CROSS-CULTURAL WOMEN'S WRITING AND THE POLITICS OF MAGIC REALISM; TONI MORRISON, MAXINE HONG KINGSTON AND LESLIE MARMON SILKO.

BY

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Dedicated to the memory of

Mabel Birtill.

Abstract

This thesis explores the political possibilities and implications of magic realist discourse in contemporary cross-cultural women's writing. Focussing on the ontological writing of Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko, the comparative critical approach acknowledges the specificity of their writing to their cultural contexts whilst combining elements from post-colonial, feminist and post-structuralist criticism.

The study demonstrates that in writing the magic realist mode, which breaks down restrictive definitions of reality and truth, has a transformative effect upon readers. By emphasising the ritual and participatory aspects of story-telling, their texts encourage readers to react to the possibility of re-conceiving their world through stories, thereby precipitating political change.

The Introduction provides a brief over-view of the concept of magic realism. The first chapter analyses Toni Morrison's creation of a specifically African American form of magic realism which promotes the expression of an alternative history of slavery, and provides a vehicle for the articulation of African American cultural memory and its ambivalences. Chapter Two examines Maxine Hong Kingston's paradoxical relationship to magic realist narrative. It analyses her resistance to her mother's magic realism which she eventually adopts for the purpose of articulating a cultural memory which will be useful to the current circumstances of Chinese Americans. The third chapter explores Leslie Marmon Silko's use of the magic realist mode to create a text which illustrates the discursive tension between dominant American and Native American cultures. By doing so, she creates a text which merges postmodernist and Native American story-telling techniques to create a text with multiple perspectives and influenced by spirituality. The conclusion identifies similarities between the writers. It reveals that they have created a new form of writing which encourages readers to realise the political potential inherent in their texts in order to re-imagine their world and to counter the individualism, materialism and ultra-rationalism of dominant culture.

List of Abbreviations

Woman Warrior - The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts

Tripmaster - Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book

Almanac - Almanac of the Dead: A Novel

Note on the System of Citation

The Modern Language Association guide for the preparation of research papers (MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 4th Edition, 1995) has been used to prepare the references and bibliography of this thesis.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This thesis examines the political possibilities inherent in the use of a magic realist narrative mode in cross-cultural feminist texts, exemplified by the novels of Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Leslie Marmon Silko. The thesis aims to show that magic realism is a particularly appropriate mode of writing for the expression of a cross-cultural context. All the texts analyzed in this thesis are influenced by two or more oppositional cultural systems, including those other than the dominant American. The cross-cultural nature of the texts provides the opportunity to analyze them from multiple critical approaches. Moreover, it allows discussion of their magic realism as a specifically cross-cultural form of writing. It also provides the opportunity for the magic realist elements of the texts, and the use of the term "magic realism" itself, to be criticised from more than one relevant cultural perspective. The fact that the differing cultural perspectives in the work leads the writers to find the concept of the term "magic realism" problematic will be considered in depth.

All three authors whose writing is the subject of study in this thesis are cross-cultural feminist women informed by non-European cultural influences, who live in the United States. They have established reputations: Toni Morrison, for instance, has a Nobel Prize for Literature, and both Beloved and Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior are frequently taught contemporary novels in university English departments. Leslie Marmon Silko is best known for her early novel Ceremony, although Almanac of the Dead did draw a large amount of media attention on the occasion of its publication due to its powerful anti-establishment political stance, and was hailed in reviews as a landmark in American literature. These three novelists have been brought

together in this thesis because of the apparent similarities of techniques and themes in their writing, which I will illustrate through a detailed analysis of their texts. What I will argue is that they have created a new strategy for political resistance through literature.

This thesis assumes a cross-cultural feminist anti-imperialist critical approach which seeks to make connections between writers from differing cultural backgrounds whilst retaining the specificity of their cultural influences. As a white European, my critical perspective is from outside these specific cultures, which allows similarities in terms of themes and narrative modes to be drawn between the writers, whilst it also requires cultural negotiation to take place during the critical process. The resulting study goes beyond previous studies of magic realism, although sharing a cross-cultural feminist critical approach with some, by locating magic realism in a politically infused form of contemporary American women's writing.

A link has been made between the communal aspects of Morrison's, Hong Kingston's and Silko's writing and their use of magic realism in Paula Raboniwitz's essay "Naming, Magic and Documentary: The Subversion of the Narrative in Song of Solomon, Ceremony, and China Men". Comparisons are also made between Morrison and Silko's adoption of a ritualistic aspect in their texts by Linda Krumholz in her doctoral thesis, Ritual Reader and Narrative in the Works of Leslie Marmon Silko and Toni Morrison. Both of these critics note in passing the political possibilities of these texts either by identifying the political aspect of the deconstruction of the categories of the real and possible, or by indicating the possibility for change through the transformative effects

of the act of reading, respectively. However, by focusing on the political possibilities of the magic realist mode of writing this thesis draws together the connections between these critical perspectives and recognises that it is magic realism that is the central element of the text which influences all other aspects. Thus the following study identifies the interconnectedness of their magic realist mode and the cross-cultural, communal, and ritual aspects of their writing which they combine in order to create and find a means to express their specific cultural memories.

I propose that magic realism is a narrative mode of writing which promotes the representation of multiple perspectives, breaks down restrictive defining categories of reality and truth, and thereby provides a poststructuralist strategy for resistance against dominant discourse. The use of ritual story-telling techniques from oral traditions in these texts also has a transformative effect upon the minds of readers and consequently influences the way in which readers live in the world. All three writers are in agreement with the statement by critic Paula Gunn Allen that "the power of imagination, of image, which is the fundamental power of literature, is the power to determine a people's fate" (268).

Through textual analysis it will be revealed that these writers have produced a particular strand of magic realism which is a form of writing at the cultural crossroads of western postmodernism and non-Western oral cultural traditions. In effect their writing is the expression of the cross-cultural context in which they live. Whilst this form of writing emphasises the process of creating the text through reading, which is related to both

post-structuralist theory and to oral tradition, it offers a way to move beyond the self-reflexive and ahistorical leanings of apocalyptical forms of postmodernism, whilst retaining postmodern narrative techniques. Ultimately, their writing reintroduces the concepts of experiential history, community and spirituality into postmodern cultures.

The concept of magic realism has been greatly promoted, misused and misunderstood in recent years. Both Terry Pratchett and Julian Barnes launched recent attacks in Britain upon magic realism. Terry Prachett, the fantasy writer, speaking on Radio 4's Ned Sherrin Show falsely claimed that magic realism is a term contrived by academics in order to study fantasy without seeming to study popular fiction. Pratchett is mistaken as Franz Roh, to whom the term is attributed, was a German artist and, moreover, magic realism is not a form of fantasy. Fantasy, as Tzevtan Todorov argues, is a form of writing which fluctuates between two states of extraordinariness. The fictional world neither makes sense according to the rules of the readers' own world, nor is it a fictional world with rules which readers understand (Todorov 25). Magic realism, on the other hand is a fictional world which is grounded in recognisable reality but where magical elements are acceptable, and ordinary.

In 1949 the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier introduced the concept of what we now recognise as literary magic realism by applying Franz Roh's idea of magic realism to literature and, most significantly, to Latin America. Combining Roh's idea that magic is ever present behind surface reality, and his own Latin American cultural background, Carpentier claimed that magic realism is a specifically Latin American form of writing.

Taking a strongly colonialist view of Latin America, Carpentier echoed Cortes's impressions of America as a strange, unfamiliar place outside his own restrictive order of European knowledge and experience. Reporting on Latin America back to Spain, Cortes wrote "'There is no human tongue that can explain its grandeurs and peculiarities'" (Zamora and Faris 104). Carpentier based his notion of magic realism on racist assumptions about the influence of mystical, moral "otherness" and savagery on Latin American culture by the Black and indigenous populations. Succinctly explaining magic realism in his racist and colonialist terms Carpentier stated:

> Because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing, America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvellous real? (Ibid. 88)

In a critical move that can be described as the impetus for the creation of the distinctions between ontological and epistemological magic realism, Carpentier attacked European magic realism for its comparative artifice, its "tiresome pretension" (Ibid. 84), and its lack of ontological groundedness. In a study of the writing of Carpentier, in 1974 Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria created a definition to distinguish between what he called "ontological" magic realism and the notion of "epistemological" magic realism (Faris 165). His definition posits that the epistemological mode utilises magic realism purely as a narrative device for the articulation of multiple perspectives. In contrast to ontological magic realism, there is no connection between the cultural context of that

which is articulated and the narrative mode (eg. Gunter Grass's The Tin Drum).

Within the confines of this distinction Morrison's, Hong Kingston's and Silko's texts can all be identified as ontological magic realism. However, within the context of this study, which acknowledges the influence of postmodernism on the writing of these three authors, it is necessary to clarify my approach to the term "ontological". The postmodernist approach of Brian McHale to literary ontology, for instance, is based upon Thomas Pavel's definition of ontology as a theoretical description of a (or plural) universe(s) (27). This approach not only implies that there is a definable and static "universe" to identify, but as Wendy Faris also points out it "stresses the magic *of* fiction rather than the magic *in* it" (173). In criticism referring to cross-cultural magic realism (albeit influenced by postmodernism) a wider definition of ontology is used which refers to the ever-changing experience of "being". P Gabrielle Foreman, for instance, explains that Morrison's mode of magic realism is ontological due to its reliance upon memory and experience (369). Foreman recognises that these ontological aspects, whilst originating from the individual experience, are connected to a community of those who share common experiences, and hence, have similar (but not identical) ontologies. This aspect of their texts is also the source of their politics of resistance in that they often express a perspective of reality which is influenced by cultural beliefs which would otherwise be dismissed by the dominant culture for being irrational.

Since Carpentier's development of the ontological mode of magic realism, it has been

prevalent, particularly in Latin America. The primary Latin American exception to this trend is Jorge Luis Borges whose magic realist writing in fact borders on the metafictional. In addition the epistemological has been developed by writers such as Italo Calvino, by Angela Carter in Wise Children and by Canadian magic realists such as Robert Kroetsch.

Latin American magic realist writing from the period beginning in the 1960s is the most widely known form of magic realism. Since the prevalence of magic realism in 1960s Latin America, known as the literary "boom", ontological magic realist novels by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel have established traditions of magic realism and Latin American literature. Thus, magic realism has become, as Carpentier would have wished, associated almost exclusively with Latin America. In what can be seen as a new "boom", over the past two decades magic realism has developed as a truly international fictional form and has established traditions in Canada, Flanders, the Caribbean, India, Africa, Australia and New Zealand. The popularity of magic realism written in English is clear when one recognises the writing of Angela Carter, Ana Castillo, Janet Frame, Robert Kroetsch, Salman Rushdie, Pauline Melville, and Jeanette Winterson.

In Flaubert's Parrot Julian Barnes attacks the vast quantity of magic realist novels coming from Latin America for becoming cliched and wishes that "...Novels set in the Arctic and the Antarctic will receive a development grant" (104). As though in ironic reply to Julian Barnes's call, the BBC's Hamish MacBeth and the American Northern

Exposure are magic realist narratives set in the northern locations of North West Scotland and Alaska. The popularity of these magic realist programmes, I would suggest, rests on their rural and isolated locations (read in dominant discourse as their marginality from the metropolis), and their connection of the magic realist happenings to Celtic and Native American influences, respectively. This reveals the central potential problem with magic realism: that magic realism, in these cases, is produced for the consumption and entertainment of the metropolis/centre, and reinforces the prejudiced assumptions of the centre regarding the "other-worldliness" of such isolated locations and their indigenous inhabitants. I suspect that the popularity of these programmes is connected to the rise of environmentalism in fashion and advertising, which is often expressed through images of Celtic and Native American people returning to their "roots"[1].

All of this provides a warning: magic realism can be used to reinforce the stereotypes and marginality of non-dominant cultures. This stems from the negative association of the magical with the non-scientific (read "non-progressive") which serves to reinforce primitivist images of the "savage other". However, what I will illustrate is that magic realism is a narrative technique that can equally be used to positive political effect for

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[1] The 1997 Organics television advertisement deliberately played on the pun of "organic root nourishing shampoo" to indicate a woman's return to her "roots" and her "organic"/environmental Native American family home. Until she has discarded her metropolitan office work clothes and unpinned and washed her hair her father will not talk to her. The father is a stereotype of an impenetrable "Red Indian" and the significance of his race is emphasised by the gift of a "Redskins" football shirt that the woman gives to him.

marginalised cultural discourses.

My interest in magic realism lies in the current development of magic realism as a potently political form of writing by feminists and postcolonial writers. It has been observed by critics such as Wendy Faris, Louis Parkinson Zamora, Stephen Slemon, P. Gabrielle Foreman and Kum Kum Sangari--amongst others--that magic realism is particularly adaptable to fiction with postcolonial and/or feminist agendas and perspectives. This may seem incongruous to the term's origins in Carpentier's racist and colonial concept; however, as the aforementioned critics have revealed, writers have found that it provides a means to articulate another way of thinking and conceiving the world, and thereby provides a means of resistance and political change through literature.

This thesis will specifically address literary forms of "magic realism" although it is a term that has been applied to many cultural forms. Franz Roh first coined the phrase in 1925 to identify a form of post-expressionist painting that he was developing in the Weimar Republic. Roh used the term to express the inexplicable fantastic elements of existence that "palpitated behind things" (Zamora and Faris 13). Grounded in urban landscapes, the paintings are modernist with exaggerated characteristics. The figures verge on caricature but carry a sinister atmosphere of the inexplicable worldliness in their shadows or in their expressions. The work of the painters from this movement, such as Otto Dix and George Grosz, can be linked to the theoretical concepts of literary surrealism. In fact this form of magic realist painting has been associated with the

surrealist writings of Franz Kafka, and had an influence upon the "father" of Latin American literary magic realism, Alejo Carpentier (Zamora and Faris 75).

Since the post-expressionist movement, literary magic realism has become a much more recognised form. Although elements of magic realism can trace their influence back to the literature of Kafka and Mikhail Bulgakov, or even Geoffrey Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale", there are often elements which distinguish them from contemporary magic realism. Elements of fable and the resistance to the magical in these texts create these distinctions. The Master and Margarita by Bulgakov, would be magic realist if it were not the case that so many of the characters are astonished at the appearance of the devil in Moscow. "The Pardoner's Tale" occasionally moves into magic realism but ultimately resists it by reinforcing its moral fable mode and the assumption that as a tale it exists on another fictional plane to reality.

Having briefly referred to the history of the term, I will define the term itself as it applies to literature. Firstly, it is important to note that the term has been translated from German into Spanish and from there into English so that it has been subject to translation variants: Magic Realism, Magical Realism, Marvellous Realism. In all of these cases the reference to "realism" has remained unchanged and can be linked to the theoretical concept of literary realism eg. Henry James's concept of fiction with "the air of reality", Maupassant's fiction as an "illusion of life", and Eliot's notion of literature as a partially distorting "mirror" of life (Furst 3-4). The word "magic" or "marvellous", however, has varied due to the wide range of non-explicable happenings that occur in

these fictions. The occurrence of ghosts and the super-natural, extra-sensory powers, religious mysticism, conjuring and miracles are all covered by this label. The term "marvellous" has both an implication that the happenings are necessarily positive and an implicit element of surprise or wonder. The term "magic" will be used throughout this thesis as it provides a more comprehensive term to describe these happenings and it does not contain an implicit emotional response. The preferred term for the purposes of this thesis is "magic realism", as opposed to "magical realism", since the construction of "magic" into the adjective "magical" implies that the magical is only an aspect of the realism. "Magic realism", on the other hand, is a term which gives equal value to each aspect. The importance of this will become clearer as I develop my argument.

Whilst Carpentier made the distinction between Roh's post-expressionist epistemological magic realism and his own ontological form, a further distinction can be drawn between Roh's magic realism, based upon visual symbolism, and Carpentier's, based upon literary, and particularly narrative, form. Simply speaking, literary magic realism is a narrative technique which does not distinguish the "magic" from the "real" but, as Zamora and Faris note: "[I]t *is* an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence--admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism" (3). For this reason narrative fiction, film and television drama can be analyzed as the same kind of magic realism, whereas image based art such as non-narrative poetry and painting cannot. Magic realism relies upon the integration by the narration of the magic element into the magic realism as though it were part of the ordinary. The narration draws the readers' attention to the magic in the text and is the

means by which the common-place tone and ordinary reaction of the characters to the magic are expressed.

Two schools of criticism have emerged regarding the relationship between the "magic" and the "real" in magic realist narrative. One school of criticism (notably expounded by Stephen Slemon) assumes that magic realism's political potential lies in the tension between structuralist binary oppositions inherent in the oxymoron "magic realism". The post-structuralist school (which is the most appropriate designation for the analysis of the texts in this thesis) assumes that the oxymoron of magic realism emphasises the deconstruction of categories between the magic and the real.

In Slemon's essay "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse", he describes magic realism as a Bakhtinian dialogic discourse. In his definition the opposing categories of the magic and the real remain as two separate strands. They work in a conflicting relationship with each other in which the categories constantly work to subvert the opposing category. Slemon argues that this discursive system has a similar structure to the postcolonial condition. Claiming, of the magic and the real, that "each remains suspended, locked in a continuous dialectic with the 'other'" (11), Slemon's argument thereby replaces the categories of the "magic" with the "colonised other" replacing the "real" with the "colonial suppressor". Slemon perceived a possibility for resistance within the tension between the categories, defined by dominant culture, which he assumes are broken down by the friction between them.

The primary problem with Slemon's argument is that it relies upon the very fixity which it claims to deconstruct. He attempts to apply a Bakhtinian argument as though it were deconstructionist. What he fails to note is that whilst the power relations remain deadlocked it does not follow that the categories are disrupted. However, it follows that if his theory of discourse recapitulates the postcolonial context and that the two discursive strands remain separate and in constant tension, then not only is he oversimplifying the colonial condition by assuming the colonized and colonisers can be neatly categorised into two groups, but he is also implying that the colonizer is equivalent to the "real" and the colonized is equivalent to the "magic". This reading re-emphasises the dominant culture's prioritisation of the colonizer/real and so implies that the colonized and their experiences of the colonization are figments of the imagination. Slemon's argument thus empties itself of any political possibilities of deconstructive resistance by using a structuralist discourse of magic realism.

The post-structuralist position has been more frequently adopted by recent critics and particularly those with a political agenda, such as the feminist critic Wendy Faris and the postcolonial critic Kum Kum Sangari. Salman Rushdie perfectly describes the post-structuralist notion of magic realism as the "commingling of the improbable and the mundane" (Midnight's Children 9). His use of the word "commingle" articulates a narrative in which the magic and the real do not exist as separate categories, but interact to produce a third state, that of the magic real. In this development, the appearance of magic as "mundane" and the real as "magical" breaks down the predefined categories of what is considered to be magical/not real and that which is accepted as real. In effect,

post-structuralist magic realism creates a space beyond categories and fixed definitions, and thereby allows the articulation of perspectives which are suppressed by the dominant culture.

This provides a political strategy for post-structuralist cross-cultural feminists and postcolonialists (such as the writers discussed in this thesis) who work towards the disruption of definitions which confine and oversimplify their view of reality, and deny the existence of those who cross or fall outside the categories established by dominant culture. Zamora and Faris introduce magic realism as a particularly political form of writing:

> Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweeness, their all--at--onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women. (6)

The articulation of multiple perspectives through post-structuralist magic realist narratives is the central focus of this thesis and provides the vehicle for the articulation of the anti-racist, anti-imperialist and feminist perspectives of Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko.

The theory of magic realism as a narrative mode resistant to racial and sexual domination draws upon cross-cultural feminist and postcolonial theories of oppression. Taken from their observation of the history of colonialism, these theories assume that

a dominant culture has been created by Europe and its diaspora "normed on a white, western (read progressive/modern)/non-western (read 'backward/traditional') hierarchy" (Mohanty 6). The dominant culture is therefore assumed to be based upon a European philosophical tradition of rationalism and individualism. Following De Beauvoir's Hegelian theory that the oppression of women is carried out through the creation of the identity of "woman" as the "other" to men (who are assumed the norm), these theorists assume that domination is also carried out through the creation of categories of "otherness" based on race, sex, sexual orientation and belief, through which the dominant group take up a "central, dominating position vis-a-vis other groups" (Minh-ha 1).

Although colonialism and racial and sexual oppression are effected through military and economic control, theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Elizabeth Meese and Trinh T Minh-ha have also drawn attention to the perpetuation of oppression (even after the withdrawal of military control) through discourse, and thereby through literature. The dominant discourse, as will be illustrated with reference to specific cultural theories in relation to African, Chinese and Native American women in the latter chapters of this thesis, has defining power over historical narratives, the definition of facts, and hierarchies of value and identity. This produces a dominant discourse from the perspective of one cultural group defined through difference to all other people. The articulation of this produces a monologic, single-perspectived discourse which claims its own authority and denies the possibility of articulation of other contesting perspectives. As Mohanty states, "colonization almost invariably implies a relation of

structural domination, and a suppression--often violent--of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question" (52).

This form of domination relies upon the control over discourse: what is spoken, what is heard and who is speaking. Although speaking primarily for women, Teresa de Lauretis expresses the frustration of the "other" in dominant discourse, being:

> at once captive and absent in discourse, constantly spoken of but of itself inaudible or inexpressible, displayed as spectacle and still unrepresented or unrepresentable.... (115)

It is therefore necessary for postcolonial and feminist writers alike to find a means of self-representation.

Magic realism offers the postcolonial and feminist writer an opportunity to bring the "unrepresented and unrepresentable" into discourse through its disruption of the category of the real and thus disrupting the rationalist ordering system of dominant culture. As Kum Kum Sangari explains:

> The seamless quality of this mode, the difficulty of distinguishing between fact and invention, brings an enormous pressure to bear upon the perception of reality. (62)

The reconception of the notion of reality through magic realism, as Zamora and Faris point out, disrupts the central ordering systems of dominant European culture:

> the Cartesian identification of truth with human consciousness; of rationalist notions of the probable and predictable relations of cause and effect.... (6)

The disruption of the dominant notion of reality in magic realism provides a highly political possibility: to reconceive the world through an alternative world view. It is exactly this possible function of magic realism that Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko explore in their narratives. For these writers the resistance to dominant discourse is essential for the articulation of their communities' alternative cross-cultural identities. As the specific cultural perspectives will be elaborated in each following chapter it will become evident that there are similar characteristics in the African American, Chinese American and Native American cultures. These characteristics, as will be illustrated, can be powerfully articulated through a magic realist narrative.

All of the texts to be analyzed in this thesis emphasise a belief system based upon the communal, spiritual or mythological, ritualistic, and the experiential and non-linear notion of history, all of which are sustained by oral story-telling. These cultural belief systems are opposed and devalued by the dominant culture's emphasis on the individual, linear historical progress and the importance of technology and written knowledge. However, magic realism is a highly compatible means of articulation for these specific alternative belief systems as it disrupts the very concept of empirical reality and produces an alternative "magic realist" perspective.

When discussing this form of ontological magic realism it is important to note Zamora and Faris's observation that:

> Texts labelled magical realist draw upon cultural systems that are no less "real" than those upon which traditional literary realism draws--often non-western

> cultural systems that privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation. Their primary narrative investment may be in myths, legends, ritual--that is, in collective (sometimes oral and performative, as well as written) practices that bind communities together. (3)

In this statement Zamora and Faris are correct in emphasising that magic realism is no less "real" than traditional literary realism. Unlike Slemon's definition of magic realism this form of post-structuralist ontological magic realism does not allow for the association of non-Western culture with the magical and Western culture with the real. As Zamora and Faris go on to explain:

> The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among those worlds--in phenomenal and spiritual regions where transformation, metamorphosis, dissolution are common, where magic is a branch of naturalism, or pragmatism. So magical realism may be considered an extension of realism in its concern with the nature of reality and its representation, at the same time it resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism. (6)

A key aspect of cultural representation expressed by Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko, and a frequent theme of other magic realist writing, is the retrieval of historical perspectives which have been denied or unacknowledged by the dominant culture. All three writers express an ontologically inspired non-linear version of history which expresses a history of racially and sexually based oppression at the hands of people

influenced by European and European American culture. Their aim is to challenge the dominant culture's authority and thereby lessen its power in order to articulate their communal histories which provide the necessary knowledge for establishing and articulating their cultural identities. Silko, in fact, claims that if one does not know one's histories one does not know one's own identity (Fielder and Baker 57). But the problem which the writers face is two-fold: they need to combat the dominant culture's suppression of their version of history; however their notion of history does not follow the dominant definition of linear, factual history. It is experiential, and is communicated through oral story-telling.

Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko share the notion that history is an ontological discourse upon which the survival of their cultural communities depends. The historical theorist Elizabeth Tonkin proposes a post-structuralist notion of history and its relationship to what she calls the "myth of realism". She posits an experiential form of history in which, "We are our memories" (Tonkin 25) in that, "We try to shape our futures in the light of past experience--or what we understand to have been past experience" (Ibid. 25). Her concept of history includes the oral tradition of transmitting versions of history through stories (which she refers to as "myths") and is based on the assumption that:

> Facts and opinions do not exist as free standing objects, but are produced through grammar and broader conventions of discourse, which in turn are interpreted by hearer or reader.... (Ibid. 27)

The theoretical stance in relation to history in this thesis follows Tonkin's notion that histories are not indisputable truths but are political discourses; "...arguments created by people in particular conditions" (189). The Native American writer Simon Ortiz explains the essential difference between the two conflicting forms of dominant American and Native American histories:

> History is the experience we live. I suppose "history" in the Western definition means something that is really a kind of contrived information to support the present case, the present United States' existence and aims. (223)

Toni Morrison expresses a similar view to Ortiz although she also notes that the very attitude towards history in dominant American culture is negative, which creates a further difficulty in carrying out historical retrieval. In an interview for City Limits magazine she claimed, referring to fellow Americans, that:

> We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over....The Culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past. (Ferguson 189)

Magic realism therefore, as will be illustrated, offers the writers a narrative mode which allows for their alternative historical perspectives to be expressed and, due to the disruption of the categories of reality and truth, provides a narrative space in which there is no pressure upon the histories to be factual or to justify their truth. As Zamora and Faris note, in magic realist texts:

> History is inscribed, often in detail, but in such a way that actual events and existing institutions are not always privileged and are certainly not limiting: historical narrative is no longer chronicle but clairvoyance. (6)

Each of the three writers' versions of history: African American, Chinese American and Native American, rely heavily upon oral story-telling traditions in which stories are passed from one generation to the next in order to retain a current communal cultural aspect. The need for this is particularly strong in times of extreme oppression (such as during slavery, mass genocide and the criminalisation of a cultural group). Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko all adapt story-telling techniques and structures from their respective oral traditions to incorporate into their written literature. As will be illustrated in the following chapters, their texts include the account of oral story-telling events between characters, whilst the texts simultaneously encourage improvisation and a non-linear reading strategy inspired by the interactive and performative role of the listener in oral story-telling traditions. These texts therefore demand the active participation of readers as producers of the text. This participation requires the negotiation of the structure, content and cultural nuances of the text by the readers. In addition, the readers' interpretation and thus influence over the text has political significance. As the story-telling techniques employed by the writers derive from their respective cultural traditions the readers need to be aware of their own cultural position in relation to the text. Thus this thesis will consider the reading process and readers' position in detail, most particularly in relation to the negotiation of differing cultural perspectives and the possibility of conflict between the readers' cultural position and that expressed in the

text.

Although oral story-telling is not related specifically to magic realism, the adoption of story-telling techniques from these traditions into literary form adds a further dimension to the readers' relationship to the magic realist perspective expressed in the text. The readers are encouraged by the story-telling techniques to become involved in the magic realist world of the text, and to allow their perceptions of reality to be altered by the text during the reading. Furthermore, the political possibilities of magic realism which go beyond resistance to dominant culture through discourse, rely on the transformation in the readers' minds of their perception of reality no matter how subtly, and the expansion of what they are willing to accept as possible in their actual world.

Critics such as Krupat and Mobley have recognised similarities between this revised form of ontological story-telling and post-structuralist writing. For instance, Maggie Sale notes that African American call-and-response writing is "...interactive, process-orientated, and concerned with innovation rather than mimetic, product-orientated or static" (41). This is reminiscent of Roland Barthes' theories of writerly non-static texts; In S/Z, Barthes notes that "...the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4). As each reading of the text is a non-static process, each reading produces an awareness in the readers of the multitudinous possible interpretations of the text. For Barthes, the possibility of reading a text in this way is the essential characteristic which identifies a valuable literary text. Wolfgang Iser's "reader-response" theories, which emphasise the role of the readers as

the producers of the text, are also related to Barthes' theory of writerly texts (although Iser is less concerned than Barthes with establishing a literary value system). Both of these theorists prioritise the multiplicity of the interpretations of the text and the need for readers to grasp its plurality. Barthes comments:

> To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it. (5)

Plurality is also encouraged in texts incorporating story-telling techniques. A text written in this manner, by definition, contains at least two, and usually more, perspectives (the perspective of the story-teller/text and of listeners/readers). Maggie Sale explains "Because it is performative in nature and communally based, this kind of (hi)story depends upon the repeated interaction of the one and the many" (43).

This, of course, has a political application in that these post-structuralist/story-telling techniques emphasise the importance of the articulation of multiple perspectives. This form of narrative emphasises the possibility of political resistance to monologic discourse inherent in such a magic realist text, as Maggie Sale indicates:

> This approach encourages multiple ways of seeing and interpreting, and so gives readers access to difficult material that encourages responses that are not exclusively defensive or justifying, but complex and contradictory. (44)

All of these theories adhere to the notion that reading is, in some manner, communal. Maggie Sale, Arnold Krupat, Susan Willis and Marilyn Sanders Mobley note that the

communal aspect of oral story-telling is translated into the creation of a community of readers. As Willis explains "The community is no longer defined as a corpus of teller-listeners, but as witnesses to the textual event" (15). Although Barthes claims that each reading is connected through the recurrence of words and phrases, and the intertextuality of references (thereby, I deduce, connecting reader to reader) he can be differentiated from these critics due to his dismissal of the functional aspect of literature to the community. Iser on the other hand recognises the social function of literature but focuses its functionality on the individual's relationship to the world and not on the individual's place in a community and that community's relationship to the world. He claims that:

> What was presented in the novel led to a specific effect: namely, to involve the reader in the world of the novel and so help him to understand it--and ultimately his own world--more clearly. (Iser xi)

This thesis assumes that story-telling is essentially functional to the community. That is to say that the story-telling event itself renews the community by drawing it together, whilst the stories told re-establish the links between the psychological and cultural histories of the people. This communal form of story-telling is, effectively, a ritual in which the stories are told in order to reinforce the community through the renewal of shared cultural memory (even when they are directed towards the re-incorporation of an individual into a community).

Story-telling is in fact a frequent form of ritual in oral cultures, in which ritual is

understood as a spiritually empowering event aimed at a transformation for the communal good. Although the dictionary definition of "ritual" is "consisting in, involving religious or other rites" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 901), ritual critics such as Ronald Grimes and Victor Turner and Native American critics such as Paula Gunn Allen assert that the essential attribute of ritual is that it transforms things from one state to another through a communal and culturally relevant act (Allen 29). As Grimes points out, the religious aspect is not strictly related to organised religion but is a spiritual aspect related to the positive effect of ritual upon the community (145). Paula Gunn Allen describes the definition of ritual, which will be adopted in this thesis, in relation to the ceremonial enactment of Native American ritual:

> At base the ceremonials restore the psychic unity of the people, reaffirm the terms of their existence in the universe, and validate their sense of realism, order and propriety. (73)

Iser notes that reading has a transformative effect on the reader's mind which is created through the process of interactive reading in which the reader, in Iser's words, "Moves forward in a new mode of constructing experience" (Iser 282). Reading therefore creates an actual transformation passing from the story through readers to the actual world. Thus the ritual aspect is actuated by interactive reading and the plurality and participatory nature of the text. Mobley explains that far from being incompatible, the story-telling technique and post-structural approach together:

> helps us to see narrative "holistically", as recent poststructuralist critics recommend; as an event in which neither the narrator/teller, nor the story/texts,

nor the audience/listener is a static entity. Instead, all are subject to various transformations during the storytelling event. (14)

There is an anomaly between the inclusion of references to Barthes's post-structuralist theories in which he proposes his notion of the death of the author, and the prioritisation of the ritualistic aspect of the text, since the ritualistic reintroduces a partial need to recognise the intent of the author. Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko write fiction which outlines problems that they identify in their own actual communities in the hope that their writing will to some extent inspire their readership to address the problems. Although it is not suggested that their highly pluralistic texts demand to be read and understood with one prescribed meaning, it is important to recognise the writer too as a participant in the literary community created by the text, and as a part of the actual community which the text addresses.

There are also resonances between magic realist texts and the concept of western postmodernism as expressed by Jean-Francois Lyotard. Lyotard's notion of the postmodern emphasises the liberating aspects of postmodern culture to "wage war on totality; be witnesses to the unrepresentable; activate the differences..." (82). Sharing the views of critics who promote the story-telling tradition, he recognises the importance of stories to guide our lives and the ritual position of story-tellers to heal the community (Lyotard 73).

However, Lyotard's theory of postmodernism conflicts with those of other postmodern

theorists such as Frederic Jameson particularly in relation to the notion of history, and to Arthur Kroker and David Cook particularly in relation to the notion of decay. Jameson defines the postmodern as a self-referential attempt to define the present, which is in constant flux: "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (3). Kroker and Cook's The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics describes a culture of panic and decay which embraces Nietzsche's nihilistic philosophies (ii).

Silko's text illustrates that a postmodern culture, such as those posited by Jameson and Cook and Kroker, has given rise to a self-obsessed people lost in a state of individualism as expounded in the writings of Thomas Pynchon and Don de Lillo. By writing novels which are recognisably postmodern in Lyotard's sense, and which embrace history, the three writers of this thesis are establishing their ontological notions of history, community and spirituality at the centre of postmodern discourse, and thereby are reestablishing these notions from their own non-European cultural contexts at the forefront of Western cultural thought.

Their writing is therefore inherently cross-cultural (as defined by post-structuralist feminist theorists such as Elizabeth Meese and Gloria Anzaldua). This thesis recognises three levels of cross-culturalism in the writings of Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko. Firstly, the writers themselves are cross-cultural. They are all Americans whose identities as Americans are defined by a relationship to a cultural group other than the dominant European American culture. Their attitude is best described by Hong

Kingston's definition of her identity as "Chinese American": the two words written together without a hyphen indicate that the identity is not constituted from two cultural influences by which one cultural influence is subsumed under the other (eg. Chinese-American), rather, she has one culture (a cross-culture) which is a Chinese way of being American. Secondly, their forms of ontological magic realism are inherently cross-cultural as they are the expression of non-European cultural beliefs through the (originally) European novel form, and contain narrative techniques which are associated with Western post-structuralism, postmodernism and their specifically non-Western story-telling traditions. Ultimately, the texts are cross-culturally transformative as they inextricably commingle influences from non-Western belief systems and Western discourse.

Consequently, their work indicates a new direction in postcolonial writing which moves away from Edward Said's warning that taking a "textual" attitude to reality creates the misunderstanding and generalities which he associates with racial otherisation. Whilst Edward Said claims: "To apply what one learns out of a book literally to reality is to risk folly or ruin" (92), Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko make the claim that although their magic realist fiction does not mirror life, one should apply the holistic, communal and spiritual attitudes of what one learns during the process of reading to life.

Chapter One will analyze Toni Morrison's creation of a specifically African American form of magic realism. What I will illustrate is that the ambivalence inherent in the

concept of magic realism provides a vehicle for the portrayal of the ambivalence expressed in African American cultural memory. Furthermore, I will illustrate that Morrison uses magic realism to create a resistant discursive space for the expression of an alternative historical perspective on slavery to that of dominant culture. Moreover, she creates a text that combines call-and-response oral story-telling tradition with written literature and by doing so requires the readers to participate in the text and thus in the text's contribution to cultural memory.

In the second chapter I will analyze Maxine Hong Kingston's ambivalent attitude towards magic realism and the problems of defining what is real or fake in magic realist narratives. I will concentrate primarily on her negotiation of the dilemma of expressing a Chinese American cultural memory in the face of the threat of erasure, either legal or social, by the American government or her own Chinese American community, who impose a taboo on repeating stories of their past. I will illustrate her negotiation of these dilemmas by embracing the ambivalence of magic realism, the notion of a Chinese American cross-culturalism, and the creation of cultural memory through oral story-telling tradition.

In the third chapter I will explore Leslie Marmon Silko's use of magic realism in order to create discursive tension in her novels between rationalist European-American and non-rationalist Native American belief systems. By creating texts which merge postmodern and ritual story-telling narrative techniques, and which express multiple perspectives, she creates a form of literature which introduces communal, spiritual and

historical aspects into dominant postmodern American culture.

Each of these chapters will emphasise the differences between the texts and particularly those created by influences from the specific cross-culture of each writer. This discussion will focus especially on variations of tone, narrative style and the political circumstances influencing each writer's attitude toward, and representation of, the role of story-telling.

The conclusion will draw together the similarities of these writers in order to emphasise their prioritisation of the creation of cross-cultural communal memories in ontological magic realism. I aim to demonstrate that these texts provide a new politically applicable mode of writing which combines the multiplicity and ambivalence of postmodern magic realist texts with the ontological communal, spiritual and historical aspects of oral story-telling tradition.

Chapter One

"Somewhere... someone forgot to tell somebody something."[2]

I. Introduction

In discussion with Paul Gilroy in 1993 Toni Morrison explained that she did not wish to be associated with magic realism: "Just as long as they don't call me a magic realist, as though I don't have a culture to write out of" (181). This chapter contests this plea by Morrison in order to reveal that there is much to gain from considering Morrison as a creator of magic realist narratives. Moreover, the magic realist narratives which she creates support the political aims of her writing: to contribute to African American cultural memory through acts of the imagination, to place powerful African American women in literature and to contest dominant forms of history.

Her use of magic realism in the imaginative recreation of history can be compared to the novels Midnight's Children and Shame by Salman Rushdie, and House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende. Morrison's and Rushdie's uses of magic realism to portray an alternative perspective to that of dominant history are comparable: British Imperial (in the case of Rushdie) and European American (in the case of Morrison). In doing so they both contest the dominant culture, although they differ in that Rushdie's form of magic

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[2] Quotation from Morrison in an interview with Ntozake Shange on Steve Cannon's Radio Show WBAI, New York, April 1978 (Foreman 369).

realism is influenced by the epistemological magic realist devices used by Gunter Grass in the novel The Tin Drum. However, whilst Allende's version of history is less concerned with portraying an alternative version of events than Morrison and Rushdie, her writing, like Morrison's, places the emotional and psychological reactions of a nation to events as the prime concern of her version of history. Allende's magic realist writing is also highly influenced by her beliefs in miracles, the psychic and spiritual in the Catholic tradition and thus creates an ontologically Christian magic realism.

A discussion of Morrison's ontologically influenced magic realist narratives emphasises the creation through magic realism of a narrative space for the articulation of alternative historical perspectives to "master" versions of history. It simultaneously focuses critical attention on the cross-cultural nature of her writing and the inherent political possibility of creating a discourse informed from multiple cultural perspectives.

However, as Morrison's comment suggests, a discussion of her writing as magic realist is problematic in regard to the politics of the cultural placement of her writing. Morrison's comment reveals that she associates the term "magic realism" with highly stylistic and epistemological discourse. Linden Peach expresses this critical viewpoint with regard to Morrison's writing:

> Although the 'magic realist' model highlights a number of key features of Morrison's novels... it can lead to an overemphasis upon them as reactions to non-African-American literary conventions. (13)

It is a different matter to claim, as I do, that her narratives are ontologically magic

realist, and that her narrative technique is an important and integral aspect of her attempt to write specifically cross-cultural African American texts, in content, style and readership.

Also underlying her comment is a defensiveness regarding African American culture which suggests that she is aware of the frequency with which African American cultural memory is disregarded. Her writing addresses the need to strengthen African American cultural memory by articulating the re-creation of African American history. Hence, the cultural placement of Morrison's writing and the readers' perspective take on acute importance. It is for this reason that a discussion of the magic realist aspects of Morrison's cross-cultural writing may appear contentious as the term was conceived in relation to European critical tradition.

Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio in 1931 as the daughter of southern African American parents. As well as writing fiction she works as a Literature and Creative Writing Professor and critic, most recently at Princeton University. Thus, Morrison's views regarding literature, and particularly African American writing, have been widely published and recognised. In 1993 she was controversially awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Whilst simultaneously being viewed as a "token" Black American woman prize winner she was equally criticised for not resisting becoming a part of the "canon" of "master" texts.

Ironically this controversy arose from her position as an unofficial cultural "guru" due

to her insistence on her responsibility to African Americans as an African American woman writer. Along with other African American women writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara, Morrison has expressed the opinion that her position as a writer gives her a responsibility to sustain the "community" of African Americans, and in particular the women. Morrison has placed herself in a position of responsibility from where she writes fiction which:

> should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. (Evans 341)

Her use of the word "enlightens" suggests that she is assuming that the present instability of African American culture has resulted in a lack of spiritual guidance. Thus, her writing focuses on reconnecting African America to its past by emphasising influences from its West African ancestors upon the present day. In her essay "Rootedness" Morrison claims that: "if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor we are, in fact, lost" (Evans 344).

In many ways she fits Alice Walker's description of a womanist: "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture,...", but who is "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (In Search of Our Mother's Gardens xi). Whilst "preference" may not be the appropriate term to use in reference to Morrison's attitude towards women (her male characters are often as important to her novels as the female characters) her novels do suggest that it is women who are central to the survival of communities.

The women in Morrison's novels, such as Baby Suggs in Beloved and Pilate and Circe in Song of Solomon, provide spiritual guidance and are the primary holders of cultural memory. The male character, Paul D, in Beloved explains this phenomenon by claiming that African American men during slavery and reconstruction were solitary, detached from communities and continually moving to avoid lynching. He claims there were "configurations and blends of families of women and children, while elsewhere, solitary, hunted and hunting for, were men, men, men" (Beloved, 52).

However, Morrison does not create an idealised image of women's roles in the community. All the characters, such as Beloved or Pilate, who initiate the reconstitution of communities are feared, and this is often increased by the fact that they have magical powers. The women who live in the Convent in Paradise create their own nurturing community for women who are isolated and in need of support. However, their vampirish behaviour and voodoo-like ceremonies are threatening to the community of Ruby. In addition, not all of Morrison's "magical" women are nurturing. Sula, the central character from the book of the same name, is a disruptive influence on her community. This is symbolised by a magical occurrence of a plague of robins that afflicts the town of Bottom at the same time as her arrival (Sula 83). Nevertheless, all Morrison's women, whether supportive or destructive, precipitate change and epiphany.

Susan Willis recognises that Morrison's writing focuses on its women's struggle for identity, place and community. Willis notes that Black history, and hence ancestral identity, is passed matrilinearly. Indeed, she sweepingly suggests that Black women

have a better grasp of history than other groups (5/6). Despite this generalization, Willis is right in pointing out that Morrison's work consistently links Black women with their racial history. Characters such as Baby Suggs and Pilate, are the spiritual healers and guides of their communities, and are both feared and respected for the knowledge of their ancestors which they possess and pass on.

Morrison's emphasis on the matrilineal aspect of Black history places her within a tradition of African American writing that is identified in cultural criticism. Within this tradition the dependence on motherhood for survival of African Americans as a racial group is emphasised. Although this may seem like an obvious point, in African American history motherhood has been difficult and at times an impossible task. As bell hooks points out, Black slave women in America were used for breeding purposes (hooks 16). This situation was unique to American slavery, but widespread throughout the slave states. Frequently the women's children were taken from them soon after birth, making the children effectively orphans and the mothers childless. By creating mother and child narratives African American women writers claim their female ancestors lost through slavery, and with them the ability to create their own identity.

Morrison recognises, and the plots of her novels Beloved and Song of Solomon illustrate, that one's relationship to one's ancestors is more problematic than simply reclaiming one's history. Morrison focuses attempts to reconnect present day African American readers to their ancestors and communal memory through bearing witness to the lives of slaves whose stories have remained untold or unremembered. The

reclamation of history from the slave's perspective is most certainly an act of defiance against the continuing dominant white and racist culture. However, Morrison is also aware that the influence of dominant racist culture on African Americans creates barriers to their own reconnection with their communal histories and the spirit of their ancestors.

Morrison notes that "American is white" (Playing in the Dark 47) and in this statement acknowledges that Black women are not only oppressed by the establishment, which is predominantly white, but are not even recognised. The problem of recognition and expression of identity has long been a problem addressed by African American writing, such as Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, and has become a particular concern for Black feminists. Barbara Smith explains:

> Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the "real world" of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown. (157)

Although Morrison comprehends the need to move away from the painful memories of slavery she also notes:

> African-Americans in rushing away from slavery, which was important to do--it meant rushing out of bondage into freedom--also rushed away from the slaves because it was painful to dwell there, and they may have abandoned some responsibility in doing so. (Darling 247)

Morrison claims that the reluctance to explore slave history is compounded by the

dominant American culture's attitude not to want to remember. This attitude is often summed up in the neat pun "The United States of Amnesia". As Morrison noted in an interview for City Limits in 1988:

> We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over.... The Culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past. (Ferguson 109)[3]

Whilst Morrison sees herself as specifically African American one must ask: what do we mean by African American? The term itself is a generalisation which operates at the expense of recently naturalised African immigrants to the United States. It is understood to refer to Americans descended from African slaves who have a distinct cross-culture. In addition, it can be asked, that if it is a distinct culture, what is it that distinguishes that culture? Of course this question is too complex to explore in depth in this thesis but it is the complexity of this question which must be borne in mind. The main difficulty is that whilst immigrant groups such as the Polish or Irish Americans could pass on their traditions and knowledge of their cultural heritage directly from generation to generation, the African Americans suffered the disruption of cultural continuity due to the regime of slavery. Taken from many cultural groups across West Africa, the slaves were punished if they spoke their mother tongue and were predominantly forced into Christianity. The result was that specifically African cultural influences in African

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[3] Cited by Rebecca Ferguson in her essay "History, Memory and Language in Toni Morrison's Beloved".

American culture can only be traced with difficulty through recognising similarities in cultural traits and tropes. The diversity of the original African cultures from which the slaves were taken is therefore less visible, and these diverse cultural influences have developed into a specifically African American cultural tradition.

Morrison's approach to African American cultural memory can be perceived as a response to W. E. B. Du Bois' and others expressed desire for a specifically African American culture. Whilst Du Bois observed that African Americans live in a state of double consciousness between, as he views them, the separate "Negro" and (Euro-) "American" cultures (Du Bois 5), Morrison's African American cultural perspective is entirely cross-cultural. It is a culture which is constructed from integrated and mutually influencing cultural strands which together create a new and distinct culture. The term "African American" describes a way of being a black American which is influenced by traces of African cultures and is distinct from other Black American cultural groups.

In his recent book Toni Morrison, Linden Peach used a large part of his introductory chapter to explore the various cultural positions and perspectives from which Morrison's work is read. Morrison is regarded as an American writer (characteristics of her narrative style can be traced to Faulkner), as an African writer (Gay Wilentz has emphasised Morrison's African cultural influences and compares her writing to African women) and as an African American writer in a specifically African American tradition. Linden Peach focuses upon this last cultural identification for Morrison. He quotes de Weever's observation that:

> Neither completely African nor completely Euro-American, this new blend is just as firmly American as the novels previously defined as American because this flower can bloom nowhere else. (12)

As I will argue, "African American" is the most appropriate designation for her writing, although I would claim that she belongs to a specifically African American women's tradition. Morrison's writing is associated particularly with that of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston due to their shared use of oral narrative techniques in written fiction, and their concern for the oppression and survival of African American women. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls this form of narrative a "speaking text" (The Signifying Monkey 131) and identifies its origins in African American story-telling tradition. Of all three writers Morrison's writing is the most experimental. Whilst Alice Walker uses colloquial speech and specifically African American speech patterns and vocabulary, she does so in a specifically literary mode as in the epistolary form of The Color Purple. The influences from oral narrative in Hurston's work reveal themselves most particularly in the vernacular dialogue, for example Chapter Two of Their Eyes Were Watching God which opens with an instance of story-telling in the vernacular, but which is written as dialogue within speech marks. There are many similarities, such as the subject matter of their story-telling, between Hurston and Morrison's writing which provide clues to Hurston's influence on Morrison. For instance, Hurston describes her character Pheoby's participatory role as a listener in a story-telling event as nourishment: "Pheoby's hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story" (10). Morrison uses this construction repeatedly to describe Beloved's relationship to Sethe's stories; Beloved too is "thirsty" and "hungry" for stories. The stories "became a way to feed

her" (Beloved 58).

A major difference between Morrison and Hurston is that Morrison often places speech without intervention from a narrator or speech marks in her written texts, creating what is in effect a transcript of the character's conversations. This is used extensively in The Bluest Eye and Beloved--the texts in which Morrison experiments most with sentence structure, punctuation and the placement of the text on the page. In each of these novels there are passages where sentence structure and written grammar have broken down to such an extent that the text is more associated with poetry than with narrative form. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., claims "The stories which we tell our children function to order our world" (Mobley 147). In Morrison's writing this process of ordering life with stories takes place on two simultaneous levels: both the protagonist and readers are expected to learn through the process of participating in the stories Morrison creates. This reader participation takes place through the use of African American communal oral story-telling techniques employed in written fiction, and in the negotiation which readers make whilst reading magic realist narratives.

In the act of writing, Morrison contributes to a cross-cultural identity by imbuing her novels with African American myths and influences from oral tradition. However, Morrison's novels address the indefinite substance of such a cross-cultural identity and the difficulties of creating that identity in the face of racist opposition and cultural ambivalence. Her novels explore the difficulties, and emphasise the creative processes through which her African American characters search for and re-create their own

distinct African American cultural memories.

For non-African American readers, the cultural specificity of the text (which includes the inherent ambivalence of African American cultural memory) provokes an awareness of their own reader position. Considering the anti-dominant perspective which Morrison adopts, white European readers thus confront many contradictions and opposing attitudes which they must negotiate in order to enter the text.

To view Morrison's narratives as ontological magic realism allows a critical perspective which at once places her writing in the specific African American cultural context and yet assumes that the reader moves between being inside and outside that cultural context. Thus, to regard Morrison's writing as magic realist allows a critique which focuses on the necessary cultural negotiation required from readers to create a communal African American cultural memory.

The most significant elements of Morrison's writing which I have identified (historical reconstruction, story-telling techniques, and ontological magic realism) coincide most strongly in Morrison's novel Beloved. This chapter continues with an analysis of the ways in which these elements interact and rely upon magic realism with particular reference to Beloved[4]. In comparing Toni Morrison's Beloved to Uncle Tom's Cabin Eileen T Bender called Beloved "a new act of emancipation for a culture still enslaved

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7 The edition of Beloved referred to hereafter is by Picador (London), 1987.

by false impressions and factitious accounts" (130). In making this statement she acknowledges several important aspects of Beloved; it is a fictitious account of the historical fact of slavery that re-addresses what has been previously written and assumed about slavery from an African American perspective.

Before I begin the analysis of the text it is appropriate to recapitulate the plot and introduce the main characters. The plot concerns the appearance of a ghost in a household of African American women during the reconstruction era (immediately after the American Civil War). The household originally consisted of Sethe, Baby Suggs (her mother-in-law) and Denver (Sethe's younger daughter). By the time the narrative begins Baby Suggs has died and shortly afterward Paul D, a friend of Sethe and Denver's father, becomes a member of the household. At this point the house is haunted by a baby ghost. The ghost is the daughter of Sethe, who was killed as a baby by her mother when she was recaptured by a slave master ("Schoolteacher"). When Paul D arrives during the Reconstruction Era he exorcises the ghost, which then transforms into a revenant, called Beloved. Beloved then acts as a catalyst for the other characters to tell their stories and to pass on personal and cultural histories to the next generation.

The community in Beloved is a small African American community on the outskirts of Cincinnati which is going through a process of reconnection. This process takes the form of the remembrance of shared experience and the simultaneous personal and communal coming to terms with the past effects of slavery upon it. The community has dispersed due, in part, to its member's differing responses to the personal history of

Sethe; the community does not recognise Sethe's act of killing her baby as part of their shared experience. Beloved centres around Sethe's family who have both excluded themselves and are excluded from the geographical community which surrounds them. The narrative follows the events which lead them to their eventual reconciliation with and welcoming by their local community.

But this story is also based on the issue of motherhood and the difference between biological motherhood and communal nurturing. Denver turns to the community to find the means to live but also to replace the mothering that she has lost since her mother's obsession with Beloved. As Morrison has said in conversation with Bonnie Angelo, "'You need a whole community... to raise a child'" (Taylor-Guthrie 260).

II. History and Magic Realism

Morrison's Beloved is not the first novel to contribute to the construction of an African American cultural memory of slavery from the female slave's perspective. Beloved can be compared to earlier texts such as Harriet Jacobs' (otherwise known as Linda Brent) Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) and Sherley Anne Williams' Dessa Rose (1985). All three texts claim to be based upon actual historical events and portray the emotional and psychological difficulties of being a mother of slaves living under sexual oppression with the constant threat of rape. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is Jacobs' autobiographical account of her life as a mother, slave and a runaway. It follows the usual autobiographical narrative style of a slave narrative and is written in literary European American English. Williams' Dessa Rose takes two recorded separate occurrences involving two women during slavery (one is a pregnant slave and the other is a harbourer of slaves) and brings them together in her story. In contrast to Jacobs' text, Beloved and Dessa Rose both use African American vernacular and create a multi-vocal narrative. The two writers' attitudes towards written history, and the passing of cultural memory through stories are strikingly similar. Written one year before Beloved, Williams claims:

> African-Americans, having survived by word of mouth... remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often, these betray us. I loved history as a child, until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free (5/6).

Referring to her fictional re-creation of history in the "Author's Note" of Dessa Rose, Williams explains that fiction has power because: "...what is here [in the novel] is as true as if I myself had lived it" (6). Although Williams' text is constructed from three different perspectives (that of a white male, a black female and a white female), unlike Beloved each narrative perspective is confined to its own chapter and the narrative is consistently realist. The participation of the reader in creating the Williams' text is therefore less challenging than in Beloved where the magical and the disrupted narrative progression need to be negotiated.

Whilst the novel Beloved is a contribution to African American historical retrieval, the text's paradox is that it is a fictional recreation of history based on the use of magic realism. Magic realism and history are closely linked in Beloved and both play a crucial role in the novel. The text revolves around the presence of the revenant, Beloved, who is not only symbolic of the past but is the past and it is her presence which makes the need to deal with the past so urgent for the characters, and also makes the impact of the recreation of history so immediate for the reader.

In dominant discourse, magic realism and fiction are primarily associated with the imagination, whilst history is associated with "truth" and "reality". The political importance of the fictional recreation of history is that the oppositional concepts of history and fiction are brought together in the text so that each concept disrupts the definition of the other. In a historical magic realist text this process is doubly enforced as the concepts of the magical and the real also disrupt each other and so open the

possibility of the creation of a version of history which is free from the constraints of a rational understanding of reality and truth. The plot of Beloved relies upon this process in order to create a contribution to African American cultural memory which is not simply factual but also spiritual and psychological.

The novel is influenced by the African American oral tradition, which involves passing experience and history from one generation to the next through stories. This passing of cultural memory through stories creates a form of alternative history which is experiential rather than factual, and which is imagined and embellished as it is spoken and heard. The text thus creates a form of history which both confronts and dismisses the rules and uses of traditional history.

Beloved is the elaboration through fiction and imagination of an historical fact taken from a recorded event in the life of an African American slave woman. The elaboration consists of fictional psychological insights which colour the historical fact to produce a story which "traditional" history does not and would not include. Marilyn Saunders Mobley states in reference to Beloved, that "Morrison's novel exposes the unsaid of the narratives, the psychic subtexts that lie within and beneath the historical facts" (193). In an interview with Wilfred D Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, Toni Morrison explained that part of her work is to "bear witness" to the "interior life of people who didn't write", that is to "fill in the blanks" that official versions of history leave (Bell 3). Morrison's alternative experiential history is best described by Deborah E McDowell as a story of "not what was *done* to slave women but what they *did* with what was done

to them" (146).

The historical fact was reported in a paper during the slavery period which described how an escaped slave woman, Margaret Garner, killed her children at their time of recapture and imminent return to slavery (Gilroy, 177). In Beloved Sethe only has time to kill one of her children but this is enough for her to be jailed and ostracised from the community in which she lives. This modification of the original historical event has the effect that Sethe can be witnessed to be a loving mother by the reader who can also witness the impact of the event on the younger surviving child, Denver, during her progression into adulthood.

Significantly, Morrison's adaptation retains the fact of the announcement of the event in the local press. In the novel this acts as a symbol of traditional "factual" history to which people react without considering the psychological reason behind the killing. Paul D reacts, without knowing why, to the newspaper cutting about Sethe with a response which implies Sethe is animalistic: "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (Beloved 165). The failure of Paul D to understand is not only upsetting for Sethe in itself but she finds unforgivable his repetition of Schoolteacher's belief that African Americans are sub-human.

Schoolteacher is the epitome of a cruel master who is also a teacher of the established white racist knowledge which prolonged and justified slavery. This "knowledge" included the idea that Blacks were without human emotion and therefore could be

treated and studied like animals. Sethe overhears Schoolteacher instructing one of his white pupils to order her characteristics into two columns: one for human characteristics and one for animal. Sethe later determines that "nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper" (Beloved 251). It is this dehumanization from which Sethe wants to protect Beloved and Denver and from which she was so determined to escape. She tells Beloved in her monologue:

> Let schoolteacher haul us away, I guess, to measure your behind before he tore it up? I have felt what it felt like and nobody walking or stretched out is going to make you feel it too. (Beloved 203)

What is particular about this form of history is that it is a personal psychological history and because it is passed through oral story-telling techniques, it is also a form of communal memory. For instance the personal histories which are shared between the women add to each other's sense of history and connection between one another. Denver tells Beloved about her life after Beloved's death and in this manner completes her story so that together they have a sense of shared experience:

> All the while Denver was obliged to talk about what they were doing--the how and why of it. About people Denver knew once or had seen, giving them more life than life had. (Beloved 120)

Linda Krumholz claims that not only does this form of story-telling narrative simultaneously create communal and personal histories, but also the story of Beloved is an allegory for the recovery of African Americans as a nation: "In Beloved Morrison

constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or national process" ("..." 395). Although the story is set during the reconstruction era (it is dated on the first page as 1873) in which the African Americans as a nation had to recover from slavery and claim themselves as free people, the processes involved in personal and communal recovery are still necessary. Today Morrison's text contributes through the reader's involvement to the personal, and thereby national, recovery of African Americans from the continuing influence of the slave era on their lives.

Morrison's motivation for the re-creation of history through story-telling is in response to a particular view of history posited in African American cultural theory. It is best described by Houston A Baker, Jr., who comments in Blues Ideology..., that: "Fixity is a function of power. Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional" (200). To Baker history is a controlled discourse produced by people from the dominant culture who claim themselves as the originals, the definitive and "traditional". He goes on to explain that in the United States the remaining "untraditional" population have histories that remain unexpressed or unacknowledged. Baker's study of these unheard histories focuses on the history of Black Americans and in particular those of the Slavery period. The fixed "traditional" history of this period is that of the white slave owners (either implicit or actual) and the removal of slavery through the white abolitionist movement. The expression of this period of history from the slave's perspective is therefore a struggle against the fixity of "official" and "definitive" history, and a struggle that is

made all the more difficult since little from the slave's perspective has been written down. The re-creation of slave history through fiction is additionally problematical in relation to conventional history as it is neither factual nor was it recorded at the time of happening and thus there is no "proof" of it being "true".

Slave narratives serve as the closest equivalent to a written history from a slave's perspective of this period, although there are many whose perspectives remain unexpressed, due to the predominance of forced illiteracy on the slave population. As slave narratives are effectively forms of autobiography, they, like Morrison's texts, create history through story-telling (even if the level of the connection with actuality is more direct). In recent years historians such as Robert B Stepto have analyzed and queried the historical perspectives of the slave narratives. He noted that there is a predominance of prefaces and letters written by white abolitionists at the beginning of many slave narratives, including the most famous by Frederick Douglass, which offers proof of authenticity to the reader. In the historical context in which Douglass's autobiography was written, which was within the framework of the predominantly white abolitionist movement, the question arises whether it was written with a white audience in mind, and to what extent this would influence the cultural perspective from which the text was written. As Stepto queries, such a format to the publication makes the contemporary reader wonder for what reason the narrative was published: to bolster the abolitionists cause, to comfort the slave, or recognise the man (8)? From a contemporary perspective the slave narratives offer historical insight into the abolitionist movement more than they address the cultural needs of the contemporary

African American who is now used to being addressed directly by writers such as Ralph Ellison and film makers such as Spike Lee.

A further remaining source of slave history is the oral histories which were recorded from ex-slaves during the Writers Works Project of the 1930s, and the stories that have been passed down through families. These histories, like Morrison's narratives, rely on the willingness of a historian to tell the tale and the willingness of the listener/reader to hear what is said and accept an alternative history or version of past reality. Morrison's texts allude to this form of oral history, as Peach notes:

> Since slavery destroyed not only whole communities but entire families, banning their religions, stopping their music and eradicating their cultures, the only way in which individuals could acquire any sense of their ancestral line was to possess and piece together the stories and memories of others, to literally acquire for themselves the texts of which they have been deprived. (Peach, 102)

However, like bell hooks, Morrison's concern is not only for African Americans (as a whole nation) but is particularly for African American women. For this reason both hooks and Morrison are not satisfied with the attempt by the Black Power movement of the 1960s to recreate their history. This movement was predominantly male and frequently sexist (hooks 97) and so as Marilyn Saunders Mobley points out:

> the rhetoric of the [Black Power] movement, in its desire to create a new version of history that would affirm the African past and the heroic deeds of a few great men, had inadvertently by-passed the equally heroic deeds of ordinary African-

Americans who had resisted and survived the painful traumas of slavery. (190)

Thus, for Morrison the articulation of history from a slave perspective is necessary not only to redress the past, but also in order to gain an understanding of the relationship of the past to the women in the present and the future of African Americans as a whole. Hazel Carby, in her study of the historical novel of slavery, emphasises the need for the past to be articulated in the present so that the present can be understood in terms of cause and effect: "The economic and social system of slavery is... a pre-history (as well as a pre-text to all African-American texts) a past social condition that can explain contemporary phenomena" (126). Ashraf Rushdy sees this form of remembrance and reclamation of the past as political because of the power of history to offer a knowledge of the collective with which to create communities. He claims, "The insistence on the interdependence of past and present is, moreover, a political act, for it advocates a revisioning of the past as it is filtered through the present" (Rushdy 566).

This situation is further complicated for African Americans as cultures from West Africa (which is the area from which most slaves were taken) emphasise the importance of history in the present and particularly emphasise the role of the ancestor [5]. The role

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[5] For more detailed historical references to the role of the ancestor see Eugene D Genevose's section on folklore and belief (217) in Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made. In reference to Morrison, Karla F C Holloway and Stephanie A Demetrakopoulos, Geraldine Smith Wright, and Trudier Harris assume that the understanding of the past in Beloved is influenced by the African tradition of ancestor worship.

of the ancestor is as a mentor to the young generation with whom they have active communication. Bernard W Bell recognises this contradiction between white American and African American belief about the role of the ancestor as the crux of the difficulties of identity: "For many African-Americans, it is the striving to reconcile one's ancestral African past--however remote, mythic or spiritual--with one's American present...." (7). An added problem which Holloway and Demetrakopoulos note is that the American emphasis on youth and ageism that they recognise in dominant American culture adds a further strain on the retention by an African American of the tradition of ancestor worship.

It is the strength of her belief in the role of the ancestor that motivates Morrison to centre her work around this issue, which is an act of resistance to dominant "white" American culture. This attitude is illustrated in Song of Solomon in Milkman Dead's quest for his ancestral routes, in Sula in the text's retrospective perspective, and in Jazz in Golden Grey's quest for his father. In Beloved the plot is built around this belief.

The existence of the baby ghost in Beloved before she becomes a revenant is a version of the belief that all time is continuous and that ancestors are not dead but continue to exist in another form. In fact, the appearance of Beloved as a revenant child, who is by definition simultaneously spiritually connected to the worlds of the living and the dead, is therefore symbolic of the connection between these worlds. Geraldine Smith Wright acknowledges the connection between Beloved and the role of the ancestor stating:

> Encounters between human and ghost characters show that *all* phases of the life

> cycle exist in an unbroken circle of being; rather than abdicate, the dead participate actively in temporal existence (164).

The notion of time in the novel is sustained by the use of the narrative device of magic realism. Morrison describes magic realism in her essay "Rootedness" as "another way of knowing things" (Mari Evans 342). I would suggest that this includes the idea of an alternative history but more importantly that the illustration and thus the readers' comprehension of the notion of time in the novel is created by the magic realism of the haunting. I call the haunting "magic realism" rather than fantasy because the characters of the novel accept and expect such hauntings to occur--it is a part of what is familiar to them. Baby Suggs commented "'Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief'" (Beloved 5). The eventual decision of the community to exorcize the revenant Beloved is taken not so much because they are afraid of the "unknown" but as a means of control over an imbalance in what they consider to be the order of things. Ella reasons, "She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion" (Beloved 257).

Time heaps up on itself with little differentiation between the past, present and future. Included in Beloved's interior monologue towards the end of the novel is the thought, "All of it is now it is always now" (Beloved 184). This thought comes from the mind of a dead girl living in the present and it is punctuated only with gaps between word groupings (full-stops do not appear) which emphasises the impossibility of delimiting time. Sethe's fear for her and for her daughter Denver's connection with the world

outside their home is because of her belief in this notion of time. Sethe explains to Denver:

> Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think that it was my rememory.... Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place--the picture of it--stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. (Beloved 36)

Because of this, not just the memory of slavery but the actuality of it and its locations remain in the world, which is why Sethe shields her daughter from the past and from the world outside: "'Denver you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over--over and done with--it's going to always be there waiting for you'" (Beloved 36).

Due to this concept of history, the novel ends not with a denouement but with contradiction and ambiguity. This is surprising to the reader as the novel appears to be moving toward a positive ending. Denver, who develops her understanding throughout the novel, becomes more and more aware of her past and of her sense of self. She notes to herself, "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (Beloved 252). In fact she has come to terms with the most difficult aspects of her past: her sense of fear that her mother will be led to kill her by external influences. She realises that in order to save her mother from starvation (Sethe gives all her food to Beloved) then she will have to find some work or help. This necessitates Denver to leave her home, which is her refuge from what she fears of the exterior world: "She would have to leave the

yard; step off the edge of the world...." (Beloved 243). While Denver attempts to gain the courage to do this, the dead Baby Suggs starts talking to her and encourages her to leave. She tells Denver that although she has no protection from the dangers of the exterior world she should "[k]now it and go on out the yard" (Beloved 244).

Denver comes to understand the act of protection which her mother carried out when she killed Beloved. She realises the extent of psychological trauma that slavery causes and the extent of cruelty of the whites. She understands what it is that the whites do that her mother was trying to protect her from:

> Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself any more. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. (Beloved 251)

However, she also acknowledges that the psychological trauma will not recede:

> Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there was no end to that.... (Beloved 251)

More troubling than this is that in the last section the narrator acknowledges that Beloved's effect has been forgotten and will not be willingly recovered. The book ends with a comment: "By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there" (Beloved 275). The reference to the footprints is a specific reference to Beloved's function as a catalyst of the character's memories, and thus the ending indicates that the characters will once again forget their

slavery past. Moreover the reference to water is a reference to the dead slaves who were thrown overboard during the crossing. Baby Suggs explains her attitude to life stating, "There's more of us drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain't a battle; it's a rout" (Beloved 244). Hence the horror of the kidnapping and transportation of the slaves has also been forgotten and with it the wisdom of ancestors such as Baby Suggs.

The novel therefore ends with the situation which Deborah Horovitz describes: "To pursue a future without remembering the past has its own and even deeper despair for it denies the reality and sacrifice of those who died" (28). What has been lost is the willingness to remember, the willingness which Beloved brought out in each character. In reference to Beloved's slight supernatural presence after her final exorcism the narrator comments, "They can touch it if they like, but don't because they know things will never be the same if they do" (Beloved 275).

The comment at the end of the novel, that, "This is not a story to pass on" (Beloved 275), is an indicator that the novel has turned a full circle. At the end, as there was at the beginning, there is no one willing to tell the story. This in effect is a plea to the readers and involves a passing of responsibility to them to pass the story on and maintain African American cultural memory.

The novel also contributes to African American cultural memory through the specifically African American narrative mode in which it is written. This is particularly

true of her magic realist narrative which revolves around the accepted existence of Beloved as a revenant ghost. From the African past to the present ghosts have always been a part of African American culture. Although writers of magic realism such as Isabel Allende also create stories around the accepted existence of ghosts, the forms of the ghosts vary depending upon the cultural tradition to which the story refers. Allende's ghosts in House of the Spirits, for instance, are psychic presences similar to a European Christian understanding of ghosts. Laura Esquivel's ghost of a Native Mexican woman in Like Water for Chocolate has similarities to Morrison's Circe (Song of Solomon) and Beloved (Beloved) since she is understood to be an ancestor appearing in order to guide the living.

However, Beloved is also a child revenant (which is a dead child who comes back to life in a full living form) which, as Eugene D. Genovese notes, is an African American tradition that can be traced to West African cultures (217). In West Africa (and particularly Yoruba culture) a revenant child who lives in a family to which he is lent by the spirit world is known as an "*Abiku* child". Ben Okri's Famished Road, which is sometimes referred to as magic realist, is a story about an *Abiku* child in Nigeria who lives in-between the worlds of the spirits of the dead and the yet to be born and the world of the living.

Beloved has the attributes usually associated with revenants such as a lack of markings on her skin. Sethe notices when she meets her that, "[h]er skin was flawless except for three vertical scratches on her forehead...." (Beloved 51). A community member

suspicious of Beloved asks Denver: "She got any lines in her hands?" (254) and Denver's negative answer confirms that Beloved is a revenant. Morrison adds her own adaptations to the many versions of the Abiku myth. For the sake of the interaction between the characters Beloved returns with the age she would have been if she had not been killed.

It is important to note that in Yoruba culture (as in Okri's text) the notion of an *Abiku* child is not magic realist if there is no conflicting ontology to suggest that the *Abiku* child does not exist. In African American culture, on the other hand, the revenant can be read cross-culturally, as both an *Abiku* child in the African tradition and as a ghost in the European tradition in which there is rationalist resistance to this belief.

The use of a revenant for this story, set during the specific historical period of the end of slavery and the reconstruction era, is especially interesting. During slavery, ghost stories were prevalent on plantations. One reason for this was that the African American slaves passed ghost stories to each other, but added to this was the manipulation of this tradition by slave owners who used the practice as a means of psychological control. In her book Night Riders in Black Folk History Gladys-Marie Fry makes an analysis of how the African American's belief in ghosts has been manipulated through several historical periods by slave owners, Paterollers, the Ku Klux Klan, and those illegally supplying corpses to medical schools in Washington, D.C.. As Fry explains, since the slaves had the capacity to believe in ghosts, an efficient means of control was to create a ghost story about a specific area that caused the master problems of control: "The

master or his guards could only be in one place at any given time, but a ghost could appear any place at anytime" (59). In this way escape routes or meeting places were secured. However, as Fry points out, the success of such stories was "not so much fear of unknown ghosts as it was of known whites" (79).

The use of a ghost in Beloved can be seen as an act of resistance to such control. Firstly, it is an act of re-appropriation of the African American tradition of ghost tales. This would not work except that the revenant Beloved is not a ghost that people are scared of. Paul D, Sethe and Denver all react sympathetically toward Beloved when she first appears: "What occupied them at the moment was what it might be that she needed" (Beloved 53). For Denver the sight of Beloved is of instant love: "She looked at this sleepy beauty and wanted more" (Beloved.).

Another of Morrison's acts of resistance through appropriation is the use of a specific historical reference associated with the Ku Klux Klan during the reconstruction era. Fry notes that the Klan used to appear dressed as ghosts (in other words in garments designed to refer to hell, death, graves etc.) and would intimidate African Americans by knocking on their doors at night and demanding a drink of water, claiming they had returned from the battle of Shiloh (138). This was a notorious battle during the American civil war in which many confederate soldiers were killed and it was reported that the numerous dying men's cries for water were extremely unnerving. The Klan used to demand buckets full of water from their victims which they would drink beyond the point that any man could take naturally. They did this by fixing contraptions for

catching the water under their cloaks so that it would seem as though they were drinking. The demand for water, then, became associated with both the Klan (whose name is derived from the Greek work "kuklos" meaning drinking bowl)[6] and with ghosts. What is interesting is that when Beloved appears from the water she asks for a drink of water and drinks to excess:

> The woman gulped water from a speckled tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times the woman drank as though she had crossed a desert. (Beloved 51)

Morrison therefore appropriates the symbolic act of drinking water away from the Ku Klux Klan and incorporates it into the story of an African American girl coming back to life into a situation in which she is not feared but is nurtured.

In fact the things which are considered to be magical, or at least unbelievable, are the extremes of kindness and cruelty of which white people were capable against the black Americans. Barbara Hill Rigney comments that, "Morrison's historic world is so unnatural, so horrific and brutal, that the only 'natural' element is the supernatural" (229). For instance, Sethe calls the act of kindness that a white girl, Amy, carries out for her--that of rubbing her legs and feet--"magic" (Beloved 35). At the other extreme the cruelty of whites against blacks is so unacceptable to the characters that they die and become insane when they understand its full extent. The ultimate unbelievable fact is "what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and made Paul D tremble.

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[6] The definition of "kuklos" is from Hugh Brogan The Pelican History of the United States of America p.378.

That anyone white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind" (Beloved 251).

This reversal of the unbelievable and believable is perfectly acceptable to the reader in the context of a magic realist text, and the irony of the actual facts of cruelty being regarded as unbelievable, places emphasis on the readers' reception of the cruelty described. Marilyn Saunders Mobley points out that:

> Morrison's words remind us that all definitions of realism are shaped by complex ideological, historical and cultural contingencies of value that blur common place distinctions between what is real and what is not. (Mythic Wings 21)

The main advantage of the use of magic realism is the resulting blurring of the definition of reality. In Song of Solomon Morrison writes "...Pilate did not have a navel. Since that was true anything could be..." (294). This creates space in which the articulation of historical events or re-creation of history, that would usually be dismissed by the dominant culture, can be carried out. It also allows for the expression of African American culture and its beliefs in the ancestor and a continuous past without coming into conflict within the text with the dominant definitions of what is or is not "real".

However, the use of magic realism in such a way to recreate history is problematic. Since in magic realism there is a disruption of the category of the real, those things

which are actual can be interpreted in reverse to be fictional. This could leave the highly damaging response to the text that the psychological trauma of slavery could be considered fictional, supernatural and magical, whereas the cruelty of whites could be considered unbelievable and unacceptable as fact. Of course it could also open up another, and post-modern scenario: that the reader considers to be true only that which is acceptable as true to the reader at the time of reading. In conversation with Bill Moyers, Morrison acknowledges that to participate in the text the reader must be willing to accept what is written (even if only for the time of reading): "'The person inside you has to be accessible. There has to be a little crack in there already, some curiosity'" (Taylor-Guthrie 273). In this manner readers would produce their own version of history that could not be held as "true" or "factual" but only as another addition to the multi-voiced historical discourse of the experience or slavery.

In the light of the reliance of the text on the reader's response the final approach seems more appropriate because, as Maggie Sale comments:

> The history created in Beloved both emphasizes the importance of perspective and requires the articulation of multiple perspectives. Because it is performative in nature and communally based, this kind of (hi)story depends upon the repeated interaction of the one and the many. ("Call and Response" 42/43)

III. Oral Narrative and Magic Realism

The previous section established Beloved as a historical ontological magic realist text; this will examine the ways in which the use of narrative technique, influenced by African American story-telling tradition works to encourage readers of Beloved to be open to its magic realist aspects.

One of the aspects of her approach to writing which separates Morrison from many other contemporary writers, but links her to Leslie Marmon Silko, is the lack of authorial distance from the readership which she addresses. The narrative techniques employed by Morrison from African American story-telling tradition encourage readers to participate in the creation of the text through the process of reading. Morrison explains in relation to the opening phrase of The Bluest Eye, "Quiet as it's kept" (1), that she used a colloquial and conspiratorial phrase in order to produce "intimacy between the reader and the page" ("Unspeakable" 21). Thus, in a magic realist text the reading process becomes a personal experience during which the readers' perceptions of truth, reality, and the possible are challenged. The political significance of this is that these texts have a deeper influence upon readers' mind than a non-participatory "readerly" text and can even challenge the way in which readers' perceive their world.

Techniques from African American oral story-telling add significantly to the ontological aspects of the text, including the magic realist narrative. The African American form of oral narrative tradition acts as a remainder of the influence of African

culture, one that persisted throughout slavery, although the language in which the tales were told, and the tales themselves changed [7]. Because of this, oral tradition is closely linked with the notion of building a cultural identity. Frederick Douglass in his slave narrative Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave emphasises the power of the oral tradition when he claims that to understand the extent of the pain of slavery one should listen to the singing of a slave expressing [her] himself (57) and not to a white commentator.

As oral story-telling relies upon a teller and a listener to be present and to interact with one another, it depends upon a community of willing listeners and tellers. In fact, the very process of oral story-telling is itself a community building experience, a gathering of a group of people to hear stories in which they will all participate. The importance of this notion will be extended in the final chapter with reference to the ritualistic writing of Leslie Marmon Silko. In Morrison's writing the telling of tales from one character to another is often the main source from which the characters create a sense of identity. For instance Milkman Dead in Song of Solomon pieces together his identity through hearing a song repeated in several locations. In Beloved Denver, Sethe and Beloved all contribute to the building of each other's identities by communally sharing

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[7] For a more detailed theoretical discussion of the importance of oral tradition in African American Literature from a postmodern marxist perspective see Houston A Baker Jr.'s book Blues Ideology and Afro American Literature: A Vernacular Theory. Specific material on Morrison and oral narrative is abundant but Susan Willis "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison" and Trudier Harris' Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison are particularly incisive.

tales.

The critics Susan Willis and Ashraf Rushdy have both separately noted that Morrison's oral narrative in Beloved is in fact an adaptation of oral narrative specifically for written fiction. They both identify this move as an adaptation to the changes in the nature of the African American community she addresses, that is, the community is no longer a physical community but one which identifies itself through her writing. Her writing is an attempt at constructing a communal memory for her readership, as a part of what Susan Willis has called a "community" of "witnesses to the textual event" (15).

Denver's introduction to her community is significantly literary. Lady Jones teaches Denver to read and introduces her to the workings of her community. The community's initial contact with Denver takes the form of baskets of food with hand-written notes attached. The notes prompt Denver to talk to members of the community and listen to their stories. In this sense, Denver's introduction to the community is through writing which then leads her to the oral culture. I would add that the traditional hierarchy of the written over the oral, of recorded written history over oral histories, is significantly overturned by Morrison's adaptation of the oral into a written form. What remains is not a written version of the oral but a written-oral narrative. The importance of this in a wider political context of American literary tradition is paradoxical. On the one hand it can be seen to be an introduction of oral techniques into a tradition which supports a formal literary style, such as that of Henry James. In this case African American culture influences the hierarchical realm of the "white" American canon of literature.

However, it can be interpreted to be a return to the tradition of the vernacular in American Literature as developed by white writers such as Mark Twain.

That withstanding, the role of the reader in European American literary tradition is overtly challenged by the necessity of reader participation in texts influenced by communal African American story-telling. Although post-structuralist European/American theorists consider the role of the reader to be a producer (and not just an interpreter) of the text, the African American tradition challenges the notion of the isolated reader. Wolfgang Iser notes that while readers interpret the text they find that the interpretation is constantly disturbed by the appearance of new possibilities which arise during the reading process (287). This is particularly apt in a magic realist text as one of magic realism's radical aspects is that it encourages the expression of multiple perspectives by disrupting categories of truth and reality. The use of story-telling narrative in a magic realist text thus doubly encourages the expression of multiple perspectives, a communally produced text and new reading approaches.

Although the role of the listener in story-telling tradition is not interchangeable with that of the reader's response, the influence of story-telling technique in a written text emphasises the importance of the readers' response. The main differences between the written text stretched to its limit (as in the highly oral style of Beloved) and oral story-telling tradition is that oral story-telling (the telling of a tale from memory or imagination to a present listener) is immediate and unrecorded. The distinction between listeners and readers is that listeners are able to directly question and to guide the story

as it is told and are frequently members of a community of present listeners and tellers. Readers, on the other hand, react in solitude to what is provided permanently on the page but are within a community of readers who have been influenced by the text, of critics, and of Morrison herself.

However, what remains in both oral narrative and written narrative is what Maggie Sale calls the "call-and-response" pattern of the participation of listeners and readers. This is the process by which listeners/readers react to what is said/written and thereby participate in the production of the story. In Sale's essay, "Call and Response as Critical Method: African American Oral Traditions and Beloved", she applies the theories of oral narrative to Morrison's writing. Unlike Willis, Sale does not make the distinction between the present community of listeners and tellers and the solitary nature of the reader in a textual community. I will, however, use her term "call-and-response" to refer, as she does, to Morrison's specific use of story-telling narrative but with the added assumption that it also refers to call-and-response between readers and the text. Morrison explains the role which she hopes her readers will perform with reference to Song of Solomon:

> The reader as narrator asks the questions the community asks, and both reader and 'voice' stand among the crowd, within it, with privileged intimacy and contact, but without any more privileged information than the crowd has. ("Unspeakable" 29)

The narrative of Beloved is multi-vocal and magic realist.

The magic realism is evident from the first sentence of the novel, "124 was spiteful" (Beloved 3). This opening signals to the reader that in this novel inanimate objects will be assigned emotions as though it were a matter of fact. It is the matter of fact tone in which extraordinary things are discussed that makes the events that would usually be called fantastic seem ordinary and unexceptional. For example, while entering the house and discovering it is haunted, Paul D asks a familiar and common question which is typical of the low key tone used to speak of the ghost, "You got company?" (Beloved 8). More dramatic dialogue is reserved for discussions of the personal traumas and histories that each character articulates such as Paul D considering to himself, "It was one thing to beat up a ghost, quite another to throw a helpless colored girl out in territory infected by the Klan" (Beloved 66).

The readers' difficulty is increased since it is often difficult to identify the voice of one specific character and in one section the narrative consists of three mingled unidentified voices. To confuse the matter, the monologue in Beloved's voice can be read, following the suggestion of Deborah Horovitz, as multi-vocal and includes her own voice and also those of Sethe's mother and grandmother [8]. The story-telling is carried out on two simultaneous levels: it is both a tale written by Morrison for readers and told by the characters to each other. In this way it is both a written and a recorded oral story.

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[8] See Deborah Horovitz "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in Beloved" for further discussion of the matrilineal line of African American women's history refer to in Beloved.

The narrative is written using a colloquial oral style. The sentences are short, simple and similar to spoken language. As indicated earlier in this chapter, the narrative takes on the style of conversational language outside speech marks. For instance, Sethe's thoughts are articulated without punctuation marks when she considers her future with Paul D: "A Life. Could be" (Beloved 47). The second sentence is grammatically incomplete in terms of written language but is comprehensible and recognisable as a common verbal shorthand. More frequently used is the unmistakeable oral device of the repetition of a short phrase, a chorus, used for emphasis. While Denver considers the change in her life after Paul D exorcised the baby ghost she mentally remarks to herself "Again she wished for the baby ghost--its anger thrilling her now where it used to wear her out. Wear her out" (Beloved 13).

In the second to fifth sections of Chapter Two, the voices of Sethe, Denver and Beloved are heard in a blanket of noise surrounding the house. Each section is progressively less like prose, less decipherable as a particular character's voice and eventually the three women's voices mingle in free verse. The voices are the thoughts which the women do not physically articulate but which are made audible in their own voices through a supernatural force in the manner of conversation. It is described by those who hear as "the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (Beloved 199).

These sections of the novel could be mistakenly described as a series of interior monologues. The narrative articulates the character's unspoken thoughts without any intervention from a separate narratorial voice. It is most closely associated with the

modernist period when the device was used to create a deeper intimacy between readers and the characters. The lack of narratorial intervention provides a heightened sense of realism and immediacy between readers and the text. In Beloved, although the narrative gives the impression to readers that the thoughts are being communicated directly (without the interference of a narrator) and might therefore have a heightened sense of realism, it is actually supernatural. Thus the presence of the magic stops the text from becoming realist and yet at the same time the realistic associations of the interior monologue give the supernatural elements an associated realism.

The first section articulates Sethe's thoughts as if she is addressing Beloved. It is written in prose using punctuation but without speech marks. The narrative style of this passage is recognisable as an African American speech pattern. Because it is a recognisably African American and is an adaptation of "Standard English" (the enforced language of the oppressor) the use of this narrative style is an act of political resistance and a re-enforcement of identity. The rules of written grammar are dismissed for a spoken, conversational style. The passage starts with the comments, "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See" (Beloved 200). The dropping of the verb in each sentence not only goes against the traditional rules of written language but also against the grammar of "the Queen's English" in favour of a specifically African American speech pattern. The Canadian Caribbean poet Marlene Nourbese Philip uses a similar device in her work, as she recognises that the rules of grammar of the colonizer's "Standard English" are a set of rules that limit that which it is possible to express in English, and a homogenization of people's speech. In this sense Philip considers English to silence the

desired expression of Blacks and so she purposefully uses English without the strictures of grammar in order to write expressively as a Black poet (Williamson 1).

This passage shows the sense of claustrophobia that exists in the relationship between Beloved and Sethe in which they "ration their strength to fight each other" (Beloved 239). Sethe eventually becomes obsessed with pleasing Beloved, even to the extent of ignoring Denver, and is willing to sacrifice her life for her. This obsession is made evident in the text as Sethe's monologues gradually become addressed directly to Beloved and not externally to readers, nor to any other characters in the text. Significantly, this gives readers the same sense of exclusion from Sethe and Beloved's relationship as Denver feels (Beloved 203).

The second section is Beloved's multi-vocal narrative which is written without punctuation. What is expressed is predominantly the thoughts of an African woman on a slave ship watching a woman, who is presumably her mother, dying and being thrown overboard. But there are also the voices of a woman watching another work in a field, and of Beloved herself describing her death and return from the dead. These voices are difficult to identify as the narrative is written as an interior monologue with no separation between each voice and with no external identifiers for each voice. It is an expression of a string of unconnected memories which are not ordered into a story.

In "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in Beloved", Deborah Horovitz has written a convincing interpretation of this section. She notes that one of the images that

Beloved describes is from the perspective of a woman on a slave ship. The memories are images of closely packed bodies, sexual assaults by white men, iron neck braces, starvation, dead bodies lying on top of the living and of corpses being pushed in the sea with a pole (Beloved 210/211). Although the connections are circumstantial, Horovitz argues that the memories are Sethe's mother's.

The second voice that I identified (of a woman watching another woman working in the fields) is not mentioned by Horovitz. This voice is reminiscent of Sethe's memory of watching her mother work as a slave in the rice fields. Beloved's section states, "I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her" (Beloved 210). In this case Beloved is not only herself but also Sethe's mother (with the memory of Sethe's grandmother) and Sethe's memory. This last connection is supported by Sethe's view of Beloved, of whom she states, "she understands everything all ready" (Beloved 200) and by Beloved's voice in her own monologue in which she refers to "the woman with my face" and repeats a desire to "join" the faces (Beloved 212-213).

Horovitz also states that Beloved is symbolic of all African American women and, although I would be cautious in making a generalization, this interpretation does emphasise the nature of multiplicity of the narrative. Beloved is her own, her mother's and her grandmother's voice but she is also the possible voice of all African American women. In the fifth section Beloved uses Sethe as a symbol of what has been done to African American mothers. She claims that, "Sethe is the one that picked flowers...."

and "Sethe went in to the sea" (Beloved 214). The passage proceeds with an absence of English grammar which is indicative of the collapse of individual identity between Sethe and Beloved, and then Denver. Beloved asks "Will we smile at me?" (Beloved 215) and "Why did you leave me who am you?" (Beloved. 216). Thus Beloved is shown to lack a sense of distinction between herself and other women and is thereby the embodiment of multiplicity, and of the variety of women that create their community. She represents each one of them individually and communally and emphasises their interdependence due to their shared history of oppression.

It is this aspect of Beloved which enables Sethe to tell her story and overcome the primary problem in the novel to find a willing story teller and listener in the characters. The novel starts with a situation where there is no willing narrator to guide the reader (or the other characters) through the limited information that is presented to them. The main reason for the unwillingness to articulate the stories by Sethe is the psychological trauma of the remembering and re-telling her life as a slave woman and the events which lead up to the killing of her baby. Sethe and her late mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, who had witnessed the murder, had both agreed that the past was "unspeakable" (Beloved. 51).

When Sethe begins to speak of her past to Denver she is unwilling to recall and relay all her memories. Denver has grown used to this so that she recognises when her mother could not tell any more:

> Denver knew that her mother was through with it--for now anyway. The single

slow blink of her eyes; the bottom lip sliding up slowly to cover the top... signs that Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go. (37)

Added to this was Sethe's conviction that Denver must be kept from the dangers of even knowing about slavery; "the job of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered" (Beloved. 42).

Denver therefore is not able to begin the story-telling process because she lacks the stories and information that Sethe retains. She states:

> I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don't know what it is, I don't know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again. I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard. (Beloved 205)

At the beginning of the novel the mother and daughter therefore live in a house with a ghost, which acts as a constant reminder of the past, and in isolation from the rest of the community. This denies Denver the means to gain a sense of identity in relation to the present and to the community which surrounds them.

It has often been noted in African American women's fiction that self-identity is related to the use of language, to naming and to verbal expression [9]. This is complicated by the

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[9] Relevant criticism on Morrison's use of language is by Rebecca Ferguson, Karla F C Holloway and Stephanie A Demetrkopoulos, Susan Willis and Trudier Harris. Morrison discusses the importance of word play and naming in the interview "The Language Must Not Sweat".

fact that their language is that of the oppressor. As Morrison points out, English is structured with racist assumptions; "I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority" (Playing in the Dark X).

Naming, in particular is a means of allocating definitions, and thus, control. It is a powerful tool of resistance for African Americans who are thereby able to define and give meaning to their world. The importance of naming is made apparent by Sethe who protects herself by keeping her name secret from the white girl who helps her during her escape from Sweet Home. Sethe notes that, "there was no point in giving her real name out to the first person she saw" (Beloved 33). The need for the three women in Beloved to tell their stories is related to the power of naming as it is also a means of controlling the meaning allocated to one's world and thereby to gain the courage to exist in the world beyond their home. This is crucial for Denver whose last contact with the exterior world struck her deaf and dumb because she didn't want to hear what her mother had done. Beloved's essential function in the story is as the catalyst for the characters to tell their personal stories and also as the memory catalyst for all the characters who come into contact with her.

Beloved uses her supernatural ability to persuade people to do her will. When Paul D begins to act contrary to his own will he recognises that when he begins to act in opposition to his own desires Beloved is influencing his behaviour. She forces him to move out of the house without using any overt mental or physical persuasion. He notes,

"She moved him nonetheless, and Paul D didn't know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving himself" (Beloved 14). Although it is not Beloved who directly influences Stamp Paid, an old friend of Baby Suggs, the supernatural forces which surround the house while Beloved is present, do. He realises Beloved's power when he passes the house 124 and finds that it is surrounded by a cacophony of voices which he recognises as the suffering of dead slaves: "The people of broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (Beloved 181). He finds it impossible to pass through the surrounding cacophony and begins to feel shame at the remembrances of his friendship with Baby Suggs in comparison to his present rejection of Sethe. The book ends with a description of the ghost Beloved appearing occasionally as footsteps in mud which fit each person who steps in them; "They are so familiar. Should a child, and adult place his feet in them, they will fit" (Beloved 275). This symbol of Beloved's function as a personal catalyst for every fictional character's memory who lives near 124 is also a symbol of the text's function as the personal catalyst for the readers' remembrance of slavery.

Beloved persuades Sethe through her supernatural power to tell her stories. Beloved touches Sethe on the shoulder and looks into her eyes before asking Sethe to tell her a story to which Sethe responds noting, "The longing she saw there was bottomless. Some plea barely in control" (Beloved 58). By telling the stories Sethe also relays the information to Denver who begins to develop a sense of her family's past. Through this story-telling process, by the end of the novel Denver has learnt to respond to language and express herself with control. When she re-meets Nelson Lord, the boy who years

before had made Denver deaf by what he told her about her sister's killing, she notes, "The last time he spoke to her his words blocked up her ears. Now they opened her mind" (Beloved 252).

Sethe is also surprised at her willingness to tell her past to Beloved. She reasons to herself, "Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the event itself, or her thirst for hearing it--in any case it was an unexpected pleasure" (Beloved 51). Of course it is ironic that Sethe thinks that Beloved is distanced from the events when Beloved's death is the direct result of them. However, Sethe is correct to recognise that Beloved desires the stories. It is through the stories that she constructs her sense of self as she is a revenant who was originally a baby; her sense of identity is minimal and her desire to create an identity is essential to her. In an essay in which she develops a criticism of Beloved with reference to the theories of Kristeva, Rebecca Ferguson points out that when Beloved appears she has no lines on her hands and no marks on her body (except the scar under her chin). She is in effect newly born and has everything to learn about herself. For Ferguson the essential problem for Beloved is to learn how to name. She has memories which extend back through several generations of women but she cannot name any of them and so she is confused: "She grasps, yet can barely understand the connection she is trying to make, and where she came from, all is confused, she knows no names" (Ferguson 121).

Beloved, therefore, must learn to fill in the blanks of the memories she has collected and, like Denver, needs Sethe to provide her with the necessary information to give

further meaning to what she knows. It is through this process of gaining information, filling in the gaps and naming that Sethe and Denver begin to progress, to come to terms with the past enough to move on confidently. The interesting feature is that although Beloved wishes to develop her understanding she does not want to move away from the past--after all she is the living embodiment of the past. The eventual mental struggle between Beloved and Sethe can therefore be seen in terms of a symbolic struggle between finding one's identity in the past and moving on to develop in the future.

During the progress of the novel, readers experience similar confusion to Denver and need to receive the information with which to fill in the gaps in the text and construct an interpretation of the events. Before the characters begin to tell their stories readers flounder with names, places and events, all of which seem unconnected or unplaced in time and order. During reading they select information and begin to construct a story in their minds. As the novel progresses and more stories are told, they gain more information which is collated with what has been remembered from the reading up to that point.

Morrison explains this deliberate ploy in her work to place the readers (and Denver) in circumstances where they rely on their imaginations and improvisational skills:

> I wanted the compelling confusion of being there as they (the characters) are; suddenly, without comfort or succor from the 'author', with only imagination, intelligence, and necessity available for the journey. ("Unspeakable" 33)

Her statement implies that the reading as well as the character's circumstances prompt the development of survival strategies. The reading process is thus politically educative.

This reading strategy is what Iser calls the dynamism of the text which he values as a heightened form of reader participation in the production of the text (Ibid. 275). Through this process Iser hopes that readers will come to a point at which they will become aware of their own thought patterns and start to consider what it is that motivates them. A similar process is carried out by the characters who make connection between each others' stories. Denver, for instance, who is most like the reader in her initial ignorance and progression towards understanding, needs to prepare herself and concentrate to tell a story. She has to make connections with the fragments she has retained in her mind: "to construct out of the strings she had heard" (Beloved 76).

During one key passage in which Denver constructs an identity for herself in a story, she and her sister Beloved perform a call-and-response style story-telling event like a "duet". It is initiated by Beloved who asks Denver to tell her a story. As Denver begins to create the story, Beloved asks questions which direct that which Denver tells her:

> Now, watching Beloved's alert and hungry face, how she took in every word, asking questions about the color of things and their size, her downright craving to know, Denver began to see what she was saying and not just to hear it. (Beloved 77)

The listener therefore becomes a part of the story-telling process and the story is consequently transformed whilst it is expressed. In this manner Beloved and Denver

simultaneously construct stories in their own minds out of which to create the vital information for their identities:

> Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it. (Beloved 78)

By interacting during the duet Beloved and Denver create two different versions of the story, each influenced by the other. Thus each story teller and listener and reader has a differing and new version of the story and in the process the stories, which each listener or teller constructs in their mind, become a part of their experiential memories. Thus, as Denver tells Beloved the story of her own birth she realises she was "seeing it now and feeling it--through Beloved" (Beloved 76).

For Deborah E McDowell the importance of Beloved is to "engrave the past on the memory of the present but, more importantly, on future generations that might otherwise succumb to the cultural amnesia that has begun to re-enslave us...." (146). This applies not only to the contemporary reader but also to the character Denver who, due to her mother's unwillingness to articulate her memories, is ignorant of what it is that her mother fears for her in life outside the protection of her free home.

Denver and the reader simultaneously need to, and begin to, understand the psychological trauma of slavery as they piece the stories together in their minds and create new memories of their own. After having begun working outside the home in

order to support her family, Denver begins to understand Sethe's attitudes rather than relating to her purely as her mother. Denver notes,

> she knew Sethe's greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning--that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant--what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin.... (Beloved 251)

The novel ends with a comment wrought with the tension that the novel's narrative centres around: "This is not a story to pass on" (Beloved 275). This comment signals the continuing tension and psychological trauma that is carried by the history of slavery and although it is articulated at the point where the reader and Denver have recreated the story in their own minds it is also the point where they must prepare to remember the story and begin the painful process of recovery in order to tell the tale to the next generation. As the character Amy says, "'Anything dead coming back to life hurts'" (Beloved 35), and that includes not only Beloved but the memories that she releases in Sethe and those of the readers.

This is not to say that present day readers, exterior to slavery, can understand and sympathise with the depth of trauma that slavery causes, but that the readers are traumatized by confronting the perpetration of an atrocity. Sale notes that "Who is saying (or writing) what to whom, and how they're saying (or writing) it is of the utmost importance to the meaning of what gets said (written)" (46). What I would note is that the participatory process of reading the text is necessarily influenced by the readers'

own cultural perspectives. As the readers reconstruct the story from what they selectively order from the novel and what they add to the interpretation from their own imagination, they bring contemporary influence to the text's version of history. Morrison assumes that the readers will participate in the text even after reading. An important aspect of the story-telling tradition, which differs from the traditional reading process, is that listeners/readers will later relay their own version of the story. Morrison's emphasis is placed upon the re-telling of the story although the critical process can be considered to contribute to this tradition. The question which must be considered is: what if the reader has no first hand experience of slavery, is white and was educated, like me, in the country which perpetrated the system of slavery?

Gabrielle P Foreman commented on Beloved that:

> In entering her world, most readers are drawn into a space which is so different from their own that they must suspend their connection with the 'logical' and the 'real' to enter. (384)

Foreman emphasis on the "logical" and "real" reveals that her critical stance adopts a traditional European philosophical perspective. Her comment highlights the problem of approaching an ontologically cross-cultural text from a cultural distance. That is, readers need to negotiate beliefs and attitudes from their own culture in order to participate in the cross-cultural text.

This question of cultural difference arises from a debate which originates from Black American academics. For this reason I feel it is especially important to confront the

issue. The questions that are raised are: are readers able to immerse themselves into the fictional world and so recreate the text without distorting Sethe's perspective?; Are readers meant to influence the texts with their personal experience, no matter how removed it may be, and add to the multiplicity of voices which constitute this form of history?

Morrison, in fact, provides an answer to this question with regard to writing Song of Solomon. She leaves her text deliberately open to multiple (mis)interpretation and thereby produces a text that reflects a true varied community:

> These spaces, which I am filling in,... can conceivably be filled in with other significances.... The point is that into these spaces should fall the ruminations of the reader and his or her invented or recollected or misunderstood knowingness. ("Unspeakable" 29)

Thus the texts contain multiple perspectives in two respects: the magic realist narrative techniques allow multiple perspectives to be expressed and the reading process encourages multiple interpretations to be created. Whilst the text employs a predominantly African American women's perspective the text also contains references to the dominant "white American" perspective, to which it acts as a reply. However, the text is not attempting to reverse the dominant/oppressed paradigm of historical discourse since the magic realist re-creation of history does not serve the same purpose as dominant versions of history. The text encourages a personal and psychological understanding of a period of history in order to contribute to African American cultural

memory. Moreover, as Baker notes (see page 57), those who control history control power. Therefore, the construction of cultural memory through stories is a means to communally resist the dominant control of power whilst providing a means to pass the personal spiritual apparatus for survival from generation to generation.

The contradiction arising from this is that although Morrison's text encourages multiple perspectives, it does prioritise one particular perspective above all others and particularly prioritises the African American perspective over the perspective of "white America". Importantly, it is from this position that she is able to create a text of resistance. However, by favouring one particular perspective the text is open to criticism of separatism. Maggie Sale notes that:

> Beloved not only presents "new " perspectives, but foregrounds the power and problematics of perspective itself; this text suggests a complex method of reading and interpreting that values multiplicity rather than codification and polemic, while simultaneously refusing the problematic notion that all positions are equally valid. (42)

Does Morrison's notion of community lead to the advocation of a segregated America where the only connection between communities is a shared sense of place, through which disputes of invasion and occupation can develop? Furthermore, if Morrison's commitment is to her own community then does she have a responsibility to any other community?

In these circumstances it was a positive gesture by Morrison to allow the reader so

much freedom to interact with the text and one which one hopes would not work against its politics. It is important to remember, however, that the text does not have a conclusive ending but ends with the same problems which the novel opens with. Horovitz notes that:

> The paradox of how to live in the present without cancelling out an excruciatingly painful past remains unresolved at the end of the novel; At the same time, something healing has happened. (166)

This comment reveals the role that the text plays in the politics of African American identity. It does not solve the problems that exist between the dominant and African American cultures, nor does it extinguish the pain of a slavery past but it suggests a means to continue in the present and that is to confront the issues, in the same way that Denver confronts the outside world. Morrison explains her attitude toward her writing, claiming that:

> It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. ("Rootedness" 341)

In response to Morrison's plea which opened this chapter, it is appropriate to claim that she creates ontologically African American magic realist narratives. This critical stance at once places her writing in the specific African American cultural context and yet assumes that the reader moves between being inside and outside that cultural context.

In consideration of this cultural ambivalence which is shared by both the protagonists and the readers it is worth considering the cultural ambivalence which is inherent in ontological magic realism. The contradiction of ontological magic realism is that the magical aspect of magic realism has to be identified from a European perspective, outside the belief system which influences the narrative. The reader therefore shifts between a dominant cultural perspective and an African American cultural perspective, ambivalently.

Her writing encourages the reader to confront the issues of cultural identity, and to take inspiration from Denver's creation of her own African American cultural memory through acts of the imagination. What is implied by Morrison's attitude towards fiction is that literature can inspire and transform people's thoughts, and this is its political power. However, this argument begs the question: does the stronger impression and demand made upon the imagination through magic realism produce a stronger political reaction?

Thus, to regard Morrison's writing as magic realist allows the critic to focus on the necessary cultural negotiations required to create a communal African American cultural memory. It also provides a critical approach which emphasises the similarities with other cross-cultural women writers attempting to create cultural memories for their own specific cross-cultures through magic realism. Ultimately this critical approach places Morrison in a writing community with other cross-cultural American women writers whilst also maintaining the recognition of the specifically African American

community of readers she addresses.

Chapter Two

"What Confucius Did Not Talk About"[10]

I. Introduction

In this chapter I will continue my analysis of the use of magic realist narratives by problematising the contradictory notions of the real and the magical and how they can be differently perceived within a specific cross-cultural context. The argument will examine how the definitions of these categories vary according not only to the cultural perspective, but also to the political stance of the reader within that cultural context.

The chapter will focus on one of the most relevant current critical debates to a discussion of magic realism: the centrality of the notions of the "real" and the "fake" (in which the "fake" is synonymous with the un-real "magical") in literary criticism about contemporary Chinese American writers. This debate questions the meaning of the "real" and the "fake" in a narrative which contributes to the cultural memory of Chinese Americans whose experience in America has been shaped from contradictory experiences, ranging from finding one's personal freedom (in Jade Snow Wong's Fifth Chinese Daughter) to being murdered in racially motivated attacks (Larissa Lai's When Fox is a Thousand).

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[10] This is the title of a book referred to by the narrator as one of the sources from which her mother validated ghost stories (Woman Warrior, 64).

The main factor which gives rise to this debate in Chinese American culture is the relative newness of the attempt to create a recognisably Chinese American cultural memory, and the obstructions to its creation due to long term institutionalised racism. Unlike African or Native Americans, the Chinese Americans are descended from voluntary immigrants within recent history. The first recorded Chinese woman in America arrived in 1834 (Ling 9). Since then, dominant American attitudes towards Chinese Americans can be traced through the American government's immigration policy which targeted Chinese Americans as the least welcome immigrant group. Hong Kingston notes in China Men that Asian immigrants, and particularly Chinese, had the strictest immigration restrictions of all immigrant groups (152). Interrogation prior to either deportation from or entry into the United States frequently lasted for weeks, sometimes longer, and included obscure and detailed questions of personal habits, political views (the time at which a man cut off his hair in the communist fashion was considered politically significant) and details of family history (China Men 60-61). For the majority of Chinese immigrants, access to the United States could only be gained by suppressing facts and constructing an identity and history acceptable to the immigration officials. In 1882 an act was passed which prohibited the entry of Chinese workers into the United States. Only as recently as 1948 were Chinese Americans able to become United States citizens (Ibid. 154). The fact that these policies were at least in part inspired by racism is illustrated by the use of references during a debate in Congress to the writer Bret Harte's character "The Heathen Chinee" from his poem "Has the White Man No Country?" which were used as proof of the malicious and devious character of Chinese men (Kim 15). The result of this authorised racism is that Chinese

Americans have been denied a voice in dominant American society. As Robert G Lee notes, in the United States, "...Orientalist ideology ... has constructed Asians in American culture, men and women alike, as alien, ahistorical, and without voice" (52)[11].

This feeling of voicelessness and misrepresentation of Chinese Americans has fuelled the debate concerning the "real" and the "fake" in Chinese American writing. The debate was initiated in 1991 when Chinese American critics led by Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan wrote the introduction to their second anthology of Asian American writing The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature. In their introduction they attacked Maxine Hong Kingston, Jade Snow Wong and Amy Tan (all American born Chinese American women writers) for providing a "fake" representation of Chinese culture in their writing. Chan et al. accused them of writing "...products of white racist imagination..." (xii) which emphasise:

> ...the fake Chinese American dream over the Chinese American reality, the belief over the fact, and the fake over the real, until the stereotype has completely displaced history in the white sensibility (xiii).

The debate focused upon Maxine Hong Kingston's first work, her semi-autobiographical

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[11] Lee's use of the term "orientalist", which is usually associated with Edward Said's examination of western ideology's attitudes towards the Islamic world (and particularly towards the Middle East), here refers to a wide-spread stereotyping of South East Asians in dominant American culture. In this case the term "orient" connotates the "Far East" but borrows an association with Said's theories of western stereotyping.

and magic realist novel The Woman Warrior: A Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts. Chin centres his concern on what he sees as her perpetuation of a racist stereotype through her presentation of Chinese culture as misogynist, anti-individualistic, mystical and antagonistic to the West. His argument focuses on three aspects of Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior which I will discuss in detail in this chapter. He attacks Hong Kingston for her creation of "fake" versions of Chinese myths, particularly for contributing to the Chinese American literary tradition whilst using the "un-Chinese" form of autobiography, and for her feminist accusation of misogyny in Chinese and Chinese American culture. Whilst in the above quotation Chin identifies Hong Kingston as an ontological writer who places importance on belief over the factual, his attack on her writing is concerned primarily with her cross-cultural adaptation of the Chinese myths which she uses as a source for her magic realist narratives of which he disapproves.

Written in 1976, The Woman Warrior received the National Book Critics Circle Award and has become widely taught in schools and colleges in the United States. The success of The Woman Warrior has fuelled the debate surrounding the text and the phrase "the real and the fake" has been adopted by other Chinese American critics in relation to Chinese American writing (Shawn Wong 2). Whether Hong Kingston was aware of this growing debate at the time of writing her third novel Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Books two years before the publication of The Big Aiiieeeee! is unknown; however, the subtitle of the novel seems to indicate a similar concern with the notions of what is "fake" and what is "real" Chinese American culture. Hong Kingston, like Morrison, also

teaches Creative Writing at an American university (Berkeley, California) which facilitates a familiarity with literary criticism and gives her access to academic debates, such as that concerning the "real" and the "fake".

Tripmaster Monkey relates the search for the cultural context in which the young protagonist (Wittman Ah-Sing), who comes from a long established Chinese American family, can allow his personal style of artistry to develop. Very much a part of his cultural environment, Wittman's life in 1960s California includes experiments with different ways of living, mind-altering drugs and a racist disassociation with "F.O.B.s" (recent Chinese immigrants "Fresh off the Boat"), all of which contribute to the confusion of what is "real" and what is "fake" that constitutes a major aspect of his cross-cultural context. As his name suggests, Wittman Ah-Sing is an amalgamation of both negative and positive cross-cultural influences; his name recalls the poet Walt Whitman and his poetry celebrating the multiplicity of American life, and most particularly brings to mind Whitman's Leaves of Grass which opens with the line, "One's-self I sing" (3). Moreover, the name "Ah-Sing" is also resonant of the racist stereotype of the "Heathen Chinee" called Ah-Sin in Bret Harte's poem to which I referred earlier. Thus, implicit in Wittman's name is his identity as a poet celebrating the multiplicity of Chinese American life.

The interest in Chinese American cross-culturalism which Hong Kingston's writing exhibits can be attributed to her own experience. She was born in 1940, in Stockton, California, where she grew up in Chinatown with her Chinese immigrant parents and

her American born siblings. Although she writes in English, she first spoke Chinese and only learnt to speak and write English at the age of 4 or 5. She has written three novels to date including the semi-autobiographical feminist memoir Woman Warrior. Her second novel, China Men (1980) is both a history and a memoir of the first Chinese immigrant men who came to America and includes autobiographical details and stories passed down through Hong Kingston's family. It switches register and narrative perspective from an omniscient narrator to a first person narrator, and also includes lists of laws. The third novel Tripmaster Monkey is her most stylistically postmodern novel in which she plays with concepts of the reliability of the narrator and magic realism. China Men and Tripmaster Monkey both contain a self-assured narrator, which contrasts with the insecurity of the narrator of Woman Warrior. Therefore, although all three novels contain magic realist aspects, only Woman Warrior explores the disruptive nature of magic realism on the narrator's understanding of reality. For this reason this chapter will focus on Woman Warrior[12].

The names of the characters in Woman Warrior correspond to those of her family, which suggests that the text is semi-autobiographical. In interviews, Hong Kingston interchangeably refers to the narrator as herself and as a fictional "narrator". However the inclusion of entire chapters of mythical stories, and the centrality of the narrator's mother to the text, make it controversial to class it as autobiography. Jade Snow Wong

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12 The edition referred to hereafter is by Picador (London), 1981.

points out that, in Chinese culture, autobiography is considered improperly egotistical if it is carried out through a first person narrative. Jade Snow Wong attempts to counter this impropriety by writing her own autobiography Fifth Chinese Daughter in the third person which she claimed "...was rooted in Chinese literary form (reflecting cultural disregard for the individual)" (Jade Snow Wong vii).

The two texts which Hong Kingston claims to have influenced her writing of The Woman Warrior are, significantly, both autobiographical. She cites Jade Snow Wong's Fifth Chinese Daughter and Marcel Proust's A la recherche du temps perdu as inspirations for the writing (TuSmith, "Literary Tricksterism" 251). Whilst the similarities to Jade Snow Wong are cultural rather than stylistic, Bonnie TuSmith identifies the similarities between The Woman Warrior and A la recherche du temps perdu as the "conscious manipulation" of the constructed self through memory with no concern to portray the "truth" ("Literary Tricksterism" 251). This is a recognised device in modern autobiography, as Dow Adams explains with regard to The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas (by Gertrude Stein) in his book Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography:

> ...what we remember--which is a mysterious amalgam of what we choose, what we really want, what actually happened, and what we are forced to remember--once turned into language and written down, becomes our personal truth without much consideration for its literal accuracy. (171)

The distinction indicated by TuSmith and Dow Adams between "autobiography" as an

attempt to provide a seemingly "truthful" account of the facts of a person's life, and "memoir" as an attempt to record the non-factual memories of a person without regard for their "truth", is useful in relation to The Woman Warrior. As the title suggests, The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts is a feminist memoir: a fictionalised account of a constructed narratorial self's relationship with her mother and community in which the narrator's use of magic realism and ambiguity dismisses any pretension to contain uncontested "truth". However, Susan Stanford Friedman claims that women's autobiography is rarely concerned with an isolated self but with a narrator who exists with and reverberates in a community (56). This is applicable to The Woman Warrior which creates the impression of a memoir that is concerned with the community even though it is written in the first person.

Her mother, Brave Orchid, who is the most prominent family member to appear in The Woman Warrior, continues to create problems for Hong Kingston by refusing to make a distinction between the true, the real, the mythical and the fictional. In an interview with me Hong Kingston admitted her exasperation with her mother's refusal to adopt a logical perspective. She told me:

> I ... participate in this trying to evolve into a more logical cause and effect mind and having to deal with people who believe that there are no strict boundaries between the fictional and non-fictional worlds. (Appendix 233)

However, as my chapter will demonstrate, Hong Kingston's semi-fictional, semi-mythological, semi-autobiographical The Woman Warrior, itself, fluctuates between the fictional and the non-fictional and adds to the significance of the notions of the "real"

and the "fake" in her writing.

The aspects of her texts to which Chin and his co-editors object could, as I will illustrate, also be regarded as the cross-cultural alterations to what is recognised as "Chinese" in second or third generation Chinese America. This chapter will explore the extent to which Hong Kingston alters Chinese mythological sources and narrative forms to support her own cross-cultural and ideologically feminist perspective in Chinese American magic realist narratives and to what extent these can be accepted as "real". Ultimately, I will reveal that Hong Kingston's writing in fact problematises the notion that there can be an absolutely "real" Chinese America. She articulates a cultural memory which is characterised by its struggle with an ambivalent attitude towards the distinctions between the "real" and the "fake".

It is essential to analyze Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior in this context as it is the most significant magic realist novel of the three novels by Chinese American writers which could be considered "magic realist". The other two novels are Larissa Lai's When Fox is a Thousand, which has three narrative voices of which only one is realist, and Tripmaster Monkey in which the narrator is unsure whether the magical events that he witnesses are real or drug induced hallucinations. Woman Warrior's magic realism lies in the narrator's realist tone which is sustained during mythological passages and ghost stories, and finally in the narrator's inability to distinguish between the real and the fictional.

In her interview with me in 1995 Maxine Hong Kingston stated that she no longer likes the term "magic realism" despite having previously agreed with Leslie Marmon Silko and Toni Morrison that it was appropriately applicable to their work (Appendix 232). She explained that her resistance to magic realism was due to her belief in a "logical scientific sequence of events" (Appendix 232). However, her attempt to dismiss the term was negated in the same interview by her non-scientific explanation that her hands ache through a psychosomatic need to write. Therefore, although Toni Morrison dismisses the term "magic realism" on the grounds of cultural positioning, Hong Kingston dismisses the term on the grounds of a desire to have an empirical personal belief system.

Whilst Maxine Hong Kingston's and Toni Morrison's approaches to magic realism are different, the subject matter of The Woman Warrior has many similarities to that of Beloved. Both texts centre around the motif of a young girl trying to find her identity in a cross-cultural context by an act of reconciling herself to her family and communal history; Denver's counterpart in The Woman Warrior is the unnamed narrator who struggles to gain a sense of her Chinese American identity against a background of cultural confusion, violence and female slavery, and predominantly, against a lack of passed-on knowledge with which to make sense of her mother's and her own ancestral history. As this suggests, and as I have already illustrated with Beloved, both texts concentrate on the recovery of un-told women's history and emphasise the importance of the ancestor to the secure continuation of present life. Both texts also rely very heavily on traditions of oral story telling by women. Similarly both writers attempt the

creation of experiential histories and cultural memory through oral tradition which serve to fill in the gaps of knowledge essential to the psychological development of future generations.

Differences between the texts are most notable in their approach to individuality and creativity. Although Hong Kingston's text deals specifically with notions of "community" this differs considerably from Morrison's communal focus. Where Morrison proposes a strategy for survival by solidarity with the community, Hong Kingston's text reveals a relationship with the community which--despite being essential to survival--is more generative of conflict. The autobiographical aspect of the Woman Warrior draws the reader's attention to the struggle of the narrator to understand her self and her circumstance. Moreover, despite the use of communal oral tradition, Hong Kingston is more concerned with the physicality of writing than Morrison, and this, together with the autobiographical aspects of the text, again draws the reader's attention to the existence of the narrator as an individual. In fact, as I will show, Hong Kingston's text is concerned with literary creativity as a strategy for individual survival but an individual survival, which relies upon understanding of her community and traditions.

In order to prove this conclusion I will analyze Hong Kingston's writing, and in particular, The Woman Warrior with specific reference to Frank Chin's objections. The first section of this chapter will examine the confusion which exists in Hong Kingston's cross-cultural context between the categories of the real and the fake. The second

section will analyze Hong Kingston's creation of a Chinese American feminist cultural memory from this state of confusion through the adaptation and use of autobiography and Chinese mythology.

II. Cheat Stories and (S)mothering Ghosts[13]

Magic realism, as has been illustrated in the previous chapter, provides a means to break down dominant culture's restrictive definitions of what is "real" and "true". Whilst this is also applicable to The Woman Warrior, the expression of multiple perspectives and the very fluidity of definition creates confusion for the young narrator of the text. The use of magic realism as a narrative technique in The Woman Warrior is therefore ambiguously valued.

The central anxiety which the narrator feels is a need to distinguish between the "real" and "not real" in order to defend herself against her extreme insecurity of self. Notions of erasure, incomprehension and silence are linked by the narrator who is silenced by anxiety. This affects her so intensely that she spends three years of her early life mute in English. She admits that "At times shaking my head is no more self assertion than I can manage" (Woman Warrior 155).

Her lack of self-assurance comes from the constant ambiguity in and contradiction of what she is told and not told, so that she does not have a notion of the "truth" on which her confidence could be based. She is faced with the threat of erasure from the absence of Chinese American voices in dominant American culture and from the silence

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[13] "Cheat Stories" is the name that the narrator gives to her mother's magic realist tales (WW, 184). "(s)mothering ghost" is a quote by G Thomas Couser in reference to the role of the narrator's mother in the text (236).

regarding the past that the immigrant Chinese American generations maintain in the face of the American born Chinese Americans. These silences create a lack of information out of which the American born generations could construct a specifically Chinese American cultural memory.

To combat this confusion and threat of erasure, the central concern of the narrator is to break the silence both individual and communal, surrounding the culture and daily life of Chinese Americans. Hong Kingston, like Morrison, has a clear aim to her writing. She states that one of her reasons for writing was that, as women from a minority group, "We couldn't find ourselves in literature" (Appendix 238). She further explains that she couldn't find "...the kind of women we wanted to learn from" (Appendix 238). Her writing, like that of Morrison's, therefore aims to contribute towards American women's cultural memory and identity.

However, silence is a very important form of protection for Chinese Americans. This creates confusion for the narrator who is unsure whether to keep silent (and thereby contribute to her own lack of existence in American literature and culture) or to risk bringing destruction on the community by shattering their protective silence surrounding aspects of their pasts which may give damaging material to immigration officials. Filled with resentment for her confusion, she complains to her mother, "I can't tell what's real and what you make up" (Woman Warrior 180). As I will argue, this is due to the circumstance of her upbringing in a cross-cultural (and often culturally frictional) environment by a mother, Brave Orchid, who speaks to her children using

the narrative mode of magic realism in a community where truth and traditions are fluid and hidden from the younger generations as a matter of survival.

The cultural confusion which this causes is the source of the second generation narrator's need to distinguish between the real and unreal, between Chinese and American, between Chinese actuality and Chinese fantasy, between American actuality and American fantasy, between genuine tradition and stereotype, between "what is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (Woman Warrior 13). The narrator, as a result, gains contradictory experiences, is given contradictory advice, and has a lack of knowledge out of which to make a coherent pattern from this experience.

This is an experience which is also portrayed in the writing of the Chinese American woman writer, Amy Tan. Both Hong Kingston and Tan are first generation American born Chinese Americans who grew up in Californian Chinatowns. Their first novels, written in 1975 (Maxine Hong Kingston) and 1989 (Amy Tan) explore the difficulties of negotiating the conflictual messages given to the American born generation from the Chinese born immigrant generation. They both express the pressures placed upon them to both reject and conform to Chinese and dominant American influences. For instance, Amy Tan's American born character Waverley Jong is made distraught by her misinterpretation of her mother's attitudes. She misconstrues her mother's unsurprised silent acceptance of her engagement to a white American as the hostility she expects her mother to show to her non-Chinese fiance. A similar reaction occurs in Tripmaster Monkey when Wittman takes his new white wife to visit his mother; he does not

introduce Tana as his wife because he is afraid of the reaction he imagines his mother will have. In fact, Wittman also fears his wife's reaction to his mother and is locked in anticipation of a meeting fraught with racist tension. He reflects, "If she says 'dragon ladies', definitely divorce" (Tripmaster Monkey 190). Woman Warrior is primarily concerned with the moments of misunderstanding and negative expectation between the Chinese and American born generations of Chinese Americans. Following her mother's stories about midwives killing babies in China if they were ill or girls the narrator even considers it possible that her mother so much did not want a girl child that she prepared ashes with which to smother her on her birth (Woman Warrior 82).

The result of her upbringing is that The Woman Warrior's narrator shares a similar position of ignorance to Denver in Beloved. She does not have the necessary sense of self or access to a communal cultural memory with which to negotiate the racism of the dominant white culture of the United States or the misogyny of both the dominant and her own marginal Chinese American culture.

Like Denver she craves the unuttered knowledge about her family's and community's past in order to place herself assuredly in the present. With no knowledge to guide her, the narrator must sort that which will be useful for her survival from what she is told, and although such sorting can be highly creative (as I will illustrate in the second section of this chapter) she flounders in the uncertainty of her choices. Even as the adult

narrator[14] addresses her Chinese American readers she asks:

> Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? (Woman Warrior 13)

In all that the narrator attempts she is anxious that she may be acting "wrongly" and is frustrated that she is not told which of the culturally determined codes of behaviour to follow. She angrily states that her mother "never explained anything that was really important" (Woman Warrior 112). Similarly, considering her childhood she notes: "You figure out what you got hit for and don't do it again if you figured correctly" (Woman Warrior 166).

Although her confusion was frustrating as a young child, in later life her inability to analyze cultural codes is highly destructive to her self identity. For instance, although she is aware that societies impose gender roles on women, the narrator is unable to distinguish between stereotype and accepted (yet not culturally determined) behaviour.

In an attempt at assimilation at her predominantly white school the narrator claims she tried to make herself "American feminine". However, rather than achieving assimilation she recognises that she has replicated herself as a racist construct: the stereotypical

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[14] In a conversation reported by the narrator at the time of narration her mother comments that the narrator's hair has become white with age (Woman Warrior, 95).

submissive silent Chinese girl. She associates the "American feminine" with walking upright while speaking in a quiet voice and she succeeds in following this behaviour to such an extent that she finds she is inaudible (Woman Warrior 18). In her frustration she turns her anger upon the girl in her class who is the most extreme example of a stereotypical Chinese girl, an entirely silent girl who wheezes sounds from her plastic flute. The narrator's comments during her unsuccessful attempt to force the girl to speak are indicative of her inability to distinguish between acceptable behaviour and stereotypical behaviour. The narrator tells the girl, "If you don't talk you can't have a personality", but she then associates "personality" with the stereotypical image of a perfect American girl as cheerleader. She demands, "Don't you ever want to be a cheerleader?" (Woman Warrior 162).

The most disquieting threat of erasure is from the narrator's own family. This threat involves the story of her paternal aunt who, due to a carrying an illegitimate child, has been removed from the family history. The aunt is referred to as "No Name Woman" and her story is only repeated as a warning to the narrator not to bring similar "shame" on her family. The narrator's mother warns her, "Now that you have started to menstruate what happened to her could happen to you.... You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born" (Woman Warrior 13).

Following this warning she adds the highly sinister comment, "The villagers are watchful" (Woman Warrior 13). This comment and the fact that this story is located in China seems at first to indicate the mother's refusal to acknowledge that her present life

is in California where the cultural and moral structures are different. It creates the misleading image of a mother who is an immigrant, "...leaving something behind" (Marlatt 219), looking back to China and attempting to re-enact her Chinese life in California.

However, the villagers have in fact moved together to the same area of California (Stockton), and they are indeed watchful. This is illustrated by the criticism of the narrator's behaviour in the Stockton laundry by the wealthiest wife of the village, who gives out American names to the villagers (Woman Warrior 172). In retrospect, and with this later incident in mind, the threat at the beginning of the text to eradicate her, which seems to be impossible in an American context, and therefore empty, is revealed to be the strongest threat of all. The use of a constructed identity was a common tactic to gain entry to the United States by Chinese immigrants and was often organised on a group basis so that an entire village would construct identities that supported each others'. Gayle K Fujito Sato refers to the practice of registering fictional sons with American immigration so that the "son's" identity may be used by a young immigrant to provide entrance into the United States:

> The strategy of "paper sons" meant that from the start the Chinese were authoring their American lives, that notions of "real" identity were never uncomplicated. Folklore and fantasy in the creation of self were implicit in the very beginning of Chinese-American society. (199)

Hong Kingston refers to such practices in Tripmaster Monkey when Wittman shares the

secret of his ancestor's model village with his wife. He explains that the model was used so that a whole group of immigrants could visualize their constructed past in the "memory village" (Tripmaster Monkey 192). Thus the villager's warning indicates that the narrator, or her family, can be punished by the village by being exposed to the immigration officials or stripped of their constructed identities which are supported by their community.

Added to this threat is the general misogyny which is repeated through traditional sayings in the company of the narrator by her parents, family and community. The narrator hears that girls are less valued by families in China. She hears that female babies are killed (Woman Warrior 82), their births (when they are allowed to live) are not celebrated (Woman Warrior 48) and they are dispensed of by their family as slaves or wives to be beaten by their in-laws (Woman Warrior 173). The narrator is terrified that if she is taken to China she will be sold (Woman Warrior 180). The knowledge which the narrator finds most disturbing is that her mother had been a midwife in China and knew how to kill a girl most effectively, although there is no proof that she actually used her knowledge (Woman Warrior 82). The implication of this is that the narrator is unsure of her mother's or her community's intentions to protect her. The narrator admits: "I hope ...that my mother did not prepare a box of clean ashes beside the birth bed in case of a girl" (Woman Warrior 82).

The narrator's fears of insubstantiality and worthlessness are reinforced again by her family's and community's constant and mundane references to ghosts. The importance

of this to the text is reinforced by the subtitle of the text: A Girlhood Among Ghosts. There are two types of ghosts which are accepted as normal phenomena and portrayed through magic realist narratives in The Woman Warrior, but their form varies considerably. They can be defined as anyone who is unfamiliar to the narrator and her community in America, and as the supernatural happenings associated with China and Chinese beliefs.

Gayle Fujito Sato notes that ghosts are culturally specific (193), that is they vary in form between different cultures and it is clear that the "revenant" of Beloved or the psychic poltergeist of Isabel Allende's House of the Spirits are as different from the two types of ghosts in The Woman Warrior as they are from each other, and as Hong Kingston's American ghosts are from her Chinese ghosts.

The treatment of ghosts in the later novels of Hong Kingston is significantly less threatening than in Woman Warrior. For instance, in China Men ghost stories are related without a comment about her personal reaction from the narrator. One similarity between the ghost stories in China Men and Woman Warrior is that the ghosts are associated with China, even though the people they represent may have lived in the United States. In China Men an uncle who died in the United States appears as a ghost to another uncle who tells him to go home, back to China. Instead both uncles disappear as though one uncle had come to take the other into death (China Men 168). There is another insinuation in these stories that Chinese immigrants return home to China after death. This has similarities with Toni Morrison's ending of Song of Solomon in which

Milkman appears to follow his great-grandfather when he dies and flies back to Africa.

The "American" form of ghosts in The Woman Warrior is illustrated by the long list of ghosts the narrator recognises as an ordinary part of every day life. The word "ghost" in fact often appears to be interchangeable for "non-Chinese American". The list includes as many types of ghosts as there can be Americans one meets in an average day (Woman Warrior 90). For instance the narrator and her siblings taunt a "Garbage ghost" who shocks them by accurately imitating the sounds of their language so that from their point of view he is "copying human language" (Woman Warrior 92). In this sense, and specifically in reference to the distinction between "human language" (Chinese) and "non-human language" (any other) it seems that the notion of ghosts in The Woman Warrior is not always used as a magic realist device but as a metaphor to refer to people who are inhuman in the racist eyes of the narrator's Chinese American family.

It would seem that the construction of ghosts as something ordinary yet peripheral (whether due to ostracisation or inconsequence) is specifically Chinese American. In the novel The Joy Luck Club Amy Tan's character An-Mei Hsu also notes her family's frequent use of the term "ghost" to refer to "...anything we were forbidden to talk about" (42). If one regards further uses of the term "ghost" in the text it becomes apparent that "ghost" is also a term which is interchangeable for anyone who is "unfamiliar" in the lives of the family, in other words, anyone who is not well known or of little importance. This, importantly, includes the second generation Chinese American who find that their elders refer to them as ""Ho Chi Kuei"" (Woman Warrior 182) ("Kuei"

meaning ghost). It is typical of the misunderstanding between the generations in Woman Warrior that the narrator expects to find a malicious translation of the phrase used by the Chinese born generations. The word "kuei/ghost" connotes distance and threat to the narrator. Ironically, the closest definition she can find in a dictionary for the phrase is the optimistic phrase "Good Foundation Ghost" (Woman Warrior 182).

Brave Orchid's account of her struggle and defeat of ghosts in China illustrates the difference between Chinese ghost constructs and those Brave Orchid recognises in the United States. Brave Orchid offers the narrator a "magic realist" tale as a strategy for survival for overcoming fear. She tells the narrator that while studying in a Chinese medical college she was determined to prove her superiority to the students who were afraid by enduring a night in a haunted room and driving out the ghost. Gayle K. Fujita Sato comments that by telling that tale Brave Orchid is able to "show off" her own reality and takes pleasure in being able to master the unknown (204). However, rather than inspiring the narrator, the tale increases her fear of China due to its unfamiliarity: "I did not want to go where the ghosts took shapes nothing like our own" (Woman Warrior 92). Amy Tan's character Lena St Clair has a similar fear of the unknown to Woman Warrior's narrator due to the ghost tales she is told as a child by a mother who is just as intractable as Brave Orchid. After being told that her great-grandfather died in the embrace of the ghost of a man whom he killed and who returned to take him into death, Lena is reprimanded for being "morbid" by asking questions. She comments to herself that "I always thought it mattered, to know what is the worst possible thing that can happen to you, to know how you can avoid it, to not be drawn by the magic of the

unspeakable" (Tan 103).

Brave Orchid's pride at battling ghosts is also infused with nostalgia since her life in the United States is entirely filled with the unfamiliar. In fact it is her constant recognition of ghosts in the United States that influences the young narrator to recognise the Chinese American construct of ghosts. The young narrator is overwhelmed by what she finds unfamiliar and explains: "Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe" (Woman Warrior 90/91). It is only when the narrator leaves home, and thus the direct influence of her mother and Chinese American community, that she is able to lose her fear of unknown people and claims, "I've found some places in this country that are ghost free" (Woman Warrior 101).

Elaine H. Kim recognises that the dilemma which the narrator faces in her daily life regarding her fear of the unfamiliar includes China and also the references to China by her family which punctuate her life:

> The American-born Chinese is left with feeling familiar with and at the same time uninformed about China. What she commands is a view of China as she pieces it together from what her parents and other immigrants tell or fail to tell her. (200)

Considering that the narrator received most of her information from her mother's magic realist tales, the question of the authenticity of the information fuels her fear of the unfamiliar. In this sense the magic realist narratives can be subject to criticism as adding

considerably to an already complex and unnerving circumstance and failing to help clarify it.

Brave Orchid is a magic realist who does not distinguish between fiction and reality, or the fantastical and ordinary in her stories. The narrator's confusion is therefore due to her mother's constant use of fictional stories to inform her daughter about reality: "...[stories] to grow up on" (Woman Warrior 13). The narrator on the other hand struggles, in an eventually aborted attempt, to discern what is "real". When the pressure of confusion finally becomes too much to suppress, the narrator angrily accuses her mother, "You lie with stories" (Woman Warrior 180). The mother's stories involve episodes in her own earlier life in China, or from Chinese mythology, which are embellished and often fantastical yet told to her daughter as though they are linked to the girl's present Californian reality. For instance, Brave Orchid tells ghost tales of her experiences as a medical woman in China; she prides herself on her knowledge of different types of ghosts, categorising them in a scientific manner: "'Oh, no. A Sitting Ghost,' she thought" (Woman Warrior 67). Thus Brave Orchid employs a magic realist narrative technique which combines a discussion of "magical" phenomena with a "realistic" scientific discourse. For example the narrator, noticing her mother's skill at categorising ghosts, comments that she is "good at naming" (Woman Warrior 64).

The narrator attempts to rationalize the phenomena that her mother describes in logical terms, so that at first she considers the reason why her mother's medical colleagues all learnt magic. She notes the need for doctors like her mother to cater for superstition in

Chinese villages during the early part of the twentieth century: "These young women, who would have to back up their science with magical spells should their patients be disappointed and not get well...." (Woman Warrior 72). However, the narrator herself reacts emotionally against her own use of logic claiming that it submerges beauty: "Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways" (Woman Warrior 182). The image of a covering of concrete also refers the reader back to the narrator's realisation that there is no escape from the supernatural through science: "Medical science does not seal the earth, whose nether creatures seep out..." (Woman Warrior 79).

Brave Orchid's use of oral story telling techniques, "talk story" (re-telling stories differently each time), adds to the confusion caused by the magic realism of the mother's tales. Although I have shown this technique to be liberating in the context of Beloved, and will discuss it positively in this chapter, the young and confused narrator finds the unfixed and non-factual way in which the events are reported is problematic. For instance, the narrator is unsure whether or not her mother had any children in China, but vaguely recalls her mother telling such a story. However, when the narrator questions her mother about them she denies the story saying, "You're always believing talk-story" (Woman Warrior 162).

A further problem related to oral narrative technique which is voiced by the narrator is the dependence on the memory of the listener for the durability of the story. The narrator finds that she cannot retain an accurate memory of her mother's stories. While narrating her mother's magic realist ghost tale she qualifies the accuracy of her

narration: "I think my mother said..." (Woman Warrior 72). In fact, the narrator admits to the reader that her own memories are also inaccurate. By commenting on her own narration she draws the reader's attention to her unreliability, wondering, "But how can I have that memory when I couldn't talk? My mother says that we, like the ghosts, have no memories" (Woman Warrior 151).

Furthermore, while story-telling in Beloved provides Denver with the means to internalise the stories from her past, the narrator in The Woman Warrior finds that her unreliable memory gives her relief from remembering the horror of some of the stories she is told. For instance, Brave Orchid describes a monkey feast to the narrator who later questions: "Did she say, 'The people laughed at the monkey screaming?'" (Woman Warrior 86). In this sense the lack of fixity in oral narrative technique provides a means for the reader to censor and block those elements they do not wish to accept.

As a result of her mother's occasional narratorial unreliability, the narrator questions each of Brave Orchid's stories. In fact, her unreliability creates added anxiety for the narrator who feels she doubts everything her mother says, although she wishes to be guided by it. For instance, her mother claims to have been wearing a silk dress when she returned to her village after graduating, but the narrator questions this as she knows that at that time women were allocated practical uniform clothing by the Chinese communist authorities (Woman Warrior 73). However, this is simply another misunderstanding by the narrator who fails to realise that her mother is referring to a pre-communist time. Furthermore, the narrator's mistake is left uncorrected in the text, deliberately

misleading the reader, who shares the narrator's confusion.

Probably the most confusing aspects of all however, are Brave Orchid's contradictory attitudes which determine the stories she tells. It has often been noted by critics that the narrator and mother do not understand one another and that this creates a tension between them. This is interpreted by critics such as Thomas Couser, who identifies the narrator's family circumstances as "bi-cultural" and a "double bondage" (235), as a tension caused by the mother's insistence on the American Chinese narrator retaining her Chinese culture. Even David Leiwei Li who sees the narrator adopt a cross-cultural position, considers her home life with her mother to commence in bi-culturalism, so that she moves from "a hyphenated Chinese-American into a non-hyphenated Chinese American, and a no name woman into the Woman Warrior" (511).

I contend that these interpretations wrongly assume that Chinese and American cultures constitute two clearly defined and oppositional cultures even within the United States. In challenging these readings of the text I argue that the tension between the mother and daughter is not a result of her mother's supposed insistence on the narrator retaining Chinese culture. In fact, Brave Orchid is confused by her own cross-cultural context. She wishes her daughter to understand her Chinese American cultural context and to create a "good foundation" for the American Chinese community. Yet at the same time the mother is painfully aware that by not imposing her pre-immigration Chinese culture onto her daughter she relinquishes a mutual cultural understanding with her. The pain and fear which this choice causes Brave Orchid, her lack of understanding of dominant

American culture, and a willingness to maintain the aspects she has retained of her own Chinese culture, create for Brave Orchid daily ambiguities in her mothering strategies.

My argument is that Brave Orchid recognises that her new cultural context is undefined and demands new ways of acting. She tells the narrator that, "things are different in this ghost country" (Woman Warrior 148). However, she is unsure of what those new ways of acting are, and wishes to maintain some aspects from Chinese tradition. For instance, Brave Orchid did not explain customs which she wishes to keep but does not expect her children to observe and emulate. The narrator, on the other hand, notices the ceremonies and feels pressure to understand and emulate them. In addition she misinterprets the silence surrounding the act to be indicative of a secret. She complains, "How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony..." (Woman Warrior 166).

The most striking attempt by Brave Orchid to help the narrator's cultural assimilation is her act of cutting the narrator's tongue loose to give her ease in languages other than Chinese. The narrator, who finds difficulty speaking, is confused by her mother's act which she considers to have hampered her speech. She tries to explain it in terms of Chinese customs by asking other Chinese American children if their mothers had done the same (Woman Warrior 148). Realising it was a unique act by her mother she is confused and comments, "Sometimes I was very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act on me. At other times I was terrified..." (Woman Warrior 148).

Although I have emphasised the importance of the mother's confused psychology as a source of confusion for the narrator, I do not intend to ignore the cultural and communal influences upon her. Her community and the Chinese American culture around her replicate her mother's ambiguous attitude towards the young generation. The narrator recognises a generational separation and a silence concerning her cultural and family history due to the ambiguous attitude of the older generation. She comments:

> They must try to confuse their off-spring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways--always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable. (Woman Warrior 13)

Silence and ambiguity surround Chinese American cultural history, making it inaccessible to the younger generations. Facts do exist in connection with the narrator's community but these facts are constantly hidden from her, as in the taboo surrounding the story of the narrator's ostracised aunt "No Name Woman". The text begins with Brave Orchid's words concerning the story: "'You must not tell anyone', my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (Woman Warrior 11).

Echoing the sinister and ironic statement in Morrison's Beloved, "This is not a story to pass on" (275), the mother's warning is simultaneously sinister, ironic and subversive and leaves the narrator in a typical state of confusion. As Shirley Geok Lin-Lim notes, Brave Orchid, by telling the story of the aunt, ironically breaks the injunction for silence ("Tradition" 260). This could be interpreted as a subversive act and yet at the same time she reiterates the community's moral code enforcing the silence.

The effect of Brave Orchid's ambiguous attitude towards the story makes the narrator curious about her aunt's life. She attempts to imagine the aunt's motivation and character and by doing so constructs the image of a woman with whom the narrator feels affinity. The narrator in fact imagines the woman as a victim of the community in which she lives. She considers the injustice that the punishment might have been instigated by the father of her child (Woman Warrior 14). The narrator then finds herself, again, in a dilemma which I will argue is central to the text. Having created an affiliation with the aunt through imagining her story, the narrator consequently feels uneasy, knowing that by obeying her family and maintaining the silence she will be contributing to her aunt's punishment: "They want me to participate in her punishment. And I have" (Woman Warrior 22). Yet, simultaneously she imagines that breaking the silence would cause her father "mysterious harm" (Woman Warrior 22). The narrator is thus forced to choose between her confused and silent loyalty towards her family and community and finding a means of survival outside her community so that she may follow her individual sense of justice, her need to express herself in words, and loyalty to her own constructed affiliations.

The autobiographical aspects of The Woman Warrior necessitate the narrator "telling" her family's stories. Yet the confusion caused by the impact of the constant ambiguity generated by what she is told (through the medium of magic realist narratives) and what she is impelled to express in words must be negotiated. Magic realism in The Woman Warrior is therefore an integral part of the construction of the central dilemma of erasure which lies at the heart of the narrator's attempts to define a self identity

consistent with the influences from her cross-cultural Chinese Californian existence. Yet the narrator's desire to express herself in her cultural context necessitates the expression of the confusion and ambivalence towards the concepts of the "real" and the "fake". The very act of writing the text demands a negotiation by the narrator of the attitudes towards magic realism and its relationship to Chinese American culture.

III. Creating One's Self in Words

In this section of the chapter I will illustrate how the narrator of The Woman Warrior learns to negotiate the dilemmas generated by the ambiguities and magic realism of the stories that she is told by her mother "to grow up on".

To negotiate the dilemmas she faces, the narrator draws on her mother's narrative skills of magic realism, improvisation and oral technique, and manipulates them to create a unique and personal form of narrative with which to negotiate the dilemmas that problematise her attempts at self expression. Through this personal form of articulation she creates her own contribution to cultural memory. Thus the confusion which her mother's narrative methods have created is manipulated as a form of protection for her mother's community, while still creating a space for the expression of her cross-cultural memory.

The primary dilemma which the narrator must negotiate is the threat to her mother's community caused by the narrator's desire to break its imposed silences. By combining her mother's methods of ambiguous narration and using her own written skills, the narrator finds a method of breaking the silence without needing to establish facts which could be used against the Chinese American community. Shirley Geok-lin Lim claims that The Woman Warrior is an: "'...over-written' text in which the written language figures as significantly as, if not more than, the subject matter" ("Tradition" 253). While I contend that the subject matter is of equal value in the text as the language in which

it is expressed, Lim's identification of the text as "over-written" is accurate and useful since the use of the written word by the narrator is an integral part of the creation of the identity of the narrator. She is only once referred to indirectly in the text, through her own narration. She is identified by her Aunt Moon Orchid as the girl whose name sounds like ink in Chinese and who, when called, appears covered in ink (Woman Warrior 120). The act of writing is therefore both indicated in her name and inscribed on her body and is constituted in the text as a self-conscious act which is directly linked to her identity.

The critic King-Kok Cheung also notes that the act of writing is a brave act when the writer has such a history of in-expression: "For someone besieged by silence, self expression is a heroic act, an offensive with verbal artillery" (172). This military metaphor reflects Hong Kingston's conflation of two legends to link the narrator's work with writing and bravery: the legend of the Woman Warrior, Fa Mu Lan, and of Yueh Fei (Cheung 177). Fa Mu Lan is a character who bravely defies the gender codes of her society by enlisting in the army in place of her ageing father, and becoming a renowned warrior (Ling 158). Yueh Fei, on the other hand, was a male legendary figure who had words tattooed onto his back with a knife by his parents so that when he went to avenge his family, even if he was killed his body would tell their story (Cheung 177).

The narrator has the characteristics of the woman warrior with the words of revenge inscribed on her back like those of Yueh Fei: "What we have in common are the words on our backs" (53). Although there is nothing to indicate that the narrator actually does

have writing on her back, she does use her body as a weapon by using the physical nature of hand-writing to inscribe her identity and existence. Furthermore, since the narrator is writing a form of autobiography, the very words themselves can be regarded as the creation of physical and tangible marks of existence.

The narrator notes that, "the idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime'.... The reporting is the vengeance...." (Woman Warrior 53). The connection of the narrator to Yueh Fei and Fa Mu Lan is thus a connection between flaunting gender roles, battle and revenge, and the physicality of words. The narrator, by creating physical marks of existence is avenging the denial of the existence of Chinese American women by dominant American culture and the misogynistic elements of Chinese American culture. In addition the narrator appears to gain reassurance from some written texts. She uses dictionaries to provide definite meanings to words, to find out if the words are harmful: "I like to look up a troublesome, shameful thing and say, 'Oh, is that all?'" (Woman Warrior 182).

However, the text although written, does not prioritise written language over spoken. In fact written language is problematised in the text. The narrator studies social and anthropological texts to aid her understanding of her Chinese cultural background. What she finds is that the books are filled with records which she does not recognise: "I read in an anthropology book that Chinese say, 'Girls are necessary too'; I have never heard the Chinese I know make this concession" (Woman Warrior 53). The narrator thereby recognises the problems involved by the act of writing as opposed to speaking, so that

what is written becomes permanently recorded and establishes a powerful link in the text between written language and stereotypes.

Although Said is concerned primarily with the Middle East his theory of orientalism reveals a similar concern for the collusion between stereotypes and writing. Since, according to Said, orientalism attempts to fix subjects in time and character, writing becomes its accomplice, providing a means of permanently recording stereotypes. This is what Said calls the orientalist's "textual attitude" (92). He notes that "It seems a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with humans" (Said 93). This attitude is also what Trinh T. Minh-ha recognises as one of the problems of the discipline of anthropology. She claims that it often attempts to speak from a highly western ideological stance and yet attempts to present itself as "nature's exact, unmisted reflection" (53). Significantly, Moon Orchid's husband who has become a successful American doctor, tells his newly arrived Chinese wife and sister; "You became people in a book I had read a long time ago" (Woman Warrior 139). This comment could simply be interpreted to indicate the doctor's physical and emotional remoteness from China. On the other hand, it is relevant that the doctor admits that he has become an entirely different person, claiming to have become an "American" (Woman Warrior 138). This comment is significant in terms of dominant American attitudes towards Chinese immigrants, the implication being that assimilation into dominant American culture (distinct from Chinese American culture) of a Chinese immigrant involves the danger of accepting the racist premises of that culture against oneself and family.

When attempting to construct her own versions of the tales, Hong Kingston is not concerned with their realism but with their usefulness. This signals her difference of approach to that of Frank Chin. Whilst Chin insists Chinese Americans accept an unproblematised Chinese culture, Hong Kingston prefers to take that which she needs to survive in her difficult cross-cultural circumstances. For example, referring to the story of No Name Woman, the narrator comments: "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (Woman Warrior 16). However, as I have already demonstrated, the narrator's working material is also limited to what she has been told and what she can remember. Where neither form of information exists, the narrator constructs a scenario which she feels is most appropriate. Thus, while improvising a background to the story of No Name Woman she reflects: "Imagining her free with sex doesn't fit though. I don't know any women like that, or men either" (Woman Warrior 16).

The most important oral source for the narrator is the legend of Fa Mu Lan, The Woman Warrior, which is passed on orally to the narrator from her mother. She only remembers it in the form of a song recalled whilst she is trying to piece together and create her own story: "I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind" (Woman Warrior 26). The narrator's use of the mother's tale demonstrates the narrator's learning process concerning the value of using magic realism as a narrative device. Cheung eloquently expresses this, noting that;

> As a child Maxine resents her mother's inconsistency and conflation of fact and fancy, insufficiently aware how the eloquent and valiant Brave Orchid is

inspiring her; as a writer Maxine herself resorts to their conflation as a narrative technique. (173)

Thus, in the section "White Tigers", the narrator creates her own magical and feminist version of the legend of The Woman Warrior. She improvises and alters the stories to generate "ancestral help" (in order to construct her own cultural memory) and projects herself into a fictional space in which she takes on the persona of the legendary figure. The gradual entry into the telling of the legend is foregrounded through stages of association for the narrator with the character of the Woman Warrior. At first she remembers her mother telling the legend and then adopts the modal case, reporting what "would" happen to her if she were the Woman Warrior. There is a break in the text of several blank lines as the narrative moves into a fantasy narrated in the past tense in which the narrator does not distinguish between herself and the Woman Warrior.

"White Tigers" is not written initially as a magic realist narrative, illustrated by the actual break on the page, between the tale and the narrator's every day life. The narrator also distinguishes between "real life" and her imaginings; for instance, in her fantasy she is asked by her guardians if she has eaten and she replies with an answer appropriate to Chinese etiquette. Yet, she is aware of the inconsistency of this answer with her own character and makes an aside to the reader; "('No, I haven't', I would have said in real life, mad at the Chinese for lying so much. '.... I like chocolate chip cookies')" (Woman Warrior 26).

However, the narrator's tale of Fa Mu Lan gradually incorporates magic realism as a narrative mode. As the narrator becomes more involved in her fantasy and she becomes the character of the Woman Warrior, her "real" American life is no longer referred to. The narrator thus immerses herself in the narrative of the legend of Fa Mu Lan, and assumes its reality. In the role of the Woman Warrior, she comments on the fantastical meta-narratives of her tale. Regarding the plausibility of the existence of a mythical amazonian witch tribe, the Woman Warrior comments: "I myself never encountered such women and could not vouch for their reality" (Woman Warrior 47). In this sense the meta-narrative is judged on its plausibility in comparison with the narrative of the legendary figure Fa Mu Lan, which illustrates that the narrative device of magic realism can be successfully incorporated into a fantasy within a text.

The narrator's version of the tale of Fa Mu Lan is also incorporated into the main text using the device of magic realism. Moon Orchid is reported as saying that Fa Mu Lan "really existed" (Woman Warrior 111). However, the narrator does not include the traditional version of the legend and consequently the "magical" version of the story is the one which the naive reader (without prior knowledge about the traditional Chinese legend) is persuaded to believe.

It is this aspect of The Woman Warrior to which Frank Chin most objects. Hong Kingston's adaptation of the chant of Fa Mu Lan is considered by him to be "fake" and a distortion of the true Chinese myth of Fa Mu Lan which informs Chinese notions of marriage. Chin's criticisms could also be viewed as those belonging to a Chinese

American who is concerned with differentiating between the real and the fake, in the same way as Hong Kingston's narrator. However, there is also an implication in Chin's criticisms that he assumes that the reader will seek a literal and unquestioning acceptance of the reality of the tales in the same way that the child narrator wishes to believe her mother's versions of tales. I would challenge the assumption that the reader is willing to accept that all fiction is true, particularly in the light of the emphasis placed in the text on the unreliability of the narrator and her use of magic realist narratives.

The narrator also recognises that the magic realist and fantastical elements of her story provide her with a fictional space in which to create her own ideal feminist mythological figure. The narrator makes feminist alterations to create a legend which affords her ancestral help in the battle against the misogyny which surrounds her. For instance, the narrator dismisses the taboo of menstruation in her legend; thus the Woman Warrior is encouraged by her guardians not to use her powers to stop her menstrual flow and finds that even when she is bleeding she is able to carry on her training as a warrior as normal (Woman Warrior 35).

The most obvious feminist device utilised is the transformation of Yueh Fei from a male to a female character. The effect of this is that the Woman Warrior, and the female narrator by extension, are, like Yueh Fei, inscribed with their ancestral history on their backs. In fact, the revenge that the Woman Warrior takes against the local corrupt baron is intensified by the shock that the baron feels when he is revenged by a woman. The narrator imagines the baron's fumbled response to his female avenger: "Then--heaven

help him--he tried to be charming, to appeal to me man to man" (Woman Warrior 45). Robert G Lee notes that the baron's shock is not merely the shock of the unexpected, but of the shattering of gender roles; in effect, the words on the Woman Warrior's back indicate that she is a woman and a bearer of history. Even the narrator speaking as the Woman Warrior notes that her body is incongruously inscribed with both male and female gendered attributes: "Now when I was naked, I was a strange human being indeed--words carved on my back and the baby large in front" (Woman Warrior 42). I would add that although women have been long recognised as the bearers of cultural oral history, the bearers of written history have been male gendered. The fact that the historical words are written on her pregnant body adds to her specifically female revolutionary power.

The narrator imagines herself as the Woman Warrior with specifically female characteristics. Thus the narrator creates a legendary figure who is simultaneously free to adopt male gender roles while maintaining female physical attributes and female characteristics of her choice. For instance, she hides and protects her baby under her armour while she goes into battle. Ironically, her increased size is considered to be an indication of her increased physical strength and hence her "masculinity" (Woman Warrior 42). The female characteristics which she chooses to maintain are connected with notions of creativity, equality and sensitivity towards other women. The Woman Warrior's tent becomes her female refuge where she is able to walk naked, to meet her husband and to indulge in traditional mothering. In this private place her attire (or lack of attire) acts as an assertion of her femaleness. When not displaying her naked,

undeniably female, body, she wears traditional female attire such as a sling in which to carry her baby. The Woman Warrior uses luxurious fabrics and rich colours to make this sling with artistry and creativity, and makes it complete with "housewife pockets" and good luck symbols (Woman Warrior 43).

Although the narrator describes the Woman Warrior as a ruthless fighter, she is also nurturing, which is a characteristic traditionally gendered female. She claims "I inspired my army, and I fed them" (Woman Warrior 40). She also inspires her army through creative activities which are often associated with mothering; for instance, she sings to her army at night, which, as an image, is reminiscent of Brave Orchid singing the chant of Fa Mu Lan to the narrator and of the final story in the text of Ts'ai Yen: "At night I sang to them glorious songs that came out of the sky and into my head" (Woman Warrior 40).

The Woman Warrior, although living in a male community, is mindful of the need to protect women; she insists that her army do not rape or steal, but, she is aware that her exploits killing men are harmful to women. After her first killing, the Woman Warrior feels sympathy for her victim's wives. Her attention is transfixed by the wives as she notes: "They were two sisters, two tiny fairies against the sky, widows from now on" (Woman Warrior 41). However, the Woman Warrior does not stop killing or lose her ruthlessness despite recognising the harm she causes (the significance of this will emerge later).

Considering the shattering of gender roles in terms of revolution and struggle is useful for the analysis of The Woman Warrior. The narrator emphasises the threat from male authority which the Woman Warrior faces: "Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations" (Woman Warrior 44). Amy Ling notes that Chinese women in history who disguised themselves as warriors were usually sent back to the women's quarters to enact women's roles rather than be executed (9). Although Hong Kingston's text is historically inaccurate, the severity of the punishment that she portrays is an indication of the extremes of misogyny which the narrator believes the Chinese men were historically capable, and which is consistent with the tradition of misogyny which she witnesses in her life.

This draws attention to the most contentious aspect of Hong Kingston's text. Frank Chin's criticisms of Hong Kingston focus on her use of the tale to reveal Chinese misogyny. He claims that:

> She takes Fa Mulan, turns her into a champion of Chinese feminism and an inspiration to Chinese American girls to dump the Chinese race and make for white universitality. (27)

Whilst Hong Kingston's exaggeration of the punishment for female-to-male cross-dressing and gender role-reversal is confrontational towards Chinese men, the tradition of misogyny which informs her exaggeration is borne out by other Chinese women writers. Amy Ling, for instance, begins her critical study of Chinese diasporic women

writers by claiming that the Confucian tradition establishes women as slaves, or even sub-humans (3). Chin's unease with these accusations is understandable and can be seen as a defense of his male Chinese identity, but there is an element of cultural purism in his criticisms of Hong Kingston in relation to her Americanization of the Chinese legend of Fa Mu Lan.

Chin, Chan et al. claim that "..we have to confront the real Fa Mulan..." (Chan et al. xiii) and appear resistant to the cross-cultural or feminist adaptation of the traditions. In Chin's essay "Come All Ye Asian American Writers" he attacks Hong Kingston and Amy Tan by announcing:

> ...to legitimize their faking, they have to fake all of Asian American history and literature, and argue that the immigrants who settled and established Chinese America lost touch with Chinese culture and that a family memory combined with new experiences produced new versions of these traditional stories. (3)

It appears to me that Chin could be accused of perpetuating a stereotypical and falsely conflictual notion of Chinese Americans exemplified by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's complaint that:

> ...Asian American writers, however rooted on this land they or their families may have been, tend to be regarded as direct transplants from Asia or as custodians of an esoteric subculture. (Reading Asian American Literatures 9)

Chin's position appears to be a desire to hold Chinese tradition in stasis by insisting that

it is not adapted. This has resonance with the Orientalist view identified by Said that the "Orient" is an unchanging a historical realm (99). Hong Kingston's adaptation of the Fa Mu Lan legend and her attack on a Chinese tradition of misogyny, on the other hand, has more resonance with recent Chinese history. Amy Ling acknowledges that the Fa Mu Lan of whom the chant is told (sometimes called Hua Mulan) was a historical figure living around AD500, although she has had several counterparts throughout Chinese history. In this century Kuo Chung-jing most notably disguised herself as a warrior in order to fight for the People's Liberation Army and was given the highest military award (Ling 9); women were involved in fighting and encouraged to fight for the communists in large numbers. During this time campaigns for women's rights were given high priority by Mao Tse-tung (Ibid. 7). In the 1960s and 1970s women were encouraged to take part in the official policy of the revolutionary and purifying action of "speaking bitterness" against patriarchy (Chow 18). What I suggest is that Hong Kingston is carrying out this contemporary Chinese act of speaking bitterness and adapting the woman warrior legend to battle against patriarchy in her contemporary time.

One of the most important feminist aspects of the stories is that the narrator inherits them from her mother. The effect of this is that by incorporating them into her personal history the narrator is creating a specifically feminist cultural history. The articulation of this history in writing is an act of resistance against the denial of the history of Chinese American women by dominant American culture and Chinese American culture, which combines Confucian misogyny and the misogyny of American patriarchal culture. Another effect of this is that the text is strongly influenced by the

fact that the narrator inherits the stories from her mother through the oral tradition of talk-story. As I have discussed in relation to Beloved, one of the most important features of oral tradition for feminist writers is its communal and multi-voiced nature.

One of the central dilemmas which the narrator faces in the text is the choice either to betray her community for the sake of her own individual expression of identity, or to remain within the community and to stifle her desire to speak out. Through inheriting and manipulating talk-stories to produce her own stories with which to construct her identity, the narrator discovers that she is able to express her self without separating herself from her community. In fact, by retelling the stories, she contributes to the continuation of her community's cultural identity, and in accordance with the tradition, recreates her own unique versions of the stories. Ironically, the act of appropriating the stories with which her mother confuses and stultifies the narrator, gives the narrator the very opportunity which she was seeking; to express an alternative and specifically feminist Chinese American cultural identity.

The communal aspect of the text is also indicated by its multi-vocality. The narrator uses two narrative modes: first person and third person narrative voices. A first person narrator is predominantly used in the text. However, substantial sections of the book consist of dialogue in speech marks. Although this dialogue is narrated by the first person narrator, the effect is that a space for the direct voice of the narrator's mother is provided. For instance, the book opens with her mother's world and other than the statement, "...my mother said..." (Woman Warrior 11), the narrator does not address

herself to the reader until the third page of the novel. The second narrative voice in the text is an omniscient narrator who predominantly expresses the perspective of Brave Orchid and her sister, Moon Orchid. This narrative voice allows Hong Kingston to provide the impression of an exterior view of herself and to imagine the thoughts of her mother and aunt. For instance, the narrator reports that Brave Orchid thinks, "Her American children had no feelings and no memory" (Woman Warrior 107). Moon Orchid provides the only description of the narrator in the text, "There was indeed an oldest girl who was absent-minded and messy" (Woman Warrior 120).

The inclusion of a narrative voice in the third person is unusual in a text containing autobiographical elements in which one expects the authorial voice in the first person to dominate the text, but it provides a communal aspect to the text. However, the third person narrative is later revealed to have been an unreliable fictional reconstruction of events indirectly reported to the first person narrator. The narrator admits her unreliability noting that "...one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs" (Woman Warrior 147).

Despite her centrality to the text, Brave Orchid does not have a direct narrative voice, even though she contributes the majority of the dialogue and oral stories upon which the text is based. However, since her influence in the text is so strong, it is difficult to isolate her stories, indirectly narrated, from those of the narrator. The telling of the story of Ts'ai Yen at the end of the novel is indicative of this inter-relatedness. Before telling

the tale of Ts'ai Yen the narrator concedes that it has been told to her by the mother and that she has altered it so that, in fact, "The beginning is hers, the ending is mine" (Woman Warrior 184).

The telling of the story of Ts'ai Yen thus illustrates the successful negotiation of the primary dilemma in the text, which is the disharmony between the mother and daughter. In fact this final story can be regarded as the narrator's "coming of age". Before telling the story she informs the reader: "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I *also* am a story-talker" (Woman Warrior 184). By telling the story in a double-voiced narrative with her mother, the narrator is finally able to overcome the stultifying experiences of her young life, and join with her mother in a creative act.

The legend of Ts'ai Yen is a story of cross-cultural negotiation and reconciliation through creativity which can be read as an analogy for the reconciliation of the relationship between the two story tellers: Brave Orchid and the narrator. In brief, Ts'ai Yen is a Chinese woman who is captured by barbarians, bears two children by their tribal chief, eventually comes to understand and participate in the music but not the language of the barbarians, and on returning to her Chinese community, is able to reconstruct the songs for the Chinese to hear.

The story of Ts'ai Yen could be read as an analogy for Brave Orchid's experience amongst Americans--Moon Orchid calls Americans "savages" (Woman Warrior 123).

Interpreted in this manner Brave Orchid's difficulty in adjusting to the complexities of her cross-cultural American life and the pain of not being able to communicate fully with her children due to their different cultural circumstance, is paralleled in Ts'ai Yen's isolation from the Barbarian tribe with which she lives. Ts'ai Yen eventually comes to understand the Barbarian music in her own cultural terms, and sings in Chinese to accompany the Barbarian flutes. By this means her children then begin to understand what she is expressing through the music despite their incomprehension of Chinese: "Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger" (Woman Warrior 186). In parallel, Brave Orchid makes a gesture of "belonging" in the United States when she tells the narrator that she has decided not to go back to China, which prompts the narrator to ask her "Will American flowers smell good now?" (Woman Warrior 99). In addition, the narrator's use of Brave Orchid's talk-story and narrative methods to create her own story-telling technique is indicative of Brave Orchid's daughter's increasing understanding of her mother's circumstances.

Concerning the final story Cheung notes, "As the lyrical ending intimates, Maxine [the narrator] has worked the discords of her life into a song" (Ibid. 183). His comment is supported by the fact that parts of the story can be read as an analogy for the narrator's conflict and eventual reconciliation with her mother and community. Ts'ai Yen's incomprehensibility to the Barbarians is comparable with the narrator's muteness during her first years at English speaking school. The narrator's eventual move outside her Chinese American community into a more multi-cultural environment in the United

States, which she claims is "ghost-free" (Woman Warrior 101), is also equivalent to Ts'ai Yen's move into a Barbarian environment with which she eventually comes to terms.

The narrator's change of attitude towards conflict with her Chinese American culture is illustrated analogically by Ts'ai Yen's reluctance to fight, in contrast to the bloodthirsty Woman Warrior; "... Ts'ai Yen fought desultorily when the fighting was at a distance, and she cut down anyone in her path during the madness of close combat" (Woman Warrior 185). The analogy suggests that the narrator has shifted from her character as the Woman Warrior, in which her existence was determined by her fighting for revenge, to sympathy with Ts'ai Yen's reluctance to harm anyone unless in self defence.

Thus the reconciliation of the narrator to her community is illustrated both analogically, by the content of Ts'ai Yen story, and by the telling of the story by the narrator. Ts'ai Yen returns home to her Chinese community after several years living amongst Barbarians to sing her Barbarian songs in Chinese using Chinese accompanying instruments (Woman Warrior 186). The narrator similarly leaves her Chinese American community in Stockton to gain a new way to view the world (Woman Warrior 182). Although the narrator, unlike the Woman Warrior and Ts'ai Yen, does not return permanently to live in her original Chinese community, she places herself in her own constructed Chinese American community by using the Ts'ai Yen story and other Chinese stories to figure her writing. However, the narrator's stories are equally as

untraditionally Chinese as Ts'ai Yen's. The narrator comments that Ts'ai Yen's songs "translated well" (Woman Warrior 186) from Barbarian culture into Chinese culture, and, following the analogy, it is thus expected that the narrator's stories will translate well from American born Chinese American culture into first generation immigrant Chinese American culture. As Lim claims, the narrator can be said to be ""talking-back" to the mother culture" ("Tradition" 263).

By drawing the analogical comparison between the story of Ts'ai Yen and The Woman Warrior, the value of the narrator's use of oral tradition as a means of placing oneself in a community, that is to construct a cultural identity, is emphasised. G Thomas Couser claims that:

> Kingston attempts in her text...to recall her own spirit from the double-bondage of her childhood--and thus to place herself in her past--by chanting her descent line in a deliberately improvisational and bicultural fashion. (235)[15]

Although Couser uses the phrase "chanting a descent line" to refer to the narrator, in fact the phrase in the text refers to Brave Orchid's request to her fellow students to call her home by improvising a descent line after the occasion of her battle with the ghost

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[15] I am using Couser's quotation despite that fact that I do not agree with the interpretation of the text inferred by Couser's vocabulary. He infers a binary opposition between the narrator's Chinese and American cultures which I would counter with the claim that she has a complex, cross-cultural experience in which the boundaries between what is Chinese, what is Chinese American and what is dominant American are not defined. I have already noted my contention in relation to identification of Hong Kingston as the narrator.

(Woman Warrior 66). This demand by Brave Orchid as an act of self identification is one of the primary influences on the creative act of self identification by the narrator through writing. It illustrates that, as I have argued, Brave Orchid is as dislocated from her culture as the narrator is from hers, and also needs to resort to improvisation to maintain a sense of cultural memory. The narrator retells Brave Orchid's tale, noting the improvised and female nature of the descent line which is created. Rather than using her own family history, the women address Brave Orchid using her present circumstance and the women who surround her to provide her cultural memory:

> These strangers had to make her come back to them. They called out their own names, women's pretty names...horizontal names of one generation. They pieced together new directions, and my mother's spirit followed them instead of the old footprints. (Woman Warrior 73)

What I suggest is that the narrator creates an identity for herself which can be regarded as a later day equivalent to the "paper sons" identity as used by Chinese immigrants to pass the immigration authority's tests. This "paper" identity is both a written (therefore permanently recorded) and a fictional construction from cultural history, which through its ambiguity defies the detection of facts and truth. This provides the narrator with a means to negotiate her central dilemma; that her need to break her community's silence and create an identity for herself also opens the community to the threat of erasure by deportation by providing the United States immigration officials with information.

Hong Kingston uses a similar method in Tripmaster Monkey in which Wittman Ah Sing

chants (or rather rants) his own descent line by holding a community play in Chinatown which he narrates. The play is excessive to the point of being magical. At the chaotic climax of the play there are gunslingers, exploding barrels, juggernauts and "Ten thousand San Franciscans, armed with knives and shouting" amongst others (Tripmaster Monkey 301). Eventually the theatre appears to catch fire but the narrator undermines the magic of the excess by admitting later that "Of course, Wittman Ah Sing didn't really burn down the Association house and theater. It was an illusion of fire" (Tripmaster 305). The narrator therefore emphasises her own unreliability and disrupts the reader's acceptance of the reality s/he is offered. By constructing an identity which cannot be categorised as either entirely fictional or real, and maintaining ambiguity surrounding these elements of her stories, Hong Kingston thus defies the construction of facts and erases the threat of exposure to the immigration authorities.

Hong Kingston's writing can be seen in a literary context to be improvising a tradition of Chinese American women's writing. Hong Kingston admits that Jade Snow Wong's Fifth Chinese Daughter was the only Chinese American text that she had read prior to writing The Woman Warrior (Ling 120). Although both texts by Chinese American women can be considered to be autobiographical in part, the dissimilarities between the texts are striking. Wong's text attempts to create a "true" portrayal of her "ethnic" life, whereas Hong Kingston's text avoids absolutes. Most importantly, Wong is often criticised (see Kim 59-71) for creating a narrator to act as "native guide" for the reader and thereby exoticising the Chinese American community (Kim 61). For instance, she explains the importance of the rituals involved in the Moon festival: "Another festival

which was traditional with the Chinese and therefore with the Wong family was the Moon festival...." (Fifth Chinese Daughter 42). In fact, Wong was so successful in this attempt that she acted as the representative of Chinese Americans, and even gave lecture tours explaining their culture and community (Kim 60). In contrast as Lim notes, The Woman Warrior defies any wish that the reader may attempt to use the text or the narrator as a "native guide":

> ...the blurring of boundaries between fact and fantasy, history and myth, personal story and public document...casts doubt rightfully on attempts to present it as accurate Chinese American social history. ("Tradition" 253)

The theatrical event in Tripmaster Monkey is also a form of cross-cultural story-telling which expresses the ambivalence of Chinese American identity. Like Woman Warrior, Tripmaster Monkey concerns the creation of community through acts of the imagination. Wittman's theatrical event is overtly for this purpose. The narrator informs the reader that:

> Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it. His community surrounding him then, were going to reward and bless Wittman with our listening while he talks to his heart's content. (Tripmaster Monkey 306)

However, Tripmaster Monkey is less concerned with the problematics of truth and fiction than with how a second generation of Chinese Americans should involve themselves as adults in America, and in relation to the wider world. For Wittman his developing artistry, his involvement with his Chinese American community, his

relationship with a white woman, and his developing sense of political responsibility at the time of the Vietnam War are his primary concerns. The ending is entirely ambivalent and relevant to the Chinese American context of the story. The narrator comments that "Wittman's community was blessing him, whether he liked it or not" (Tripmaster 340).

The narrator's perspective in China Men is removed from the majority of the stories she tells, as the narrator is reporting the stories of men older than herself and thus distanced by sex and age. The perspective of the text is therefore retrospective and is primarily concerned with encouraging, not story-telling, but listening as an important aspect of community building. The novel ends with a comment which is typical of the tone of the novel: "Now I could watch the young men who listen" (China Men 301).

As in Morrison's writing, the destabilising of the categories of truth and fiction in the text by the use of magic realism thus provides the space for the narrator to express her cross-cultural identity. Equally, the use of magic realism to contribute to cultural memory allows her to express the ambiguity which is central to the Chinese American experience. Thus her writing contributes to Chinese American cultural memory by placing Chinese Americans in literature in a way that, whilst remaining fictional, is useful to Chinese American actuality, and most particularly, to the women. This argument places her in opposition to those who demand a version of Chinese American culture based upon an uncomplicated definition of Chinese culture. The debate surrounding the "real" and the "fake" demonstrates that magic realism in a text which

contributes to cultural memory relies for its acceptance, not only upon the cultural context from which one views the magic realism but also upon the political perspective with which one views that culture. Magic realism as used by Maxine Hong Kingston can be said, therefore, to be politically and ontologically determined.

Chapter Three

I. Introduction

> Surely this is the time referred to in the ancient prophecy... and Native Americans lead the world into a new age of peace, balance, harmony, and respect for all that is. (Allen, The Sacred Hoop x)

In this chapter I will consider the limits and potentialities of the use of the term Magic Realism with reference to contemporary Native American writing. What my argument will illustrate is that ontological magic realism can only be recognised as such if it expresses a cross-cultural perspective and does not simply have a cross-cultural author or setting. In addition, I will also illustrate that where magic realism is used in a cross-cultural Native American narrative, it can provide a means through which to express opposition to, and influence upon, dominant American and, particularly, postmodern culture from an alternative ontology.

The argument will be developed through examination of the work of mixed blood Laguna Peublo woman writer Leslie Marmon Silko in comparison to other writing by contemporary Native American writers. Born in 1948 in Albuquerque she has published five books, each very different in style. The first: Laguna Woman (1974) is a book of poetry. The realist novel Ceremony (1977), which follows a young Native's recovery from his experiences in Vietnam with the aid of a Native healer, is the work which has

received most recognition to date. In 1981 she published a collection of family photos, traditional Laguna stories and personal commentaries: Storyteller. Her latest novel, Almanac of the Dead: A Novel (1991), is a postmodern narrative which connects many different strands of stories from differing cultural perspectives to create an apocalyptic impression of the future of the Americas. Her most recent publication is a book of essays on writing, photography and environment called Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today (1997).

Silko, like Morrison and Hong Kingston, writes in the hope that her writing may be useful to her readers' lives. As I have argued in previous chapters, Morrison holds this attitude because of the traditional importance of story-telling for the continuation of African-American cultural memory. For Silko the importance of story-telling is heightened due to the emphasis placed upon it as a survival tactic for Native American communities. The Native American form of story-telling is a ritual intended to create and maintain a sense of communal support and continuation. The mixed blood Laguna Pueblo/Sioux writer Paula Gunn Allen explains its importance:

> Entry into the narrative tradition enables individuals to realize that the significance of their own lives stems in large part from their interlocking connections with the lives of all the others who share a particular psychospiritual tradition. It lets people realize that individual experience is not isolated but is part of a coherent and timeless whole, providing them with a means of personal empowerment and giving shape and direction to their lives (The Sacred Hoop 100).

The heightened awareness of the importance of community as a means of continuation and survival for Native Americans is attributable to their position as one of the most persecuted cultural groups in the United States, both historically and in contemporary times. Silko's novel Almanac quotes a figure of 60 million Native Americans throughout the Americas who were killed during the time of initial colonisation (1600s). Although it is acknowledged by colonial historians that many Native Americans were killed during this time, the number according to Silko and other Native Americans, has been grossly underestimated and the importance of these deaths upon the lives of surviving Native Americans remains unacknowledged by dominant culture. Dee Brown's history Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee traces the perpetration of violence and hostility against Native Americans during the expansion of colonial settlement into the American West from 1865 to 1890. He quotes the testimony of Red Cloud (a renowned Sioux chief of the late nineteenth century) that European Americans:

> ... made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it. (Brown 448).

Brown notes that writing such a history is a project of historical retrieval and resistance which, in Morrison's words, "fill in the gaps" left in histories written from a European American perspective. He claims that during these times the predominant image of Native Americans was re-enforced by histories which portrayed Native Americans as "...the dark menace of the myths" (Ibid. xv).

Contemporary Native American literature portrays the continuation of violence and

prejudice against Native Americans. Novels and autobiography focus primarily on the problems of hardship, alcoholism and poverty on the reservations and the similar difficulties, including alienation, of living outside reservations as a Native American. Both Ceremony by Silko and The Surrounded by D'arcy McNickle (1936) portray the return of a Native American boy from a life of alienation outside the reservation to witness the alcohol induced violence and destructiveness of the male reservation population. Dee Brown explains that part of his purpose of writing Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee was so that "...if readers... should ever chance to see the poverty, the hopelessness, and the squalor of a modern Indian reservation, they may find it possible to truly understand the reasons why" (xvii).

Historical retrieval is an equally important aspect of Silko's work as a novelist. Ceremony documents the effects of combat in Vietnam on Native American youths. Almanac includes pages of dates relating important events in Native American history, such as Indian slave uprisings (527). The novel opens with a map of the United States/Mexico border region which documents not only the locations and movements of the novel's fictional characters, but also includes text boxes which contain historical statements. The box titled "The Indian Connection" reads as a form of manifesto of historical retrieval and resistance:

> Sixty million Native Americans died between 1500 and 1600. The defiance and resistance to things European continue unabated. The Indian Wars have never ended in the Americas. Native Americans acknowledge no borders; they seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands (Almanac ii).

Silko's novel Almanac is worthy of particular note in this thesis in that it is distinctive as Native American writing due to its concern for Native Americans outside reservations who interact with a large range of characters from varied cultural (and often cross-cultural) groups. Silko claims in reference to Almanac that she wished to explore what it was like to live as Native American in isolation from one's tribal home. She commented in an interview that her interest in writing the novel was to explore what it is like to find oneself without belief or with only a partial belief that isolates one from the community in which one lives or has been raised (Coltelli, 151). This distinguishes the novel from other Native American novels which tend to portray life on reservations or in Indian boarding schools. The cross-cultural elements in these novels usually take the form of a person returning after disruption, away from the reservation, in the culture of European dominated America (Ceremony, The Surrounded, House Made of Dawn--1968--by N Scott Momaday, and the novels of Louise Erdrich all fit this description). Exceptions other than Almanac are Paula Gunn Allen's novel The Woman Who Owned the Shadows, Louise Erdrich's Blue Jays Dance (1995) and novels by Gerald Vizenor, particularly Heirs of Columbus (1991). Allen's novel is an experimental narrative about a woman, Epiphanie, who moves away from a reservation and struggles with mental illness, but finds peace in isolation away from all other cultural influences. Erdrich's Blue Jays Dance is a memoir about her pregnancies and family life set and written in an isolation from all but her family and nature in the rural North Eastern United States. Vizenor's Heirs of Columbus is a postmodern text which refers by metaphor and allegory to the influence of Christopher Columbus upon Native Americans. It has similarities with Silko's work due to its broad range of influences from different cultures

and times. The text uses influences from Native American trickster tales, and also draws on the current United States gambling laws (which allow Native Americans to run casinos in States where gambling is otherwise outlawed). Vizenor's text is set in the distant future and so, like Silko's, is also concerned with how Native Americans will be involved in the future of the United States. However, the text is not "magic realist" as it is set in the distant future and is thus removed for readers from current actuality.

This chapter will focus discussion on Silko's Almanac[16] as its cross-cultural setting and multiple cultural perspectives provide a distinctive narrative perspective, which acknowledges the cross-cultural complexities and influences of contemporary Native American life. Occurrences of magic realism in Almanac will be contrasted with similar instances in Ceremony and other Native American novels, in order to reveal how the difference in the cultural perspective of the narrative can influence the interpretation of what constitutes magic realism.

Almanac addresses the continuing destructive influence of colonial culture in America from a predominantly Native American perspective. Noting its apocalyptic tone, Janet St Clair has said of the novel that it provides "... the most elaborate and detailed accounting of the decline and fall of western civilisation yet written" (104). As the title of the novel suggests, Almanac is also a form of prophetic almanac. It foretells the destruction of the earth and calls, in response, for a cultural transformation which would

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[16] The edition referred to hereafter is by Penguin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex), 1992.

change the continuing colonial attitudes in contemporary European American culture. As I will show through textual analysis, this transformation is carried out through the influence of Native American traditions on both the text's form and content.

Almanac holds a crucial position in this thesis as its form of Ritual Literature allows for an exploration of the connections between magic realism, story-telling, cultural memory, and spirituality, and the potential political influence that texts with these combined elements hold. Silko's novel is also important because it opens up an exploration of the difficulties and conflicts involved in the cross-cultural politics implicit in the texts analyzed in this thesis. Silko's novel is not simply multi-vocal, it is multi-discursive. She employs free indirect discourse for the narratives of her fifty or more characters; consequently each character's story is narrated in the unique tone and vocabulary of the character. Moreover, because her characters have diverse cultural backgrounds, and are cross-culturally influenced, the various cultural and ideological positions from which her character's speak create multiple discourses in the novel.

The Almanac's fifty main characters, drawn from diverse cultural backgrounds, live in varied locations throughout the contemporary Americas. It is set predominantly in one of the most culturally diverse and tense regions of the Americas: the US/Mexico border region which Gloria Anzaldua describes as "...*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (3). Although the action of the novel centres on Tucson, Arizona, it also covers the whole of the Americas from Alaska to New York and Argentina. This diversity is reflected in the cultural influences

operating upon the characters: Native American, European American, African American, Asian American, Chicano, working class and aristocratic.

Each character carries a different plot line which, as will be seen from the following summary, is inter-connected to those of the other characters. The primary central characters are: a family of mixed blood Yaquis Native Americans (Zeta, Lecha, Ferro and Paulie); Lecha's brain-damaged lover, Root; his mystical cocaine snorting Native American cousin Mosca; their old relative Calabazas; Zeta's gardener, Sterling; Lecha's secretary, Seese; a group of drug smugglers and snuff pornographers led by a European aristocrat, Beaufrey; his lover David (the father of Seese's child) and an Argentinean aristocrat, Serlo; an aristocratic Mexican with confused bourgeois and Marxist principals, Alegria; her social climbing mixed blood Native Mexican husband, Menardo, and her Cuban Marxist revolutionary boyfriend, Bartolomeo; Bartolomeo's Mexican Native extreme revolutionary colleague and lover, Angelita; a group of Mexican Native revolutionaries led by twin brothers with mystical powers, Tacho (the chauffeur of Menardo) and El Feo; a family of leading mafia, the Blue's, and Leah Blue's paraplegic lover, Trigg, who runs a blood bank. There are also approximately another thirty characters who influence the lives of each of these characters and whose stories are told in briefer form.

The mixed blood Yaquis family live in Arizona where they struggle with the paradoxical relationship of their drug smuggling and addiction, with the twin sister's responsibility to pass on their psychic powers and knowledge of Native American

cultural memories. Part of the complexity of their situation is their notion, which they share with many of the Native American characters, that drug smuggling is a form of revolution against the laws of the United States. The characters that surround the family live similarly complex lives which they struggle to reconcile. Root has been rejected by his European American family after a near death experience changed his cultural priorities. Sterling, a Laguna Peublo Native American, was exiled from his homeland by the tribal council for neglecting to protect the tribe's mystical stone snake from the intrusions of a Hollywood film crew. Hence, he has lost his personal identity and lacks a sense of belonging to any group. Seese is a cocaine addict who has lost the ability to control her life. After her son was kidnapped by Beaufrey in San Diego she sought Lecha, to whom she was introduced via a psychic connection through a television set.

Like the reference to the newspaper report in Beloved and the use of the chant of Fa Mu Lan in Woman Warrior, Almanac combines its fictional elements with actual historical events and recognisable myths. The stone snake which is found on Laguna Peublo land by Sterling's clan in the novel is the exact equivalent to a stone snake which was found in Jackpile uranium mine in 1979/80 in Paguate, on the Laguna Peublo reservation (Silko, Yellow Woman 126). The only alteration of the details of the snake is that the mouth of the actual snake was open towards the West, whereas Silko's fictional snake has its mouth open towards the South. Furthermore, the Jackpile Stone Snake has mythical significance which is repeated in reference to the novel's stone snake. The snake was considered by the Laguna people to be a spiritual messenger called Ma-ah-shra-true-ee whose message has been interpreted in many different ways by different

writers. Silko's interpretation of the snake forms the central premise of her novel; she assumes that the Jackpile snake constitutes a warning about the imminent destruction of the human race brought about by damage to the earth (Ibid. 144).

In fact, fragments of the Mayan almanacs from which the fictional extracts are said to have come do exist in museums in Dresden, Madrid and Paris; these Mayan almanacs (codices), which were painted on screen-folds made of bark or animal skin and consisted of images rather than words (Ibid. 156), are a few of the 17 codices which survived the burning of libraries of the Americas in 1540 by the Spanish invaders. The Mayan almanacs referred to in the title of the novel were written in pre-colonial times but predicted early colonialism and the arrival of Cortes (Ibid. 156).

The fictional almanac in the novel was written in code by Mayans as a form of security to record their cultural memories in the face of what they recognised as imminent annihilation by the Spanish. Silko explains that the importance of such documents, in relation to the actual surviving codices, is their significance as evidence of civilisation in the pre-conquest Americas. She states:

> They burned the great libraries because they wished to foster the notion that the New World was populated by savages. Savages could be slaughtered and enslaved; savages were no better than wild beasts and thus had no property rights. (Ibid. 157)

The almanac in the novel is being translated into written English by Lecha, transcribed

by Seese and thus it appears in the text as fragments in English in the transcribed form. The act of interpreting and recording the fragment of fictional almanac is demonstrative of fictional and actual historical retrieval and the historical revision which is carried out in the novel. The majority of the revision takes the form of comments by Native American characters about the past: the spiritual leader Weasel Tail reminds a conference of people (and thus readers) of the genocide of Native Americans during colonisation: "Sixty million souls howl for justice in the Americas!" (Almanac 723).

The novel could be said to be structured around the character Sterling's own personal process of historical retrieval which he carries out and thus leads himself back to his home community and peace of mind. Sterling lives amongst European Americans or non-reservation mixed blood Natives, but has been brought up with a traditional tribal philosophy. The conflicting influences from non-Native culture have confused him to the point where he can only make sense of his confusion by gradually retracing his past, but finds resistance from European American culture to discovering Native American history. As Angelita La Escapia notes, "For hundreds of years white men had been telling the people of the Americas to forget the past..." (Almanac 311). This is reminiscent of Morrison's assertion that Americans are encouraged to erase their past and to concentrate on building a new future. Sterling discovers this attitude in contemporary America whilst reading popular magazine articles giving personal advice about forgetting the past and rebuilding one's life in the future, which he abbreviates to "Spilled milk". However the unease which he feels in response to this attitude to the past leads him to recognise his need to maintain links with history:

> Sterling knows he's one of those old-fashioned people who has trouble forgetting the past no matter how bad remembering might be for chronic depression (Almanac 24).

Several characters including Sterling, in Silko's Almanac echo Toni Morrison's notion elsewhere that one cannot survive without connection to one's ancestors and history. Angelita La Escapia explains that Native American belief systems, like West African belief systems, rely upon a connection with the past for the continuation of circular time, "The old-time people believed ...they must reckon with the past because within it lay seeds of the present and future" (Almanac 311).

Although not a sophisticated revolutionary thinker like Angelita La Escapia, Sterling similarly understands that the European American desire for the Native Americans to forget what they understand of the past works against the Native Americans, and maintains the impression of European American innocence. Sterling prefers to examine recent history. Even this allows him insight into the denial of history from a Native American perspective:

> Sterling was pretty sure Cole Younger and some of the Jesse James gang had been part Indian by their looks in old photographs. Sterling knows that Starrs had been Oklahoma half-breeds. Sterling thought he was probably one of the few Indians interested in famous Indian outlaws. He knew tribal leaders and so-called Indian experts preferred that Indians got left out of that part of American history too, since their only other appearances had been at so-called massacres

of white settlers. (Almanac 40)

This quotation also indicates that Sterling recognises the complicity of Native Americans in the suppression of their own role in history. Whilst Morrison illustrates African American personal psychological resistance to memory, and Hong Kingston reveals the damaging effects of over-protection through taboo and silence, Silko's comment refers directly to the effects of colonialism upon the colonized. This insight is repeated several times throughout the novel and reinforces the view that no one could remain untainted or unaffected by colonialism and that, in fact, the guilt is not only one sided. As a new Hopi leader accuses his revolutionary followers:

> ... where were you when the people first discussed the Europeans? Tell the truth. You forgot everything you had ever been told. You forgot the stories with warnings. (Almanac 721)

Equally, Sterling's gradual access to understanding also takes him through a process of becoming more in touch with his community's tribal belief systems. In effect, Sterling illustrates the different levels of connection with tribal belief systems with which Native Americans live in America. At first Sterling notes that he had:

> ... begun to realize that people he had been used to calling "Mexicans" were really remnants of different kinds of Indians.... They had lost contact with their tribes and their ancestor's worlds. (Almanac 88)

Sterling acquires a sense of displacement through observation and experience of the negative aspects of Tucson, which leads him to seek a positive reconnection with his

Laguna Peublo community. On returning home he begins to wholly adopt the Laguna Peublo belief system for the first time and recognises prophetic warning signs in his natural environment concerning the future of the continent.

What Sterling comes to realise through historical retrieval is the differences of philosophy between European and Native American traditions, and the ways in which this has affected history itself. By following the story of his hero Geronimo, Sterling realises that no one man of that name had existed:

> The U.S. soldiers had misunderstood just as they had misunderstood just about everything else they had found in this land. In time there came to be at least four Apache riders who were called by the name Geronimo.... (Almanac 224)

The European Americans' confusion concerning Geronimo is attributed by Sterling to the fact that the man who led the Apache was actually a medicine man who specialised in "...silence and, occasionally, invisibility" (Almanac 225). In effect, Sterling attributes the European American's difficulties in tracking Geronimo to the differences of the European American and Native American philosophies: the rational and the magic realist.

Additionally the realist aspects of the text are emphasised by the fact that many of the occurrences and characters, although fictional, are similar enough to actual events and people in contemporary America to appear real. The critic Kenneth Lincoln notes that: "The concept of a true living story, the personal inflection embodied and embraced in communal history, bedrocks Leslie Marmon Silko's fiction" (224). This becomes

apparent from reading the work of cultural theorists such as Gloria Anzaldua and Aleticia Tijerina whose work focuses on the actuality of the border region and describes many of the types of incidents which occur in Almanac. In an autobiographical piece written for Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Colour, Aleticia Tijerina explains that in her youth in the US/Mexico border region she regarded law breaking as a means of rebellion against the state which she viewed as her enemy:

> My reign of revenge followed--robbery--assault on a policeman--possession of narcotics--crossing the state lines with narcotics--documents indicating the plot to overthrow the government. (172)

Silko's character Zeta echoes exactly the same philosophy as described by Tijerina. Whilst considering her life of rebellious law breaking Zeta ponders:

> What good had all their talk of war against the United States government done? What good had all their law breaking done? The United States government intended to keep all the stolen land. (Almanac 702)

The references to actual or mythical or rumoured events (which are repeated until they are attributed with truth) provide an added realist element to the novel which challenges readers when confronted with the magical or the incredible in the same narrative style. Ironically, the extreme of the cruelty, violence and degradation in the U.S./Mexico border region to which Silko refers, lends an impression of exaggeration to the description of even the realist aspects of Almanac. This impression is noted by St Clair who comments that on occasion the descriptions are so vivid that they are grotesque:

"the reader's eyes veer off the page in horror" (85). Silko's vivid descriptions of destruction are all too credible for comfortable reading. Silko thus appears to share Hunter S. Thompson's view that the actuality of present day South Western United States in itself challenges one's perception of reality. In Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas he comments, with specific reference to Las Vegas, that "..this is not a good town for psychedelic drugs. Reality itself is too twisted" (Thompson 47).

Silko uses two forms of magic realist narrative. The first form is indicated by an unease attributed to the characters in relation to the events which otherwise are narrated as real occurrences. She predominantly uses this form of magic realism in her novel Ceremony. In Ceremony a young Laguna man (Tayo), having returned from fighting in the Vietnam war, finds spiritual and thus physical healing, through the intervention of a medicine man (Betonie) and the healing presence of a mysterious woman (Ts'eh). Tayo is doubtful about the truth of magic power even though he appears to be healed by it. For instance, he accepts the presence of Ts'eh as a part of his reality although he is often afraid that he is hallucinating and is suffering from recurring mental illness: "...what if there were no traces of her, no lines of sand pressed by her body...?" (Ceremony 222). The second form of magic realism in Silko's writing is illustrated when Tayo's grandmother hears that Tayo has been cared for by an unknown person; she assumes that Ts'eh is a spirit that has been sent by Betonie to help Tayo. She comments approvingly: "'So old Betonie did some good after all'" (Ibid. 215). Tayo's grandmother therefore expresses unsurprised acceptance and belief in relation to a happening which would be considered magical from a rationalist perspective.

This second form of magic realism is used in Almanac. Mosca, for example, notices sorcerers on the city streets every day (Almanac 602). However, the majority of the magic realist happenings or tales in Almanac are questioned by one character or another. For instance, Mosca uses cocaine as "doorways" (Almanac 602) to his prophecies which undermines belief in the truth about Mosca's magical powers for readers and the other characters. Mosca realises that Liria and other characters consider him to be "a joke" (Almanac 609).

As with Morrison's and Hong Kingston's writing, Silko's magic realism is also ontological. That is to say that almost all of the magic realist incidents and tales in the text are associated with some aspect of Native American culture. One must consider whether this encourages the colonial attitude that the European colonisers are solely capable of rational thought and that all magical and mystical aspects are primitive and therefore belong to the colonised. However, the text is in fact constructed so that although almost all the magic realist incidents are associated with Native American belief systems, not all the characters who believe the incidents are Native American. For instance, the European American character Seese is magically affected by the almanac fragments which she types. Root, Lecha and Zeta are only partly Native American and yet they have full access to the magic.

Silko also makes a connection between the Native American and African Americans which mirrors Morrison's similar connection in Beloved. Paul D is cared for and aided in his escape by a group of Cherokee (Beloved 112). Silko's African American character

Clinton practices West African forms of rituals which have similarities to the rituals carried out by Tacho, including the interpretation of spiritual voices (Almanac 413). Clinton himself notes that his beliefs have similarities to Native American belief systems:

> ...certain of the African gods had located themselves in the Americas as well as Africa: the Giant Serpent, the Twin Brothers, the Maize Mother, to name a few. (Almanac 416)

Clinton, in fact, is doubly important as an illustrator of the possibility of accessing other belief systems, as he gains his beliefs through experience, not through his cultural upbringing:

> SPIRITS DIDN'T FRIGHTEN CLINTON. He knew how to talk to them silently; he had ordinary conversations with them unless they had to come to Clinton with a message. Clinton had not always believed. Then he got hit in Vietnam.... (Almanac 423)

This notion is reminiscent of Stephen Slemon's dialogic construction in which the rational is associated with the colonial, and the magical is associated with the post-colonial. However, Silko's magic realism associates the anti-colonial[17] as a positive alternative way of being which is magic realist, indivisibly inclusive of both aspects,

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[17] I refer to Silko's writing as "anti-colonial" due to the continuing colonisation by European Americans of Native Americans. Here I am assuming that the term "post-colonial" is, by definition, anti-colonial.

and thereby is not simply magical.

However, the magic realism in the novel is not deployed simply to express opposition to colonial rationalism, but is actually based upon the holistic belief systems of the Native American peoples of the US/Mexico border region. Witchcraft, animals which are spiritual messengers, and the existence of the spirits of the dead amongst the living, all occur in the novel and are all recognisable aspects of Native American reality. Tacho, who receives guidance from speaking macaws is warned of the death of his boss, Mernado, by oozing blood from his traditional prayer bundle which he keeps under his bed roll (Almanac 511). Moreover, Tacho is one of the twins who are the equivalent in the text to the mythological twins who lead the people into the next phase of life. Readers who are not familiar with the Laguna Peublo emergence myth would also not recognise that Mosca (whose name is "fly" in Spanish) symbolises the creature (a fly) who first entered the fifth and final phase of the life cycle (which is associated with our phase of existence). The fly in the Laguna Pueblo emergence myth is the forbearer of descriptions of the new world. The implication of this association with Mosca in the novel is that far from being a joke, he is in fact a prophet.

In contrast to the magic realism in Ceremony, the exaggerated atmosphere of the realism of Almanac has the effect of heightening the magical aspects so that they are more noticeably non-rational. Whereas it is unclear whether Ts'eh is a spirit appearing in full bodily form in Ceremony, Mosca's powers are acknowledged by other characters, including Root, who notes that Mosca has a spirit which inhabits his shoulder and

passes messages to him through strange popping sounds:

> Root did not ridicule Mosca because he had heard Mosca's shoulder make creaking and popping sounds even when Mosca had not moved. Root didn't think the spirit voice could be any crazier than Mosca was himself; the spirit voice might even be an improvement. (Almanac 632)

So far the overall impression of all the magic realist tales in Almanac is that there are alternative "ways of being" in the world to those of western rationalism and that one need not ever look far to find examples of such alternatives. Certainly the way in which magic realism is used in the text is as a testing ground upon which to explore differing levels of belief and the effect of those beliefs upon the characters. In this way the text does not demand that readers believe the magic realist aspects of the text but it does prioritise an alternative way of being (that of the Native American philosophy).

This chapter continues with an exploration of the significant aspects of the text outlined in the introduction. Firstly, I will expose the discursive tension in the text between the Native American magic realist discourse and colonial European American discourse. Then, I will examine the use of magic realism in association with the ritual aspects of Almanac and the Native American perspective of the novel. Finally I will establish whether the prioritisation of a magic realist discourse in Silko's text associated with Native American culture can in fact be called Magic Realist, or whether that is an imposition of a colonial assumption. I will also consider whether the prioritisation of Native American cultural discourse in the text is ethnocentric.

What I will argue is that Silko's text contains strong political potential outside itself and in relation to the actual world. Moreover, the cross-cultural manner of the text reveals the tension between the European American and Native American traditions, whilst also creating a threshold of influences between these cultural systems without domination by one over the other. What I will ultimately reveal is that the literary form of post-structuralist magic realism can be considered positively despite its association with European critical tradition, as it is indistinguishable in form (but not philosophy) from holistic Native American literature influenced by traditional story-telling techniques.

II. Discursive Tension in Almanac of the Dead

Although Silko has mixed ancestry, her own Native American cultural background provides the predominant cultural context for the novel. The novel prioritises Native American belief systems which are based upon principles of inclusiveness and a holistic communal guardianship of each other and the land, and which are significantly projected in opposition to European American culture.

This chapter will assume that there are similarities between different Native American nations' beliefs. As Paula Gunn Allen notes, Native Americans have also grouped together for political purposes in order to strengthen their political power (The Sacred Hoop x). However, the predominance of the symbol of the circle in the mythology of many Native American nations illustrates points of similarity such as the notion of harmony, unity and continuation that is symbolised by the "sacred hoop" or "medicine wheel" of the Laguna and the Plains people (The Sacred Hoop 56). Native American belief assumes that all things are spiritually alive (whether scientifically proved living organisms or not) and are an equally important part of a harmonious system of life. Rather than being a resource to be used, the earth is the living and spiritual Mother which is the source of all life, which cannot be owned but which provides gifts of the essentials for life for all creatures. By contrast, dominant colonial European American culture is portrayed and criticised in the novel for worshipping death and for being the source of environmental and cultural destruction. The spiritual characters in the novel set out to halt the destruction thus perpetrated by European Americans and to repair the

damage through ritual restoration (by the embrace of Native American holistic belief). Only one group of indigenous Americans are demonised by Silko and that is the Aztecs, due to their conquest of the Mayan tribes.

Whilst prioritising her own Native American belief system, Silko is aware that she is also an American citizen who lives in the United States. This places her in a complex circumstance, as the United States has colonial power over Native Americans and has a dominant culture which is predominantly European American. As European American culture is arguably based upon colonial materialism and Cartesian individuality, Native American culture could be said to be its most clearly opposed way of thinking within the United States. In fact, the attempt by European colonials to obliterate the Native American population can be seen as evidence of the extreme opposition of European America to Native America. This can be attributed particularly to the difference in attitude to land. Where Native American attitudes to land require the communal care of the land, European American attitudes to land address the desire for exclusive land ownership. These attitudes are represented in Almanac which illustrates the battle of survival by Native Americans, and the tensions between them and European American culture.

Silko's illustration of the Native American ontological relationship to the land is also significantly different to that of Chinese Americans and African Americans portrayed by Morrison and Hong Kingston. Neither Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison express a feeling of belonging to the American land. As the Chinese American population and

Hong Kingston's novels are predominantly urban this is not surprising. Toni Morrison's novels, by contrast, with the exception of Jazz, are rural or suburban. However, the lack of a relationship to the land for African Americans does not indicate an opposition to Native American belief but illustrates their dislocation. This is the result of centuries of living and working on land which is owned by a slave master who reaps its profits. Part of the process of coming to terms with slavery is the articulation of Paul D's desire to claim a relationship to a part of American land. He comments, "in all those escapes he could not help being astonished at the beauty of the land that was not his" (Beloved 270). This is unresolved in Beloved, as Paul D. claims the same parcel of land as the white owner of the house, Mr. Baldwin. The process of coming to terms with the African American past, as with the Native American situation, therefore also involves conflicts over land claims.

Katherine Callen King, in her essay on the epic form and Almanac, explains that in Silko's text she sees a central tension between the colonial European American and the Native American cultures drawn upon a difference in philosophies. Whilst Callen King identifies European American thought as essentially rational and secular, she identifies Native American belief as magical realist and spiritual. She explains:

> For two centuries at least would-be writers of epic have had to figure out substitutes for a "divine machinery" that ceased to be convincing in European culture with the onset of the Enlightenment, especially in the intellectually secular twentieth century. In the indigenous cultures of the Americas, which contributed to the magical realism mode... this is not a problem. (King 37/8)

King thereby recognises a connection between the prioritisation of spirituality in Silko's text, and her prioritisation of magic realism in the form of Native American beliefs.

The distinctions between these two cultural groups are illustrated in the narrative of the text by the division of the characters into those who participate in a magic realist discourse in the novel and those who do not recognise magic realism. This creates a tension in the novel between two discursive strands: the rational and the spiritual. Allen has noted, with particular reference to Ceremony, that Silko's characters can be divided into those who have a spiritual life and those who do not (118). Tayo's healing process after his return from the Vietnam war draws him closer to his grandmother's spiritually inspired way of life, and away from that of his army veteran friends who drink and fight to combat their spiritual emptiness. In Almanac this likewise reveals itself by the division between those who live predominantly within the contemporary European American culture of colonialism, individuality, rationality and utility, and those who live predominantly within holistic, inclusive, communal and spiritual cultures.

These two groups of people can also be identified as those who are influenced by the effects of the Eighteenth Century European movement of Enlightenment, and those who maintain a predominantly spiritual belief system.

As Thomas Docherty notes:

> The Enlightenment aimed at human emancipation from myth, superstition and enthralled enchantment to mysterious powers and forces of nature through the progressive operations of a critical reason. (5)

Moreover, the influence of the Enlightenment on European culture has lead it to define itself in opposition to spiritually based cultures. As Adorno and Horkheimer note, "For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect" (6). The project of the Enlightenment, which sought the eradication of spiritual influences in cultures can thus be recognised as an influence on the project of colonialism. This is illustrated by Silko's text in which each character's personal discourse fits into one of two categories; the one (colonial, rational and dominant) having the political power, and the second (subversive, magic realist and oppressed) having the spiritual power.

The prioritisation of the magic realist discourse in Almanac creates an overtly anti-colonialist perspective which distinguishes the novel from books written by non-Native American writers in the United States. Silko posits that the government of the United States maintains the same extent of colonial control over, and aggression towards, Native Americans as during the time of the initial conquest and settlement as they continue to maintain oppression of the Native Americans through the legal system. Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison, by contrast, illustrate current day racism which originates in attitudes that have continued from the past and which in the past was supported by laws eg. the legalisation of slavery and the criminalisation of Chinese immigration, which have since been reverted. Silko uses magic realism uniquely in Almanac as a political device to explore and reveal colonial aspects of American life which are otherwise dismissed by the government as Native American paranoia or subversive propaganda.

Silko's novel was written at the same time as the production of the television drama The X Files, which also deals through fiction with unacknowledged and unexplained happenings in present day America. Both The X Files and Almanac address an audience unconvinced by the assumption that "reality" is as the government would wish its people to believe. They are an audience to whom governmental conspiracy theories seem increasingly compellingly true. The African American Vietnam veteran (ironically his name is Clinton) is the main proponent of conspiracy theories in Almanac. Considering his role in Vietnam he realises:

> Clinton had seen how many dark American faces had been in the Asian war. Clinton had seen the white toads, Lyndon Johnson and his generals, smacking their lips at all the splattered brains and guts of black and brown men. Forces sent to destroy indigenous populations were themselves composed of "expendables". (Almanac 407)

For added force Silko also outlines a conspiracy revolving around the Reagan "Contra" affair through the boastful confession of the "blue blooded" American Beaufrey:

> The cocaine had been part of a deliberate plan to finance CIA operations in Mexico and Central America with the proceeds of cocaine sales in the United States. (Almanac 548/9)

In this sense Almanac also shows similarities with the works of Thomas Pynchon, most especially with The Crying of Lot 49 in which readers, through the characters, gain a sense that there is an alternative reality beneath a surface reality which is presented and somehow does not quite convince. In The Crying of Lot 49 Oedipa Maas sets out on a

pseudo-detective quest in search of a hidden meaning, and an alternative to the version of reality she has been offered through drugs and through the Californian media with which she is engulfed. Her counterpart in Almanac is Seese who, living in the same geographical area as Oedipa, also seeks a deeper meaning and an alternative to her life on cocaine. Seese also finds her inspiration for her quest through the media, during a psychic connection with a guest on a television chat show which reveals to her a glimpse of a spiritual existence which provides an alternative to the deathly world of drugs and exploitation in which she lives. However, whereas Oedipa (along with readers) is left unsatisfied and in suspense by the postmodern absence of a conclusion and entropy of meaning at the end of The Crying of Lot 49, Seese is presented with the possibility of spiritual renewal at the end of Almanac. As a consequence I argue that Silko provides a philosophical means to transcend the disabling aspects of postmodernism.

As I have noted, dominant colonial European American culture is portrayed and criticised in the novel as a culture that is fascinated by death for three reasons: the destructive treatment of the earth as a resource; the dominant culture's links to the bloody past of colonialism; the prevalence of the notion of the death of God in postmodern culture.

Firstly, the discourses about land from both a Native American and a dominant American perspective conflict in the text. The Native Yaquis character, Calabazas, explains that for the older generations of his family their understanding of the land was

paramount for their survival:

> Survival had depended upon differences. Not just the differences in the terrain that gave the desert traveller critical information about traces of water or grass for his animals, but the sheer varieties of plants and bugs and animals. (Almanac 202)

He goes on to explain that:

> The elders used to argue that this was one of the most dangerous qualities of the Europeans: Europeans suffered a sort of blindness to the world. To them, a "rock" was just a "rock".... (Almanac 224)

Because of their lack of understanding of the importance of each aspect of the land, the European Americans use the land as a resource without considering its harmony and thus, according to the Native American characters, they "..violated mother earth..." (Almanac 121). The environmental destruction is considered by the Native American characters as having brought the earth to a crisis point. Clinton comments:

> The Europeans had managed to dirty up the good land and good water around the world in less than five hundred years. Now the despoilers wanted the last bits of living earth for themselves alone. (Almanac 415)

Secondly, the European Americans are called 'the destroyers' by several of the American Indian characters in the text. The use of this term is significant because it re-establishes the links between the Spanish colonizers and the death cults of the Aztecs, as the term 'the destroyers' is used by the characters to refer to both groups. Sterling

notes, "No wonder Cortes and Montezuma had hit it off together when they met; both had been members of the same secret clan" (Almanac 760).

Likewise, Tacho recognises the centrality of death in Christian culture. He considers that:

> The Destroyers secretly prayed and waited for disaster and destruction. Secretly they were thrilled by the spectacle of death. The European invaders had brought their Jesus hanging bloody and dead from the cross.... (Almanac 475)

Although this can obviously be regarded as a mis-reading of Christian theology, the symbol of the cross without a prior knowledge of Christian teaching concerning self-sacrifice certainly presents a morbid icon. Tacho's literal interpretation of the symbol of the crucifix is central to Silko's attack on European American culture as it symbolises in itself the destructive aspects of colonial Christian religions. Tacho's twin brother, El Feo, explains:

> European descendants on American soil anxiously purchased indigenous cures for their dark nights of the soul on the continents where Christianity had repeatedly violated its own canons. (Almanac 478)

Surprising as it may seem, Tacho's statements are actually rather generous to European Americans such as the character Beaufrey, who is by far the most abhorrent of all the characters. Beaufrey is a financier, smuggler and lover of violent pornographic ("snuff") movies, who is incapable of loving other living beings. Watching his sexual partner watch snuff movies he notes that he:

> enjoyed watching the expressions on David's face as the torture had progressed conveniently into the "autopsy" of the victim. David had enjoyed watching torture and killing videos before; most men did. Beaufrey divided the world into those who admitted the truth and those who lied.... Beaufrey had to smile to himself.... David was afraid to feel how much he enjoyed the scalpel sinking through skin and flesh. (Almanac 538)

Although the existence of men such as Beaufrey is beyond dispute (one need only think of the notorious serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer), the linking of his destructive actions to dominant postmodern American culture may well seem contentious. However, Silko makes the link between the present death of spirituality in contemporary European American culture and the influence of Nietzsche's notion of the death of God from Beyond Good and Evil on current apocalyptic forms of postmodernism:

> Now Clinton understood why European philosophers had told their people God was dead: the white man's God had died about the time the Europeans had started sailing around the world. (Almanac 417)

Beaufrey's admiration of nihilistic art, instantaneous pleasure, the dehumanising effects of technology and sterility are close to Arthur Kroker and David Cook's apocalyptic definition of postmodernism in The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics as a:

> *fin de millennium* consciousness which, existing at the end of history in the twilight time of ultramodernism (of technology) and hyperprimitivism (of public moods), uncovers a great arc of disintegration and decay against the

background radiation of parody, kitsch, and burnout. (8)

As Silko recognises, where this apocalyptical form of postmodernism is embraced, then so too is death (and particularly the death of spirituality). Janet St Clair notes in her essay "Death of Love/Love of Death: Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead" that the only symbols of new life (eg. flowers) in the novel appear in association with violent death. She cites the description of Eric's suicide which recounts the bloody image of "...a field of red shapes which might be peonies" (St. Clair, "Death of Love" 108).

Beaufrey's art, above all, illustrates Silko's proposition that death and postmodernism are inextricably linked. Beaufrey's attitude towards art is best illustrated by the episode in the novel in which he sells photographs of a suicide which he knowingly caused. The public reception reported to have been given to the exhibition of the photographs is disturbingly familiar to the "western" reader. The reported comments focus attention on the style of the photographs and thrill at the violence: "'Punk comes to photography'"(Almanac. 208), and "David had photographed Eric's corpse Police Gazette style" (Almanac 106). In the extremes of Beaufrey's postmodern California, death is emptied of any spiritual meaning and becomes a glossy artefact.

As an artist Beaufrey can be interpreted as the equivalent in the text, but the antithesis in attitude, to Silko as an artist/writer. Whilst Beaufrey's art is empty of meaning with only monetary and perverse value, Silko's novel in which he appears is culturally

relevant, responsible and transformative. In this sense Silko's work is the antithesis of the impasse of postmodernism. As TuSmith notes, Silko's "faith in the power of stories to heal and bind in a collective sense offers an alternative to Tocqueville's judgment of Americans as isolated individuals" (121).

In fact, to interpret Beaufrey through the postmodern understanding of Cook and Kroker reenforces my interpretation of Silko's text. Beaufrey's attitudes to art are strikingly similar to Cook and Kroker's descriptions of the contemporary American artist Eric Fischl [18]. According to Cook and Kroker Fischl's pictures portray "self-liquidation" and "'viciousness for fun' as the dark sign of Christian voluptuousness" (Cook and Kroker 280). As Cook and Kroker note it is art for, "a whole society of dead souls who confuse leisure with freedom" (281).

Thankfully, Cook and Kroker state that their text is designed to state the worst case scenario of our current time. It is a "panic" book which is written, as are Silko's texts, "in response to the outbreak again of the dialectic of enlightenment" (Ibid. i). They explain that:

> In an age where computers reify the meaning of memory...then it may still be salutary to meditate anew on historical remembrance as the basis of politics. (Ibid. i)

Thus Beaufrey can be interpreted as the worst case scenario of postmodernism who is

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[18] See Cook and Kroker's chapter titled "Postmodern America in Ruins: Are We Having Fun Yet?".

portrayed in Silko's text as a protest against the extremes of enlightenment as they appear in contemporary times.

I should emphasise that Silko does not attack modern technology and the paraphernalia of modern living, and therefore is not reactionary, but she does attack the use of objects to aid the colonial process by helping people to forget. In the text, for instance, there are two opposing uses of drugs. Seese remains a cocaine addict and lives, unhelped, with her painful memories for the majority of the book. Lecha, from whom she seeks help, lives in limbo wavering between her life of drug addiction and the spiritual life of a psychic healer and keeper of Native American cultural memory. It is only when Lecha recognises her responsibility towards her community by studying a fragment of ancient almanac that she is able to begin even to help Seese and herself to control their addictions. On the other hand, Mosca uses "Mama Coca" (Almanac 602) (cocaine) as a source of traditional spiritual inspiration, as was common amongst the Mexican tribes. The essential differences between these cultures illustrated in the novel can be presented as Individualism versus Community, and Destruction versus Nurturing. Bonnie TuSmith devotes her book All My Relatives to an exploration of the continuation of community as the underpinning of many of what she calls "ethnic" cultures in the United States. Although she does not consider whites or other minority groups in the United States, she defends the continuation of community building which she witnesses. The previous chapters have illustrated how Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko promote the creation of communities which share location, attitudes or mutual experience. In reaction to the accusation that Americans have lost

even the language of community TuSmith asks:

> 'Which Americans?'. Immediately coming to mind were the wealth of communal expressions embedded in ethnic American speech patterns, such as the 'y'all' of Southern Black folks, the 'familia' of Latinos, and the expression for everyone, 'dajia' (big family), of Chinese Americans. (viii)

She goes on to explain that implicit in this idea of "community" is a connection between people which goes beyond the determined roles existing in a capitalist system established for a common aim of economic and material gain: "... the term *community* refers to the relatedness and dynamic interdependence of all life-forms rather then the stagnant, conformist vision that the term tends to evoke in a capitalist society" (vii).

Although TuSmith does not specifically mention the American Indian notion of community, her definition is in fact very similar to that of Laguna Peublo writer Paula Gunn Allen who describes the American Indian notion of community as an inclusive notion of all things which "inhabit the tribe's universe" (Allen 63). What I would like to emphasise about these two definitions is the nurturing interconnectedness and mutual responsibility for the well-being of all things, and a beyond-the-material connection between things and people; in other words, a spiritual connection which they display. I should also add that whilst Allen's definition may seem limited to only those within close proximity to a specific tribe, in fact the "tribe's universe" includes all those who have an effect on the spiritual mother, the earth. This inclusiveness at the core of Native American belief makes the use of magic realism as an inclusive discourse (breaking down the boundaries between categories of the real and magical) entirely appropriate

and natural and is an essential process in the maintenance of communities. As Allen explains:

> If the work of literature is imbued with the power which is in the mind of the writer, that meaning will take a form and shape that is real and vital, and that will continue to bear meaning for generations to come. ("Bringing Home the Fact" 578)

Whilst TuSmith's use of the word "ethnic" demands caution and the notion of "community" needs further exploration, Silko's novel confirms TuSmith's statement that the predominant loss in dominant America is the loss of a sense of the importance of community. Silko's novel exemplifies the form of writing which helps to maintain such communities. Her use of Native American narrative techniques places her alongside traditional story-tellers of whom Lincoln notes:

> storytellers... historically mark and recount events worth remembering, so that culture extends history as a collective experience, across the spaces between peoples, over time that separates living and dead (Lincoln 223).

III. Magic Realism and Transformation in Almanac of the Dead

Almanac has been called an epic by Catherine Callen King due to its national and communal significance and its groundedness in history. However, the power of the novel reaches beyond that of the epic mode. The most significant aspect of Almanac is Silko's development of a cross-culturally revised version of Native American Ritual Literature. In her study of the role of women in Native American culture, The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions, Paula Gunn Allen identifies a form of Native American literature which is the written equivalent of traditional ritual story-telling, intended to transform the story-teller and listeners, and hence the world they inhabit. The most prominent ritual aspect which I will explore in this chapter is the transformative potential of the text due to the use of magic realism and participatory story-telling techniques.

Silko herself refers to the ritual function of stories in relation to her own life and community in Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit. She explains the problems of the relationship of Native Americans who maintain tradition to United States judicial law. The old people enacting Laguna Peublo tradition testified in court in a land rights case (for which they won financial compensation) with stories (Silko, Yellow Woman 18). Silko hence decided that as a writer "...the only way to seek justice was through the power of stories" (Ibid. 20). Her novels Ceremony, and as I will argue, Almanac of the Dead are thus imbued with an aim to transform the actual world through her fictional stories.

In effect, magic realism and ritual literature have a mutually supportive relationship. Whilst magic realism brings previously thought impossible or implausible things into existence in a fictional world, ritual literature brings that fictional world into contact with the actual, and transforms the actual with influence from the fictional.

Discussing traditional forms of Native American literature, Paula Gunn Allen identifies a form of writing which she calls "Ceremonial Literature". This form of literature focuses on literature as the written version of an actual ceremonial chant, song or story. The title of Silko's novel Ceremony foregrounds the importance of the notion to this novel which is structured around a chant of renewal and rebirth. It starts with a story in verse form about the emergence of life into this world (Silko, Ceremony 1) and ends with an invocation to the sunrise (Ibid. 262). The novel itself follows the healing process of Tayo brought about through a succession of spiritual experiences orchestrated by a medicine man and so the plot can be read as the story of a healing ceremony.

The change of approach that I wish to make from calling this a story *about* a healing ceremony to identifying the book as a *form* of ritual in itself must be understood in the context of Native American oral story-telling cultures. The second section of verse in Ceremony is a transcript of an oral chant which explains that in Native American cultures stories have a transformative and instructive spiritual aspect which places them in the realm of ritual. The transcribed chant, titled "Ceremony" reads as follows:

> I will tell you something about stories/[he said]/They aren't just

entertainment./Don't be fooled./They are all we have, you see,/all we have to fight off illness and death./You don't have anything if you don't have the stories./Their evil is mighty but it can't stand up to our stories./so they try to destroy the stories let the stories be confused or forgotten. (Ibid. 2)

The male speaker's section of the chant ends: "And in the belly of this story/the rituals and the ceremony are still growing" (Ibid. 2).

I have identified Almanac as "Ritual Literature" since ritual is the overarching element which is carried out by the enactment of ceremonies; however Almanac does not contain one single ceremony, but has multitudinous cross-cultural ritualistic aspects such as the participation of a community in the telling of a tale and the expectation that the community will use the tale to a transformative effect upon the actual world of the community. It must be understood that I have also made the distinction between "ceremonial" and "ritual" due to the non-specifically Native devices of literature that Silko employs whilst maintaining certain traditional "ceremonial literature" devices. Firstly, the recognised definition of "Ritual" is the notion attributed to deliberate culturally based religious or other acts (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 901). Both the Ritual critic Ronald Grimes, and Laguna Peublo critic, Paula Gunn Allen, assert that the essential attributes of ritual acts are that they transform things from one state or condition to another (Allen 29). Although the dictionary defines Ritual as "religious", Grimes comments it is not necessarily "religious" in a strict sense, although it relies upon external powers for transformation and is "evocative of communitas" (Grimes 145). This I translate to mean that it is has both a communal and spiritual aspect. Paula

Gunn Allen best describes this definition of ritual specifically in relation to Native American literature:

> At base the ceremonials restore the psychic unity of the people, reaffirm the terms of their existence in the universe, and validate their sense of realism, order and propriety. (Allen 73)

The most frequently enacted ceremony in Native American cultures is the act of oral story-telling. In this ceremony the story-teller reaffirms cultural memories through the mutually active roles of telling and listening, and thereby actually and culturally binds the community (Lincoln 223). This same process is portrayed in Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior as the narrator consolidates her position in her community by repeating her mother's chants of Fa Mu Lan and Ts'ai Yen. Morrison also illustrates such community building through story-telling amongst Sethe's family. Silko's text Storyteller is the consequence and continuation of such rituals. Silko states in this text that story-telling provides a means to communicate "an entire culture, an entire identity of a people" (Storyteller 6). Native American ritual literature is the written equivalent of oral story-telling from which the written form takes many of its devices. Ritual literature therefore relies upon three things: a community to participate in the ritual and share cultural memories; the full participation of readers in transforming the words into meaning and placing it in the world; and the aim by the writer of transforming the world through the power of literature. In Storyteller Silko writes down stories told by her relatives and provides a further layer to the stories in which she explains her own reactions to the story and the circumstances at the time of listening, such as her

introduction of her Aunt Susie and the location of the story-telling in the kitchen (Ibid. 4). By connecting the photographs and stories together in one text, she unifies, and thereby creates a sense of community specifically amongst those who appear in the text and those who can associate their own experience with the text.

Silko uses aspects of spoken story-telling in her texts such as the reliance upon the active participation by readers to produce the ritual aspect of the text. In Storyteller Silko emphasises the call and response aspects of narration by noting that "The Laguna people always begin their stories with 'humma-hah' that means 'long ago'. And the ones who are listening say 'aaaa-eh'" (38). Unlike House Made of Dawn which begins with the same phrase in Jemez "Dypaloh" (1), Silko's texts do not begin with this address to the listener/reader but instead require readers to participate in the text by creating the connecting significance of the accumulated stories. The structure of Almanac encourages an active reading strategy. All the characters appear in each other's stories without reference to their previous context, so that the novel as a whole is formed from multitudinous small sketches which readers must connect and interpret. This is reminiscent of traditional story-telling technique by which:

> Traditional tribal narratives possess a circular structure, incorporating event within event, piling meaning upon meaning, until the accretion finally results in a story. (Allen 79)

In fact, the act of interpretation in a text written as ritual is a form of ritual itself as it is an act which has a transformative effect on the readers' minds. As T. Moore notes in

Rituals of the Imagination, "Words can be ritualized acts, if they are put in the river, in the stream of the imagination" (7). Readers actively imagine the world of the text in their minds and thereby add to their own cultural memory, changing the ways in which they view and thereby act in the world. This is comparable to the old tribal belief in "the bonding and animating power of words--to invoke and actualize the world through a language of experience" (Lincoln 18).

The power of words to actualize the world is the central premise of Silko's writing. Arnold Krupat has noted that, "...Silko dramatises her belief that stories--both the mythic and traditional tales passed down among the people and the day-to-day narrations of events--do make things happen" (63). In fact, the ability of words to invoke power, known as "wacah" in several Native American languages (Lincoln ii), is significantly but indirectly invoked in the novel. One of the central characters who leads the revolution is the male twin Tacho, who is also called "Wacah" by the magical speaking macaw birds who are his spiritual messengers (Almanac 476).

The relationship between text, readers, and the actual world is illustrated in Almanac by references to and the inclusion of fictional fragments of an ancient Mayan almanac. Seese can be viewed as the functioning for readers in the text as it is she who transcribes but does not translate the fragment of almanac. Her relationship with the almanac is complex and has a mystical influence upon her actual life which she herself does not understand. She explains:

> I dream all night about pages I typed the day before, except they aren't the pages

> I've typed, they are the pages I *dream*, but when I awake, the dreams feel they are real even though I know they are only dreams. (Almanac 452)

Readers are presented with unexplained transcribed segments of Lecha's almanac for which they, like Seese, must seek meaning. Interpretations for this can only be established when readers recall information from other sections of the novel. For instance, the reference to the "Death dog" (Almanac 571) in the almanac can only be understood if readers have remembered that Menardo's grandfather tells him that the "death dog" is a sign of a period of drought and destruction (Almanac 257).

The novel itself actually takes the same form as Lecha's almanac: consisting of fragments of stories of the past, present and predictions of the future. Confronted by fragments of stories in the novel, readers need to retain and recall information whilst reading, and therefore participate in the production of the text. For instance, the name "destroyers" is referred to without explanation (Almanac 702). However, the name "Gunyadeeahs" is used in the same context by another character who explains that the term refers to a violent tribe (Almanac 759). The term is then later used to refer to those who have no regard for the guardianship of life (with particular reference to the colonial invaders) (Almanac 723).

Janet St Clair, in analysing the structure of the novel, sees it as circular, rather than linear:

> Almanac of the Dead is a story that rises above its own tangled plot lines to

> reveal both the confluence of seemingly fragmented stories and the other that such confluence implies. The myriad plots are finally understood not as lines at all, but as great looping convergences.... (87)

Her description is reminiscent of Silko's perception that stories function as a part of a spider-web-like structure consisting of human identity, imagination and story-telling anchored by Mother Earth at the centre (Yellow Woman 21).

As a record of cultural memories the almanac has a sacred value, and hence the references to the Mayan almanac also lend a sacredness to the novel. The implication is that the novel itself is a sacred text of cultural memory written at a time of a similar level of crisis to that of early Spanish colonialism. These sacred associations, in combination with the acute realism, enable the novel to be read as an actual warning that the crisis with potential to bring about the destruction of the earth (and with it its people)--is now upon us.

Moreover, the fact that the novel has five sections has mythological significance. The Mayans believed there would be five phases of the sun before the earth would either end or renew itself. They believed that the passing of each phase of human existence was characterised by a crisis which threatened the existence of the earth, and that the renewal of the earth could only be brought about by the appropriate ritual. The renewal was often carried out by mythological twins (whose details differ from tribe to tribe) (Allen 19). Thus the centrality of the two sets of Native American twins in the novel has a mythical resonance beyond the text.

One of the interesting elements regarding the twins in Laguna mythology is that it is claimed that one twin is orientated towards communicating with her/his own community whilst the other twin is orientated towards communicating with people from outside that community (The Sacred Hoop 19). Silko's twins follow this pattern. Of the female twins, Lecha uses her psychic powers to communicate with all Americans by performing on television; Zeta, meanwhile, looks after Lecha's son at home and prefers to deal with her Native American business associates in a form of warped revolution through law breaking. Of the male twins, Tacho lives and communicates with European Americans whilst El Feo remains within their Native Mexican group. This sets up a difficult and fraught relationship between both sets of twins which is reflective of the tension between the magical and material perspectives in the novel.

IV. Cultural Bias

As in Beloved, Magic Realism is used by Silko to present spiritually imbued alternative ways of being to the dominant European American materialism. For both texts the acceptance by readers of "magic realist" ways of being is vital not only for the premise of the novel but, according to the novel, for the survival of the actual people who live alternative lives.

Whilst the novel warns readers of the destruction of the earth, it also offers hope to any reader who enters the alternate discourse produced by magic realism. There is a progression throughout the novel of characters coming together and seeking revolution and renewal. There are groups of homeless Vietnam veterans gathering to take over prosperous neighbourhoods, and networks of highly technologically trained guerilla movements whose battle is to save the environment, but emphasis is placed most strongly on a movement of Native Americans to come together with spiritual force to carry out a ritual of renewal for the earth. The novel in fact ends with the prophecy of a Native American ritual of renewal which relies upon the participation of readers in the magic realist discourse for its interpretation and enactment.

The prophecy notes that the mythological stone snake which is a spiritual messenger for the Laguna Peublo in the text has turned and was "looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come" (Almanac 763). This prophecy relies upon the readers' two-fold participation in the magic realist discourse to make the

prophecy credible and hence hopeful. Firstly, one must believe that the stone snake and the twins have mystical powers of guidance, and that in itself relies, secondly, upon the acceptance by readers of the magical practices of the mystical twin, Tacho/Wacah, referred to earlier.

Again, how much of the Native American culturally influenced magic realism that readers choose to accept is a test of the extent of their belief. It is possible to disbelieve the plausibility of several of the incidents, such as the occurrence of witchcraft, and to align oneself with the sceptical characters, and yet to accept other seemingly magic realist notions of animism or the living essence of the earth. To reject the holistic environmental philosophy associated with the Native American belief systems presented in the text is, however, to reject the central premise of the text. Although readers who cannot accept the Native American perspective are presented with other prophecies for the future (civil war, the expulsion of European Americans from the Americas), none of them are positively promoted.

In her essay titled "Uneasy Ethnocentrism: Recent Works of Allen, Silko, and Hogan", Janet St Clair poses the question of whether the prioritising of the aspects associated with Native American belief in Almanac is in fact ethnocentric, or whether this is avoided by the emphasis of an inclusive (and thus not ethnocentric) belief system. She explains, the "...dilemma arises from the paradox inherent in a specifically ethnic spiritual tradition that teaches inclusivity and convergence..." (St Clair 83).

Whilst it is true that the text prioritises an inclusive spirituality, the question to be asked is whether the inclusive spirituality is exclusively Native American. Catherine Callen King points out that the overarching philosophy of Almanac is in fact specifically but not exclusively Native American:

> Its radical vision of democracy reflects first and foremost the Pueblo cultures of the Southwest. But the vision is not alien to the Euro-American via the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. (39)

In fact what is presented in Almanac is that the overarching Native American perspective is not biased towards Native American ethnicity. In fact, the diversity of the characters who, even unwittingly, live a spiritually inclusive way of life, such as Clinton, Root and, towards the end, Alegria and Seese, reveal that "...it is not ethnicity which is being chosen as much as a workable way of conducting one's life" (St Clair 92).

My remaining unease with the text rests in the negative portrayal of homosexuality which is presented as a part of the depravity of European American culture, and with the flippant naming of an Asian character "Awa Gee" (Almanac 678). Whilst the exaggerated tone of the novel may provide a space for the ridiculous, the significance of names such as Seese/cease, Mosca/fly and Wacah, contrast with the dismissiveness of the one Asian character's name. This negativity towards homosexuality can be understood through the interpretation of the text by Janet St Clair in her essay "Death of Love/Love of Death: Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead". She explains

that:

> Vicious, manipulative homosexuality and injurious--even murderous--sexual perversions become relentless metaphors of the insane solipsism and phallocentric avarice that characterize the dominant culture. (St Clair, "Death of Love" 141)

This she relates to the "Philosophy of the primacy of the individual [which] has in fact stripped individuals of the social and spiritual structures that define their humanity" (Ibid. 141). In the light of these comments, is worth noting that the solipsism St Clair refers to affects all characters and is not simply associated with homosexuality. Ironically, the only occurrence of love between humans in the novel is carried out between Ferro and his male lover, Jamie (Almanac 693).

Thus, Silko's text differs from those of Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston as their prioritised discourses are specifically, and identifiably, African American and Chinese American. By contrast, the prioritised cultural perspective of Almanac can be seen to defy ethnic categories. Similarly, the techniques of the novel also cross the boundaries of culturally defined literary traditions. The epic, the realist novel, and particularly post-structuralism all have a notable influence upon the text. Silko employs free indirect discourse for the narratives of her fifty or more characters, meaning that each character's story is narrated from the perspective, and using the vocabulary, of the character. Moreover, because her characters have diverse cultural backgrounds, and are cross-culturally influenced, the various cultural and ideological positions from which her character's speak create multiple, diverse and often oppositional discourses in the

novel. The contrast is extreme between Trigg's discourse on war: "...if civil war broke out in Mexico, there would be not shortages of donor organs in Tucson" (Almanac 663), and Sterling's discourse on the sanctity of life: "...every drop of moisture, every drop of blood, each tear, had been made precious by this arid land" (Almanac 760). However, Silko delivers each discourse in the same matter of fact narrative style, and withdraws from authorial comment.

Arnold Krupat has noted that many of the subversive aspects of post-structuralist literature also occur independently in Native American literature by the translation of the story-telling tradition and holistic inclusive beliefs into literary form (118). So, rather than attempting to categorise Silko's use of multi-vocal narratives and reader participation as either post-structuralist or Native American tradition, I emphasise the meeting point of these two originally different systems.

It appears to me that Silko has developed a form of writing which replaces aspects such as the power of words and spirituality (whose absence has limited the political power of postmodernism to transform the world through Art). Yet her writing maintains points of contact with post-structuralism which could be used to lead the way out of the political and spiritual impasse into which postmodern culture has lead us. Perhaps Paula Gunn Allen is right to claim that: "Something sacred is happening" (Allen xiv).

Thus, Silko's Almanac of the Dead can be seen to have a more ambitious ritual aim than both Morrison's and Hong Kingston's novels (which attempt to create cultural memory

within a particular cultural group). The ritual aim of Almanac of the Dead involves the spiritual transformation of even those with an opposing cultural and political stance. Moreover, as with Beloved, the question of how these rituals will be carried out with regard to the material, and in particular, with regard to land claims, remains unanswered.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters I examined the creation and political potential of ontological magic realist narratives in texts by cross-cultural American women writers. By focusing on Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko, this thesis reveals that their particular literature aims to create actual cultural change to counter what they see as the materialism, individualism, and overly-rationalist perspective of the dominant culture, that suppresses the expression of communal and non-rational cultural memories. As Zamora and Faris state in their introduction to Magical Realism: Theory, History and Community:

> In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation (3).

I suggest that despite their specific influences, their situation as cross-cultural American women writers reveals similar concerns across their cultural differences. These can be attributed to the fact that their cross-cultural contexts place them in a contradictory circumstance in which they are partly influenced by the dominant American culture which they also oppose. Whilst I do not wish to create the impression that their cultural perspectives can be homogenized, it is true to say that all three writers take a similar opposing stance to the limiting effect of the defining power and rationalist perspective of dominant European/American culture. For these writers tradition is subject to change

and to constant re-evaluation in accordance with its cross-cultural fluid context. Their stance includes a similar embracing of non-rational influences, and the beneficial spiritual and communal effects of story-telling incorporating the passing of cultural memory from generation to generation.

The first chapter illustrates, with specific reference to Toni Morrison's writing, how magic realist narratives open discursive spaces in which cultural perspectives may be expressed, that oppose the self-serving control over discourse exercised by dominant culture. Furthermore, magic realist discourse is shown to be created from sometimes opposing, multiple and indivisible cultural influences from anti-dominant and dominant cultures. Thus this ambivalent form of discourse has been shown to be an appropriate means through which to discuss the ambivalence and contradictory cultural influences in a cross-cultural context.

The analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston's writing also illustrates the positive political aspects of magic realism such as the expression of a non-rationalist cultural perspective, and the expression of a history that has been silenced by dominant culture. However, it reveals the problems and disruption caused by the notion of magic realism and its fracturing of the categories of truth and fiction. The analysis also reveals how the use of magic realist narratives can heighten the confusion inherent in a cross-cultural context. Moreover, the understanding of such a context and acceptance of its inherent ambivalence depends on the individual's political perspective.

Analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko's novels further illustrates that she, like Morrison and Hong Kingston, uses magic realism in order to express an anti-dominant and non-rationalist cultural perspective and to express a cultural memory that is denied by dominant culture. The analysis reveals the way in which an ontological cross-cultural magic realist text, such as Silko's Almanac, can appear to be written in the dominant postmodern tradition and yet subvert that tradition from within. It is also apparent from Silko's text that the combination of ontological magic realism in a text influenced by traditional oral story-telling techniques can subvert not only dominant discourse, but also has a direct effect upon the actual world through the internalisation of the anti-dominant and non-rationalist magic realist perspective by readers whose response to the actual is influenced by it.

What I have set out to do in this conclusion is to illustrate that multiple similarities in content, themes, attitudes to narrative forms and devices, writing and belief systems indicate that Morrison, Silko and Hong Kingston can be seen to have created a new genre of fiction. By doing so I have drawn together and expanded upon similarities of my critical approach to that of the critics Paula Raboniwitz, Linda Krumholz and Kum Kum Sangari who are each concerned with an aspect explored in this study eg. ritual, memory, post-colonial politics.

This thesis has revealed two levels of political significance to ontological cross-cultural women's magic realism. On the one level, magic realism has been revealed to be a narrative device which fractures categories associated with notions of the real and not

real (reality, truth, fiction etc.) to produce a narrative space in which discourse is not limited by enforced limitations of what is true or significant. This is extended in ontological magic realist texts such as Beloved, Woman Warrior, and Almanac of the Dead as the magic realist narrative allows the expression of a non-rationalist cultural perspective which is related to the writer's own cultural belief system. This aspect of their writing has been discussed by many critics, including Stephen Slemon's post-colonial reading, and Wendy Faris's postmodernist reading which follows Lyotard's interpretation of postmodernism. Paula Rabonowitz also notes that their writing combines the content of the political aim and the narrative form so that the story is "embedded" (28) in the telling. In this manner their ontological cross-cultural magic realist fiction, influenced by story-telling technique, is a balanced form of fiction in which the content, message and narrative are fused by the element of magic realism.

The second level of political significance is related to the writer's aim to use magic realist narratives in order to influence the readers' mind through interaction with the text. There is a request implicit in the magic realist elements of the text for readers to accept the magic realist cultural perspective which is presented to them. Although this may appear as simply an extended version of the suspension of (dis)belief of readers, these texts require readers to recognise additionally the political significance of its magic realism to actuality. In her essay "The Politics of the Possible" Kum Kum Sangari noted that the magic realist writing of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie, which she calls "nonmimetic narrative modes", have a "political dimension qualitatively different from the current postmodern skepticism" (Sangari 157). Considering Marquez and Rushdie as cross-cultural writers, she states that Marquez in

particular creates:

> ... a plane on which the notion of knowledge as provisional and of truth as historically circumscribed is not only *necessary* for understanding, but can in turn be made to *work* from positions of engagement within the local and contemporary (Sangari 161).

The readers' cultural assumptions are challenged during reading and are encouraged by the inclusion of recognisable realistic and actual elements in the text to apply the magic realist perspective to their actual world. Furthermore, as I discussed in chapter three, the attitudes towards writing of Silko and Morrison in particular propose a ritualistic aspect to the texts and the readers' response. In her doctoral thesis Linda Krumholz proposed that an anthropological definition of ritual should be applied to the writing of Morrison and Silko (5). She argues that oral story-telling is considered to be an important ritual in Native American and African American cultural tradition by which psychic transformation, cultural renewal and communal memory is created. Krumholz argues that, by introducing elements of story-telling tradition into written fiction, their writing adopts a ritual aspect which the writers emphasise so that their readers are guided by the stories to recreate their communities.

Whilst Hong Kingston shares Morrison and Silko's attitude towards the communal and guiding function of stories, her writing problematises the notion of literature as a form of ritual. This is because the ritual element of the stories which function in her Chinese American context is not overt, hence the confusion which she suffers regarding the

stories she is told. The effect is that Hong Kingston creates a text which questions issues of belief and truth to a greater extent than the other texts discussed, and in this way appears to be the most postmodern and self-conscious of these writers. The element of doubt expressed towards magic elements in Hong Kingston's narratives also makes readers question their own confidence in the function of the text as a ritual guide to be applied to reality.

Neither is Sangari's analysis of Marquez and Rushdie totally applicable to a consideration of the ritualistic aspect of the writing of Morrison, Hong Kingston and Silko. She regards the political possibilities in their writing to hinge upon the lack of closure and upon relativism (Sangari 165). Whilst Morrison's, Silko's and Hong Kingston's texts are participatory and thereby lack closure, their writing does reveal a limit to relativism. Their expressed opposition (although ambivalent) to dominant culture demonstrates this. Paula Rabonowitz, for instance, claims that "these authors construct a magical realism from the anger and power of otherness" (40).

My discussion of all three of these writers reveals the links between magic realism and political change both in discourse and in relation to the actual world, and between magic realism and non-rationalist, communal and orally based belief systems. They have each adopted the use of stories from oral traditions in order to warn, aid, or guide readers/listeners (particularly those who share their cultural context). The main theme of each writer which links their work, is the desire to create a communal memory. This takes the form of a guide for the people with whom they share their cultural context to

resist and revise versions of their histories which have been defined or denied by dominant culture. As Homi Bhabha suggests in relation to Toni Morrison's Beloved, their texts create cultural memory in the absence of the possibility of expressing a factual and provable history that would be accepted by dominant culture in our contemporary postmodern context:

> When historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of memory and the indirections of art offer us the image of our psychic survival (Bhabha 18).

The reconstruction of memory in literature through the adaptation of oral story-telling to written narrative draws together the writing of these three authors. The product of this adaptation has been shown to be a multi-voiced narrative which appears to be post-structuralist. Equally, the emphasis on story-telling as a recurrent theme, and the discussion of story-telling in the narrative lends the appearance of a postmodernist self-reflexive narrative to their texts. There are also similarities between some tenets of reader-response theory and the expectations of these writers that their readers will participate ritually in the texts, following Iser's emphasis on readers as the focal point for the interpretation--and the creation--of the text. In effect these texts may be approached through post-structuralist, postmodern and reader-response critiques, but their defining feature as a separate form of writing lies within their ontological magic realist elements. These writers create texts which appear to be a part of European/American literary tradition, and yet the very same features which indicate a postmodernist/post-structuralist text also originate from oral cultures. In effect, these

writers have produced a form of writing which creates a meeting point for European/American postmodernism and non-European communal oral cultures.

One aspect of magic realism remains unresolved in this thesis, and that is the opposition voiced by Morrison and Hong Kingston to the very term "magic realism". I have revealed the ways in which the concept of magic realism is particularly useful to a cross-cultural writer, but Morrison and Hong Kingston's objections can be related to the inherent associations of the words "magic" and "realist". As Zamora and Faris note, there are "...contradictions between the critical label and the literary practice" (4). The term, as I stated in the introduction, originates from European/American critical tradition, and yet the practice is used to create narratives which challenge this very tradition. Carpentier's initial application of this term was strongly influenced by the racist assumptions of European belief in regard to the Americas. The term "magic" also carries a negative meaning in rationalist dominant culture, and whilst their writing contains elements which can be described as "magical" which they protect from negative associations through cross-cultural magic realist narrative techniques, their ambivalence to dominant culture does not allow them to entirely disregard its definitions. It is appropriate to note that the term "magic realism" refers to a cross-cultural situation which rational and non-rational belief systems mutually influence; the very paradoxical notions inherent in the term are themselves indicative of the ambivalence towards the multiple cultural influences which exist in an ontological magic realist narrative. In the absence of a phrase which is not defined by dominant discourse, which can be associated with alternative cultural influences and yet maintain

an element of cross-cultural ambivalence, "magic realism" is the most appropriate term to use to refer to such a politically complex concept.

These texts not only challenge the readers' belief systems but also challenge their perception of the function of literature. Since the reading of magic realism fractures and combines the categories of the actual and the fictional, the improbable and the probable, not only in content but also in the implicit ritual function of the literature, readers are challenged to re-evaluate the limitations of that which they are willing to believe and the way in which these limitations affect the world.

The critics Linda Hutcheon and Walter Benn Michaels, although writing critical postmodernist studies from two differing perspectives, both noted the specific relevance to actuality and the historical references in texts which I have identified as magic realist. Hutcheon's text, A Poetics of Post-modernism: History, Theory, Fiction, includes a discussion of these two approaches to postmodernism and the origins of these from aspects of Nietzsche's varied philosophical works. Hutcheon's definition hinges upon the ironic revision of history, and is based upon Nietzsche's revision of historical significance in The Use and Abuse of History, in which he requested that history be made useful for the present and not be fossilised in the past (99). Michael's apocalyptical definition is based upon Nietzsche's theory of the death of God in Beyond Good and Evil (223).

Linda Hutcheon considers such texts as Woman Warrior, Song of Solomon, and One

Hundred Years of Solitude as the epitome of postmodernist fiction, which she calls "historiographic metafiction"(5). Walter Benn Michaels, in his essay "Post-historicism", takes a post-marxist approach, and identifies Almanac of the Dead as typifying a "post-post-historicist" (19) interpretation to our contemporary time.

For Hutcheon these texts exemplify postmodernist fiction, as she states in reference to the historiographic metafictional text that:

> its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs...is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past (5)

She views these texts as essentially radical, as they "work *within* conventions in order to subvert them" (Ibid. 5). Hutcheon therefore has identified the political power of the narrative device of magic realism without specifically naming it. It has the power to deconstruct from a position that is simultaneously inside and outside that which it attempts to revise. It is this power which Silko's Almanac holds in relation to Californian postmodernist culture. That is, it provides a means to deconstruct postmodernist discourse from the inside, by introducing contesting elements from Native American tradition which appear similar to postmodernist narrative devices and yet which are based upon contesting assumptions. However, the texts do not completely follow Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism as, despite their self-conscious concern with history, they do not take an "ironic" approach to history since they do not assume that history is an entirely constructed concept. Their fiction can be associated with actuality, and history is the narrative by which actual events are recalled and interpreted.

As Morrison stated on the Radio 4 programme "Book Club" on 7 July 1998, one must "select from [history's] truth, its facts, in order to go forward".

Walter Benn Michaels, in response to Fukuyama's post-marxist proclamation that the end of the cold war has created a new age of post-historicism, claims that Silko's Almanac is indicative of the self-conscious re-emphasis of the importance of history, in reaction to the nihilistic and isolating interpretation which philosophers such as Fukuyama propose for our age. Michaels names Silko's text "post-post-historicist" in order to emphasise its revisionary, grounded and progressive approach in reaction to the stasis of Fukuyama's post-historicism.

Whilst Hutcheon proposes that the writers whom I have identified as magic realist are essentially postmodernist, Michaels proposes that Silko's text (and the techniques which he discusses and I have previously associated with other cross-cultural magic realist narratives) moves beyond postmodernism, and is creating a new cultural and stylistic perspective.

The texts analyzed in this study suggest that their "stories with warnings" are aimed at the ahistorical, anti-spiritual, individualistic and nihilistic elements of post-Enlightenment postmodernism, and its effects upon contemporary dominant American culture. On the one hand, Morrison, Hong Kingston, and particularly Silko can thus be seen to write postmodernist literature in that they write self-reflexive narratives and take a revised view of history. On the other hand, they confront the apocalyptical aspects of

postmodernist culture by reintroducing notions of communality and spirituality into a contemporary world view. Thereby they go beyond Michaels' and Hutcheon's analysis which focus on history.

These texts provide a way forward which avoids the disruptive influence of dominant culture on their cultural memory by self-consciously constructing a means to express the memory of the past--the magic realist narrative. With the expression of their communal memories and the call for readers to participate in them, their texts move beyond the nihilistic aspects of postmodernism which deny those memories. They provide both an apocalyptic warning and an alternative spiritual guide which favours cross-cultural communal renewal. They are in effect birthing the future from postmodernism.

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Appendix

Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston, London, 21 September 1995.

Abbreviations:

MAB -- Margaret Ann Bowers
MHK -- Maxine Hong Kingston

MAB Maxine, you have published three books to date, the last of which was the wonderfully energetic Tripmaster Monkey. Before that was your fictional biography and cultural history of male Chinese immigrants to the United States, China Men, and before that, the hugely successful Woman Warrior which, in my haste to categorise, I have called a fictional autobiography. Some writers are said to be visual, others evoke a mood well but I've always felt your writing is loud and audible. There are a lot of songs, poetry, shouting and in Tripmaster Monkey the ranting of Wittman Ah Sing. What is the importance of sound for you?

MHK There are many importances to sound. I write about the struggle to find a voice; that would be a personal as well as a political voice. I want my writing to be like music. I heard China Men as a symphony. Quite often as I was working on it I heard major and minor movements of the symphony which were very clear to me and then I translated it into sound and words. In the process of writing my work I always read it aloud. I want it to stand up as an oral piece of art and not just text. Perhaps I have been influenced by talk story--I was raised on talk story and I understand that in all human cultures we told stories to one another before we could write. As a child I listened to and told stories before I could write and I wanted to put over all the strengths of the oral story even though I was writing text: the changeability, the voices of the oral story. It's interesting to me that

you pick up on the music of what I do because I think of myself as a very visual person. I paint, but I'm not knowledgeable about music. I don't have a system for recording music and hence I can't remember music; I can hear it, but I can't remember it. The only way I can remember it is to write it down as a story or a large book with many movements, small themes and rhythm. Another reason why it is important to me for my work to read aloud--I love it when people tell me they have read my work aloud to children--is then I think that I am closer to how ancient Chinese poets worked. They not only composed their poetry but they painted it, they did their calligraphy and sang it and performed it. So an artist in ancient China was a more integrated and whole person and I think that I am aiming for that.

MAB Would you like to push more towards oral story telling and audio-record your writing?

MHK I have recorded. There is an abridged Woman Warrior that Random House did which I recorded but more importantly I'm now enjoying very much reading out loud to audiences and it is performing in a way. Also, China Men and Woman Warrior were done as plays and so there is the work being performed and in a way coming out of text into oral tradition.

MAB Did you have any hand in changing the text from novel to play?

MHK I consulted the playwright.

MAB Can you see yourself writing a play?

MHK No, because I lived in Hollywood for some years--my husband is an actor--and after reading scripts and hearing that a speech must be no longer than an inch of type, no. I love writing description and you are just not allowed that in a play.

I like the speeches and dialogue being said by actors and getting accents and dialects and ways of speaking--I like that but I don't want to write a play.

MAB You spent part of your early school life silent in English and in The Woman Warrior you refer to the pain of speaking--are you working through these demons by producing such audible writing in English?

MHK Since it was so traumatic for me when I realised the language of home was different from the language outside... and then it was also such a wonder when I eventually learned English and saw how easy English is. I can write in English. A child can write in English and you can take the phonetic alphabet and write in any other language. You can take sounds into that alphabet and it's so much fun to play with that. Once I had figured out a way to express something then I find the next thing which is difficult to write so that I find I am going into things which are more and more subtle and larger and larger in the writing. In speaking I also find I am trying to say things which have not been said before by me or by other people. Sometimes it is very alarming. I think that I have worked through a way of speaking and then I'm struck shy or start to stutter or a situation arises and I can't think of what to say, and it happens often. I used to think that if I wrote down a nightmare it would go away or that as in psychotherapy they say if you have an insight or see something then your obsessions will go away, but I find that if I learn to say or write something then somehow the stakes get higher and the challenge gets bigger as I go further. It's hard. Every book seems to get longer and it takes me longer. It took 3 years for Woman Warrior, maybe 4 years for China Men and then 8 years for Tripmaster Monkey. I hope it doesn't keep going like this!

MAB One thing I am very aware of as a reader of your work is the power of words to both create and to harm--it comes across very strongly in your writing. I'm thinking in particular of the breaking of taboos by speaking out and conversely

of the threat that was put on the community in Woman Warrior by that breaking of taboos. Also you wrote that you thought you would actually wound your father with words. Do you feel danger and freedom with your use of words? Are you consciousness of this when you use them?

MHK I feel both these things and, of course, freedom has its dangers. I am working now on an idea that there are ideas out in the world and there are ideas that humans can invent and we can invest those ideas into a physical reality. The medium of doing that is words, words as a blueprint of at least being able to change the atmosphere of how humans are able to behold one another and then we can work through them. I think of ideas being invisible and that we can make them more manifest so that we can send them to one another. After words maybe there is a next step which is building the physical universe. I am thinking we can make a peaceful world--how can we change the world? So first there has to be the idea of peace and community and love and I am working on the idea that we can't have love without ideas. I want love to be declared to me and I want to declare it to others and from that we build our family and community.

MAB I had a similar idea as well, that by using magic realism in particular, you could bring things which don't exist into writing and there they can exist simultaneously as things which are known to be real.

MHK Oh good!

MAB Sau Ling Cynthia Wong says that you are "talking things into existence"....

MHK Yes, yes, that's what I mean! Talking and writing things into existence--a wonderful way to put it. This word peace is a common word but I truly think that most people haven't said it right. We haven't explained it right. We haven't told exactly what peace consists of and if we can do that better we can have

peace, we can change the world. I don't quite like the term "magic realism". It's about eight years ago that Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko and I were in China and we were talking about what it is that we do. At that time we were satisfied with the term "magic realism" but since then I've decided I don't like it. It's because "magic" means supernatural, instant changes that come out of nowhere and I believe in a logical scientific sequence of events in which there's an idea, there's finding the words for it and one word at a time one makes a blue print and then one puts the posts into the ground, the steel flashing we put into the posts, the two-by-four framework, the plaster and so on; the negotiations, the dialogue--one word at a time between people taking place moment by moment, and each moment causing the next moment and that's not magic. Magic is illogical, supernatural, it's not in our hands and that world isn't in our hands.

MAB What I was thinking of just as you were saying that was Brave Orchid, your mother, and the episode in Woman Warrior at the medical school in China where she battles with a ghost and you write a wonderful comment "Medical science does not seal the earth, whose nether creatures seep out" (79). I was wondering if this is a review of your thoughts when you wrote that?

MHK There is a constant contending with people who think like her--that's not even thinking. That's another state of mind where the supernatural exists. Look at the OJ Simpson trial. There are people willing to believe wild, unscientific, unevidenced information and there's scientific information as well, DNA etc. There are two states of mind and two ways of thinking here and they are contending back and forth. The lawyers are appealing to the jury in one magic way and one scientific way. At home I still contend with that. My mother just turned ninety-one and she says she is ninety-two but she refuses to move into my sisters house because she says there are ghosts there to push her down. So now she is living in the back yard in a trailer--it's brand new and so there are no

ghosts there. When we were trying to talk our mother to move in with my sister I was thinking: why do we have to contend with this at all? I knew I couldn't talk her into there not being any ghosts and so I thought: why am I having to talk around these ghosts in 1995? I also participate in this trying to evolve into a more logical cause and effect mind and having to deal with people who believe that there are no strict boundaries between the fictional and non-fictional worlds.

MAB I was also thinking of the physicality of your writing. There's a reminder in your writing of the physicality of words and the way in which things can be created in words and also of the very physicality of writing itself: in Woman Warrior the narrator's name sounds like ink, she appears covered in ink and becomes an embodiment of writing. Fa Mu Lan's back in the "White Tigers" section of the book is carved with words and is a wincingly painful reminder of how words can exist almost as a living presence. What is the connection for you between writing and the body?

MHK After my house burned and my book burned and disappeared I phoned my mother and she said "You've got hands just build it all again" and then immediately after my hands hurt. After the fire my hands hurt for a long time and I'd wake up in the middle of the night and they'd hurt. They weren't burned in the fire or anything but what I thought was that it was sheer energy being caught in my hands and I couldn't get started with my writing. I couldn't do it fast enough and I felt once in a while my writing arm hurt and I think it's all of those ideas trying to come out and my not being able to do it fast enough. I have been very inspired by the Buddhist statues and Indian statues of gods with many hands. Sometimes they have thousands or ten thousand hands and each of those hands have hands radiating out and I wished for that so I could have more than one writing hand. Some of those hands have eyes and I love to imagine that each of my hands has an eye in the middle of it so that I'm more mindful and

careful if I touch things and I know I can see better if I use my hands better. I have often thought that if I couldn't see and didn't have hands I couldn't write anymore. That's very scary. It's so strange that writing is to do with the hands. Manuscript--manu means hand doesn't it?

MAB Do you feel you could switch to a purely spoken skill?

MHK I've heard of people being able to compose onto a tape recorder but I think it's too slippery, it's too unhandable. All kinds of things come out of the mouth and there's such an exactness of handling not just every word but every letter of the alphabet.

MAB You said that your house which contained your latest manuscript was recently destroyed in a fire. Originally, when I was thinking about the Woman Warrior I was thinking that by writing an autobiography, no matter how many fictional elements there are, you are proving your existence and writing down something which is inerasable. After the fire do you have a new attitude towards the longevity of the written word, the life of your work; the security of writing?

MHK I'm pretty sure that I've always known that I'm not my writing. I'm not the same person as my writing. I have a very full life apart from my writing. A book being lost in a fire--when I arrived at the fire and realised that the book was gone I had a series of very interesting experiences. I remember, standing there feeling I was thingless. I felt divested and empty. I felt I understood the Buddhist sense of emptiness. Suddenly I felt full of something which I named "idea". I could have also named it "spirit" but I felt that it was all around me and maybe it was because I was alive and I wasn't killed in the fire so I could feel this life energy, but I thought "I know what this is, it's "idea" and it was the book before and after it was in words". The manuscript that I wrote still existed--it was an idea that was all around me and inside me too.

MAB You are now working on a continuation of the book that was burned. At the ICA (20 September 1995) you called it The Fifth Book of Peace whose title refers to a series of lost books in China called the "Three Books of Peace", the fourth book refers to the book lost in the fire and the fifth is the book you are now writing. This idea of lost books is particularly interesting and it ties in with the impression I have of your work that each one of your books fills in a gap in history which has been untold, denied or ignored. I was wondering if you consciously recreate history in your work?

MHK I did know that I was writing history and I felt that I needed to give readers background in order for them to understand stories in the foreground. That had been a problem for me as a young writer because I wanted to write more simple present-time stories and I didn't want to spend a lot of work on expository information and yet I have to do it. So, I was always working out ways to educate the reader in history. I hadn't realised until you just now said it that I am working in a sequence of history, that I am filling in gaps even into telling the history of the Sixties as well as the time of Ghengis Khan. I have noticed at one time that I was working on a whole series of wars throughout the ages. I didn't realise until you said it that it's actually quite ordered what I have done.

MAB You mentioned war--you have a concern for the Vietnam war. I know your brother Joe was involved in the war but could you explain why this event in history has a particular interest for you aside from the connection with your brother?

MHK I'm surprised that more people don't feel the way I do because the Vietnam war was so long. I noticed that in The Odyssey they call the Trojan war "The Long War" and that is what we could call the Vietnam war. It took up so many years of our lives. I've always been aware of the wars in my life and I don't understand how people can say "Oh, I didn't know there were concentration camps" because

I was a baby during World War Two and I was perfectly aware that the Japanese were being taken away. I was aware when they came back and all those Japanese American children were coming into Kindergarten with me. I remember the blackouts and I knew there was a war from the very moment there was consciousness. For most of my youth there was the Vietnam war. I was very much part of it. I saw a pall over the world and I was aware when we were sending advisors over there and I know how we caused it. I tried to stop it and in that way I was engaged and personally involved. I felt not just that it was happening but that it was my responsibility to do something about it. Even if it was my responsibility to fight it, it would still be my responsibility but it was my responsibility to stop it. So I have referred to it as "my war".

MAB You have taken a responsibility in it with your writing, of course, and running a writers project for returning veterans....

MHK I'm not just my writing. I don't feel that it is enough to write about a war and about human relationships. I also feel I need to get my body and myself out on the picket line in addition to writing--it's not enough just to do writing.

MAB Considering Vietnam and problems you face as a woman from a minority group in the United States, and one which has received not only racist but anti-communist prejudice as well, what is your attitude toward your nation, the United States, and it's authorities? Did any negative feeling you might have felt towards the United States push you towards the emotional connection with China, which is revealed in the Woman Warrior?

MHK Of course my feelings of being an American are very complex and constantly changing. There were times during the Vietnam war when I just wanted to leave--but then, where do you go? There was a vague thought of leaving for Japan because they have a non-military constitution but then I got as far as

Hawaii which gives another interesting feeling about the US. Living in California, being born and raised in California, you feel you are at the edge of the United States, but then going to Hawaii brings you to another kind of the United States. Then, finding that while Hawaii has so many races it is one great military base. They were developing rockets and battle ships and so much of Hawaiian culture is military, with Pearl Harbour etc. But there are good feelings about being an American. One good thing is the "Bill of Rights". I've often thought that the "Bill of Rights" is a blue print, a way in which we can existentially become an American by actually practising it. I see the "Bill of Rights" as saying "Practice free speech! Just go out there and talk and write and practice assembly!". I see it as a call to go out there and form communities, practice religion, have a spiritual life. I see that first amendment as a great idea that I mean to carry out and that I think everyone else ought to carry out.

MAB You toured China with Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko. It seems to me that your writing is very similar--not so much in style as more in the issues which you are all working with--memory, oral story telling, the magic and the real....

MHK There are exactly similar images. Working in the sugar cane, ceremonies, communities, story telling. We all feel that we have inherited stories from the ancestors--the ancestors that can fly! I see exact correspondences.

MAB Is this purely coincidental?

MHK Oh, yes.

MAB You've been drawn together because of the similarities?

MHK Yes, it's coincidental because those things are actually out there in the real universe, and the mythic universe. Those ways and images are out there and we

are able to see them.

MAB Do you think that is specifically because you are all three women from minority backgrounds, no matter how different they may be? Why have you all noted this need to express these issues and acted upon the need?

MHK I think that we're all literary people and we are all aware of British and American literature and we are all readers and raised on this and we want to find strength in literature and we found that we are missing. We couldn't find ourselves in literature and we were living amongst people who still had those myths and ancestral histories and we could not see them in literature so we had to write it ourselves. I think being a woman is also very important. We not only couldn't find the cultures that we were living in but we also couldn't find enough women in literature--the kind of women we wanted to learn from. So we had to invent them ourselves. We had to bring what we knew into literature.

MAB One way in which all of your writing is similar is that you all write feminist writing but you all go beyond your gendered experience. You have all written feminist books with male protagonists. Tripmaster Monkey, with the very engaging male protagonist Wittman Ah Sing, reminds me very strongly of Wise Children by Angela Carter but I can't imagine Wise Children with a male protagonist. Is this a continuation of the same feminist stance you had when you wrote The Woman Warrior or is Tripmaster Monkey a new direction you are taking?

MHK I feel that an evolved feminist or human being first understands oneself and then considers the other. First there is compassion for oneself and then for it to be true compassion it has to go out to one who is not the same as oneself. I see my work as going from a self-centred narcissistic world into a larger world. I think there's always a struggle in people to break out of narcissism, to feel the

emotions of others. I think a great writer has to be empathetic to people who are seen to be different. In my work I work through an understanding of myself. When I was very young I thought only women and girls had feelings and I was sure that men and boys did not because I saw no evidence that they had any. They never cried, they were able to fight and hurt each other as though they enjoyed it so obviously they had no feelings. I had the idea that feeling in men and boys was something that I conferred on them with my empathy. I feel it is a philosophical stance that I am going to assume they have feelings and I have to treat them that way and write them that way.

MAB I know you wrote the passages set in China in Woman Warrior before you had visited China and you were writing an imaginary China. Walter Abish in How German Is It wrote an experiment of the imagination to see how closely he could imagine Germany without having visited. There is a question about whether his accurate descriptions of contemporary Germany are stereotypical or whether he has accentuated key elements of German society. I know we've said before that stereotypes can seem very close to real people but could you explain your attitudes towards imagining things which you have not seen and the danger of stereotyping?

MHK I guess people seem stereotypical if one doesn't look deeply enough inside them. I have a sense that I don't describe how people look but I write about what they are thinking and feeling and in that sense we get beyond appearances--which is all that stereotypes are--they are just appearances without essence and depth. I imagined China before going to China and the first long trip through China was with Toni and Leslie. At that time Woman Warrior and China Men had already been written and I was fearful and curious to see whether the China I had imagined would be similar to, or invalidated by, the China I saw in real life and it turned out to be very similar in detail and in feeling. Of course, I felt very glad

that my powers of imagination were affirmed by reality. I was thinking that a strong imagination imagines the truth. But then, that brings up another philosophical question about perception; Am I so imprisoned in my way of seeing that when I get over there I am not able to see through my pre-conceptions to what reality is, and how does one do it? I tried to be mindful of whatever I was looking at and looking for something new, something to surprise me and actually looking for things to contradict what I knew. I saw how people live so close to one another. The villages look like villages as you would see in Africa or South America--they look like Pueblos. It made me understand that one woman having an affair could impact the whole village because they are right next to each other. It's amazing they found a place to go to have any privacy. The people built on top of one another's common walls. The beds are like Dutch beds in cupboards. I wish I had had physical detail like that before writing. However, there were essential human truths that were borne out by the journey. I only found details which would tell so much I wish I had had them because it would have made my work even more real and physical. An example of this is that after China Men was published my brother told me that there were Litton Industry executives on the aircraft carrier, corporate executives that were running the war. These executives were wearing yellow hats, they were civilians but they came from corporations so I guess they were CEOs or something. They are on board the aircraft carrier and they are being saluted and saluting people just as if they were in the military. I thought, "I wish I had had that when I wrote about the aircraft carrier". Instead, I had pages of statistics proving that there was corporate sponsorship of the war and that is not dramatic, nor interesting. I don't remember the statistics now but I would remember these men marching around the ship with these little yellow hats saluting one another. See, that's the kind of thing that I missed by not being there. But then not seeing it doesn't really invalidate what I wrote. If anything, in China everything I saw affirmed what I wrote in detail.

MAB The word "invalidates" is interesting because it sounds like your fiction would not be true to you had you found China was different from your imaginings.

MHK Yes, that's right.

MAB Do you think that is possible? Would you have thought your perception was invalidated or your written work?

MHK Oh, I think both, but then it is a hypothetical question because I have never found anything contradictory.