

Three Women's Texts and the Healing Power of the Other Woman*

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Abstract

While language partakes in the white-male-as-norm ideology and is employed predominately as a vehicle to circulate established power relations, contemporary Third World feminists specifically credit the achievements of women writers of color. Inscribing the figure of the Other Woman, the Woman who is sexually, racially, and culturally "othered," these non-mainstream women writers disrupt the white hegemonic representations of "the Other" to define a gender- and race-specific identity. Challenging the racism of feminist literary history, this paper foregrounds three American ethnic women's texts to investigate the power of the Other Woman as that which sustains and renews a tribal and ethnic legacy. Pivoting around three prototypes, Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978), Ts'eh in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), and Brave Orchid (Ying-lan) in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), this study uses the concepts of "the wild zone" and "the uncanny" to define otherness, and argues for feminist ethnic differences that can eventually become sources of tribal renewal and healing. The healing power of the Other Woman as configured in "three women's texts" thus not only represents a significant mode of the "critique of imperialism," but also redeems Black/Indian/Asian women's sense of nothingness and makes their ethnic salvation possible.

Keywords

The Other Woman, Third World feminism, the wild zone, the uncanny, otherness, feminist ethnic differences, contemporary American ethnic women's writings

In her renowned essay, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak criticizes Gilbert and Gubar for reading Bertha Mason only as Jane Eyre's "dark double" and thus overlooking the fact that nineteenth-century feminist individualism is strongly inflected by the drama of imperialism. Charlotte Brontë marginalizes the native Creole woman as she strives to

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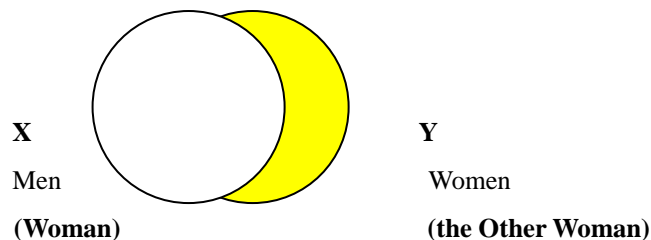
assert the white woman as speaking subject. In setting fire to Thornfield Hall, Bertha is destroyed, as a fictive Other Woman, for the construction of “a self-immolating colonial subject” (Spivak 270). Therein Spivak brilliantly discloses that *Jane Eyre*, this widely-read girl’s book, is in reality an “allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism” (270). Spivak eventually argues that the question for feminism should not be “Who am I?” but rather, “Who is the Other Woman?” and that the essential thing is to define a gender- and race-specific identity, a racial Other Woman. Indeed, the figure of the Other Woman has permeated contemporary feminist criticism for the last two decades or so. In an article where she sketches out the parallel histories of Afro-American and feminist literary criticism and theory, Elaine Showalter commences her discussion by acknowledging the “uncannily feminine and Other,” i.e., “the Other Woman of feminist discourse, the women outside of academia in the ‘real world,’ or the Third World” (“A Criticism of Our Own” 168-69). Like Spivak, Showalter reminds us of the presence of “the Other Woman”: “Who is the other woman? How am I naming her” (169)? While feminists have objected to the sexism of literary history, the figure of the Other Woman apparently challenges the racism of feminist literary history.¹

As a matter of fact, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) first sees the similarities between racial and gender oppression when she compares women’s situation to that of the predicament of Bigger Thomas, the Afro-American trapped by color, in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). For both women and Afro-Americans are “partially integrated in a civilization that nevertheless regards them as constituting an inferior caste” (de Beauvoir 335). More than thirty-five years later, Barbara Smith again notes the intersection of race and gender in her essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1985) as she pinpoints the importance of understanding and recognizing how both sexual and racial politics are “crucially interlocking factors” in black women’s writings (170). Smith problematizes the “universal” statements of “women” and particularly concerns herself with the danger of white feminism as “disguised cultural imperialism” which never sees the Other Woman in her own right but forever appropriates her for its own ends (172). While the Other Woman is invisible and yet ubiquitous, Third World feminists start to urge on us the recognition that race, ethnicity, and gender in effect function as inextricable systems of oppression and form a “matrix

¹ Recognizing the significance of the Other Woman, Showalter nevertheless fails to mention a single black or Third World woman writer, whether major or minor, to exemplify her questionable category. Barbara Smith thus contends that “the idea of critics like Showalter *using* Black literature is chilling, a

of domination,” to borrow Patricia Hill-Collins’s words.

Indeed, the term “woman” has long been synonymous with “white woman,” as bell hooks points out in her book on black women and feminism entitled *Ain’t I a Woman*, and the very existence of the Other Woman has disappeared from a feminist discourse designed to express the types of oppression from which women of color have suffered the most. Identifying/naming the presence of the Other Woman helps to call into question the singular and monolithic category of Woman that is White and accordingly becomes crucial in contemporary feminist criticism. A new paradigm examining the articulation of gender alongside the axes of race and ethnicity is needed to credit the multi-cultural voices in non-mainstream women writers, and thus displace the previously oversimplified male-female dyad in feminist criticism. Precisely, the relationship between the dominant female culture which is White and the culture of the Other Woman can be illustrated in a diagram adopted and adapted from Edwin Ardener’s model of women’s culture. Elaine Showalter in her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” borrows Ardener’s model to theorize the differences among women’s writings, and argues that Ardener’s culture model is more complete and satisfying than models based on biological, linguistic, and psychological differentiation (259-63). In his essay “Belief and the Problem of Women,”² as he maps the differences between women’s culture and the dominant culture, Ardener uses intersecting circles to represent the dualistic nature of women’s cultural sphere:



Since women constitute a muted group, the boundary of whose culture overlaps but is not wholly contained by the dominant (male) group, much of the muted circle Y falls within the boundary of circle X while there is also a shadowed crescent of Y which is outside the dominant boundary and which thus, in Ardener’s terminology, becomes “wild.” In representing the hierarchical view of our current feminist criticism, we

case of barely disguised cultural imperialism” (172; emphasis original).

² Edwin Ardener, “Belief and the Problem of Women” in Shirley Ardener, ed., *Perceiving Women* (New York: Halsted Press, 1978) 3, qtd. in Showalter 261-62.

replace the dominant group of “Men” in Ardener’s graph with that of “Woman,” and the muted (subordinated) group of “Women” with that of “the Other Woman,” in order to address the concepts of silence and silencing so crucial to the discussion of non-white women’s participation in women’s culture. The “wild zone” of the Other Woman can be understood experientially and metaphorically. Experientially it stands for the aspects of non-white women’s cultural and ethnic experience that is different from that of white women and there is certainly a corresponding zone in the dominant white experience that is alien to women of color. But metaphorically speaking, this wild zone has no corresponding area in the dominant circle since white women’s consciousness falls within the dominant boundary, being thus well represented and more accessible. Women know what the white female crescent is like as it is the subject of current feminist studies. The ethnic women’s culture, however, is doubly marginalized and remains obscure. The wild zone, or Other Woman’s space, thus addresses the concern of a genuinely all-women-centered criticism. Our project is to represent this wild zone, to retrieve the lost ethnic memory, to reconstruct the erased female identity, to acknowledge the silenced women’s differences, and to name the unspeakable presence of the Other Woman, i.e., to counter the dominant (white) female culture with an “otherness” that has its sources in ethnic history and culture.

This paper pivots around the figure of the Other Woman, the Woman who is sexually, racially and culturally “othered.” Her very salvation, however, resides in her “otherness,” specifically her magic power to be transported to and connect with the “other” world, the world of ancestral spirits. Three prototypes from American ethnic women’s writings illuminate the thematic concern of this paper: Pilate in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1978), Ts’eh in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), and Brave Orchid (Ying-lan) in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Pilate is Morrison’s most complex and concentrated image of an Afro-American in touch with the spiritual resources of black folk traditions. While Pilate is a conjuror, Brave Orchid for Kingston is a shaman, a witch doctor who acts as a medium between the visible world and the invisible world of ancestral spirits and ghosts. Ts’eh in *Ceremony* embodies the image of Kochinnenako (Yellow Woman), the ceremonial woman who helps reclaim the Indian gynarchical and sacred traditions. This paper proposes to analyze the true Spirit of the Other Woman as embodied in these three prototypes. For their sexual, ethnic, and cultural otherness not only disrupts the

hegemonic (white) American identity but also becomes the source of their people's salvation, healing, and renewal. Through the stories of these "other" women, each of the three writers brings art back in touch with her sacred ethnic sources and also herself becomes "a new shaman." Laurence Coupe in *Myth* (1997) identifies the artist as a shaman, "a conductor of forces" who is able to "develops not only new forms of art, but new forms of living." As Coupe puts it, the artist as a new shaman is "a mythical, priestly, and political figure who has become a visionary and a healer" (57). Likewise, Trinh T. Minh-ha refers to ethnic women's story-telling as a shamanic art (128-29, 140). Story-telling becomes at once "magic, sorcery, and religion" (129), which embody the power of the ethnic Other Woman: the words and images have a palpable energy, a kind of power that effects cures. Indeed, the three terms "woman," "native," and "other" that constitute Trinh's book title and address her critical concern with postcoloniality and feminism, converge in the metaphoric figure of a shaman. That the Other/Native/Woman writer/story-teller is a shaman who animates, regenerates, and fertilizes the tribal civilization identifies ethnic women's story-telling as a powerful undertaking. For Trinh, otherness is strength.

Therefore, while ethnic female culture is silenced/muted/repressed, the cumulative effect of ethnic women's creative energy can never be ignored and cancelled. Through their stories of the Other Woman, Silko, Morrison and Kingston transcend the dominant racial and sexual confines, and (re)define a tradition that is at once outside and inside the established female literary tradition. They indeed enter the wild zone—the "uncanny" territory that has been "concealed, kept from sight," to borrow Freud's words (223). The Freudian configuration of the uncanny as something unfamiliar and yet "secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it" (Freud 245) best characterizes the "wild" stories of ethnic women writers. These stories are wild because the repressed energy "returns" without restraint. Furthermore, as these stories become the site of a struggle from which the ethnic female voice originates, they are also a place where "the specific memory of traumatic historical events accedes to what Toni Morrison has called a 'rememory': an incantation, an iteration, of that position from which the subject speaks the present in the past" (Bhabha 201). Morrison coins the term "rememory" to suggest women's power of "creating, singing, holding, bearing, transforming the culture for generations" (Moyer 270).³ Women become the speaking subjects who "rememory" and

³ "Rememory" appears in Toni Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, where it refers to the activity of re-remembering/connecting the past with the present.

“talk-story”⁴ to connect the present with their ethnic cultural past. These stories are wild because women’s “rememory” and “talk-story” let loose what has originally been repressed. As Morrison contends:

I am valuable as a writer because I am a woman, because women, it seems to me, have some special knowledge about certain things. [It comes from] the ways in which they view the world, and from women’s imagination. Once *it is unruly and let loose*, it can bring things to the surface that men—trained to be men in a certain way—have difficulty getting access to [...]. (emphasis added)⁵

We are tempted to understand things “unruly and let loose” as the essential elements of the “wild” zone. Coincidentally, Leslie Marmon Silko uses a similar concept to orient her story: “It’s already *turned loose* / It’s already coming. / It can’t be called back” (*Ceremony* 138; emphasis added). A story is not just a story. Once its imaginative force has been aroused and set into motion, it cannot simply be stopped until it re-surfaces things long repressed. Likewise, Maxine Hong Kingston’s metaphor for herself as story-teller is that of a “loose tongue”: “I was the one with the tongue cut loose” (*The Woman Warrior* 197). The story begins with Kingston’s mother’s warning against speech: “Don’t tell;” and yet twenty years after her mother tells the story of her no-name aunt, she breaks the family taboo by re-telling the story. A story told is bound to circulate. Telling Kingston the story, the mother knows that the forbidden family history cannot remain concealed any longer. Meanwhile the daughter empowered by the mother’s “talk-story” becomes a story-teller herself who re-members and re-deems the repressed ethnic past. The mother and daughter join to commemorate and transmit the cultural past. Significantly, what is transmitted is not simply the story but also “the power of transmission” (Trinh 134).

In effect, ethnic women writers are always empowered by the presence of the (M)Other Woman.⁶ Alice Walker works at re-discovering “our mothers’ gardens.”

⁴ Like “rememory,” “talk-story” can be both a verb and a noun. In Chinese, “talk-story” (說故事) means “telling a story.” Kingston uses the term “talk-story,” a common idiom drawn from Cantonese, to signify any kind of oral tale, whether personal, familial, communal, or historical (Lim 259).

⁵ Toni Morrison, “An Interview with Toni Morrison, Hessian Radio Network, Frankfurt, West Germany,” conducted by Rosemarie K. Lester, qtd. in *Awkward* 95.

⁶ Western (white) women writers, nonetheless, suffer from maternal absence. Recognizing the disadvantage of lacking a literary foremother in Western civilization, such renowned women writers as Charlotte and Emily Brontë and George Eliot adopt masculine pseudonyms while Dorothy Wordsworth confesses that she detests the idea of being set up as an author. They are infected with “the anxiety of

Toni Morrison in her essay “Memory, Creation and Writing” confesses:

I do feel a strong connection to ‘ancestor[s],’ so to speak. What is the uppermost in my mind as I think about this is that my life seems to be dominated by information about black women. They were the *culture bearers*, and they told us [children] what to do. (398; emphasis added)

The ancestral knowledge preserved and transmitted by mothers is a treasure of ethnic culture. Or rather, as Trinh T. Minh-ha pinpoints, “the world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women” (121). (M)Other Women become “culture bearers” because they always sing, chant, and “talk” stories to children. Reflecting on her mother’s story-telling, Maxine Hong Kingston says: “I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story” (*The Woman Warrior* 19-20). Mother has a mother. Every woman patiently partakes in nurturing and transmitting the cultural past. Leslie Marmon Silko’s source is her grandmother:

I grew up with storytelling. My earliest memories are of my grandmother telling me stories while she watered the morning-glories in the yard. [...] *The chanting or telling of ancient stories to effect certain cures or protect from illness and harm have always been part of the Pueblo’s curing ceremonies.* I feel the power that the stories still have to bring us together, especially when there is loss and grief. (emphasis added)⁷

Like Kingston, Silko feels “the power” of the (Grand)(M)Other Woman’s stories. Telling stories, like watering morning glories, functions to refresh, purify, and regenerate (Trinh 136). Furthermore, story-telling/story-chanting provides a cure and protection from disease and effects a ceremonial healing. The grandmother is the medium of this healing as she chants and tells “ancient stories” to “bring us together” in contact with ancestral spirits.

Indeed, the power of healing resides in the (M)Other Woman’s stories. Not only does the oral art of story-telling challenge the traditional written authority and thus, in

authorship,” as Gilbert and Gubar suggest. Gilbert and Gubar replace Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” with the term “anxiety of authorship” to characterize the nineteenth-century British and American female literary tradition, which is, of course, Caucasian (49).

⁷ In *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh Minh-ha quotes this passage as an epigraph to a section entitled “A cure and a protection from illness,” from the back cover page of the Viking version of *Ceremony*, originally published in 1977 (New York: Viking Press).

effect, Eurocentric understanding of language and representation; the tales women “talk” actually preserve/recover a past repressed and lost. Consequently, story-telling becomes a strong weapon against white culture in the struggle to avert cultural eradication.

Silko’s novel *Ceremony* is about the healing power of the (M)Other Woman’s stories. The novel opens with a poem about Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought Woman: “Thought-Woman, the spider, / named things and / as she named them they appeared. / [...] / I’m telling the story / she is thinking” (1). The Indian people believe that language does not merely describe reality; stories are origins and thoughts are the “creative fountain of reality” (Blumenthal 369). Thought-Woman’s words create reality. Thought-Woman is also the spider, the mythic grandmother goddess found in much of American Indian mythology. As Swan notes, Spider Woman makes and names everything by singing reality into being (“Laguna Symbolic Geography” 230). Consequently, Laguna conceptions of things start with a name, Spider Woman’s “stamp of reality.” Things are enlivened by stories so that they become “animated with a presence of their own” (Swan, “Laguna Symbolic Geography” 235). Here the image of the spider, with its unique web-spinning ability, also denotes the significant function that the grandmother has in the Indian culture. The spider webs, with their inherent strength, hold the parts/fragments into a whole. The grandmother spider is obviously the center that holds: “She wait[s] in certain locations for people to come to her for help” (*Ceremony* 94). Specifically, her power comes from her thinking and her stories. Her “webs” eventually laid out as patterns structure thinking and story-telling, interweaving the personal with mythological, historical, and tribal memories. Stories become cures, as the second poem at the outset of the novel elucidates:

They [stories] are not 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.

[...]

And in the belly of this story

The rituals and the ceremony

Are still growing. (2)

Paula Gunn Allen defines the word “sacred” in the Indian context as “any material that is drawn from ritual and myth.” This definition, according to Allen, can extend to “include ‘little stories,’ the kind that are told to children” (“Special Problems” 379). “Little stories” carry the same kind of cultural significance as “ritual and myth.” Apparently, Grandmother’s storytelling is more than mere entertainment or even the transmission of culture and history to the next generation. It is a ceremony that acts as a link between the mythic deities and the Laguna people who base their ritual life on myths. This link with the mythic past empowers the Laguna people and provides cures and protection from “illness,” which is a metaphor for cultural/psychological alienation inflicted by “their evil”—the evil of the white’s cultural hegemony. Significantly, this commencing poem associates the story with the belly. Stories do not reside in the head or mind as a Westerner would imagine, but in the belly which nurtures and grows life. As Trinh Minh-ha points out, “belly” or “stomach” is “unanimously attributed to women and their powers” (136). The belly signifies the feminine power of reproduction while the head/mind denotes the masculine power of production. Words are contained in and regenerated from “the belly” and pass down not simply from mouth to ear, but from womb to womb, body to body, in order to be remembered. Though the voice of this poem comes from a masculine “he,” the power of story-telling resides in the belly—our Mother’s womb. The power of story-telling is hereditary within the matrilineal clan and a man can only be empowered through the (M)Other woman.

Noticeably, at the outset of the prose section of *Ceremony*, Tayo suffers from what his physicians term “battle fatigue” but specifically his dysfunction results from alienation and estrangement from his maternal past: he hears “the women’s voices,” merging with “his mother’s,” but “when he was about to make out the meaning of the words, the voice broke into a language he could not understand” (6). In fact, Silko locates the source of Tayo’s torture in the belly. He experiences “a swelling in his belly, a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat” (9). We recall the opening poem where a male voice says he keeps his stories in his belly. Tayo’s belly

contains words and yet these words “are formed with an invisible tongue”—“they have no sound” (15).⁸ Tayo does not suffer from any mental disorder that the modern psychiatric profession could diagnose or treat. A story would be his tonic (Salyer 36) and what he needs is a ceremonial healing journey into his ancestral past. Remembering the times when he and his cousin Rocky wandered the mesas, he recalls:

They [distances and days] all had *a story*. They were not barriers. If a person wanted to get to the moon, there was a way; it all depended on whether you knew the directions—exactly which way to go and what to do to get there; it depended on whether you knew *the story* of how others before you had gone. He had believed in *the stories* for a long time, until the teacher at Indian school taught him not to believe in that kind of “nonsense.” But they had been wrong. (19; emphasis added)

Ceremony features Tayo’s healing journey; stories provide resolutions. Tayo’s cure rests on a quest that would lead him back to the Indian past and its traditions, and to the ancient stories of his tribe. Discharged from the hospital, he returns to Grandmother and Auntie. Grandmother calls in traditional healers and Tayo starts on an intense journey of inner healing and reconnection with his painful but rich past.

Tayo’s quest for healing is in certain sense a search for the mother whose words Tayo tries to understand at the very beginning. In one of the few sections that inform readers of Tayo’s mother Laura, Auntie relates a story on the riverbank. One morning right as the sun rose, Auntie discovered Laura “coming down the trail on the other side”: she “walked under that big cotton-wood tree, [...] she had no clothes on. Nothing. She was completely naked except for her high-heel shoes [...]” (*Ceremony* 70). As Salyer suggests and as we see in Silko’s other work *Storyteller*, the river, cottonwoods, trail on the other side of the river, and woman walking are all components of the Yellow Woman stories from Laguna myth (Salyer 45). The myth of the Yellow Woman Kochinnenako originates in traditional Laguna Pueblo stories. The themes of these stories are always female-centered. Some older versions of Yellow Woman tales make her the daughter of the hocheni, the ruler. The position of hocheni in the Indian conception is “Mother Chief,” radically different from

⁸ “Belly” is a crucial metaphor which occurs at least forty-seven times in the novel. At the beginning, Tayo vomits because of sickness in the belly. As he embarks on his healing journey, energy builds, “gathering in his belly” (181). His quest for the tribal memory or past makes the belly “smooth and soft, following the contours of the hills and holding the silence of snow” (205). As sunshine brings a cure to his damaged health, he feels “the muscles of his neck and belly relax” (222).

Anglo-European ideas of rulership (Allen, “Kochinnenako in Academe” 84). Urging the importance of approaching Laguna tales in terms of “tribal feminism,” Paula Gunn Allen remarks:

Often what appears to be a misinterpretation caused by racial differences is a distortion based on sexual politics. When the patriarchal paradigm that characterizes western thinking is applied to gynecentric tribal modes, it transforms the ideas, significances, and raw data into something that is not only unrecognizable to the tribes but entirely incongruent with their philosophies and theories. (83-84)

The male bias of the Western establishment seriously distorts our understanding of tribal philosophies. Rather than patriarchal colonialism, the woman-centered Indian tribes claim “gynarchical, egalitarian, and sacred traditions” (Allen 85). The *hoheni* is the woman who tells time and prays for all people, even for the whites, so that men, women, spirit folk, nature, and seasons can be organized into a balanced and integral dynamic. Apparently, the patriarchal assumption of hierarchical rulership dislocates the central position of women and distorts the harmonious social and spiritual relationship that ancient Indian myths reclaim. Approached in this light, the figure of the Yellow Woman, like Grandmother Spider Woman and ruler *hoheni*, represents the Spirit of Woman, the tribal guardian of the spiritual world, central to the harmony, balance and prosperity of the tribe. This tribal concept of divinity, feminine in essence and plural in forms, obviously challenges the monolithic view of a Christian God who is Male and One.

Many of the Yellow Woman stories highlight the Woman’s alienation from the people and her difference from the women who hear her stories: she has a potential for wildness and wantonness. This very difference then makes her adventures possible—the adventures that eventually become beneficial to her people. As Paula Gunn Allen suggests, Yellow Woman is “a Spirit, a Mother, a blessed ear of corn, an archetype, a person, a daughter [...] an agent of change and of obscure events, a wanton, an outcast, a girl who runs off with Navajos, or Zunis, or even Mexicans” (“Cochiti and Laguna Pueblo Traditional Yellow Woman Stories” 211). Wanton as she may be, the Yellow Woman functions in the Indian myth as a powerful image of liberty, sexuality, and creativity—qualities that the tribe values (Jones 216).

While Tayo’s mother embodies the image of Yellow Woman, like some of her mythological predecessors she runs away and never returns. Consequently, Mother is

“the absent center” that Tayo seeks (Salyer 45). Tayo’s journey is in some sense a search for the lost mother’s guidance, the absent Yellow Woman. The Spirit of Woman returns when he encounters Ts’eh Montano, a mountain spirit whose color is yellow: “She was wearing a man’s shirt tucked into a *yellow* skirt that hung below her knees. Pale *buckskin* moccasins reached the edge of her skirt. [...] Her skin was *light brown*; she had *ocher* eyes [...] walking through the *sunflowers*” (*Ceremony* 177, 221; emphasis added). The Yellow Woman is the “Woman-Woman” whose color is yellow; this, and not the pink and red of Anglo-European Americans, is a ceremonial and royal color (Allen, “Kochinnenako” 88). Ts’eh represents the ceremonial Yellow Woman whose spiritual guidance has once been lost and is now regained. At the end of Tayo’s healing ceremony with the medicine man, old Betonie envisions stars, spotted cattle, a mountain and a woman: “the ceremony isn’t finished yet” (152) until he meets the woman. Ts’eh completes Tayo’s healing and their sexual union initiates Tayo’s spiritual recovery. It is during his sexual liaison with Ts’eh that Tayo begins to heal as he realizes that love always endures:

The terror of dreaming [...] was gone, *uprooted from his belly*; and the woman had *filled the hollow spaces* with new dreams [...]. [H]e could still feel the love they had for him. The damage that had been done had never reached this feeling. This feeling was their [Rocky and Josiah’s] life, vitality locked deep in blood memory, and the people were strong, and the fifth world endured, and nothing was ever lost as long as the love remained. (219-20; emphasis added)

Tayo is cured because Ts’eh’s love reconnects him with the spirit of Rocky and Uncle Josiah. Tayo grows up with his Grandmother and Auntie since his mother has run off and his father remains unknown. While his maternal uncle Josiah is in effect his surrogate father, loss of Uncle Josiah, like loss of his cousin Rocky, results in psychological trauma. His reconnection with the spirit of Josiah, therefore, at once ignites his blood memory and helps him to reclaim the lost paternal and maternal love. Such a reconnection, furthermore, proves the endurance of “the fifth world,” the world of his people. Later, symbolically, by recovering Josiah’s stolen spotted cattle,⁹ Tayo is capable of reclaiming the ownership of their “stolen rivers and mountains / the stolen

⁹ Unlike Herefords, the white-faced cattle that are domesticated and always waiting for the water wagon to come, spotted cattle have little regard for fences and are constantly moving in search of a water supply. Wild in nature, Josiah’s spotted cattle represent the unique Indian spirit, their instinct and potential for

land [...]” (136)—the world of his people that has been “stolen” by the whites. Thus, the image of the belly recurs in this quoted passage not as the origin of an illness but as the source of power and healing. As Swan remarks, Tayo carries a “new shield of strength,” “activated and sustained by Ts’eh and her love for him” (“Healing” 325). Like the Virgin Mary or Dante’s Beatrice in Western orthodoxy, Ts’eh is a female spiritual guide. But she is in effect “unorthodox” for she is wanton and sexual, while the Virgin Mary and Beatrice, saintly and asexual, have been frozen into icons, false feminine ideals.¹⁰ Joseph Campbell suggests in his classical study *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. [...] Woman is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure. [...] [S]he is redeemed by the eye of understanding. The hero who can take her as she is [...] is potentially the king, the incarnate god [...]. (116; 120)

The informing principle of myth inscribes women as supplements and objects, as lesser beings that can only be redeemed by the heroic male “gaze” of “understanding.” The Virgin Mary and Beatrice are colonized icons— colonized by male values. They exist only in the service of the crowned male god. The Yellow Woman, however, comes from female-centered tribal myths with woman as subject and hero who instructs ignorant males. Her heterodoxy constitutes a critique of the phallogentric nature of Western myth(s)/religion(s). Specifically, the redemptive power of this “heterodox goddess,” to borrow Rosenberg’s term (169), resides in her wildness, or rather, in the liberty of her sexuality that makes Tayo’s contact with the spirit world possible. Ts’eh leaves after love-making, as happens in most Yellow Woman stories. But her departure does not mean another absence. She teaches the means of regaining spiritual equilibrium by asking Tayo to plant her seeds: “He would gather the seeds for her and plant them with great care [...]. The plants would grow there like *the story*, strong and translucent as the stars” (254; emphasis added). Planting the seeds is like nurturing the story. Life grows and the “story” sustains. Tayo’s spiritual journey is

self-cultivation, a symbol of their tribal renewal and salvation.

¹⁰ Quoting Jules Michelet, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément call the Virgin and Beatrice “sterile” women; as Michelet observes, they are sterile in function, but with a sterility that is both saintly and false: the Virgin, “the Woman who is extolled is not the fertile mother adorned with her children. It is the Virgin and Beatrice, who dies young and childless” (qtd. in Cixous and Clément 32).

complete when he goes to the Kiva and tells the story of his encounter with the Yellow Woman: “It took a long time to tell them the story; they stopped him frequently with questions about the location and the time of day; they asked about the direction she had come from and the color of her eyes” (257). Tayo’s story-telling—a power gained through his encounter with the Yellow Woman and through his symbolic act of “planting her seeds”—eventually brings tribal salvation as the elders chant: “You have seen her [the Yellow Woman] / We will be blessed again” (257). At the end of his ceremonial healing, it is perhaps Ts’eh or perhaps his mother that he thinks of: “He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise” (255). After all, it is the Yellow Woman, the Spirit of Woman that blesses him with the power of healing.

Not only a young beautiful fairy like Ts’eh but also an ugly witch like Pilate in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* has the decisive power of healing. As she first appears to his nephew Milkman, Pilate is “ugly, dirty, poor, and drunk” (37). She is furthermore a witch, a conjuror. Giving Ruth “some greenish-gray greasy-looking stuff” (125) to put in Macon’s food, she helps to revive his sexual interest in her. She also places “a small doll on Macon’s chair” and prevents Macon from terminating Ruth’s pregnancy: “a male doll with a small painted chicken bone between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly” (132). Witchcraft, according to H el ene Cixous and Catherine Cl ement, “incarnates the re-inscription of the traces of paganism that triumphant Christianity repressed” (xii). More importantly, however, while witchcraft is regarded as exclusively evil by the “civilized” mind, Pilate’s magic power, an inheritance from the black legacy, heals and animates; it removes Macon’s intention to abort and kill life.

But Pilate is ostracized because she is different, born without a navel. As Macon recalls, “after their mother died, she [Pilate] had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or pressure of swift womb water” (227). The absence of Pilate’s navel, however, links her with Nature. Samuels and Hudson-Weems identify her as Mother Earth: “smooth stomach [is] a sign that she was not born from human woman—in mystical terms, she is Earth, the Mother of all” (62). Indeed, Pilate is closely associated with Nature: she “smelled even then like forest” (27); she is “remembered as pretty woods-wild girl that couldn’t nobody put shoes on” (234); “every place [she] went [she] got [herself] a rock” (142). In her interview with

Anne Koenen, Morrison says that “Pilate is Earth” (76).¹¹

Associated with nature/earth, Morrison’s Pilate in effect embodies the image of a “tar lady” in African mythology. Disturbed by the childhood story of the tar-baby figure a white man uses to catch a rabbit, Morrison explores and interprets the image:

“Tar baby” is also a name, like nigger, that white people call black children, black girls as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth. It held together things like Moses’s little boat and the pyramids. (LeClair 26-27)

Tar is black, thick, sticky, and strong in holding things together. Tar comes from the earth and is ancient. Moses’ mother pitches a basket with tar before sending him down the Nile. Tar is used in North Africa to build pyramids which commemorate the lives of ancestors. For Morrison, tar comes to symbolize the power of black women who “hold things together.” Morrison appropriates the Westernized version of the tar baby story and restores it to the original myth in order to credit the sacred power of black women in nurturing their ancestral heritage and holding things together. Apparently the myth provides a “maternal metaphor” for the working through of Morrison’s text (Stryz 123).

The significance of (M)Other Woman as the culture bearer that “holds things together” is manifested in the opening epigraph of *Song of Solomon*: “The fathers may soar, And the children may know their names.” For little children to remember their departing fathers is an impossible task unless mothers fill the vacancy by telling stories about the absent fathers. Pilate preserves the name of the father by singing the song to which the title refers. She, nevertheless, makes an error in substituting “Sugarman” for “Solomon.” The displacement of the biblical reference may result from the ignorance of the illiterate. But Morrison may well replace the Christian reference with the African one. Most likely, as Stryz comments, Pilate’s mistake can stem from

¹¹ Ts’eh in Silko’s *Ceremony* is linked with Nature, too. With Ts’eh, most significantly, there are many references to water: Ts’eh’s moccasin buttons have “rainbirds carved on them”; her blanket has “patterns of storm clouds”; Tayo could “feel the damp wide leaf pattern that had soaked into the blanket where she lay” (177). Ts’eh’s association with water obviously suggests her power to heal/end the drought that Indian tribes suffer because of the whites’ mining of uranium and their testing of atomic bombs in the Indian reservations.

a fragmented oral tradition (116). Thus, by singing and making her own substitution, Pilate produces an original text and inscribes the missing link with her retrieval of the tribal memory.

Indeed, Pilate's singing permeates her life. Her characteristic lips mark her link with orality. Her lips never stop moving even when she does not sing: "As a baby, as a very young girl, she kept things in her mouth—straw from brooms, gristle, buttons, seeds, leaves, string, and her favorite, [...] rubber bands and India rubber erasers" (30). As strange as her lips, her voice "[makes] Milkman think of pebbles. Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other. Maybe she was hoarse, or maybe it was the way she said her words. With both a drawl and a clip" (40). When she first appears in the novel, she sings; "others listen as though in a silent movie" (6). Her singing also attracts her cold-blooded brother Macon: "Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. [...] As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down" (28-29). The singing enchants; it arouses the latent memory; it is "bewitching."

Pilate's singing, in fact, results from a mistaken message from her ghost father. As she tells Milkman, "he [Father] kept coming to see me, off and on. Tell me things to do" (208). While never learning her mother's name is Sing, she takes her ghost father's whispered "Sing" as a command. Thereafter, singing becomes an important part of her life. Pilate's intimate connectedness with the dead father's spirit highlights the importance of the ancestors' spiritual forces in black culture. As Morrison asserts, the ancestors are the "foundation": "You know there are a lot of people who talk about the position that men hold as of primary importance, but actually it is if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor we are, in fact, lost" ("Rootedness" 344). Pilate's communication with her ghost father transports her to the ancestral past and advances what Jane Cambell would call "interchange of life forces [...] by which the departed give advice to and empower the living, the living honoring their ancestors in return" (145). Consequently, Pilate becomes "the ancestor": "the apogee of all that: of the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 344). She is the genealogical mentor, Milkman's pilot, guiding him on his journey in search of true identity. Milkman's problem is manifested in his name: he is an immature person still sucking milk, a black whitened with the color of milk. Besides, Milkman's family name "Dead" in effect suggests the whites' cultural eradication: as Morrison indicates in her interview with Cecil Brown, the name "Dead" expresses "a mistake [...] the carelessness of white people [...] they don't pay much

attention to what the records are” (4). With the name rendered as “Dead,” the black becomes culturally invisible and spiritually dead. Thus, Pilate’s singing the song of Solomon that contains her familial past engenders Milkman’s re-discovery of his eradicated black roots, and hence the healing of his “Dead-ness”—“not only as an individual but as a representative of an entire Black generation” (C. Lee 111). Pilate then is “the giver of stories, of counsel, the link to a precarious but necessary past” (Foreman 287). Skerrett furthermore identifies her as Milkman’s surrogate mother, as “a figure of motherly nurture in the folk” (198). Without a navel, Pilate in effect becomes the “World Navel”—in Joseph Campbell’s words, “the symbol of the continuous creation: the mystery of the maintenance of the world through that continuous miracle of vivification which wells within all things” (41).

Mother always has a mother. Every black woman partakes in the chain of story-telling. Milkman’s quest for the lost family name brings him to Circe, who delivers Pilate and protects her from murder at the hands of white men. Unlike the Circe of Greek myth, who turns the men of Odysseus into swines, this Circe is the midwife that delivers life, fulfilling the position of Pilate’s absent mother. Morrison’s Circe is also “mythic” for she survives to an old age: as elderly Reverend Cooper tells Milkman, she “was a hundred when I was a boy” (233). When Milkman first sees her, she is likened to “a witch” emerging from his childhood fantasy. He is “bewitched,” for “when he saw the woman at the top of the stairs there was no way for him to resist climbing up toward her outstretched hands, her fingers spread wide for him, her mouth gaping open for him, her eyes devouring him. In a dream you climb the stairs” (239). For black people, witchery/enchantment, which is “discredited” as “superstition” by the “cultivated mind,” represents “another way,” indeed, a significant way of “knowing things” (Morrison, “Rootedness” 342). Later, Milkman confronts the discrepancy between Circe’s appearance and voice: “She was old. So old she was colorless. So old only her mouth and eyes were distinguishable features in her face. Nose, chin, cheekbones, forehead, neck all had surrendered their identity to the pleats and crochet-work of skin committed to constant change” (240). But “out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old-girl” (240). With her “strong, young cultivated voice” (244), Morrison’s Circe revises the stereotype of the crone by transforming it into a positive depiction of crone as healer (Mobley 120-21). As Milkman listens to her story of his family, he realizes that, like Pilate, she is a “healer, deliverer [who] in another world would have been the head nurse at Mercy” (*Song of Solomon* 246). By telling Milkman the story of his grandparents after their

settlement in Danville, this old woman helps him make sense of the fragmented portions of his family history that he learns from Pilate. From Circe, Milkman also learns that his grandmother is an Indian girl named Sing and hence part of the Dead family representing Native Americans. “Native” becomes a name through which the blacks as well as the Indians reclaim their ownership of the American land. As Trinh contends, “terming us [ourselves] the ‘natives’ focuses on *our* innate qualities and our belonging to a particular place” (52; emphasis original). Empowered by his ancestral past, Milkman finally becomes himself the healer and the prophet as he performs an act of conjuring by the “grand recitation of names” at the end of the novel (J. Brown 724-25).

Like Morrison and Silko, Kingston claims America: “claiming America does not mean assimilation of American values, but rather a response to the legislation and racism that says we of Chinese origin do not belong here in America. [...] No, we’re not outsiders; we Chinese belong here. This is our country, this is our history, we are a part of America. If it weren’t for us, America would be a different place” (“Maxine Hong Kingston” 16). But unlike Morrison and Silko who stress the healing power of (M)Other Women in reconnecting with ancestral spirits, especially for male heroes, Kingston centers on the transmission of traditions from Mother to daughter. The title heroine is Kingston herself as a “woman warrior”: “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families.’ *The reporting is the vengeance*—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (*The Woman Warrior* 53; emphasis added). Writing *The Woman Warrior* is an act of “revenge” as Chinese people use the same character “bao” for “reporting” and “revenge” (報仇即報導). Specifically, Kingston writes to “report” on a suppressed Chinese American history. History, as Foucault argues, has the form of war, embodying power relations, relations of domination and control (Foucault 114). The “omission” of Chinese American history is based on an institutional power structure that dominates and controls. This omission or suppression is also the outcome of a Eurocentric desire to alienate the Asian as Other “for the consolidation of Self” (Li, “the Production” 320). To combat this strategy of eradication, Kingston deals with the specificity of Chinese American history from the outset of her work. The opening sentence of the second paragraph starts with a year: “In 1924 just a few days after our village celebrated seventeen hurry-up weddings—to make sure that every young man who went ‘out on the road’ would responsibly come home—your father and his brothers and your grand-father and

his brothers and your aunt's new husband sailed for America, the Gold Mountain" (3). As Leiwei Li suggests, Kingston is accurate with her date (*Imagining the Nation* 61). The reference to the year manifests her ethnic-political intention. In 1924, "the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act" was expanded to exclude all Asians from entry, including even the Chinese wives of American citizens.¹² In *China Men*, her second award-winning work, Kingston explains this exclusion law in a lucid fashion: "1924: An Immigrant Act passed by Congress specifically excluded 'Chinese women, wives, and prostitutes.' Any American who married a Chinese woman lost his citizenship; any Chinese man who married an American woman caused her to lose her citizenship" (146). We simply cannot neglect the historical period in which Kingston sets the opening chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, a story about "hurry-up marriage" and consequent estrangement "which occurs under the shadow of legislated racism against Asian Americans" (Li 61). The plight of the No Name Woman is occasioned by the racist exclusion of Chinese in America (Li 61).

Thus, Kingston inscribes her omitted history or rather "herstory." It is precisely the erasure of the history of Chinese women that *The Woman Warrior* interrogates. No Name Woman's identity is that of lack (Lim 261). To fill this lack is to tell the story of this "forgotten as if [...] never born" (*The Woman Warrior* 3) ghost. As Kingston addresses the No Name Woman as "my aunt, my forerunner" (*The Woman Warrior* 8), admiring her for defying conventions, breaking taboos, cultivating individuality regardless of the cost, Kingston in effect undertakes the historian's mission of inscribing "herstory." Indeed, Kingston tells her own life story through imagining and narrating "other" women's stories—a mode that "masks the self's true story and yet identifies it with the community of women's stories" (Kennedy and Morse 122). Unlike Silko and Morrison, who concentrate on a single male hero's quest for his ancestral past, Kingston writes a collective autobiography that comprises the stories of herself and her female relatives, actual and legendary. Behind the No Name Woman are the mother/storyteller and the daughter/writer/historian; and *Mu Lan*, literally meaning Sylvan Orchid, is a legendary relative, who shares the generational name with the mother Brave Orchid (*Ying Lan*) and the aunt Moon Orchid (*Yue Lan*). All

¹² As sources of his findings, Li refers to H. M. Lai and P. P. Choy's *Outlines: History of the Chinese in America* (San Francisco: Chinese American Studies Planning Group, 1971) and Judy Yung's *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1986). A number of works treat the Chinese immigrant history in illuminating ways. For Chinese immigration to and exclusion in the U. S., see Chan; for feature films and other sources that help situate Chinese immigrants in American history, see Lin; for the early history of Chinese immigration, see Coolidge; for early Chinatown

together they represent the true spirit of “The Woman Warrior.”

Nonetheless, Kingston’s power to script “herstory”—whether to claim an aunt from deliberate oblivion or to record an alternative story—originates from her mother’s “talk-stories.” But Mother does not just tell stories; as a scholar-midwife, Brave Orchid is identified as a witch doctor whose special talent lies in her naming, naming of ghosts, “Wall Ghost, Frog spirit [...], Eating Partner” (*The Woman Warrior* 65). In fact, Kingston envisions her as a “shaman” who relishes “scare orgies” (65) in dealing with ghosts. In medical school she stays in a haunted room where she reads without being disturbed, and constantly enters the spirit world to negotiate and struggle with the ghosts. She is capable of magic spells and when she returns to her village after graduation, she is welcomed like “the ancient [magician] who [comes] down from the mountains” (76). She has the power to change her size, becoming “big” in America while she is “small” in China (104). And she overpowers “the hairy beasts whether flesh or ghost because she could eat them” (92). “Big eaters win,” as Kingston explains, citing famous ancient “ghost-eating” scholars (89-90). Brave Orchid’s shamanism therefore distinguishes her from other women in the village: “My mother was not crazy for seeing ghosts nor was she one of those the women teased for ‘longing’ after men. She was a capable exorcist; she did not ‘long’” (92).

Indeed, by virtue of her access to supernatural forces, Kingston’s shaman mother has the power to persuade spirits/ghosts and to conduct rituals as an ancient shaman does. The act of combating ghosts is significant. As Robert Lee suggests, “taking up a struggle against a ghost in medical school, where she is otherwise immersed in Western science, is an act of resistance to the hegemonic discourse of Europeanization” (60). As a matter of fact, Kingston characterizes all the women “students at the To Keung School of Midwifery [as] new women, scientists who changed the rituals” (75). Thus, once after Brave Orchid’s exorcism of a sitting ghost, rather than chant lineal descent lines (the patronymic and patriarchal) to direct her spirit back to the school, they “called out their own [non-patronymic] names, women’s pretty names, haphazard names, horizontal names of one generation. They pieced together new directions, and my mother’s spirit followed them instead of the old footprints” (75-76). So women’s names, rather than the Name of the Father, become the monument that guides and heals the wandering spirits. Consequently, unlike Morrison, who traces the paternal name of Solomon, Kingston retrieves the matrilineal genealogy.

community life, see Kim 91-121.

As a matter of fact, the maternal name of Ying Lan “Brave Orchid,” bypassing the father’s position, informs Kingston and enables her to produce such strong women warriors as the swordswoman Mu Lan, who shares the generational name “Lan” with Ying Lan. If the story of the No Name Woman opens the old wound, the mother/shaman/story-teller heals the wound with the legend of Mu Lan:

I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village [...] this chant given by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (*The Woman Warrior* 20)

Apparently the mother’s “talk-story” becomes the cure for the daughter’s discontent. But when she transforms the mother’s oral tale into her own written text, Kingston “rewrites” because, as she confesses, “I don’t see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years” (*The Woman Warrior* 185). Recovering a Chinese story untransformed by her American experience is an impossible task.¹³ The liberty of transforming the mother’s/Chinese text enables Kingston to transcend the limits of “Chinese facts” to reveal a reality truer in essence and spirit. Specifically, while the original Mu Lan story exemplifies the Confucian virtues of filial piety and loyalty (忠孝), Kingston’s text features a journey of ritual trials and sexual initiations. Kingston elaborates on how Mu Lan continues her training despite menstruation, and describes the smell of menstrual blood and the “red dreams” Mu Lan has when menstruating (*The Woman Warrior* 30-34). In the army, Mu Lan gets married, becomes pregnant, and begets a son. Kingston depicts Mu Lan’s menstruation, pregnancy, her being “in labor,” and her maternity in detail—the details even include how “any high cry make the milk spill from [her] breast” (41). Mu Lan eventually dries the umbilical cord on a flagpole and watches it fly (40). Though the male disguise enables her to “reverse the traditional role models and establish a new set of relationships based on equality

¹³ In *Ceremony*, Silko also recognizes the necessity of blending the Native and Western knowledge into a new ceremonial vision. Betonie, the wise tribal medicine man, maintains that “after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong” (126). Silko and Kingston seem to share similar viewpoints toward the transformation of their native/ethnic traditions.

and individual fulfillment” (Li, “The Naming” 507), Mu Lan continues to experience sexuality as a woman. The image of the woman warrior becomes particularly powerful in the context of the feminization of the military. Where the military was once gendered “masculine” and its victims were often women, Kingston subverts this simple dichotomy. She transforms the “masculine” war to “defend the country” into a “feminine” one featuring the psycho-sexual development of a woman warrior. Finally, the mature female body becomes the bearer of his/herstory. With stories of injustices carved on her back, Kingston’s Mu Lan achieves victory over the baron at the moment he discovers that she is both a woman and the bearer of his/herstory: “‘You’ve done this,’ I said, and ripped off my shirt to show him my back. ‘You are responsible for this.’ When I saw *his startled eyes at my breasts*, I slashed him across the face and on the second stroke cut off his head” (44; emphasis added). Kingston’s Mu Lan outplays the Western heroine Joan of Arc by experimenting and experiencing the essence of female sexuality. Courageous and powerful as she may be, Joan of Arc becomes a canonized virgin saint, a frozen symbol for us to worship. Mu Lan is in this sense superior; as Kingston remarks in her narrative, “marriage and childbirth strengthen the swordswoman, who is not a *maid* like Joan of Arc” (*The Woman Warrior* 48; emphasis added).

Noticeably, the power of Kingston’s revised text resides in its capacity to contextualize contemporary events in her American life: “From the fairy tales, I’ve learned exactly who the enemies are. I easily recognize them— business-suited *in their modern American executive guise, each boss two feet taller than I am and impossible to meet eye to eye*” (*The Woman Warrior* 48, emphasis added). The identification of the baron in the Mu Lan tale with the boss in real life indicates a movement from mythic imagination to harsh daily reality (Li, “The Naming” 508). Embodied in each “giant” boss is the composite image of a white, a male and a capitalist. Before this image, Kingston feels belittled. While racism, sexism and capitalism continue to shackle her American life, the boss as baron is metaphorically “killed” in the mythic text of the Mu Lan story.

Kingston concludes her narrative by retelling her mother’s talk-story of Ts’ai Yen, a talented ancient Chinese poetess who returned to China after twelve years with the Southern Hsiung-nu, barbarians to people in the Central Kingdom (中國). As VanSpanckeren suggests, with the figure of Ts’ai Yen, who is commended for her song of “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” (胡笳十八拍), “the ceremonial cycle of the feminine is completed” (49-50). Kingston becomes the modern Ts’ai Yen, who

creates trans-cultural songs that inspire and speak for women of different cultures. Empowered by the mother's talk-stories, Kingston eventually crowns herself as a poet/writer/story-teller—as she tells her mother, “I also talk story”; “the beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (106).

As Trinh Minh-ha brilliantly remarks, “story, history, and literature—all in one” become the tools of the Native/Other Woman for articulating the silenced truth (119): her tribal survival relies on her power to identify the “differences” and to make them strengths. Otherness is strength. Without recognizing their ethnic differences, women of color remain always the defined, the object, and the victim. Returning to their native roots and retrieving “otherness,” ethnic women writers focus on the innate qualities that make them unique. The significance of the three ethnic women's texts is thus threefold. The texts are communicative because the stories provide the missing link between the ancestral past and the tribal present. They are furthermore transformative, converting sexual/racial/cultural “nothingness” into insight. They are above all healing since in them ethnic myth and national history converge to make the “hurt” become the “hope.” Publishing their works in three consecutive years, Kingston, Silko and Morrison coincidentally tell the story of the Other Woman, a story that contains the history of Herself and that of her people. Their works become the locale where marginal tribal cultures grate against the dominant white hegemony and where the personal and the political are joined. Consequently the power of the Other Woman, as configured in “three women's texts,” not only represents a significant mode of the “critique of imperialism” but also becomes the driving force of Asian/Indian/Black ethnic salvation.

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