on members of the American Indian Movement. Though reputedly the most symbolically and politically "Indian" Native Americans, Vizenor reveals that even AIM members are inventions of white society: "News reports created the heroes of confrontation for an imaginative white audience, but those dedicated to negotiations were ignored. […] [Dennis] Banks and radical leaders have become the warriors of headlines, but not the heart of the best stories that turn the remembered tribal world" (*People* 130). He evens appeals to more authentic, essential notions of Native American culture to expose the simulations for what they are: "The political ideologies of the radical tribal leaders are reactions to racism and cultural adversities; that much all tribal people have in common; but the radical rhetoric of the leaders was not learned form traditional tribal people on reservations or in tribal communities" (*People* 130).

Citing the reality of historical experience as opposed to the fiction of the noble savage identity assumed by AIM members, he adds elsewhere, "These ersatz warriors were much closer to the invented tragedies of a vanishing race than were the crossbloods who endured the *real* politics and weather on reservations" (*Crossbloods* xiii; emphasis added). As an alternative to such performed Indian identity, Vizenor offers his own trickster activism, which preceded that of AIM. In *Wordarrows*, he describes the Vizenor-like fictional tribal advocate as "the tribal trickster and realist" (45) who organizes the "first protest against the federal colonialists" (10). Vizenor also highlights the potential of trickster discourse when critically applied to Russell Means' contrived experiences. Though he often disapproves of Means and other activists in AIM for playing the role of invented "indian," he interprets Means as a "laudable postindian" when he posed in the "silk screen portrait by Andy Warhol" (*Manifest* 17). Co-opting Means' mimicry in accord with his "trickster hermeneutics," as he refers to it in *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor reads Means' portrait disruptively to say, "This portrait is not an Indian," citing artist René Magritte's surrealist painting of a pipe, "This is Not a Pipe" (18). As Bhabha explains, "Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" ("Of Mimicry" 86). Yet to read Means as disavowing Indian identity through simulation rather than re-inscribing it requires the theoretical perspective that supplements the hermeneutic function of the trickster with the phenomenological encounter between reader and narrative content.

"Indian." The alternative to being an indian is to be a "Native," who is a "presence" (*Fugitive* 15), or a "postindian," as he refers to it *Manifest Manners*.

One of the primary reasons for the accusation that Vizenor renounces foundations is his comparable description of the trickster in his criticism as an absence, as solely a semiotic tool. However, Vizenor's goal is not a cosmopolitan deconstruction of identity in general but is rather to free recoverable tribal identities, which are accessible in traditional narratives, from the shackles of imposed ones. His trickster discourse is therefore a targeted subversion of dangerous and artificial categories of identity, not necessarily of identity categories themselves. In this way, it is akin to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's definition of deconstruction: "Deconstruction does not say there is no subject, there is no truth, there is no history. It simply questions the privileging of identity so that someone is believed to have the truth. It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced" ("Bonding" 285). Vizenor models this process of excavating how specific experiences are naturalized into ahistorical categories of identity by revising his journalistic perspective into a fictional trickster perspective.

In *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* (1987), winner of the 1988 American Book Award, Vizenor exemplifies the kind of mediating trickster discourse I have been describing.[326] Based on his own experiences as a teacher in the People's Republic of China in the early 1980s, *Griever* provides Vizenor with the fictional space in which to present himself as a trickster figure in a crosscultural context, to record his own phenomenological experiences while summoning the trickster figure to interpret

[326] That both *Griever* and *The Signifying Monkey* won the Before Columbus Foundation's award within a year of each other suggests that their use of the trickster was welcome to an influential body of minority scholars and thinkers at the time.

them. As he admits in an interview, "I just wrote about me as a trickster" (Coltelli 181). By correlating the Anishinaabe Naanabozho with the Chinese Monkey King in the character Griever, Vizenor makes the trickster archetype useful for offering a theory that can be applicable in a multicultural context while addressing specific historical and cultural experiences.[327] Following Vizenor's footsteps, Griever is a visiting teacher at a university in Tianjin, China, where he struggles against the perceived injustices of the Communist system through characteristic trickster behavior, not the least of which is his rampant seduction of multiple female characters. Griever impregnates one of these characters, Hester Hua Dan, who is the daughter of the corrupt president of the university, Egas Zhang. At the end of the novel, Egas drowns her and his unborn granddaughter as punishment for Hester's allegedly immoral behavior. Distraught by the loss, Griever escapes China on a "microlight" airplane accompanied by one of his lovers, Kangmei, the daughter of a white American sinophile and Egas Zhang's Chinese wife.

Wary of the ethnocentric tendency to impose one's own perspective on another culture, Vizenor admits that he had not planned on writing about China because of "cultural contradictions." However, in response to his personal experiences, he was so convinced that the "Chinese Monkey King, or Mind Monkey, was a transformational character related to Naanabozho, the *anishinaabe* trickster" and that "these two wonderful trickster characters are cousins," that he embraced the opportunity to chart that "coincidence of transmotion" (*Postindian* 116).[328] In other words, narratives of Naanabozho, when juxtaposed against narratives of the Monkey King, allowed Vizenor

[327] The character of Griever also appeared in *The Trickster of Liberty* (1988), which in some ways can be understood as a sequel.
[328] Vizenor reiterates this stance in *Landfill Meditation*: "Griever, conceived in mythic time, is a close relative to the mind monkeys from China" (182).

to recognize the crosscultural expressions of the archetype so he could fictionalize and make meaningful his own crosscultural experiences.[329] To ethically perform such a comparative study, Vizenor required a sense of foundations by which to put the two cultures in dynamic relation. He discovered that foundation in the trickster, who is a comparative figure both because he manifests in multiple cultural contexts and because he is, by definition, a border crosser.[330] According to Vizenor, the opposite of love is not hate, in accordance with structuralist binaries, but rather separation ("Crows" 106), and so the trickster figure beneficially disallows separation by bridging boundaries, whether sexual, racial, or national. To artificially separate even the most contradictory of things, for Vizenor, is to promulgate injustice.

In addition to the narrator's repeated reference to him as "the trickster," Griever is instantly recognizable as this archetypal figure given his many border crossings, not only of cultural and national boundaries, but also temporal boundaries through his time travel (47, 51), boundaries of animal and plant species (54), and boundaries of gender (55). The novel's temporal manipulation, for example, is complex and reminiscent of Silko's *Ceremony* and Kingston's *Woman Warrior*. To disrupt the nationalist conception of time as a linear category, Griever plays on the saying, "How time flies" with the palimpsestic statement, "How time folds" (203). Griever as trickster manifestation resists progressive narratives of time, exemplifying Patton's "practical theory" in which phenomenological

[329] In addition to his recognition of the similarities between the two trickster figures, Vizenor has other reasons to compare Native American and Asian cultures more generally. For example, he has degrees in anthropology, library science, and Asian studies, and he was in Japan with the army. Blaeser also explains that "Vizenor saw great similarities between the haiku form and the Ojibway dream songs, and during the time he was involved in the writing of his early haiku, he also undertook the reexpression of traditional Ojibway songs and stories" (*Gerald* 6). Vizenor has published six books of haiku, which have received much commendation among haiku scholars.

[330] Vizenor does not limit the crosscultural similarities to the trickster specifically. There are other references, such as to stones, scrolls, and certain animals that are of major significance in both Anishinaabe and Chinese mythic traditions, though these often relate to the trickster in important ways.

focus on a myth disrupts evolutionary narratives of progress. Despite China's attempts to emplot its history according to such a narrative, Griever insists that "the nation lives in three centuries at the same time" (203).

For the picture on his identification card, Griever dresses up as the Monkey King (138), and he refers to himself as "White Earth Monkey King" (151). (White Earth is the name of the Anishinaabe reservation of which Vizenor is a member). All the while, his mischievous acts are in keeping with Vizenor's stance that the trickster is, despite Radin's statements to the contrary, a figure who upsets the status quo for the betterment of society. Vizenor's claim that Naanabozho is a "compassionate trickster" also corresponds with the traditional understandings of the Chinese Monkey King, who, after years of penance in the service of the monk Tripitaka (assigned by the bodhisattva Kuan Yin), achieves the status of bodhisattva himself.[331] For this reason, just as Vizenor recognized the Monkey King as a "cousin" of Naanabozho, so too do the Chinese characters in his novel recognize Griever as a manifestation of the Monkey King because his clowning actions not only disrupt conventions but do so on others' behalf. Even though they cannot understand his words, some Chinese characters refer to Griever as the Monkey King when he liberates chickens from the hands of a sadistic butcher (40-41) and when he insists that even though in communist China every one is equal, young men should give up their bus seats to elderly women (86). In the latter case, he does not impose (Native) American cultural standards of morality, but rather cites Confucius, a founding mythmaker of Chinese culture, to counter communist rhetoric: "Confucius would give his seat to an old woman" (86). Emulating the simultaneously disruptive and

[331] A bodhisattva is a supernatural figure in Buddhist theology who, just before reaching nirvana, volunteers to be reborn on earth to guide suffering humans toward nirvana.

restorative role of Naanabozho and the Monkey King, Griever acts in the world to expose its constricting ideological heritage and to make room in that heritage for more liberating expressions.

Despite a poststructuralist suspicion of universals, Vizenor does traffic in archetypes through his identification of Naanabozho with the Monkey King. But his archetype is sustained by crosscultural comparison and not by universalist impositions that depend on structuralist binaries between Euro-American, Christian subject and primitive other. In this way, Vizenor's methodology is analogous to the recent work of poststructuralist anthropologists who do not focus on origins or argue for "archetypal roots in a transcendent human psyche" but rather study various "cultural manifestations" within their particular contexts (Hynes and Doty "Introducing" 2). To attend to these cultural particulars, Vizenor introduces his chapters with epigraphs by historians, anthropologists, and other scholars about China and incorporates such contextual information, as well as first-order archival materials, into the body of the novel itself. For example, in the scene in which Tianjin's mayor hosts a dinner party, Vizenor intersperses quotations from the mayor's real speech about the city's progress with the American teachers' complaints about how the city reeks of excrement (179-185).[332] In response to the mayor's narrative of progress, in which he claims that Tianjin is a place where "political stability and unity have become an irreversible historical trend" (183), Griever declares that he plans on questioning the mayor about the unequal treatment experienced in his city by the Algerians and Africans (185-186).

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[332] In the epilogue, where Vizenor reveals many of his sources, he affirms that this speech is the mayor's actual words (236).

This documentation of a nonfictional moment of political rhetoric juxtaposed with Vizenor's fictive contradictions of that rhetoric grounds a self-avowedly deconstructive strategy in a real-world context. In other words, Vizenor's incorporation of primary sources in the realm of literature allows him to invalidate the truth-claims posed by the archive while situating such subversion within a materialist realm where injustices are experienced on a daily basis. Though most of Vizenor's fiction is replete with such references to historical phenomena, he insists that *Griever* contains "more historical references" than his other works "because of the many tricky poses and performances" (*Postindian* 123). The trickier the prose, it seems, the more requisite the referential framework in order to make the narrative directly impinge on the phenomenological realm. And the more powerful the dominant rhetorical simulations of the archive, the trickier, the more demanding of hermeneutic engagement, the prose.

One of Griever's most revolutionary acts is his liberation of the death-row inmates. Vizenor introduces this part of the novel with an epigraph from Amnesty International on Chinese human rights violations, which documents the extensive use of capital punishment in China for crimes as varied as bribery, drug trafficking, and "passing on methods of committing crimes" (107). In light of this verifiable information, the reader interprets Griever's hijacking of the "Execution Caravan" as an attempt to save the prisoners, who include rapists, a wrongly accused prostitute, and an art historian thief of cultural relics, from similar executions that regularly occur in China. Given that Vizenor petitioned to save the life of death-row inmate, Thomas White Hawk, Griever's fictional attempt to do likewise assumes a comparable level of real-world significance. In this scene, Griever speaks to the crowd, "Yesterday, I heard there were thirty people

executed. … You tried thirty young men in the stadium in San Li Tun in front of fifty-thousand people. How could thirty people get a fair trial in one day? […] Do your police never make a mistake? Are your police filled with virtue and do they have all the wisdom of Confucius?" (150). Again, Griever cites Confucius to expose the "tyrannical" and artificially imposed system that not only uses the death penalty but abuses it.

As he demands the "release of the prisoners," Griever "mimics" the soldiers and then identifies himself not only as the "White Earth Monkey King" (151) but also as Wei Jingshen (151) and Fu Yuehua (152), whom Louis Owens has pointed out are both "historical political prisoners in China" (*Other* 249). He then speaks from these activists' points of view, first as Jingshen: "We opposed socialism and the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, and […] we wanted the rights of democracies, and so we were arrested." As Yuehua (a woman), he claims, "Five years ago we organized a peasant demonstration to end hunger and persecution, we demanded human rights but instead we were sentenced to a labor camp" (152). Griever's role as a crosscultural and crossgendered trickster allows him to situate himself in the position of political prisoner, to give voice to their disruptive and liberative methods and goals, which in turn, become trickster acts. Through his mimicry, antics, and wily diversions, all of which make the soldiers double "over in laughter," Griever is able to free the prisoners and hear their stories (153). Supporting Griever's accusations of legal injustice, the wrongly accused prostitute reveals, "From our arrest to a death sentence took less than a week" (154). With clownish behavior and ventriloquist wordplay but also through his ability to interrupt a literal progression (the caravan) and a figurative one (the narrative of national advancement that justifies the death penalty), Griever exposes injustices that not only

occur in his fictional Tianjin but that reverberate beyond that realm into the world beyond the text.

Griever's tricky performance to save those destined for execution is representative of the function of trickster discourse if it is understood as simultaneously phenomenological and hermeneutic. Early in the novel, the narrator describes how Griever thinks, how he interprets: "His memories are bundled and marked with emblems, and he imagines stories about other people from their scars, prints, carved hearts, crude crosses gashed on trees; new cultures scored on desks and public corridors, and from natural wrinkles, faults on faces and the earth" (27). In addition to describing Griever's interpretive method, Vizenor is here acknowledging his own fictional methodology: both Griever and Vizenor look to empirical traces as phenomena that launch, substantiate, guide, and delimit their imaginative and compassionate storytelling. Vizenor's fiction models Griever's consultation of visible markers through his own references to first-order, archival materials, such as dates, maps, and historical personages.

We are to leave the novel *Griever*, then, with the understanding that a mythic figure, and myth in general, can also assume the role of such archival phenomena in the realm of literature. In the literary context, the mediating role of the trickster allows Vizenor to shift foundations from suspect biologic essentialisms or romantic, universalized projections to a narrative foundation animated by the simultaneously fictional and metafictional trickster. Though the trickster's hermeneutic function, according to Gates' and Vizenor's critical visions, guides our reading process according to specific cultural modes of interpretation that seem to endlessly defer meaning, that interpretation is halted by the trickster character's participation in and disruption of our

own lived world. Put differently, the phenomenological focus on myth disrupts transcendent claims while guiding the reader's requisite pursuit to interpret Vizenor's seemingly fantastic world as intimately related to our very real one.

Committing to Social Cohesion through Disruption

Despite the efficacy of Griever's trickster acts, his liberating efforts are not wholly successful. The rapists who try to escape the caravan are killed, and Vizenor does not spare the gory details: "The soldiers carried out the death sentence at the site. Hundreds of bullets hit the rapists, their heads burst, brains steamed, blood stained the river" (155). This scene is not the only one in which Griever's trickster behavior falls short. As Owens explains, Griever's "heroic" gestures often result in "anticlimax" (249). Even his humor, one of the most identifiable characteristics of the trickster, is sometimes inappropriate and fails to transmit, such as when he ridicules an old Chinese woman's inability to walk well: "He mocked her moves too, her short minced steps back from the counter, […] No one laughed; her feet here bound when she was a child" (42). Built into the novel itself, then, are limitations of trickster discourse, in which Vizenor exemplifies how a trickster's constant subversion and playfulness remain embedded in specific historical contexts that may bar translation. Recognizing that Griever's acts do not always translate in a foreign context allows the reader to appreciate his role as an unassimilable phenomenological marker that halts both conventionally archetypal and disruptively hermeneutic readings. In other words, in this case, Griever's cultural specificity defers archetypal familiarity, and his inappropriate subversion points to the limits of crosscultural hermeneutics.

It is perhaps for this reason that Kingston, in *Tripmaster Monkey*, supplements her trickster narrator, Wittman, with the goddess of mercy, the bodhisattva of compassion, Kuan Yin. The trickster does not provide universally applicable guidance but rather draws our attention to the need to work toward crosscultural compassion. In one sense, it is possible to read *Griever* as forestalling a curative ending because Egas drowns his daughter Hester and her unborn daughter, whom Griever had given the name Kuan Yin; compassion, it seems, is effectively eliminated. When another character tries to console Griever by making Hester's death mythic, he shouts, "The [cultural] revolution ended that jade rabbit monkey shit."[333] The narrator reveals that Griever feels "severed from his shadow in a culture that pretended to understand the monkey king and trickeries" (228). In other words, the imposed political system of communism undermines the Chinese people's ability to successfully interpret the trickster. The hermeneutic is impeded because the trickster has become artificially separated from his "shadow," Vizenor's reference to an inexpressible foundation. The successful phenomenological experience of the trickster image is suspended, and the potential of trickster discourse seems, like Kingston's revision of Fa Mu Lan, to fall short.

At the conclusion of the novel, however, when Griever writes to a fellow White Earth Anishinaabe, he reveals that the Chinese children continue to recognize him as "their treasure, an immortal monkey king" on his travels (231). Because the trickster exposes social ills, even if through his failings, John Lowe reads both Kingston and Vizenor as "promulgating an aesthetics of healing" (107); while they "frequently play out

[333] The Cultural Revolution, instigated by Mao Zedong in 1966 and lasting into at least the 1970s, aimed to rid China of any remaining bourgeois elements and traditional Chinese culture by enforcing strict Communist policies and ideals. It was devastating to the survival of the Chinese mythic and narrative traditions, and millions of people died, were injured, or were displaced in the conflict.

Lyotard's laundry list of postmodern tricks, [they] violate the dictum of postmodernism's high priest against 'therapeutic' writing, also posited by his confrere, Frederic Jameson" (106).[334] Though often accused of inappropriately applying Euro-American poststructuralist discourse to minority tradition, Vizenor can be understood as proposing a different kind of disruptive discourse, one akin to Wittman's play that supplements an aesthetic of semiotic excess with a commitment to end real-world suffering.[335]

If we embrace the trickster as representative of an enduring *and* mutable narrative foundation, an indigenous rhetorical body whose purpose is to provide social cohesion, even if through disruption, then we can reconcile Vizenor's fictional trickster discourse with a dedication to political activism.[336] Finally, whether curative trickster discourse comes to fruition in the text of *Griever* remains unresolved, suggesting that the trickster's

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[334] Lowe makes the argument that Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* is indebted to Vizenor's *Griever* (104).

[335] Arnold Krupat, for one, cannot validate such an approach. In his discussion of Vizenor's *Heirs of Columbus* (1991), he refers to Vizenor's theoretical commitment as "an antagonist to Western postmodernism rather than an ally. In its sensitivity to a pervasive human suffering and its desire to act, in the Sartrean manner, on behalf of that suffering, this is a postmodernism that takes a position far less ambiguous than anything possible in the more usual postmodernisms of Europe and America" (*Turn* 68). Despite such an ethical impetus, Krupat finds fault with what he terms Vizenor's "posttribal utopian community" (68-69), because such an "unambiguous," un-ironic "commitment cannot logically be derived from anything that has preceded it" (69). In other words, Krupat cannot reconcile the seemingly unfoundational nature of Vizenor's discourse with his simultaneous appeal to an ethics and aesthetics of healing. In his collaborative essay with Michael A. Elliott, however, Krupat speaks more approvingly of the simultaneously deconstructive and reconstructive project of *The Heirs of Columbus*, which they argue "may be Vizenor's clearest statement of the goals of a cosmopolitan, postnational sovereignty that manages to remain rooted in tribal values, including humor, healing, and the oral traditions of imagination, without defining membership through division, exclusion, or tragic narratives of victimization" (144-145).

[336] For Vizenor, literature is not a self-indulgent escape from real-world experiences but rather acts, in a similar way as Ts'ai Yen's story at the end of Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, as the most potent weapon with which to achieve tangible restitutions. Such a function is possible because of the constructed and yet essential nature of language itself. In a discussion of English, for example, Vizenor points out that it is both "the linear tongue of colonial discoveries, racial cruelties, invented names, the simulation of tribal cultures, manifest manners, and the unheard literature of dominance in tribal communities" as well as "a language of invincible imagination and liberation for many tribal people in the postindian world" (*Manifest* 105). Because English "carried the vision and shadows of the Ghost Dance, the religion of renewal" (105), it offers real-world, foundational repercussions in the literary realm: "The shadows and language of tribal poets and novelists could be the new ghost dance literature, the shadow literature of liberation that enlivens tribal survivance" (106). It is now the task of Native American literature to exploit the liberative potential of the English language, to formulate pan-Indian inspiration for rejecting colonial impositions and embracing a "religion of renewal."

potential awaits the readers' reception. The character provides a hermeneutic model that can only be successfully transmitted via an experience of reading that acknowledges Griever's interference in the phenomenological realm, the world of his readers. When a fictional narrative enlivens a mythic figure and exposes how he is – or is not – made mythic, the mediating theory of the trickster guides the critical project of articulating both foundational and resistant stories of a people.

Conclusion: Looking Ahead

Despite continued culture-war accusations that it is a "literature of victimhood," US minority literature has become, over the course of the 1990s, canonical – if precariously so. If literature awards are any indication, then it is informative to remark that minority authors did not begin to win the National Book Award for fiction or poetry with any frequency until the 1980s (excepting Ralph Ellison's 1953 win for *Invisible Man*). Maxine Hong Kingston won in 1981 under the decidedly more minority-friendly category, "Nonfiction" for *China Men*; Alice Walker won the 1983 award for fiction for *The Color Purple*; and Gloria Naylor won in 1983 for *The Women of Brewster Place* under the category "First Novel." The Pulitzer Prize was a bit more prescient, having recognized Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry collection, *Annie Allen* in 1950 and N. Scott Momaday's foundational work of Native American fiction, *House Made of Dawn* in 1969. In ensuing years, the trend basically coincides with that of the National Book Awards. It is clear that by the 1980s, the decade in which the term "multiculturalism" became one of both praise and complaint, minority US literature was providing both alternate as well as defining narratives of American literary expression.

However, when minority US literature is taught or written about in critical conversations, it is usually done so in isolation, organized as discrete ethnic or racial traditions. Otherwise, it is integrated as tokens of larger discussions of American literature, usually guided by familiar scripts of American exceptionalism and progress and categorized under the familiar but often ill-fitting literary characterizations of "modernist" and "postmodernist." This dissertation has worked toward forging an understanding that US minority literatures have, in the post-Civil Rights era, assumed the

status and role as principal players in the American literary field. The interpolation of mythic narratives in the formative literary works discussed in this dissertation, as well as in those by Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, Ishmael Reed, James Welch, and Sandra Cisneros, among many others, has fueled the eminent rise of US minority literature. The alternate origin stories provided by myths have radically altered the imagination of Americans – both *how* they imagine and *who* they imagine Americans to be. Though distinct from dominant origin stories based on Puritan jeremiads, Christian salvation, and manifest destiny, these alternate origin stories remain identifiable and indigenous – though not limited – to the nation.

The main body of this dissertation ends in the early 1990s, a moment when the relationship of minority US literatures to the canon was being solidified. To extend the narrative, as well as to provide a capsule summary of it, I would like to compare works by Ana Castillo – an influential Chicana writer over the past three decades – from four periods of her career: her early poetry originally written and published between 1976 and 1988 and collected in *My Father Was a Toltec: New and Collected Poems* (1995); her work that restores Chicano/a mythology in her edited collection *Goddess of the Americas* (1997); her theoretical and critical work in *Massacre of the Dreamers* (1994); and finally her most recent poetry written and published between 1989 and 2000 and collected in *I Ask the Impossible* (2001). I turn to Castillo here to look both backward and forward, so as to articulate a provisional sense of the literary usages of myth in minority US literatures over the last four decades.[337] Castillo therefore serves as a case study to illustrate how an individual author has participated in the movements of recovery,

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[337] An added benefit of considering her poetry and nonfiction is that Castillo criticism has almost exclusively focused on her fiction.

revision, and theorizing that have characterized trends in post-Civil Rights minority US literatures as well as to tentatively surmise some new directions of these trends. Castillo exemplifies how a single career can work through the various phases and strategies that I have described in the dissertation and usefully demonstrates that these moments, in fact, are not entirely separable.

An influential figure in the paradigm-shifting literary and political movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, Castillo describes how she "worked with several Latino artists' groups – all led by men," as well the challenges she faced when she realized she needed to integrate considerations of gender in her struggle toward racial equality and "retribution" (Introduction *My Father* xix). Her early poetry is very much a part of the projects of recovery and revision of both Power literature and minority feminist literature. It works to incorporate Mesoamerican mythologies while self-consciously juxtaposing them against historical discourse, thereby exposing their contingency. For example, in "Ixtacihuatl Died in Vain," Castillo imagines Chicanas as the "snowcapped volcanoes / buried alive in myths / princesses with the name of a warrior on our lips" (39) – an Aztec legend that she further explains in a footnote (41). Here, she exposes the oppressive nature of myth, the way it locates women in a subservient position, oppressed by and dependent on patriarchal narratives.

In the final section of this poem, however, the speaker insists to her lesbian lover, "Let us place this born of us / at Ixtacihuatl's grave: / a footnote in the book of myths / sum of our existence – / 'Even the greatest truths / contain the tremor of a lie'" (40-41). Despite the repressive nature of myths, Castillo here recognizes their vulnerability to manipulation – the way that they offer, through the most inconceivable plots, great truths,

the "sum of our existence." Simultaneously, she alludes to the way that myths purport to offer these great truths while promulgating artificial and hierarchical social constructions, in part because they are just that: social constructions, "born of us." For this reason, she turns Aztec myth on its head, reversing a conventionally patriarchal narrative tradition so vigorously employed by *El Movimiento* to revise it in accordance with a feminist politics.

In "Wyoming Crossing Thoughts," the persona similarly insists, "i will never / in my life / marry / a Mexican man, / utter / with deep devotion / 'Si, mi señor'" (46). To make good on this claim, she ends the poem with a declaration that channels the violent pre-Columbian goddesses frequently associated with obsidian stone, obsidian knives, and blood: "i will desire him / my own way / give him / what i please / meet him when / and where / no one else sees, / drive an obsidian blade / through his heart, / lick up the blood" (47). Like Momaday, Baraka, and Chin, Castillo recognizes the political impetus of myths and the need to recover them for cultural empowerment. Like Anzaldúa, Silko, and Kingston, she also evinces awareness of the liability of myth given its ahistoricity. She therefore emplots her myth in strenuously historicized, often contemporary settings and discourse.

Between her early poems in *My Father was a Toltec* and her next significant poetry collection, *I Ask the Impossible*, Castillo published an edited collection of essays, poems, and stories about the Virgin of Guadalupe as well as a collection of self-authored theoretical and critical essays on Chicana history and identity, *The Massacre of the Dreamers*. In the former, Castillo explores the multivalent use-value of the Virgin, how the figuration and narratives of the Virgin not only converted the indigenous population and served the masculine leaders of the Mexican revolution but also continues to inspire

an oppositional feminist politics and the recovery of a non-European identity for Chicano/as. With contributions from writers across the political spectrum – from Octavio Paz and Richard Rodriguez to Sandra Cisneros and Cherríe Moraga – the collection effectively illustrates this dual potential that myth in particular is able to accomplish: "In Mexico we have a confrontation of beliefs [indigenous religions and Catholicism] that serve opposing social and cultural interests, and yet, within a theological context, uncannily fit like a Chinese puzzle and do not contradict each other. Tonantzin is a mother of a god; Holy Mary is the mother of Jesus; both are referred to as the Mother of God" (Introduction *Goddess* xix). In the mythic figure of Mary, in other words, discrepant political aims can be realized. This project, too, effectively takes part in that of mythic recovery while making explicit myth's particular usefulness for political transformation given its malleability and ambivalent political potential.

In *The Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo affirms much of the myth-inspired theorizing creatively expressed in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She does so to develop a politically viable, population-wide concept of Chicana identity, a concept she terms *Xicanisma*. Submitted as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Bremen in Germany, *Massacre of the Dreamers* questions the applicability of ethnography and the anthropological discipline for attaining cultural knowledge. At first, Castillo claims, "As Mexic Amerindians we must, to find a clue as to who we are and from whom we descend, become akin to archeologists" (6). However, giving voice to many of the same concerns as Gerald Vizenor, she reveals that she found in her research "ethnographic data that ultimately did not bring me closer to understanding how the Mexic Amerindian woman truly perceives herself since anthropology is traditionally based on the

objectification of its subjects" (7). In response to this limitation, Castillo turned to the mythic tradition itself in order to "reinsert the forsaken feminine into our consciousness" (12). Like Anzaldúa, Castillo recognizes the importance of historical research (12) in order to trace the ways that not only the Aztecs' "phallocracy" (11) but also the Judeo-Christian and Islamic-Moorish religions transformed what were originally societal systems structured around "Mother worship" to those that desexualized, undermined, and neglected women.

In many ways, Castillo here seems to be continuing much of the work of Power literature in its attempt to recover ostracized mythic traditions to develop a separate literary and political tradition, despite her wariness about the project of salvage ethnography: "Choosing to be conscious transmitters of literary expressions, we have become excavators of our common culture, mining legends, folklore, and myths for our own metaphors. Ours is not Homer but Netzahaulcotl, not Sappho but Sor Juana, not Athena but Coatlicue. Our cultural heritages were 'discovered' in the era of our generation's rebellion" (166). She even echoes some of the racial memory tropes of Power literature as well as the essentialist arguments that Gates is inclined to make, going so far as to describe the "female indigenous consciousness" as part of her "genetic collective memory" (17). However, Castillo also distances her project from the recovery work of the late 1960s and 1970s: "I am inclined to object to the claim that we are simply in search of identity but rather asserting it" (12). In other words, her turn to myth allows her to recognize a literary, religious, and political tradition that has been alive and operational in Chicano/a communities all along. Myth is a creative opportunity for transformation, not necessarily an ahistorical prescription for group identity.

Castillo self-consciously identifies the pitfalls and challenges of drawing on myth for political liberation given the significant degree to which it has been employed to restrict a woman's ability to be fulfilled beyond being "fulfilled by fulfilling the needs of men" (117). She claims, "It seems an insurmountable task to begin our own myth making from which to establish role models to guide us out of historical convolution and de-evolution" (119). Yet, she insists, "We can begin to write our own [origin] story: *In the beginning, there was Eva*" (119). Castillo's realization of the value of an alternate origin story is here explicitly pronounced. Emulating the literary self-consciousness of Anzaldúa, Silko, and Kingston, Castillo remains vigilant about such a task: "We must take heed that not all symbols that we have inherited are truly symbolic of the life-sustaining energy we carry within ourselves as women; so even when selectively incorporating what seems indispensable to our religiosity, we must analyze its historical meaning" (145). The symbols inherited via myth, then, must be measured against historical experience, so they may fuel survival "on our own terms" (145-146), and not from the top-down.

Castillo then makes this self-reflexivity relevant to the field of literary criticism in a move similar to Gates and Vizenor: "Ours is a poetics no different than other literary movements throughout the ages. We are looking at what has been handed down to us by previous generations of poets and, in effect, rejecting, reshaping, restructuring, reconstructing that legacy and making language and structure ours, suitable to our moment in history" (165). As in Vizenor's *Griever*, Castillo's theoretical approach involves supplementing the act of mythic recovery with a critical eye that measures the recovered ahistorical narrative against specific historical experiences, documented by the

archive. With this self-conscious act, she is better equipped to interpret Chicana cultural production according to the tradition from which it emerges.

The theoretical approach developed in *Massacre of the Dreamers* and in much of the minority literary theory of the 1980s and 1990s, I believe, has guided the recent proliferation of minority US literatures, which thrive off of the recovery, revisionary, and theoretical work accomplished in prior decades. As such, they seem to be moving away from overt political activism manifested through a culturally specific vision. Whereas Gates', Vizenor's, and Castillo's theories aimed toward providing theories universally applicable to a specific culture's tradition, Castillo's more recent poetry brings myth to the level of the personal and often juxtaposes mythic narratives with those from other cultures as well as with imagery and narratives out of popular culture, downplaying their role as culturally specific, authoritative discourse. In the 1990 poem, "You are Real as Earth y más," collected in *I Ask the Impossible*, for example, Castillo incorporates references not only to Aztec and Catholic mythic figures such as Tonantzin and the Virgin of Guadalupe, but also to a generic "Trickster" (10) and the Chinese figure of the "Warrior Monkey," whom Kingston and Vizenor brought to life in *Tripmaster Monkey* and *Griever*, respectively. Instead of focusing exclusively on recovering and imagining a coherent Chicano/a identity, this poem engages in a comparative move, exemplifying one of multiculturalism's greatest but perhaps most challenging aspirations. Castillo explains this stance in *Massacre of the Dreamers* when she argues that "U.S. society must eventually acculturate our mestizo vision. Our collective memories and present analyses along these lines hold the antidote to that profound sense of alienation many experience in white dominant society" (16-17). While echoing Jung and Anzaldúa's belief that myth

can restore an alienated consciousness, Castillo's perspective here acknowledges the politicization of race via culturally specific myth as applicable and restorative not only to Chicano/as but to all Americans whose primary mythic sustenance derives solely from the narratives of American exceptionalism.

Castillo also incorporates mythic figures in her most recent poems to limn such experiences as a solitary walk through the desert ("The Desert as Antidote: Verano, 1997") and making love ("Tatehuarí"), poetic expressions directed more at personal experience than at correcting racist and sexist treatment of a population. "Nani Worries about Her Father's Happiness in the Afterlife," written in 1991, offers an example of a poem that undertakes mythic comparison, incorporates the mythic to illuminate the personal, and exposes both the limitations and usefulness of myth as a means for cultural- and self-recognition. The poem is about the death of the speaker's father and her subsequent meditation on the nature of death. As she wonders "where he went," she remembers that the Nahuas believed that the dead traveled for four years before reaching the "Region of the Dead, / also called Ximoayan, / Place of the Fleshless. / Mictlan: The House of Quetzal Plumes, / where there is no time" (79). After she imagines this Mesoamerican underworld, she then recalls the Christian tradition: "Jesus descended into Hell / for three days, / freed his predecessor, Adam, / and returned to Earth" (79). In response to both of these myths from disparate traditions, to which she has turned for comfort and explanation, she belittles their significance: "Oh – such stories I have heard! / Men and their inventions" (79).

The derisive treatment of myth here departs drastically from the deferential way Castillo approaches it – whether as patriarchal burden or liberating inspiration – in her

earlier poetic work, as well as in her contemporary theoretical work. In the final paragraph, she reveals that her father is dying on Ash Wednesday. Experiencing her father's death at such a theologically evocative time in the Catholic tradition, the speaker can only think about the "uselessness of doctrine." She then comes to two conclusions with her mother: "*This* is hell. / *This* is not the whole story" (80). These final two lines at once resist myth's applicability and reinstate it. Instead of hell being the Mesoamerican Mictlan or the place where Jesus descended, it is the position that the speaker currently occupies as she witnesses the death of her father. Yet this personalized manifestation does not constitute the "whole story"; there is more, a larger, but unknown story that encompasses her own.

This simultaneous distrust of and faith in a narrative tradition that makes sense of the incomprehensible characterizes much of Castillo's most recent poetry. The work of recovery and revision are established and ongoing, but no longer fledgling. These methods can now be applied toward the task of recognizing similarities across cultural divides, between Nahuatl and Christian belief, for example, without upholding the one or the other as the superior manifestation. They can also be appreciated as more than ends in themselves, as routes toward forging a sense of one's particular experiences, even as they fall short. Finally, the use of myth in these poems is less overtly political, is more clearly personal, yet it retains the awareness brought so clearly to the fore by minority feminists that the personal is political. I believe this turn to the personal is characteristic of much minority literature from the 1990s and 2000s, which has the luxury of a reprieve from making theoretically coherent or population-wide claims on behalf of a particular identity politics. Yet it can do so without revoking or obscuring such a politically

committed stance. Colson Whitehead, Sherman Alexie, and Marilyn Chin are other examples of contemporary authors who incorporate mythic narratives, thereby evoking communities and traditions, without doing so to fuel an explicit political project. Instead, they shed light on specific experiences of individuals, juxtaposing the universal with the particular in a way that discounts the significance of neither.

This recent turn to the personal is admittedly risky due to the ways in which it can so easily be put in the service of a Western "philosophical commitment […] to radical and atomistic individualism," one in which "any notion of the social or the collective is supposed to be a product of self-interested rationality" (Goldberg 25). Such were the apprehensions of the critical multiculturalists, that multicultural literature was being made susceptible to and compatible with exceptionalist narratives that focused on individual achievement (the self-made man, rags to riches) as opposed to socioeconomic and political systems of exploitation and power imbalance. These very susceptibilities led, ultimately, to the downfall of multiculturalism, which has lost its status as preeminent critical trend in the academy to transnationalism.

I am tempted to view this latest trend in US literary studies, also known as transatlantic or hemispheric studies, as an extension, or offspring, of multiculturalism, as a critical discourse aiming to correct many of multiculturalism's shortcomings – the way, for example, that it re-inscribed the centrality of the nation. Because it challenges national borders, transnationalism can be understood as a panacea, or band-aid, for the flaws of multiculturalism. Yet critical transnationalism, which resists the celebratory narrative of globalization, is very much akin to critical multiculturalism – so much so that is not difficult to imagine the former's inevitable and imminent demise. Like

multiculturalism, transnationalism is another "-ism" that has, since its inception, worked to resist the co-optive influence of dominant exceptionalist narratives, those that reinstate empire despite concerted and sincere attempts to dismantle it. Paul Giles, for one, has pointed out that hemispheric studies is at an impasse; while it laments empire, empire nevertheless remains at the center: "Given that nationalism carries such a freight of historical and institutional meaning, with the hemisphere by contrast being hardly more than a tenuous cartographic phenomenon, it would seem absurdly utopian to imagine that nationalist templates could ever simply mutate into a benign hemispheric multilateralism" (651-652). "One obvious pitfall of hemispheric studies," he adds, "is the prospect of simply replacing nationalist essentialism predicated upon state autonomy with a geographical essentialism predicated on physical contiguity" (649). For example, even though "the hierarchical mystique of a capital city has been supplanted by a more porous notion of the borderlands, the notion of a special zone, a charmed circle, remains the same" (650). Despite the critical maneuvers of both multiculturalism and transnationalism, exceptionalism has not released its grasp.

Perhaps the lesson to be learned from multiculturalism and transnationalism is that they are both susceptible to what Sacvan Bercovitch identifies as the accommodating pressures of American exceptionalist mythology. To be vigilant against such co-optation requires constant dynamic movement between the local and the global and between the personal and the political. Castillo's and other recent authors' reminder of the dialectical relationship between master narratives – no matter from whence they came – and local experience is an apt one. It is for this reason that myth remains essential to the task of producing minority US literatures. Myth, a narrative of the communal, at once draws

boundaries around discrete communities while opening up theoretical space for comparison across cultural divides. To recognize the benefits that post-Civil Rights minority US literatures introduced to the national literary scene via alternate origin stories is not necessarily to re-inscribe exceptionalist narratives of the nation. Rather, it is to acknowledge the ways that such myths expose the nation's origins as multivalent, as not limited to the nation, as reaching across the oceans to China and Africa and across man-made boundaries to Mexico and tribal lands.

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