

Textual Expressions of the Search for Cultural Identity

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In the United States of America, the search for identity has been a recurrent literary theme, addressing the perceived plight of individuals, social groups and the nation as a whole. The cultural revolution of the sixties both weakened the hegemony of the "dominant" Euroamerican culture and strengthened the various "subcultures". On the one hand, there was a tendency to question and even deny the traditional values, norms and beliefs which had laid the "foundation" of American cultural identity; on the other hand there was a powerful civil rights movement which drew attention to the situation of the "other" Americans whose life experiences and histories diverged from these norms. Such developments entailed a shift in the rhetoric from the assimilation metaphor of the "melting pot" to the multicultural metaphors of the "cultural mosaic" or "salad bowl". In so-called marginal or ethnic groups, the quest for cultural identity which followed often took the form of a rejection of the dominant culture, accompanied by the revival or (re)construction of their distinctive ethnic or marginal cultures, including a rewriting of the stories and of the communal history. The role played by the texts of writers of ethnic origin or who belong to these marginal cultural groups has been central in this process of "ethnic/marginal" identity (trans)formation. A closer analysis of *The Warrior Woman: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*¹ by Maxine Hong Kingston (Chinese-American), *Beloved*² by Toni Morrison (African-American), and *Ceremony*³ by

1 (London: Pan Books, 1981).

2 (London: Pan Books, 1988).

3 (New York: Penguin, 1986).

Leslie Marmon Silko (Native American), as textual expressions of the search for personal and/or communal cultural identity, may serve to illustrate the various paths chosen by "ethnic/marginal" writers in their quests. Moreover, such an analysis might also serve to illustrate the role texts as "stories" play in the process of identity (trans)formation in general. The decision to approach the issue of identity through the concept of the "story", seemed justified in that these writers have all adopted this as a narrative technique, which has implications for both form and focus.

Culture is a vast and fluctuating concept, with a multitude of dimensions. The western social scientists who studied this phenomenon initially focused on such characteristics as the behavioural, ideological and relational features which distinguished a particular group of people. There has been a clear tendency, therefore, to define cultures in terms of the distinctive features which establish their alterity; a tendency which has been reflected in all attempts to establish cultural identity.

Gradually, the focal point shifted from the "content" of cultures to the processes whereby cultural units were constituted and members recruited through descent or consent, a development which coincided with a growing interest in such interpersonal processes as socialization, identification, and interaction. Of these, the latter has perhaps proved most fruitful in the present context, focusing as it does on the manner in which the distinction between "own" and "other" is activated in the process of social group formation.⁴ Thus, an exploration of the own/other dichotomy may be considered central to the search for group identity.

Clifford and Marcus have added yet another dimension to this concept, maintaining that "Cultures are not scientific 'objects' ... [but] are produced historically and are actively contested."⁵ This historical aspect is also evident in Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which brings together the common experiences that are represented in history and in shared material and social conditions, which in turn structure social interaction.⁶ Since culture and history are so closely interrelated, therefore, I have interpreted the concept of culture broadly, considering it to encompass history for the purpose of the present discussion.

4 Identity and interaction across cultural boundaries has been studied by anthropologists in particular, including Fredrik Barth, John Turner and Erving Goffman.

5 James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 18.

6 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outlines of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

The concepts of culture as process and of identity clearly converge, since cultures are obviously produced and reproduced by individuals interacting in socio-political contexts. In "Beyond the Culture Wars," Gates maintains "that [identities] exist ... only in relation to one another, and ... are ... sites for contest and negotiation, self-fashioning and refashioning."⁷ Bentley makes a similar point, stressing that ethnic identities are related to perceived differences and affinities, being "anchored internally in experience as well as externally in the cognitive distinctions in terms of which experience is ordered."⁸ This combined internal/external focus is also reflected in the fact that identity is sought through gaining an understanding of one's own culture in its wider multicultural context. Implicit in this view is the fact that any consideration of cultural identity must take into account both the external historical, social, political and interactional dimensions, as well as various internal "componential" and interactional dimensions.

Language warrants special mention in the present discussion of cultural identity in view of the role it plays both in cognition and in communication. The relationship between language and conceptualization must be kept in mind because different cultures structure knowledge and thinking in different ways, and this is reflected not only in variations in language usage, but also in different world-views. It must be borne in mind, therefore, that language constitutes a communicative medium both within and across cultural boundaries; hence, differences in cultural codes, both verbal and non-verbal, can result in a breakdown of communication. Finally, there is the question of translatability, of the extent to which culture-specific meaning and language can (or should) be translated. Writers from "ethnicminority" cultures may face a threefold problem, requiring a translation from another language to English, from a vernacular "english"⁹ to a more standard variety, and from oral to written.

In reading texts by "ethniclmarginal" writers as expressions of the search for cultural identity, I have sought to apply in a general way the

7 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Beyond the Culture Wars: Identities in Dialogue." *Profession* (New York: MLA (1993)), pp. 6-11.

8 Carter Bentley, "Ethnicity and Practice." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol. 9, No. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 36.

9 A distinction is made here between standard English, which is written with an upper case 'E'; and vernacular 'englishes', which are distinguished by the lower case 'e'.

theoretical perspectives outlined above. In so doing, I have assigned the writers to the role of agents, actively engaged in the process of producing, contesting, re-inventing and re-interpreting their cultures and histories, and in managing their personal and collective cultural identities in a multicultural society. Their quests for cultural identity have moved in somewhat different directions, however, and although the relevance of the historical, the ideological/mythical and the interactional/relational dimensions are evident to some degree in all the texts considered in this paper, relationship/interaction plays a particularly prominent role in the search for identity in *The Woman Warrior*, as does history in *Beloved* and ideology/myth in *Ceremony*. It is on these aspects I will focus, following a brief exploration of the manner in which "stories" serve as the pivotal point around which both individual and community quests revolve.

Stories and textual expressions

Among the various functions served by stories, the following are relevant to the present discussion: as a means of constructing cultural identities; as expressions of the cultural values, norms, beliefs, and traditions of the social group; and as links between past and present, inner and outer, self and other. In this context they serve not only to perpetuate culture, but also to (trans)form it, since it is the individual storyteller who shapes the central cultural ideas in order to achieve a specific goal. Storytelling, therefore, is an art form in which tales are not simply told, but rather re-told by the teller, who can alter various elements in response to perceived inner or outer needs. Thus, it is as acts of interpretation by storytellers, that "translations" of "ethnically marginal" oral traditions into English texts may be understood. This is clearly reflected in the emphasis placed by each of these writers on the importance of re-writing and interpreting the stories included in their texts.

Stories are not simply told, they are lived. In *Women Who Run With the Wolves*¹⁰, the Jungian analyst and cantadora storyteller Clarissa Pinkola Estés uses the term "story" in its broadest sense, encompassing

¹⁰ Clarissa Pinkola, *Women Who Run with Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books. 1992).

dream material, physical sensations and body memories. Both the personal and communal stories in the three texts included in this paper benefit from such a broad interpretation of this term, since the idea that a story is simply an account of true or imagined events is culture-bound, i.e. Euroamerican.

Stories are often used to instruct, thus contributing to the perpetuation of cultural traditions, rather than their modification. The cautionary tale of No Name Woman in *The Warrior Woman* would illustrate how Chinese mothers use stories to emphasize the consequences of non-conformity. What is particularly interesting about Kingston's attitude to and handling of this story is the fact that she is obviously dissatisfied with the identity attributed to the woman in the Chinese story, and re-interprets it from alternative perspectives to create optional romantic or oppressed identities. In this way, even instructional stories can be re-told in such a way as to undermine tradition and facilitate the search for cultural identity.

In their healing capacity, stories are part of the process of "soul-making" and may contain the cures which will reclaim lost psychic drive, or restore a weakened and confused individual or community. *Ceremony* illustrates this type of story, incorporating Native American myths into a new variant of a traditional ceremony, with the intention of healing both the protagonist and the environment. Here the healing process focuses on the reestablishment of links between past and present, inner and outer, self and other.

Estés also refers to what she has termed "root-stories", which contain truths "so fundamental to human development that without integration of this fact, further progression is shaky" (167). The story of "The Ugly Duckling" is a root story about "Finding one's pack: belonging as blessing" (166) which is relevant to the theme of the search for cultural identity in each of these stories. Consider, for example, the position of Denver in *Beloved*; although trapped in a fantasy world which isolates her from any form of community, she finds the courage to leave the porch and seek help to save her mother. In so doing, she recovers not only her own words and opinions, but also her place in the community. The feeling of being an "outsider" in the existing social order also moves Tayo in *Ceremony* and the "I" in *The Warrior Woman*, each of whom may be considered to have a "fragmented psyche" or "fractured consciousness."

According to Estks, certain other categories of story may be considered archetypal, being found in many cultures. She maintains that the miracle tales of other worldly characters and superhuman feats attribute such virtues as sensitivity, courage, loyalty and dedication to a woman, providing a positive role model to emulate in the personal search for identity. Thus, the story of Fa Mu Lan in *The Warrior Woman* represents not only an adaptation of a Chinese myth, but also a wider tradition. Estès also refers to the archetypal hunting story, which may be seen as representing a search for understanding and nourishment for self through merging with nature. Thus, in *Ceremony*, Tayo's search for the white cattle, with all its sacred overtones, may also be read from the perspective of the traditional hunting story. Such archetypal stories are, according to Estks, important for the process of self-definition, and hence for personal identity - and ultimately, I would argue, for cultural identity as well.

Turning from function to form, it must be stressed that the inclusion of stories in a narrative text, be they for instruction or healing, has implications for the form because stories are by nature oral. According to Melendez, "in mainstream American literature, oral heritage of Native and ethnic peoples merits recognition not only as a primary historical and literary source, but also as documentation of the unofficial traditions, for its artistic expressiveness and *for its distinctive form*" (my emphasis).¹¹ A basic distinction should be made here between the communal voice in the sacred myths and non-sacred tales, and the personal voice in family stories, all of which are represented in these texts.

There are a number of narrative techniques which are used in the texts considered in this paper, which may derive from the oral tradition. For example, in *Beloved* vernacular language expresses the oral nature of the texts; in *Ceremony* mythical texts are distinguished by their poetic form; and in *The Warrior Woman* the tale within a tale serves as a framing device. All of these writers have structured their texts in what has been variously described as vignettes, tableaux, or "patchwork quilts", combining relatively short blocks of narrative achronologically. In this way, they are able to convey the experience of fragmentation which typifies the mental state during the search for identity, and imitate

11 Theresa Melendez, "The Oral Tradition and the Study of American Literature." *Redefining American Literary History*, Ed. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (New York: MLA, 1990) 142-149.

the process of (re)constructing an identity; and/or to convey a holistic perspective in which past and present, and here and there are irrelevant dichotomies. To varying degrees, they blend together multiple voices, multiple stories and multiple points of view, often failing to acknowledge the transition. The incorporation of different levels of reality as well, enables them to illustrate that even "reality" is culturally defined.

When oral traditions are "translated" into the English language structures, both the original and target structures may be altered to express this. Such modifications to the narrative techniques enable the writers from "ethnic/marginal" groups to communicate with in-group members using some of their own cultural codes. It also enables them to communicate cultural distinctions to the multicultural population at large. This illustrates the process by which these writers find a voice or style which is in keeping with their various identities.¹²

The texts represented in this paper may be considered transitional between oral literary traditions and written; hence, the texts themselves may epitomize the search for cultural identity as the writers explore "new" modes of expression. It might, however, be more accurate to say that they indicate a "new" adaptation of the oral storytelling tradition. In my opinion, these "new" textual expressions, which seem quite common in the literature of "ethnic/marginal" peoples, warrant a closer examination which the limits of time and space do not allow in the present paper.

The Ho Chi Kuei: Chinese-American Ghosts

In *The Woman Warrior*, the writer's personal narrative is told through family tales, legends and talk-story, and it is in relation to the female figures in these stories that the process of self-definition takes place. By interweaving stories and experiences distant both in time and space, Kingston produces the effect of diffusion, which is heightened by the juxtaposition of real-life referent and traditional wisdom. This technique may serve to capture the experiences of an individual who feels frag-

¹² Michael M. J. Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Ed. Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1986) 194-233.

mented, the plight of bicultural persons. In this way the medium embodies the message.

According to Yalom, the stories are transformed into personal fictions in childhood, which are later refashioned in adulthood, and finally adapted for publication.¹³ This progression seems clearly to reflect the writer's search for cultural identity, as epitomized in the process by which she personalizes others' stories and adapts them to her own requirements in the American multicultural context.

In *The Woman Warrior*, cultural identity is being negotiated in the mother-daughter relationship, as the writer juxtaposes and seeks to reconcile two divergent sets of norms and values, and of female models and expectations. The emphasis in this text, therefore, is on the Chinese/American dichotomy, and on the search for a hyphenated Chinese-American identity.

Brave Orchid, the emigrant Chinese mother, is struggling to raise a good "Chinese" daughter in America. Her story-talking constitutes a source of Chinese wisdom and lore, and may be viewed as an element in the evolution of a mode of consciousness. These stories are a powerful influence in shaping cultural identity, and also a source of confusion. As Kingston phrases it, "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America" (WW 13).

Thus, one of the central problem areas facing second generation Chinese-Americans is how to distinguish whether the statements made and the stories told are true or false. The Chinese do not give their proper names, they conceal their occupations, and rather than paying compliments they "like to say the opposite." How then is it possible to know what is meant? It is the girl's inability to distinguish fact from fantasy which underlies many of the mother-daughter confrontations in this text; operating with different cultural codes, they often fail to understand one another.

The central dichotomy between Chinese and American culture seems, for the writer at least, to revolve around the issue of gender. There is no equality of the sexes in the Chinese family and many proverbs are included in the text which express the negative Chinese attitude to

13 Marilyn Yalom, "The Woman Warrior as Postmodern Autobiography," *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's The Woman Warrior*, Ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim (New York: MLA, 1989), pp. 108-115.

daughters. The dominant images of Chinese women are, according to the writer, those of wives and slaves, and of heroines and swordswomen. Only by performing superhuman feats is it possible for a Chinese girl to demonstrate "perfect filiality" (WW 47). Brave Orchid's own stories of her life-experiences in China emphasize the respect and status she achieved as a doctor, and her bravery and power is revealed in her confrontations with ghosts. To reconcile these Chinese models of femaleness with those of the dominant American culture, is no easy task for a young girl.

The idea of "American-normal" (WW 82) seems a more attractive identity to the child in the text. In many respects the Chinese ghosts of her mother's talk-stories, which frame her search for identity, are more real to her than the black and white ghosts which populate America. Nevertheless, she "had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing" (WW 182). It is this combination of fantasy and logic that forms the foundation for her hyphenated Chinese-American identity.

Voice is problematic for the child in the story, epitomizing the cultural duality which she experiences. On the one hand, she "quacks like a duck" when she speaks Chinese; on the other hand, it takes years before she dares to speak English at all, and even longer to invent "an American-feminine speaking personality" (WW 155). It is in the act of finding a voice, in becoming a word warrior, that the cultural contradictions are tentatively bridged, combining the linguistic traditions of the dominant culture with the narrative traditions of the subordinant. In story-talking her own life experiences, and interpreting her mother's talk-stories, legends and proverbs in the light of her personal need to understand the why's and wherefor's, she is seeking to create a tenable personal history, and to come to terms with her own fragmented consciousness. She is also undertaking a revisionary exercise, re-writing myth and history in an attempt to claim the fragments as her own and to give them new meaning relevant to the American socio-cultural context.

A bicultural identity, like any other, is not a static phenomenon to be embraced once and forever; rather it is an ongoing process of interpretation. Thus, it is necessary to "continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (WW183).

Laying down the stories

Liberation is more than emancipation, and in *Beloved* Tony Morrison focuses on the transformation from ex-slave to free agent, from object to subject, and from ahistorical 'animal' to historical person. The processes involved are complex, comprised of the individual laying claim to self and personal history, and thereafter the development of communal identity and a tenable history.

As property, slaves had been denied voice and language, name and history, family and community, love and belonging, as well as physical freedom. The institution of slavery had denied their subjectivity and their humanity, empowering the masters to define slaves' identities and record their history; their culture was not even recognized. The schoolteacher epitomizes the process by which the dominant culture assigns an identity to "the Others"¹⁴; he and his pupils measure, observe and record the "otherness" of the slaves, documenting their animal characteristics and the need to control them, and thereby justifying the system.

Sethe declares that "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (B 95). One of the central dimensions of this process is perhaps that of discovering ones own body. Baby Suggs experiences freedom as she takes possession of her hands and heart, and she shares this understanding with others in the community. Reclaiming her name is the second step she takes, as she denies the bill-of-sale name by which she has been known by her master. The third step is to try to trace her lost children, since most bonds of kinship had been broken under slavery and the family unit is necessary for the construction of individual subjectivity.¹⁵ For Sethe as well, the reclamation of self focuses on her children, and on her right to love them and make decisions concerning them. For Paul D the issue of being free to love and establish a family is related to his need to define himself as a man, where others have defined him as a boy. Thus, the claiming of self is a complex process which centers on interaction with others and a sharing of stories.

14 "Other", with an upper case "O", is used to refer to the social identity established in interaction across cultural boundaries.

15 Mae G. Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-membering the Body as Historical Text." *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex and Nationality in the Modern Text*, Ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 62-83.

Personal history is also an aspect of self-construction, but these stories are so painful that the ex-slaves have sought to "disremember" them. Nevertheless, for *Sethe* there are certain things which cannot be forgotten, and are constantly "remembered." For her, "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (B 42), while for Paul D it had been necessary to "shut down a generous portion of his head" (B 41). As trust develops based on love and "relatedness," there follows a need to tell these stories, and *Sethe* acknowledges that "Her story was bearable because it was his as well -- to tell, to refine and tell again" (B 99). It is this process of conscious remembering, therefore, which enables one to construct tenable personal histories, and to make meaning of our individual and collective lives.¹⁶ And only when the past is remembered do life in the present and plans for the future become possible.

Communal history is based on interwoven stories and common lived experiences. According to Henderson, "the importance of our private memories becomes, ultimately, the basis for a reconstructed public history" (83). Hence, the rituals which Baby Suggs holds in the forest, through which she helps others to reclaim their bodies, lay the foundations for both the individual ex-slave's sense of self-worth and self-respect, and for a sense of communal identity. In a different way, the murder of the baby Beloved may also contribute to communal identity formation in that it establishes communal norms; social ostracism is the penalty for having "got proud" (B 147) and for murder. Eighteen years later, the penalized arrogance seems to have run its course and past errors, in the form of the resurrected Beloved, threaten to take possession of the present. The community is then prepared to take action, and the planned exorcism becomes a ritual re-enactment of the tragedy. The vital difference, however, is that *Sethe* attacks the approaching white man rather than her daughter, and the neighbourhood women intervene to prevent the tragedy, rather than standing passive. In this re-enactment, the ghost representing their past suffering, the ultimate Other, is exorcised and the community is reunited.

16 Marilyn Sanders Mobley, "A Different Remembering: Memory, History, and Meaning in *Beloved*," *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1992), pp. 356-365.

Community is defined not only on the basis of personal and internal needs for mutuality, but also by external forces.¹⁷ Thus, the we/they, black/white dichotomy, and social, political and economic interaction across cultural boundaries must also be taken into consideration. Baby Suggs' dying message is "that there was no bad luck in the world but white-people. 'They don't know when to stop'" (B 104). There is evidence in this statement and the many others referring to white people in this text, that interaction across cultural boundaries dividing free African-Americans from their white compatriots has not changed greatly with the former's emancipation. The terms on which interaction is predicated are still dictated by the former.

This text is not simply an exercise in rewriting history, however, but carries a clear message for African-Americans of the United States of the present; a message about the processes of liberation, about community formation and about the need for a tenable past.

The only cure is a good ceremony

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. (C2)

In Ceremony, various myths, stories, rituals and ceremonies guide Tayo's quest for identity, and mythic devices such as supernatural characters and non-ordinary events are employed. Since the Native Ameri-

17 Charles Scruggs, "The Invisible City in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Arizona Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (1992), pp. 95-132.

can cosmology is holistic, his alienation/illness and that of the land are one, and his healing ceremony runs parallel to the myth of Reed Woman, which restores rain to the earth and harmony to the universe. The sacred hoop of being, which Spider Woman remembers and remembers, is an ordered, balanced, living whole in which time is cyclical and space spherical, and in which all that is alive grows and changes. This is in stark contrast to the dominant Judeo-Christian view of cosmology which is dualistic and hierarchical, and is thus considered a source of alienation.

According to myth, witchery "storied" the white people into existence, after which they grew away from the earth, their fellow creatures and life itself. Alienated and fearful, they became destroyers, serving the cause of witchery rather than harmony. Thus, the people in this text can be divided into two categories according to whether they consider themselves integrated in the cosmos or apart from it.

As the story opens, Tayo is crying "because they are all dead and everything is dying" (C 16). He is struggling to untangle the memories inside his skull and reconstitute his invisible self from the silent, white smoke. Caught up in the witchery, he is alienated from his self, culture and cosmos.

The alienation of a warrior, however, is essential if the holistic world-view is to be maintained. Allen maintains that the war is actually the second of three stages in Tayo's ceremony.¹⁸ The first stage is his incorporation into the holistic universe in a visit to a traditional ritual site where he en-visions "a world made of stories ... a world alive, always changing and moving" (C 95); and in the encounter with Night Swan, who is associated through colour imagery with the regenerative power of Ts'eh. The second stage is the ritual of war, which involves the dissolution of all connections and therefore of self. Finally, the third stage is the reincorporation of the alienated warrior into the whole, and old Ku'oosh is called upon to perform the traditional Scalp ceremony. However, as the medicine man points out, "There are some things we can't cure like we used to ... not since the white people came" (C 38). In white people's warfare, the killing takes place across great distances and there is no knowing who or how many have died.

18 Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

Bentoni, the mixed-blood medicine man Tayo is then taken to, reiterates this point, emphasizing that "elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies" (C 126). This new ceremony is complex and protracted, beginning with Bentoni's mythical and pragmatic explanations of the nature and all-inclusiveness of the problem and the cure. The sacred hoop ritual follows, after which Bentoni relates a vision to Tayo, in which he has seen the spotted cattle, certain constellations of stars, a mountain and a woman; and he warns Tayo that "they" will try to stop him and that the world depends on his succeeding. Tayo sets out on a ritual journey guided by this vision, during which he finds the cattle and repossesses them; meet and establishes a relationship with Ts'eh, the earth spirit; and confronts the destroyers without retaliating and being incorporated in the witchery himself. Only then does he see the pattern, and realize that he is not crazy at all; only then is he able to nurture the land; and only then is he incorporated into the community. Having bridged the gap between isolated consciousness and universal being, and having defeated the witchery, which "is dead for now" (C 261), his journey is completed. Although on one level it is a personal quest, it was also made on behalf of the community, the land and all creation. Moreover, the corporate identity achieved is no more fixed than the ceremony which called it forth.

Another aspect of Tayo's alienation which must be considered is related to his identity as a half-breed, and as the illegitimate son of an Indian mother and an unknown father. This is symbolized by his "Mexican eyes", which constantly remind others as well as himself of "his" shame and of his "otherness". Night Swan explains the rejection Tayo experiences as deriving from fear: "'They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don't have to think about what is happening inside themselves'" (C 100). Yet it is perhaps this mixed blood which enables him to complete the ceremony, and all of the significant figures guiding Tayo's quest are distinguished by their eye color. It is they who have insight into the "true" situation, and in the end Tayo himself has gained new insight as well, which he shares with the tribe; and in telling his story he is not only reconstructing his personal history and identity, but also contributing to the communal history. Thus, it may be in the people with mixed blood the hope for survival of Indian cultural identity

lies, since they are often in the forefront of change, and it is through change that tradition survives.

According to Wiget, "Tayo's story ... becomes for us our shared ceremony of reading and, in restoring some of our shared humanity despite our cultural differences, offers us a healing equal to Tayo's" (89).¹⁹ Thus, Silko envisions a potential for unity in multicultural America based on the Native American holistic view of the cosmos; and by putting this vision into words, she is "storying" this unity into existence. In her "myth" she is binding together the search for individual, community and universal identity.

Conclusion

At this juncture it seems appropriate to draw together the various threads of "ethnic/marginal" identity which have been the subject of this paper. The most marked similarities between texts lies in the narrative techniques, which draw heavily on culture specific oral traditions. All of the writers are storytellers in the traditional sense of the word, and are drawing on existing stories/myths as the nexus for their creative quests; and cultural identity is one of the many aspects of these quests.

As Wong so aptly points out, all three of these cultural groups are vulnerable to exoticization, although in different ways; "Native Americans, being the indigenous inhabitants of the North American continent, cannot be regarded as foreign, [and]... the culture that African Americans have had to develop is indisputably American. ... Asian Americans tend to be regarded as direct transplants from Asia or as custodians of an esoteric subculture" (9).²⁰ This basic distinction seems to have implications for such diverse features as the individual writer's conception of the quest for cultural identity, for the textual expression of this, for the solution envisaged, and for the social, historical and political issues raised in this context.

Considering the different conceptions of the quest, it is interesting to note that while Kingston has focused on the personal search for identity, and Morrison on the personal and communal, Silko has drawn upon the

¹⁹ Andrew Wiget, *Native American Literature* (Boston: Twayne, 1985).

²⁰ San-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Native American holistic world-view and envisaged an all-inclusive personal, communal and universal quest. This, among other things, has had implications for the aspect of the quest which they have chosen to highlight. Thus, since it is in interaction and relationships that personal identities tend to be shaped, it is on this aspect Kingston has focused. In addition to relationships, Morrison, has also focused on history as a community building concept. And Silko has combined the preceding with a prevailing ritual/ceremonial approach, which has enhanced the holistic emphasis. The "solution" to the identity problem, or rather the goal of the quest, is in each text appropriate to the direction taken: through interaction and a careful balance of Chinese fantasy and Euroamerican logic, Kingston reconciles the fragmented consciousness and negotiates a hyphenated Chinese-American identity, the process shaping the Ho Chi Kuei; through interaction, shared "rememories" and a focus on common experiences and joint action, Morrison begins to give shape to a positive African-American identity, the process involving the laying down of the stories; and through interaction with the environment as well as people, and the reformulation of community rituals, Silko produces an integrated universe, the process requiring a good ceremony. With regard to the issues which the authors have highlighted, Kingston has concentrated largely on gender; Morrison on cultural, political and social relations of domination; and Silko on the processes of environmental and human alienation/destruction. Thus, each in its own way, these texts allow readers from both dominant and "ethnically marginal" cultural groups to "experience" vicariously what it means to be on the margins of a multicultural society; to suffer from fragmented consciousness and alienation; and to set out on a quest to find one's cultural identity.

Finally, I would like to emphasize the implications these texts, and others by writers from "ethnic/marginal" cultures, have for communal identity (trans)formation. Stories have the power to capture the imagination, and to shape the way in which we think of ourselves and others. Perhaps such texts will set people pondering the problem of how to construct a truly multicultural society. Then perhaps these thoughts, like those of Spider Woman, may materialize.